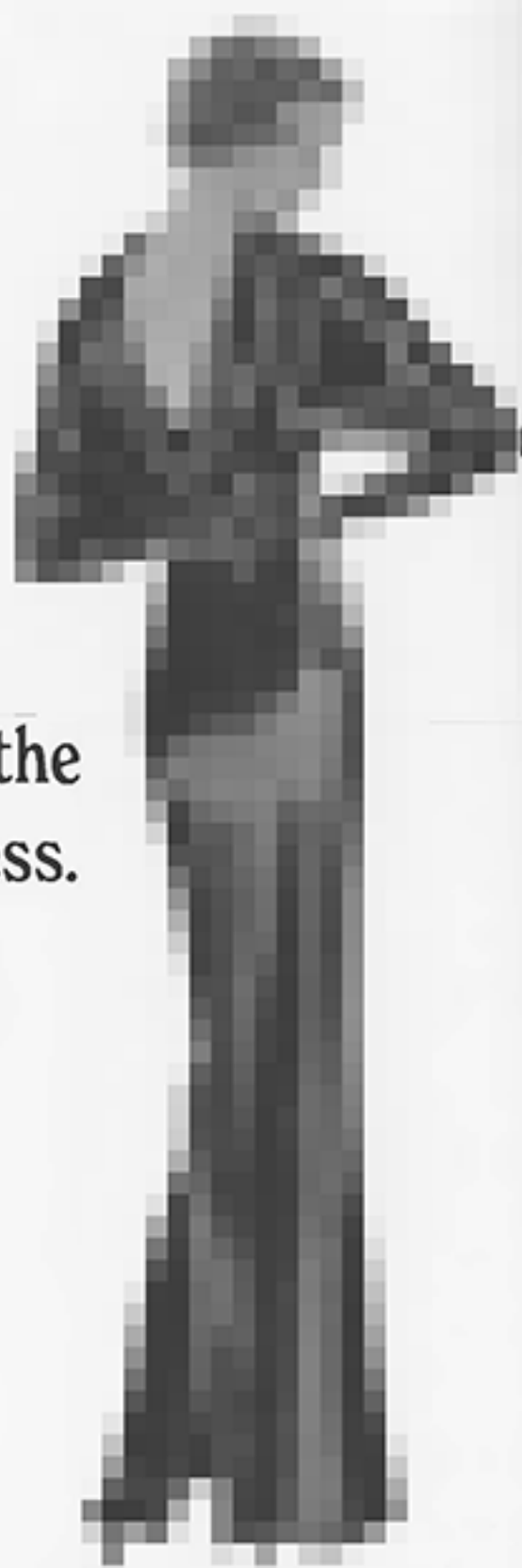


# Ephemeral Vocabulary



The transformation of words in the seasonal cycle of the fashion press.

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When first she launches upon the smooth seas of high fashion she may think she will have a fine disregard for the ephemeral fancies of vogue language; but soon her nerve ends become responsive to the language in the air, soon her finger-tips refuse to type phrases that are out of date.

(Alison Adburgham, writing for *The Guardian*, September 13, 1961\*)

As an industry subject to constant upheaval, luxury fashion works at an alarming speed. Each season<sup>91</sup> a completely new collection is produced as if completely different to what has gone before. Fashion's seasonal ephemerality is further constructed (albeit inaccurately) in its contrast to the perceived stable and enduring creative industries of art and literature. While practices of consumption and modes of production of the fashion industry have changed radically with digital technology (a term that broadly encircles social media, e-commerce and publishing), *change* itself is one aspect that has modified very little since the origins of this industry in modernity.

But it is not only the garments that periodically transform from one fashion season to the next. The material vocabularies of fashion—the magazines, the ads, the shop windows, the campaign images—are reinvented with a new season. And in this seasonal production of fashion, magazines, whether print or digital, have an essential role as curated displays of fashion in image and text.<sup>92</sup> We often focus on the visual outputs of fashion, but text also has a pivotal function in the mediation of fashion.

