

## So Last Season: The Production of the Fashion Present in the Politics of Time

By dr. Aurélie Van de Peer

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### Abstract

Fashion is a powerful cultural phenomenon in its ability to impose on fashion items, its wearers, and producers a quality of forwardness or backwardness. As a temporal designation, both scholars and industry professionals tend to regard fashion as rooted in the present. Yet hitherto academic debate has not sufficiently scrutinized the fashion present and its boundaries. The idea of being up to date necessitates a relational temporal order in which the present or the modern is constituted vis-à-vis the outmoded. Through a concise historicization of the temporal anchorage of fashion, this article argues that we primarily read the present of fashion in a chronological way. Today we take as given the sequential transience of fashion, characterized by the ultimate absence of fashion history. Moreover, the variety of chronometric operations that allow for control over fashion changes enable the field of high fashion production to engage in a politics of time in which it displays its own forwardness by picturing (the sartorial choices of) others as “so last season,” or, to put it in other words, as lagging behind the industry’s referential time.

KEYWORDS: the fashion present, politics of time, temporal architecture, referential coevalness

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Fashion industry friend: So what have you been up to this weekend?

Author: I went shopping yesterday. I got this new dress. [Points at the dress she is wearing]

Friend: [Frowns] Oh.

Author: You don’t like it?

Friend: No, it’s not that. It suits you all right. But it’s just that it is a bit *passé*. I mean, we saw that pattern all over the Paris catwalks *six seasons ago*.

I begin this article with an extract from a conversation I had with my fashion stylist friend during a Sunday night dinner. It makes abundantly clear how in everyday life we use concepts that designate time (*passé*, *six seasons ago*) to make forceful aesthetic judgments about

fashionable dress. Walking home that evening, I soon accepted my friend's judgment that my newly purchased dress was already *démodé* using the following rationalization. Sociologist Joanne Entwistle, in the context of fieldwork among high-end fashion professionals, described her outsider identity as being that of "a fashionably dressed *academic*" (2009: 144). Neither had I, so my argument went, acquired a fashion professional's "eye" nor did I embody the great amount of "tacit aesthetic knowledge" (2009: 129) to select, let alone to predict, the newest styles. In day-to-day life I take an interest in looking fashionable, although my professional activities lie in *making sense* of fashion in a scholarly manner. This justification of my "wrong" choice of dress notwithstanding, whenever I now see that dress hanging in my wardrobe it bears the mental tag "old-fashioned." I have not worn it since. At least, not in the presence of my fashion stylist friend.

This conversation solicits a number of questions. Time is a powerful demarcating concept when discussing fashionable dress, so much is clear. How can it be that we denounce the fashionable by employing instances of the past, and confirm and celebrate it by evoking notions of the present? Most importantly, what are the dominant criteria we employ to construe the boundaries of past and present in fashion? Surely my friend and I were in the same chronological present or clock-measured moment in time. Likewise, we sat on the same restaurant's terrace on the same chilly spring evening with the sun just set. Seen through the lens of physical or natural time, no one would deny that my friend and I were physically simultaneous to each other. Yet my choice of dress was not deemed contemporary or distinctively representative of the fashion present.

The first section of this article illustrates how connected our understanding of the fashionable is to the present. Next, I examine how our construction of the present of fashion occurs in a relational dynamic to its past. The third section contributes a better conceptual understanding of the fashion present through an analysis of its boundaries. I argue that hitherto the present of fashion has been theorized first and foremost using two chronological conceptions that share the recognition of the absence of the past. Then I explore briefly two important developments in the installment of the now self-evident chronological "temporal architecture" (Pomian 1984) of fashion: the introduction of the concept of "fashion season" in the late seventeenth century and the public display of this seasonal order by the fashion press and by the notion of "fashion weeks" in the early twentieth century. This stepping stone to a future detailed historicization of the temporal anchorage of fashion allows me to unpack in the final section how aesthetic judgments based on chronological concepts are part and parcel of its "chronopolitics" (Fabian 2002; see also Osborne 1995) in fashion.

## **The Present-ness of Fashion**

*La mode* in her perfect essence

Is the daughter of Inconstancy,  
True sister of the present time...

(La description de *la mode* qui court 1604, quoted in Jones 2007: 17)

This poem likens fashion to a capricious, passing present. Later dictionary definitions of the term likewise embrace the idea that fashion is “the prevailing style (as in dress) during a particular time” (3b, *Webster’s New Collegiate Dictionary* 1977: 416) of which its “usage (as in dressing, decorating or living) generally accepted by those who regard themselves as up-to-date” (2, *Webster’s New Collegiate Dictionary* 1977: 417). Fashion is thus commonly perceived as a passing phenomenon that is tightly linked to the present. Karl Lagerfeld captured the temporal definition of fashion in just two words: “Why now?” when talking to Cathy Horyn (2000b: B11) in *The New York Times*.

At times it has been impossible to envision fashion outside the boundaries of the present. In 1890 the French writer Albert Robiba in the science fiction novel *La vie électrique*, the last part of his trilogy *Le Vingtième siècle*, describes everyday life as he imagined it would be in 1955. The lead characters, the young couple George Lorris and Estelle Lacombe, live in a time when women and men are each other’s political and social equals. The lovebirds meet via the *téléphonoscope*, a large round screen that is much like a contemporary webcam. They use *hélicoptères* to move through the air and talk over distance through the *phonograph*. Interestingly, the illustrations accompanying the novel, drawn by Robiba himself, picture the protagonists dressed in the fashionable style of the author’s own belle époque age, i.e. bustles for women and top hats for men. Hence, although Robiba had no problem stepping outside the boundaries of the present when envisaging the technology or social phenomena to come, he remained immersed in the present when picturing sartorial behavior.

