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Fashion Film and the Art and Archaeology of Screen Promotion

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In this article, Marketa Uhlirova discusses some of the theoretical and practical challenges she faced in the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) funded project on fashion film in the early 20th century, which she ran with fashion historian Caroline Evans and media theorist Jussi Parikka. In conversation with Emily Caston, Uhlirova probes some of the associated and different curatorial and historical questions faced in Caston's AHRC research project on British music videos. The conversation covers questions of definition, catalogue research, the condition of hidden screen industry archives, and media archaeology research paradigms.

Marketa Uhlirova in Conversation with Emily Caston

In this conversation, Emily Caston talks to Marketa Uhlirova about her work in fashion film. Uhlirova is an art historian with an interest in the display, representation and mediation of fashion and dress, especially in the moving image. She is Reader in Fashion, Cinema and Visual Studies at Central Saint Martins, University of the Arts London, and Director of the Fashion in Film Festival where she oversees all of its programming. In 2017, Uhlirova was part of a research team that was awarded an Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) grant to investigate the form, titled An Archaeology of Fashion Film. The research project was the first to systematically investigate the hidden history of fashion film in the silent era between 1900 and 1929.[1] Drawing on Uhlirova's published work on that research project (2020, 2021, 2022), Caston talks to Uhlirova about the key ideas in her research design related to the issues she tackled in her project on music videos (2020). Caston and Uhlirova met in 2015 when Uhlirova joined the Advisory Board of Caston's AHRC Fifty Years of British Music Video Project.[2] In 2017, Caston joined the Advisory Board of Uhlirova's AHRC Fashion Film project as Chair. Their conversation reflects an ongoing intellectual dialogue that has taken place over the last ten years of their associated, sometimes collaborative, research into distinct, yet at times affiliated, hidden promotional screen industries.

Definitions

EC: Can we start by identifying the subjects we research? What is fashion film?

MU: Our AHRC research project actually posed this very question, as have some of my publications, and the search for a useful definition was an important part of it. There have been, and probably will continue to be, disagreements about what fashion film is. Some apply the term to all kinds of film forms from feature films to documentaries but we took a cue from the fashion industry itself, which has largely treated 'fashion film' as a specific category of short-form films that are typically closely associated with fashion brands or online fashion magazines and other such platforms and demonstrate some kind of artistic ambition or image-making craft. So we chose to focus on short films only and examined them in two distinct historical periods and contexts: in the early 21st century (in the context of new forms of image-making emerging from the fashion industry), and in the first three decades of the 20th century (in the context of silent

[1] *Archaeology of Fashion Film AH/P004598/1 (2017–2019)*, co-led by Uhlirova and Caroline Evans (University of the Arts London), with Jussi Parikka (University of Southampton).

[2] *Fifty Years of British Music Video 1964–2014 AH/M003515/1 (2015–2018)*, co-led by Emily Caston (then at the University of the Arts London) and Justin Smith (then at University of Portsmouth).

film production). In both these periods, we considered the key forms and functions of fashion film and asked what the moving image, as a technology, did for fashion.

EC: Was the main purpose of these films to promote fashion garments?

MU: To a degree. But this was not always as direct as one might expect. The more we looked the more we realised that fashion films have also served other agendas and purposes – instructional and educational, for example – and have of course also been part of popular entertainment. They have also had looser editorial functions and sometimes they were purely experimental. The point has often been to express a point of view or a vision, just like a fashion show would, or a retail installation, or a magazine spread. Designers, stylists, image-makers and other creatives often expand their vision beyond the clothes around which the fashion industry revolves. In fact, it may be pertinent to ask if it still does. The field of fashion communication is now so substantial and so varied; it is a complex ecosystem in its own right.

We felt that to posit fashion film as exclusively a promotional medium was limiting. But to go back to your question, I think it may be more precise to ask what exactly is being promoted by fashion films? To look at this historically, sometimes national interests were being promoted over individual designers, and sometimes it was new technologies that were the real highlight – especially colour. These days brands very much promote products but alongside this, they work hard to increase their cultural capital in more symbolic ways. They invest in all sorts of cultural productions and associations as a way to position themselves.

