

## **Ghostbusting fashion: Symbolic boundaries and the politics of time in fashion journalism**

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### **Abstract**

This article examines the rhetorical tools that leading fashion journalists have used over the past 60 years when they seek to protect the idea of impenetrable temporal boundaries between contemporary fashionable dress and its history. Journalists have always taken a dim view of fashion practices that recycle historical styles in contemporary fashion design. Yet in the late 20th century they intensified this repudiation by the previously unseen use of negatively connoted temporal fashion words, like 'retro' and 'nostalgia'. Journalists further combined such fashion words, declaring specific styles as *passé* or fashion-dead, with chronological designations to evoke the idea that such styles belong to an irretrievable chronological past. In doing so, they are 'ghost-busting' the presence of fashion history for the benefit of a cultural industry that is centred on a rhythmic transcendence of its own past in order to convince consumers of the apparent newness of fashion products.

### **Keywords**

Bourdieu, chronology, discourse, fashion journalism, politics of time, temporal boundaries

The visibility and the appreciation of the history of fashionable dress has reached new heights in the early 21st century. Urban streets are flocked with fashionable people sporting vintage styles. The fashions pictured in television drama series like *Mad Men* (set in the 1960s) and *Downton Abbey* (set in the 1910s–early 1920s) are praised by audiences across the world, and with the rising popularity of fashion exhibitions historical styles have entered the museum (Foreman, 2013: 12). This article establishes, however, that an important professional group within the system of high-end fashion production has not valorized to a great extent the historical designs now gathered by museums and sought after by discerning consumers. When it comes to deciding on the quality of the latest fashion collections, over more than half a century fashion journalists have taken a dim view of the use of fashion history in contemporary fashion design.

Eugenia Sheppard, a prominent member of the fashion press in her role as fashion editor of the then *New York Herald Tribune*, acidly noted in 1959 that she regards fashion history as a mausoleum (1959b: 5), in which couturiers are placed when they cannot create modern designs that capture the present moment. Interestingly, Sheppard evoked a symbol of death to survey fashion history, which she and her later colleagues ultimately regarded as bygone.

In their opinion for designers it is best not to dig up fashion history, so the latest collections are not ‘bothered by ghosts’ (Sheppard, 1959a: 1) and can ‘[leave] behind the past to build fashion’s future’ (Menkes, 2010b: 10). The trope of death is a long-standing metaphor for fashion’s transience and its attempted transcendence of the past in conceptualizations of sartorial fashion (e.g. Blumer, 1969: 278; Parkins, 2012). The early 19th-century poet Giacomo Leopardi (1982 [1824]: 67) tellingly staged Fashion in a dialogue with Death as ‘daughters of Decay’, who ‘equally aim continually to destroy and change all things here below’. In all its ephemeral qualities, it thus seems that whenever sartorial fashion wishes new styles to enter the scene, it peels off its old-fashioned or not-so-present skin and refers it to the garbage bin.

This discarding temporal logic of fashion, constituting a qualitative break between past and present, has led several theorists to liken fashion to the modern (Blumer, 1969; Breward and Evans, 2005). ‘Fashion [...] institutes an essentially modern social system, freed from the grip of the past’, writes philosopher Gilles Lipovetsky (2002: 23). So the break fashion installs with continuity, tradition and the past resonates with classic observations of modernity noting the exclusion of history and continuity within the modern (e.g. Nietzsche, 2005 [1874]). It reminds us of modernity’s ‘exclusive valorization [...] of the present over the past as its negation and transcendence’ (Osborne, 1992: 73). Moreover, ‘from the point of view of the naïve public’, sociologist Diana Crane (2000: 152) writes, ‘fashion change appears to be linear’ in leaving behind previous styles and presenting so-called completely new ones that direct fashion toward the future. The valorization of a present eyeing the future thus constitutes another feature that sartorial fashion shares with a common conception of the linear development of historical time in modernity (Koselleck, 2004).

Nevertheless, few fashion theorists and historians today support the claim that fashion develops exclusively in a linear manner. Rather, changes in fashion occur cyclically by glancing backwards in time to those styles it once declared dead (Evans, 2003; Lehmann, 2000; Parkins, 2012; Vinken, 2005). Sociologist Barbara Adam (1995: 38) writes that ‘it is essential to appreciate that all social processes display aspects of linearity and cyclical’. I argue that the same line of thought captures fashion change. Yet bearing in mind contributions from postcolonial studies (e.g. Ganguly, 2004), anthropology (e.g. Fabian, 2002) and feminism (e.g. Crosby, 1991), which all point to the modern political project of the creation and performance of linear advancement as serving the benefit of specific social categories while temporally ‘backwarding’ others, one may wonder how it can be that scholarly debate still finds ‘the naïve public’ to regard sartorial fashion as following the linear steps of time with its past irretrievably gone once styles fall out of favour. Is a political concern invested in the production and maintenance of such a conception of linearity?