Words—and the fashion journalists that produce them—have distinct powers in the marketing of fashion. In reviews or editorials, they elucidate the trends of a season. In captions, bylines and titles, they decorate and extend fashion images. Journalists, whether reporting on shows or writing for magazines, work actively in the progressive turnover of fashion, producing a whole new vocabulary each season. In more ways than one, writing “produces” fashion. The spe-

cial role of the fashion journalist and the temporal nature of their words is not something we readily recognize in critical discussions of fashion as an industry subject to symbolic and material modes of production. But the shifting character of words in fashion, or, as Alison Adburgham phrases it, “ephemeral fancies of vogue language”, form, and are formed by, the changing nature of fashion. And—despite the limited recognition of fashion journalists as critical practitioners—they are a poetic expression of fashion, even if they are entangled in ambivalent webs of promotion, marketing, and legitimation.

Last year, to be smart was to wear a pale pastel chiffon evening dress. This year, metal lace and brocades lead the list. Last year, modernistic art lived inside of frames in picture-galleries. This year, it paints its cubes and triangles and fantastic figures on sports wear and accessories. Only one bag used to be chic, the envelope, and now the small antelope pouch is even smarter. Pearls were the only jewel, and now diamonds, emeralds, and sapphires are the newer notes. (*Vogue US*, September 1, 1925)

## CHANGE IS FASHION

Discourse on fashion reinforces “change” as its enduring feature. Constantly reinventing itself, fashion has a peculiar relationship with time that is fundamentally connected to the seasonal structure of its production. But fashion also recurs internally and re-indexes itself; in forms and trends, it revives and re-makes its history over and over. We see this progressive repetition in the way that the minimalism of the Y2K-era—for instance, the sleek visions of Calvin Klein and Jil Sander in the late 1990s—revived the futurist forms of 1960s designers such as Pierre Cardin. Or in the way that the mid-nineties grunge aesthetic returned in the quasi-Soviet utilitarianism of Balenciaga under the lead of

Demna Gvasalia. Natasha Stagg writes that “fashion isn’t history repeating itself. It is a study of history, and of identity as asserted through repetition.”<sup>93</sup> Fashion seasonal volition is a strange mix of internal and external conditions, it develops in relation to itself and in relation to the world—its geopolitics, social relations and technology.

This trope of fashion as changeable and fickle is often credited to modern theorists and philosophers writing in the early twentieth century. Walter Benjamin, Thorstein Veblen, Georg Simmel and Charles Baudelaire (writing in the century prior), and others, equated *mode* with *modernity* in framing fashion as a distinctly modern system of production in the transience of its surfaces. Baudelaire described fashion as “the ephemeral, the fugitive, the contingent, the half of art whose other half is the eternal and the immutable.”<sup>94</sup> And Benjamin saw fashion “as a paradigmatic phenomenon of modernity and tied it to the accelerated development of the bourgeois social order and capitalist social order,”<sup>95</sup> a bond that would endure in the philosophizing of fashion. But similarities between mode and modernity went beyond the etymological or purely conceptual. At the turn of the twentieth century, the fashion industry was in a state of upheaval, breaking away from its status as a trade of dressmaking and emerging as a modern system of production through new industry practices. The first salon shows, pioneered by couturier Charles Worth, were one major factor (in addition to developments in







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transport, retail and technology and so forth) in this upheaval. With the seasonal presentation of collections from Parisian couturiers, fashion became linked with the concept of ephemerality and volatility, often in opposition to the ostensibly timeless character of art. Not only was fashion undergoing modernisation at the time of Benjamin's writing, but it also became emblematic of culture in the process of transformation and, in particular, the need to produce new dynamics of what would constitute the past, present, and future.

