**Fashion, Film, and Gender:**

**Aesthetics and Violence in the (New) Fashion Film**

*Abstract*

Fashion photography has for over a century held a prominent position in the dissemination and representation of fashion, both as aesthetic image and as marketing tool. Whereas the moving image – in the first decades of the 20th Century – disrupted the prominence of the still photo in other fields (e g popular culture, political documentary, art, and scientific research), fashion was never really affected by the potential of moving images. Of course, since the early 20th Century fashion has been filmed, yet early fashion film was static in its portrayal of fashion shows on the catwalk, and hence void of the aesthetic qualities that in many ways are characteristic of fashion photography.

Almost a century after the invention and introduction of the moving images, does fashion seriously start to pay attention to the possibilities of the film medium, and so, fashion film comes into being – mostly spread over the internet. This new film genre, much aligned with art cinema, expands not only fashion photography but also, other traditional film genres. The fashion film is the logical outcome of fashion photography, and also, of photographers and advertisement filmmakers realizing the artistic potential in films, making their fashion photography into narrative moving images – while evidently adding a stillness, inherited from the tradition of fashion photography. Fashion films have a similar arty aesthetics and are often heavily relying on past genres within mainstream narrative cinema, while also borrowing elements and moods from documentary film. They are advanced and playful when it comes to technical astuteness, and their take on time – with stillness, repetition and slow-motion as recurrent devices – almost obsessive.

What connects these films further, is their subject matter: fashion, sex, and violence. The porno-violence of many of these films are part not only of their representation, but also of their narrative. Prevalent are images of lesbian desire, S/M and dominance, but also of butchery and vampirism. This talk will analyze this new genre from two different, yet intermingled, perspectives: looking at its aesthetic and technical characteristics it will discuss how this genre expands the framings for both fashion photography and film, and by focusing on its subject-matter, it will discuss the possible meaning of its obsession with porno-violence.

*Introduction*

As has been pointed out by several scholars, fashion film has a long history, the first films in fact being produced not long after cinema was born in the late 19th Century. Fashion and film, as two different yet connected industries to come out of Modernity and a steadily growing commercial and visual culture, have always had an intimate, if not symbiotic, relation with one another (see for example Evans 2005, 2011, 2013; Khan 2009, 2012; Uhlirova 2013; Tolini Finamore 2013). The early fashion film functioned as an important marketing tool for the fashion industry (Uhlirova 2013; Evans 2011; 2013) and the promotional and selling aspect of the fashion film has always been its essence. This is so because the new medium proved early to be so “adept at recasting consumption as seductive visual entertainment” (Uhlirova 2013: 137). As short films made to market products (hats, stockings, shoes) and specific fashion designs, the more commercial fashion films were not seldom part of the newsreel, hence reaching a wide audience both in terms of age, nationality, and class, although its target audience was women.[[1]](#endnote-2)

The silver screen, from early on, functioned as a kind of shopping window, selling not only dreams of a better life (as in classical Hollywood cinema), but also actual products (see for example Friedberg 1993). These products, advertised and spread on the screen as fashionable and desirable both in fiction films and in newsreels, were foremostly made available in department stores, hence there was a clear connection between cinema and fashion also in terms of space (the movie theatre and the department store functioning as enclosed commercial spaces, as dream palaces).[[2]](#endnote-3) But there were other forums for selling products and dreams: the fashion and the film magazines, with fashion spreads, and with advertisements relating both to film and to fashion, with sewing patterns, make-up tips, and life style recommendations. And although cinema in various forms early on exposed and benefited from fashion, it is the fashion photography that for over a century has held the most prominent position in the dissemination and representation of fashion, both as aesthetic image and as marketing tool. Whereas the moving image – in the first decades of the 20th Century – disrupted the prominence of the still photo in other fields – for example, popular culture, political documentary, art, and scientific research – the fashion industry, in fact, was or let itself be little affected by the potential of moving images.[[3]](#endnote-4)

It is only a century after the invention and introduction of the moving images that the fashion industry seriously has started to use and benefit the possibilities of the film medium, and so, fashion film has become as dominant a visual dissemination of fashion as the fashion photograph. One reason to its supremacy is the fact that the fashion film, just like fashion photography, is spread over the Internet, making it highly accessible or everyone, everywhere. Hence, fashion brands and fashion houses, both high and low, are now using film as a medium to sell both their brand identity and their products (be that clothes, bags, perfumes, or other). Not surprisingly, most of the fashion films made today are (still) commissioned by the industry. Yet, most of these films are not to be considered as commercial ads – only. This (new) film genre, which I will be arguing is much aligned with art and mainstream cinema, is interesting in itself, and has often more in common with both narrative and non-narrative film, than with plain commercials. The fashion film is also interesting in the ways it expands not only fashion photography, but also, other media and more traditional film genres. As such, it is highly mediatized, as well as highly intertextual. The fashion film is perhaps the logical outcome or continuation of fashion photography, with photographers and advertisement filmmakers realizing the artistic potential in films, making their fashion photography into narrative moving images, but it is also part of a more prevailing mediatization process, or what one might refer to as a *hypermediatization* process, that today inflects all areas of image making, communication, and media.

Expanding the possibility of photography, borrowing heavily from other media and other film genres, the fashion film is indeed characterized by both immediacy and hypermediacy: it refashions older media while at the same time being itself refashioned by older media (Bolter and Grusin 1998: 15). Fashion films have a similar arty aesthetics and are often heavily relying on past genres within mainstream narrative cinema and television, while also borrowing elements and moods from documentary film: yet it tries hard in offering a break with the old by refashioning it, reusing it in new ways to give it more of an immediacy. The new fashion films are advanced and playful when it comes to technical astuteness, and their take on time and movement – with stillness, repetition and slow-motion as recurrent devices – almost obsessive. They all have elements of pastiche in them: just like fashion, they strive to be new, immediate, but always refer back to, and reuse, the old, often in a glossy and ironic manner.

