

# Space, Time and Catwalks: Fashion Shows as a Multilayered Communication Channel

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## Abstract

Fashion shows — the key moment in the fashion communication system — have become a privileged setting for experimenting with new communication languages that implement multifaceted and multi-channel strategies, poised between innovation and tradition. Fashion shows always could read and interpret the spirit of the times in different eras, transforming and shaping themselves into different formats each time while always remaining true to themselves. The article investigates the different contemporary forms of the catwalks, whether real or virtual, implemented due to the digital acceleration witnessed during the Covid-19 social distancing period. In this context, the fashion shows define new communication forms and strategies that are no longer limited to the “here and now” but expand space, thanks to the possibility of remote participation and time, by amplifying the whole concept: the catwalk-event become amplified with the inclusion of a pre, a during and a post. The time expands thanks to communication strategies that increasingly stage the phases that precede the fashion show (the creative process, the backstage, the work in progress), but also the subsequent phases, those of storytelling and narration, formerly the prerogative of a few privileged journalists, now shared storytelling, in which designers directly tell and explain their point of view, both through traditional narrative forms (such as interviews) and through forms of interaction typical of digital (such as gaming, sharing and Instagram live).

**Keywords:** Fashion Communication; Creative industries; Fashion Branding; Fashion Shows; Digital.

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## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

Fashion as a cultural, productive and creative system is by its very nature about transformation. As Yuniya Kawamura states, in fact, “whatever historical period we are talking about, the fundamental essence of fashion is change: the process of fashion explains the diversity and changes in styles”. Technological innovations have stimulated creativity related to fashion communication and vice versa. The development of the steam engine — a technology that could be defined as hard — allowed fashion, in the second half of the 18th century, to establish itself as one of the leading manufacturing sectors; today, developments in digital technologies have given new impetus — accelerated by the Covid-19 pandemic — to the definition of new forms of communication and marketing of fashion and its artefacts.

The contemporary fashion system characterises itself as an innovative force for creative experimentation, managing to ride on and exploit Toffler’s so-called “third wave” of technology, characterised by a powerful digital component that manages information, space and creates the global village. The result is the realisation of visions that define new futuristic and futureable aesthetics but above all new forms of interaction that rewrite the way people interact, between people and objects and, last but not least, between brands and consumers. A technological present is taking place beyond the concepts of complexity and tangibility, favouring an increasingly simple, invisible and intangible technology, and for this very reason, more pervasive.

We are witnessing a sort of mutation of the typical form of the fashion show which, on the one hand, implements new narrative modes, and on the other, creates narratives that we could define as meta-fashion shows: fashion shows-not-shows which, while losing the concept of live broadcasting, maintain the form of the “classic” event, with a catwalk, a sequence of models, garments and occasions of use, presented according to precise, more or less linear paths, becoming, to all intents and purposes, true short films in the form of fashion shows, or vice versa, designed for digital. Through an analysis of the evolution of the relationship between fashion and digital communication (presented by Chiara Pompa) and an overview of the current framework (presented by Vittorio Linfante), the article aims to investigate how the fashion system has been expanding its communicative vocabulary, implementing narrative forms in which the boundaries between physical and digital are becoming blurred, as happened during the Balenciaga Fall 2021 fashion show in which real models walked among a digital audience or the Miu Miu Spring 2021 show in which a real audience, remotely connected, was at the same time both spectator and set of the event. Boundaries that also transcend tradition and innovation: for example, Moschino’s puppet theatre staged by Jeremy Scott for the Spring 2021 collection, or J.W. Anderson’s project Show-in-a-Box, in which the physicality of a box containing cardboard cuttings, notes and silhouettes are translated into a highly personal, physical and sensorial experience, shared and communicated through social networks. This blurring of boundaries also affects the form and content of the shows themselves, as in the interviews with Miuccia Prada and Raf Simons, who share their creative process through words, answering questions from the brand’s fans and interacting through various Instagram tools.

## Fashion Under Attack. Fashion Shows and Digital Resilience

*Le Mythe Dior*: this is the title of the short movie by Matteo Garrone to show the Haute Couture Fall/Winter 2020 collection of the historic Parisian Fashion House that won the first prize of the “Fashion Film Festival Milano 2021”, the first entirely online. A short film that — behind the fantastic patina of a bucolic dimension inhabited by fauns, nymphs, mermaids, statues in a metamorphosis who come to life and wear pieces designed by Christian Dior Couture — hides a message, not at all veiled, of resilience. The trunk in the shape of the historic headquarters of the Maison, in Avenue Montaigne,

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1. This article was conceived by both authors in its entirety. Specifically, Chiara Pompa is responsible for sections: “Fashion under attack. Fashion shows and digital resilience” and “The technological roots of fashion digital transformation”. Vittorio Linfante is responsible for sections: “Digital acceleration of fashion communication: from a necessity to an opportunity for experimentation and creativity”, “The catwalks will never die[?]” and “Fashion shows are dead, long live fashion shows [?]”.

carried by two porters in elegant livery who wander through the forests showing the mythological creatures the sumptuous collection kept there and reproduced on a small scale, is a reference to the famous travelling exhibition *Théâtre de la Mode*. After all, as the press points out, “comparisons between the post-lockdown and the second post-war period, given the right proportions, are easy.”<sup>2</sup> Among the promotional initiatives implemented by French institutions “following the isolation created by the war and the German occupation ... to bring the fame of French couture ... and textiles back into the international spotlight,”<sup>3</sup> the exhibition aimed to reaffirm the dominant position of Paris in the field of international fashion. Initially held in the Pavillon Marsan in Paris (today’s Musée des Arts Décoratifs) and later in numerous locations around the world, the exhibition displayed miniature mannequins with reproductions of the latest creations of the great couturiers, demonstrating the ability of French Maisons to face adversity and lead the renaissance of fashion. In this perspective, the Haute Couture Fall/Winter 2020 collection was therefore created to offer “a heartfelt tribute to this admirable spirit of rebirth and optimism,”<sup>4</sup> giving once again proof of the ability of French fashion to react, this time also using digital technology and cinematographic language.

And it is with these words that, as a proof of the digital resilience of Dior — and, we might add, of the entire Fashion&Luxury sector during the pandemic<sup>5</sup> — creative director Maria Grazia Chiuri commented on the reorganisation of the consolidated process of creation and presentation of the brand’s sartorial collections:

I started this haute couture in the middle of the quarantine, in my home in Rome, far from my staff, from the atelier, from the premières, from Paris. Once the first moment of disorientation had passed, we had to completely rethink the working method, from creating the garments to the way of presenting them, seeing that the fashion show was not a viable option this time.<sup>6</sup>

To comply with social distancing and travel restrictions, Paris Haute Couture Week took place entirely online for the first time since its inception. As officially announced by the Fédération de la Haute Couture et de la Mode in a concise press release issued at the end of May 2020,<sup>7</sup> the collections were presented “in the form of creative videos/films” published on a special platform and, in parallel, shared on the main international media networks as well as on the official channels of the various brands. As an alternative to the live show and in the presence of an audience, from 6 to 8 July, 31 audiovisual contents were uploaded online, according to a precise daily schedule: 6 fashion films; 4 videos in the form of fashion shows (i.e. défilés, without an audience, pre-recorded and broadcast in video format); 8 video look-books. The creative solutions adopted for the Paris Haute Couture Week Fall/Winter 2020 are among the timely and concrete reactions to the challenges imposed by Covid-19. They are essentially related, beyond the formal differences, to the three cases listed above.

If, in fact, today, one year later, we look at how the collections were presented before and after the outbreak of the pandemic, it is clear that the complete conversion to digital of the Fashion Weeks held in

2. For further investigation → see Serena Tibaldi, “Matteo Garrone, un film per l’alta moda: ninfe, sirene e gli abiti in miniatura di Dior,” *La Repubblica*, July 6, 2020, <https://www.repubblica.it/moda-e-beauty/2020/07/06/news/digital-fashion-week-haute-couture-autunno-inverno-2020-dior-matteo-garrone-291619113/>. Accessed March 30, 2021.
3. For an in depth analysis of the promotion strategies implemented by French fashion institutions to cope with the economic crisis after World War II, see, Gianluigi Di Gangirolamo, *Istituzioni per la moda. Interventi tra pubblico e privato in Italia e in Francia (1945-1965)* (Milano: Bruno Mondadori, 2019), 29–33. See also: Dominique Veillon, *Fashion Under the Occupation* (Oxford: Berg, 2002).
4. For further investigation: [https://www.dior.com/it\\_it/moda-donna/sfilate-haute-couture/folder-collezione-haute-couture-autunno-inverno-2020-2021/le-theatre-de-la-mode-!%E2%80%99dissea-dei-sogni](https://www.dior.com/it_it/moda-donna/sfilate-haute-couture/folder-collezione-haute-couture-autunno-inverno-2020-2021/le-theatre-de-la-mode-!%E2%80%99dissea-dei-sogni) Accessed June 6, 2021.
5. For further investigation → see Silvia Pieraccini, “Tecnologie digitali e Ict: i big della moda pronti ad aumentare gli investimenti,” *Il Sole 24 Ore*, December 3, 2020, <https://www.ilssole24ore.com/art/tecnologie-digitali-e-ict-big-moda-pronti-ad-aumentare-investimenti-ADn1c85>. Accessed March 30, 2021.
6. Maria Grazia Chiuri’s statement is reported in: Serena Tibaldi, “Matteo Garrone, un film per l’alta moda: ninfe, sirene e gli abiti in miniatura di Dior,” *La Repubblica*, July 6, 2020.
7. The press release mentioned can be found at the following link: <https://fhcm.paris/en/2020/05/28/haute-couture-online-2/>. Accessed March 30, 2021.

