



# Fashion and Organization Studies: Exploring conceptual paradoxes and empirical opportunities

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## **Fashion & Organization Studies:**

### **Exploring conceptual paradoxes and empirical opportunities**

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#### **Abstract**

Although frequently perceived as inconsequential and frivolous, fashion is a central interdisciplinary concept, and a substantial global industry. This necessitates taking it seriously, both as a set of theoretical tensions, and as a concrete empirical phenomenon of rich potential interest to organization studies. Our essay outlines and further develops fashion's conceptual and empirical expressions, and suggests subsequent avenues for valuable research. In particular, we commence with a discussion of three key definitions, namely fashion as individual manner, fashion as organizing of dress, and fashion as a system. This enables us to problematise its industry and economy, from their historical roots and evolutions, to their varied organizational frictions, forms and practices today. We then conclude by examining the on-going, substantial changes within the fashion industry as we have known it since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and considering its potential implications and openings for organization studies scholars.

#### **Keywords**

Fashion, sociology, paradox, aesthetic economy

## **Introduction: ‘I love fashion, but it’s everything I hate’<sup>1</sup>**

This essay engages with what fashion *is*, and how and what it *does*, at individual, organisational, and industry levels. In taking it seriously, we also purposefully counter its continued popular perception as being ‘simultaneously frivolous and indulgent’, according to a report on ‘The State of Fashion 2017’ (BoF/McKinsey, 2017, p. 6) – a perception present in scholarship as well. For example, Kawamura (2005) and Tseelon (1997) highlighted fashion’s dismissal in mainstream sociology partly due to historically being seen as chiefly relevant to women, while Aspers and Godart (2013) noted its perceived, and problematic, link to outward appearance and consumption. In economics, Nystrom (1928, p. 68) described fashion as ‘for want of a better name, a philosophy of futility’, while the 19<sup>th</sup> century sociologist Veblen (1899) characterised fashion’s futility and wastefulness, as it continually reinvents without clear function, as ugly and irrational. In this, disdain of fashion has echoed the disdain for the popular, which ten Bos (2000, p. xii) identified as being ‘linked to vulgarity, tastelessness, gaudiness’ (see also Rhodes & Westwood, 2008). Importantly, such dismissal is recognised even by those engaging it as a business (BoF/McKinsey, 2017). As such, the overheard quip in the sub-title of this section, recorded by the fashion documentarian Loic Prigent during a fashion week, also reflects the contradictions inherent to fashion. Tellingly and paradoxically, this includes taking seriously something that often does not take itself seriously – or works to give this impression, so as to avoid more serious questions. This is in part because behind fashion’s shiny surfaces lie a number of tensions, ripe for further empirical and analytical engagement.

This is a key departure point for us. In particular, following the footsteps of interactionist scholars (e.g. Czarniawska, 1998; Yanow & Ybema, 2009), we start by arguing that the seemingly inconsequential and irrelevant is indeed consequential and meaningful

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<sup>1</sup> Prigent (2016, p. 120)

once its surface is more than just scratched. Seemingly flawless representations, like those often associated with fashion, hold significant analytical lessons, if engaged with equal scholarly robustness and sincerity as other organisational settings and phenomena. For fashion, this is notably not a new argument. Yet, though decades have passed since Blumer's (1969, p. 275) 'invitation to sociologists to take seriously the topic of fashion', in the field of organization studies, it could have been made only years ago. In many ways, Czarniawska's (2011, p. 600) admonition still stands: 'instead of moralising about fashion, we should be studying and trying to understand it'. This is all the more pertinent since, as Aspers and Godart (2013, p. 172) stressed, 'hardly any area of contemporary social life is not subject to fashion, and it is a topic in which all classical sociological questions reappear, from the culture/structure conundrum to the micro/macro debate'. This includes tensions between agency and structure, or 'individuality and generality' (Simmel, 1991, p. 63), expressed in fashion as creative drivers of unique expression *and* as an ordering and organised phenomenon (Edwards, 1997). A serious engagement with fashion thus also holds relevance for continually central concepts in organization studies, including identity, temporality, change, paradox and power, but also industry, ethical consumption, and sustainability, as we outline.

Our aim is therefore to tease out and explore multiple connections and possibilities within fashion, and between fashion and organization studies as a result. Specifically, we stitch together a diverse, occasionally overlooked collective of voices, issues, spaces, and theoretical perspectives. Taken together, they paint a complex, inherently-partial whole, with room for meaningful openings. Like Beyes' (2016, p. 1469), our endeavour is thus purposefully 'anti-systematic, explorative, eschewing [...] rigid conceptual frameworks'. This is appropriate least of all because it matches the ontology and lived experience of fashion as a phenomenon. In doing so, we also use the essay as an invitation to explore not just fashion as

an organisational site for seeing, but how it can phenomenologically help us see elsewhere and differently. We do so by engaging sociology and anthropology, as well as fashion theory, a discipline not central to most contemporary research in organization studies. This is to suggest promising concepts for future investigations of similar phenomena of interest, and to stimulate cross-disciplinary conversations, recognising fashion as a ‘hybrid subject’ (Fine & Leopold, 1993) and interdisciplinary concept par excellence. In doing so, we detail the different ways to explore fashion further in organization studies, beyond the classical management fads and fashions (e.g. Abrahamson, 1991; 1995; Benders & Van Veen, 2001), or the travel of global ideas (e.g. Czarniawska & Sevón, 2005; Røvik, 2011), for instance.