Over seventy years later fashion styles actually did seem to evoke the future in André Courrèges’ mid-1960s “space-age style” with its angular-cut silhouette, mini-dresses, helmets, and goggles reminiscent of astronaut equipment. Yet this future-oriented look used futurism as a metaphor for youth (Steele 1998: 278) and told us more about the early 1960s obsession with progression in time and space than that it visualized fashionable dress to come. In retrospect, Cocqueline Courrèges placed her husband in his own period when she said that he: “saw with the eyes of his generation—it was a time of missiles to the moon” (quoted in “Snow Whites” 1995). It thus seems that, although fashionable styles may toy with the future, ultimately we think, talk, and imagine fashion as absorbed in the present.

### **The Relational Self-fashioning of the Fashion Present**

Thinking fashion as the ubiquitous materialization and symbol of the fleeting present brings us to an expansive body of scholarly literature on modernity that shares the centrality of the

present or the now with theories of fashion, regardless of the conceptualization of modernity as historical period or as experience.

Modernity's first prominent understanding is epochal, which is to say that it constitutes a distinct historical period with its beginning and end still under debate (Gumbrecht 1978: 96). In the early nineteenth century the German philosopher Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1977[1807]) was the first to theorize his own age, i.e. modernity, as a new historical-philosophical period which he viewed as the endpoint in a progressive history. Yet, according to Jürgen Habermas (1990), Hegel's conception of modernity also hinted at another comprehension of the notion: the experience of what it feels and means to be modern. Not only was the modern present felt to be different from what came before (Fritzsche 2004: 25), this present was also experienced as "a transition that is consumed in the consciousness of a speeding up and in the expectation of a differentness of the future" (Habermas 1990: 6). Recently this experiential understanding of modernity's temporality has gained momentum in the historical and philosophical debate through the work of, among others, the historians Reinhart Koselleck (2002, 2004) and François Hartog (1994, 2003), and the philosophers Peter Osborne (1992, 1995), Sylviane Agacinski (2000), and Paul de Man (1983). This section seeks to demonstrate that their conceptualizations share a relational reading of the constitution of the modern that is particularly resourceful to grasp better the temporal modes of fashion and the interactions between its past and present.

The work of Peter Osborne merits special attention for its focus on the qualitative designation of modernity. Resonating with Fritzsche's and Habermas' writings on its experience, Osborne developed how the modern registers "contemporaneity in terms of a qualitatively new, self-transcending temporality, which has the simultaneous effect of distancing the present from even that most recent past with which it is thus identified" (1992: 73). The argument that past and present exclude one another in modernity stretches back further, however, to the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche's *On the Use and Abuse of History* (2005[1874]). In this text Nietzsche viewed modernity and history as opposites, when arguing that modernity has the ability to forget history. The Belgian-born scholar of deconstruction Paul de Man noted that here Nietzsche "captures the authentic spirit of modernity" (1983: 147) in the desire to abandon the preceding and to create a present that may serve as a new origin. Yet Nietzsche also added a valorization to the view that "life" or modernity is directly opposite to what came before. Forgetting is beneficial for life, he wrote, because a culture overburdened by its past cannot live through its present. Hence, in modernity the temporal modes both exclude one another and are characterized by an "exclusive valorization [...] of the present over the past as its negation and transcendence" (Osborne 1992: 73). The French cultural historian François Hartog sought to develop the valorization of these modes further in his coinage of "the modern

regime of historicity,” by which he did not understand regime as an epochal break in time. Rather in Osborne’s qualitative observation Hartog wrote:

By regime, I mean something more active. Understood as an expression of a temporal experience, regimes do not merely mark off time in a neutral fashion, but rather organize the past as a sequence of structures. It is the scholarly framing of the experience (*Erfahrung*) of time. (1994: 96)

In the modern order of historicity people thus experience the present, first, as opening up towards the future rather than repeating the past and, second, as the privileged temporal mode.<sup>1</sup>

Probing the question how the modern present constitutes its present-ness led several of the above-mentioned theorists to go beyond the claim that in modernity the present merely transcends the past. Instead they reached for a relational reading of modernity’s time consciousness (e.g. de Man 1983; Hartog 2003; Osborne 1992). Paul de Man, for instance, proposed to read the difference between modernity and history in Nietzsche’s essay as solicited by “interplay” between the two configurations. The transience of the modern, which follows from its wish to be continuously present, creates a temporal experience “historical in the deepest sense of the term in that it implies the necessary experience of any present as a passing experience that makes the past irrevocable and unforgettable” (1983: 148–9). Relational conceptualizations of the modern are often inspired by the groundbreaking work of the German historian Reinhart Koselleck in the 1970s and 1980s. Koselleck (2002, 2004) demonstrated that the technical-industrial transformations of the world between 1500 and 1800 led to an experience of time that is ever-accelerating. In the *Neuzeit* (literally the “New Time”), the present and future become privileged. This experience fed into the discovery and maintenance of the historical past, which in turn invigorated the modern idea that the present and the future are somehow different from what came before. “If the new time is offering something new all the time, the different past has to be discovered and recognized, that is to say, its strangeness” (Koselleck 2002: 120) .