July 2020 marked a watershed.<sup>8</sup> As will be argued in the course of this contribution, from a basic bipolarity which contemplated only the canonical fashion show on the one hand and the look-book on the other, during the 2020s, a plurality of solutions was gradually experimented with, which necessarily expanded the range of tools that can be used to show a collection to all the actors involved. Moreover, companies, in synergy with the various national fashion institutions, have promptly been working to identify alternative platforms, formulas and languages, to upset the dichotomous system which, before the lockdown, contrasted a substantial predominance of live shows (with possible live streaming) with limited use of the look-book as the main viable option in digital terms. We should also point out that, although since September 2020 there has been a gradual “return to the real” — and for this reason, the sector’s press has adopted the neologism *phygital* (the result of the crisis of physical and digital) to describe the hybrid nature of Fashion Weeks characterised by the alternation of purely digital shows and fashion shows with both live and online audiences — the range of solutions employed has not contracted again. Invoked by a segment of the industry that is very reluctant about a complete conversion to digital or to solutions that, through the media, extend the concept of liveness beyond the spatial-temporal co-presence of the show and the audience,<sup>9</sup> this contrary thrust does not seem to have halted, at least for the moment, the process of *Digital Transformation* in the field under examination. According to a mapping of the different practices implemented by 270 brands as of July 2020, which supports the analysis of the phenomenon carried out in the following sections, it clearly emerges that one year later, in March 2021, the panorama is much more varied and tends to include not only live fashion shows and look-books, but also fashion films, videos in the form of fashion shows, digital catwalks (in 3D or AR and VR) and other solutions which, to the detriment of forced digitalisation, retrieve extremely physical materials and methods.

This phenomenon, described above, is certainly noteworthy as it can be observed from multiple points of view: if, in fact, on the one hand, it can highlight the ability of the Fashion System to respond to the crisis with timeliness and to manage the emergency in the short term, on the other hand, the recent tendency to return just as abruptly to normality — and not to the so-called *New Normal* —, implies an articulated reflection on the relationship that the sector has with technologies and digital cultures. In this sense, it is worth pointing out that the use of videos or fashion films in place of the conventional fashion show, as well as the involvement of the audience remotely through live streaming, are not a novelty introduced by the need to adapt to a new landscape in which, among the most affected sectors, there is undoubtedly that of the live show.<sup>10</sup> Suppose one looks back at the history of fashion shows from the point of view of the presentation methods adopted before the pandemic. In that case, it is clear that the various brands, trying to adapt quickly to the changes taking place, first of all, recovered and optimised the experiments already carried out — albeit sporadically or in niche contexts — during the previous decades and, in some cases, even during the 20th century. As we are going to discuss in the next section by reviewing a series of particularly illustrative cases, the potential of the moving image to promote fashion has been grasped and exploited since the days of early cinema, just as the possibilities of deferred fruition or remote participation through live streaming had already taken hold in previous decades, in conjunction with the technological changes that marked the decades at the turn of the millennium.<sup>11</sup>

8. If we exclude the experiments in complete digital conversion of the Tokyo and Shanghai Fashion Weeks, broadcast live on Tmall in April 2020 (and which in some cases exploited augmented reality to “virtually” host the public in the front row who could comment and buy the collections in real-time with the See now-buy now option), it was in July 2020 that the main Fashion Weeks were held, for the first time since their inception, exclusively online and without a live audience.

9. According to some studies on the various forms of live performance in the domain of theatre, the concept of “liveness” can also be applied to the analysis of fashion shows; the existence of multiple connections between theatrical performances and some modes of presentation of collections has in fact been investigated and attested by several studies. On the evolution of the concept of “liveness” in relation to the Digital Transformation and mediatisation in theatre, see: Laura Gemini, “Liveness: le logiche mediali nella comunicazione dal vivo,” *Sociologia della comunicazione* 51 (2016): 43–63. For an in-depth exploration of the fashion show and theatre nexus, see: Nancy J. Troy, “The Theatre of Fashion: Staging Haute Couture in Early 20th-Century France,” *Theatre Journal*, 53 (2001): 1–32.

10. For further investigation → see Laura Gemini, Stefano Brilli e Francesca Giuliani, “Il dispositivo teatrale alla prova del Covid-19. Mediatizzazione, liveness e pubblici,” *Mediascapes journal*, 15 (2010): 45–58.

11. The reference is to the important technological transformations that have taken place since the beginning of the 1990s in the iconosphere, “the sphere constituted by the set of images circulating in a given cultural context, the technologies

There is no doubt that Covid-19 highlighted the need to speed up digitisation processes, but the solutions adopted result from a change that was already underway. From the multitude of statements made by industry insiders in the early months of 2020, as well as the detailed analysis in the special edition, published following the pandemic outbreak, of the annual report on the state of fashion by Business of Fashion magazine and international strategy consultancy McKinsey & Company, a cohesive and widely shared position emerges: Covid-19 is the engine of change in a system that already had problems. This crisis factor has helped to accelerate the achievement of a greater degree of awareness by industry players of the need to redesign the Fashion System, perhaps starting with technological innovation.<sup>12</sup>

Ultimately, as will be argued in the following pages, it is possible to say that the pandemic has contributed to emphasising the urgency of investing in technological innovation and Digital Transformation, bringing to a new stage the experiments that had already begun in previous decades.

## The Technological Roots of Fashion Digital Transformation

During 2020 and early 2021, contemporary fashion brands innovated the live fashion show through heterogeneous digital tools, as can be seen in the mapping of the different ways of presenting clothing collections illustrated in the following sections. However, before reviewing these case studies and analysing them in detail, it is productive to contextualise this recent development within the previous fashion show mediatisation. In order to fully understand the digital transformation of fashion shows stimulated by the challenges imposed by the pandemic, it is, therefore, necessary to take a step back to investigate the nature of the exchanges that the fashion industry has had, and still has, with the media system and, in particular, with both still and moving images when presenting its stylistic innovations. First of all, it is necessary to start from a basic assumption, although we are aware that this may seem too unbalanced in a deterministic sense:

the acceleration of fashion's transformation evidently has to do with the technological expansion of this system. If fashion is changing so fast today, it is because there are a series of instruments that materialize it, fix it and, precisely because they fix it, stimulate change. ... fashion exists because there is a media system that establishes and communicates it.<sup>13</sup>

It follows that fashion shows — if intended as functional appointments for the presentation of new collections, which in turn are called upon to represent and feed the regime mentioned above of changing tastes on a material level — have always been accompanied by a media system. Fashion magazines in close synergy with photographic images, cinema, television and, in recent decades, websites and social networking platforms have contributed, in parallel with the fashion show, to disseminate to the public the stylistic innovations introduced in respect of previous seasons, mediating, freezing, fixing and communicating them to the point of establishing fashion itself.

It is also interesting to note that throughout the 20th century and up to the present day, these means of communication have been used to present the fashion show itself. As Caroline Evans noted, from the second decade of the 20th century, “both fashion journalism and newsreel began to show scenes of Paris

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with which they are produced, processed, transmitted and archived, and the social uses to which these images are put”. For further information, see: Andrea Pinotti e Antonio Somaini, *Cultura visuale. Immagini, sguardi, media, dispositivi* (Torino: Einaudi, 2016), 17–19.

