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# Art, life, and the fashion museum: for a more solidaritarian exhibition practice



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## Abstract

This article departs from the century-long understanding that fashion connects ‘life and art’, an understanding once advocated by Hans Siemsen in his avantgarde journal *Zeit-Echo*, to discuss how the museum constitutes an important space, or arena, where this connection is taking place. The museum as we know it is a space dedicated to displaying objects of art—and to some degree, of everyday life objects—and as such it constitutes a space for the linkage between the aesthetic and the profane, between art and life. However, as will be argued, as a space that has increasingly become dedicated to fashion—as a cultural, social and not least economic phenomenon—the museum does not embrace its full potential in displaying and problematizing fashion’s close and real relation to actual life, and especially, the very lives that produce it. The museum and its curatorial practices, it will be argued, ought to strive less to offer its audiences spectacular displays of extravagant designer fashion—and instead dare to deal with the urgent quest for and necessity of a reformed fashion industry in which textile and garment workers can actually lead safe and *liveable* lives.

**Keywords:** Fashion exhibitions, Museum practices, Democratization, Consumptionism, Mediatization, Commercialization, Environmental and human solidarity

## Introduction

Since the turn of the last Century, fashion has entered the museum space in if not unanticipated, then clearly astounding, ways. The museum, a kind of memory institution that has as its main purpose to acquire, store and display historical and/or art objects, has become an essential, cardinal fashion space, attracting thousands of visitors. This article traces the more recent development of fashion’s access to the museum, either as a kind popular and spectacular affair, *or* as an engagement with and exploration of handicraft and fashion as cultural artefact, discussing how fashion, art and life for long have been intimately related. While a few exhibitions will be brought forward as examples of what many contemporary fashion exhibitions entail, some of which will be described a bit more in detail, overarching and crucial aspects connected to fashion will also be touched upon. These aspects include fashion as part of a wider democratization; as part of an increasingly widespread consumptionism (Strauss 1924); as a kind of pluralistic and multifaceted mediatization; and as pure commerce. Recurring throughout the article,

however, is an emphasis on fashion's intimate relation to life—both in terms of relying on fashion in order to understand past lives, understanding fashion and dress as an important part of various cultural histories, and in terms of how damaging and injurious fashion production has been and still is to many lives.

Concluding the article, this emphasis on fashion's relation to *life*, and on the necessity to make all lives *livable*, is stressed even further. We are indeed at a critical point in time colored by a widespread environmental destruction, and fashion industry is one of the most polluting industries worldwide, constituting one of our most urgent environmental threats. In addition, it is an industry that openly exploits its many under-paid workers—many of whom are left injured, severely ill, or even dead. The gap between fashion as spectacular extravagancy, which has come to dominate how fashion is being displayed in the museum, and the horrendous, life-threatening realities of fashion's many exploited workers is prohibitive, preposterous, and this gap needs to be dismantled.

Together with other institutions and movements, the museum, and its many museological practices, can play a crucial part in initiating and taking sturdy grip on the serious urgency that we are facing. Displaying fashion in the museum, in the twenty-first century, I will argue, must engage with the actual situation and must have as its aim to involve, engage and educate us, the spectators, so that we as consumers, and as emphatic and solidaristic individuals, can contribute to changing the status quo. The fashion industry is not going to change the current situation, despite its many recent exclamations and manifestations of going green. Nor are governments going to change the state of affairs. It is up to the consumers, and here, the museum constitute one important arena in which knowledge, information and not least inspiration can be produced, negotiated and transmitted.

### **Art, life, and fashion**

In 1915, German journalist, editor and publicist Hans Siemsen stated in his avant-garde and modernist journal *Zeit-Echo* that: “[...] it seems today like fashion is the one arena within the arts that most intimately connects life itself with art” (Siemsen 1915). More than a 100 years later, his statement is still valid and highly relevant: over the past few years, we have seen how art and fashion have been collaborating and inspiring each other in various forms, as well as in various arenas. Hence, Siemsen's century old statement may be understood as even *more* valid today. Fashion is being aligned with the music industry, with film, not only with the film industry but also, through the genre of high budget “fashion films”, with various kinds of art scenes, and with memory institutions, like the museum.

