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## Fashion film festivals: Shifting perspectives on fashion in one of the world's dirtiest industries

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Fashion film festivals have quite suddenly mushroomed worldwide. After the establishment of the pioneering Fashion in Film Festival[1] in 2006 in London, the idea was picked up in Paris by fashion critic and blogger Diane Pernet, who founded A Shaded View On Fashion Film[2] in 2008. From then on, the fashion film festival concept has significantly grown in different parts of the world. The breakthrough of the fashion film festival as a distinctive subtype of film festival came forth in 2014 when ten new festivals were initiated, and the list is still growing.

The years in which these film festivals focusing on fashion (and/in) film have emerged and spread have also been remarkable for the fashion industry. Over the last decade fashion consumers have become more aware of the impact of the mass consumption of trend-based clothing,[3] and are slowly becoming more critical with regards to where, how, and by whom their clothes are made. Hence 'sustainability' has become a hot topic in fashion (and beyond).[4] I will be reviewing three types of fashion film festivals with distinct selections and approaches to fashion films and their contextualisation. This review concentrates on one question: how these festivals position the fashion film within the rapidly expanding (fast) fashion culture, and how they relate to the increasing public awareness of the industry's dark sides. I will look at how these festivals are not only shaping the way spectators look at fashion films, but also how they look at fashion through fashion films. Hereby I question the critical standpoint of these festivals with regards to the issue of sustainability that the fashion industry is currently dealing with. After all, a key target group of fashion films are audiences who are interested in and consume fashion.

## The Fashion in Film festival London

Established by Marketa Uhlířová, Christel Tsilibaris, and Roger Burton, the Fashion in Film festival premiered in London in May 2006 as the first film festival of its kind. The founders' academic background informed the set-up of the festival: Fashion in Film is an exhibition, research, and education project founded at The Horse Hospital, and now has its home at Central Saint Martins College of Art and Design, part of the University of the Arts London. The concept of Fashion in Film is to combine film screenings with various other projects, such as exhibitions, talk series, and conferences. The festival showcases films that encourage discussion on (fashion and costume) design in film, ranging from documentaries, fashion films, commercials, newsreels, early cinema, experimental films, classic and forgotten gems in European, American, and world cinemas.

The 2017 edition, entitled 'Wearing Time: Past, Present, Future, Dream', explored the connections between fashion, cinema, and time, connecting the temporal finiteness that is inherent to the concept of fashion with film as a temporal medium. The premise is that 'clothing/fashion is not only a vehicle for representing time, but can actually invoke a sense of the past, present and future'.<sup>[5]</sup> The festival structures time in past, present, and future, but adds a fourth dimension to it: the dream. This extra dimension shows that instead of categorising films in a predefined time box, the aim of the festival is to showcase the complexity of the magic and attraction of fashion and its relation with time through film:

[s]lipping out of waking conscious time into the world of wish fulfilment or nightmare demands a different raiment. Not simply the sleepwear of pyjamas, or even the fantasy of nudity (...), the fashion of slumber-land may invoke a projected fantasy of the future, or a sudden intrusion from the repressed past. <sup>[6]</sup>

Neither the seemingly defined time spectrums of past, present, and future are presented as self-evident. For example, in the 'past' section fashion and media scholar Silvia Vacirca gave a talk about how costume films demand historical accuracy but also have to relate to a contemporary audience.<sup>[7]</sup> The past therefore always forms a bridge with the 'now', making time and fashion not a measurable entity but a fluid imagined reality. But even the present now is difficult to grasp, and cannot be defined as '(...) a static moment, but [rather as] one in which time rushes on (...)'<sup>[8]</sup> as in Varda's *Cléo From 5 to*

7 (1962), or may even be characterised by the absence of time like in the textured abstract world of *The Colour of Pomegranates* (Parajanov, 1969). Besides that, the future needs to be a recognisable version of the present, reinterpreting the past and present.

The film program aims to decompose time in relation to fashion and reflects upon a different understanding of fashion for which 'fashio' is perhaps not the right word. Instead of being pre-defined by temporality – today it is 'in' and tomorrow it is 'out' – fashion is shown as having a much more complex relation to time, one in which elements of the past are constantly re-mixed for reimagining the future, blurring the present with references. Directly and indirectly the festival's program may inspire the spectator to reflect upon how their consumerism relates to the pre-defined temporal understanding of fashion, and how this could be imagined differently. Instead of focusing on the novelty of tomorrow, propagated by fashion as an industry, the festival uses film as the art of time passing to clarify fashion as an ambiguous construction of multiple experiences and interpretations of time. This understanding is pivotal for a sustainable future of fashion in which conscious re-using and remixing of items over time is one of the factors that can contribute to a longer lifetime of clothes.

