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EDITORIAL

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Feeding the imaginary

INTRODUCTION

The imaginary that has dominated the fashion system since the mid-twentieth century seems, in recent years, to have been challenged by empirical phenomena. 'Imaginary' is a complex notion that can be addressed from many perspectives. Here, we refer to the stock of images, values, practices and rules that dominate the western fashion system and that its participants take for granted in their relationship with fashion. Of course, different participants base their understanding of fashion on different imaginaries, and different imaginaries may be shared by different communities, but a hegemonic imaginary has underpinned the western fashion discourse for some decades now. For example, pertaining to this imaginary is the ideal of the female body's thinness (Bordo 1993); the positive value attributed to the youthful body; and the aspiration to the beautiful-and-new as a source of distinction (Lipovetsky 1987), as well as the sur-representation of Caucasian ethnic groups in images of fashion (Entwistle and Wissinger 2006). Also pertaining to this imaginary of fashion are usually implicit assumptions about human life. For instance, assumptions about the temporal organization of the day and the week into work time (office), leisure time (in the countryside) and social time (evening), or the belief that the possession of certain consumer goods certifies social status. These are fragments of representations of the world consistent with the project of western modernity to achieve the ideal of a world in which technology and science enable humans to fulfil themselves as independent adults with the capacity to choose. This, in fact, was the promise of the Enlightenment, with industrial capitalism and the bourgeoisie embodying its

values and assuming the task of realizing it. Fashion as an institution of western modernity (Wilson 1985; Lehmann 2000) has contributed significantly to this project – and is an explicit manifestation of it. This was already highlighted by the authors of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century who described the salient features of the new phenomenon of fashion, focusing from opposite points of view (some very critical of it, others endorsing the Enlightenment project) on the typical aspects of modern life: the concentration of commercial life in the *galeries* and department stores of big cities; the desire for the new both satisfied and stimulated by the collections of master couturiers; the accumulation of sensory stimuli from many different sources; the coexistence at the forefront of urban life of people belonging to very distant social classes and groups; the acceleration of the pace of life; the fragmentation of experiences (Baudelaire 1995 [1863]; Benjamin 2002; Simmel 1950 [1903]).

Throughout the twentieth century, these factors underpinned the development of the fashion system in European countries. They fuelled the progressive consolidation of the fashion industry, which soon superseded the original haute couture model by producing ever more complex forms of business spread throughout the market pyramid (Aspers and Godart 2013). The imaginary that supported this development was consistent with it, and as the fashion industry targeted new segments of the population, these too aspired to exclusiveness and uniqueness.

Recently, however, the western fashion system seems to have been able to include meanings that it had thus far marginalized. A number of factors are altering the ordinary metabolism of this system; new ways to do things and new representations (discourses, visual contents, values) appear that seem to provide the dominant fashion imaginary with new contents and avenues.

The need to take stock of these new developments prompted the conference entitled *Fashion Tales 2015: Feeding the Imaginary*, organized in June 2015 by Centro Modacult of the Catholic University of Milan, in collaboration with this journal. The conference – of which this issue of the *International Journal of Fashion Studies* collects some contributions – identified three main directions along which innovative experiences occur. Two of them have to do with the impact of new technologies on the structure of the fashion system itself; in particular, the technologies arising from advances in chemical research, and digital technologies. While the former are transforming the fashion industry under the banner of sustainability, the latter are leading to the widespread mediatization of fashion (Rocamora 2016). The third direction concerns non-western fashion, and it strongly challenges the traditional idea of fashion as an institution of the modern West.