But let me ask you in return, what is a music video? And, to come back to your question about promotion, do you consider it secondary to the music as the 'product' it sells?

EC: That's a complex question, which I tackle in my book.[3] I don't define a music video as a film made for a music track because quite a lot of music videos are based on recycled scripts unsuccessfully pitched to previous artists. Instead, I define a music video as a film made with the consent of the recording artist, which usually takes the form of a licensing agreement. If you don't make the artist's consent and collaboration part of the definition, you end up including lots of unofficial videos made for YouTube without the artist's knowledge. Of course, a handful of famous music videos have been made despite the artist's opposition and the record label (usually responsible for issuing the license) and the artist do not always agree; but a good definition can always tolerate exceptions.

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[3] Caston, Emily. *British Music Videos 1966–2016: Genre, Authenticity and Art*. Edinburgh University Press, 2020.

I wouldn't describe music videos as 'selling' music because that concept doesn't accurately describe the process of making them, distributing them, or watching them. A music video isn't an entity physically separate from the track in the way that a commercial is a physically distinct entity from the car or washing detergent it advertises. A music video *is* the music track in a very basic existential sense; when one watches the video, one is also listening to the music and therefore always consuming the product; the artist and record label consequently earn royalties on the music whenever a video is streamed. The question 'is a music video secondary to the music?' is a bit like asking whether a gig is secondary to the music; no, a music video is, like a live gig, one among several different ways we experience music.

MU: And it is also quite often how the music exists in our memory and imagination, isn't it? What was the thinking behind creating the early music videos?

EC: In the so-called 'first British pop music invasion' of the USA in the 1960s, the managers of bands like The Dave Clark Five and The Beatles cut together live footage to send to US television music shows in lieu of a live performance – it wasn't so much that it was cheaper, more that the bands often got tired of travelling or weren't available due to other commitments. The Who, Pink Floyd, The Kinks, The Animals and The Rolling Stones all began making them and became more inventive about cutting in conceptual footage and narratives. In the 1970s, the harmonisation of European release dates accelerated this, stimulating labels to commission videos for television shows in France, Germany, Italy and across Europe. And then you have the famous story of Queen making *Bohemian Rhapsody* (1975) because they didn't think it would work if it'd been lip-synched on *Top of the Pops* (in those days acts didn't sing live on the show).[4]

Agendas and audiences

MU: Were you interested in the audiences for music videos across the decades?

EC: We looked at audiences, yes, because there was this myth that everyone watched music videos on MTV in the 1980s and '90s. Many countries had their own national dedicated music video shows or channels focused on showing music produced in their own language or nation or region. MTV and America hijacked academia by leading British scholars to think most people watched videos on their MTV channels. Of course, there were some countries in which they did, but many in which nationally produced terrestrial shows were the main channel for audiences to watch music videos. We music video producers knew this because we were commissioned to deliver the music videos

[4] *Top of the Pops*, BBC 1964–2006.

for British show deadlines such as *The Chart Show* (C4, ITV) and *Live and Kicking* (BBC) through the '90s; the video commissioners at all the main record labels were focused primarily on getting the videos playlisted on these shows, not MTV; these terrestrial shows had higher British ratings because so many households didn't receive MTV on cable or satellite. I was quite surprised when I later found out academics thought MTV was the main viewing platform in Britain. Maybe those first scholars of music videos allowed themselves to be seduced because MTV was an enticing novel format, prime fodder for speculation about 'the postmodern', which was all the rage in academia at that time. Today, more research on regional differences in production and consumption is taking place. I've just written a chapter on Government-run television shows and digital platforms for music videos in Cuba since the 1970s, for example.[5] What about fashion film? Who were the original audiences in the silent era?

MU: Most of the early fashion newsreels addressed themselves to women. This was not only through their subject matter, titles and intertitles but also through the way they were marketed and advertised by distributors and the press. In the popular psyche, fashion was very much a female realm and I am convinced the early fashion film audience was predominantly female (which is not to say men were excluded). In a broader sense, cinemas during the 1910s actively courted women, and silent film academics have shown that in this period female audiences became a major part of the filmgoing demographic. In cities, films were not only shown after working hours but also during daytime, in places close to, and even directly attached to shopping and other entertainment spaces, so women would pop into a cinema space while shopping or doing errands, sometimes accompanied by children. Prior to the newsreel, fashion films would have been shown with other shorts, in the variety format. When the fashion newsreel established itself around 1910, fashion was shown in this context of news and general interest; and here again, fashion represented female-oriented content.