What connect these films further, are their sturdy and untiring subject matters: fashion, feminine beauty, and the female (white) body, always in combination with sexual or erotic allure, and not seldom with sex and violence. The sexual or erotic, so blatant and predictable within any visualization of fashion (since sex is still supposed to sell), is in many fashion films being pushed and stretched towards the pornographic, and the violence, also blatant within much fashion imagery, is pushed to create *porno violence*. The porno violence, then, is part not only of these films’ representation and imagery, but also of their narrative – yet, this is often a kind of porno violence that breaks with the mainstream/malestream. Prevalent in much contemporary fashion film, are images and stories of *lesbian* desire and sexuality that is violent; of vampirism, of sadism and masochism, of necrophilia, and of butchery and slaughter. In this sense, fashion films expand and challenge other visualizations, like the photograph, of fashion: it blurs boundaries, and it exposes and investigates other kinds of imagery that is part of both old and contemporary popular culture.

In this talk, I will discuss contemporary fashion film, looking at films that are both commissioned and non-commissioned, trying first to map and define this (new) genre by looking at its defining and common characteristics (in terms both of its aesthetic and its subject matters), and then, by focusing on a few specific films that clearly have porno violence as both aesthetic and narrative traits and/or topics, discuss the possible meanings that this film genre has for the representation of fashion, sexuality, and gender.

*Mapping Today’s Fashion Film*

Fashion film has evolved both as an important and visually interesting dissemination form *and* as a crucial marketing tool for the fashion industry. This is all in conjunction with the fact that fashion, as is claimed by Alison Bancroft, has “changed the way it perceives itself” through “an increasing emphasis on creativity, with fashion now “arguing its case as an aesthetic form instead of merely a product to be sold” (Bancroft 2012: 1). Looking at the directors behind the films made in the last decade or so, it is striking how several fashion photographers have crossed over into making films, while still producing fashion photography, not seldom in tandem. It has become common that a fashion ad or spread in a fashion magazine more than often is accompanied by an entire fashion film. Hence, the fashion photograph – as presented in a spread – is to be understood as one single still from a film containing hundreds or even thousands of stills. Most films are commissioned by the fashion industry, but some are not: some films are produced as mere artistic and cinematic investigations of fashion, dress, body, time, and movement – but also of sex and violence. However, the commercial aspect is always present: fashion, just like film, is part of consumer and capitalist culture and does not, cannot, stand as “art” only.

 As has been pointed out, fashion film is nothing new, and could indeed be said to be simultaneous with the birth and development of fashion photography. Film, as moving images, grew of course out of still photography, yet film has for long been see and understood as film, as an artistic and technical medium in its own right. And fashion film, both in terms of its aesthetics and its narrative structure, are very often taken from film, *as well* as from fashion photography. One example of how fashion film combines or relies on both mediums, would be Ruth Hogben’s fashion film for Gareth Pugh’s Spring/Summer collection 2011, starring Kristen McMenamy. This film is all about choreographed bodily movement, that is, the body moving in slow motion, almost as if dancing, to show the effects of the garment dresses on the human body. The body is captured by a static camera, and the footage is beautifully manipulated in the post process. The stillness of the frame, and the movement of the object (the dressed body) resembles the fashion photograph, yet, this film – together with most films made in collaboration between Pugh and Hogben – has, I would argue, more in common with the early Serpentine films made in the late 19th Century, than with fashion photography, although one could of course draw a parallel to the photos taken by Richard Avedon in the late 1960s of model Veruschka moving and caught as a frozen bodily movement/moment.

It would not be farfetched to argue also that some of the filmmakers of fashion film take on the position, or the legacy, of earlier avant-garde, underground or art cinema filmmakers, such as Maya Deren, Kenneth Anger, Jean Genet, and Jack Smith. Cinematically, their aesthetics are much informed by the dreaminess (or the oneiric), the awkwardness, the subconscious, and the super sensual (and often erotic) scenarios depicted on screen by these avant-garde cinematographers. Like in their films, the narrative structure is often illogical and hard to follow – presenting a scenario that has much in common with how dreams play out, with rough editing and a lack of any clear chronology. Yet, the contemporary fashion film also relies heavily on mainstream film genres, and in doing so, they are often highly palimpsestic, clearly layered over previous films. The palimpsestic is both in the narrative or in specific scenes or shots, and in the stylistic and aesthetic links, such as the use of color, the splitting of the screen, the mise-en-scène, or the use of music.

Further, some of the fashion films produced use fashion to as a framing for explore certain risqué topics also investigated by art cinema: themes that float around in culture, topics that may be taboo, but that are there all the same. In that way, they are not only contemporary, but also daring, and as such, engaging with a wider discourse. One such example would be the investigations of a series of films produced under the theme of fashion fetish: here, various filmmakers and fashion workers – all women – were invited by interactive website SHOWstudio to make short fashion films dealing with fashion (as) fetish(ism). The series was launched in 2012 alongside the SHOWstudio shop exhibition called “Selling Sex”. The outcome was of course varied, and offered personal takes on the theme, although the erotic and at times pornographic element was strongly outspoken and visualized. Commodity culture is formed by fetishism, and the fashion industry is one that plays with and explores fetishism in many ways; hence, fetishism is definitively part of our culture. Not in the specific and aberrational ways that Freudian theory would have it, ascribing fetishism to male fear of women’s sexual difference from man, all coming back to the fear of the *vagina dentata*, but more in terms of an overly sexualized commodity culture that engulfs everyone. Another example would be director and founder of SHOWstudio Nick Knight’s lovely short film **Stud** from 2012, a film exploring – and giving voice to – transgendered, lesbian black British women. His camera offers close-ups of these women’s faces and body parts, but is never intrusive. These women are proud over what they are, and present themselves to the camera, to our gaze, being in control of their own representation.