12. The analysis presented in the McKinsey & Company report reveals five trajectories from which the change of course highlighted and accelerated by social distancing is expected to take place. These include Digital Escalation, which is now considered a priority throughout the value chain, and the Innovation Imperative, which requires the adoption of new tools and strategies to make business models shock-proof in the future. See: McKinsey & Company, *The State of Fashion 2020. Coronavirus Update*, April 7, 2020. <https://www.mckinsey.com/industries/retail/our-insights/its-time-to-rewire-the-fashion-system-state-of-fashion-coronavirus-update>. Accessed March 30, 2021.

13. See: Claudio Marra, *Nelle ombre di un sogno. Storie e idee della fotografia di moda* (Milano: Bruno Mondadori, 2004), 40–41.

mannequins — as fashion models were called — at work.”<sup>14</sup> If, in fact, the primitive forms of presenting new creations worn by a model, i.e. the défilé of the mannequins in the Parisian couturiers’ salon, had been invisible to the public in the previous decades,<sup>15</sup> from 1908 onwards, they were frequently documented through both still and moving images. Initially developed as a private, closed-door spectacle to present to an elite audience and foreign buyers from both Europe and America, the Paris fashion shows quickly came to the attention of a wider public. Alongside the habit of sending mannequins “to model” at the races, in holiday resorts, on cruise ships or tours of European and American department stores, after 1910, some couturiers opened the doors of their salons to photographers and cameramen.<sup>16</sup> At this time, the industry began to recognise and exploit the potential of the technological image to promote clothing and accessories. In order to retrace the main stages of the relationship between fashion and moving images and thus to understand the impact they had on the presentation of clothing collections, we must go back to the so-called “cinema of attractions”. As Evans’ study suggests, the pioneer film maker Georges Méliès has made 15 short publicity films in 1900, including one for *Mystère corsets* and another for *Delion hats*.<sup>17</sup> Two very interesting cases from several points of view. Primarily, as Marketa Uhlírova has pointed out, they constitute an early example of “the practice of expanding fashion advertising into the realm of the moving image,”<sup>18</sup> used in the first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century mainly to promote ready-made items.<sup>19</sup> Secondly, they are noteworthy because they were projected at night onto the street outside his Theatre Robert-Houdin. From this perspective, they represent an early example of projecting filmed fashion products in public spaces, which has been very common in the last decades. It has become a widespread practice to project and live-stream fashion show on monuments or urban buildings in the digital era, as will be analysed in the following pages.

Among the first couturiers who, on the other hand, grasped the potential offered by cinema, we can mention Paul Poiret.<sup>20</sup> He was probably the first to have had “the idea of replacing the live fashion show with a film,”<sup>21</sup> thus adapting “the strategies of popular visual culture to high-end consumer culture.”<sup>22</sup> In 1911 the fashion parade held at his famous “The Thousand and Second Night” party was shown to foreign clients and buyers in August of the same year, projecting its film simultaneously to a live fashion show. Three years later, Poiret again used moving images to promote his collections on an American marketing tour, projecting it in preview at a dinner in his Parisien garden. In both cases, we are facing an *ante-litteram* example of “videos in fashion show form” — as we labelled some films produced by fashion houses during the pandemic. Differently from what we have called “fashion films”, they do not exploit the narrative potential of cinema and therefore do not transport the viewer into the diegetic universe. As Evans noted,<sup>23</sup> Poiret’s fashion show films present the models walking across the screen rather than telling a story.

In the same years, the fashion show also gained popularity in another film genre. Indeed, some Parisian Maisons began to allow film companies such as Pathé-Frères and Gaumont access to their ateliers to produce footage to be included in newsreels. In the 1910s and 1920s, in the newsreel footage began to appear

14. Caroline Evans, “Early French Fashion Shows as a Cinema of Attractions,” in *Fashion in Film*, ed. Adrienne Munich, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011), 110.

15. Ibid. According to Evans, between the end of the nineteenth century and the first decade of the twentieth century, the fashion shows of Parisian Maisons were not publicized because couturiers did not want to publicize their business relationships with American and European department store buyers.

16. See: Caroline Evans, *The Mechanical Smile: Modernism and the First Fashion Shows in France and America, 1900–1929* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013)

17. Evans, “Early French Fashion Shows...”, 120.

18. See: Marketa Uhlírova, “100 Years of the Fashion Film: Frameworks and Histories,” *Fashion Theories*, 17 (2013): 140.

19. Uhlírova, 140.

20. Evans, “Early French Fashion Shows...”, 119–23.

21. Marketa Uhlírova, “100 Years of the Fashion Film”, 153.

22. Evans, “Early French Fashion Shows...”, 119.

23. Evans, 119.

some mannequins [that] simply model as they would have done professionally to clients in the salon, but others play the role of society women, chatting and taking tea together in narrative scenarios that thinly veil the point of displaying the latest fashionable costumes, introducing a note of fiction into real-life modeling.<sup>24</sup>

In the first case, newsreels show “filmed defilé”. In the second, they start to utilise the narrative potential of cinema, even if still in a rudimentary way. We can partly find this bifurcation in the solutions adopted during the pandemic to overcome the impossibility of showing live collections. Leaving the “narrative fashion films” aside for the moment, it is, therefore, possible to state that the still alive relationship between the presentation of clothes worn by models and moving images has its roots in the first decades of the last century. In order to underline once again how the legacy of early exchanges between fashion and cinema has been exploited in recent decades, we can say that television formats such as Elsa Klensch’s *Style*, broadcast on CNN from 1980 to 2001, have their roots in fashion newsreels shown in cinemas. In the footsteps of *Style*, several TV programmes presented fashion shows and their backstages to the audience in the 1980s and 1990s.<sup>25</sup> After all, behind-the-scenes fashion has a fascination that has often been revealed and made spectacular yesterday and today. In fact, some documentaries that became popular in the 1930s shine a spotlight on the hidden sides of the fashion industry on par with some live streaming fashion shows that begin backstage. Hybridizing the documentary style with advertising and avant-garde techniques, these films produced for promotional or educational purposes were dedicated to various aspects of the fashion industry, usually invisible to the public eye. From this perspective, Humphrey Jennings’ *Making Fashion* (1939) is emblematic, documenting the preparation of Norman Hartnell’s Couture Spring/Summer 1938 collection. Going through designing and creating the collection, the short film “culminates in two substantial modelling sequences — one internal, stage on the salon; the other a fashion show for a small audience.”<sup>26</sup> Drawing another connection between the past and recent years, SHOWstudio, the platform for fashion film founded in 2000 by fashion photographer Nick Knight and graphic designer Peter Saville, has often shed light on the fashion industry backstage, documenting its mechanisms and processes and making them accessible to web users. In addition to establishing itself on the scene as a pioneering project in digital fashion imaging and promoting film as a valuable alternative to the live fashion show, it has kept faith with its initial vocation, namely “to put the spotlight on the behind-the-scenes creative process of fashion and fashion image-making.”<sup>27</sup>

Without any claim to being exhaustive, the examples presented here allow the recent relationship between fashion shows and moving images to be framed as part of a broader story. This history is rooted in the relationship between fashion and cinema since its origins. From this perspective, the above examples support the thesis that digital technologies and the Internet have facilitated and thus helped normalise practices that were gradually consolidated in the pre-digital era. These practices have been intensifying since the 1990s, when some niche or avant-garde brands, in particular, started, thanks to the above-mentioned technological innovations, to use moving images to present their collections, substituting them for the live fashion show or incorporating them into it as its paratext. Used to cut the costs of catwalk shows or to respond to the need for aesthetic experimentation as in the case of Hussein Chalayan, Maison Martin Margiela or Viktor & Rolf, this exponential increase in the use of moving images set the basis for the explosion and dissemination of “digital fashion films” during the first two decades of the new millennium.<sup>28</sup>

Nothing more than disseminating a new genre for which it is difficult to provide a precise definition.

24. Evans, 119.

25. Marketa Uhlířová, “100 Years of the Fashion Film”, 153.

26. Uhlířová, 146.

27. Uhlířová, 146.

28. As a testament to the transformation taking place, Newsweek’s March 2010 issue reads, “In any case, the revolution is probably just beginning. Labels and designers like Yves Saint Laurent and British avant-garde talent Gareth Pugh are eschewing runway shows altogether during certain seasons, opting instead to produce and present footage to publishers both in person and online. ... After all, embracing the future is what fashion does.” See: Sameer Reddy, “Streaming Live From the Catwalk,” *Newsweek*, March 4, 2010.

