

ECONOMY OF THE EPHEMERAL

BLOOM AND DECAY IN TIME-CENTRIC CONSUMERISM

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Abstract

This paper explores fashion as the 'Economy of the Ephemeral', focusing on the cyclical and impermanent aspects of fashion through the scope of consumerism. Chapter I, 'Bloom,' analyses the historical roots of fashion's seasonal system and its evolution into a rapid, ever-changing matter. It delves into the profound impact of technological advancements and production innovations, which have not only accelerated fashion's cycles but have also fostered a disconnection from the natural rhythm of seasons, profoundly altering the ecological landscape. Chapter II, 'Decay,' focuses on the Maison Martin Margiela 9/4/1615 exhibition, held at the Boijmans van Beuningen as a case study for the impairment of fashion matter. The exhibition presents a time-based narrative that explores the interactions between living organisms, materials, and the museum environment. This paper offers a comprehensive exploration of the interplay between time, consumerism, and the impermanence of fashion. Therewith it encourages a deeper understanding of the cyclical patterns that extend beyond the traditional notions of bloom, and aid in encompassing the significance of decay.

Keywords: *Cyclical patterns; Perpetual Renewal; Planned obsolescence; Consumer behaviour; Material agency*

PERPETUAL RENEWAL OF FASHION CONSUMERISM

Fashion's economic framework flourishes within the perpetual cycle of creation, consumption, and disposal of garments, placing significant emphasis on the transient nature of trends. This ephemeral quality cultivates a sense of time scarcity, fuelling impulsive and immediate consumption behaviours. As a result, a severe neglect of the long-term consequences of consumer choices and their impact on their surroundings and other non-human entities involved has emerged.

Fashion as an economy of the ephemeral highlights the cultural significance attributed to the temporariness of novelty through monetary means, and how this shapes consumer behaviours accordingly. This

paper seeks to explore how fashion's mechanism of perpetual renewal is intertwined with time from a consumer-oriented perspective. This by focusing specifically on two principal life cycle phases: bloom and decay.

In part I 'Bloom', a trans-historical analysis of the seasonal system of timekeeping is made by analysing the correlation between fashion's value creation and its ongoing cycle of bloom and decay. This will be explored further by connecting this analysis to theories on neoliberal economics and production methods through the lens of modernity, explaining how these developments have contributed to the advent of the Anthropocene. Part II: Decay will extend this analysis by discussing designers who use the temporal dynamics of

fashion to critique consumer culture. For this, the 9/4/1615 exhibition by fashion designer Martin Margiela, showcased at the Boijmans Van Beuningen Museum in 1997, will be used as a case study. This exhibition presents a time-based narrative founded on the construction of Western value ideologies.

This exhibition not only symbolises the ecological-philosophical concept of a metamorphosis between bloom and decay, but also demonstrates how fashion can function as a social critique that questions the economic system and proposes a design approach that's more holistic in tune with nature. This paper will utilise this exhibition to formulate a discussion regarding eco-politics, material agency, and how this could influence consumer perspectives and value determination.

BLOOM

Fashion's essence may be elusive; however, its structure is periodical and, in certain ways, rigid. Historically, the fashion industry has aligned its production and distribution logic with the temporal measures of nature, particularly in the designation of (Western) seasons (Evans & Vaccari, 2020, p. 50). This seasonal thinking has legitimised the periodic creation of styles in the fashion industry. Even more pronounced than adhering to a seasonal rhythm, fashion operates in cycles. It begins with the abstract concept of newness, which then materialised through the commodification of garments. These garments are subsequently consumed and ultimately discarded. This cycle is then perpetuated by the emergence of a successive style that renders the current style obsolete, marking the dawn of a new cycle.

Considering fashion's deeply embedded desire for the next, the most successful styles are those with the shortest life cycles (Svendsen, 2006, p.31). Technological and production innovations have accelerated this progression, resulting in an immense proliferation of styles, or so-called trends, often in and out of fashion within a single season. The rapid turnover of trends has ultimately caused fashion to outgrow its original seasonal structure (Svendsen, 2006, p.32). Nowadays, it is not uncommon for fast fashion brands to offer 52 so-called micro collections per season, launching new styles every week, instead of presenting a collection that is embedded within a particular season. Fashion is therefore not as harmonised with the ecological structure of the seasons as it was

historically; however, it is more than ever kindred with the neoliberal pursuit of providing products at an ever-evolving speed.

