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## ***Archaeology of Fashion Film***

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### **Conference Review**

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The one-day conference 'Archaeology of Fashion Film', organised by the University of the Arts London, Central Saint Martins, and the University of Southampton, proposed that the 'fashion film' is an object of study worthy of greater consideration in the field of Film Studies, and foregrounded media archaeology as the methodology of reference for the exploration of this corpus. The event was named after the 2017-2019 UK Arts and Humanities Research Council-funded research project led by fashion historian and theorist Caroline Evans (Central Saint Martins, London, UK) as Principal Investigator, media scholar Jussi Parikka (University of Southampton, UK) and art historian Marketa Uhlirova (Central Saint Martins), both co-investigators, with Lucy Moyse Ferreira (Central Saint Martins) as Post-Doctoral Research Assistant. The Conference Programme aimed to epitomize the research project in its interdisciplinary approach and its effort to mix different methodologies at the intersection of film, fashion, history, industry, technology and culture.

The day thus featured both keynotes from film historians and media studies scholars and plenary discussion sessions with contemporary fashion filmmakers and producers. As the research project put it, the goals were to interrogate both "*the transformative effects of film on fashion*" and also "*how contemporary fashion filmmakers understand the history of their*

discipline".<sup>1</sup> Looking at "two parallel moments of fashion and film in the early 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries"<sup>2</sup>, moments where new technologies of what Zielinski calls "audiovision"<sup>3</sup> come to redefine both cinema and the fashion industry, the conference aimed to establish media archaeology as a key set of tools to explore both historical and current contexts for fashion films and their conversation with what the Conference Programme calls "contemporary audiovisual aesthetics".

Popularized in Media Studies notably by Jussi Parikka, media archaeology has become an essential set of methodologies to construct alternative film and media histories.<sup>4</sup> First, media archaeology has shown itself particularly adept at re-inscribing the discards of traditional film histories and the "weird objects" of film history.<sup>5</sup> Fashion films, with typically short shelf-lives, and scattered among many different forms - from feature or short fiction films to magic films to newsreels to marketing films - constitute just such typical forms and fragments of what Jussi Parikka at the conference called "excerpt cinema". In this way, media archaeology has helped film and media history develop fruitful dialogues with a wide range of other histories, whether wider audiovisual genealogies (histories of data<sup>6</sup>, communication<sup>7</sup>, the history of "imaginary media"<sup>8</sup>), the history of raw materials and rare earth minerals<sup>9</sup>, of spiritualism<sup>10</sup>, or of the histories of ephemeral cultural objects such as toys.<sup>11</sup> In all these forms, it has helped create complex genealogies and championed understandings of film in its full cultural materiality. As such, media archaeology would seem to be particularly suited to an understanding of the history of the fashion film, situated at the interface of various industrial and technological histories. One of the key successes of this conference was indeed the creation of a convincing argument for a social and industrial genealogy for the fashion film.

Exemplary of this generosity of research methodologies and concerns inherent in media archaeology, and of its natural affinity for "anarchaeology" – the "option to gallop off at a

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<sup>1</sup> For more information on the research project, see <http://www.arts.ac.uk/research/current-research/u-al-research-projects/fashion-design/archaeology-of-fashion-film/>.

<sup>2</sup> The Conference programme is available at <http://events.arts.ac.uk/event/2018/7/6/Archaeology-of-Fashion-Film/>.

<sup>3</sup> Siegfried Zielinski, *Audio visions: Cinema and Television as Entr'Actes in History* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 1999).

<sup>4</sup> See Jussi Parikka, *What is Media Archaeology?*, Cambridge: Polity, 2012, Erkki Huhtamo and Jussi Parikka, eds. *Media archaeology: Approaches, Applications, and Implications*, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2011, and Thomas Elsaesser, 'The New Film History as Media Archaeology'. (in *Cinemas: revue d'études cinématographiques*, vol. 14 nos. 2-3, Spring 2004, pp. 75-117.

<sup>5</sup> Parikka, *What is Media Archaeology?*, ch. 3, 'Imaginary Media: Mapping Weird Objects', pp. 41-62.

<sup>6</sup> Lisa Gitelman, *Always Already New: Media, History, and the Data of Culture*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006.

<sup>7</sup> Siegfried Zielinski, *Deep Time of the Media: Toward an Archaeology of Hearing and Seeing by Technical Means*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006.

<sup>8</sup> Eric Kluitenberg, ed., *Book of Imaginary Media: Excavating the Dream of the Ultimate Communication Medium*, Rotterdam: Netherlands Architecture Institute, 2006.

<sup>9</sup> Jussi Parikka, *A Geology of Media*, Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2015.

<sup>10</sup> Simone Natale, *Supernatural Entertainments: Victorian Spiritualism and the Rise of Modern Media Culture*, University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2016.

<sup>11</sup> Wanda Strauven, 'The Observer's Dilemma: To Touch or Not to Touch', in Erkki Huhtamo and Jussi Parikka eds., *Media Archaeology: Approaches, Applications, and Implications*, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2011, pp. 148-64.