Theories of fashion share with the debate on modernity a two-sided conceptualization of its research object as epochal and qualitative phenomenon. Until now scholarly literature has displayed great diversity in pinning down the inception of fashion, which ranges from the Middle Ages (Heller 2007) to the nineteenth century (Perrot 1994). Nevertheless, in keeping with the work of the French historian Fernand Braudel (1973), the lion’s share of fashion theories recognizes that by the late Renaissance the desire for recurrent novelty that fashion requires started to seep into various strata and groups of Western society, enabling this formation to gain further momentum in succeeding epochs. Scholars thus by and large agree that fashion

is a modern phenomenon in its epochal meaning. Yet others evade the ongoing question of the exact chronological origins of fashion (e.g. Baudelaire 1995[1863]; Evans 2003; Parkins 2012; Wilson 2005), when regarding fashion as modern in its qualitative designation. Fashion is modern because it “prescribes what is ‘the right thing’ for ‘now’” (Sellerberg 2001: 5412). In doing so, as sociologist Herbert Blumer noted, it “implies a readiness to denigrate given older forms of life as being outmoded” (1969: 286). Fashion thus seems to fit Hartog’s, Koselleck’s, Nietzsche’s, and Osborne’s observations on the excluding features of the temporal modes of modernity. If it were not for the devaluation of the past and the exaltation of the present and the changeable, fashion would not have existed (Lipovetsky 2002: 18–25). Because fashion always aspires to be “of the moment,” it seeks to depart from its own history. Yet when thinking of the fashionable we necessarily think of the unfashionable or even the old-fashioned, which as a notion carries the past upon its sleeve. Wanting to be “in fashion” necessitates the continuous demonstration of up-to-dateness vis-à-vis the old-fashioned or the outmoded. In this respect the modern *Vergänglichkeit* of fashion, which has been translated with the neologisms *passingness* and *passagèreté* (Agacinski 2000: 180, 3), requires a relational self-fashioning in which fashion seeks to pin down its present momentum by allocating the passé outside the boundaries of the present; hence into fashion history. In this sense fashion is the ultimate carrier of modernity and expresser of the modern order of historicity (Hartog 2003).<sup>2</sup> The past and present of fashion, its history and modernity, are thus mutually excluding and mutually dependent notions.

This section developed that fashion is likened to the modern in both its epochal and qualitative meanings. Students of the latter interpretation of modernity offer a relational argument of its constitution, which is equally crucial to understand the interactions between the temporal modes of fashion. Because of the primacy of *passagèreté*, fashion is forced to produce continuously its own boundaries in the flow of time in relation to and dependent on what it does not wish to become: its own history. Despite current fashion studies literature agreeing on the evanescence of its research object, it has yet to settle when exactly fashion breaks off and slides into the past. The question of where we draw the boundaries of the fashion present seems paramount.

### **What Fashion Present?**

Hitherto scholars have defined fashion in a language of momentariness which sharply contrasts with the eternal or the timeless, according to a longstanding (originally Platonic) philosophical tradition. This tradition privileges permanence for its being (*Sein*) that can never pass and thus ultimately devours the value transience (*Schein*) might have. The French philosopher Sylviane Agacinski (2000: 13) noted that passingness is often cast in a language

of arrival and disappearance, birth and death. Yet because the eternal can never move from one place to another, it cannot *arrive* in the sensible and sensory world either.

In the mid-nineteenth century, in light of the ever-increasing percolation of fashion into wider society, Charles Baudelaire (1995[1863]) aimed to think through the arrival of the timeless *within* the passing. In his theory of beauty he claimed that the notion consisted of two poles; one eternal and immovable, one transient and contingent. Modernity or beauty's fleeting form constitutes the latter half of beauty's double-sidedness, which we may also call contemporaneity or fashion. The modern artwork succeeds when it distills for a moment the timeless, which inhabits the historical, from the transience of modernity. Most interestingly for this article, Baudelaire offered criticism a new conception of fashion's temporality. He sought to imagine how the *passagèreté* of fashion would not require viewing its own past as dead. Contrary to the chronological rectilinear understanding, Baudelaire maintained that fashion history, and the past more generally, could be very much alive in the fleeting present.

The historian of ideas Preston King (2000) developed a typology of "presents" that offers a resourceful framework for comprehending the various ways that the fashion present has (not) been cast off from the past. He demonstrated that the present has both chronological and substantive dimensions (2000: 54) and that these configurations challenge each other's credibility. Recently some scholars of fashion have taken up the substantive view of the presence of the past, arguing from a Baudelairean or Benjaminian perspective on modernity (e.g. Evans 2003; Lehmann 2000; Vinken 2005). Throughout the remainder of this article, however, I will propose that the field of high fashion production, supported by key works in the academic study of fashion, has so far construed fashion first and foremost as a sequential transient cultural formation that constantly shakes off its own past in the quest to create new beginnings. Although I am sympathetic to substantive readings of the fashion present, I see the need to explore further the widespread *aim* of the field of production to misrecognize the potential of the past to permeate the cracks in the boundaries of the present. Fashion marches under the banner of *passagèreté*. Furthermore, the construction of a chronometric skeleton for its changes lets fashion pace down a chronological path with fixed points of entry for the New and repudiation for the Old. King (2000) concedes that the central question in such chronological understandings of the present is centered on duration: how long does it take for fashion to turn into fashion history?