## **The Canadian International Fashion Film Festival**

The Fashion in Film festival in London does not call itself a 'fashion film festival' specifically – a term that has become popular for many other fashion film-related festivals. Indeed, Fashion in Film addresses a much broader spectrum of films than what would typically be considered as 'fashion films' today. This usually concerns a short film that is inspired by fashion, either by featuring it and/or by (re)creating the overall feeling or philosophy of a certain fashion item, brand, or movement. These films are deeply embedded in contemporary online (commercial) culture and social media channels, and allow for experimentation with the possibilities of fashion as both an industry and an art form and practice.

The Canadian International Fashion Film Festival (CANIFFF) is one of the newest fashion film festivals focusing particularly on the contemporary fashion film; it launched its first edition in 2016. The festival is set up from both a love and intrigue for fashion and fashion film, highlighting the artistic qualities of the fashion film by providing a cinematic and offline platform, whilst

in turn inevitably also creating additional value for its commercial purposes, pushing creativity within branded content through its awards. The value of the festival for visitors is created through the engagement of the audience with an insider's perspective on the fashion film industry, as well as an opportunity for young talents to network. The festival's objective is to submerge the visitor in the world of fashion film by taking the audience behind the scenes of the industry, and touring through the ethics of fashion.[9] The CANIFFF embeds the topic of ethical fashion within a context of luxury and glamour, for example in 2016 with the opening of the festival with a luxury screening and event at the four star Le Germain Hotel, followed by an Ethical Fashion Initiative screening and talk by Rebecca van Bergen[10] on ethical fashion on the second day. The event is then closed with a glamorous red carpet awards ceremony and after party.

The latest festival edition held in May 2017 screened and awarded the documentary *RiverBlue* (McIlvride and Williams 2016), which exposes environmental catastrophes caused by the fashion industry. Through the festival's programming, the debate on ethical and sustainable fashion becomes an integral part of luxury fashion, instead of a contrasting debate that condemns fashion. The argument of ethical/sustainable dimensions as a fundamental part of luxury/high fashion is then communicated from inside-out in the industry, and becomes an exciting source of improvement and new creative possibilities for design. However, the festival's pitfall is that it distances itself from fast fashion by focusing on the luxury industry, and hereby tends to deny the flaws and socio-environmental impact of the latter. The program introduction reads:

[w]e celebrated Earth Day in Kensington with Swizzlesticks and screened the film *RiverBlue* which exposes the industry of fast fashion and how it is polluting the rivers worldwide. [11]

In *RiverBlue*, a high fashion company like Gucci is quite literally put alongside mass fashion chains like Forever21 and GAP, but CANIFFF does include Gucci's fashion film *Gucci #24HourAce* (Marlon Rueberg, 2016) in their official selection screening (while not showing any films related to fast fashion brands).

From the above I would conclude that the fashion film festival event has the power of transforming the predominantly activist debate on ethical and sustainable fashion into a self-evident dimension of high fashion. The concept of luxury then transcends the look, name, and quality of clothing, but also

entails the importance of the impact of its production on people and the environment. Consequently, since high and luxury fashion greatly influences what happens in the mass or fast fashion industry,[12] this could have a significant influence on the fashion industry as a whole. However, the festival also seems to create a misconception of sustainability in fashion by dismissing the socio-environmental problems as solely related to the fast fashion industry, implying that sustainable fashion is only attainable for the elite that can afford luxury fashion. Still, fair and sustainable fashion is explicitly and implicitly portrayed as desirable, which may change consumer demands beyond the luxury industry.

## The Aesthetica Short Film Festival

The Aesthetica Short Film Festival (ASFF) is hosted by art and culture magazine Aesthetica, which was founded in 2002. The British magazine covers a range of topics from design, photography, fashion, architecture, film, music, exhibitions, and performances. The film festival was established in 2011, and in 2014 expanded its program with a fashion[13] and advertising category, alongside earlier categories as animation, music video, artists' film, documentary, thriller, dance, comedy, experimental drama, and family-friendly films. This was also the year in which the festival acquired BAFTA qualifying status. Interesting is the separation between the additional fashion and advertising categories, implying that a fashion film is indeed much more than a fancy marketing strategy. The film festival's program reads that fashion films are 'taking new steps towards a new filmic and stylistic way of storytelling' and even 'question the very concepts of fashion and aesthetics in today's world'.[14] Advertising is described as 'initially a tool for selling the latest in designer and technological products that is embarking on new aesthetic endeavors'.[15]