The label ‘fashion film’, in fact, refers to an increasingly wide range of audiovisual contents, mainly short (from 2/3 minutes up to about 15/20 minutes) connected in various ways to fashion. As Gary Needham noted, the term includes indistinctly: “promotional videos for seasonal collections, substitutes for conventional catwalk displays, electronic look-books, experimental films used to advertise brands (clothing, accessories, and perfume), ‘promos’ for the digital platform version of print magazines, e-stores, and brand-funded artists’ videos.”<sup>29</sup> Not to be confused with the widely described filmed catwalk shows, they are formally less formulaic and often adhere to the aesthetic vision of those directing them. In particular, the various luxury brands, having large budgets to invest in communication, now regularly commission such films from famous directors, photographers, or artists.<sup>30</sup> Among the latter, purely for simplification purposes, we can cite David Lynch for Dior (*Lady Blue Shanghai*, 2010), Harmony Korine for Proenza Schouler (*Snowballs*, 2010), Roman Polanski for Prada (*A Therapy*, 2012), Glen Luchford for Gucci (2017), Wim Wenders for Jil Sander (2018), up to Matteo Garrone, mentioned at the beginning of this paper and called to direct *Le Mythe Dior* in 2020. Unlike the other films listed above — which were mainly used as “promotional videos for seasonal collections” or “experimental films used to advertise brands”, and therefore disseminated on the Internet, through social media, independently of the fashion show — Garrone shot this video during the pandemic in place of the fashion show itself. Together with fashion films such as *Carillon* for Magliano or *The Adventures of Zoocom with Friends* for Luis Vuitton by Virgil Abloh (both shot for Digital Fashion Week of July 2020), the one by Garrone is based on an operational practice inaugurated by couturiers such as Paul Poiret and re-launched almost a century later by some designers in the Nineties. In 1998, Helmut Lang presented the year’s Fall/Winter collection exclusively through a video broadcast on the Internet and a CD distributed to the press,<sup>31</sup> following the footsteps of Rifat Ozbek, Jasper Conran e Antony Price who made this radical act in 1990 yet.<sup>32</sup> As a final point, however, it should be clarified that the ‘digital fashion films’ listed above do not merely show a sequence of outfits worn by models in a given space but also make extensive use of the narrative potential of the cinematic medium, sometimes respecting the conventions of mainstream films, sometimes moving away from them through a more experimental approach.

From this point of view, the pandemic has only stimulated a change that was already underway. As can be seen from this overview, which does not claim exhaustive, in the flow of crossings and grafts, of direct and indirect exchanges between cinema and fashion, different ways of displaying seasonal collections have emerged, which have further evolved in the digital age. On the threshold of the new millennium, unprecedented possibilities have opened up — especially in quantitative terms — for the production and dissemination of technological solutions capable of mediatizing the fashion show. In these years, in fact, it also began to be live-streamed through the digital screens that surround us, which are now proliferating.<sup>33</sup> Although the boom in live-streaming fashion shows occurred around 2010, it is possible to trace some experiments in this direction from the late 1990s that drove this evolution.<sup>34</sup> There is no doubt that the presentation events of Burberry Fall/Winter 2010 or Spring/Summer 2014 women’s collections represented a watershed. While the first one involved the broadcasting of the fashion show in live 3D streaming and events organized simultaneously around the world,<sup>35</sup> the second one is noteworthy for the impressive media exposure both on the web (on 11 social media), the flagship stores, and a series of giant screens positioned outside, in strategic places in metropolises like New York or Hong

29. Gary Needham, “Digital Fashion Film,” in *Fashion Cultures Revisited: Theories, Explorations and Analysis*, eds Stella Bruzzi and Pamela Church Gibson, (Oxon: Routledge, 2014), 105.

30. Gary Needham, “Digital Fashion Film”, 107.

31. Miles Socha, “Seminal Fashion Moments: Helmut Lang’s Online Show in March 1998,” *WWD*, May 5, 2020. Available at: <https://wwd.com/fashion-news/fashion-features/first-online-fashion-show-ever-helmut-lang-lessons-1203626257/>. Accessed June 6, 2021.

32. Marketa Uhlířová, “100 Years of the Fashion Film”, 145.

33. Gary Needham, “Digital Fashion Film,” in *Fashion Cultures Revisited: Theories, Explorations and Analysis*, eds Stella Bruzzi and Pamela Church Gibson, (Oxon: Routledge, 2014), 103–111.

34. See: Caterina Lughì, “Le sfilate vanno online,” in *Oltre il CRM. La customer experience nell’era digitale. Strategie, best practices, scenari del settore moda e lusso*, ed. Michela Ornati, (Milano: Franco Angeli, Kindle Format, 2011)

35. Lughì.





Figure 1: Models walk the runway during Alexander McQueen Pret-a-Porter show as part of the Paris Womenswear Fashion Week Spring/Summer 2010 at Palais Omnisports de Bercy on October 6, 2009 in Paris, France. The show was created in collaboration with Nick Knight and broadcast live on the SHOWstudio website.  
© Victor Boyko/Getty Images

Kong.<sup>36</sup> However, it is necessary to move the first experiments in this direction back more than a decade. The first remarkable case, which can be considered a forerunner of this phenomenon, was the fashion show for the presentation of Krizia's Spring/Summer 2000 collection. Held on 29 September, on the occasion of the Milan Fashion Week, Mariuccia Mandelli proposed, for the first time in Europe, the live streaming of her show on krizia.net in collaboration with Kataweb, also showing the backstage of the show and involving the Japanese market; in fact, Japanese buyers were offered the possibility of placing orders even though they were not physically present. This experiment was repurposed over the following years: from Armani Privé's Spring/Summer 2007 fashion show, broadcasted live on SMG and Cingular mobiles, to Alexander McQueen's Spring/Summer 2009 show (Fig. 01), produced in collaboration with Nick Knight and broadcasted live on the SHOWstudio website, as well as Gucci live broadcasts over the decade, on the occasion of the opening of its flagship stores around the world. Lastly, a final noteworthy example is the fashion show for the presentation of Ermenegildo Zegna's Fall/Winter 2011 collection. Entitled *In the Moon for China*, the event included, alongside the models on the catwalk, the projection of the backstage onto a huge back-drop of the Great Wall of China, anticipating the experiments that in the following decades often undermined or altered the space-time dimension. In the same years, fashion shows began to forge a close relationship with social media. Beginning with Dolce and Gabbana's show of September 2009 that featured fashion bloggers in the front row and the Burberry show for the Spring/Summer 2014 collection mentioned above, as Rocamora noted, "social media have become a staple of the shows, events increasingly geared at bringing the public in."<sup>37</sup> Their spread, in synergy with the smartphone screen, has favoured the democratisation of access to the fashion show, which has begun to 'travel' through the Internet rhizome until it becomes ubiquitous itself: either shown 'as is' delayed as well as live; or substituted by 'digital fashion films' which have taken its place in fulfilling the function of displaying collections, although often lowering them into a narrative universe; or presented in hybrid versions which we are going to illustrate in the following sections, as a result of attempts to adapt to the limitations of the pandemic context. Moreover, the spread of these points of junction and contact, as screens can be considered today, helped amplify and complete the redefinition of the *hic et nunc* that is peculiar to live shows and, consequently, also to the fashion shows. This redefinition had already begun in the early years of the massification of the Internet and the personal computer (which made live streaming of fashion shows feasible). It was taken to a new stage by the experimentation of digital liveness on various levels, which has been carried out in recent years and will definitively be normalised in 2020. As Rosie Findlay pointed out, "in dispersing the event and extending it to a broader audience, media coverage effectively gives the AFW shows a second life — they live beyond their liveness through their mediated transmission."<sup>38</sup> Finally, this proliferation has created the conditions for reducing the information asymmetry between brand and consumer,<sup>39</sup> or, as Nathalie Khan argued, for the metamorphosis of the latter into a spectator.<sup>40</sup>

In this context images of fashion are not simply a vehicle of consumption relying on the discourse of commodity fetishism, as is the case with fashion advertising. Instead one could argue that fashion film aims to break down boundaries between consumption and representation, by relying on cinematic language.<sup>41</sup>

From this perspective, the factors that have driven the changes made evident by the restrictions imposed by the pandemic are multiple and interconnected: from the advent of the Internet to the so-called Dig-

36. See: Rachel Strugatz, "Burberry's Spring Show Goes Global," *WWD*, September 17, 2013. Available at: <http://www.wwd.com/media-news/digital/burberrys-spring-show-goes-global-7160355/print-preview/>. Accessed June 12, 2021.

37. Agnès Rocamora, "Mediatization and Digital Media in the Fashion Field," *The Journal of Dress, Body and Culture*, (2016): 5.

38. Rosie Findlay, "Things to Be Seen": Spectacle and the performance of Brand in Contemporary," *About Performance*, no. 14-15 (2017): 115.

39. Michela Ornati (ed.), *Oltre il CRM. La customer experience nell'era digitale. Strategie, best practices, scenari del settore moda e lusso* (Milano: Franco Angeli, Kindle format, 2011), 1321-1322.