This ongoing movement towards the next exemplifies how fashion embodies the utopian promise of hope and new beginnings, urging the abandonment of the past in favour of a more meaningful future (Wilson, 2003). These ideas position fashion as a striking example of modernity, as modernity championed liberation from tradition and embraced innovation. Industrialization and economic strategies emphasising efficiency and speed, such as Fordism and Taylorism, further bolstered this modernistic thinking (Bolton, 2020). This mindset permeated not only factories and workspaces but also the consumer landscape and strengthened their reciprocal impact. During the period of modernity, the desire for the new was not only legitimised but became normalised. Consequently, consumption patterns were reshaped and thus the way people utilised goods and services.

A key business strategy in these systematic efforts on consumer behaviour was planned obsolescence (Packard, 1960, p.53). The goal of planned obsolescence is to render an object superfluous based on non-essential qualities, thereby establishing a timely death date for the product on the premise of novelty. (Packard, 1960, chapter 7). Fashion, and its irrational pursuit of change for the sake of change, is exemplary for planned obsolescence, by mostly aesthetical and superficial enhancements to a product (Aspers & Godart, 2013, p.173). Planned obsolescence has effectively created a method of timekeeping, and inventing limitations that were otherwise non-existent. A mechanism brought into life for mere capitalistic reasons (Wilson, 2003, p13).

From this perspective, fashion can be understood as an economy of the ephemeral, representing the cultural significance that Western society attributes to the temporariness of novelty and how this intertwines with belief systems regarding value. Expanding this, fashion could then be viewed as an ideology in which time and desire determine an item's worth, in the context of relevancy and money. The latest it-bag epitomises the ultimate celebration of the present and the transient. Over time it will become the equivalent of a plastic bag, a mere throwaway product, intended for brief use possessing minimal long-lasting value. Thus, this constructed socio-cultural perception of value,

reinforced by the influx of mimetic desires, and optimised by technological advancements, is how the economy of the ephemeral spring to life. The rapid change inherent in fashion often involves not genuine innovation but rather references to its historical precedents, frequently drawing inspiration from past styles. This concept, termed as a 'Tigersprung' by Lehmann Ulrich (2000), describes fashion's ability to leap into the past to create an ever-changing present. In this way, fashion demonstrates its capability to dissolve boundaries between temporal periods and different timelines, resulting in a non-chronological existence (Benjamin, 2020, p. 77). By doing so, it takes on the form of a metamorphosis, oscillating between progression and retrogression, undergoing a constant process of inhabiting the future, present, and past within a single time continuum (Lehmann, 2020, p. 80).

This lays the groundwork for hypothesising that as fashion advances, it might adopt a 'rhizomatic' timeline instead of a linear one. Philosophers Deleuze and Guattari (1988, p. 25) support this notion through their concept of the rhizome: "A rhizome has no beginning or end...it is always in the middle, between things, inter-being." From a philosophical perspective, their statement could be understood as the sprawl of time itself, existing throughout different periods and timelines. A fashion style or trend does not arrive at one moment and disappear the next; rather, it is a gradual process. Thus, fashion mimics nature's evolutionary pattern in a multitude of ways, transitioning from new to old, and transforming from blooming into decay. But never definitive, never completed.

When mirroring the workings of fashion to those of nature, a metaphorical resemblance between life and fashion can be uncovered. Both possess an ephemeral core that encapsulates the passage of time. This rhizomatic state can be linked to what political theorist Jane Bennett (2010, p. 10) describes as "The comings and goings of ideas, sensations, values, objects, and relationships that shape us and are shaped by us". This in-between state illustrates how a multitude of factors influence each other, connected to a specific time and place, ultimately creating a lively moment of concurrence. Fashion has indeed always been influenced by social and cultural forces. However, when considering Bennett's concept of in-betweenness, fashion emerges as a vibrant assemblage that

encompasses not only these external influences but also material, organic, and natural elements in a specific moment in time and place.

When addressing the importance of time and place, it is crucial to include the global and rapid development of design within postmodernism and consumerism and its profound impact on the natural world in the discussion. The paradigm of human exceptionalism at the heart of these developments has led to grave consequences in the beginning of the twenty-first century. Overconsumption, misuse of resources, and carbon dioxide emissions have caused various severe changes to the ecological system (Haraway, 2016, p. 30). This dominant attitude of the twenty-first century is often referred to as the Anthropocene, a new geological epoch in which humans have obtained a hierarchical position in relation to other living and non-living matter (Haraway, 2016). As a direct result of this, humans have made life increasingly more uninhabitable for plants and animals. Political theorists and philosophers such as Bennett, Haraway, and Escobar advocate for greater recognition of the importance of other material and lives to re-establish a more balanced existence on Earth. The concept of 'becoming-with' emphasises the significance of human responsibilities to nurture a relationship with nature and animals based on mutual respect. Haraway (2016, p. 244) argues that equality among animals, plants, and humans is necessary to care for all beings involved, promoting a collective and interspecies way of living together without separation or individualistic thinking. Central to achieving this is the acknowledgment of material rights, regardless of how small or seemingly insignificant a life or materiality may be. Granting greater material agency could potentially lead to a shift in contemporary consumption behaviour, assigning equal value to both the decaying and blooming phases of existence.