Because the film festival is not a 'fashion film festival' specifically, such as the CANIFFF, (luxury) fashion films do not necessarily end up in the fashion category, but may be classified under advertising. Some examples from the latest edition of the festival, which was held in November 2016, are *By the Way* (John Wright, 2015) for Fendi, *From Lancôme With Love* (Wright, 2016), and *Never Ending Story* (Metz and Racine, 2015) for Luis Vuitton. While the advertising category often praises aesthetically polished branded content, the fashion category goes a step further by looking at how film as a medium can

change the way we think about fashion. Inherent to this category division and film festival format itself is a critical view on fashion films, prompting the young genre to experiment and develop, while distancing it from sole commercial successes. Fashion films then go on to create ‘cinematic fashioned worlds’, in which fashion is not solely the central object (as in look books or commercials) or an attribute of a character-supporting narrative (as for example in costume films), but in which fashion is translated through the overall film language and aesthetics.

Giuliana Bruno introduced the idea of a ‘fashioned world’ when describing Wong Kar-wai’s *In the Mood for Love* (2000): ‘attire is carefully constructed as if it were a tangible form of architecture, while lived space, in turn, is fashioned as if it were an enveloping dress, a second skin’.[16] In other words, the very structure of ASFF pushes fashion films in which fashion becomes a fundamental part of film aesthetics and the creation of a ‘fashioned’ cinematic emotional world and experience. The fact that fashion here transcends clothing as an object, but instead becomes an overall aesthetics and feeling, shifts the focus from the desirability of solely possessing a certain garment towards living an experience. I would argue that these films can change and shape the perception of fashion as not a solely superficially/aesthetically-oriented, fugitive, and disposable series of material objects, but as a deeply engaging experience with an emotional affect. This intrinsic mindset opens up new possibilities for a more sustainable understanding of fashion that is not a temporary consumer product, but creates worlds and garments in and with which we can grow.

## Conclusion

As important ‘gatekeepers’, fashion film festivals have a significant impact on the development of the fashion film genre. In various ways, these festivals shape perspectives on fashion through certain framings of fashion films – Fashion in Film through thematic research, the Canadian International Fashion Film Festival by moving the debate on sustainability into the glamorous environment of luxury, while Aesthetica Short Film Festival pushes the young genre itself further beyond its commercial dimension into the creation of fashioned worlds, allowing a more intimate conception of fashion. The festival as event can promote emotional longevity as an intrinsic part of fashion from the inside-out, occurring as a natural consequence of a shift in

perspective (instead of externally imposing sustainability on fashion through environmental activist movements). Fashion is then about the (ongoing) personal relationship between clothing and wearer, instead of a volatile alter ego.

Overall, the fashion film festival as a platform lends itself well to explicitly addressing questions around sustainability in fashion, because it positively engages with fashion as both an attraction that plays on the emotion of desire, but also brings it forward as a complex cultural phenomenon that is intellectually challenging and worthy of reflection. It is within this dialectic space, filled with fashion's glamorous aura, that fashion (film) can be questioned more critically without losing its attractiveness, which could stimulate a more mindful perception of the fashion industry.

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## Notes

- [1] [www.fashioninfilm.com](http://www.fashioninfilm.com).
- [2] [www.ashadedviewonfashionfilm.com](http://www.ashadedviewonfashionfilm.com).
- [3] Jones et al. 2005, p. 36; Niinimäki 2010, p. 151; Salesses & Romain 2013, p. 179; Shen et al. 2012, p. 234; Ritch & Schröder 2012, p. 203.



- [4] The term 'sustainability' has been used in various academic fields ranging from fashion studies to environmental studies, geography, urban studies, landscape architecture, sociology, anthropology, economics, and more, accounting for many different interpretations and conceptualisations. I will be referring to sustainability in the context of fashion studies, where the challenge has been to address issues around waste, recycling, fashion design, and the way in which fashion is (re)presented in relation to environmental exhaustion and social ethics.
- [5] <http://www.fashioninfilm.com/festival/wearing-time-past-present-future-dream/>.
- [6] Fashion in Film 2017, p. 45.
- [7] Ibid., p. 15.
- [8] Ibid., p. 25.
- [9] CANIFF 2016, p. 2.
- [10] Rebecca van Bergen is the founder and executive director of NEST, a non-profit organisation that helps local artisan businesses to fairly reintegrate into the fashion industry.
- [11] CANIFF 2017, p.3.
- [12] Haug & Busch 2015, p. 331.
- [13] In partnership with the London College of Fashion: <http://www.asff.co.uk/round-new-strands-fashion-advertising-asff-2014/>.
- [14] Aesthetica Short Film Festival 2016, p. 115.
- [15] Ibid., p. 123
- [16] Bruno 2011, p. 87.