In 1995, some 80 years after Siemsen's statement, Aileen Riberio seems to paraphrase him when she writes in her impressive work *The Art of Dress* that “fashion acts as a link between life and art” (Ribeiro 1995, p. 5). It is however interesting to note, that the time span of her study is between 1750 and 1820, that is, more than a century before Siemsen made his observation. Departing from the understanding that fashion connects life and art, this article will look the fashion exhibition, and at its very space, or arena—the space where this connection is taking place, that is, the museum. As a space dedicated to displaying objects of art, and to some degree, of everyday life objects, the museum constitutes an interesting space for the linkage between the

aesthetic and the profane, that is, between art and life. And here, fashion and garments come to play an intriguing role, since they are the epitome of both. In the twenty-first Century, their role has however changed: fashion and dress holds quite another meaning today with the garment and textile industries constituting two of the most polluting and exploitative ones. The production of fashion is one that is highly detrimental to our natural environment, and also, it is a production that is inflicting and destroying people's life and health, leaving many injured and ill from handling lethal and poisonous substances and/or working in unsafe work places. Hence, fashion today is even more connected not to life—or rather, *with* life. In fact, fashion is tightly connected to what conceptions that regard which lives are worth caring for, and not.

Siemsen's observation was made at a point in time when fashion had become more visible and present in everyday life, and also, more available for a larger segment of the population. Fashion was no longer only the privilege of the rich only, which had been the case in the decades preceding the turn of the century. In fact, this turn saw an important shift in fashion and its new accessibility may well be said to coincide with the turn of the Century. In the new Century, fashion goes from the exclusivity of the rich to availability for almost everyone. It now becomes democratized. This "democratization" was largely due to fashion's fast-growing mass-production of ready-to-wear goods within the garment industry, in combination with its increasing diffusion and visual display. Fashion takes on both an immaterial and a material identity: it is being promoted as ideal image in fashion magazines and in the new popular medium that film will constitute, and its production rate will increase due to the invention of new technology such as manageable sewing machines and cheap labor. And so, fashion is being promoted visually in various forms of advertisement—that is, it becomes highly mediatized—and shortly after, made available in shops and via post order catalogues, and always easy to get hold of and affordable for many.

Already in the mid nineteenth century had certain cities around the Western world become known for their large production of ready-to-wear goods, and these cities come to foster entire garment districts where garments are produced by one dominating social group: young immigrant women and children. Cities such as Paris in France; Manchester in the UK, known as "Cottonopolis" due to its dominance on the cotton market; Chicago, Philadelphia and New York in the US; Berlin in Germany; and Norrköping in Sweden, to mention a few, become the hubs for fast textile and garment production. And the workers are exploited working 12–14 h a day for little money, and under very unhealthy and risky conditions. William Leach, in his *Land of Desire* from 1993, writes "The evolution of the fashion world rested, in fact, on the most exploitive, the most backbreaking, and the most sweated industry in all of American business" (Leach 1993, p. 94). Here, America could be exchanged with many other nations: every fashion evolution rested on these parameters, and the exploited were very much the same: poor, working class women and children, forced into living a life that was *unlivable*. In 1845, in his *The Working Conditions of the Working Class in England*, Friedrich Engels writes:

*The girls have to bend continually over their work and their food is both poor*

*and difficult to digest. All this, and in particular the long hours of work and the lack of fresh air have the tragic result as far as health of these girls is concerned... There they sit bent over their work and sew from four or five in the morning until midnight. Their health is ruined in a few years and they sink into an early grave, without having been able to earn the barest necessities of life (Engels 1845/1958, pp. 237–8, p. 239).*

It is clear that the democratization of fashion is closely connected to the exploitation of workers: the cheap fashions produced contribute to a more democratic relation to fashion and to commercial goods. Democratization for all, in this case, is dependent on the exploitation of some. And this democratization is of course also aligned to the consumptionism that had evolved since the mid nineteenth century, and which must be understood both as a facilitator and a consequence of capitalism.