Despite the many artistic and non-commissioned fashion films that have been produced and that are available on the internet for anyone to watch, and despite their impact, the fashion film continues to be viewed as commercial before anything. It is seen and understood as part of a conscious and at times costly marketing strategy, and as such, it is thought to have more in common with the music video (once made to sell records), than with proper cinema. Their (logical) link to fashion photography implies that they are often seen as a prolongation of some of the fashion photographs by narrative high-end photographers such as Helmut Newton, Ellen von Unwerth, and Guy Bourdin, to mention a few. And surely, the fashion film, very often intertextually referring to the earlier narrative fashion snapshots by these photographers, serves to vitalize or give further life to the narratives once orchestrated by Newton et al. It tells, or offers, a longer part of the story, but it does not offer the entire story, since there seldom is a beginning or an ending (closure): the viewer is always central in trying to construct a more whole story (which of course will be a different story because of the different readings of it). In a sense, this development is both logic and expected: once photography was invented, film – moving photography, if one wishes – would follow. What is odd, then, is that the fashion film, as we know it today, would wait so long before coming into existence.

In terms of marketing strategies, exclusive fashion brands have in recent years turned to film as a tool when launching not only new collections, but also new fragrances. For the marketing of perfume, famous actresses seem to be preferred over fashion models, hence there is a continuation in blurring the border between the film and the fashion industry, between the film star and the model, that is indeed very explicit.[[4]](#endnote-5) Not seldom is the boarder blurred also by the use of famous filmmakers to make these fashion films. Examples would be Dior using actress Natalie Portman and Sofia Coppola in their romantic promotion film and ads for the fragrance Miss Dior in **Miss Dior: La vie en rose** (2013); or Chanel using actress Nicole Kidman and Baz Luhrmann for the fragrance Chanel no 5 (2010), or KENZO using Margret Qually and Spike Jonze for the perfume film for Kenzo World (2016). Although some of these films are all exaggeratedly *heteronormative* in their romanticism, bordering to irony, there are also several fashion films that focus on lesbian romantic and erotic liaisons, two examples would be Karl Lagerfeld’s **Tale of A Fairy** for Chanel, starring (among others) Kirsten McMenamy, Freja Beha, and Anna Mouglalis from 2012 and Stuart Blumberg’s **She Said, She Said** for fashion label Co from 2012, starring Marisa Tomei and Elodie Bouchez. And the lesbian liaison is something that I will have to come return to, taken that lesbianism is such a central topic – if not trope – in many contemporary fashion films.

Some fashion brands strive to make fashion films that have a high artistic value or a high cinematic “quality”: here, it is not so often the collection or a specific product that is at center, rather it is the collaboration with a famous filmmaker that is the main outcome. One such example would be Prada’s invitation to Roman Polanski to film a fashion film for the house in 2012: the film, starring Ben Kingsley and Helena Bonham Carter, is called **A Theraphy**, and has as its punch line, with Kingsley trying on Bonham Carter’s far too small fur coat, that Prada suits everyone. Or, Dior’s collaboration with David Lynch, using actress Marion Cotillard in fashion film **Lady Blue Shanghai** (2010). There are also some houses, for example Dior and Prada, who produce so called production films, films that are educational in terms of presenting the process of creating a dress, from sketch to finished product. Some films are a mixture of these, offering a narrative while also showing the back stage of the fashion business, mixing fiction with non-fiction, as in James Lima’s film **LOVE** for Louis Vuitton A/W 2013 together with *Love Magazine*. Here, imagery of models posing as prostitutes in silk underwear and fur coats on a dark street, apparently waiting to be picked up by cars, are mixed with imagery taken from the actual fashion show when these silk underwear were presented on the catwalk. The film has rightfully been critiqued for its bleak romantization of prostitution, yet, it needs to be pointed out that the film can also be read as a severe critique of the fashion industry in the way it links this industry to prostitution. Further, the film does not present happy prostitutes to the viewer (which is a longstanding trope within film and television), rather the opposite: the films shows young disillusioned women as exchangeable in presenting themselves as objects, as bodies that are for sale – just like in the modeling business. By also including footage of Marc Jacobs, as the head designer of the new LV collection, the (male) designer is as much inscribed in the prostitution as are the (female) models, hence pointing at the fashion industry *in toto* being one of prostitution.

Not seldom, as we have seen, does the fashion photograph – published on the glossy inside of fashion magazines – not only constitute a still from a film, it simultaneously works as an ad for the film, with an invitation to log on to the internet to see the entire picture. Apparently, the fashion photograph used for the ad, no longer functions as a conventional fashion photograph – it is now a still from a film. The fashion image is no longer still, *it is moving* (Khan 2012: 235).

One defining characteristic of the fashion film is its availability: it is produced for the internet and as such, it is digital. Its digital essence, and the fact that one as spectator can control the film (go back and forth, freeze the frame etc), and hence, interact with it, is yet another defining characteristic. The discussion of what constitutes film is longstanding, and has become even more crucial as digital film has been invented. The most elementary definition is that of moving images, stills put together and shown in a certain paste so as to create moving images, that is the illusion of a moving image. Today, with digital film and with the expansion of various kinds of manipulations, this definition is far too limited. Due to its digital essence, some would argue that it is not film, not in the meaning that is used for defining analogue film. Using descriptions as “kinetic” or “cinematic”, would then be wrong. Yet, if we use the broader definition of film – *film as moving images* (whether digitally or analogously produced) – then digital film is also film, and the digital fashion film to be conceived of in terms of cinematic or filmic.

*Defining Fashion Film*

The fashion film ought to be understood as a film genre in its own right: although it very often takes on, or borrows, characteristics of art cinema, and steals heedlessly from other popular film genres in terms of narrative tropes and stereotypes. In fact, for fashion film, the intertextual connections to other specific films and specific genres are crucial, and as such, it is indeed a hybrid-genre. Yet, very few genres (if any) are “pure”: most genres are hybridic to some extent.