DECAY

Historically, humans have asserted their superiority over other forms of life, and the fashion industry is no exception. Few designers possess the rare ability to seamlessly meld ecological philosophy with poignant cultural commentary through aesthetic expression. Among these exceptional talents stands Hussein Chalayan. For his Tangent Flows collection from 1997, Chalayan buried silk dresses covered with iron filings for several months before

unearthing them and incorporating them into the collection (Vrencoska, 2009, p. 873). The buried garments emerged with stains, rust marks, and an overall weathered appearance, creating a visual narrative of transformation and the passage of time (Kiziltunali, 2012, p. 2). Moreover, it implicitly addressed issues of sustainability and the lifecycle of clothing, themes that have become increasingly relevant in contemporary fashion discourse. Likewise, Iris van Herpen drew inspiration from the wonders of the natural world and the captivating properties of ferrofluids. As part of the *Future of Fashion is Now* exhibition held at the Boijmans van Beuningen in 2014, Van Herpen created an installation in which the 3D printed Ferro Fluid dress was immersed in a bath of ferrofluids, while rivulets of ferrous liquid dripped down from above (Boijmans, 2014). These drops adhered to the dress, enhancing the garment over time as they interacted with magnets that were incorporated in the dress. The dress underwent a gradual metamorphosis, its contours shifting and evolving in a fluid, almost organic manner. This dynamic interplay between the dress and its magnetic environment imbued it with a narrative of constant transformation and renewal. Van Herpen's installation demonstrated that fashion can be shaped and altered not just by humans, but also by non-human forces.

The Maison Martin Margiela 9/14/1516 exhibition, held in 1997 at the Boijmans van Beuningen Museum in Rotterdam, showcased both the effects of natural forces on garments, similar to Hussein Chalayan's experimentation with natural forces and Iris van Herpen's real-time processes. This exhibition wasn't merely a presentation of a collection; it was a collaborative process of creation. Humankind was not the master of matter, but rather a participant in nature's ethereal inclinations in a certain place and time. These aspects are deeply rooted in its title: 9/4/1516. The 9 represents the fashion house's nine years of operation, the 4 signifies the days during which mould and bacteria had time to develop before the exhibition's opening, and the 1516 denotes the hours the collection would be on display at the Museum (Evans, 1998, pp. 75-77). The title simultaneously references the three protagonists in this time-based fashion narrative: the designs of Maison Martin Margiela, the microorganisms, and the Boijmans van Beuningen Museum. From the outset, this triangular relationship illustrates the relationship

between humans, nature, and culture.

For this retrospective exhibition, Maison Martin Margiela displayed designs from its collection up to that moment. Notably, the Maison crafted replicas of these archival designs. A total of 18 sets were recreated using textiles in whites, beiges, and greys, treated with cultures of microorganisms such as green mould, pink yeast, and fuchsia or yellow bacteria (Duits, 1997, p. 153). Thereafter, the garments were placed within a modified cubical greenhouse for four days. The purpose of this was to create a humid atmosphere that would expedite the development of the yeasts and bacteria (Evans, 1998, p. 75-77). In reaction to these biological forces, the presence of microorganisms unfolded, showcasing their colours on the textiles, and gradually overtaking the design discourse of the garments (Duits, 1997, p. 153). Uncontrolled exposure to the sun and rain had enhanced the development of microorganisms, resulting in a variation of dark and lighter patches of mould. Particularly underneath the revers of the suits, inside the jacket hems, and within the crevasses of the cuffs this became evident. Photos from the exhibition vividly illustrate this process, revealing an absence of the original white, beige, and grey textiles by the end of the 1516 hours (Evans, 1998, p. 79).