Fashion journalism, as a profession for writers, emerges parallel to the development of the modern fashion industry at large. Caroline Evans writes about the role of the first fashion shows as a dynamic site for fashion as a modern practice, and the same could be argued of fashion journalism as a profession for (largely) female writers. These salon shows, quite different to the public spectacle of contemporary fashion presentations, were exclusive events staged seasonally for industry and press. So, fashion shows and fashion journalism went hand in hand. Fashion journalists and editors were (and to an extent a role they still hold), quite literally, gatekeepers of this industry, responsible for taking the collections to the public. At the same time, increasing numbers of fashion magazines came onto newsstands catering to diverse markets of women.<sup>66</sup> *Vogue* US published its first issue in 1892, sharing the Paris collections to American customers, with its the French counterpart beginning later in 1920, amongst many other

titles that emerged in the market of women's magazines.

These early fashion journalists—crucial in the modernization of fashion—are largely forgotten. Instead, notions of “fashion as change” are today attributed to these (almost exclusively male) philosophers, though the early fashion journalists (almost exclusively female) also produced literary observations of dress. Fashion journalists in the early twentieth century were creating a new profession in the context of a modernizing industry. These writers also constructed the concept of fashion as change through their literary and philosophical observations of dress and its transient and changing nature. Mila Ganeva notes how, “while the male theorists were abstractly interested in fashion’s function within capitalism, their female counterparts in the 1920s were involved—through their writing—primarily in ‘self-fashioning,’ that is, creating and interpreting their own fashionable images.”<sup>67</sup>

Even before the salon shows, fashion journals had a key role in the industry functioning to advertise the new modes from Paris, with fashion plates accompanied by poetic descriptions of dress. Text had a vital role for fashion media before photography began to dominate its pages. Many of these early fashion magazines, often reporting on Paris modes for international audiences, relied on text and writing to convey clothing collections and disseminate the emerging trends from Paris.<sup>68</sup> As Olivier Saillard points out, “[u]ntil photography came to occupy the position it has held since the 1950s, and supplanted the written word, newspapers and magazines amply described the new collections in veritable treatises on elegance.”<sup>69</sup> Fashion show reviews and editorial features described the ideal of a collection, rather than its material reality. Columns and articles reporting on fashion constructed textual visions of dress, “imaginary scenes in the reader’s mind and thereby contributed to the formation of the visual culture of Parisian consumption.”<sup>70</sup> As far back as the very first fashion journals, fashion writers were mythologizing fashion through their writing—and

the production of myth entwined with the production of consumptive desire.

**Fashion is a decorative art; its only serious purpose is frivolity.**  
(Alison Adburgham, writing for *Punch*, August 15, 1956<sup>71</sup>)

But these journalists were also producing metaphorical constructions of fashion in their real-time attempts to understand the changing conditions of fashion and culture in general in modernity. German fashion journalist Helen Hessel<sup>72</sup> writes, for example, of “the toque tipped forward over the forehead, a style we owe to the Manet exhibition, demonstrat[ing] quite simply our new readiness to confront the end of the previous century.”<sup>73</sup> Hessel is a particularly distinct writer in this context, as she appears to have straddled both the work of fashion as a journalist reporting on Paris fashions to German readers, and the literary circles of the time, through her husband Franz Hessel and as a good friend of Walter Benjamin. Active between 1921 and 1938, Hessel wrote about fashion in an impressionistic and literary style. Her writing, staged from the perspective of an active observer, reflects an experimental approach, writing about the consumption patterns of fashion as a uniquely modern industry and experience.

Fashion journalism and writing is under-appreciated (and historically so) as a critical form. By comparison, art writing is highly self-reflexive: constantly re-invented and re-evalu-



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ated by artistic practices. As Andre Rangiah notes, art magazines and writing continually seeks not only to critique itself, but challenge "their viewer to think differently; making them aware of the dangers of safely idealised narratives that have turned people, places and experiences into subjects to be mined."<sup>14</sup> However, as I hope to show here, fashion writing is also highly dynamic, and has its own process of re-invention, though this process (as the art industry is also) is connected to the volition of its production.