EC: What do you think was the attraction of these films?

MU: Women were keen to have up-to-date information about fashion and to keep up with the latest styles; all of a sudden, fashion could be shown in time, in detail, and in motion. But I think one of the key reasons for fashion films' popularity was the colours in which they circulated and which we know audiences found charming and dazzling. Most fashion films were coloured by stencilling – a technology in which highly vivid aniline colours were applied on the film strip through stencils. Pathé's system, known

[5] Caston, Emily. 2025. 'Government by Music Videos: Music Television in Cuba', in *Oxford Handbook to Music and Television*, edited by Jessica Getman, Ron Rodman and James Deaville, Oxford University Press (forthcoming, 2025).

as Pathécolour, was considered superior to other systems (which, ironically, also included the photographic systems like Kinemacolor or Chronochrome that aimed to reproduce 'true colours', as experienced in reality).

EC: So the films were 'content'? If they weren't promotional, were they sold or rented to exhibitors?

MU: Largely yes. I would distinguish between two main categories of fashion film in this period: the newsreels, of which there are a great many and which are non-narrative and have a more editorial approach; and the more straight-forward advertising films, which are typically narrative and somewhat direct and didactic in their address to a 'customer'. Not many advertising films seem to have survived. Of those I have found, very few were made in France and the United States. My suspicion is that French and American fashion houses had a pretty good relationship with film companies like Pathé, Gaumont, or Fox so there may have been less of a need to commission advertising because the newsreels were already performing this function.

EC: So whose interests did these films further?

MU: I think everyone benefited. To my knowledge, the newsreels were entirely financed by the film companies and so the fashion content was conceived as news and entertainment as much as an informative showcase of new fashions. I haven't found any records of any business transactions yet, but I guess the fashion companies either gladly supplied the garments for the films for free, or it was lucrative enough for the film companies to buy in the clothes. Crucially, the fashion companies didn't produce the films unlike later, when fashion film or moving image content exploded again in the digital era. In the silent era, fashion film was 'owned' by the film industry and it was not a negligible aspect of this industry, precisely in the way that fashion film has not been a negligible aspect of the fashion industry today. Our research project wanted to draw attention to the importance of these moving image forms that had been mostly overlooked among the film history establishment.

EC: Why do you think they were overlooked?

MU: To put this simplistically, I suspect it was partly because of the hierarchy that the discipline established, which was then also mirrored by the priorities set by the national film archives. Film studies originally tended to focus on narrative feature films that were formally or otherwise innovative. I think this had much to do with the need to legitimise the discipline by legitimising film as an art form. Initially, film studies had a strong interest in the figure of the *auteur*. This mindset was also open to artistic and

experimental film, and silent cinema figures like Méliès or Chaplin could be construed as early *auteurs*. But the bulk of the commercial shorts that fill our film archives didn't fare too well. Later, cultural and visual studies, new film history, feminist studies and an interest in film exhibition and audiences prepared the ground for some of the marginalised forms to begin to enjoy more interest – but it strikes me that even that has been selective. Fashion film has been almost completely ignored in much work on silent film and even in studies of Pathé and Gaumont cinema.

EC: Have you found out who the original filmmakers were?

MU: In very few instances we have names of the directors in the film credits and we know of some of the fashion editors involved. Luke McKernan has written about Abby Meehan, an editor involved in producing some of the Kinemacolor fashion films in the early 1910s,[6] and Michelle Tolini Finnamore has written about the editor and producer Florence Rose who had a fashion film series named after her in the United States, produced by the American branch of Pathé.[7] It seems – at least in the instances we know of – that the fashion editor (the person who selected the clothes) was a more important figure than the general producer or camera operator. Within companies like Pathé and Gaumont, fashion films would have been made by specialist units that produced the newsreels. This was a separate operation from feature films. But this kind of data is quite scarce, especially because the filmmakers and fashion editors are rarely credited in the films themselves. You have to do a lot of digging and you need a lot of luck in coming across mentions when you least expect them. I would love to know more.