### ***The Instantaneous Fashion Present***

"Fashions die before they are born" (cited in Jones 2007: 37). With this dictum the *Mercurie Galant*, the first periodical to address the latest fashions, in 1673 evoked the short-lived duration of fashion styles. Nearly three centuries later the modernist couturière Elsa Schiaparelli echoed this observation, again in the topoi of birth and death, when she said that:

“as soon as a dress is born it becomes a thing of the past” (cited in Parkins 2012: 42). Coco Chanel likewise found that: “the more ephemeral fashion is, the more perfect it is. You can’t protect what is already dead” (Morand 1976: 140, cited in Vinken 2005: 42). Although such claims evade the question of who gave birth to fashion and when they did so, they illustrate how at times we experience the fleeting temporality of fashion to the extent that it exists only for the merest fraction of time. King (2000: 28) labels this as the chronological “instantaneous present.” Following this perspective, time is a three-point linear sequence in which the present always constitutes the middle point and represents:

what occurs...now. If we locate the present as that which we read or hear or say (etc.)...*now*, then whatever transpired or was recounted earlier in this paragraph, in this essay, in this day (and so on), is already past, is already final, is already history, including the “now” last cited. (King 2000: 28)

### ***The Extended Fashion Present***

Based on an ethnographic study of the Parisian world of high fashion, Herbert Blumer (1969) likewise came to understand fashion as merely “being in fashion” (1969: 289) or being “abreast of the times” (1969: 283). Blumer thus placed a premium on the present-ness of fashion. His observations of Parisian designers led him to argue that:

[t]hey pick up ideas of the past, but always through the filter of the present; they are guided and constrained by the immediate styles in dress, particularly the direction of such styles in the recent span of years. (1969: 280)

[Contrary to the view of the instant death of fashion, Blumer construed the fashion present as having some duration. A fashionable style runs over a certain amount of time until it “marches relentlessly to its doom” (1969: 278). Much like other theorists who mainly work from anthropological, economic, or sociological angles on the question of how long a fashion style persists and what causes its decline (e.g. Richardson and Kroeber 1947; Lowe and Lowe 1982; Nystrom 1928; Pesendorfer 1995; Simmel 1957), Blumer’s interest in the collective selection of fashion trends and the role of prestige figures in trend affirmation points to the idea that ‘being abreast of the times’ is a condition *with* duration. The fashion present is not instantaneous, simply because immediate death impedes any sense of a developing fashion trend. Blumer explicitly stated that he provides an account “of the operation of fashion in our contemporary epoch with its [...] emphasis on modernity” (1969: 278). He thus positioned himself as a researcher writing in the late 1960s contemporary to the designers he observed in the 1950s. Yet if Blumer were to understand the fashion present as evaporating as soon as



it is evoked, he simply could not study modern fashion while sharing its present moment because everything would become part of the instantaneous past the very instant fashion dies. We may further wonder whether it even makes sense to speak of an academic study of contemporary fashion when viewing the present of fashion as having no duration or temporal depth.

Instead, Blumer's collective selection thesis is a fine example of King's (2000: 30–6) notion of the "extended present." Blumer developed a chronological understanding of the present that has "something to stick to" (1969: 33). In other words, he was able to grasp the present by construing it as a time concept he can simultaneously experience and produce an account of. He studied modern fashion through collective selection *within* the moment. The boundaries of this extended present, however, are entirely arbitrary, as long as they do not conflate with the merest fraction in time (the instantaneous) or eternity (1969: 32). Blumer construed these boundaries in relation to Georg Simmel's (1957[1904]) theory of class differentiation, which he saw as relevant only in understanding fashion from the seventeenth to the nineteenth century in Europe. He found that his analysis, however, pertains to the present and its modernity reaching from the early twentieth century to Blumer's moment of writing. Yet his periodization of "our contemporary epoch" proves entirely contingent, as Blumer might just as well have chosen a decade, year, or fashion season to close off the duration of the fashion present.

### ***Not Enough Ghost Busters***

Regardless of the duration of the fashionable and in keeping with the argument that chronological time is irrevocable, both the instantaneous and extended chronological views picture fashion as lost irretrievably once the artificial demarcation line between present and past has been transgressed. Yet the past may hold more presence in fashion than some are willing to admit, as Caroline Evans (2003) and Barbara Vinken (2005) among others have noted. The following extract from a fashion review of the 2000 *haute couture* collections in Paris illustrates how one group of industry professionals, fashion journalists, acted as keepers of the chronological present-ness of fashion at a time when it seemed that, perhaps more than ever, experimental designers played with the Benjaminian philosophy of time discussed by Evans and Vinken. Comparing the collection of French designer Jean Paul Gaultier to those of Valentino and John Galliano for Dior, Cathy Horyn (2000a: B8) of *The New York Times* lamented that the latter two designers pulled too much of the past into the fashion present:

It is not by chance that high fashion causes mere mortals to grin with fright. Here is John Galliano, the chief designer of Dior, up in his studio explaining how his spring haute couture collection was inspired by the tramp balls that aristocrats used to throw for themselves in the 1920's. [...] That's been the

trouble with the spring 2000 couture shows, now in their third day. 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. The one brilliant exception was Jean Paul Gaultier. [...] He said, "It's important to remember that while I love the past, I am not from that time."