This article asserts empirically and theoretically that over the past 60 years key players in the production of ‘fashion media discourse’ (Rocamora, 2009: 54–62), that is, the visual and written fashion discourses articulated across a plethora of media texts, have been engaged in a discourse that seeks to deaden historical fashion styles and objects through mixing chronological language (using years, decades and particular fashion seasons) with, as I develop below, ‘neoteric’ or fashionable language, that is, the discourse of the *passé* (King, 2000). A central aim of this rhetorical strategy is to safeguard the commercial prosperity of the world of high fashion, which is rooted in a linear and future-oriented vision. The observations build on a critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 2010) of 1301 fashion reviews of the latest high-end collections published between 1949 and 2010 in *The New York Times* and the *International Herald Tribune*, two high-quality daily newspapers that reach a large public.<sup>1</sup>

### Delineating fashion time: chronology and the neoteric

Today we think of the fashion season (autumn/winter and spring/summer) as the twice yearly moments for the entrance of new styles. These moments mobilize the promotional and commercial representatives of the fashion industry to travel across the globe to attend several fashion weeks. The fashion season is one of the most successful chronological conventions signalling that the time has come for current styles to break off into fashion history. Fashion historian Jennifer Jones (2007) established that at the French court of Louis XIV in the late 17th century the mutability of fashion was organized by the introduction of 'the fashion season'. This chronological device began to control the previously indeterminate changes of fashionable dress that made it difficult for Parisian fashion merchants to calculate at what future moment in time to restock produce, for instance. For the development of the fashion industry complex the installing of various chronological rhythms was crucial to construe moments for the entry of the new and the repudiation of the old (Sewell, 2010). Scholarship agrees that the quantified, divided and abstract time of chronology is intricately linked to capitalism (Adam, 1995: 90; see also Harvey, 1989; Marx, 1976 [1867]). Hence, the introduction and proliferation of the chronological fashion season was tightly connected to the commercial enterprise of *la mode*.

Interestingly, the French court sought to create a structure for fashion's changes by ordering on a seasonal basis the reports on fashion in the court periodical the *Mercure Galant* (1672–1724). Hence, from its birth in the *Mercure Galant* (Vincent, 2005), the fashion press played an important role in the setting up of a chronological order. It displayed in public at set moments in time that the fashionable is now outmoded (Van de Peer, 2014a). From the very beginning the fashion press has been engaged (though not always explicitly) in supporting the commercial roots of fashion, which thrive because of the introduction of a chronological structure for fashion change. The extensive use of chronological language, which this article observes in late 20th-century fashion journalism, therefore solicits the following reading: whatever falls outside the chronological borders is forever gone.

Indeed, chronological time often uses language referring to a time economy and the loss of time (Adam, 1995). The time that one has given to a particular activity cannot be regained and constitutes a bygone. It is crucial to bear in mind that chronology constitutes an empty time. Yet when scholars and industry professionals describe fashion history as dead, by which they mean that it contains what is now unfashionable, they fabricate a time made meaningful or, as Johannes Fabian (2002: 23) coined it, a 'typological time'.

Recently, several fashion scholars have reversed the dominant observations on fashion history. They argue that the past of fashion far from loses its appeal (Evans, 2003; Lehmann, 2000). This suggests that while the history of fashion may be bygone in the chronological sense (belonging to the collections presented last year), it still holds a claim to the fashionable. The past can still be meaningfully up to date.

The conceptual delineation of modalities of time developed by philosopher Preston King (2000) offers a fruitful framework to understand the two different aspects the time of fashion seems to have: the arbitrary time of chronology and the typological time of the fashionable. King explains chronological time as the empty sequential container (years, hours and arbitrarily construed fashion seasons) *in* which things occur. It divides time into neat sections that construe clear-cut boundaries around the fashion present. Once the next fashion season arrives, the designs presented in all previous seasons are in the chronological past, which is lost irretrievably. Yet this does not imply that earlier styles are necessarily unfashionable or meaningfully past. King tackles this conundrum by arguing that the present can also be conceived as 'neoteric', which he connects to the dialectics of fashion (2000: 41). Neoteric time distinguishes what is representative of the

present and of the past, that is, what is fashionable and what is *passé*. This means that fashion styles can be chronologically past, yet fashionably present.