EC: Our British music video project was very focused on collecting data about the filmmakers because I knew the data was out there on call sheets held by many of the filmmakers. I set up a Facebook group to connect with the filmmakers. My loft is full of boxes of call sheets they donated. The Facebook group was great because so many of the filmmakers, CEOs, producers and execs had moved on to other careers or countries. We were able to reach a large number (over 500) to confirm credits and technical details of the films. It became this big community effort. I felt quite humbled by the amount of time and effort people contributed. We used many of those credits in the catalogue enclosed in our DVD *Power to the People*,[8] but I have hundreds more

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[6] McKernan, Luke. 2020. 'Abby Meehan'. In *Women Film Pioneers Project*, edited by Jane Gaines, Radha Vatsal, and Monica Dall'Asta. New York, NY: Columbia University Libraries, 2020.

[7] Tolini Finamore Michelle. 2013. *Hollywood Before Glamour: Fashion in American Silent Film*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

[8] Power to the People: British Music Videos 1966–2016. Thunderbird Releasing, 2017. 900 minutes, 6 discs.

very detailed technical production notes on other music videos on my SSDs[9] at home, along with stacks of original call sheets. Many of the filmmakers retained masters and 16 mm or 35 mm rushes in their lofts and garages. It felt tragic that I couldn't accept those rushes because I didn't have access to resources to store them, let alone digitise and conserve them for future generations of researchers and music fans. I felt that much of our cultural heritage was at risk and remains at risk. I wasn't aware before we ran the project of how limited the digital capacity of the British Library and British Film Institute was. It still worries me. I've always seen my role as that of a custodian with a responsibility to ensure that the culture is preserved for future generations to re-discover, interpret anew and enjoy.

MU: With the silent fashion films, we have lost a lot of the film material. A lot has survived in the Pathé and Gaumont collections in France, even if much of it is made from negatives and so is black and white only. But other productions have almost completely disappeared. There is probably only a handful of Kinemacolor fashion films... The surviving films are scattered in archives all over, which is not surprising as they had a global distribution. So in my research I had to navigate the different cultures of different archives. Many archives have holdings of colour material, sometimes only on nitrate, and not all of this is made accessible. Nitrate is very fragile, unstable and not exactly safe, and it is more complex for archives to retrieve it. Like much research it's detective work. It's knocking on lots of doors. And sometimes it's banging your head against closed doors – it's all of that.

EC: We are so dependent on the archivists who archived material before us and their method for cataloguing it. I remember that, when researching my PhD, I was dependent on whether or not archivists had categorised film characters as 'angels.' My thesis was on narratives of angelic intervention in Hollywood films between 1933 and 1955. When I searched the catalogues for plot synopses containing 'angels' I was at the mercy of the cultural conceptions of 'angels' available to those archivists when they had originally entered the film's metadata on the catalogues. I quickly learned to search for other terms such as 'ghosts' and 'saints' and 'alter-egos.' In our music video project, I wasn't dependent on archivists because I'd worked in the industry and brought an encyclopaedic knowledge of music video history to the research project. The PhD had taught me that hermeneutics and ethnography were indispensable components of a robust research methodology. Without those elements of research design, you might be better off avoiding the catalogue entries completely and looking at the material directly, although looking at the original films is immensely time-consuming.

[9] Solid State Drives.

MU: Yes, the film archive is generally tricky to navigate. Catalogue descriptions are crucial for thematic searches, and of course, they often don't exist or are only partial – and sometimes they are wrong. I find having an open and ongoing dialogue with archives is absolutely crucial. We do rely on the knowledge of archive curators who can open doors and help us contextualise the material we encounter. They can also help us ask better questions. But it should cut both ways: we have a lot to offer back. When the dialogue works, it can be fantastic. The EYE film archive in Amsterdam is exemplary in the way it works with researchers. And there are others. But sometimes there just isn't the capacity... What has been your experience working in film archives?