40. See: Nathalie Khan, "Cutting the Fashion Body: Why the Fashion Image Is No Longer Still," *Fashion Theory*. Vol. 16 n. 2 (2015): 235-49.

41. Khan, 235-49.

ital Turn, from the rapid diffusion of both desktop and portable computers to the widespread use of smartphones with integrated cameras and touch screens to the explosion of social networking platforms and blogs. Summarising the evolution of the relationship between fashion shows and the media since the last decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it is possible to identify three different stages, respectively determined by the changes taking place in the technological sphere: 1) 1999–2009: the Internet, together with the “Digital Turn” and the widespread diffusion of personal computers, encouraged the first experiments with live streaming, together with the first circulation, outside niche contexts, of “narrative videos” to replace the fashion show; 2) 2009/10–2020: the increasing proliferation of social media together with the widespread use of smartphones and, therefore, of screens that have now become ubiquitous, has encouraged the live streaming boom as well as the dissemination of video content; 3) 2020: the crisis caused by the pandemic has accelerated the process of normalising the experiments carried out in the previous phases, taking full advantage of all the features offered by technology. Experiments which will be reviewed in the following sections and which take the parade to a new level of innovation or, better still, transform it into a multilayered communication channel.

## Digital Acceleration of Fashion Communication: From a Necessity to an Opportunity for Experimentation and Creativity

The year 2020 also represented a watershed for fashion, between a *before* that is consolidated, reassuring, manageable. An *after* that is uncertain, unstable, constantly evolving, not only from the point of view of design, creative, production and sales methods but also in terms of the sphere of the communication and the relationship with the consumers of the various brands.

For years now, the whole fashion system has defined communication in the digital sphere as one of the most effective ways of interacting between brands and consumers, often overcoming traditional fashion media and journalists’ intermediation. With 2020, communication has had to speed up, not only in terms of the quantity of content to be conveyed but, above all, in terms of quality, variety, and the search for more innovative and immersive forms of communication. The social distancing imposed by the pandemic has thus defined a new communicative “normality”, which takes on ever-changing forms that do not necessarily replace the previous modes but which sublimate and amplify what can be considered the traditional communicative tools of fashion.

The fashion show, as well as the presentation of the collections, are traditionally the core of fashion communication — the endpoint of the creative process and, at the same time, the starting point for communication and sales strategies — and in this context, they become a real field of experimentation. Since January 2020, fashion weeks, and above all their contents, have been rethought, reworked, redesigned, reassembled, in different forms and, in some cases, totally innovative — if not absolutely, at least for the fashion system — in other cases, recovering unexpected methods and tools that were thought to be outdated and belonging to history. Past, present and future are thus mixed within a process of experimentation, which has seen the various fashion brands and institutions linked to fashion weeks redefine themselves, and redefine their relationship with the market.

In this panorama, and in less than a year, there has been a proliferation of events, more or less isolated, which have defined a new and multi-faceted abacus of communication tools in the hands of fashion creatives. If, until 2020, there were traditionally two modes of presentation consolidated by the system (fashion shows and look-books), with the social distancing imposed by Covid-19, after the first shock, we have witnessed an unprecedented multiplicity of tools and modes for presenting the fashion world and its products.

Although the first response was the more reassuring one of shifting all, or most, of the traditional fashion show presentation methods to the photographic production of look-books — more or less implemented also in the form of short fashion films —, it is only with the second half of the year that a renewed desire to challenge oneself by exploiting the most important and most consolidated resource of the sector becomes central: creativity. Although the drop in sales could not be contained to any great extent, what could and should be contained was the loss of interest and public involvement and customers.

The fashion capitals and their Weeks are expanding in time and space, nominally linked to a physical place, but in fact, come to life on the net. The *here* and *now* of the official calendar still represent the boundaries within which the fashion system moves, a system which, however, at the same time, spreads in space and time, going beyond temporal and geographical boundaries, thus defining an extended calendar and space, which in a certain sense becomes truly global.

The instant understood as the event's time is extended, and precise calendars, times, places — or rather sites or links — are being defined that welcome visitors in different forms and ways, which are no less prestigious. Fashion shows are consolidating as both in-person and remote events, becoming increasingly physical and digital, also “extending the ‘spatial and temporal parameters’ of the fashion show, to accessible instant consumption and social mediatization.”<sup>42</sup> Each event is designed to be experienced primarily, if not exclusively, through social channels. The *mediatization* of fashion has already stimulated brands to conceive communication, and the production of content, in the format of 1080x1920 pixels (or vice versa, depending on the content), i.e. the proportion of the screen of our devices. Everything, in this sense, is now designed to be enjoyed within the social media interface that allows not only to participate but above all to interact and finalize a purchase.

Thus digital platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat (Burberry previewed their Spring-Summer 2016 collection there) and the more recent Periscope (a live video streaming extension of Twitter) have become legitimate spaces of diffusion of the collections. In this context, the shows are increasingly designed with social media in mind; they have become mediatized events, events produced and staged to be consumed online, on a digital screen. In July 2013, for instance, fashion show producer Alexandre de Bétak explains that the internet ‘has totally changed how we frame what we show, not just visually but also in time. ... even the way I direct the models is affected by where some of the cameras for the webcast are placed’ ... Shows are full of ‘made-for-Instagram moments’, as the Business of Fashion put it, end of the shows ‘tableaus’ having become common ready-to-be-Instagrammed stagings.<sup>43</sup>

From this point of view, it is interesting to consider what has happened over the last year, both from a quantitative and qualitative point of view, and how the fashion show system has changed and expanded, redefining itself as a method that is no longer stable but constantly evolving and experimenting. This does not only involve the architectural and performance spheres — which are still valid and highly appealing from the point of view of social media — but also extends to new forms of hybrid narration, in which cinema, performing art, digital art and the creation of editorial content combine in different ways to generate new forms of presentation of the collections.

During the last year, a study was carried out to map the different ways of presenting the collections, which nowadays is reductive and partly anachronistic to classify as fashion weeks.

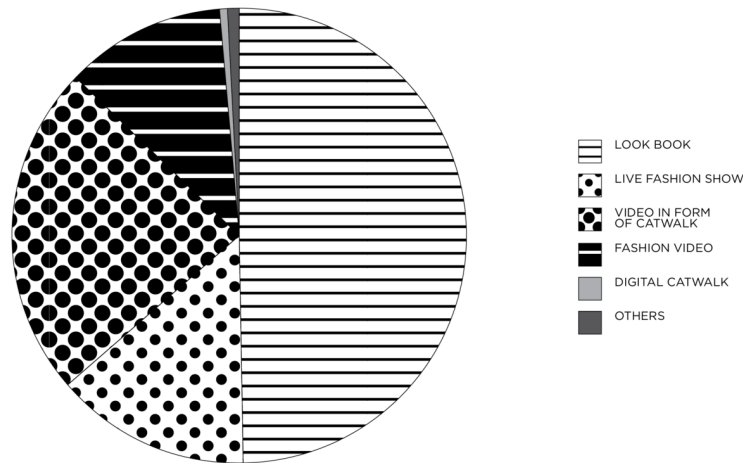
The study considered a total of 8 seasons (Couture Spring/Summer 2021 and Fall/Winter 2021, the women's ready-to-wear collections Resort 2021, Pre-Fall 2021, Spring/Summer 2021 and Fall/Winter 2021, as well as the men's collections Spring/Summer 2021 and Fall/Winter 2021), 270 brands (both women's and men's fashion) and a total of 690 presentations (Fig. 02). The analysis was structured by considering the different fashion weeks communicated through “Vogue Runway”, which with its different editions, covers both consolidated markets and brands of the fashion system and those gravitating outside the traditional circuits and emerging realities. This analysis has resulted in an extraordinarily vast and varied landscape with the most diversified modes and forms of presentation, thus creating a renewed vocabulary of fashion communication, poised between presence and absence (of public and brands), between physical and digital space, between direct and deferred, between tradition and innovation.