Returning to scholarship of modernity's time consciousness and, in particular, to sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's (1996) work on the politics of time invested in fields of cultural production, I maintain that the fashionable (construed as the neoteric present) is dependent upon the unfashionable (construed as the neoteric past) in its excluding attempts. Philosopher Peter Osborne (1992, 1995) noted that when modernity is viewed as a qualitative designation in which the present transcends the past, such a negating dynamic is in fact relational because the present cannot claim privilege without the past. The work of Pierre Bourdieu (Bourdieu and Delsaut, 1975) and Ilya Parkins (2012) demonstrates a similar dynamic in sartorial fashion, which opposes its own history to demonstrate its constant newness, while always remaining dependent upon its history to self-fashion its up-to-dateness. In keeping with his overall field theory based on the idea that agents in a field compete for the resources to gain access to crucial field positions, Bourdieu (1996: 154–61) confirms the relational reading of neoteric aspects of the past and the present. Fashion designers, for instance, seek to establish their authority, grounded in up-to-dateness, through allocating other designers to the field's bygone past, making them 'appear outmoded, irrelevant, old-fashioned' (Bourdieu and Delsaut, 1975: 15). Yet not only designers construe one another as outmoded. As players in the fashion field, they also apply this dynamic to other professional groups and even to consumers, who, in their outmoded status, nevertheless remain indispensable for the temporal identity construction of 'up-to-date' fashion professionals (Parkins, 2012). This article shows that fashion journalists too engage in this discarding strategy.

### **Journalists, fashion words and symbolic boundaries**

In 1999 Suzy Menkes, the then fashion editor of the *IHT*, positively judged the menswear collections in Paris:

The nearest thing to sportswear was what an *old-fashioned* gentleman would once have called a 'sports coat' [...]. Yet far from looking [...] *retro*, these clothes for winter 2000 seemed *modern*. [...] as though all the experiments [...] had been part of the *dying* century. (Menkes, 1999: 7, emphasis added)

In this quote Menkes relies on the metaphor of death to dismiss more experimental styles in men's fashion from previous seasons. Yet by contrasting the notions *old-fashioned* and *retro* to *modern*, she also employs the implicit connection established between the two former designations to reinforce existing symbolic boundaries of time in designer fashion.

Sociologists Lamont and Molnar suggest that symbolic boundaries are also brought to bear upon the temporality of social processes: 'symbolic boundaries are conceptual distinctions made by social actors to categorize objects, people, practices, and even *time and space*. They are tools by which individuals and groups struggle over and come to agree upon definitions of reality' (2002: 168, emphasis added). Although scholars have touched upon the 'boundary-work' (Gieryn, 1999) invested in the socio-temporal order (e.g. Zerubavel, 1982), recent work in the theory of history (Lorenz and Bevernage, 2013: 10) has argued that empirical inquiries into the conceptual distinctions between the temporal modes of past, present and future have hitherto received insufficient scrutiny.

Fashion journalists seek to instruct their double readership of peers and consumers on how correctly to perceive the nature of fashion (Bourdieu and Delsaut, 1975: 25). This article proposes that they rely on what I term *fashion words* or neoteric designations of what is representative of the present and of the past to maintain and strengthen a reality with strict

boundaries between fashions past and present.<sup>2</sup> Fashion words are thus forceful performative tools; they ‘do something’ (Austin, 1962; Bourdieu, 1991). Journalists rely on such evocative phrasings to maintain the temporal boundaries of fashion, for these words indicate what counts as ‘good’ fashion and, more fundamentally, what counts as fashion and what does not. Fashion words are far from neutral designations because they are employed by journalists in a politics of time or ‘a politics which takes the temporal structures of social practices as the specific objects of its transformative (or preservative) intent’ (Osborne, 1995: xi).

Although much boundary-work occurs tacitly, as when we act in ways that reproduce the boundaries themselves, we may also deliberately negotiate them. This happens regularly when tacit boundaries which suit important purposes are contested. In the 60-year period of fashion reviewing that this article covers, the construed temporal boundaries also came to the fore in a straightforward manner when, for example, designers and consumers challenged the borders.

Hitherto the structuring capacities of language use have been largely overlooked in accounts of the fashion press, because of the dominant focus on the study of the visual in fashion media discourse. Few have tapped into boundary constructions in written fashion discourse (e.g. König, 2006; Rocamora, 2001) and even fewer have examined how written fashion discourse impacts on fundamental temporal boundaries in fashionable dress. The fashion reviews studied in this article provide an excellent case-study to undertake such a project, as *NYT* and *IHT* journalists are positioned as connoisseurs in the field of high-end fashion production.

The discourse of the press and of other critics, Bourdieu writes (1996: 170), is part and parcel of the production of the meaning and symbolic value of aesthetic formations. The fashion press participates in conflicts over symbolic boundaries, which amounts to struggles over ‘the best definition of conditions of true membership of the field’ (1996: 223), because ‘to define boundaries, defend them and control entries is to defend the established order in the field’ (1996: 225). Once symbolic boundaries are established, fashion players can adhere to them in varying degrees, which places them higher or lower in the internal field hierarchy of values. Journalists finding themselves in the dominant field positions convince their peers more easily of their opinions, for they embody large amounts of the field-specific resource, or ‘fashion capital’ (Entwistle and Rocamora, 2006: 740), for which ‘seeing and being seen’ (2006: 737) at exclusive industry events (fashion shows, after-show parties, etc.) is crucial. Cultural capital is a form of capital central to fashion capital for it ‘includes one’s knowledge about, for instance, the history of fashion but also about up-and-coming designers and trends’ (2006: 746).