This mechanism of mutual influence, resulting in uncontrolled aesthetics, aligns with anthropologist Arturo Escobar's concept of ontological design, which he defines as "The interaction between understanding and creation" (Escobar, 2018, p. 4). Ontological design entails grasping the interconnectedness of materiality and how one entity continuously reshapes and redesigns another. It underscores the idea that all materials exert influence on one another and are intricately interrelated with other materialities and entities. The 9/4/1516 exhibition illustrates this concept: while microorganisms are originally part of the natural world, within this exhibition, Margiela positions them to become part of culture. They are brought under cultivation, becoming an integrated part of a design object. Margiela seemingly did not initiate this interaction for the mere sake of decoration, but rather as a study on non-human agency, thus extending relationships between the human and nonhuman world. The interaction between organisms, material, and museum gradually transformed the collection of non-living canvas pieces into beings.

Additionally, it is important to acknowledge

the role of the Boijmans Museum within this interaction, as it serves as another facilitator of external influences. In this exhibition, the typical museum setting was reversed: the collection wasn't installed inside the museum walls but outside on the patio. The garments were not merely presented; instead, they were planted within the museum garden, allowing them to grow and develop. Instead of presenting the collection in a well-preserved, climate-regulated space with white walls and impeccable lighting, this exhibition was set outdoors, left to the whims of nature. The museum park served as a backdrop, and the rising and setting of the sun functioned as stage lighting. In this setting, the garments were experienced from a distance, creating an unobtainable grasp. While museums typically strive to preserve objects as best as possible, aiming to conserve time through objects, the Boijmans van Beuningen Museum set several mechanisms in motion to enable the opposite.

The 9/4/1516 exhibition is inherently dialectical, considering that the museum, as a cultural institution, has the obligation to society to preserve acquired objects for generations to come, contrasts sharply with fashion's deep dedication to rendering the current obsolete as quickly as possible, ensuring its eventual obscurity to maintain its short-lived existence. Margiela subtly critiques both fashion and the museum by showcasing the transience of design objects within an institution primarily focused on object conservation. The exhibition creates a tension where the museum cannot assert ownership or control over the presented matter, as the garments, microorganisms, and textiles act autonomously. The garments resist being subjected to the museum's will, refusing to become its subjects. Thus, demonstrating a high level of material agency.

As indicated in the title, the exhibition lasted for 1516 hours. Annemartine van Kesteren, Curator of the Boijmans van Beuningen Museum, conveyed via email correspondence that following this duration, the pieces deteriorated to such an extent that they completely perished in the weeks that followed. Therewith, neither Maison Martin Margiela nor the Boijmans van Beuningen could archive this collection in their depot. The garments slipped through the fingers of both the museum as a cultural institution and its creator. The Boijmans van Beuningen museum respected time, place, and life by allowing nature to run its own course. This allowed a peculiar event to occur: the museum

became subject to the object. Moreover, microorganisms hijacked and perpetuated consumerism by consuming it themselves.

Margiela's body of work, characterised by its use of deconstructivism, was at that time primarily perceived as a critique of the rapid pace of the fashion industry and consumerism (Rocamora & Smelik, 2015, p. 266). Offering a critical reflection on garments as symbols of hyper consumerism, being produced quickly, inexpensively, and consumed in the same manner. However, when re-situating this exhibition in the twenty-first century, another commentary emerges, one that extends beyond discussions of neoliberal capitalism and labour conditions and delves into socio-natural configurations and cultural-political reflections. The exhibition as an archival report prompts for exploration of boundaries between subject and object, nature and culture, matter, and spirit, fostering a dialogue about material agency and its role in resource utilisation and the negligent attitudes towards fashion consumption.

CONCLUSIONS

Maison Martin Margiela's ephemeral exhibition offered a commentary on the passage of time and consumerism through the lens of nature and ecology. In this exhibition, the development of bacteria was accelerated by favourable conditions, while the pace of fashion was deliberately slowed down, highlighting its decay rather than its bloom. However, both phenomena embody a life cycle, albeit at different speeds. The 9/4/1516 exhibition mirrored the workings of planned obsolescence, wherein, akin to the conventional manner, its decay was planned. Consequently, the exhibition can be viewed as an ephemeral artefact that critiques, yet also meaningfully celebrates fashion's transient essence and its notion of value. Margiela demonstrated the undeniable power of nonhuman entities and how they can influence discourses of design, matter, and life. Margiela liberated fashion from its neoliberal pursuit to be a coveted object of novelty and allowed its ephemerality to serve as a humbling experience regarding one's place in the world and its relation to it. In essence, this exhibition delved into debates about ecology and material agency, offering a performance by garments that gradually established joint agency between nonhuman and human. More importantly, it showcased how cyclical patterns need not solely revolve around bloom, but also around decay. Instead of obscuring this phase, it was

honoured—not perceived as a mere commodity, but as a material being undergoing lively transitions through time. Ultimately, it encouraged reflection on alternative modes of consumption.

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