TECHNOLOGIES AND SUSTAINABLE CHANGE

As regards fashion, technological innovation has distinctive potential. Fashion is a cultural industry *sui generis* (Hesmondhalgh 2002) with two ‘souls’: one has to do with manufacturing, the other with communication. Technological innovation affects the transformation of both these ‘souls’. Reference is usually made to digital technologies, given their influence on the transformation of communication processes (in production as well as communication and marketing) and design practices. However, the most interesting aspect from our point of view is that other technologies, mainly related to advances in chemistry and its applications, are having a transformative impact on the

fashion industry. 'Green chemistry' or 'sustainable chemistry' has developed in the last twenty years, focused on the design of products and processes that minimize the use and generation of hazardous substances. It is aimed at engineering technological approaches to preventing pollution and reducing consumption of nonrenewable resources. In the field of fashion, examples are biopolymers and biodegradable polymers, as well as green polymers (Thangavelu and Subramani 2016). Furthermore, in the phase of dyeing textiles, scientists and practitioners on the one hand support the beneficial use of safe synthetic dyes (Bide 2014), and on the other hand, research how to increase the production of natural dyes, preserving natural resources that are in short supply (Saxena and Raja 2014).

Since the Rana Plaza tragedy of 2013,¹ the change ongoing in the world of fashion has sometimes been described in terms of a revolution.² This is an overstatement. However, when one considers some of the actors that now occupy centre stage in the public fashion discourse, and the effects of this on the production chain, it earns some significance. Organizations like Greenpeace, PETA and CleanClothes have acquired an appreciable role in the system by presenting themselves as advocates for the citizens of the globe and demanding transparency, commitment and concrete action on the part of fashion companies to reduce their impact on the environment and the exploitation of labour. Campaigns like Detox, launched by Greenpeace,³ involve fashion brands and their suppliers in a joint endeavour – of which the NGOs are guarantors – to trial and implement new sustainable technological devices and production processes. It seems that a phase has begun in which the containment of environmental and social impacts has earned a place on the agenda of the fashion system's most important players (Khurana and Ricchetti 2016), such as luxury corporations and high-street brands, and it is consequently bound to have relevant effects on the value structure of the dominant fashion imaginary.

However, the change is at its inception, as even some of the brands that subscribed to the Detox programme seem to behave like greenwashers (see Chua 2016) and the spread of interest for sustainability among consumers is still limited, as shown by Diana Crane in this issue of the *International Journal of Fashion Studies*.

The article by Diana Crane and that by Laura Bovone, also in this issue, reflect on that change from different perspectives. They provide insights with which to question the main commonplaces that have accompanied studies in this area in the past ten years. Crane's article questions whether consumers have any real interest in the products of critical fashion. Those who hoped for a rapid reversal of the commercial results of fast fashion brands, or even a general reduction in the consumption of fashion as a whole, should reconsider their misplaced expectations. Bovone's article suggests that a kind of 'ethical imagination' is arising in the contemporary world. It draws attention to the forms of conviviality that people seek to achieve through 'a community of intents between production and consumption'. The liminal space between production and consumption has been interrogated by many scholars of consumption in the past 30 years (after the seminal work of De Certeau 1984 [1980], see for instance Campbell 2005 and Du Gay 1998). It is particularly apparent in the field of fashion, where the use of a product, and in particular its embodiment, informs its design (see Smelik, Toussaint and van Dongen in this issue) and often inspires the creativity of professionals, through the mediation of magazines (Moeran 2006)

1. 1134 people died and more than 2500 were injured in the collapse of Rana Plaza in Dhaka, Bangladesh, in April 2013. At work in the building – unfit for use according to the most common international conventions on safety – were thousands of people engaged in the manufacture of garments for some of the most important fashion brands in the world and located at every level of the market pyramid. The tragedy obviously attracted worldwide attention, and it was regarded by the press as a turning point in the public perception of the social sustainability problems of fashion production (see Burke 2014; Cherny-Scanlon 2016; Jones 2014; Matthews and Bergman 2015; Risberg 2013).
2. See the UK-based not-for-profit community interest company the Fashion Revolution (<http://goo.gl/lbopQi>), established immediately after the collapse of Rana Plaza.
3. Greenpeace launched the Detox Campaign in 2011, inviting textile companies and fashion and sportswear brands to commit to progressively reduce the use of toxic substances in their supply chain, according to a timeline shared with Greenpeace. At the time of writing 76 companies had subscribed to Detox. Greenpeace regularly monitors the results of the brands involved, publishing on a yearly basis reports about them, called Detox Catwalk. Brands are evaluated according to their Detox 2020 deadline to eliminate hazardous chemicals, looking back to assess if they have the necessary tools to