In the small and close-knit journalistic fashion community (McRobbie, 1998: 161) one can easily discern the ‘possessors of legitimacy’ (Bourdieu, 1993: 134) by glancing at the peer recognition industry professionals receive, which is ‘the highest conceivable “confirmation” of a value judgment’ (van Rees, 1987: 283). Industry peers place great value on the interpretations and evaluations of the *NYT* and *IHT* journalists. In keeping with the prestige associated with the attendance of the seasonal fashion shows in Paris – an exclusivity which finds its materialization in the highly visible show invitations (Entwistle and Rocamora, 2006) – Albert Elbaz of the Lanvin fashion house recently indicated just how much he values *IHT* journalist Suzy Menkes: ‘When I am designing an invitation for a fashion show, I will write Suzy’s name on the trial proof. If her name looks good on it, I know I can send it’ (Designer quotes on Suzy ..., 2013). The fashion journalists of the *NYT* and *IHT* are thus viewed by the field of production as connoisseurs or experts of judgement.

### **Situating the qualitative study**

The article studies the symbolic boundaries of high fashion and aims to determine long-term developments in the justifications or explanations journalists give for a positive or negative value judgement of the reviewed collection. In focusing on 1301 collection reviews published in seven sets of reference years between 1949 and 2010 in the *NYT* and *IHT*, the present article probes the temporal themes on which journalists rely to decide on the quality of fashion. The sample covers seven sets of reference years, each containing four fashion seasons<sup>3</sup> – 1949–50, 1959–60, 1969–70, 1979–80, 1989–90, 1999–2000 and 2009–10. Haute couture, women's prêt-à-porter and men's collections presented in Paris, Milan, London or New York are included in the sample.

**Table 1.** Code book of 'modalities of time – past, present, future'

<b>FUTURE</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• (part of) the collection was <b>future-oriented</b></li> <li>• (part of) the collection was moving fashion <b>forward</b></li> </ul>
<b>NO FUTURE</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• (part of) the collection was <b>not eyeing the future</b></li> <li>• (part of) the collection was <b>not forward looking</b></li> </ul>
<b>PAST</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• (part of) the collection was like <b>a historical costume</b></li> <li>• (part of) the collection was <b>a literal reproduction of the past</b></li> <li>• Move this code to the header NO PAST instead of PAST</li> <li>• (part of) the collection was <b>like a museum</b></li> <li>• (part of) the collection was <b>nostalgic</b> for historical fashion styles</li> <li>• (part of) the collection was <b>retro</b></li> <li>• (part of) the collection was <b>vintage</b></li> <li>• (part of) the collection was <b>a revival</b> of historical fashion styles</li> </ul>
<b>NO PAST</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• (part of) the collection was <b>not a costume</b></li> <li>- (part of) the collection <b>made the past contemporary</b></li> <li>• (part of) the collection was <b>not nostalgic</b></li> <li>• (part of) the collection was <b>not retro</b></li> <li>• (part of) the collection was <b>not vintage</b></li> </ul>
<b>PRESENT</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• (part of) the collection <b>expressed the present moment</b></li> <li>• (part of) the collection was <b>up to date</b></li> <li>• (part of) the collection was <b>contemporary</b></li> <li>• (part of) the collection was <b>modern</b> (interpreted as expressive of the present)</li> </ul>
<b>NO PRESENT</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• (part of) the collection was <b>not expressing the present moment</b></li> <li>• (part of) the collection was <b>not contemporary</b></li> <li>• (part of) the collection was <b>not modern</b></li> </ul>

The reviews were manually coded through the computer-assisted data analysis software NVivo 9. Because few studies have considered longitudinal developments in the contents of fashion media discourse, Grounded Theory (Strauss and Corbin, 1990) was the most apt methodological approach. First, it allowed for the collection reviews to be the prime catalyst for theory building. (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) The 'bubble-up' Grounded Theory approach further solicited a coding strategy that mostly followed the journalists' own phrasings. It also contributed a cyclical coding process, by which previous coding and the developed interpretation of the data was constantly measured against the results of new and more detailed coding cycles. An investigator triangulation ensured the reliability and validity of this

study, as it removed the potential bias resulting from a single-person analysis (Denzin, 1970). Two hundred and seventy review articles, selected at random, were coded by a second researcher using the code book developed by the primary researcher.