Defining the fashion film is an endeavor that may prove tricky, and some questioned whether it can be posited as genre (Uhlirova 2013: 137). Yet, I do believe that we can define fashion film as a genre, and that it is not only productive, but also important to do so. It helps define this film as *film*, not as commercial: defining it as film contributes to an erasure of its somewhat derogatory status as commercial (only). Having said that, I do believe that the commercial fashion films are to be considered as films, and as artistic productions too. Even if commissioned, it is still a product with an artistic purpose, it is still the outcome of an artistic and creative process. Surely, the end product is a film ad made to sell an image, a brand, a product, yet the film in itself has an artistic value, and it is no less a fashion film than films made only for the artistic purpose.[[5]](#endnote-6)

Shortly put, film genre refers to both the similarities in narrative elements that make up film and to the similarities in aesthetics, which could include cinematography (editing and film qualities) and *mise-en-scène* (setting, costume, make-up and lighting). Any work – be that film or any other culturally produced text – “implicitly evokes and acknowledges prior models of cultural production, of which it is necessarily a perception and on which it is necessarily a variation”, to quote Richard Dyer (Dyer 2007: 119). When it is evident, the notion of a genre, is evoked. Genre is, however, a vague term with no fixed boundaries and most genres have elements of other genres in them. There are few films that can be said to belong only to one genre, and there are few genres that are pure in terms of both narrative elements and aesthetics. Here, the fashion film proves to be a very good example in its willingness and openness to adapt and use various aspects of different genres. The fashion film is indeed a hybrid genre, or a hybridization of genres. Yet, there are a few characteristics that make the fashion film stand out in relation to other kinds of films, or films genres. These characteristics make the fashion film instantly recognizable.

Apart from the more obvious elements – more than instantly recognizable – such as young, skinny and beautiful fashion models and beautiful clothes, these characteristics are to be found both on an aesthetic and a narrative level. If one should come up with a few aesthetic traits that are characteristic of the last years’ fashion film, it would be the following: sleek, distanced, mechanical, repetitive, oneiric, and obsessed with stretching and investigating both time and movement.

Most films are indeed sleek and glossy: not only are the model bodies recognizable as fashion, whether dressed or undressed, so is the setting, the lighting, and the quality of film used. This sleekness brings a distance between text and spectator, as well as between characters within the text. Most films are also mechanical: both in terms of the emphasis on repetition of movements and event, and in terms of models performing mechanically in front of the camera. In fact, the more mechanical (and hence indeed poor, at least in terms of acting skills) the performance, the better, it seems.[[6]](#endnote-7)

Repetition, or the repeating of certain images, letting entire events or bodily movements happen many times in a row, often in slow motion, is a prominent characteristic, and is used to stretch and manipulate both time and movement. Most often, this repetition involves model bodies in monotonous movement, walking down the same stairs, moving in the same circle, all of which is closely connected to the mechanic movement of the mannequin, as well as connected to the repetitious labor of the fashion model in front of the camera, posing and repeating the same movements, gestures and facial expressions over and over. One could suspect that the cinematic emphasis and use of repetition is, again, connected to the still medium, and that the fashion film indeed is a prolonged still photo, or a moving still photo. Yet, the repetitiveness is interesting in itself as an exploration of the moving image and of what the film medium is capable of doing to time and movement, not too different from the playful investigations of the medium that characterized much filmmaking in the infancy of film (see for example Dahlquist 2001). From a more theoretical perspective, based in Deleuzian (and Bergsonian) thoughts on the crystallic, the fashion film using repetition as a means to stretch and investigate both time and movement would constitute an almost too welcome object of study (Deleuze 1992, 1993; Sutton 2009).

The dreaminess, or the *oneiric*, is as crucial as is the repetitiveness. In fact, the “oneiric” is a dominant feature or characteristic in most fashion films. Many fashion films play out the scenario as if it is caught in a loop, the narrative is looping, just like dreams often are, repeating an image, caught in an event, over and over. Most often, due to their subject-matter, the oneiric id nightmarish, rather than dreamy. Here, the fashion films borrow many traits from horror pictures, as well as from pornographic films. This characteristic or device is indeed an aware and palimpsestic reuse of, or even homage to, previous domineering cinematic visualizations of the subconscious. This kind of visualization was very popular in 1940s and 1950s Hollywood, much due to the fact that psychoanalysis was such a strong influential theory at the time, informing many various cultural productions, but also, social structures and relations. Here, films like **Secret behind the door** (Fritz Lang 1947) and **Suddenly, Last Summer** (Joseph L. Mankiewicz 1959)seem to be most influential texts in the reliance on the oneiric as aesthetic and narrative devices.

Even the most romantic fashion films, like **Miss Dior: La vie en rose**, (Sofia Coppola 2013) and **L’invitation au voyage** (Inez Van Lamsweerde and Vinoodh Matadin 2012) made for Louis Vuitton, have an oneiric quality to them. The editing, the lack of logic transference between different settings, the juxtaposition between night and day, the slow motion often mixed with real motion, it is all qualities usually ascribed to dreams. The nightmarish films, which often include a high degree of sexual violence or the threat of sexual violence, are as oneiric, if not more.

Another defining characteristic is of course that of the intertextual, and the constant referring to and reusing of previous texts and genres. Here, both homage and irony are guiding principles or approaches and they are often combined so as to create of formulate a text that is palimpsestic and a pastiche. Here, popular culture is a vivid referent for these films – and especially popular culture film productions belonging to mainstream genres such as the romantic drama, the thriller, and the horror film. Other popular culture referents are popular music and literature, as well as fashion photography. The intertextuality is not only applicable to certain motifs or narrative conventions: it is also applicable to cinematography and editing techniques. Many films are indeed transgressive in terms of both aesthetic and technical style, and offer investigatory and playful takes on cinematic conventions. As such, they are truly cinematic – not photographic – in their engagement with film form in a manner that tries to expand the notion of what film is, or can be. Hence, this is in clear contrast to the attempt to define fashion films in terms of its still image legacy, and it closeness to the fashion photography, rather than to narrative cinema (Khan 2012). Certainly, fashion film has lot in common with the fashion photography: in many cases, as we have seen, it seems to come out of the photograph, to be its logical outcome, as if it were “fashion photography in motion”. Yet, this kind of fashion film can be interpreted as investigations of moving images, as an almost scientific approach to how film is a series of stills that through the mechanical reproduction creates the illusion of movement, of reproducing reality, while bending it through fast and slow motions, and through repetition. A good example of this kind of investigatory visual work would be Steven Klein and Madonna’s collaboration exhibition **X-STaTIC ProCeSS** from 2003.