In 1924, some 10 years after Siemsen's statement, North American journalist and political philosopher Samuel Strauss argued that this consumptionism would come to define twentieth century American society (Strauss 1924). It is, he argued, is a *philosophy of life* that commit human beings to the production and consumption of more things—"more this year than last year, more next year than this year"—and that stress the "standard of living" above all other values (Strauss 1924, as cited in Leach 1993, p. 267). Consumptionism, Strauss stated, also includes the compulsion to buy what is not wanted, nor needed, a compulsion that he reckoned is forced upon consumers by business manipulation of public and private life:

*Formerly the task was to supply the things men wanted, the new necessity is to make men want things ... the problem before us today is not how to produce the goods, but how to produce consumers. Consumptionism is the science of compelling men to use more and more things (Strauss 1924, as cited in Leach 1993, p. 268).*

It is easy to see why fashion will come to constitute one of the corner stones in this philosophy of life: fashion not only inspires, but also compels, people to buy, to dispose of, and to buy again. Here, the tangibility and the non-tangibility of fashion works together in perfect tandem. Fashion media disperse fashion as desirable image—as *allure*—while the outcome of fashion's ritualistic seasons, which only increase in number, most of which are available both in stores and on the internet—one click away. Together, the fashion image and the actual fashion object induce people to desire what is in fact artificially created shifts in fashion.

Fashion—or rather, the fashion *industry*—demands and offers constant change, and hence, what is fashionable today, is out of fashion tomorrow. It is therefore not surprising that Fashion has come to constitute the very "metaphor for constant change", to speak with Nancy Green (Green 1997, p. 19). Already in 1894, Norwegian-American economist and sociologist Thorstein Veblen would comment on the artificially created shifts, noting that "nothing can be worn which is out of date. A new wasteful trinket or garment must constantly supersede the old one" (Veblen 1894, as cited in Leach 1993, p. 92). Neomania, then, has been the very pillar of fashion.

And neomania has been fed by the rapidness and excess of production and the cheap prices that have come to characterize fashion and garment production. Fashion stopped to be about enduring artistry and handicraft of goods around the 1900s: it now turned

into speedy production of available, exchangeable goods that came in excess and that cost very little. And in the late 2010s, this development seems to have reached its roof: certain fast fashion chains fill their shops and internet outlets with numerous collections per month or even week, and the overproduction of fast fashion leads to monstrous mountains of clothing waste. This waste consists of discarded clothes, but it may also consist of clothes that have never even been used (BBC News 2018). The over production may also lead to fashion companies burning their unsold stock, and hence, contributing over and over to the destruction of the environment (Huffpost 2018). For the consumer, this fast production rate encourages a consumption pattern that is reckless and hasty—and that costs very little. Very little for the consumer, that is: for the underpaid and exploited textile worker producing the garments, the cost is, as we all know, very high. And as today's garment and textile workers are still working under backbreaking conditions, the price for fashion items and garments is only decreasing—which compels consumers to indulge in an unsustainable over-consumptionism.<sup>1</sup> In 1900, the average US household spent 15% of its income on clothing. In 2010, they spent 2.8%. In 1997, British women on average bought 19 pieces of clothing per year. In 2007, they bought 34 (The Guardian 2014). The economic equation is a simple one: as clothes get cheaper, we consume more, and we throw away more. We have moved from a wear-and-tear culture to a wear-and-waste culture.