The material was analysed with conceptual insights developed by Critical Discourse Analysis (Fairclough, 2010). The study pays particular attention to the journalists' positive and negative evaluative statements. These are often realized as relational processes (Fairclough, 2003) in which the judgement receives meaning in opposition to or in alignment with another evaluation.<sup>4</sup> In the review of the Italian designer Valentino's collection, for instance, the negative direction of 'nostalgia' was strengthened by the positive assessment of 'contemporary': 'white lace stockings brought a whiff of the 1960's, but the overall look was more *contemporary* than *nostalgic*' (Morris, 1990a: B6, my emphasis). Table 1 presents an outline of the finalized code book of temporal themes in the material.

### **Guarding the temporality of high fashion (1949–2010)**

Throughout the research period journalists of the *NYT* and *IHT* have recognized that fashion designers often look over their shoulders to historical styles. Although they may not wish such revivals to occur, for example Eugenia Sheppard (1960: 5) noted that she 'take[s] a dim view of fashion revivals, whether the Directoire, Empire, Gibson Girl or flapper', journalists tend to appreciate fashion history as a repository of inspiration on which designers can draw, as long as they mould historical styles to such an extent that these become expressive of the present. In 1949 a fashion journalist appreciated through the lens of the present a revival of the Directoire style: 'A Directoire note, stressing Robespierre and the Incroyables, is [...] interpreted in the modern manner for the woman of today' (Paris fashion openings, 1949: 5). In the *IHT* the couturière Paulette who 'finds inspiration in the Middle Ages for her 1950–51 collection', was praised because 'this is never done ostentatiously' (New Paris silhouette ..., 1949: 5).

Journalists dismissed collections that failed to transcend the historical origins of the designs. This review practice intensified in the later reference years, when journalists articulated increasingly hostile attitudes toward designers who recycled older styles without using the present as touchstone. In 1979 a journalist privileged American over French designers because the latter were thought to copy elements from fashion history:

Yet, while American designers [...] just hint at the past, most Parisian designers hit you over the head with it. For instance, a Bill Blass suit or an Oscar de la Renta dress may vaguely recall Balenciaga designs of the early 60's, but in Paris Karl Lagerfeld's new minidress smacks of Courrèges revisited. (American preview ..., 1979: 5, my emphasis).

Ten years later it became particularly apparent in the *NYT* that fashion journalists privileged a linear conception of fashion change that moved toward the future. If the past served as design inspiration the historical building blocks were expected to be covered by the gloss of the present. Yet journalists favoured designs that did not pull fashion history into the present at all. In a review of the Armani collection, Bernadine Morris (1990b: B4) of the *NYT* discussed what retailers (and Morris herself) expected of high-end fashion:

Nostalgia for the 1960's, which has blanketed many shows, is not enough, they believe; what fashion needs is a road to the future. Armani has provided it. [...] The dresses are not revivals of stiff Courreges shifts or the limp Vionnet bias cut. They do not look like flapper dresses.

By the late 20th century, journalists thus increasingly argued that the best fashion presents 'something original and modern with no references to the past' (Menkes, 2000, 15 Feb: 8). Yet

journalists realized that designers recurrently use fashion history as a source, so they began to articulate a clear demarcation between ‘good’ modernized revivals and ‘bad’ revivals. The review of the collection of Christophe Decardin, who ‘did punk – and not even an improvised version of the ’70s look, but a dead-straight one [...] Yikes’ (Horyn, 2010b: B9) serves as a clear illustration of the difference that journalists established between dead-straight revivals and a version of the past. The former they regard as the ultimate distinction between fashion and non-fashion. Hence, while fashion design that brings historical fashion into the present still counts as fashion because it can be inscribed in a forward-looking perspective of fashion change, designs that ‘get just plain lost in the past’ (Horyn, 1999: 1) are allocated outside fashion, in fashion history. The new accelerated fashion culture of the later 20th century is one of the prime reasons for the intensification of journalists’ repudiation of such fashions.

### **A new sartorial fashion culture**

The period from 1860 to 1960 is described as the Century of Fashion (Lipovetsky, 2002) in which Parisian haute couture reigned supreme and other sources of fashion, including mass-produced ready-to-wear, small dressmakers and home sewers, almost exclusively looked to it for an authoritative stand on the future fashion (Grumbach, 2008). By the late 1960s a new fashion culture emerged, however, in which high-end ready-to-wear took the dominant position of couture as the laboratory of innovation, because it tapped into emerging youth cultures and because it was better suited to women entering the labour market in large numbers (Steele, 1998). Where the older fashion culture was founded on a devaluation of the input of the wearer/consumer in the creation of fashionable dress through the dominance of the couturier (Grumbach, 2008), the consumer regained some currency in the new fashion culture as designers began to incorporate styles initiated in youth and street cultures.