EC: For the music video project I didn't work with archivists – I collected all our material from the artists and filmmakers themselves. The industry ran its own commercial archive, VPL, from which you could purchase digital copies.[10] I didn't want to use VPL because I couldn't assess which version of the video VPL held and I knew from my experience as a producer that multiple versions were often mastered. I had run Ridley Scott's music video company, Black Dog, before I became an academic. I'd also run the music video division for Harry Nash and worked as a producer at Propaganda Films, which was a subsidiary of Polygram Filmed Entertainment before I became an academic, so I knew most of the directors personally and just messaged them. Between their companies and the labels, we were almost always able to source the correct version.

The issue of restoration also occurred. In consultation with our directors, I decided to produce a DVD rather than a Blu-Ray because so few of the videos had originated in HD. I had to decide on aspect ratio because some of the original videos were mastered in 4:3 academy for television and we wanted to produce a 16:9 frame. Jonathan Glazer's Jamiroquai video *Virtual Insanity* (1996) was mastered in a 4:3 frame, for example. I had an option to crop or pan and scan to 16:9, but I didn't want to without the consent of the director. So I messaged each director privately to establish their preference. Each director chose whether to remain at 4:3, 1:85 or 2:39 if they'd shot on anamorphic lenses and added a black surround to fit the 16:9 frame. Some of the directors themselves paid to go back into post to remaster the video. It took time, but I always reminded the team that art curators wouldn't rush a decision about how and where to hang a Picasso, and they certainly wouldn't remove the lower two inches of the painting in order to make it fit the wall.

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[10] Video Performance Ltd. https://www.ppluk.com/music-licensing/music-video-licensing/.

MU: Can you talk about how you arrived at your list of videos? I remember you had a very collaborative method. How did it work for you?

EC: Yes, I assembled a consultative panel of 100 or so directors, producers, commissioners, editors and cinematographers. Over two long days at The British Library, we watched about 500 music videos (from a 'long list' of around 1000) and debated the historical significance of each: a video was not selected on the basis of artistic merit, but because it represented a *landmark* of some kind, such as the first known use of a particular lens or colour grading software. We used the Facebook group too. If filmmakers couldn't make our meetings because they were shooting or out of town, I'd message and ask them to nominate films that influenced their practice as well as comment on the long list of 1000.

MU: Does your interest in the music video extend to fashion?

EC: Yes, it does. You get fashion playing an important role in 16 mm documentaries and then music videos. In the 1960s, fashion, music and film were enmeshed within films like Nicolas Roeg's *Performance* (1970) and Peter Whitehead's *Tonite Let's All Make Love in London* (1967). 16 mm facilitated more affordable documentary filmmaking. Unfortunately, I couldn't investigate this as much as I'd have liked, and I hope to research it further in the future.

MU: I recall seeing other documentaries from the 1960s about the youth culture of the 'swinging sixties.' And then there were also some TV programmes. But with the music video, this connection really exploded. I remember being completely glued to MTV for much of the early '90s, as soon as it became available in Czechoslovakia. I was watching the same videos over and over, utterly mesmerised. When *Nothing Compares 2 U* was first broadcast in 1990, I went to the hairdressers straight away! MTV seemed to me an irresistible mix of music and fashion – and of course, novel moving image expressions. British culture was key to this phenomenon, wasn't it? Can you say more about what came out of your music video project about fashion in music videos?

EC: The early British MTV videos were led by fashion styling, hair and make-up. Much of this was informed by the punk spirit, as was the rise of the fashion stylist in the early 1980s. But whilst many bands like Duran Duran were dressed by stylists employed by the record companies, many other artists did not like to be styled. That was seen as 'inauthentic'. The authenticity of the artist was a really big deal in the '90s after the mediatized excesses of the '80s. There was a bit of a kickback against music videos from artists like Oasis who preferred their fans to experience their music through live gigs in the '90s.

Methods

EC: Your research project was titled 'Archaeology of Fashion Film' and used media archaeology as its main method. Why?