With this in mind, before problematising the fashion industry and considering its changing contours and possible alternatives, we start by examining the very concept and its subsequent openings for organization studies. We then turn to the fashion industry to outline some of its key features (i.e. its organizations, the interplays between production and consumption, its dark sides, and the specific nature of its economy), which can be valuably further explored by organization scholars. We finally consider the possibility of an ‘after fashion’ – the potential consequences of changes to key structures and logics of today’s fashion industry in the near future.

### **What is fashion?**

Many accounts of fashion begin the discussion of this topic by reference to its history (i.e. the birth of social mobility, e.g. Entwistle, 2015; Polhemus & Proctor, 1978), its business side (i.e. the fashion industry, e.g. Skov, 2006), or its ephemeral nature (i.e. a fashion engaged as part of a succession of fashions, e.g. Braham, 1997; Sævi, 2001). Although relevant and discussed later, we begin differently. Specifically, we suggest that to engage with fashion comprehensively in a way that speaks to organization studies, it is useful to examine it first as

a local *façon*, that is as doing things and dressing in a certain identifiable manner. This then allows us to examine it as social and collective processes of organizing dress – as Aspers and Godart (2013, p. 173) stress, *façon*'s etymology also reveals a focus on 'making and doing things together' – before talking about it as a global system.

### *Fashion as individual manner*

Before being connected to any brand or value-laden representation, a fashion is first and foremost a distinct way of doing something. This definition represents an important step back from customary sociological definitions, including 'fashion as dress' and 'fashion as change' (Aspers & Godart, 2013, p. 172). Indeed, its contemporary everyday use as a signifier of constant change is a relatively recent development (Luhmann, 2000). In particular, the word comes from Old French *façon*, which translates as 'a way, a manner, a style'. *Façon* itself comes from the Latin *factio*, which means a way of proceeding, an active and collective manner of making (Kawamura, 2005, p. 3). Fashion is thus a recognizable pattern, a *modus operandi* that someone or some people carry and are known for. It is a signature that others will be able to connect to a specific identity or belonging, and so also eventually judge – positively or negatively. Such signatures and identities are supported and driven by fashion's ordering structures, including its organisations and industrial forms of particular concern to organisational scholars, but are also expressed in materialities and their consumptions and uses.

Namely, when it comes to clothing or dress (Entwistle, 2015), a fashion is first a local and specific way of selecting, combining and wearing certain outfits and accessories – fashioning oneself. It is a manner of ornamenting bodies that becomes a signature and a projection of meaning, whether specific to one person – like Iris Apfel, to name one recognised fashion original we discuss later – or a defined clan – like the punks of New York,

or African *sapeurs* (distinctly elegant dressers) in Paris, who we also introduce in the sections that follow. This definition is thus most closely related to Aspers' (2006, p. 75) discussion of style, as a 'multidimensional self-referential aesthetic system produced and extended over time'. This understanding of fashion as a mundane bodily practice is important because it highlights the corporeal and aesthetic dimension, echoing the established importance of materiality (e.g. Carlile, Nicolini, Langley & Tsoukas, 2013) and aesthetics (e.g. Strati, 1999) in understanding organisational phenomena. Fashion as clothes may very well become a socially constructed and challenged taste, institutionalised via industrial organisations and market forms, with broader consequences. However, it also starts with fabric touching the skin, with how a cut folds on a silhouette, with distinct combinations, and with a person too (Entwistle, 2015).

Consequently, not everyone can say they dress in a certain fashion – as fashion needs to carry a specific signature. Equally, those dressing in a certain fashion can do so without being in style, that is 'trendy' or 'right now'. This accounts for the distinction between fashion as everyday ways of dressing susceptible to short-lived 'trends' (which can be individual and represent one notable understanding of potential interest to organisational scholars; see also Aspers & Godart, 2013), and fashion as a distinct expression of a certain community at a certain time. The latter highlights fashion's social and temporal elements – we dress alone or with others, are recognised and driven by own or others' patterns, with those patterns taking particular shapes at distinct times. In other words, there is fashion that is specific, but fashion also phenomenologically relates to collective identities and temporal domains.

In this way, fashion recalls conceptual discussions in organization studies more broadly, namely the role of relationality (e.g. Bradbury & Lichtenstein, 2000; Emirbayer, 1997) and temporality (e.g. Kaplan & Orlikowski, 2013), as key to how phenomena are

practically accomplished. Playfulness with fashion is also analytically and practically playfulness with time – what used to be you (or us), expressed before in this kind of a shape or an item, reconceptualised now to say something different, or imagined for a future yet to come. A ‘90s fashion (re)told in 2017 on the streets of New York, or a formalised spring/summer 2019 fashion (fore)told in September 2018 during the densely organised and institutionalised New York fashion week. Fashion as an individual manner thus becomes and is relationally intertwined with multiple social temporalities. Indeed, in Simmel’s (1991) theorisation of style, which echoes fashion as individual manner discussed here, true individual creativity regarding style implies ‘the transcendence of here and now’, precisely because style often comes from adherence to generality of a distinct time.

One particularly revelatory exemplar of such dynamics of fashion as individual manner is Iris Apfel, an American interior designer and fashion icon. Born in the early 1920’s in Queens, New York, she contributed to the interior design of the White House for nine presidents. However, what has made her well-known is her unmistakably unique fashion. In Albert Maysles’ 2015 documentary *Iris*, she expresses her view on fashion during a seminar to help trendy New Yorkers find their own look. In her words, ‘I like individuality. So lost these days. There’s so much sameness. Everything is homogenized. I hate it. [...] With me, it’s not intellectual. It’s all gut [...] Downtown they think they’re stylish, but they all wear black, you know? It’s not really style, it’s a uniform’. As a result, she enjoys considering outfits and dressing up alone, instead of going out and being seen; detaching herself from the ‘general feeling’ (Simmel, 1991, p. 70) of fashion being practiced at present, to retain uniqueness of her individual manner. As she says, ‘most of the world is not with me, but I don’t care’.