be fit for 2020. See for instance, Greenpeace (2016): in the Detox Catwalk 2016, brands like Benetton, H&M, Inditex are considered the avant-garde of the commitment to sustainability, while some of the subscribers, like Mango, GStar and Valentino, among others, although big efforts have been made and good results have been achieved, need to implement their actions faster to achieve the 2020 Detox goal. The Ngo denounces also the brands that, though they subscribed to the campaign, do not seem to commit themselves adequately to the Detox aims (Esprit, Limited Brands and Nike among others).

4. Here we follow Gilman (2008) in using 'fat' since possible alternative words are often based on a stigmatization of fatness.

or buyers (Entwistle and Wissinger 2006) – not to mention the new production of trends and styles by consumers themselves (Kawamura 2006; Luvaas 2016; Woodward 2009).

DIGITAL TECHNOLOGIES, MEDIATIZATION AND COMMUNICATION

Even more evident is the profound impact of digital technologies in redrawing the map of the dominant fashion imaginary. Digital technologies, in fact, increase opportunities to collect, organize and transmit information and meanings. It follows that the digital breakthrough has not only created new models and practices of communication, but it has also established new spaces for interaction among subjects and for relations between people and things. As has been noted, 'the media have infiltrated into the rhythms and practices of everyday life as well as systems of governance and the conduct of societies more generally' (Cottle 2006: loc. 201). The effect of this pervasiveness of the media is the progressive mediatization of society, whereby the different kinds of media exercise a transformative power on reality (Rocamora 2016).

In other words, they have a performative power (Cottle 2006; Hepp, Hjarvard and Lundby 2015; Lunt and Livingstone 2015). In design and production processes, for example, digitalization opens opportunities for creativity in the design of artefacts able to expand people's capacity for action. In this issue of the journal, the article by Anneke Smelik, Lianne Toussaint and Pauline van Dongen considers some of the possible applications of wearable technologies. Wearable technologies open up new spaces of creativity for designers, who can work on new forms of interaction between materials and bodies while engaging consumers in unprecedented relations with clothing; they can enhance sport performances, enable the differently abled, and incorporate abilities previously separate from the body (such as the detection of emotions or recharging the batteries of electronic devices).

Also, in terms of communication, distribution and commerce, digital media contribute to the reorganization of the supply chain in ways that were unforeseeable only a few years ago. It goes without saying that the digitalization of fashion communication has not only transformed the traditional media but it has also introduced new web-based channels: the blogosphere, as well as social media, for instance. But the implications of this process for the imaginary of fashion have yet to be fully assessed, particularly as regards the new players that have been brought to the fore who are often – at least initially – outsiders with respect to fashion media professionals (Rocamora 2012). On the one hand, the fashion system's extraordinary ability to absorb the spontaneous demands of amateurs is evident. In a sense, therefore, the innovative potential of the new communication tools for actors external to the established fashion system has been annulled. On the other hand, however, voice has been given to those traditionally on the margins of the spectrum of values represented in the fashion imaginaries, such as elderly people, 'fat'⁴ people and ethnic minorities (see for instance, Lewis 2013 on modest fashion). This aspect is examined by Monica Titton in her contribution to this issue, which deals with the lack, in fashion, of a form of criticism comparable to that in art and literature. Titton shows how the most recent forms of fashion communication tend to acquire and replicate the economic dependence from the fashion industry that has historically prevented the traditional media from developing an independent fashion criticism.

Finally, the mediatization of the media also emerges – as illustrated by Flavia Loscialpo in her contribution to this issue – in the field of exhibitions and curation. Two trends of digitalization in museums and exhibitions are apparent. In some cases, only digital media are used, thus doing away with the physical materiality of bodies to deploy the full potential of a fashion design, as in the case of Prada's digital platform *A Future Archive*. Other experiences favour forms of exposure where digital media and material exhibits coexist and interact with each other, as in the case of the *Fashion Curation'13* installation by the London-based curatorial collective White Line Projects. This second strategy, where mediatization occurs, goes beyond the mere representation in the museum's space of items, meanings and values created elsewhere. It privileges a performative logic whereby the museum becomes a narrative space: the curator acts as an author, creating an autonomous discourse that solicits responses and critical reactions from the visitor. The museum is no longer a mere medium, but becomes an arena in which fashion is made.