Since Galliano and Valentino did not accomplish their task as ghost busters, Horyn took it upon herself to demonstrate the importance of keeping the past from seeping into the fissures of the present. It is crucial to note, however, that Horyn qualifies her view. She writes in the same review: "[f]or high fashion to have meaning, it must have roots, yet they can't be so twisted or obscure as to have absolutely no connection to the present" (2000a: B8). Horyn grants the past some value as long as fashion history remains an inspirational source that designers *work upon* in order to modernize or "presentize" the past. She favored the Gaultier collection because "Mr. Gaultier did some ingenious things, like mixing old fabrics with current materials like python," which made the 2000 couture "a season elevated by Mr. Gaultier's light hand and the consideration he so obviously pays to making an old tradition say something new" (2000a: B8). In fashion, the past is thus valued only in light of the present, but not in its "spooky," non-worked-through self. In pinning down such "spooks" in the 1920s and 1963, Horyn cuts the too literal past from the 2000 correlative fashion present. The chronological conception Horyn puts forward illustrates how she perceives fashion history as, ultimately, absent. This should remain the case, so the argument goes, until it is extensively directed to express the current zeitgeist. In light of this observation Eugenia Sheppard in *The International Herald Tribune* reviewed the "Givenchy hit collection" in 1959 as "timely, because many American buyers have been threatening to lay him [Hubert de Givenchy] away in the mausoleum of fashion history" (1959: 5).

So far I have argued that viewing fashion history as a mausoleum requires a chronological conception of time that, irrespective of the time slot allotted to the present, pictures the past as a bygone through continuously referring to the difference between the modernity and history of fashion. Yet the chronological present-ness of fashion, enabled by its *passagèreté*, is not a natural feature born together with *la mode*. Rather it has demanded a variety of chronometric operations to strengthen the boundaries of the chronological present. The following section discusses how quantified time has not always accompanied fashion through a concise historical exploration of one of these operations on the experience of fashion change. This analysis strengthens further my contention that the chronological transience of fashion is

continuously performed by a plethora of public discourses. In the end the chronological passingness of fashion is thus constructed.

### **The Temporal Architecture of Fashion: Fashion Season and Fashion Week**

In his book *L'Ordre du Temps* (1984) the Polish philosopher of history Krzysztof Pomian developed the notion of “temporal architecture” to designate the idea that time, rather than an objective reality, is an order requiring a chronometric operation. The sociologist Eviatar Zerubavel (1982) would agree with Pomian’s argument that time is a social construct. He takes a more phenomenological approach, however, in understanding why we take for granted the sequential regularity of everyday life involving “before” and “after.” Following Harold Garfinkel’s (1967) notions of “figure” and “ground” (themselves inspired by the work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty) in “making sense” of “normal” practices, Zerubavel (1982: 19–21) demonstrates how our everyday world, by the application of time constructs (e.g. hour, day, week, month, year, season, epoch, century), receives a temporal anchorage from which to grant free-floating figures a ground against which they can be perceived. He adds that when we encounter “groundless figures,” we feel the strong need to establish such temporal anchorage or ground because without it the figure makes little sense. I would argue that before *la mode* received a rigid temporal anchorage it was a groundless figure.

Dictionary, academic, and producers’ definitions regard ephemerality and changeability as the crux of fashion, regardless of the duration of the time lapse between moments of passing. Until well into the late eighteenth century the fickle goddess of fashion was regarded with anxiety as her changes seemed beyond human control, popping up at indeterminate moments (Jones 2007). *The Mercure Galant* (1672–1724), the first periodic journal to dedicate considerable space to the topic of fashion under the auspices of Louis XIV, made the original attempt to govern its unpredictability by organizing the changes of *la mode* according to four principles: “royal authority, social rank, the season or weather, and gender” (Jones 2007: 28). Much earlier than Lise Skov’s (2010) observation of seasonal fashion change originating in the nineteenth century, the *Mercure* published pieces on the latest fashions in the Spring/Summer and in the Fall/Winter. In doing so the periodical rendered its content into a “timepiece” (Gumbrecht 1997: 233–40) that, much like clocks and calendars, publicly displayed the new seasonal rhythm of fashion. Such a seasonal ruling of fashion was primarily inspired by the wish of the Sun King and his minister of finance, Jean-Baptiste Colbert, to furnish and expand the French mercantilist economy. As Koselleck (2002: 3) reminds us, we simply cannot conceive of time without dating by naturalistic temporal divisions, although the experience of time cannot be degraded to temporal measures drawn from nature (e.g. season).

Organizing fashion change by the season surely benefited the French economy because of the rhythm’s propensity to be understood and accepted across borders. Yet responses were

far from positive at first as the fashion seasons did not necessarily coincide with the natural seasons on which they were modeled, causing both consumers and merchants great distress (Jones 2007: 33). It is ironic to have the most artificial phenomenon of all, as Baudelaire (1995[1863]) claimed a century later, mimic the natural changing of seasons. The budding high fashion industry thus unexpectedly turned the “older” cyclical and eternal temporality of the “natural season” into a designation that fragmented fashion time in the irrevocable time slots of the “fashion season.” Such temporal anchorage not only allowed *la mode* to transgress further national boundaries on the seeming analogy with the universal seasons of nature, it also granted the fickle changes of fashion a “rationality” of sorts. We may not know what fashion will offer us next, but at least by the late eighteenth century we could expect major changes to occur twice a year.