Like Simmel (1991), who suggested past periods are often seen as more stylish due to their apparent coherence and ‘a more general feeling’, Apfel also recognises the influence of



the past: ‘I had a great sense of history, and I realized that everything is interrelated and that politics and science and economics and fashion and all that are one and part of the same, and I applied it – I know if you look at a dress, it’s affected by all those things. I mean you can almost tell what was going on at that period’. This reminds us that fashion cannot be disconnected from a place, a time, and a community. Indeed, however individual fashion might appear, its definition is achieved in relation to a recognizable pattern at a certain place, time and context, in an ever-changing mix. Thus, a more collective organizing aspect inevitably emerges.

### *Fashion as organising of dress*

Fashion is often referred to as a *system* of dress, as a result of a more or less acknowledged inheritance of Roland Barthes’ (1966/2014) structuralist approach. However accurate this may be, as we discuss later, it also puts significant emphasis on a stable, coherent and detached apparatus of generalisation and reference – the system. If we start tracing the footsteps of fashion by noting how people come to dress themselves individually however, going straight to an industry or a market-based structure shaping our outfits and behaviours represents an analytical leap that obscures more than it reveals. This is because before becoming an industry as an expression of ‘aesthetic economy’ (Entwistle, 2002), which we engage in the final sections, fashion as an individual manner of dress expresses itself as an *organising* of dress. Such organising is a continually emergent, refined manner of fashioning, accomplished through local negotiations. There are patterns and recurrence, but these are (variably) in flux.

Fashion, in this conceptualisation, is therefore a way in which a community – from a handful of people in the same neighbourhood to an international network – defines and presents itself through outfits and accessories, but also language and behaviours. These are

purposefully constructed and subsequently considered as similar, that is in the same style. Such fashion is grounded in the negotiated aesthetic of a particular social group: a sense of how one should dress, and what one should prefer or reject, appreciate or feel uncomfortable with. Fashion here becomes an expression of belonging to, or identifying via a tribe, through the bodily practice of attire, mundane aesthetic judgments, and an expression of one's freedom to adhere to that expression or choose another (with potential consequences). It is shared, and therefore as much sign as stigma, depending on the contexts and moments in which it is accorded meaning. In Bauman's (2004b, p. 38) words, 'identification is also a powerful factor in stratification' (see also Brake, 1985). Fashion can thus claim a status and a function. If nothing else, this function is to organise you – into this, not that. As an emergent marker of a tribe, such fashioning is therefore always precarious, and limited in its coherence. It is flexible and paradoxical in its organizing, and thus rarely stable or systematic.

One highly promising entry point with regard to subsequent lessons and openings for organization studies is Esposito's (2011) exploration of this critical contradiction, namely fashion's 'originality through imitation'. In particular, as an 'inherently paradoxical phenomenon', she argues the contradiction is indeed 'rational in its way of producing and using irrationality' (Esposito, 2011, p. 604). This echoes the definition of fashion by Aspers and Godart (2013, p. 174) as 'an *unplanned* process of recurrent *change* against a backdrop of *order* in the public realm' (emphasis added). Fashion is therefore based 'on a network of paradoxes [which] works just because its paradoxes, instead of summing up and making it even more problematic and incomprehensible, in a certain sense cancel or at least neutralize each other' (Esposito, 2011, p. 609). This neutralization crucially functions through the institutionalization of surprises, which 'we learn to expect' (Esposito, 2011, p. 610). We can thus detect echoes of growing scholarly work on paradox in organization studies (Eisenhardt, 2000; Lewis, 2000; Smith & Lewis, 2011). In particular, as Poole and Van de Ven (1989, p.

576) argued, by engaging with recognised paradoxes, ‘researchers may uncover as yet unknown ones that can move social inquiry in new directions’. With regard to fashion, this includes central concepts to organization studies, like change, stability, and creativity.

This further implies that fashion emerges as cycles, not as linear processes of birth, emergence, diffusion and disappearance. These are not independent episodes that follow one another with a clear-cut beginning, middle and end. Instead, fashions interact and influence each other, both in opposition and reciprocal strengthening – akin to logics in practice studied by Smets, Jarzabkowski, Burke and Spee (2014) and others. As Sellaars (2001, p. 5414) suggested, ‘fashion in this perspective is not born, but is rediscovered’. Transferred to organization studies, this suggests exploring how distinct fashions emerge through particular negotiations and arrangements within and across groups, but also how fashions encounter others over time, and are variously reconfigured into something new yet again.

One particularly rich exemplar of such interactive dynamics of fashion as organising, already engaged in organization studies to explore, for instance, authenticity (e.g. Westwood & Rhodes, 2007) and possibilities for ethical consumption (e.g. Clarke & Holt, 2017), is the punk movement. In particular, in the spring of 2013, the Metropolitan Museum of Art opened the *Punk: Chaos to Couture* exhibition. The juxtaposition of punk and couture (high) fashion was meant to be surprising, and a statement about what this radical movement became. Namely, though the punk aesthetic was purposefully ‘low brow’ and radical, it has been subsumed by precisely the kind of organised fashion it originally rejected: wealthy, flashy, and commercial.