42. Tiziana Ferrero-Regis and Marissa Lindquist (eds.), *Staging Fashion: The Fashion Show and Its Spaces* (London-New York, Bloomsbury, 2020)

43. Rocamora, “Mediatization and Digital Media in the Fashion Field”, 6.

**SYNTHESIS OF THE ANALYSIS OF THE MODALITIES OF PRESENTATION CARRIED OUT DURING THE PERIOD OF THE PANDEMIC ON A TOTAL OF 690 EVENTS**

222 WOMEN'S COLLECTIONS S/S 2021, 222 WOMEN'S COLLECTIONS F/W 2021 AND 119 RESORT 2021  
 18 COUTURE COLLECTIONS FALL 2021 AND 18 COUTURE COLLECTIONS SUMMER 2021  
 9 MEN'S COLLECTIONS S/S 2021 AND 82 MEN'S COLLECTIONS F/W 2021



**EVOLUTION OF THE MODALITIES OF PRESENTING A FASHION COLLECTION.**

COMPARISON BETWEEN A MAIN PRE-PANDEMIC SEASON AND THE S/S 2021 AND FW 2021 SEASONS

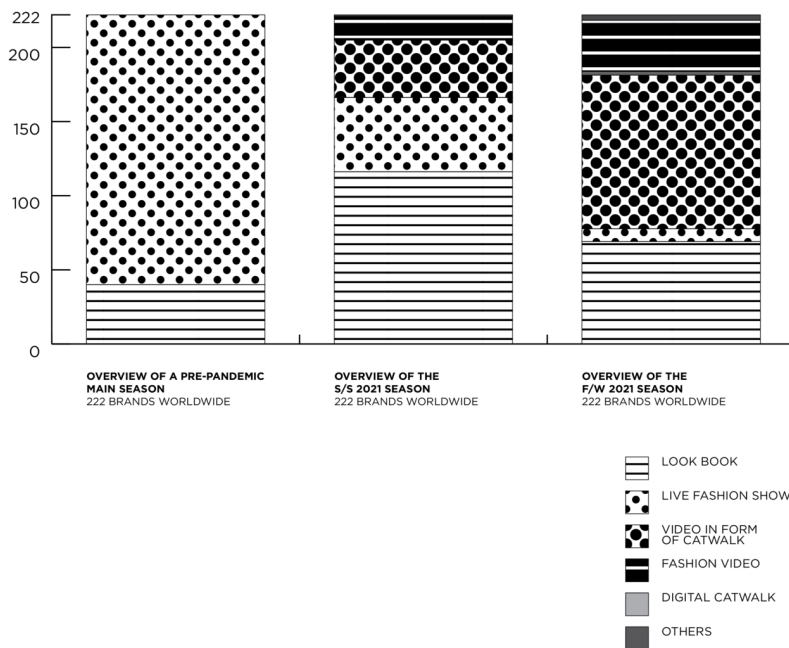


Figure 2: Visual overview of the mapping carried out on a total of 690 presentations (in the period from July 2020 to February 2021) which shows how the panorama of collection presentation methods has expanded and how the fashion show form, whether live or as a video in the form of a fashion show, is still a valid and widely used tool.

Visualisation by the authors

## The Catwalks Will Never Die[?]

In a sense, rethink, resist and adapt were the keywords that defined the reorganization and, in a sense, the questioning of the catwalk and collection presentation system. At the same time, the pandemic necessarily stimulated debate on the value and relevance of the catwalk system. Many actions firmly intended to express signs of resistance and resilience to the contingent situation.

An immediate response came through digital channels with statements and declarations of intent from most of the fashion industry players. They began to question the system as a whole. The Open Letter to the Fashion Industry petition launched online via [forumletter.org](https://forumletter.org) by Dries Van Noten, as well as Alessandro Michele's *Note dal Silenzio* [Notes from the Silence], typewritten posts that appeared on Gucci's Instagram channel during the tightest lockdown, represent actions that draw attention to the need to rethink the entire system from the point of view of product quality and quantity: "current environment although challenging, presents an opportunity for a fundamental and welcome change that will simplify our businesses, making them more environmentally and socially sustainable and ultimately align them more closely with customers' needs."<sup>44</sup> Statements that go in the direction of reconsidering the system and the structure of the collections, not just from the point of view of the method, but somewhat of the quantity of the products, collections and seasons themselves, hoping for new methods of production and communication processes no longer linked to the market, but creativity.



Figure 3: Models walk the runway at the Dior Cruise 2021 fashion show on July 22, 2020 in Lecce. It was one of the first live events to take place after the start of the pandemic and was strongly supported by Maria Grazia Chiuri and Pietro Beccari (at the helm of Dior) as a demonstration of the resistance and resilience of the fashion system, both in terms of production and communication. © Stefania D'Alessandro/WireImage

In contrast, many brands interpret the need to be physically present as a positive sign of resistance, resilience and support for the manufacturing world: this is the direction taken by Maria Grazia Chiuri and Pietro Beccari (at the helm of Dior), who have not given up on the fashion show as a topical moment in the system: "For us, fashion is also emotion, and nothing is more emotional than a fashion show.

44. For further investigation → see <https://forumletter.org/>. Accessed March 30, 2021.



Figure 4: A model walks the runway at the Marco Rambaldi fashion show during the Milan Women's Fashion Week on September 25, 2020 in Milan. In order to allow for the live presence of the public, it has become normal practice to set up fashion shows in urban spaces that allow not only greater distance but also greater sharing of the event between insiders and outsiders. © Pietro D'Aprano/Getty Images

The second reason why we have decided to resume the project [the live fashion show in Lecce in July 2020] is that we want to give a sign of hope to the whole world and indicate a reason for rebirth.<sup>45</sup> Such signals are conveyed by the Cruise 2021 collection fashion show, which takes place open-air (in the cathedral square in Lecce) and with guests in attendance (Fig. 03). Open spaces, be they urban or rural, are increasingly becoming ideal locations to guarantee the proper distance without renouncing the event's emotion. Thus the number of open-air fashion shows designed to be open to an audience in presence, like live performance events to be communicated through digital means, increases.

The Seine thus becomes a long water catwalk on which Balmain, during Paris Haute Couture Week Fall/Winter 2021, organizes an event/show/exhibition/concert called *Balmain's Sur Seine*: a cruise on the Seine, on a boat that hosted the French singer Yseult, a dance performance, and the fashion show/exhibition with models wearing pieces from the Balmain archive (from Pierre Balmain to Erik Mortensen, Oscar de la Renta and, of course, Olivier Rousteing). An event open to the city in primis but has renewed the spotlight of digital users on Paris Fashion Week. Dior and Balmain were echoed by Chloé, who showed on the Palais de Tokyo stairs for the Spring/Summer 2021 collection, and for the Fall/Winter 2021, under the new creative direction of Gabriela Hearst, showed her creations in the empty streets of Saint-Germain-des-Prés; or Rick Owens, who for the Spring/Summer 2021 and Fall/Winter 2021 collections opted for the Venice Lido to show off his creations with an increasingly apocalyptic aesthetic; or like two insta-brands<sup>46</sup>: the French designer Jacquemus, whose Spring/Summer 2021 collection was presented on a 600-metre-long catwalk in a wheat field, where the seats for the guests (100 in total) were placed at a distance and isolated from each other, and the Italian designer Marco Rambaldi, whose Spring/Summer 2021 collection was presented in the streets of Milan's Porta Venezia district (Fig. 04).

With the pandemic, new ways have been designed to allow the public to participate in the events, which although "extended", thanks to the inclusiveness of social media, are still subdivided between the exclusivity of the invitation in person and the world of followers: the ritual of the paper invitation, personal and direct, has not lost importance, indeed in an era of forced digitalization, it has assumed even more importance, but also the presence (in any form) of the official guests becomes fundamental: the front rows thus take on a new and increasingly important meaning. The presence (even digital) is even more exhibited, so at Miu Miu during the Spring/Summer 2021 fashion show, the few and selected guests have become an integral part of the set design; the space designed by OMA includes maxi screens in the walls through which the guests observe, as if they were in the front row, the collection and at the same time are seen by the public connected online as well as becoming an integral part of the set design.

Monitors represent a new form of presence, becoming in the Balmain Spring/Summer 2021 fashion show the counterpart to the real audience: the set of the fashion show was designed as an arena divided into two wings, one with the audience in attendance, counterbalanced by rows of monitors for the remote guests (Fig. 05). In the Louis Vuitton Spring/Summer 2021 fashion show set up inside the Samaritaine department store in Paris, real and digital guests alternated: seats for guests in attendance and columns holding smartphones for guests connected from home. Connected guests and followers on social media also had a different experience from the on-site guests. Space, in fact, was covered with green screens that made the physical space a metaphysical green environment and instead made the space in the digital a multimedia experience with the models and viewers immersed in the cinematic world of scenes from Wim Wenders' film *Wings of Desire*. But digital is not the only solution to this distancing. For the Fall/Winter 2021 collection, Coperni created a drive-in where guests in cars watch the show and at the same time create the setting for the event: the models walk down the runway in an unreal space, designed by the rhythm of the parked cars, which illuminate the models' movements and the show with their headlights (Fig. 06). Thus, the catwalks regain their centrality, thanks to digital communication, reaffirming their effectiveness and expanding their form. The catwalks are implemented with deferred

45. Michele Ciavarella, "Dior: La moda riparte dalla Cruise a Lecce," *Corriere della Sera — Style Magazine*, June 22, 2020, <https://style.corriere.it/moda/dior-la-moda-riparte-dalla-cruise-lecce/>. Accessed March 30, 2021.