CHALLENGING THE EUROCENTRIC PERSPECTIVE ON FASHION

A long time has passed since scholars laid the foundations of fashion studies in the 1980s by identifying the origins of fashion in European mercantile capitalism of the fourteenth century (Wilson 1985: 22), and by establishing a direct link (Rouse 1999) between that historical period and modern fashion as an institution of change, which arose in Paris during the mid-nineteenth century. Although this framework still predominates (Entwistle 2015: 40–41), since the 1990s it has been challenged by competing visions. These refuse to consider fashion in non-western contexts as only a recent consequence of capitalist globalization (Riello and McNeil 2010), and they recognize the existence of fashion systems that have arisen in other geographical areas and on models alternative to that of modern capitalist consumption (Craik 1994: X–XI). In this regard, other authors propose that it is possible to speak of fashion 'when the cultural value placed on novelty becomes prominent and when the desire for innovation and the capacity for the production of innovation' (Heller 2010: 25) become part of an ongoing system of change. And this happens in different ways and contexts that make it possible to extend the range of application of the label 'fashion' to garments that in the past would have been classified as traditional costumes (Kaiser 2012).

The challenge raised against the hegemonic Eurocentric perspective on fashion has intensified in recent years in parallel with growing cultural interconnectedness and mobility across space (Ong 1999: 4). This process has certainly challenged the dominant imaginary of fashion. On the one hand, it has enjoined talk of 'global dress' and concern about disparities and inequalities throughout the world (Maynard 2004: 2). The reference is to the specific phenomenon of fashion globalization with regards to 'those transnational arrangements that involve [the] corporate strategies' of international fashion brands (Kaiser 2012: 33). On the other hand, however, as emphasized by Jennifer Craik and Angela Jansen in the editorial of issue 2.1 of the *International Journal of Fashion Studies* (2015), it becomes possible and also necessary to overcome the false dichotomies produced by a Eurocentric binary-oppositional thinking. The article by Leslie Rabine in this issue takes a decisive and innovative step in this direction by pointing towards a possible transformation of the values that still dominate the field of fashion.

Rabine gives voice to some Senegalese designers whose testimonies invite us to question the conceptual and geographical map on which we have built

the traditional dominant imaginary of fashion, with the naturalized centrality of Europe and the West/North, as well as the categories of identity, originality and distinction as cultural drivers of creativity. In particular, the controversial use made by the streetwear designers of Dakar of the term 'identity', so important for western fashion studies, exemplifies a different semantic framework. They interpret their role as creatives who confront/engage with – and treasure – content, values and experiences acquired in transnational networks in which they seek to move as actors who are equals amongst equals. These others are often the Africans of the diaspora, especially those in North America. The values and experiences they embrace are both those of African American culture and art and those representing the ancestral inherited values and cultures of the African continent. The term 'identity' thus loses the connotation of individualistic stability that it had for modern Eurocentric culture. It acquires a connotation that also encompasses the cultural, geographical and social world whence one comes (*thiossane* in the Wolof language). A person matters not so much as an individual, but as someone involved in journeys – sometimes real, sometimes imagined –, e.g. in the connections that are sought and found in creative work.

In the interviews collected by Rabine, the dualism of western philosophy seems to have been overcome in experiences that exemplify an imaginary open to new scenarios that extend beyond the traditional boundaries of the Eurocentric fashion system. These processes are challenging the fashion global system and encourage it to think in new ways about the various contemporary instances of fashion production, communication and consumption in different geographical contexts. However, such processes are not restricted to fashion. They are symptomatic of the wider transformations of contemporary modernities and remind us not to simply consider globalization as an overwhelming constraint. Today, as at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century, fashion is a key social arena where profound changes in culture and social structure manifest themselves and find their way into everyday experiences.

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