No matter the impossibly cheap prices—how can a t-shirt made of cotton cost as little as 5 US dollars?—there is big money in fashion, in low cost and fast fashion as well as in high end, slow fashion. Big money for the fashion companies and their stake holders, most of which are situated in the West, and yet, little money for the workers who actually produce it, and who to a large extent are situated in so called developing countries in South Asia and Africa. Here, Sweden constitutes an interesting example: in this country with a small population of some 9 million people, the fashion industry is one of its most important industries. Since the birth of what has been referred to as the Swedish “fashion wonder” (Falk 2011), this industry has come to steadily increase its economic gain year by year—not least through the global expansion of the fast fashion company H&M. Since 2011, Sweden has doubled its fashion export, and in 2017, the industry had a turnover of 326 million Swedish crowns which is approximately 28 million US dollars (Dagens Industri 2018). And while the ownership together with the design and marketing reside in Sweden, the actual production is located elsewhere, in countries where production costs are still low—and still, highly exploitative and backbreaking. This outsourcing of production is telling for many of the new “fashion nations” to which Sweden belongs, many of which used to have their own textile and garment industries in the late eighteenth, nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

We can contend from this short contextualization that fashion plays a crucial and complicated economic role in our contemporary society—and that its role, which is tainted with enormous environmental and work-related problems and challenges, seems only to be increasing. Its increasing importance has come about through the successively

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<sup>1</sup> According to a recent survey of 2000 women, participants owned “66 items of clothing” on average, including “at least 10 items of clothing that will never be worn again”; “most clothes are worn just seven times”, and about one-third of participants “went off clothes after wearing them a couple of times”. See Morgan (2015).

expanding presence that fashion takes up in our culture and society which is formed by economic factors, but also, by the increasingly cultural, artistic and possibly also political role that fashion plays today. Although some strains of fashion may strive to be art, and although some pieces of fashion may in fact *be* art, fashion as a phenomenon is always tied to commerce—and to industrialization. It is also tied to the spectacular, and to display. And in recent decades, the display of fashion within the museological context has turned out to be a successful magnet to attract large crowds of visitors. In what follows next, I will tune in on the relation between fashion and other art forms, and then move on to fashion and the museum to discuss fashion's place within the museum context. The museum, as a memory institution and a cultural sanctionary created for the display of historical objects and art, has been “transformed” by the admittance of fashion. This transformation has much been indebted to the very commercialization—and the *zeitgeist*—that fashion unavoidably brings with it (Vinken 2004).

### **Fashion, life, art, and the museum**

Fashion as an arena for the connection between art and life, as was pinpointed by Siemsen, becomes most evident when the actual arts are taken into account: not only is fashion central in literature and in painting, it also holds a crucial role in theatre, opera and film. In these three artistic mediums or art forms, fashion, most often in the form of costumes, has flourished within the overall narration and *mise-en-scène*. Fashion and costume—as two different, yet intimately interdependent and influential forms of dress—depend on each other in their artistic and commercial expressions, constantly glancing at each other to get inspiration. The stage has been dependent on fashion—whether contemporary or historic fashion—in order to create a convincing time-specific scenario and hence, to make believe, and the fashion industry has often been inspired by costumes. From the beginning of the twentieth century, it has in particular been cinema costume that has served as a source of inspiration for fashion. In fact, this cross-fertilizing of stage/screen and fashion become evident when one considers how many fashion designers who have crossed over to the stage and to film and vice versa. As examples, one could mention French fashion designers Coco Chanel, Christian Dior, and Christian Lacroix—all of whom resided in Paris, the cradle of haute couture—and all of whom also made costumes for the cinema and other scenic arts. Before them, English fashion designer Lucy Christina Duff Gordon, known under the name of Lucile, had already in the early twentieth century combined her skills as a costume designer for the theatre and as a fashion designer. Three notable film costume designers who crossed over to fashion were Americans Howard Green, Adrian and the legendary Edith Head. I would also like to bring up the German–Swedish fashion drawer Max Goldstein, known as Mago, who would go from fashion to costume in the early 1950s when he was discovered and made into one of the most productive and prolific stage and screen designers in Sweden and abroad—for decades to come. An Italian example would be Valentino Garavani, who designed costumes for *La Traviata*, directed by film director Sofia Coppola at Teatro dell'Opera in Rome in May 2016, and a French example is designer Jean Paul Gaultier who continuously has been creating costumes not only for cinema but also for theatre and ballet.