When it comes to subject matters, the fashion film is relentless in its take on issues that have once been, or still are, taboo in our society. Sexual violence – or the threat of sexual violence – is a most recurrent theme, as is extreme violence connected to certain specific aberrational sexual desires. However, it should be pointed out that quite a few films (especially the ones commissioned by big and exclusive brands) have another focus: sex (or eroticism) is clearly implied, whereas violence (or sexual violence) is not. If the first category of films, created not so much to sell a specific brand or a product as to explore fashion as/in time and as/in movement, is raw and unmerciful in its representation of sexual violence, the latter one, commissioned by the industry to show collections, products, and specific brands, are romantic in their take on sex. In fact, the more artistic fashion films, may they be commissioned or non-commissioned, seem obsessed with sex and violence, in a very similar way that most high-end fashion photography has been obsessed with these themes throughout the 20th Century. Having tried to map out and define contemporary fashion film, I will now turn to a few specific films produced during the last decade, all of which hare heavy loaded with pornographic violence.

*Porno Violence*

The (un)tiring emphasis on pornographic and sexual violence that is to be found in fashion film, does not stand isolated: it is to be found in many different cultural productions, and is indeed a phenomena that informs much media discourse today. Mainstream film, television, literature, as well as the internet, all thrive on a similar obsession for the overtly sexual and for extreme violence, and in this sense, fashion film, with its focus on these topics, is not unique. Yet, the fashion film differs from these other media, since it combines commerce, art, and sexual violence in a rather short and often abstract form. Further, it differs in terms of a specifically targeted audience.[[7]](#endnote-8)

Even in films in which there are no outbursts of violence, there is the constant threat of violence: fashion, in many ways, is connected to violence and danger. And this fashion violence, in its turn, is most often connected to sex. Sex is not presented so much as sexual activity – but through fashion models bodies expressing sex (based on notions of sex that have been stipulated by the fashion industry and by the porn industry). But whereas sex in porn is about fleshiness, fluids, and penetration – there are no bodily juices, although at times blood is smeared over the models as signs of aberrant sexual desires – sex in fashion (film) is the allure of sex to come, or, as in the case of some representations, a certain dodgy sexiness after sex. It gives it all away, but the spectator is always too early, or too late. In images, both still and moving, it is the *before* and the *after*, and as such, it is all about sex, but sex that simultaneously escapes the eye. This does not make fashion imagery less voyeuristic, nor less scopophilic. Just like the cinematic apparatus, fashion imagery – still or moving – thrives on voyeurism. The pleasure in looking, whether this looking is sadistically colored or not, is inscribed in the images: it directs the looking, it constructs the looking. Here, the sexual content and the sexual allure – indeed often taking on, or relying on, pornographic aesthetics and traits – is both within the representation of human encounters and within the fetishized object, which may be the fashion per se (a bag, a shoe, underwear, a gun etc) and/or the fashionable female model body.

The obsession with sex and violence that makes up so many of today’s fashion film, has a clear forerunner in the fashion photograph, and many of the scenarios depicted in these films clearly resemble those of high-end fashion photography produced throughout the 20th Century. But whereas many of the high-end fashion photographs by artists such as Helmut Newton, Guy Bourdin and Ellen von Unwerth, offered frozen stylized snapshots of sexual and at times sadistic and/or masochistic innuendos and/or settings, then the contemporary fashion film gives away it all. However, just like the fashion photograph, it does so in a most unphysical, that is non-fleshy, manner: and the exact moment is always, as pointed out above, lost on the spectator.

Further, the bodies in these movies, although they engage in violent and/or sexual acts, resemble lifeless bodies – just like in fashion photography: they seem more then often to be what one may assume to be the living dead, moving about in slow-motion and in a mechanical manner that make them resemble zombies more than living human beings. The models, although highly fashionable and desirable, are dead bodies. What helps further construct or accentuate their apparent lack of lifeliness, is the fact that they are, with very few deviations, always very, very white. The whiteness of the skin, the paleness, in combination with other deadly traits or characteristics, help emphasize the lack of fluid, the lack of life. As has been pointed out by Richard Dyer, Western art has for long presented the dead white body as an object of beauty, and that in “Victorian times, death – especially that of children, above all girls – was seen as a fit subject for painting and photography that had far more to do with beauty than tragedy” (Dyer 1997: 208). In the fashion film, there is an obsession with death, and death is presented as both frightening and beautiful. Further, it is a death that brings with it more death: the dead are living, living to kill those who are alive, turning them into living dead. Not seldom is this obsession connected to sadism on the one hand, and/or to masochism on the other. Tied closely to both of these narrative structures and visual systems, is fetishism, and of fetishism, the fashion film, of course, abounds: these films brim with fetishistic representations and objects in the form of high-heeled shoes, tight fitting corsets and clothes, guns, wigs and sunglasses, that is, the usual fetishist paraphernalia that have had a prominent position in fashion (and other) photography. These fetishist elements, and the fact that they are worn by a phallic and dominating woman, opens up for a possible masochism (Thanem and Wallenberg 2010).