Importantly, the emergence of a punk aesthetic was partly what allowed a loose collective to become the distinct movement – especially its fashion. Its defining aspects emerged slowly, through trials and attempts at aesthetic choices, as well as economic constraints of a lifestyle. Repairing torn shirts with pins was as much style, as it was poverty

and necessity. Later on, as Bolton outlines in the exhibition's catalogue (Bolton et al., 2013), Malcolm McLaren and his partner Vivienne Westwood 'were instrumental in crystallizing and commercializing what became known as the classic punk style through their boutique at 430 King's Road'. Through their designs, they gave birth to the punk uniform (black, skinny jeans, leather jacket, Dr. Martens, pins), which allowed one to be seen and recognised as a punk, with small details enabling only insiders to know whether one was from New York or London. Once institutionalised beyond its original localised community however, the punk aesthetic began to lose its original, radical meaning, to be replaced by an 'increasingly more prescribed and homogeneous [...] "commodity punk"' (Bolton et al., 2013, p. 13). Institutionalization thus implied death of an organic organising aesthetic of New York and London punks, which both structured and was reinvigorated by constantly renewed practices of the movements' insiders.

The paradox of desiring chaos from change, while concurrently embracing the institutionalisation that necessarily displaces fashion away from its spatial, temporal and communal roots echoes an elemental characteristic: fashion requires the presence of both sameness and difference. This suggests we can valuably engage, and empirically investigate, fashion as a porous and contradictory place in-between. Building on Blumer (1969), Czarniawska (2011) thus emphasised the subversive nature of fashions, which are by definition always playing against the institutional order – something punks knew a lot about. In being disruptive, they shed light on the dynamics of creativity and innovation of any organizing process, whether dress, music, or another social practice. In her words (Czarniawska, 2011, p. 601), 'invention and imitation, variation and uniformity, distance and interest, novelty and conservatism, unity and segregation, conformity and deviation, change and status quo, and revolution and evolution' – all are implicated, and can be explored further,

if fashion is considered as a dynamic organising phenomenon before being seen as a stable system.

There is consequently a fundamental tension characterising fashion as organising of dress: constantly emerging through daily dressing practices against fundamentally stable-enough patterns, which further evolve with each individual and collective iteration, to enable both identity and performativity. If the patterns are then institutionalised, and joined with consumption and marketization, they partly lose their dynamic toward becoming a system – relatively stable, yet eventually subject to slower evolutions and revolutions of its own. They become monetised, systematised expressions of ‘fashion as change’ (Aspers & Godart, 2013, p. 172) – macro manifestations of distinct classification.

#### *Fashion as a system*

As briefly noted earlier, often the way a certain community orders its dress becomes fashion in the more systematic sense of the term. This occurs when patterns of dress travel across the boundaries of original collectives, like from New York punks to Paris couture houses. In this process of displacement, they also mutate, by losing some of their original meaning and gaining others – not always in predictable or desired ways. Such institutionalisation, required for crossing frontiers, subsequently results in *fashion as a system* – or in Barthes’ (1966/2014) wording, fashion as ‘dress’. Importantly, by becoming an institution, a certain fashion emerges as a reference for structured classification. It is only then that one can see fashion as a stable structure that systematically organises dress – a structure outside, above and beyond the original individual or tribe, thus enabling ‘external’ judgment and evaluation. Fashion here is ‘a way, a manner, a style’ that circumvents the individual and distinct tribes, and instead manufactures its own, for instance as a 2017/18 autumn/winter fashion show.

Roland Barthes' work is particularly relevant in thinking through the analytical implications of such distinctions. In particular, Barthes (1966/2014) argued that while fashion is a fundamental part of cultural systems, it is not reducible to the distinct practical constraints and social tastes of said cultural system. It also involves individual forms of expression, and artistic creation. As a result, to understand dress, he urges us to analyse fashion's wider context. This specifically means taking 'the time to define what, at any given moment, a vestimentary system [of fashion] might be, that is the overall axiology (constraints, prohibitions, tolerances, aberrations, fantasies, congruences and exclusions) that constitutes it'.

Grounding his analysis in semiology, Barthes (1957/2014, p. 6) thus sees any garment as both a signifier (the perceived object, sound or image), and a signified (its related concept or meaning). These are in relations with one another, but never in a linear manner. Specifically, although dressing oneself is fundamentally a personal practice, it always 'inserts itself into an organized, formal and normative system that is recognized by society'. Studying fashion is therefore a legitimate and important point of entry for organization scholars. Indeed, for Barthes, a garment becomes 'dress' as soon as it is defined by a social group. This suggests that organizational clothes, such as uniforms or dress codes, are institutions conveying meaning (Bazin & Aubert-Tarby, 2013). In this perspective, the practice of 'dressing' only makes sense in relation to a system of 'dress': 'an institutional, fundamentally social, reality, which, independent of the individual, is like the systematic, normative reserve from which the individual draws their own clothing' (Bazin & Aubert-Tarby, 2013, p. 8).

Using semiological analysis thus allows Barthes to provide a dynamic, rich account of fashion, as constant interplay between a stable, yet evolving, social institution ('dress'), and a myriad of daily individual practices ('dressing'). Fashion can consequently be seen as originating either from institutional prescription of some key actors (who transcend localised

‘tribes’ organising distinct fashion), or as propagation of individual acts of dressing. This suggests that at this scale (as a system), fashion requires an apparatus for supply and demand to meet. It cannot be solely about individual choices and local creations; it needs an industry. This transforms fashion into a commodity, as well as an entire infrastructure of competing judgments, productions and distributions – with meaning and consequence.