This new fashion culture was built on acceleration, increasing historical revivalism, the compression of the time lapse between revivals, and the popular (consumer) choice of ‘vintage fashion’. Designers presented clothes in which ‘referencing the past appears to have escalated’ (Crane, 2000: 156), although to be sure designers glanced backwards long before the instalment of this new fashion culture (Wilson, 2003). In particular, in the work of late 20th-century experimental designers (Evans, 2003) such cyclical referencing of fashion history appeared to have become anarchic with respect to, for instance, the temporality of the fashion system that seeks to lay claim to the new every season. Furthermore, historical revivals in the 19th and early 20th centuries generally occurred after a time lapse of several decades (Young, 1937). Yet in designer fashion of the late 20th century the interval between revivals decreased considerably. Especially with the breakthrough of the internet, new fashion culture speeded up the rate of its backward glances (Lynch, 2007). In this new culture of production a plethora of historical revivals thus occurred at ever-increasing rates of recurrence; and they sometimes appeared simultaneously with the revival of other historical styles.

Another element that adds to the feeling that the history of fashion has been omnipresent in recent years and, likewise, has been increasingly valorized both by consumers (Palmer, 2005) and by certain groups of industry professionals (Evans, 2003; Jenss, 2013), was the newly fashionable character of vintage fashion or clothes that were designed several decades ago (McColl et al., 2013). Starting in the 1990s, it became fashionable to wear ‘vintage’ clothes. Though often second-hand, vintage clothing is ‘not something that is just old. If a “50s dress is an ugly hideous rag – that is what it is, an ugly hideous rag” (2013: 145). Interestingly, Gregson et al. (2001: 12) describe consumers of vintage as displaying an important facet of industry professionals’ cultural aspect of fashion capital; that is, vintage wearers are discerning

consumers who practice ‘clever dressing for knowing audiences’ (2001: 12), by which they show their connoisseurship of fashion history (Delong et al., 2005). Furthermore, in the early 21st century, sourcing and retailing vintage fashion has become a multimillion pound industry (McColl et al., 2013) evidenced by the proliferation of vintage clothing shops in fashionable urban areas. The fashion industry itself sought to deal with the consumer pull that vintage clothing had by incorporating it in ‘the new vintage phenomenon’ (Aranowsky-Cronberg, 2009) or newly produced but deliberately old-looking clothing. Such incorporation indicates that fashion system is now even more compromised from within by an appreciation for the old, which it seeks to transcend in its constant quest to install, promote and sell the new. To support the idea of temporal transcendence in fashion, *NYT* and *IHT* journalists relied on two rhetorical tools. First, in the late 20th century they began to draw on specific negatively connoted fashion words. Second, they intensified the use of a known rhetorical strategy – the combination of the neoteric discourse of fashion words with the self-evident chronological discourse of fashion seasons, years and decades.

### **Fashion words: ‘retro’, ‘nostalgia’, ‘vintage’ and ‘costume’**

Rather than notions conveying what occurs *in* abstract time, fashion words designate time made meaningful. Hence, they are a valuable tool to frame which objects, practices and designers are deemed within the boundaries of fashion and which are not. In the later reference years *NYT* and *IHT* journalists began to employ the fashion words ‘retro’, ‘nostalgia’, ‘vintage’ and ‘costume’ as evaluative designations representative *of* the past. All fashion words expressing the past have in common that none appeared in the reviews of 1949–50 and 1959–60 carrying the same meaning as in the later 20th-century reviews.

‘Costume’, for instance, was a neutral term in the first reference years referring to ‘garments of many types, particularly when worn as an ensemble’ (Eicher, 2005), whereas later it articulated journalists’ attempt to allocate designers into a stable past in opposition to the fleetingness of fashion. For instance, Gianfranco Ferré was inspired by ‘Italian 18th-century costumes [...]. The problem with a lot of the clothes [...] was that they looked like costumes’ (Menkes, 1989: 7). ‘Vintage’ was another neutral term in 1949–50 and 1959–60. Yet in the late 20th century journalists also began to refer to the term mainly to describe and sometimes to reject the way established designers recycled their own aesthetic codes. Similarly, journalists did not refer to ‘nostalgia’ at the start of the research period. In 1970, however, they began to employ ‘nostalgia’ as an evaluative marker through the lens of a combination of the term’s 18th-century interpretation as a spatial concept and its initial late 17th-century meaning as a medical condition (Starobinski, 1966). The best fashions ‘come in the new modern look without any sobbing over the past. [...] nostalgia is sick. In fashion, unfortunately, it’s a disease that’s all too easy to catch’ (*In the grips of nostalgia*, 1970: 6). Finally, as much as retro fashion design was a late 20th-century phenomenon (Retro, n.d.), journalists never used the notion to review collections until 1989–90, when a journalist appreciated Zang Toi’s collection which ‘harks back to an earlier age without being retro’ (Schiro, 1990: 54). Twenty years later, Suzy Menkes (2010a: 9) singled out that ‘[u]sing retro ideas is a skill [...] of absorbing, rather than reflecting, an inspiration. [...] the occasional flash of a brightly colored silk scarf [...] suggested the 1970s without ever tumbling into retro’. Yet one difference between the use of fashion words representative *of* the past merits attention. The notion of ‘costume’ carries a far more negative connotation than other terms. While the press still tended to regard collections they evaluated as ‘retro’, ‘nostalgic’ or ‘vintage’ as within the boundaries of fashion, it designated

things as ‘costume’ when it sought to allocate the collection completely outside of the present fashion moment.