46. Alexander Fury, "Jacquemus — fashion's favourite Insta-brand," *Financial Times*, July 19, 2019, <https://www.ft.com/content/8f62f38a-a7ac-11e9-90e9-fc4b9d9528b4>. Accessed March 30, 2021.



experiences from the live experience but keep all the formal and performance archetypes of the catwalk concept alive. In each form the shows preserve their essence of being ‘those moments when there is a sense that nothing after ... will ever be the same’.<sup>47</sup>

## Fashion Shows Are Dead, Long Live Fashion Shows [?]

*Faux show, virtual show, défilé or runway experience* are some of the neologisms that have been created over the last year, new words defining new hybrid forms of fashion shows. Where the restrictions of the pandemic have allowed it, the form of the live show has been maintained, with or without guests present, while where restrictions have not allowed it — or where brands, for security reasons, have not considered it effective — new forms of presentation have been opted for, which we could define as a crasis between fashion show and fashion film, or even a *runway experience*.

Traditional and innovative presentation types are included in the various fashion weeks’ official calendars but actually, take place elsewhere and at different times. Thus Valentino remains officially in the Paris Haute Couture Spring/Summer 2021 week, but shows in the Sala Grande of the Galleria Colonna in Rome, or such as Miu Miu, which, also officially in the Paris Fashion Week calendar, shows in Cortina with a fashion show en Plein air, creating a product halfway between a traditional fashion show and a short film.

Hybrid fashion shows that — while maintaining the traditional form of the more or less linear catwalk on which models walk — borrow the typical languages of cinema and video clips, in which the spectacular nature of the location and filming is combined with a variety of points of view, which tell the story of the garments both as a whole and in detail, emphasizing the models’ faces as well as their expressions. The fashion shows start in the backstage area. In a subjective shot, a cameraman follows the model as she enters the “arena”: the fashion show becomes a mash-up of “institutional” moments and performance moments. This action is only possible with film editing. This “new mobility,”<sup>48</sup> which fashion communication borrows from the language of cinema, fulfils the public’s desire to bring objects — and events — “closer spatially and humanly.”<sup>49</sup>

Thus, the Balmain Fall/Winter 2021 fashion show is staged in Charles de Gaulle airport’s hangar.<sup>50</sup> The show takes place “at the same time” in four different locations, some real, like the wings of the Air France 777, the landing pad, the interior of the hangar, others digital, like the moon in the opening scene where Olivier Rousteing (artistic director of the fashion house) controls everything, or the luminous catwalk suspended in space, the final part of the journey of “BAL 021”. A video fashion show that, while following a script, with syncopated editing and direction by Valentin Petit, does not lose the catwalk concept, which adapts and changes according to the different parts of the collection. The video-shows introduce a further new element: the credits. In streaming fashion shows, the names of the directors, editors, DJs, digital artists and stylists were rarely declared at the end of the performance. In this new hybrid form, the narrative and presentation methods typical of cinematography are added, not only as a shooting or editing language, but also as a formal element, so in addition to the anticipation for the new collection, for the fashion show location and the performance, there is also the expectation for the new narrative and storytelling that will be presented.

In Chanel’s Fall/Winter 2021 show, the change of photography, between black and white and colour, underlines the two narrative and location themes, from the dichromatic and metaphysical exterior of the

47. John Seabrook, “A Samurai in Paris: Suzy Menkes,” *The New Yorker*, March 17, 2001. Available on line: <http://www.johnseabrook.com/a-samurai-in-paris/>. Accessed January 17, 2021.

48. Lev Manovich, *Il linguaggio dei nuovi media* (Milano: Edizioni Olivares, 2002), 219.

49. Walter Benjamin, *L’opera d’arte nell’epoca della sua riproducibilità tecnica. Arte e società di massa* (Torino: Einaudi, 1991 [1966])

50. This type of location in itself is not new — it has already been used by various fashion brands such as Chanel, which in 2015 recreates the lobby of an airport in the Grand Palais, or Armani, which in 2018 showed in a hangar at Milan’s Linate airport — but here it is used, in a way, to its full potential.



Figure 5: The Balmain fashion show during Paris Women's Fashion Week Spring/Summer 2021 on September 30, 2020 in Paris, France. The guests were present in a hybrid form, some in person, others connected online, but attending the fashion show thanks to the digital seating set up scenographically as rows of monitors. The meaning of the front row is thus preserved even in times of social distancing. © Estrop/Getty Images



Figure 6: Models walk the runway during the Coperni show as part of the Paris Fashion Week Womenswear Fall/Winter 2021/2022 on March 04, 2021 in Paris, France. In a time of social distancing and to allow the live presence of guests, the set of the fashion show takes its form thanks to a drive-in in which the cars that host (safely) the guests become at the same time a safe place and an intrinsic element of the scenography. © Francois Durand/Getty Images

rue Princesse to the colourful intimacy of the Chez Castel nightclub in whose typically Parisian interior the models walk as if they were inside Maison's atelier on the rue Chambon.

The locations across the world, which in the pre-Covid period were used mainly for the presentation of pre-collections,<sup>51</sup> now take on a new meaning thanks also to the spectacular nature of the filming, which allows the use of ever more extensive and more scenic spaces, without the problem of visibility of the models by the public, which is absent. Celine (without the accent as per the wishes of Hedi Slimane at the helm of the brand since 2018) shows the Fall/Winter 2021 men's collection on the balustraded terraces of Chambord Castle, the Spring/Summer 2020 collection on the athletics track of the Louis II Stadium in Monaco and the Spring/Summer 2020 men's collection on the race track of the Paul Ricard circuit in the south of France. The absence of an audience becomes a creative stimulus for Demna Gvasalia, at the helm of Balenciaga since 2015, who borrows from gaming the language of the aesthetics of his collections and the methods and setting of the presentations. The Georgian-born designer takes his collections onto digital platforms, creating a real game called *Afterworld: The Age of Tomorrow* for Fall/Winter 2021, and then showing real models in a world of digital avatars, the only spectators who, in a period of social distancing, can "really" take part in a physical event: the fashion show thus truly takes on a phygital form. Digital has rarely been used to its full potential to create environments, characters, audiences and products. In particular, emerging brands have used 100% digital communication approaches to present their collections. Many of these brands have defined these strategies as totally digital presentations, partly due to economic necessity (optimising sample production costs) and partly because of their proximity to a language and approach to communication and its digital virality, familiar to generations from Z onwards. And so, for example, Hanifa, a fashion designer based in Congo, debuted on 22 May 2020 with a completely virtual fashion show presented via her Instagram channel. Digital is the protagonist here. The models were not there. Instead, the clothes moved in a neutral space, following the movements of the human body, which could only be perceived thanks to the garments whose fabrics drew the models' silhouettes.

If, on the one hand, Hanifa defines the digital fashion show as an exclusive communication tool to be conveyed through social media, on the other hand, Simone Rizzo and Loris Messina, who founded their brand Sunnei in 2014, during the Italian lockdown, combined collection design, distribution strategies, sustainable production methods and digital communication into a single action and interface. The 'Canvas' project, presented in July 2020, was conceived as an online platform, which using 3D modelling tools and personalization technologies, creates a multifunctional virtual environment for designing, presenting, promoting, personalizing and communicating the collection: a tool within which digital avatars wear the pieces of the collection in a sort of immaterial sample collection/showroom, within which retailers could digitally modify the shape, fit and materials of a series of pieces from the collection itself. A platform that mixed the real and virtual levels of the creative and production phases was also used as a promotional tool. During the men's fashion week in July 2020, the tool's avatars staged a fashion show choreographed to the rhythm of the *Macarena*, a performance expressed in short videos broadcast both on the brand's official channels and on giant billboards in the streets of Milan.