*tangent*" that Zielinski has proposed as central to the work of media archaeologies<sup>12</sup> – the first Keynote Address, by Wanda Strauven (Goethe University, Frankfurt) sought to construct a non-linear understanding of the history of film and fashion film in dialogue with the history of the loom and other machinery of import for textile industries. Entitled 'Text, Texture, Textile: A Media-Archaeological Mapping of Fashion and Film', Strauven's presentation offered a non-linear genealogy of media and the sewing machine, both as inscription devices (*graphein*) operating on textile (the screen as cloth, celluloid advertised as garment material in the 1880s, or as material for ping pong balls until 2014). Her mapping focused on a series of "nodes" where film and media history came to encounter fashion and textile history, where genealogies crossed and inter-pollinated.

Examples included Lyon (where both the Lumière projector/camera and the Jacquard loom were invented), espionage (both in terms of industrial espionage in the history of reverse engineering of movie cameras and projectors from competitors' models in the 1870s-1890s, and in the form of women in Belgium knitting secret codes for the Belgian resistance during World War 1), or gender, with the particularly important place occupied by women in both early film industry (notably in the production processes) and in fashion industries (the umbrella as fashion accessory *and* magic screen in early Méliès films). This rich and provocative genealogy raised a central concern around the question of the materiality of the film image: as the result of a technology of both presence and absence, of on the one hand a technology of fixing (images on celluloid, patterns on textile) and of punching holes (with provocative links made here between the Jacquard loom and early computing cards). This, she suggested, would be an issue that would seem to be just as central to an archaeology of the *fashion* film as disembodied spectacle of consumption and desire.

The remaining two keynotes of the day offered two different ways to conceptualize this inscription of the fashion film and attempted to illustrate one of the key strengths of the methods of media archaeology: the bringing together of two different historical periods on the look-out for confluences, surprises, echoes – the circular, additive, non-linear "*lurches*" that, according to Parikka, inform both film history and fashion history. In 'The Paradox of Contemporary Fashion Film', Nick Rees-Robert (University of Paris – Sorbonne Nouvelle) offered "*a whirlwind tour of what the fashion film is today*". His presentation offered evidence that as an object of film study the fashion film remains elusive and paradoxical, ranging from fragments of feature films to Instagram posts. Fundamentally this is a form, he argued, held in a tension between the non-narrative display mode and narrative embedding, between visual continuities of coherent aesthetics and playful or arresting discontinuities of editing, between art and branding. Beatrice Behlen, for her part, in a presentation entitled 'Floating Chiffon and Misty Tulle: The Materiality of Fashion in Motion', focused on a 1918 Pathé film fragment – "*a banal snippet of film*", as she put it - that shows British high society ladies parading clothes on a windy day in a London garden.

Frustrated by her experience, as a curator at the Museum of London, of displaying old clothes "*as corpses*", and looking to film "*to re-animate dress objects in the archive*" by showing the "*movement of fashion*", she presented her careful and painstaking investigation

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<sup>12</sup> Zielinski, *Deep Time of the Media*, p. 27.

into the identities of the wearers of clothes in the 1918 fragment. While the society ladies of the film prove rather awkward as fashion models (unable, notably, to hold the “*fashion line*” twice in the excerpt, despite help from an impressively mustached military officer), their identification reminded the conference of the need to think of the fashion film not just, as the presentation generously showed, as vicarious experience of how the wind, fabrics and layers of clothing react together, but also as a marker in the social inscription and materiality of fashion and film. As its own object of study (and not just as a historical record of fashion), the fashion film deserves careful attention in terms of who produces it, for what audiences, with what kinds of audience engagement in mind – an interrogation as valid now as it was a century ago.

The conference offered a fascinating window on the research project as a whole. Where a media archaeology of the fashion film might seem to prove most fruitful is first in its non-linear exploration of the recurrences, recursive structures, and other tropes that can be found across the history of fashion films (the fashion line, the walk, the Zoetrope-like rotation of figures). As an eclectic sample of fashion films produced from 1908 to 2018 (curated by Lucy Moyse Ferreira) reminded the conference, there is scope for a careful mapping of the forms and discourses of fashion films, their evolution, borrowings, and citations, to expand our understanding of how early cinema may enter into conversation with contemporary digital aesthetics in its ‘post-cinema’ moment, and to start mapping a more formal aesthetic history of commercial films. Second, an investigation along the lines offered by Wanda Strauven’s alternative genealogies, looking at the parallel histories of emerging technologies of the image and emerging structures and technologies of industry, would also seem to offer intriguing opportunities for a cross-investigation of film with social, industrial, cultural and, today, digital forces. By focusing on the typically ephemeral, peripheral form of the fashion film, at the intersection of art, commerce, consumption, fantasy and desire, the research project can be expected to offer a significant and original contribution to our understanding of cultural forces that have shaped cinema history.