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Mapping the fashion film festival landscape: Fashion, film, and the digital age

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The digital revolution and the reorganisation of the media environment have contributed to the emergence of new forms to communicate and to apprehend media. These mutations and technological evolutions have allowed renewed fashion imagery and enabled new forms of communicating fashion, making fashion films a relevant and widely broadcasted form. Forms of distribution move from promotional spots in movie theaters to social media (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram), video platforms (YouTube, Vimeo), specific fashion film platforms (Nowness, ShowStudio), or television fashion channels (Fashion TV). However, fashion film festivals play an essential role in the spread and valorisation of fashion films. Analysing and discussing their diversity provides an understanding of the fashion film festival circuit.

From an aesthetic approach, fashion films are connected to what is currently identified as a ‘new media genre’.[1] It is hybrid media, with characteristics of ‘immersion cinema’,[2] where image and sound are used in order to intensify the sensorial experience, exploring synesthetic properties in film reception. Fashion film comprises different types of films; it can be understood as short films inspired by the fashion universe with a strong focus on aesthetics, it can be apprehended as documentaries about fashion, art video recordings, or comedy sketches. It can have narrative or non-narrative storylines, be inspirational or focused on self-derision, or have codes from film genres or video clips.

Even if the term ‘fashion film’ is not well-known to all communities, there is an important increase of its production, aiming at different ends. Indeed, since the first fashion film festival was launched in 2006, more than a hundred different events of this kind have taken place at least once in over 46 countries on the five continents. Based on data gathered between 2015 and

2017, the highest peak in fashion film festivals was in 2014, when the number of festivals has doubled compared to 2013. However, from 2015 to 2017 the number of film festivals have settled down toward what can be understood as a period of stabilisation of an innovation ('confirmation' stage of the adoption process of an innovation).[3]

To understand the fashion film festival circuit, in this review I will first consider how fashion films have developed through the years, briefly outlining historical origins as well as sketching the social and technological context. Then I will map the fashion film festival landscape and indicate its variety, how it is organised as a system, and the role of the digital age on its prosperity.

Fashion on screen or the birth of fashion films

Although the first international fashion film festival was not staged until 2006, in Los Angeles (*You Wear it Well*) and London (*Fashion in Film Festival*), precursors to such film aesthetics could already be observed in early cinematic motion pictures. Fashion and film have always had a symbiotic relationship since the first experimental uses of the cinematograph in the beginning of the 20th century. In the online archives of British Pathé, many films about fashion trends from that period give interesting insights about the origins of fashion films. At that time, fashion moving images were screened within the Pathé Weekly in London, or the Gaumont Actualités in Paris, as part of newsreels.[4] Gradually, as the technique was being mastered and improved, an increasing attention to aesthetics and *mise en scène* can be observed, such as slow delicate tilt shots,[5] close-up shots, and an attention to the context and angles of shots.[6] Even if the decade is known for the advent of advertising in different fields of consumption, fashion was precisely the field where art could be nested naturally. Despite different experimental films that came out in that period, films on fashion did not evolve much, photography being the major form of communication since then. Indeed, fashion and costume have been in the center of feature film plots – but not as an expression itself.

A hundred years after the cinematograph, the internet and digital technologies have awakened a new wave of inspiration in the fashion field. The 2000s was a symbolic decade of transition, marking the mutations in progress in media and audiovisual environments.[7] It is also pertinent to emphasise that, within the increasing spawn of social media platforms, visual

forms of communication became imperative within the digital sphere – and moving images are esteemed today as a form of discourse as reliable as text itself.

In this enthusiastic mood, fashion photographer Nick Knight, considered a pioneer of fashion films, has created an online platform dedicated to fashion photography and fashion moving image. A few years later, in 2006, American fashion journalist Diane Pernet launched the first fashion film festival in Los Angeles, named You Wear it Well.[8] The same year, Marketa Uhlirova launched the first edition of Fashion in Film Festival in London. With a different perspective, the festival aimed to be a retrospective showcase of film and video work in fashion, screening documentary, instructional and propaganda films, newsreels, artist videos, and fashion image-makers' shorts. The festival also had a focus on archives, and in contrast to other festivals hosts special screenings of rarely-seen cult movies with fashion and clothing as their central theme.[9] Indeed, when fashion films started to become popular – at least amongst the fashion industry – creating a dedicated festival seemed an interesting strategy to spread this content, to make it legitimate, and to approach fashion as a form of art, borrowing codes from the most legitimate film festivals.