In this 100% digital environment, only a few have yet moved, including brands such as GCDS, Iceberg and Philipp Plein, which for the presentation of the Spring/Summer 2020 collection, the first, and the Fall/Winter 2021 the other two, created virtual events in which digital and non-digital avatars moved within worlds created in 3D graphics. While these digital actions have implemented public awareness of new or emerging brands, these actions should be read as a form of communication and not as displaying a collection. As Giuliano Calza himself (born in 1989, who together with his brother Giordano founded GCDS in 2015) underlined: however, the avatar show received more than one and a half million views (which for an emerging brand are significant numbers), "when you are on the runway, and you are sitting down you see exactly how a dress moves, that zip how much it shines, that is the real emotion

51. For further investigation → see Valeria Iannilli and Vittorio Linfante, "Nuovi percorsi della moda tra globale e locale. Dai grandi centri alla disseminazione culturale del fashion system," *ZoneModa Journal*, Vol. 9 n. 2 (December 2019): 141-65, <https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.2611-0563/9966>.

of the catwalk.”<sup>52</sup> Paradoxically, in totally digital visualisations, the clothes disappear, in a certain sense absorbed by the sense of wonder generated by the accuracy and realistic details produced by the software.

In this perspective, it is interesting to point out how the use of digital communication channels has, on the other hand, stimulated the revival of modes and types of presentations that are outdated but which have nevertheless emerged as extremely contemporary, as well as being appreciated by digital users: tools such as Pandora or Théâtre de la Mode thus define the narrations for Dior and Moschino. For the Spring/Summer 2020 Haute Couture collection, Maria Grazia Chiuri commissioned Matteo Garrone to make a short film in which two concierges move through an honorific world, with Pre-Raphaelite references, presenting scale models of the collection to nymph-clients carried in a trunk that recalled the historic atelier at 30 Avenue Montaigne. For Moschino’s Spring/Summer 2021 collection, Jeremy Scott staged a real theatre, a video presented directly by the American-born designer according to the Milan Fashion Week calendar, a fashion show featuring guests (including Anna Wintour and Anna Dello Russo) and models in puppet form. A Moschino-style Théâtre de la Mode with the traditional setting of the ateliers of the 1950s: a retro setting, which also returns in the presentation of Moschino’s Fall/Winter 2021 collection. In this case, however, the models and the location are real and are reminiscent (in the colours, the photography, the looks) of the world of Cukor and his *Women* who moved among the haute couture ateliers (Fig. 07). If Dior and Moschino reinterpret traditional modes of presentation, J.W. Anderson takes up the paper’s physicality.

The Digital for the Irish designer becomes a natural communication channel, in which the online channel must not monopolize or somewhat affect the language of the content. And so the collections designed and presented during the pandemic became more physical than the clothes themselves. They became boxes — real show-in-a-boxes — containing a multiform quantity of objects: fabric samples, the paper pattern (which can also be downloaded, if necessary, online) of one of the main pieces to be able to recreate the garment at home, as well as images of the collection’s looks. A box that also becomes the location for a fashion show with a set to assemble and a cardboard record player to play the event’s soundtrack (Fig. 08). If on the one hand, to paraphrase The Buggles, it was thought that *Digital Killed the Catwalk Star*, in this case, as in music, the exact opposite has come true; on the contrary, Digital has helped to strengthen and indeed made it possible to expand the forms and contents of fashion communication. It is precisely in the contents that fashion defines a new approach in the digital communication fields. It defines strategies that do not end with the fashion show but instead create an authentic and proper schedule with precise programming. Thus Virgil Abloh created an Imaginary TV (<https://imaginary-tv.off---white.com/>), a platform that offers an actual content schedule, which also includes Off-White’s collections (Fig. 09). Imaginary TV represents a digital channel to produce and promote content capable of better defining and narrating the brand’s identity. “With the growing economic impact of social media, fashion brands have morphed from design houses into more hybrid studios that produce both material products and digital content,”<sup>53</sup> not only incorporating the production of videos into their communication strategies but also defining themselves as real 360° content houses: from podcasts to gaming, from tutorials to conferences to amplify brand identity in different forms. And so, the narrative of the brand’s identity for Miuccia Prada and Raf Simons (co-directors of Prada from 2020) is conveyed through debates, interviews and exchanges of ideas that are broadcast immediately after the fashion show, in the form of talk shows (in digital-television format), during which the two creatives share their points of view with students, journalists and professionals from various sectors. Until recently, the punctuality of time and space of fashion shows defined a unique feature of the event. In contemporary times, the concept is extended into a before, during and after, which, thanks to Digital, no longer require a spatial unity. Thanks to digital, local and global events are defined, not only because they are spread globally through communication channels but also because they take place in continuity with each other but in different time zones. According to this approach, Hermès has created a live presentation for the Fall/Winter 2021 collection in three acts and three different locations:

52. Anna Dello Russo’s interview with Giuliano Calza during a live broadcast on the Italian fashion editor’s Instagram channel on May 20, 2021. <https://www.instagram.com/tv/CPGEycyI1GI/>. Accessed June 4, 2021.

53. Nick Rees-Roberts, “After fashion film: social video and brand content in the influencer economy,” *Journal of Visual Culture*, Vol 19.3: 407, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1470412920964>.

New York (Park Avenue Armory), Paris (Garde Républicaine) and Shanghai (Maison Hermès). A live triptych composed of two ballets and a fashion show, which begins at 8.31 am in New York (2.31 pm in Paris and 9.31 pm in Shanghai) with a prologue choreographed by Madeline Hollander. After seven minutes of performance, the direction moves to Paris, where the actual fashion show comes to life. It continues after eight minutes in Shanghai, concluding the event with a choreography by Gu Jiani.



Figure 7: A model poses in the backstage at the Moschino Fashion Show during the Milan Fashion Week Fall/Winter 2021/2022 on February 25, 2021 in Milan, Italy. The show took the form of a fashion film that, recalling Cukor's *Women*, re-enacted the glamour of the haute couture ateliers of the 1950s. © Handout//Moschino/Getty Images



Figure 8: The first Show-in-a-Box designed by J.W. Anderson for Loewe. A box containing a multiform quantity of objects: fabric samples, the paper pattern (which can also be downloaded, if necessary, online) of one of the main pieces to be able to recreate the garment at home, as well as images of the collection's looks. A box that also becomes the location for a fashion show with a set to assemble and a cardboard record player to play the event's soundtrack. © Loewe



Figure 9: The Imaginary TV. The platform created by Virgil Abloh that offers different editorial contents and also includes Off-White's collections. A digital channel to produce and promote contents capable of better defining and narrating the brand's identity. © Off-White



## Conclusions

The analysis carried out reveals the wide range of presentation methods implemented to show and promote the new collection. In this context, fashion shows become also a design field for defining innovative communication tools and strategies. The communication of live fashion shows, already reverberated and amplified through social media, also expands in languages and presentation methods. Fashion shows thus become more and more a platform for experimenting with new, extraordinarily digital and technological languages and recovering “old style” presentation methods and representations such as the Pandora, or the little theatre and the showroom defiléé. The digital acceleration, forced by the pandemic, has thus codified the paradigm of the “communicational continuum,”<sup>54</sup> thus defining new approaches in building transmedia narratives “to talk about the brand beyond the runway presentation and advertising campaigns.”<sup>55</sup> Fashion, which in a certain sense, had already understood the potential of what Toffler<sup>56</sup> called ‘the third wave’ of technology — the era of information, space, electronics and the global village — and in the contemporary is riding, with increasing open-mindedness, the fourth wave of technology, that of information, communication, mobile, virtual communities<sup>57</sup> and thus becomes a driving force. A communicatively digital fashion that, however, does not renounce the physicality of bodies in motion, the spectacle of the event through the use of real spaces, often inaccessible, the presence (albeit at a distance) of the public, the need for reality (albeit conveyed through digital devices) that represents the essence of fashion.

Digital, forced by Covid-19, has increasingly allowed the possibility of implementing new multilayered forms of presentation of the collections, which, while not renouncing the physical form, create fashion shows in different forms, modes, times and places. In a context, such as the present one, in which the digital contributes to saturate, and in some cases to flatten, communication, the different forms that the fashion show has taken in the last year of pandemic define a more and more interesting field to investigate, especially given new normality (hopefully more and more imminent) during which it will be possible to understand how much the current digital acceleration is lasting or short-term.

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54. Valérie Jeanne-Perrier, *Internet a Aussi Change la Mode — Quand Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat, Pinterest, YouTube, Vine, Periscope, Tumbler & Cie S'affichent Sur le Devant Des Podiums* (Annecy Le Vieux: Editions Kawa, 2016), 26.
  55. Silvano Mendes, “The Instagrammability of the Runway: Architecture, Scenography, and the Spatial Turn in Fashion Communications,” *Fashion Theory* Vol. 25, 2021 – Issue 3: 14, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1362704X.2019.1629758>.
  56. Alvin Toffler, *Future Shock* (New York: Random House, 1970)
  57. Adam Gazzaley, and Larry D. Rosen, *The Distracted Mind: Ancient Brains in a High-Tech World* (Cambridge and London: The MIT press, 2016)

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