MU: Media archaeology has been a somewhat contested ground. It is not so much one method but rather a set of methods that aim to disrupt traditional historical assumptions. It is considered 'experimental' by some and others seem puzzled by it because they feel it is, at least to a degree, a new label for older approaches pulled from elsewhere. But I think media archaeology has consolidated a certain set of theoretical principles and has been a helpful intervention to cinema and media studies. You could say that by the time we came along, media archaeology had already had 'its moment' in the academy and some of its challenges were already becoming absorbed into more traditional film and media histories. We chose it partly because it genuinely seemed to fit our project and we felt fashion studies could benefit from its thinking too. Also, fashion film has always been – and still is – outside of the film historical canon, and so it seemed apt to use an approach that challenged the very notion of a canon. Speaking personally, as a trained art historian, I have sometimes found traditional history a little constraining. Archaeology offers a different tool kit to deal with different historical temporalities and a lot of uncertainties and unknowns within those. A lot of the thinking behind media archaeology has been influenced by Walter Benjamin and Michel Foucault.

EC: I'm fascinated because although I studied Foucault as an undergraduate and his texts were fundamental to our social and political sciences degree at Cambridge at the end of the 1980s, including his seminal *Archaeology of Knowledge*, I didn't use a media archaeology approach on our music video research project. You did. Why?

MU: In media archaeology, you are perhaps less driven to construct a single linear, causal narrative – as in, X enabled Y and that led to Z... Instead, you seek alternative routes into the past that allow for different historical models. These include multiple origins and networks and hierarchies, media re-emergences, historical disruptions, accidents, discontinuities, forgotten or inconsequential media forms. Another thing it can do is look at media developments through the framework of 'deep time', as Siegfried Zielinski put it, to trace narratives across broader time spans. When Caroline (Evans) and I started thinking about how to study fashion film and how to frame the research, media archaeology appealed to us precisely because it programmatically embraces uncertainty and disorder and allows for multiple, parallel histories. So we went to talk to Jussi Parikka. Media archaeology allows you to ask questions differently. To be more specific, we took a parallel look at two historical periods one hundred years

apart and asked what that encounter could yield. This juxtaposition didn't necessarily always go into historical depth using published sources (if only because there aren't too many of those); our research was as much about conceptualising what a history of fashion film might look like and posing questions as it was about finding answers. We wanted to explore new epistemologies of fashion film, treating it not as one single media form but, rather, as forms with multiple discrete trajectories that sometimes crossed over, and sometimes didn't. One way of challenging ourselves was to combine the knowledges and competences of a range of different participants – curators and academics with fashion, film and media expertise, fashion image-makers and stylists, fashion content commissioners and producers, and so on. We drew on people from all these backgrounds to collectively generate new thinking. I am currently editing a book of some of our conversations.

EC: In our project, we too brought together those disparate groups, clusters of creatives who don't normally work together – archivists and filmmakers in particular. But I was very struck in a series of meetings we held at the British Film Institute for all the music video filmmakers by the filmmakers' desire for *a story.* I remember asking the panel how they wanted me to curate the DVD – should I do it chronologically, for example? – and they were adamant about wanting a narrative story rather than just linear history or a random collection of videos. Perhaps academics dislike stories, but most of us (and I include myself here) enjoy history when it's narrated through a story. The industry had volunteered so much free time and effort to our project and was so passionate about creating resources that secondary school and university students might enjoy. So, I heeded their request and set about telling a story in both the DVD and the book.

MU: I'd say media archaeology also tells stories. For example, it asks how we may rethink the relevance of historical cinema forms through the lens of today's digital media culture. I suspect this was a question you asked yourselves in your project too. We are constantly re-casting the past from the perspective of the present. I am not surprised that your collaborators wanted to see their 'story' told, to have their legacy properly recognised in the face of what's followed. Their work has had such a profound impact on today's screen cultures, directly and indirectly – from music video to fashion film, advertising, artist film, and beyond. And of course, music video – though an important art form in its own right – was also the training ground for the likes of Glazer, Fincher or Jonze. And yes, absolutely, stories are very powerful. They help us understand and position things. With fashion film, written records are quite scarce – we couldn't find much detail on how the films were shot, who the directors were, exactly what the audience demographics were, all the types of spaces in which they

were shown... I suspect you also had to do a lot of digging but at least in your case, there is a lot of knowledge that can still be passed on through oral history.