### **Industrializing fashion**

Fashion as a social phenomenon (i.e. as waves of changes in dressing and behaving) emerged in the 14<sup>th</sup> century. According to historians, it occurred when social mobility and appearance of royal courts made it increasingly possible to (a) move away from the high stability of traditional garments (what Flügel [1930] called ‘fixed dress’, or Polhemus & Proctor [1978] referred to as ‘antifashion’), and (b) more finely differentiate and classify oneself and others based on outfits, beyond broad social classes and specific professions (Simmel, 1904). Fashion as an industry, the one we know today, only became one during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, with the emergence and stabilization of *haute couture* (high fashion). Specifically, according to Lipovetsky and Serroy (2013, p. 152-153), ‘by giving fashion its properly modern structures, Haute Couture has put in place a long-lasting organization that is going to steer and oversee in a more or less invariant manner the world of feminine elegance for over a century’. With this, the different companies involved in clothing, emerging around luxury houses creating *haute couture* (e.g. the textile industry, retailers, training programmes, but also magazines, and now blogs and online stores), became the locus for defining what was in style, or not. As Braham (1997, p. 134) put it, ‘what is distinctive about the fashion code is that it must pass through the filter of the fashion industry’. Crucially, this filter has always been distributed, multi-spatial, and contested – an important aspect that we discuss in more depth below.

Today, fashion as an economic sector has tremendous and increasing importance. As highlighted by the ‘The State of Fashion 2017’ report (BoF/McKinsey, 2017), if ranked according to GDP, the industry’s 2016 value of \$2.4 trillion would make it the seventh largest world economy. It is also one of the world’s major value-creating industries, with a decade of growth at 5.5 percent per year. In addition, the industry of textiles and clothing is said to employ nearly 60 million people worldwide, and is highly globalised in its production and consumption. Put simply, fashion is a serious global business, which ought to be studied accordingly.

It is worth emphasizing however that fashion as an industrialised system is not only found, empirically and analytically, in the glittering ‘front stages’ (Goffman, 1969) of Western capitals, where much of design remains centred (Breward & Gilbert, 2006; Godart, 2014). Scholars of fashion have called for moving away from the Western ethnocentrism in many fashion accounts, which are too often centred on a few famous European and US brands, and their marketing practices (Entwistle, 2015, p. 47-48). This is least of all because the organisation of fashion businesses echoes the specificities of the industry that structures them, and the interplays between consumption *and* production. To tackle this analytically thus requires (a) making sense of fashion as a multi-spatial and social industry, (b) acknowledging the dark side it works to forget or disguise, and (c) conceptualising its function as part of what we term *aestheticisation*. Only then can we substantively consider fashion as a changing industry, and therefore which avenues of subsequent research might be fruitfully explored.

#### *Fashion as a multi-spatial and social industry*

As Entwistle (2015, p. 208) argued, ‘any analysis of fashion has to consider the various agents, institutions and practices, which intersect to produce fashion’. Given fashion’s highly dispersed nature, the question of how it maintains close relations necessary to be considered



an ‘industry’ inevitably emerge – making it an interesting case study for organization studies scholars as well. Addressing precisely this conundrum, Skov (2006) engaged with fashion weeks and fairs as essential rituals for this professional community, enabling its very existence. Specifically, he identified how the multiple encounters that occur during these focused institutionalised occasions are fundamentally about knowledge – knowing who knows what, but also where the winds of emergent fashions are blowing, shaped and defined by whom. Consequently, studying fashion weeks is an opportunity to investigate a dispersed industry at the very place of its many intersections and contradictions. These are spaces where the socialisation of the industry as a system, rather than a local community, is accomplished.

Secondly, as Skov (2006, p. 768) explains, fashion weeks operate effectively as representational stages. In particular, they enable us to access the entire value chain of an industry, for ‘the fair gives reality to that value chain interface by allowing it to be enacted and experienced simultaneously by thousands of fashion world members’. Crucially, such valuation is notably also social. As Entwistle and Rocamora (2006, p. 742) argue, one of the many functions of fashion weeks is to bring the industry into being – they are ‘opportunities for fields to materialize and reproduce themselves’. Being present (and visible) in this space thus means to be a ‘real actor’ in the field – important enough to be invited, maybe even made highly visible. Such relational spaces facilitate socialisation and accord actorhood, thereby also affording legitimacy – familiar concepts to organization studies for which fashion offers a relevant site for further investigation.

Thirdly, fashion shows as professional fairs are localised, temporally fixed spaces where the industry, as transitory and changing, stabilises, even if momentarily. It is therefore precisely because of such underpinning tensions, between stability and change, and between different formations, identities and locales, that attending analytically and empirically to fashion as industry could tell us much of interest to organization studies. This includes about

innovation and disruption in fast-paced organising (e.g. producing six shows a year, and an increasing number of smaller editions), speed and its organisational consequences (e.g. disruption to traditional fashion cycles by ‘See-Now, Buy-Now’ trend of purchasing straight from the runway), coordination in temporary organisations (e.g. fashion production is often outsourced via multiple chains; its stages are frequently built by teams working against tight deadlines), multiple logics and their temporary resolutions (e.g. Lane, 2014), and the mobilisation of boundaries over time in relation to phenomena like identity and change, among others.