A century after the *Mercure*'s initial installment of seasonal fashion change, the *Cabinet des Mode* (1785–93) entered onto the scene. At this point only the season and gender had survived from the four earlier structuring principles (Jones 2007: 183). In the *Cabinet des Modes*, renamed *Magasin des modes nouvelles* (September 30, 1788), the fashion season worked like clockwork: “On the seventh of this month, everyone put on their fall clothing” (quoted in Jones 2007: 206, n. 12).<sup>3</sup> By the time the number of fashion publications exploded in the early and mid-nineteenth century, an important chapter in the temporal architecture of fashion had been built. In 1874 Stéphane Mallarmé had his alter ego, the fashion reporter Marguerite de Ponty, state in the fashion magazine *La Dernière Mode* that seasonal renewal was a *law of fashion*:

Why do I say all this, if not that (except in the case of lingerie, which obeys other laws of fashion than those of the season) we wish, at this moment of renewal, to reclothe our lady-reader from top to toe? (issue 2, September 20, quoted in Furbank and Cain 2004: 51)

Other early fashion theorists followed suit. For instance, both Karl Marx (1976[1867]: 608) in *Capital* and Thorstein Veblen in *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (1994[1899]) took for granted that fashion was temporally structured by biannual seasonal change when what was fashionable became old-fashioned.

The institutionalization of a twice-yearly *haute couture* “fashion week” in early twentieth-century Paris marked an important second chapter in the existing temporal architecture of fashion. Gumbrecht (1997: 238) notes that “[t]ime that is kept in the form of a constant rhythm needs to be publicly visible.” Fashion shows grouped in “fashion weeks” signal for a great audience of producers and consumers that the time for fashion change has yet again arrived. In 1911 *La Chambre Syndicale de la Couture Parisienne* (since 1973 *La Fédération Française de la*

*Couture du Prêt-à-Porter des Couturiers and Créateurs de Mode*), a trade organization having its origins in the mid-nineteenth century, centralized Parisian couture into a fashion system (Kawamura 2004: 38). The first institutionalized fashion shows in 1910 further rigidified the existing temporal architecture of fashion. These trade events with ritualistic aspects expose designers' latest collections to gatekeepers, such as journalists and buyers (Kawamura 2004: 61). Presenting a new collection during the Parisian fashion week is essential for the livelihood of every aspiring high fashion designer (Kawamura 2004: 62). Official inclusion on the member list of the Fédération, moreover, allows designers the privilege to pick the date and hour for their runway show from the calendar the Fédération designs every season. Like every type of calendar (Zerubavel 1982: 70–100), the show calendar of the Fédération strengthens in-group sentiments and exudes social control at the same time. Moreover, the Parisian show calendar is invested with great prestige. A newly appointed designer testifies: “[a]ll my friends and staff members were surprised and excited to see my name there. You suddenly become official. People look at you differently” (quoted in Kawamura 2004: 64). It is not only designers that work within this seasonal rhythm, however. The entire field of high fashion production, from fashion buyers (Entwistle 2009) to fashion journalists, follows this rigid temporal architecture that—chronologically speaking—is always four to six months (one season) ahead of the consumers of fashion. Although the time slots between the classic two buying seasons have been shortened in recent years with pre-Fall and cruise collections (Entwistle 2009; Skov 2010), the fashion weeks for the three types of high fashion (*haute couture*, *prêt-à-porter*, and menswear) still have the “fashion season” as their central axis.

In a recent contribution the sociologists Patrik Aspers and Frédéric Godart (2013: 171) define fashion as “the unplanned process of recurrent change against the backdrop of order in the public realm,” after which they add that fashion “can take place only given a background that is more stable than what is about to change” (Aspers and Godart 2013: 187). This section established that a public temporal order for the plentiful changes in fashionable dress was established by the investiture of the fashion season as an important chapter in the ongoing process of chronometric operations on the experience of fashion temporality. I would argue that the public display of fashion change as seasonally motivated, for instance on the pages of the fashion press and later in the time-grouped showings of the latest collections, contributed to an experience of the transience and changeability of fashion as a normal, understandable, or “grounded” feature of everyday life. In other words, the chronological architecture of fashion as organized by the season granted its changes the required background order in the public sphere. Through a variety of public discourses and practices we have naturalized the idea that the major changes of fashion enter our day-to-day lives at least two times a year, when the buds stem on the trees or when the leaves turn brown. The now self-evident rhythm of designer fashion thus forces its *passagèreté* into a scheme of regular, entrenched moments of change

in a regime of historicity (Hartog 2003) that largely shapes the experience of fashion change by the law of the season, although the institutionalized points of entry for the new have increased over the past decades. Admittedly, the gradual installment of the chronological anchorage of fashion over the past 300 years and the possible challenges to the chronometric operations that aimed for such irreversible order merit a more detailed account in future research. Yet I believe that it remains safe to conclude that the temporal architecture of fashion is a social convention. The next section sets out to show that the irreversible character of seasonal change has offered the high fashion industry more than a frame for global expansion: the potential to employ chronology in a politics of time.

## **Referential Coevalness and Chronopolitics in Fashion**

### ***Chronopolitics in Fashion***

In his sociological analysis of the field of high fashion production, Pierre Bourdieu noted how couturiers establish authority by placing other couturiers that threaten their appearance of newness or contemporaneity into the irrelevant and archaic past (Bourdieu and Delsaut 1975: 15). These couturiers thus seek to construe their fellow designers as anachronisms; or as existing in another time (Fabian 2002).