The *before-or-after-sex* can be viewed as an important mechanism that serves (visually) to separate fashion from porn, yet, this stretched moment (or, the missed moment, if one wishes) is pornographic in the way it is represented. Further, the before-or-after also opens up for or brings in a masochistic structure – or a masochistic dream – to the fashion representation. In quite a few fashion films (as in fashion photography), model women constitute phallic and fetishist women who serve the masochistic imagination. They – through their posing, their forceful invitation to or threat of sex, and the paraphernalia that belong to the fetishist dream – are inscribed in a masochistic scenario in which the (male) viewer is positioned as masochist, at least if we are to follow Freud. According to him, it is before a phallic and fetishized woman that the masochist (who is always male) submits and faints. Her fetishization comes from her castrated nature, and this nature is at the core of Freud’s understanding of the phallic woman. As men are terrified by her obvious lack, Woman is reconstituted as a fetishized phallic woman, which conceals her lack (her castration). But the fetish triggers sexual arousal in the masochist, connecting terror with sexual excitement:

The sight of Medusa’s head makes the spectator stiff with terror, turns him to stone. Observe that we have once again the same origin from the castration complex and the same transformation of affect! For becoming stiff means an erection. Thus in the original situation it offers consolidation to the spectator: he is still in possession of a penis, and the stiffening reassures him of the fact. (Freud 1922/1997: 202)

To be stiffed with terror is to be stiffed with desire – in this case, according to Freud, to be stiffed with masochistic desire. Sexual arousal, for the masochist, requires terror. Freud, then, views the phallic woman as a male creation invented to help him repress his fears of castration. He manages to avoid this threat through the fetishes she wears – furs, whips, high heels – because these fetishes divest her of lack and invest her with a phallus. In fashion photography and in fashion films, it is all there (Thanem and Wallenberg 2010). Most fashion models, at least in high fashion representations, constitute powerful and classic phallic women: and as fashion film has taken a liking to violence and especially to guns, her already attractive paraphernalia has been extended. To watch a fashion film may involve becoming stiff with terror – for the male viewer.[[8]](#endnote-9)

Photographer Steve Klein is known for his depictions of fetishistic violence that is informed by what could be classified as an obsessive love for guns as sexual play tools. In his work, both in his stills and in his films, violence is presented through the focus on the gun, which is presented as erotic and sexual. Here, the threat of sexual violence is orchestrated, through the presentation of it in connection with human nakedness and bodily perfection, as something attractive. Although there are clear connections to the iconography found in Jean Genet´s film **Un chant d’amour** from 1950, the gun in Klein’s imagery is much more explicitly made into a sexual play tool. In a film called **Lara, fiction noir** – which is most surely must be considered to be a neo-*neo-noir* – accompanying the fashion shoot Klein did for *Vogue Paris* in 2009, model Lara Stone figures in a nightmarish setting where extreme violence is depicted.[[9]](#endnote-10) In the opening sequence, she is seated in the driver’s seat and next to her is a male corpse, his face completely smeared in blood. She has blood stains over her throat and on her arms as she enjoys a cigarette – again as in after-sex, or here, as in after-murder – while looking very content with herself. She is presented not only as the femme fatale in this very noir film noir, but also as a *killing-machine* (Griggers 1995). In another sequence, she is depicted on top of a nude young male body on a bed, her mouth and chin covered in blood, clearly positioning her as a vampire. Like in so much of Klein’s recent work, a gun is present in the imagery. The gun can of course be said to be a substitute for a penis, hence rendering Lara into a most phallic woman as she in six different sequences on a split screen violates, dominates and threats a police officer with the gun, but also, the gun as a sexual object per se. The film, with no clear trajectory, nor narrative, depicts scenarios that are extreme in their violence, yes, but also, scenarios that can be said to refer to already existing imagery coming from film and from sadomasochistic representations. The first sequence described shortly above, smoking after slaughter (sex), refers clearly to two films made in the early 2000s: **Monster** (Patty Jenkins, 2003) and **Trouble every day** (Claire Denis, 2001). **Lara, fiction noir**, is monstrous in its connection between fashion and sexual violence, and pushes the boarders for what had up until been represented in fashion imagery: dead (female) bodies have been populating fashion representations for a long time, but not in the explicit and bloody way that Klein brought forward. Also, in much of Klein’s work – just like in **Lara, fiction noir** – the predator is female, the victim male. There is a complete power switch that positions woman as danger and that renders men into sexual victims for her fury and retribution. His images are indeed nightmarish in a shocking and ultra-uncanny way that for example Guy Bourdin’s “neat” and frozen pictures of dead women are not. In this sense, Klein’s work serves to provoke and upset, and not to titillate: the woman killer-machine is a prolongation of not only the fears of a vengeful femininity that will explode and retaliate patriarchy’s atrocities carried out against women throughout history, but also, it is a powerful illumination of an image that is already existent in popular culture, from Medusa to Jennifer Hill. Further, his imagery serves to make visible the gendered and un-gendered atrocities that characterize the imagery and the narratives brought forward by popular culture at large, while also laying bare the real atrocities of own our culture.[[10]](#endnote-11)

Another fashion film clearly fetishizing violence is Johnny Green’s **Packing Heat**, commissioned by and made for the British underwear brand Damaris in 2011. Green offers an oneiric mini-narrative in which the model body, underwear, and guns are at the center. The setting is what seems to be an old, empty town house, and there are mainly two interiors that are used: a bathroom and a staircase. A third setting is the interior of a car that is introduced only at the very end, with the model apparently driving away from the house. Each scene presents model Liberty Ross – presumably as a killer-machine, that is, a contract killer – dressed in different colorful underwear while enjoying the company of several guns, both heavy automatic weapons and old fashioned revolvers, that she fires. The obvious gun fetishism that leads the (thin) story forward, is one which is made visually clear by the use of the focus on the guns shooting and giving away explosions in color. There seems to be no real bullets, but bullets of some kind of color cream (like the ones used in paint ball). Here, shooting is presented in a most alluring manner, it is clear that it gives some kind of erotic pleasure: the shooting in shown in slow motion, and each color bullet exploding is presented via a money shot in slow motion pertaining to the pornographic film. It is just that here, it is a woman shooting, hence the “release”, or the orgasm, is hers. The oneiric imagery suggests that not only do the guns that she handles and fires function as a phallus, it also suggests that *she* has – or is – the phallus. She is a phallic women in possession of a most dangerous phallus. According to Barbara Creed, the phallic woman not only conceals her lack and castration (Creed 1993): her fetishes also invest her with the power to castrate by means of a *vagina dentata*. While the masochist thrives on his fear of castration, phallic women – as the ones represented in **Packing Heat** and in **Lara, Fiction Noir** – are not merely male creations, they are female creations through which women refuse to be reduced to a patriarchal image. Having acquired the phallus, phallic women transgress and denaturalize sexual and gendered identity and by exposing phallic masculinity as a “put-on”, as mere style, they serve to delegitimize it as phallic imposture (Thanem and Wallenberg 2010). Not only are these women presented as phallic and as killer-machines: they are also, both of them, presented as active subjects, and as heroines. After having released all her guns, the woman in **Packing Heat** leaves the building in her car, driving away from the crime and/or sex scene, mission completed and positioned as heroine – just like we have seen in so many films noirs, only that in those, the heroine has always been male.