### The neoteric and the chronological in the mix

Bourdieu (1996) has argued that sites of symbolic boundary construction, like fashion media discourse, are battlegrounds for the imposition of authoritative aesthetic judgements. In the late 20th century, *NYT* and *IHT* journalists operated within a new fashion culture in which a growing number of voices declared that genuinely old clothes and newly produced retro or nostalgic styles are modern and fashionable, precisely because of a temporal distance which does not require transcendence through concealing historical building blocks (Jenss, 2013: 117). In this context the *NYT* and *IHT* journalists sharpened their pencils to convince readers that they should still consider as *passé* temporally distanced designs as well as the newly produced fashions that visually display the appreciation of such distance. Journalists pursued this task by intensifying their references to chronological markers of time, which they combined with neoteric fashion words.

In 1949 Lucie Noel of the *IHT* combined the neoteric and the chronological. Maud Roser’s ‘source of inspiration is a charming compromise between 1900 and 1925, resulting in a perfectly *modern* silhouette for 1950’ (Noel, 1949: 5, emphasis added). Yet only in the late 20 century did journalists recurrently mention the chronological origins of the proposed styles to strengthen their evaluations of those styles as fashion-dead. In the January 2010 couture season Cathy Horyn (2010a: 1, emphasis added) rejected the *Ticci* for *Givenchy* collection when comparing it to *Lagerfeld* for *Chanel*:

It might help, for a start, if designers acknowledged that they are living in *the 21st century*.  
[...] At *Givenchy*, Riccardo Tisci also seemed to have his feet planted in the glue of the past – in his case, *the 1970s* [...] Mr. *Lagerfeld* does not suffer any of this old business. ‘I don’t want *vintage*,’ he said.

Ten years earlier Cathy Horyn (2000: B8) also applied this rhetorical strategy:

Designers have been too besotted with the past, and worse still with their own past, as *Valentino* was on Sunday when he *trawled back over 40 years* of jet-set glamour, right down to the blue eyeshadow and petrified-looking hairdos that recalled Baby Jane Holzer, *circa 1963*. So there have been too many spooks and not enough ghost busters. [...] *Valentino* [...] left nothing but an *old impression*. (2000: B8, emphasis added)

In this citation Horyn rejected *Valentino*’s collection because she thought the designer brought forth spooks rather than pursuing the alleged task of a fashion designer, which is to let the bygones of sartorial fashion be bygones through staying on a linear path that looks to the future.

Scholarship has established that chronology, with its implications of a time that is forever lost once spent, has become a taken-for-granted feature of the current global experience of time (Adam, 1995). Chronological time ‘has a strangely impalpable character and is hard to question’ (Bevernage, 2012: 86). So whereas one may still challenge the alleged *passé* character of *Valentino*’s collection, one cannot deny that the hairdo of 1963 is chronologically in the past. In this sense chronology becomes the go-to rhetorical tool if one seeks to construe the reality of fragile temporal boundaries – the history of fashion recurrently visits the fashion present (Evans, 2003; Parkins, 2012) – as strict and steady-state demarcation lines. One may therefore argue that journalists are ghost-busting fashion by meticulously pinpointing the chronological origins of designers’ collections to evoke in the minds of their readers that the styles neoterically belong to the past, that is, to the *passé*.

## Conclusion

This article has established that over the past six decades journalists' defence of fashionable dress as modern, which they understand as styles that, regardless of the inspiration taken from fashion history ultimately express the present, has intensified in the context of a new late 20th-century fashion culture centred on acceleration and revivalism. *NYT* and *IHT* journalists sought to support the boundaries between past and present by employing forceful fashion words that have the power to construe particular collections, their designers and those who wear such fashions as more, less or not representative of the present. Yet because in reality the (temporal) symbolic boundaries that fashion words articulate always remain open to contestation (Bourdieu, 1996), an evaluative discourse rooted in the neoteric is never without the potential for debate. Alternatives to the present fashion always remain within sight. Drawing on scholarship that noted the self-evident character of chronological time, however, I observed the ways in which prominent journalists at the turn of the 20th century intensified the combination of fashion words and chronological conceptions of the temporality of fashion (seasons, years and decades) in a quest to declare dead styles that insufficiently modernized fashion history.