Yet it is not only groups and individuals participating in the material and symbolic production of fashion that contribute to the ban on the old-fashioned. This relational, temporal logic likewise bridges the world of production and consumption and is at play externally to the field of production. Analyzing the politics of time between designers and consumers, Ilya Parkins (2012) has recently nuanced Bourdieu's account. The couturiers discussed in her study (Poiret, Dior, and Schiaparelli) not only performed their ambivalent temporal identities in relation to other designers, but also vis-à-vis the female mannequins and costumers they dressed. The couturiers fashioned themselves as either contemporary or timeless through construing the women who they entered into a relationship with as respectively premodern relics from a past long gone or as the ultimate representations of ephemeral modernity.

The fashion media too engaged, and undoubtedly still do, in a self-fashioning rooted in the temporal disavowal of their (consuming) readership. When you imagine a hypothetical situation in which the average reader of fashion publications is as up-to-date as the fashion writers themselves, you endanger the core identity of these media as arbiters, pathfinders, and lecturers of fashionable taste. Consider the article "Olympia and London Fashions: Vogue's Eye View of the Mode" on the new Fall/Winter collections of 1928. The journalist evoked *Vogue* as being ahead in fashion time by implicitly positioning the magazine as more Knowledgeable (the "eye") than its readership:

Fashion is a fleet-footed divinity, and in order to get a good view of the mercurial goddess one must keep just a little ahead of her. Let her pass you and you find yourself panting in her wake with only a tantalizing glimpse of flying skirts and silver sandals. So let us instead keep a vantage point well to the fore. And here Vogue can offer you the hospitality of its own *advanced* observation post. (Anon. 1928: 55; author's emphasis)

So much is clear when glancing at the use of time concepts in fashion discourses. Negatively connoted notions nearly always evoke the past in general or the history of fashion more specifically. Yet the often-heard and read notions such as *so last season*, *so 2012* and *backward* and their opposites: *up-to-date*, *so 2013*, and *forward* do more than just attribute value. Such lexicon pulls clothes (and the people wearing and producing them) into the present of fashion and cuts others out by producing a clean divide between the past and present.

### ***Referential Coevalness***

Hitherto this article has shown that in matters of fashionable dress time concepts are used to deny physically synchronous people coevalness, or the recognition of living within the same time. When judging a style of dress as *passé*, you implicitly say that those who adopt the style display their anachronistic identity in the sartorial aspects of everyday life. Yet the chronopolitics invested in the dynamics of identity formation in fashion invite the question whether people, say fashion designers, would succeed in establishing an appearance of up-to-dateness by simply construing others as belonging to a different time, which is not their own? Are the politics of time effective when just failing (deliberately or not) to recognize the contemporaneity of others? The Dutch anthropologist Johannes Fabian argues in his groundbreaking book *Time and the Other* (2002) that such a "denial of coevalness," a practice which he also describes as the creation of the Other as an "allochronism," indeed supports the political project of the non-inclusion of the Other in the present. Fabian thus regards the concepts of "denial of coevalness" and "allochronism" as synonyms.

The theorist of history Berber Bevernage (2013: 2) recently disentangled these two concepts and found that saying that someone lives in another time (denial of coevalness) is actually "a politically neutral recognition of temporal difference." The concept of allochronism, however, remains politically charged. Interestingly, Bevernage adds that the latter concept only proves ideological through positing a relationship between the Self (West, White, Man, Present) and Other (Rest, Black, Woman, Past) in which these notions are regarded as coeval yet hierarchically qualified.<sup>4</sup> Let me give an example related to fashion. When you claim that someone who exclusively wears vintage clothing from the early 1960s sports a style stemming from another era in fashion history, you indeed recognize this person's non-coevalness. Yet

only when you inscribe his/her sartorial choices into your own fashion style that you regard as more representative of the present, you manage to create a temporal distance by positing your up-to-date styles as the “good practice for fashionable dressing.” Bevernage coins such politics of time as a:

seemingly “undeniable” *“referential coevalness”*. Only from the perspective of such a coevalness can difference be translated in terms of spatiotemporal backwardness of forwardness. Saying that another lives in another time or historical dimension is in itself not ideological: this effect comes into being when one claims the Other lives an earlier “phase” of our own history/time.  
(2013: 21)

Bevernage’s critical reading of Fabian’s work offers a new perspective on the above-mentioned question on the politics of time in fashion. The engagement in a variety of practices and discourses that display others as lagging behind whatever the time (individual, group, industry, etc.) is set as the referential time assists people in establishing an image of fashionability or present-ness. So rather than the allocation of others to a past that you do not share with them, it is their inscription in your own time, by which you recognize them as being coeval, that makes the politics of time particularly forceful. Hence, the undercurrent of fashion’s chronopolitics is the mutual existence of the fashionable and the passé individual or group *within* the referential time of the fashionable. I contend that, perhaps more so than other cultural industries, the designer fashion industry performs such a *political* project of referential coevalness by presenting the Other, who can be the consumer, the fellow designer, the model or the journalist, as an anachronism.