EC: Yes, and oral history isn't an obvious tool of media archaeology. It's something I write about in my article on the advertising industry in this issue.

MU: In our case, the media archaeological approach allowed us to build knowledge piecemeal, from whatever has survived. The essence of the research was the material objects – the archival films and film fragments. We haven't found systematic film company catalogue entries on fashion films and where they exist, they are not very descriptive. As far as I know, there are no call sheets, financial ledgers, correspondence between the film companies and the fashion editors – though I still hope to be wrong. As an approach, media archaeology gave us some freedom to stumble in the dark, to find the material reel by reel, randomly scattered in archives... The project is not over yet!

EC: In the music video project, we were lucky in that respect. We found that directors had fastidiously archived their own films from the video era and onwards – initially Umatic, Beta SP, then Digibeta, D1, and so on. But the advertising archives are not in such good shape. I am told that advertising agencies think today and tomorrow, never the past. For historical sources before 1960, I'm dependent on archives and, frustratingly, they are few and far between. The media archaeology approach is therefore apt. Advertising films are designed to be viewed repeatedly, dozens of times, without your audience getting alienated. The creative people were the planners who constructed an experience for the audience across poster, print, radio, TV, cinema, with cutdowns. That planning information is often missing. You can't make hasty assumptions about how to interpret those films because we don't have this information. The commercials were not viewed by audiences in isolation. They were part of a multi-media strategic campaign. Perhaps this lends itself to the archaeological method.

Archives and history

MU: Which archives have you used to find advertising films? Are you focusing on the UK only?

EC: Yes, it's for a book for the BFI's Bloomsbury's 'British Screen Stories' series.[11] My starting point is the History of Advertising Trust (HAT) in Norwich, which is the industry's own funded archive. The BFI also has a significant collection although largely

[11] Caston, Emily. 2025. Screen Advertising. British Screen Stories, Bloomsbury (forthcoming).

without production information. Regional screen archives also hold a lot of material. Your fashion film project wasn't exclusively British, I know. So how easy was it to make connections between different national archival collections? Did early fashion films articulate colonialist paradigms?

MU: Yes, they did. The films are gorgeous to look at and may seem utterly innocuous but clearly, they were produced by major empires and screened thanks to their carefully managed global distribution networks – in the 1910s and '20s these films were shown all around the world. They were predominantly French and somewhat less frequently American, British, German, Austrian... Their main producers made big financial profits, but the films also functioned to sustain these powers in a colonialist logic. It was not just fashion film of course. Film in general made a lot of profit while it was also a tool of soft power for the most successful film-producing nations. But what's interesting about fashion film is the power and influence of the film industry combined with the power and influence of the fashion industry, in which France was of course also king. So it was very much a case of projecting from France – and more specifically Paris – to the rest of the world. The message was: our fashion is superior but it is your fashion too, you too can participate, you too can follow and better yourself. When American newsreels became more important, through American Pathé, Hearst, Mutual and Fox, they started to showcase more American fashion, but French fashion continued to be the benchmark.

EC: Have you looked at fashion film outside Europe and the USA?

MU: Within the context of my longer-term research and curatorial project, the Fashion in Film Festival, we have done (though not enough), but with fashion film – not so much. I recently did some quite unsystematic scoping of a few African and Central and South American archives, but this needs more time.

EC: How interested is the fashion industry in its own history?

MU: Fashion brands are extremely self-conscious when it comes to their historical heritage and they actively 'curate' it. In the big blockbuster exhibitions we have recently seen in museums, brands have typically been present, exercising some degree of control over the narrative... They fiercely guard their cultural cache because heritage is a big part of their identity and marketing strategy. When it comes to film, though, brands typically don't own much footage. Where brands had material on film stock, I imagine they would have donated it to film archives, for them to conserve and restore it. Also, historically, brands didn't necessarily produce or commission films, with a few exceptions.

EC: Does the brands' knowledge and understanding of their film heritage inform how they produce fashion film now?

MU: Not much. There are not that many surviving brands with what you could call a 'film heritage'. Among the few that have been quite involved in this space are Giorgio Armani and Jean-Paul Gaultier, but this is through feature film, not the short form. Fashion film is something museums are now increasingly keen to tap into when they stage their major retrospectives.