Finally, fashion as an industry is a complex entwinement of distributed actors making an industrialised collective (e.g. Wilson, 2007). In this, as Entwistle (2015, p. 209) insists, ‘neither production nor consumption operates independently from each other’, as in many other industries. In particular, ‘one way to think of fashion is as a culture industry. Fashion is the product of a complex set of interactions between various agents set in temporal and spatial relations to one another – between design houses, fabric and clothing manufacturers and retailers and the fashion-buying public’ (Entwistle, 2015, p. 220-221). Therefore, by focusing on prominent spatialisations of fashion as an industry, like *haute couture* or powerful global retailers (Godart, 2014), we risk either falling under its glamorous spell, or dismissing the complex whole by engaging it solely as wasteful and primarily driven by fast and frequent consumption. Firstly, this overlooks agency – fashion is not something that happens wholly beyond our choices as consumers (Entwistle, 2015). This raises the related question we eventually end on: is a different kind of fashion (industry) possible? Secondly, such an approach would mean overlooking fashion’s less glamorous, but highly consequential spatial tensions. One such example comes from Italy, where the rise of Chinese-owned factories over the last decade increasingly threatens to upend traditional expressions of value and identity, and survival of historical forms of craft and organisation. This notably has consequences for

local communities and brands capitalising on the ‘Made in Italy’ label, not to mention more precarious workers (e.g. Donadio, 2010; Burleigh, 2011; Max, 2018; Wilkinson, 2008). Such examples also remind us that the fashion industry has a dark side, which we discuss next.

### *Dark sides of the fashion industry*

Much of fashion’s ‘front stage’ (Goffman, 1969) builds on glamour and luxury. Indeed, as Bourdieu (1995, p. 138) argued, this screen is needed for its ‘magic’ to work. As such, it is hardly surprising that fashion organisations frequently work to forget or distract from the less impressive ‘back stage’ aspects of their activities, such as programmed obsolescence, child labour, and environmental devastation (Entwistle, 2015). Firstly, given its fast-paced production and resource intensity, fashion’s ecological footprint is tremendous. As BoF/McKinsey (2017, p. 32) stress, this includes ‘high water consumption, discharge of hazardous chemicals [...] greenhouse-gas emissions, and waste production’. In addition, its globalised production has triggered long-standing protests, particularly around labour issues, revived since the 2013 Rana Plaza collapse in Bangladesh (Lund-Thomsen & Lindgreen, 2014; Reinecke & Donaghey, 2015). Secondly, as Entwistle (2015, p. 212) highlighted, ‘the history of industrialization within the clothing and textile industry is a history inextricably linked to colonial exploitation abroad as well as the exploitation of labour at home’ (see also Howard, 1997). While some fashion companies worked to tackle the issues within their production chains, others continue to distance themselves from the labour practices and wider consequences of factories producing their products. For instance, Lown and Chenut (1984) demonstrated how Courtaulds, a textile company, strategically sought female labour in poor areas, partly by designing production equipment specifically tailored for women. More recently, journalists investigated the existence of ‘dark factories’ in UK cities like Leicester,

where workers are regularly paid below legal minimum wage, and work in conditions featuring ‘blocked fire escapes, old machines and no holiday or sick pay’ (O’Connor, 2018).

Reflecting our ‘liquid modern’ condition (Bauman, 2004a), precarious and damaging labour practices are not only present in developing countries and fashion’s ‘back stages’ (Goffman, 1969), but also in fashion industry’s glittering Western centres. The most obvious examples are fashion models, who project the industry’s aesthetics, values and power dynamics in their working conditions (e.g. Rodriguez, 2017), and bodies as manifestations of implied beauty (e.g. Rodgers et al., 2017). Following sustained criticism, the industry’s responses include, for instance, the Model Charter launched by fashion conglomerates LVMH and Kering, and France’s law banning hiring of overly thin models (Picy, 2015). To what extent these represent meaningful change, or isomorphic tendencies with decoupling in practice (Meyer & Rowan, 1977), remains ripe for scholarly empirical investigation. Indeed, further questions are offered by Mensitieri’s (2018) book on working conditions of young Parisian designers and stylists, who wear the luxurious products of France’s second biggest industry, but often cannot pay rent. Tellingly, the industry’s response was to challenge and dismiss Mensitieri’s findings, as evident in Jean-Paul Gaultier’s statement that ‘[fashion] is like a family’ (Marsh, 2018).

Such revelations also inevitably raise questions about ‘ethics of fashion consumption’ (Clarke & Holt, 2016), especially given the rise of ethical consumption elsewhere (e.g. Adams & Raisborough, 2010). As Clarke and Holt (2016) elaborate, fashion entities have increasingly publicly engaged in social and environmental awareness, including changing supply chains, redistributing profits to social causes, using less environmentally invasive methods and similar. However, the industry is also uniquely placed to construct these into appealingly packaged products, while deflecting from investigation of its ‘back stages’ (Goffman, 1969) or challenges to consumption itself. As noted by Nickel and Eickenberry

(2009, p. 975), this risks ‘[creating] the appearance of giving back, [while] disguising the fact that it is already based [on] taking away’. The case of Vivienne Westwood, which Clarke and Holt (2016) explore, offers one intriguing example of how such apparent tensions, here between consumption and ethics, could be balanced in organisational settings, including acknowledging the active role of consumers. Further explorations, particularly vis-à-vis other major fashion brands and conglomerates, as Clarke and Holt (2016) also acknowledge, would bring valuable insights. This is least of all because how organisations balance varied external demands and occasion meaningful structural change, including toward sustainable organising (Gladwin et al., 1995; Whiteman, Walker & Perego, 2013), remains highly relevant to organization studies.

Yet, fashion’s dark side is not only expressed in its industrial modes, and their lived and material consequences. It also imposes itself in a process of holistic classification of a fashioned person, which we identify as aestheticisation.