In his inquiry into the rhetorical strategies invested in late 20th-century truth commissions, historian Berber Bevernage describes how taken-for-granted chronological time can be used as a veil covering neoteric discourse. He writes that: 'the description of crimes as belonging to the "past" in a chronological sense provokes the connotation that they are "past" in the substantial sense of "past", "dead" or "over and done with"' (2012: 86). As much as modern historical discourse is thus employed to write the non-spatial proximity (i.e. the presence) of crimes out of the present, I would argue that in the late 20th century momentum among fashion journalists was gained to expel the spooks of fashion history to the immobile past by evoking the proposed styles' old-fashioned character through tracing the chronological roots of those styles.

So far this article has not considered whether a political project, in the sense of benefitting a particular group or institution, might be invested in construing fashion styles as irretrievably gone once declared outmoded. Although fashion has always been compromised from within by its dependence on its own past (Parkins, 2012), this constellation further deepened in a late 20th-century fashion culture steeped in an acceleration of historical revivalism and the voguish character of wearing 'vintage' clothes. The scholarly debate on the vintage phenomenon in dress insists that people select such dress for the authenticity and uniqueness attached to these fragments of fashion history (e.g. Delong et al., 2005; Palmer, 2005), and for the capacity to unsettle the global fashion industry's ideology 'that fashion is exclusively about the new' (Reiley and Delong, 2011: 64). Aranowsky-Cronberg (2009: 130) further pulls this probing logic into the global system of production when arguing that newly produced but vintage-looking items are a 'rebellion against the idea of constant progress, against temporal irreversibility'.

One now begins to see how the explicit acknowledgement of the presence of fashion history within the system of production is experienced by journalists as threatening the system's apparently linear functioning which declares styles as *passé* when yet another season has passed. The practices of people who posit the up-to-dateness of historical styles endanger the commercial crux of the global fashion system, which is not only predicated on the production of new or unworn clothing but also on the need to convince consumers every season of its products' newness. This is why by portraying designers who display such history-saturated creations as lesser designers or by altogether allocating them to the mausoleum of fashion history, that is, by construing them as 'backward' in time, *NYT* and *IHT* journalists seek to strengthen the image of sartorial fashion as changing in linear fashion. Consequently,

journalists implicitly aimed to convince readers that as consumers they too are more representative of the present when avoiding the purchase of clothes expressing an appreciation for fashion history. Yet given the renewed empowerment of fashion consumers in the later decades of the 20th century (some groups themselves became the initiators of styles picked up in the world of high fashion), such a linear view has been crumbling for some time as discerning consumers (Gregson et al., 2001) have realized that they can still be fashionable when they purchase used clothing or recycle what is in their (parents') wardrobe rather than that they shop in the luxury department stores. Furthermore, one may read the proliferation of old-looking styles presented within the high-end field of fashion production itself as unsettling the thrust toward transcendence of the past, for this recognition of fashion history invites consumers to reconsider the long-standing alignment of newly produced and newly purchased items with being modern, fashionable and representative of the present. Hence, I see the protection of the commercial heart of fashionable dress as one of the central concerns for fashion journalists in guarding the boundaries of past and present by the rhetorical strategy of mixing fashion words (neoteric discourse) and chronological discourse.

Future inquiries into the politics of time invested in fashion media discourse could probe the extent to which the ghost-busting of the presence of fashion history is shared by peers, in particular by new voices in fashion media discourse, like bloggers. Jenss (2013) has shown, for instance, that much of the work of fashion bloggers is centred instead on an appreciation of (fashion) history through nostalgic gestures. Nevertheless, I expect further research to find a preservative politics of time across multiple established media texts in which journalists take it upon themselves to patrol the global industry's contested temporal boundaries by construing all fashion items from the past as Leopardi's 'daughters of Decay', who had best stay in their tomb or closet once they are buried or out of season.

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## Notes

1. In the remainder of the article *The New York Times* will be abbreviated as *NYT* and the *International Herald Tribune* as *IHT*. Since 1967 the *NYT* has been joint owner of the *IHT*. As of 2003 the *IHT* is completely owned by the New York Times Company. In the fall of 2013 the *IHT* was renamed *The International New York Times*.
2. Temporal fashion words do not belong to the domain of fashionable dress exclusively. Their wider structuring propensity derives from the fact that fashion in its broad definition crosses the borders of sartorial dress into all consumer products, and even into non-material phenomena, like children's names (Lieberson, 2000).
3. The four fashion seasons included in one reference year are, for instance: Spring/Summer 1949, Autumn/Winter 1949, Spring/Summer 1950 and Autumn/Winter 1950.
4. The study delineated explicit evaluations, signalled by phrasings like 'Brilliant. The best in Paris' (Sheppard, 1959b: 1), from implicit ones, which can be discerned through rhetorical tools such as metaphors, rhetorical questions and the practice of opposition (Fairclough, 2010). For more on the explicit and implicit character of value judgements in fashion reviewing, see Van de Peer (2014b). This article discusses findings derived from both implicit and explicit evaluations.

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