From 2006 to 2010, both A Shaded View on Fashion Film and Fashion in Film Festival were the only relevant festivals around fashion. However, from 2011 other festivals started to appear, such as the New York Fashion Film Festival and the Berlin Fashion Film Festival. By 2014 more than 30 fashion film festivals took place all over the world.



Fig. 1: Fashion Film Festivals overview

Mapping the fashion film festival landscape

As a general trend, numerous film festivals of the 21st century have arisen from the convergence of a specific cultural practice or object seeking to link individuals to new identities in public alternative public spheres.[10] As highlighted previously, fashion films have emerged in an effervescent creative mood as well as in the context of a technological evolution: digital processes has enabled the manipulation of many aspects of film, as well as making filmmaking itself accessible; also, the internet made it easy to spread this content on different video platforms.

In my analysis I found it essential to take into consideration different types of fashion film festivals, since their organisational forms diverge from one festival to another. More than half of the festivals are entirely dedicated to fashion films (A Shaded View on Fashion Film, Fashion in Film, Berlin Fashion Film Festival) while others are incorporated into major film festivals, as short film festivals (London Short Film Festival, Aesthetica Short Film Festival), feature film festivals where they are screened as a category of film (Season Film Festival, International Film Festival of Rotterdam, Bird Eye View Film Festival), or on the occasion of a fashion or art event, which can be the case of itinerant festivals. Even though fashion films seek a recognition from different fields they do not deny their belonging to the fashion industry. Due to their diffusion based on festivals and online platforms, fashion films have a means of distribution similar to short films. However, the means of production, distribution, and consumption should be apprehended through a brand new perspective.

A relevant aspect of film festivals concerns the place chosen to hold the event. From the collected database, I could observe that more than 50% of the analysed festivals have taken place in museums, art galleries, and art centers, or in movie theaters and cinemathèques. This choice shows the aim to bring fashion films closer to an art expression and away from pure advertising, embracing a hybrid nature and being presented as a completely new object. It seems fair to say that fashion film festivals seek to be recognised as film festivals, but also as creative art events.

Moreover, fashion film festivals are present in different fields according to their organisational form. The types of fashion film festivals can be organised following four main key aspects:

Films: The program of fashion film festivals can be very eclectic. A few festivals focus on feature films about the fashion industry or biopics on the

greatest designers, while others screen historical films with a particular focus on costumes, early silent films where costumes have a relevant role, or contemporary short films made by high and low fashion brands as well as amateurs filmmakers (which includes inspirational films, experimental, comedy sketches, etc.). It also includes documentaries or experimental films not necessarily focused on fashion but on art in general.

Events: A few festivals have a professional goal, where the main objective is to bring together professionals from the fashion, art, and film fields to discuss and inspire (Milan Fashion Film Festival). Other festivals keep a more academic approach, gathering researchers from different fields to discuss fashion in a popular scientific communication, and shared with a diversified audience (Dressing the Film, Fashion in Film Festival). A few festivals are focused on awards while others prefer to focus on film screenings only (Copenhagen Fashion Film Festival). A few festivals have conferences, master classes, or art installations, while others focus on social events such as performances, parties, and ceremonies. However, a few festivals mix many of these aspects together.

Audience: The target audience also varies from one festival to another. While some festivals are open to all kinds of audiences – professionals, amateurs, and the curious – and are quite accessible in terms of ticket prices (A Shaded View on Fashion Film, London Fashion Film Festival), others target a small group of people and are organised as a meeting between professionals from the fashion and film industries. In this case, tickets might be limited and have higher prices, often including glamorous prize ceremonies and parties (La Jolla International Fashion Film Festival, Milano Fashion Film Festival). However, this limits a wider audience and keeps a small circle of regular festival goers.

Also, regarding the motivational aspects of audiences, based on in-depth interviews, it is possible to underline three major dimensions:

1. **Professional:** includes answers drawing attention to the festival as a valued network and institutional occasion for interaction.
2. **Inspirational:** includes answers emphasising the discovery of new fields of work and the possibility to see art inspired films.
3. **Curiosity:** covers answers featuring the discovery of an unknown subject.