And while costume has entered the museum space to a certain extent, it is fashion that has occupied the museum space in the past couple of decades. As this trend has increased, some new fashion museums have been erected, while already existent museums have partly turned into fashion museums. It is especially designers who have influenced the twentieth century that have been at focus, and the work of famous designers such as Coco Chanel, Christian Dior, Cristobal Balenciaga, Valentino Garavani and Jean-Paul Gaultier, among many, have recently had their oeuvre exhibited in the museum context, and some of these exhibitions have been ambulating. Some fashion exhibitions have been solely dedicated to the “maestro” and his or her work—as in “Valentino: Master of Couture” at Somerset House in London in 2012–2013; in “Esprit Dior” held in Seoul in 2015; in “Christian Dior—Designer of Dreams” at the Albert and Victoria Museum in London 2019; in “Balenciaga, l’oeuvre au noir”, which focused solely on Balenciaga’s black couture and which was held in Paris in 2017; or “The Fashion World of Jean-Paul Gaultier: from Sidewalk to Catwalk” at De Young Galleries in San Francisco in 2012. The latter exhibition travelled the world: it was later shown at Brooklyn Museum in New York in 2013–2014; in Stockholm at the Modern Museum in 2013; and at the Dongdaemun Design Plaza in Seoul in 2016, and in other cities. And before Gaultier was on display in Seoul in 2016, the Dongdaemun Design Plaza stood as host for an exhibition on Coco Chanel—“Culture Chanel: The Sense of Places”—in 2014. These were all extravagant and spectacular exhibitions, positioning haute couture and their creators as *geniuses* of couture. They were constructed and designed so as to make us, the spectators, admire the beauty, the allure and the artistry. And while most extravagant and genius-focused exhibitions are inviting us to look, desire and admire, there is a clear distance inscribed in their structure—there is distance between us and the extravagant garments, garments that we will never be able or allowed to wear. Out of our reach, yet so close to us there in the gallery or in the museum. This is fashion and couture when it is at its most glamorous—and when it is as most “unavailably available”. Yet, these exhibitions communicate and draw us into their universe through a direct dialogue with our senses, a dialogue that is characterized by the spectacular and the visual.

Other exhibitions are dedicated more to a specific era than to a specific designer—like “The Golden Age of Haute Couture” that was held at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London in 2008—or dedicated to a specific wearer and collector, like “La Mode Retrouvée” shown at Palais Galliera in Paris in 2015–2016. This latter exhibition focused on the wardrobe of la Comtesse Greffhule, the woman who inspired not only Marcel Proust as he created his fictive character Duchesse de Guermantes in his *À la recherche du temps perdu*, and who also inspired many of her contemporary fashion designers. Another exhibition that tries to capture an era and the aesthetics of a specific culture through the use of fashion, is the latest exhibition held at the Costume Institute at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York entitled “Camp: Notes on Fashion”. While most would define camp as a rather modern phenomenon stretching from the late nineteenth century to the late twentieth century, with a certain height in the 1950s and 1960s, that is, before the Stonewall riots in 1969, this exhibition starts off in the late seventeenth century. Others again position fashion or a specific fashion designer in relation to other arts, as in “L’Impressionism et la

mode/"Impressionism and Fashion" held in Musée d'Orsay in Paris in 2012 or "Balenciaga y la pintura Española"/"Balenciaga and Spanish painting", on display at Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza in Madrid in 2019.

It would, however, be a mistake to think that the 2 recent decades have seen fashion entering the museum in completely new and unprecedented ways. The affluent number of fashion exhibitions in the museum space is new, but the display of fashion in the museum is not. As has been advocated by Julia Petrov, fashion has for more than a century been an integral part of museum displays, and as a museum-worthy object to protect and preserve for later generations. Garments and fashion may say a lot about previous generations and epochs, in fact, garments and accessories are tactile, embodied objects that perhaps better than other objects can make the spectator experience an affiliation with the past. In her book *Fashion, History, Museums* from 2019, Petrov shows how fashion for long has been an integral part of the museum discourse and its preserving practices and how in fact historical dress—as a way to know and understand the past—has been "displayed in various ways and venues" since the late eighteenth century (Petrov 2019, p. 13). Investigating the long history of displaying dress, and the many ways it has been displayed for an audience, Petrov asks: "While there are certainly more fashion exhibitions worldwide than ever before, can they be said to be innovative?" (Petrov 2019, p. 11).