EC: Have you come across promotional films commissioned by fashion houses before the early 21st century? Or is this phenomenon specific to the digital era?

MU: I have come across some, and some we know of but they don't seem to have survived. For example, Caroline Evans and Michelle Tolini Finamore write about Paul Poiret publicly and privately showing films of his mannequins very early on, in 1911 and 1913. I suspect that he may have teamed up with one of the French film producers to make them, but the initiative would have been his. We know he also worked with Urban's Kinemacolor and later Pathé and British Pathé – those films would have been distributed by those companies and would have been mutually beneficial to both the fashion house and the film company. I also know that many companies in Europe used film to promote their clothing and accessories, but mostly as one-offs. There is one company worth noting that regularly commissioned their own promotional films in the late 1920s – the Czechoslovak shoe manufacturer Baťa, based in Zlín near Brno. They took the cinema extremely seriously as a promotional and instructional tool, so much so that they created their own film studio in the mid-1930s. It's all about putting pieces of a mosaic together and archival curators are well-placed to do this kind of research and collaborate with academics working across archives, together building the picture. This kind of research doesn't yield results quickly, it requires time.

Value

EC: I sometimes wonder about what the point of history is. As human beings, we can't help doing history to make sense of the world. We just do 'history-making all the time' when we chatter about this and that and tell each other stories. As other historians have shown, there are deep parallels between today's digital chaos and the very early years of film. I feel strongly that historical perspectives have value. You have expertise in fashion film and you can offer a new outlook.

MU: You can definitely provide a framework to think the past in a certain way, and to see historical objects in a certain way. I also think history is always re-writing itself.

It's not that we can learn from the past that is somehow given to us (or obscured but there). No – the issue is that history needs rewriting all the time and it also extends its tentacles into the present all the time. World leaders are always mobilising history as it suits their politics. History is a deeply contested territory.

Speaking of the value of what we do, would you say advertising is being re-evaluated now? My perception is that it is now being more seriously archived and critically analysed... But historically, it was considered an ephemeral screen form that was largely without merit once it had served its purpose. Also, culturally, it has been understood as manipulative and inextricably tied with the ideologies of capitalism and consumerism, all of which have made advertising unappealing as an object of study. People didn't think 'we must preserve this for posterity.'

EC: Yes, this is changing. We may also be on the cusp of a renaissance in creative screen advertising. In the 2010s it looked like subscription-based platforms like Netflix, Amazon and Disney would kill screen advertising. But in the last 12 months, we've seen most of the platforms adopt the old advertising model of late 20th-century television. The novelty of subscription-based streamers providing whole series that audiences can binge on has worn off. Many people either don't want to pay expensive subscriptions or can't afford to. Advertising was an enabler, a financier of either its own high-quality content (as Shell functioned like 'the new Medici' in the 1930s, or Guinness in the '90s) or other film and television content. It paid for platforms to provide 'free content' to their audiences. The screen industries are perhaps remembering that they can't survive financially without advertising. Sadly, a lot of the skill has been lost because in order to save costs, many agencies and brands stopped hiring independent production companies and experienced filmmakers to make their commercials and began producing their own adverts in-house. But some of the extraordinary creativity we saw in the 20th century could be renewed if commissions to the independent production sector are revived.

MU: As a curator, I can't help but look at this from an artistic and curatorial perspective, and there are a lot of fashion films that I would not put in front of an audience. That said, there are some outstanding films around, as is the case with advertising. And so I get a little irritated when people dismiss fashion film out of hand because it's commercial. I think the fact fashion needs to consistently reinvent itself, that it's always on the cusp of something new, gives it immense energy and emotion and a push for innovation. There is a relentless pace to it, which can result in something quite intoxicating. And of course, it can also be all-consuming and destructive. Looking

at fashion from a birds-eye view, it is by and large an unethical, unsustainable and polluting industry, with only small pockets of alternative practice. Yet, at a close-up, it can still be a platform where creative people can exercise quite a lot of artistic freedom, certainly compared to other industries. I think this goes for fashion film and the music video too. I also think creativity can be the answer to the industry's problems.

Competing Interests

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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