### *Fashion’s aesthetic economy*

That fashion encompasses the circulation of aesthetic judgements is not new (Baudrillard, 1981; Blumer, 1969). That this is an ‘industry driven by “economic” considerations as well as “cultural” ones’ (Entwistle, 2015, p. 236) has only been richly problematised recently, via growing interest in the ‘aesthetic economy’ (Aspers, 2006; Beckert & Aspers, 2011). This recognises that increasing sectors and markets feature ‘aesthetics [as] a key component in the production of particular goods and services [and are] central to the economic calculations of

that setting' (Entwistle, 2002, p. 321). Importantly, the production, circulation and evolution of acquired taste also remains under-studied in organization studies (Gherardi, 2009).

However, the expansion of the logic of the aesthetic economy produces not an aesthetic *per se*, but aestheticisation. Specifically, the punk identity, for instance, was entwined with an emergent, messy and heterogeneous aesthetics. Aestheticisation, in turn, suggests a designed and marketised process of fashioning, purposefully made stable beyond the original 'tribe', i.e. aestheticised (Entwistle, 2015, p. 48). Indeed, the fashion industry not only commodifies the aesthetics of a given fashion, it reifies it – thus imposing a movement from autonomy to heteronomy. According to Lipovetsky and Serroy (2013, p. 25-26), modern capitalism has entered the 'transaesthetic age'. This represents 'a new universe in which the avant-gardes are integrated to the economic order, accepted, sought, supported by official institutions'. Aestheticisation of commodities has thus led to 'a time of pervasive fashion or hyperfashion' (Lipovetsky and Serroy, 2013, p. 79; see also Gabriel, 2005). Fashion is no longer just in clothes and accessories – it is everywhere.

Although heterogeneous and highly competitive, the fashion industry also relies on a rationale of influencing, if not controlling. This is accomplished via careful crafting 'across a number of economic and cultural sites – advertising, marketing, magazines, shop design' (Entwistle, 2015, p. 210). These forms define and organise an arena in which we wear clothes about which we have little to say. We thus emerge as central to 'aesthetic labour', including by joining our bodies in the production of distinct corporate aesthetics (e.g. Witz, Warhurst & Nickson, 2003). The most obvious example are fashion models, but this also includes, for instance, financial professionals (Bazin & Aubert-Tarby, 2013). In this, the industry's aestheticisation finds a central place in what Debord (1967) called the society of the spectacle, where people are not able to produce their own lives, but are reduced to spectators passively consuming merchandise articulated to craft their lifestyle (Flyverbom & Reinecke, 2017).

Furthermore, if successful, the fashion industry also leads to a form of control over the dispersed scattering of the ‘sensible’, what Jacques Rancière (2011, p. 12) would call ‘the politics of aesthetics’. As he defines it, ‘distribution of the sensible [is] the system of self-evident facts of sense perception that simultaneously discloses the existence of something in common and the delimitations that define the respective parts and positions within it’. This realm not only defines what should be appreciated, but also distributes positions and status to actors, across time and space. Here, the fashion industry does not solely attempt to control our choices afterward (e.g. in shop changing rooms). Instead, as a holistic cultural system, it acts to influence our a priori frames of experience, and therefore appreciation. Not all of us are Iris Apfel in our ability to individually circumvent such influencing, especially in corporate settings. As such, the industry is not a mere marketing tool. It actively contributes to and enacts a form of social control aiming at influence, if not compliance – it is *political* in nature.

A telling example of such politics in the context of fashion are the African *sapeurs*. *La Sape* is the acronym for *Société des Ambianceurs et des Personnes Élégantes* (roughly translated as the Society of Party-makers and Elegant Persons). According to Oberhofer (2012, p. 69), ‘a *sapeur* devotes his money and life to dress himself with expensive and elegant brand clothes from Paris and to display them ostentatiously in public’. The clothes are high-end, evidencing a ‘cult of labels’ (Gondola, 1999), displayed in flashy ways (e.g. bright colors) or daring juxtapositions (Robson, 2016). This appropriation is not always appreciated however. As one head of marketing told Brodin and colleagues (2016, p. 49), ‘real luxury is about sobriety, not bling-bling or exaggeration; [it’s] not the same codes. There has been no learning of the brand, as in the case of the traditional Lacoste clientele [...]’. Those shared values are lacking here”. Thus, despite being dedicated consumers, *sapeurs* do not match the fashion industry’s idealised ‘politics of aesthetics’. Indeed, by rejecting strict compliance, and instead engaging strategies of appropriation, hybridization and creative display (Brodin et al.,

2016), *sapeurs* may very well be a dangerous clientele. They reinterpret fashion's products in ways not envisioned by the industry, and thus represent a non-sanctioned manner of dressing and consuming. This reminds us that while fashion inherently features breaches, not all disruptions or consumptions are equally accepted – as seen also in prominent news that Burberry burned items worth £28.6 million, rather than allowing these to be pirated or purchased by a clientele it does not see echoing its brand; that is to preserve its 'brand value' (Paton, 2018).

Taken more broadly, this thus also suggests that for every new manner that emerges, others are subsumed, repurposed, or disappear. If this is so for individual dress and for organising within original 'tribes', as presented earlier, what about for fashion as an industrialised system of aestheticisation?

### **After fashion?: 'Fashion is so over, people have moved on to something else'<sup>2</sup>**

Is the present fashion industry going out of fashion? Behind this provocative question lies a final conceptual problematisation of this essay, rooted in recent developments in the fashion industry, and the emergence of new trends and fashion actors.