#### EPHEMERAL VOCABULARY

As designers reinvent silhouettes, fabrics, colours, and forms, the writing that describes them must also be updated. Fashion writing in this context is also subject to the ephemeral qualities of this industry. And it was fashion's frontier journalists that first began to use the aesthetics of language from very early on in a plastic way to describe the changing seasons. One way to re-engage this undervalued form of writing is to examine the differences in the words themselves that are used from season to season.

Reporting on the early salon shows of the Parisian couturiers, the first generation of fashion journalists used text evocatively to describe the latest Paris modes, and deliver the current season to their readers. In a regular feature of US *Vogue's* September issue, an 1937 editorial praises the latest silhouettes from the Paris salon shows, noting in particular "Molyneux's cylinder silhouette, zipped tightly up to the front." (1937, September 1, p.77). The next year and season, in 1938, this transformed to a "skater silhouette, a spinning skirt (over a taffeta petticoat), a bolero of black Lyons velvet." (1938, September 1, p.58). Reading through these early issues of *Vogue*, the playful, dynamic and decorative nature of the writing is striking. The words constantly reinvent themselves, mirroring the silhouettes of the couture designers that also feature on the pages. The evocative textural descriptions of fabrics—"black wool brushed with polecat hairs", "jac-

quard satin with a serpentine motif," "hairy navy-blue wool" (1934, September 1, pp.37-51)—through to the colours—Maggy Rouff's "candy-pink," Schiaparelli's "sultry' rose," Molyneux's "pearl-grey satin," "Dérain-green," "after-the-storm' blues," and "wicked blacks for dinner" (*Vogue*, 1937 p.84) define the aesthetics of the season.

Owing to the ephemeral nature of this material, and in order to produce the aesthetic effects of change—namely, desire—in the pages of the magazines, fashion writers must reinvent their vocabulary to describe fashion.

This change is, of course, connected to demand, commerce and the ebb and flow of this capitalist consumer industry. Fashion writing—produced, in varying ways, in the context of its print and digital media platforms—is connected to the internal volition of this industry in producing desire. Show reviews, editorial features, captions, all fall under the banner of fashion journalism subject to this seasonal change. Roland Barthes uses the bold metaphor of a machine to describe the fashion magazine, and the editors, writers (and all other contributors) that work together to make them. He asserts the fashion magazine as essential in the production of fashion, functioning as "a machine that makes Fashion"<sup>15</sup> through their seasonal refreshing. Though Barthes' metaphor was instated in a vastly technologically different time of the 1960s, they continue to have a machine-like function in the post-digital age. However, this changing character of the fashion magazine is not only an aesthetic

strategy, but an economic necessity towards producing new desire.

The practice of fashion journalism still today is a role of constant aesthetic re-invention even in the accelerated conditions of fashion mediated through digital, social media and its many and various channels. Fashion's pace is quicker, more distributed, memetic at the level of language forms, and coded into a network of innumerable subcultural lexicons. Yet attention is often given, so much more so in this digital fashion era, to the still and moving images of fashion in our observations from season to season. A recent project, and one that is still unfolding, [wordsonfashionwebsites.com](http://wordsonfashionwebsites.com) explores how text transforms "garments into dreams and fashion into feelings."<sup>16</sup> Initiated by Femke de Vries, the site functions as a selective search engine producing poetic compilations of data on fashion text sourced from ten major digital fashion/lifestyle media websites. The project directs attention to how words, and the journalists that write them, are used to infuse value and produce desire in mass fashion media, digital channels and their endless production of fashion-related content.

It is the words too that change with the same ebb and flow as its images. But it is the words too that construct fashion, and therefore formally construct its metaphorical character. With words so entwined in the commerce of fashion, new words might produce new desires or redirect our desires in new directions.