Moreover, if researchers wish to comprehend better the ideological notion of allochronism, they need to deconstruct how such referential coevalness is maintained, performed and comes into play in the first place (2013: 21). In the end its normativity is only “seemingly undeniable.” Through a focus on the origin and the public display of the chronological temporal architecture of fashion, this article has contributed a first inquiry into our normalized account of the seasonal rhythmicity of fashion change. It developed that luxury fashionable dress came into its institutionalized systemic state in the modern regime of historicity that values the past less than other temporal configurations (Hartog 2003). Yet only by positing its own changeable up-to-dateness as the yardstick in matters of fashionable dress has the institutionalized field of high fashion been able to establish an ideological referential coevalness, forceful to the extent that both high-end and mass-produced fast fashion are temporally organized on sequential seasonal lines.<sup>5</sup> This article has further demonstrated that in the field of fashion such referential coevalness is tightly anchored by historically contingent chronological designations. Indeed, the now naturalized temporal architecture of fashion has become self-evident of the ongoing



distinctions between objects and people deemed “fashion-forward” and those judged as “backward.” At present the sequential structure of the passingness of fashion frames the justification for assessments that find a particular couturier, consumer, or fashion item to be *passé*.

## **Conclusion**

This article has shown that our temporal conception of fashion is interwoven with a present that defines itself in a relational manner to whatever style came before. The self-fashioning of the fashion present construes fashion history as its negation, while also being dependent upon the otherness of fashion’s past to perform its modern transcendence. Recently scholars (e.g. Evans 2003; Lehmann 2000; Vinken 2005) have thought through the temporality of fashion in a substantive manner that foregrounds the presence of the past. The academic debate has insufficiently conceptualized the dominant criteria, however, by which the field of production construes and maintains the boundaries of the present. Following the typology of “presents” developed by Preston King, I have argued that both the designer fashion industry and key thinkers in fashion studies developed a forceful chronological conception of the fashion present (with or without duration) which sought to keep fashion history out of modern fashion. At present we tend to take for granted the chronological passingness of fashion. I maintained that, rather than the sequential transience of fashion being a natural given, a variety of discourses and practices within and outside the field of high fashion production continuously reinforce this perspective. Paradoxically enough, this ultimately turns fashion history to present in its state of absence, which implies that the chronometric operations invested in fashion production means that all those who seek to deny the presence of fashion’s past can never rest on their laurels if they are to avoid (fashion) history seeping into the fashion present.

Consequently, the performative naturalization of the chronological architecture of fashion has no fixed state. This implies a potential to de-naturalization. In this article I hope to have established that “the preoccupation with chronology,” the maintenance of which the field of high fashion performs with great rigor, “restrains us in perceiving the political in the politics of time” (Bevernage 2013: 20). How else may we understand that soon after the negative judgment that I was wearing a *passé* dress imprinted with the historical present of *six seasons ago*, I accepted my friend’s judgment based on the (now exposed) self-evident rationalization that his aesthetic industry knowledge is more *advanced* than mine? The field of high fashion production and those allying with it rely on statements and naturalizations like these to sustain their forwardness in the sequential temporal architecture the field has constructed for itself.

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## Notes

1. Hartog (2003) argues that the modern regime of historicity, characterized by its denouncement of the past, was initiated by the French Revolution and lasted until the late 1980s. This observation is supported by the work of Koselleck (2004) who also views the late eighteenth century as the start of the *Neuzeit* or the time of the birth of the "otherness" of the past. Yet the rejection of the past in favor of the present and the future has been key to the definition of fashion since its inception, generally located well in advance of the French Revolution. Obviously fashion has turned heads away from the past much earlier than Hartog's periodization allows. With Bevernage and Lorenz (2013: 9), we may therefore question whether Hartog's historicization of time regimes has received enough empirical attention to posit such an epochal unity. Fashion may be one cultural outlet in which the modern time-conception manifested itself earlier than the late eighteenth century.

2. Admittedly, "retro" may be a valid sartorial choice in the modern fashion landscape. Although the notion "retro" was only designated as such in the later twentieth-century fashion world, retro fashions figure prominently both in retro youth or subcultures (Jenss 2004) and in the designer fashion world. In keeping with Peter Osborne's definition of the modern as the valorization of the present over the past, however, the field of high fashion production tends to privilege "non-retro" styles. I would argue that, whereas retro subcultures value the notion's quality of past-ness permanently and in its own right, the designer fashion world only appreciates "retro" in a particular moment of fashion, that is to say, as expressive of a transient fashion present.

3. The temporal structure of changing into the appropriate clothes for the hour of the day likewise found its footing in the eighteenth century (Jones 2007: 184). Even when (upper-class) men and women changed fashions several times a day until well into twentieth century, the fashion season remained the pillar supporting the overall appropriate dress choice.

4. The idea that past and present in fashion are reciprocally dependent and excluding notions, bearing on Osborne's (1992, 1995) argument of the negation of the past as the qualitative characteristic of the modern, operates as an allochronism in Bevernage's (2013) understanding of the term. It displays the modern or the fashionable as more representative of the present than what comes before in time.

5. Joanne Entwistle (2009: 86) differentiates this argument in her ethnographic study of high-end fashion buyers. More than the mass-market high street segment which follows trends closer to the time of purchase, designer fashion remains predicated on the biannual seasonal rhythm of change.

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Aurélië Van de Peer is a PhD Fellow of the Research Foundation Flanders—FWO at the Department of Philosophy, Ghent University (Belgium). Her dissertation explores how the printed fashion media have constructed their object of criticism throughout the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Her work has appeared in *Address: Journal for Fashion Criticism*.  
aurelie.vandeppeer@ugent.be