Specifically, according to Lipovetsky and Serroy (2013, p. 83), there is the growing confusion between the fashion industry, whose image used to be grounded in glamorous luxury, and the contemporary practices of production and consumption. For instance, Armani today designs Samsung phones, while Karl Lagerfeld works with Coca-Cola Light. In examples like these, we can see traces of a particular shift: 'luxury, which was an industry marked by permanence and craftsmanship of tradition, has switched over to the realm of spectacular fashion'. This blurs the line between not just ready-to-wear fashion and haute

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<sup>2</sup> Prigent (2016, p. 102)



couture, but also between avant-garde and tradition, ephemerality and continuity, distant fascination and constant accessibility. Importantly, in actively embracing this expansion, today's prominent fashion houses are perhaps unaware that they may be compromising their very identities.

Indeed, according to Agins (1990), fashion's Paris *haute couture* origins are now long lost. The business logic has clearly overpowered the designers' original hegemony, so that contemporary major designers are mostly limited to designing what can be sold – with the exception of a few remaining *haute couture* creations, largely spared for marketing purposes. As Grumbach (2008) put it, 'if brands are born in freedom, they always end up in the industry'. This suggests that the economic/cultural hybrids of fashion as an industry moved away from their original creativity toward commercial sterility. Such sterility, paradoxically, has in turn meant that their sustainability was increasingly compromised as well. In particular, if 'high fashion was built around an "aristocratic" principle characterised by the refusal of commercial domination' (Lipovetsky & Serroy, 2013, p. 156), what does the diminished space for such refusals mean for the continuation of today's increasingly concentrated, commodified and financially-driven fashion industry? Can the current fashion industry survive, if the spaces for alterity that long guaranteed its continuation are no longer there?

Certainly, there are some signs that the fashion industry is in trouble. Surprisingly, this includes consumption itself. In the US, drastic decreases in clothing sales have resulted in increasing numbers of companies – established physical retailers and new online challengers – going bankrupt (Rupp, Whiteaker, Townsend & Bhasin, 2018). In particular, Americans are spending more on experiences, and boundaries between office and everyday clothing are blurring (Green, 2017). In addition, social media allows consumers to easily circumvent the fashion industry's marketing (Hope, 2016), thus allowing them to craft their own fashions. Social media has also contributed to the dizzying speeding up of the fashion industry. In

particular, if Top Shop today releases new items to its stores on a daily basis, then, as one fashion industry insider commented, ‘the idea of a bunch people sitting in a room and deciding what the colours are going to be in two years’ time or what materials are going to be used in three years’ time is a complete nonsense’ (Abnett, 2015). In other words, we are witnessing a decrease not only in spaces for alterity, but also in time to create and evolve a manner beyond items for immediate, and instantly forgettable consumption (Bauman, 2004a).

Where does that leave the industry? Are alternatives possible? The paradoxical (and therefore conceptually entirely appropriate) answer may involve reinserting a different kind of alterity and time, for a different kind of fashion (industry). For example, *The Guardian* proposed the young UK designer Matty Bovan, who tellingly identifies the punk Vivienne Westwood as an inspiration, as perhaps ‘the saviour the fashion industry needs’ (Marriott, 2018). Specifically, key to Bovan’s suggested uniqueness (though in this, as we outlined earlier, he is far from unique) is his rejection of the existing standards of fashion as an industry. In his words, ‘there seems to be a consensus among people my age who are trying to find a way to operate in fashion that isn’t mass production. That, in my gut, just feels right. More than ever, we need less stuff. Mass consumption, mass production can’t go on for ever’. Notably, Bovan was still set to present at London fashion week, where fashion’s membership is performed and established. Yet, in his approach, Bovan harks to fashion’s craft-based origins: ‘as machine technology booms, he says, “craft is more important than ever. Imagine if you could print your own jumper at home – I think that will happen – but you have to have the handmade element along with the tech element”. Otherwise, fashion and consumption will continue to spiral out of control’. This brings to mind Bauman’s (2004a, p. 117) argument that ‘liquid modern culture no longer feels like a culture of learning and accumulation [... but] a culture of disengagement, discontinuity and forgetting’. In other words, forget today’s methods, and return to better times, old techniques, and older heroes. This reminds us that

when it comes to fashion, like other paradoxical organisational phenomena, where there are ends, there are also possible beginnings. Both such ends and such beginnings hold promising lessons for us to analytically explore.

## **Conclusion**

Echoing fashion as a phenomenon – conceptual and concrete at the same time – the aim of our essay was to suggest a number of promising openings, which taking it seriously might occasion for organization studies. In this, we followed organisational scholars like Aspers and Godart (2013) and Czarniawska (2011), but also those in related fields of sociology, anthropology and fashion theory. In particular, many of the empirical openings fashion stimulates, which we stressed, connect to timely and consequential topics in organization studies: precarious work and flexible identities, crafting of corporate selves, dynamics and concentrations of power across global sites and actors, ethics of consumption, responsibilities for production, and possibilities for alterity and sustainability when it comes to organisations and their consequences. Like March (2013) in his essay on beauty, we readily acknowledge such explorations as necessary and commendable. We hope our essay stimulates them. However, fashion as a phenomenologically paradoxical phenomenon also offers the opportunity to engage with and explore beauty: ideas, creativity, innovation, craft, taste, aesthetics, the senses and the body, and agency in practice. As March stressed, ‘the pursuit of beauty can often be justified by the unintended usefulness of its outcomes. [Indeed], many of the more important ideas in management theory have in fact come not from trying to be useful but from imagining ideas with elements of beauty’. Fashion provides us with a range of such elements, as well as possible surprises, which March (2013) identified as critical to richer organisational theorising and scholarship. What remains is for us to imagine and explore them.



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