Fashion media is changeable—regularly updated with new articles or content—and this is the nature of the profession that fashion journalists are subjected to. While philosophers of fashion seem to be constantly revisited and canonised, still today, in their abstracted musings on dress and its fickle character, fashion writers, on the other hand, are marginalised by history as an innate effect of their medium. Rather than rely on their philosophical abstraction, we could find value in revisiting the journalistic materials themselves. Fashion journalism reflects the writing of fashion itself; the language is produced with-



in the fashion moment and expressed fashion from inside. Correspondingly, when we read this journalism today, we are reading fashion in a diachronic encounter. We experience its seasons and moments through the writing and, in particular, the lexical change.

We see in recent decades how the art press has brought fashion into their remit, often as a subject that stands in symbolically for other concerns such as affective labor, body politics, and corporatization. Additionally, new and more critical writing practices in fashion outside of its commercial boundaries are bringing much-needed discourse on this creative phenomenon and its economic, cultural and social tendencies. However, writing *within* this industry also has extraordinary poetic and aesthetic formations and practice. There is something distinctly unique to be found in the writing of fashion journalists—beyond simply beauty—to the study and discourse of fashion. This other language—and its operations, uses, and modes of legitimization also deserves recognition as a critical and poetic form. A re-evaluation of this writing as a productive intersection of aesthetic philosophy and industry writing practice will develop richer writing practices in fashion, and in its external discourse. ☺

- 01 Not to mention the sub-seasons—such as pre-fall, resort, etc.—that have more recently been added to the yearly cycle of fashion, and the increasingly popular "see-now-buy-now" shows.
- 02 Addressing here the western luxury fashion industry, as centered (more or less) around the seasonal fashion weeks in London, Milan, Paris and New York.
- 03 Stagg, N., 2019, *Sleeveless*. Cambridge, MA: MIT/Semiotexte, p. 93.
- 04 Baudelaire, C. & Mayne, J., 1964. *The painter of modern life and other essays*, Oxford, UK: Phaidon, p.13.
- 05 Ganeva, M., 2008. *Women in Weimar fashion: discourses and displays in German culture, 1918–1933*, London: Camden House, p.7.
- 06 Although there is a much longer history of the fashion journal, beginning with *Parisian Cabinet des Modes*, founded in 1785, which is often referred to as the first fashion journal.
- 07 Ganeva, M., 2008. *Women in Weimar fashion: discourses and displays in German culture, 1918–1933*, London: Camden House, p.2.
- 08 Writing later in the twentieth century, Roland Barthes produced the concept of 'written fashion' in his text *The Fashion System* (1967), to describe how text functions actively in the production of fashion. In this semiotic analysis of fashion through fashion magazines, Barthes proposes three dialectic garments, the "image garment", the "written garment" and the "actual garment". Each of these actively participant in the construction of fashion.
- 09 Saillard, O., 2007. "Mot-ifs—before and after the garment: The text." in L. Marchetti & E. Quinz (eds), *Dysfashion*, Barcelona: BOM, p.11.
- 10 Hahn, H., 2005. "Fashion discourses in fashion magazines and Madame De Girardin's *Lettres Parisiennes* in July-Monarchy France (1830–1848)," in *Fashion Theory*, vol. 9, no. 2, p.214.
- 11 Adbugham, A., 1966. *View of Fashion*, London: Allen & Unwin, p.124.
- 12 Interestingly, Walter Benjamin cites writing from Hessel in the section on "Fashion" in his *Arcades Project* epic.
- 13 Kruse, K., 2015, "Look again: The first collected writings of legendary fashion critic Helen Hessel," in *Frieze*, available here: [frieze.com/article/politik-linien](http://frieze.com/article/politik-linien).
- 14 Rangiah, A., 2010, "The Art of Fashion Writing," in *Philament Journal*, available here: [philamentjournal.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/](http://philamentjournal.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/)
- 15 Barthes, R., 1990, *The Fashion System*, University of California Press, Berkeley, p.51.
- 16 [wordsonfashionwebsites.com/about](http://wordsonfashionwebsites.com/about)