Awards: It is important to notice that fashion film festivals are organised following the system of classical film festivals, but adding a touch of glamour

from the fashion universe and the art side of art exhibitions. From the film milieu, it usually brings together the excitement of stars, cinema, and the glamour of red carpets and ceremonies. Even though fashion film festivals can be seen as edgier, niche festivals, they are often organised as celebrity and luxury events. The main objective remains the encounter of fashion professionals from different fields (filmmakers, photographers, journalists, illustrators, designers), the fusion of fashion and film art, as well as a form to recognise filmmakers from around the world, celebrating a new form of filmmaking. It helps the filmmakers publicise their films chosen for the festival and to create buzz.

Fashion film festivals will not focus on costume or beauty more than other film festivals. They keep the film techniques, the story, best actor, best director, best soundtrack, the direction, and the photography as the main prize categories. In addition to that a few specific prizes are added, such as 'Best Hairstyle', 'Best Makeup', and 'Best Costume' (even if the category 'Costumes' is often present in film festivals in general, as in the Césars, the British Academy Awards, or the category 'Hair and Makeup' for the Oscars). A few fashion film festivals also separate categories from fashion film and promotional film, marking the difference between what is an advertising fashion film and what is a short fashion film.

Since fashion film festivals are still relatively new, we can observe a range of different jury members: journalists (specialised and general press), marketing and advertising professionals, actresses, models, film directors, fashion designers, photographers, researchers, writers, and museum curators. Through these very diversified jury members, fashion film festivals aim to reach recognition and legitimation from different areas, and mostly to establish a consensus on the definition of what a fashion film is.

Other than the approval of intellectuals and experts, another category of jury is present in fashion film festivals: fashion media. These media professionals represent the third jury category most often seen in fashion film festivals. It is interesting to notice that another part of the jury is composed of fashion photographers, who are exploring new media but have the knowhow and the sensibility for fashion. Indeed, the collectivity of judgement is varied, with professionals coming from different fields but that sometimes have the same role in different festivals.

Concluding thoughts

Despite the fact that fashion films find multiple forms to spread in, festivals have an essential role in the propagation of the fashion film concept, contributing to the detachment of fashion from its economic capital to a wider cultural sphere. While being a form of 'new media', it is also firmly situated within the context of the current social organisation, which might explain its limited ability to weaken the established dominant representational codes.

We can say that the digital age has had a meaningful impact on the diversity of film festivals in general; it has enabled them to broadcast niche contents, it has democratised filmmaking (accessible materials and platforms to spread amateurs' films), and it has made it possible to connect specific audiences on a transnational scale. Fashion film festivals are one of the many niche film festivals that have arisen within the digital revolution. Fashion films have become then a significant aspect of the moving image culture of fashion communication, and they continue to reshape the system and the ways to consume it. Also, the fashion film festival circuit has an important role in the processes of legitimisation and stabilisation of this new object.

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Notes

- [1] See more about new media in Manovich 2001.
- [2] See more about the Diffusion of Innovations theory in Everett 2003 (orig. in 1962).
- [3] See more about the 'immersion cinema' in Jullier 1997.

- [4] Leese 1991.
- [5] 'Fashion early 1900's – Rare footage', British Pathé YouTube Channel: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kc32Ks-3NY8> (accessed on 27 September 2017).
- [6] 'Paris Fashions (1909)', British Pathé YouTube Channel: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_pQGweZK6jU (accessed on 27 September 2017).
- [7] We can evoke here the notion of transmedia storytelling developed by Henry Jenkins and defined by him as 'a process where elements of a fiction get dispersed systematically across multiple delivery channels for the purpose of creating a unified and coordinated entertainment experience'. Online at http://henryjenkins.org/blog/2007/03/transmedia_storytelling_101.html (accessed on 27 September 2017).
- [8] The festival You Wear it Well was described as '[a]n annual festival of short films & videos that explores the intersection of film with fashion, beauty and style. These themes have traditionally been the domain of still photography and have rarely been a feature element of film. However, with the advent of the internet and other new ways of communicating, cross-disciplinary approaches to short film are now beginning to find a growing audience.'
- The Fashion in Film Festival description: '[t]he programme features films and videos that have fashion and clothing as their central theme, bringing together a variety of genres that have reported on, promoted and documented fashion, otherwise "spoken" about it or used it to attract and entertain audiences. It explores the ambiguous relationship between the machines of Western fashion and film, revealing film's tendency to discredit fashion while paradoxically celebrating its seductive power and enigmatic qualities. Clothing will be revisited as fashion's proper subject, with the aim to establish an intimacy between clothing and the film viewer.'
- [9] De Valck & Loist & Kredell 2016.
- [10] From in-depth interviews gathered during the festival A Shaded View on Fashion Film in December 2015.