And heroines are prominent in the fashion film: women who can handle violence, women who use violence, women who refuse victimhood – at least in relation to the other sex. In Nick Knight’s film **Get back, Stay back** from 2012, the heroine is one who is in control of her body and who can fight of the most violent male attacker. Here, high-end fashion is mixed with self-defense techniques – called *krav manga* – that are presented and instructed by model Lara Stone. Here, in a series of sequences, all set up and choreographed in front of a static camera, Stone – perfectly dressed in high, tight fashion, and styled by Carine Roitfeld – defends herself against male attackers, one who we may assume, attacks her to abuse her sexually. The soundtrack used reinforces the violent scenario: the metallic band Walls of Jericho offers a cacophony of screaming voices and metal music that help reinforce the rage that the imagery portrays. Most of her self-defense is concentrated to hitting and kicking the man in his face and between his legs. High heels and hard fists help a lot, and the film ends with an instruction to “Fight like a girl”.

The longing for, or the strive for, a desirable sexual indifference, however, is not only to be ascribed to the male spectator and/or the male character in fashion film. In fact, men are quite often excluded from fashion film – which in many instances constitutes itself as a feminine dominium *par excellence*. Ruth Hogben’s **Love me** is part of the aforementioned film series called “Fashion fetish” from 2012 made by women directors only for SHOWstudio. In Hogben’s take on fashion fetish, she has ultraskinny model Karlie Kloss playing various characters, or rather, different roles within one character – women who are engaged, or are to be engaged in, sexual activity colored by role-playing, sadomasochism, and fetishism. Kloss is at center, but through her various roles or disguises, obviously desiring each other, the scenario becomes, if not a lesbian one, then at least an autoerotic, or autosexual, one. All she needs to fulfill her desires is herself, or others like herself, hence inviting a homospectatorial look (Fuss 1992). This suggests an erotic environment all constructed and working upon sexual indifference.

From the earlier mentioned SHOWstudio shop exhibition called “Selling Sex”, designer Atsuko Kudo, together with Simon Walter Hoare, has made a film called **Dressing for Pleasure** which deals with fetishism and latex. Selling sex is not about selling sex, but about how fashion sells sex, or how fashion is used to sell the idea of sex. Here, latex is discussed on the soundtrack by Kudo herself together with others in the knowing, as it is presented as a fetish material – earlier only found in the sex shop – that now has found its way into (mainstream) fashion, and how fashion serves to make it, a hitherto rather taboo material, accepted. It has become, a voice tells on the soundtrack, “overground” with the help of fashion. The film functions as an instruction or educational movie on how to dress in latex: the soundtrack is instructive and very informative, but it is the visuals that construct the dressing. A static camera show how a nude model is slowly letting herself get dressed in latex attire – a most time-consuming undertaking – by three other women: slowly, they make her into a superwoman, a fetish goddess in latex stay-ups, latex underwear, a latex cat mask, and high heels. Added to her outfit is a whip, which helps positioning her as a doyenne. Just like in **Love me**, these images initiate or invite a homospectatorial look that is positioned as feminine (disregarding the actual sex of the viewer).

The fact that the look is positioned as feminine makes it pro-lesbian. But the possible lesbianism is not only in the looking relations: many times, as I have pointed out above, do fashion films also depict lesbian relations and desires. Lesbianism, in fact, is the driving desire in many fashion films. Justin Anderson’s **Fleurs du mal**, made for underwear brand Agent Provocateur, is rich in its intertextual references to other lesbian representations – always connected to deathly desires and slaughter. Here, the spectator is offered imagery of lesbian desire in terms of vampirism, ultraviolence, and the living dead, with clear cinematic references to Dario Argento’s **L‘uccello dale piume di cristallo** (1970). Just like in Green’s **Packing Heat**, woman alone takes care of her sexual and violent desires: there is no man in sight, no man is needed. This is an all women scenario – one of sexual indifference, and one of an expressed female sexual desire that is all directed to the feminine and to women.

Lucretia Martel’s film **MUTA** for fashion house MiuMiu Fall/Winter 2011 also offers an interesting example of lesbianism and of the living dead – imagery that for long has belonged to fashion photography, and one which has become more and more prevalent with fashion film. Here, model women are mechanically acting as living dead in front of the camera, all dressed up in the new collection and hiding their faces from the camera or behind long hair or behind sunglasses. The film, which was the second of a series of short films entitled **Women’s Tales**, opens with a shot of a ship floating down a river in the tropics, supposedly abandoned. A following interior shot focusing on a small door, through which tall stiff mannequins one by one crawls out, taking over what seems to be an empty ship. The ship is slowly floating on a river, and the interaction between the mechanical women, the living dead – lends itself to be interpreted as lesbian through caresses, looks, and undressing. Soon, there is a realization that these women have probably killed off all the men, as one scene shows a man in the water who tries to save himself and get back on the ship, only to be thrown back. Again, this is an all-women space, a feminine dominium *par excellence*.

This all female dominium evokes the Deleuzian idea of “pack” – and here, it is not so much ‘becoming woman’, as ‘becoming other’ – or even ‘becoming animal’, that unifies the pack. A fashion film that explicitly refers to the pack is of course Steve Klein’s **WOLVES** for Balmain from 2016 – fashion film that is simultaneously a music video *and* a commercial for the Kayne West – Kim Kardashian love relationship. A student of mine who refuses both the male and the female pronoun, recently referred to this film as a lesbian dream scenario.

*Conclusion*

How come then, that so much of the recent fashion film imagery makes violent lesbian desire so desirable? And why are women positioned as killer-machines within these scenarios? One could suspect that the emphasis on lesbian sexuality, or lesbian desires, is there to please a male eye (just like in pornographic films with lesbian element leading up to the real thing, that is penile penetration), but that is a suggestion that does not stand long. For the male to be part of these scenarios, a male, or at least a male position, is needed. And there are very few such positions in view. Rather, men are made into masochists, desiring sexual indifference, or they are completely absent – or, as in **MUTA**, they are killed off. There is no male position from which to desire the lesbians, no position from which man can envision himself coming in to fulfill the scene. He, as a male spectator (whether straight, gay or queer), is excluded. My reading of these films would instead suggest that the spectator, per definition, is forcefully positioned as feminine, and that these films render any male watching them feminine in their spectatorship. In their construction, they are feminine texts in many ways: not only do they destruct the male narrative by refusing a narrative structure with a clear opening and a clear end (closure), they are also feminine in the way they position their spectator as female, or as feminine (Kuhn 1982). The feminine text, in case of the fashion film, is one that is one of immediacy, hypermediacy, pastiche, and irony. It is richly palimpsestic in the way it pays homage to previous texts – and it is political.

It may be true that fashion is far too dependent on social structures to present a viable challenge to them, and that it is therefore difficult to claim that fashion is radical, nor less revolutionary (Bancroft 2012: 5). Yet, many of the fashion films produced, serve not only to upset, but also to subvert certain social structures, although even in their representation. Yet, representations are powerful, and are not to be discarded as only images: representations have the power to change. By being provocative, transgressive, challenging and threatening in terms of offering violent depictions of revenge and rage towards patriarchy on the one hand, and an almost total exclusion of men from the erotic realm of women on the other – these images demonstrate a disruptive and political potential. The films focused upon here, have apparently been fashion films with a vengeance, and as such, they have a political potential. The porno violence that constitute such a crucial subject matter in these films, and which also serve to make up their aesthetics, functions not only as a titillating tool or device, and as such, as an unreflective and tired aspect of fashion’s supposed need to sell itself always in conjunction with sex. The porno violence in these films, I believe, must be credited as a vibrant critique of a gender status-quo that is slow in changing, and as such, as a pro-feminist response not only to the fashion industry, but to female oppression and suppression at large.

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**FOOTNOTES**

1. Apart from being vivid market tools for the fashion industry (both for the ready-made industry and the couture industry), the early fashion films can also be said to have had an instrumental or educational quality: they functioned as obvious gender technologies, instructing its (female) viewer on how to carry herself as a woman (de Lauretis 1987). But they did not only promote not only specific gender traits or qualities, they were instrumental in terms of offering certain (middle class) lifestyle advises. The modern fashion film continues to be instrumental, and to work as a gender technology, no doubt, but it is now more varied and less easily defined in terms of “essence”. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
2. For a discussion of the similarities between the movie theatre and the department store, see for example Friedberg 1993 and Leach 1994. For a discussion of the department store as new commercial space, see also Williams 1982. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
3. A few fashion designers and fashion houses were however early in using the film medium to promote their products. For an overview of these, see for example Caroline Evans 2011 and Marketa Uhlirova 2013. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
4. About the use of fashion models in the film industry and the use of actresses and actors) in the fashion industry, see for example deCordova 2001, Munich 20111, and Church Gibson 2011. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
5. If the early fashion film started out as a marketing tool for the fashion industry, today’s fashion film does not always function as advertisement for a product or a brand, that is, not all contemporary fashion films are commissioned by the industry. This fact easily helps create a division between commissioned and non-commissioned fashion film, the former being more commercial film than the latter. This does not, however, mean that a fashion film that is commissioned is less of a fashion film, and more of an ad. Still, it is film. In addition, it does not mean that a fashion film created for more “artistic” purposes should be understood as a more “pure” form of (fashion) film. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
6. And it is not only fashion models who perform poorly: even celebrated actresses like Bonham-Carter and Cotillard are equally bad in the films in which they appear (namely **A Therapy** and **Lady Blue Shanghai**). [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
7. Films, commercial and not (so) commercial, that I find to be representative and prolific for the entire genre, while also offering diversity are: **Love Me** (Ruth Hogben 2011); **Lara, Fiction Noir** (Steven Klein 2009); **1Velvet Mourning** (Joseph Lally 2011); **MUTA** (Lucretia Martel 2011); **Fleurs du mal (**Justin Anderson 2011); **Dressing for Pleasure (**Atsuko Kudo and Simon Walter 2012); **Get Back/Stay Back** (Nick Knight 2012); and **Packing Heat (**Johnny Green 2011). [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
8. Whereas the scenario described by Leopold von Sacher-Masoch in *Venus in furs* was one between two people in a relationship, saved by the constant postponing of any real sexual encounter, the specific scenario constituted through fashion representation, is one that for both model body and viewer is safe. Still, for the masochistic viewer, fashion representations must be a most fantastic source for a constant enacting of the masochistic relationship: every new photo, every new film, offers a promise of a relationship with phallic women, dominating and severe, yet, always safe since they stay safely within their frame. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
9. For an initiated discussion of the ”neo-noir” as pastich on the classic noir, see Richard Dyer’s *Pastiche* from 2007. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
10. In one of his most recent films, a work entitled **Secret project** (Klein 2013) which is a collaboration with Madonna, the uncanny is taken if possible even further. Here, death seems to be prevailing in every sense: as if it is also longed for and desired. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)