While one can contend from Petrov's study that little is actually new, it is worth looking into why the number of museums turning to fashion has augmented, and why the number of fashion exhibitions has increased—worldwide. Many are the museums that never before have cared for fashion or exhibited fashion, but who recently have jumped on the band wagon. It has become clear that fashion attracts large audiences: whether it is fashion—new as well as old—or stage and/or film costume, audiences flock to see pieces of clothes and garments up close. Fashion exhibitions in the museum context with a focus on fashion's cultural, socio-economic, artistic and political meanings in both a historical and contemporary perspective attract large groups of audiences—audiences that indeed are mixed in terms of gender, age and social class.

Whereas a few museums have had costume and textile collections as part of their collected materials, often hidden away in their archives, only a few museums have had as their aim to preserve and exhibit fashion. Here, museums like MOMU (Mode Museum) in Antwerp, the Kyoto Costume Institute in Japan, Museo del traje in Madrid, the Palais Galliera in Paris, and the Fashion Museum in Bath could be mentioned as five obvious examples. These are all museums that have as their unique goal to preserve, exhibit and collect textiles and fashion, and they are often connected to the world of academic research—generously admitting researchers into their collections, while also employing researchers on short or long-term contracts as part of their staff.

Renown and large institutional museum like the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, the Costume Institute at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York and the Nordic Museum in Stockholm, to mention a few, have at times curated fashion and textile exhibitions in the past. Recently—during the last 10 years—they too, however, have turned into fashion museums. If curating and producing large fashion exhibitions at least once yearly in their repertoire, they must be considered "fashion museums". This is so because fashion attracts, and in a time when museums have to fight to keep

their visitor numbers in order to survive, fashion has proved to be a safer card. Let me give you some statistics: in 2012, the “Hollywood Costume” exhibition held at Victoria and Albert Museum, curated by renown costume designer Deborah Landis from Hollywood, attracted 251,738 visitors. The exhibition “David Bowie Is”, also at the Victoria and Albert Museum, and held in the following year, attracted 312,000 visitors. I chose to include the David Bowie exhibition because although this was not a pure fashion exhibition, it was a hybrid since costumes and fashion surely played an important role in the overall design of the exhibition. These are high numbers, indicating that fashion and costume do attract large audiences. Yet, they are rather sparse when compared to the exhibition “Alexander McQueen: Savage Beauty”: in 2015 it was on display at the Victoria and Albert Museum, where it attracted no less than 493,043 visitors. Yet, in the year before, when it was on display at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, it had attracted a total of 661,500 visitors, which places the exhibition as one of ten of the most popular exhibitions ever in the 147-year long history of that museum.<sup>2</sup> Even in a small context such as the Swedish one, fashion-related exhibitions are indeed proving to be highly popular among the general public, while also attracting school classes, university students, and researchers.

The increasing number of visitors who come to see fashion exhibitions, in tandem with the constantly growing interest from the media to cover fashion exhibitions, is a clear indicator of the present and intriguing role that fashion has come to play in contemporary society. The attraction of alluring, exiting, exclusive, elegant and/or provocative and avantgarde fashion is augmenting, but along this more frivolous interest, is the apparent desire to understand and to see displays of other kinds of fashion. Or *garments*, really. Garments are part of our cultural history and hence, of our cultural heritage, and the possibility to encounter and learn about earlier kinds of handmade or ready-made clothes which is offered at some exhibitions also attract a large number of visitors—from across various social, economic and generational categories or groups. Garments that tell a story—its *wearer’s* story, in a specific time and place. Hence, tactile, worn garments are always *situational*. They can tell stories that is part of the past, of our or others’ histories, that is, of our different yet related cultural, social, and economic histories. As Zillah Halls has pointed out:

*it can tell us more than any other type of museum collection about how people looked and felt and lived in a particular time. A garment can be regarded as the remaining outer shell of a living person and will reflect that person’s taste, position, way of life, or even a transient mood of gaiety or grief, more faithfully and more directly than other arts (Halls 1968, as cited in Petrov 2019, p. 25).*

Hence, garments do have meaning. It is then not surprising that fashion has turned into an object of study—and that it has come to occupy a central place in the overall focus on cultural heritage, which is very much on the agenda in times of globalization. As much as fashion and actual garments can tell us our (his-)stories, they also constitute

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<sup>2</sup> After acquiring the fashion- and costume collection from Brooklyn Museum in 2010, the Costume Institute at the Metropolitan Museum of Art (which was installed at the museum in 1946 and headed by Diana Vreeland between 1972 and 1989) has focused on their textile and fashion exhibition more than before.

themselves as a counterpart or a contrast to an increasing fast fashion production and to the over-consumption that this production rate help foster—a kind of consumption that has come to structure much of our relation to garments.

As examples of Swedish museums that have included fashion exhibitions in recent years, I would like to mention the Hallwyl Palace and the Nordic Museum in Stockholm, along with the Röhsska Museum in Gothenburg, all of which have their own rather sizeable fashion and costume collections. Amongst the Hallwyl Palace's fashion exhibitions one finds "Huset Elliot"/"The House of Elliot" (1995); "Notti Italiane" (2009); "Vävda modedrämmar"/"Woven Fashion Dreams" (2011); "Dräkter från Downton"/"Costumes from Downton" (2012); "Under ytan"/"Under the surface" (2013); "Hatten av!"/"Hats off!" (2014); and "Mariano Fortuny" (2015); and "Bergman på modet"/"Bergman à la mode" (2017–2018)—all of which attracted large audiences. As for the Nordic Museum, "Mitt 50-tal"/"My 1950s" (2017), an exhibition dedicated to Swedish women's fashion and their everyday life in the 1950s, needs to be highlighted. Here, there were no Dior, Jacques Fath or Balenciaga dresses included: mostly home-made or ready-made dresses were included, alongside a few couture pieces created by the more fancy fashion salons Märthaskolan and Leja in Stockholm. Most of the garments on display, no matter whether home-made or couture, were inspired by the fashionable Parisian looks, but translated for Swedish conditions and wearers. The emphasis here was partly on the national translation of the more cosmopolitan Parisian fashions—but also, on the locally homemade and *sustainable* making of fashion back in the 1950s. Most of the garments on display were donated to the museum by private persons, ranging from working and middle-class women in both rural and urban contexts, to the social, cultural and economic elite in the capital. While positioning the garments in relation to the originals created by Parisian designers, the exhibition explored the *homemade*, homemade either by the women who were wearing the garments, or by women who worked as home seamstresses, that is, women who would visit women their homes to make garments for them—in a point in time when fast fashion and over consumption were still to come. "My 1950s" also made an effort to tell the stories of the women who wore the garments, and so, the exhibition served as an invitation to re-visit a past decade through tactile fashion and personal stories of what it was to be a woman in mid twentieth century Sweden.

All of the above exhibitions held at Hallwyl and the Nordic Museums were large visitor successes, it was the two exhibitions on fashion and television costume, "The House Elliot" and "Costumes from Downton", that came to draw the largest audiences. The "The House of Elliot" exhibition drew 70,000 visitors, and "Costumes from Downton" came to increase the overall attendance record with 12%. This says something about the interest amongst the audience to watch and to learn more about the meaning of costume in fictional settings—and also, about the thrill of seeing handmade couture or garments up-close. In times of over-consumption of ready-made clothes and non-lasting fast fashion, the very *handicraft* of garments, whether costumes of couture, attracts spectators. Hence, the museum space constitutes a crucial space where we as spectators can be inspired to explore, enjoy and critically think through handicraft and slow fashion as more sustainable and ethical options in relation to the detrimental production and consumption of fast fashion, and also, to think through our own consumption practices.



**Fig. 1** Costumes by Marik Vos for Ingmar Bergman's film *Fanny and Alexander* from 1983 on display in "Bergman à la mode". This exhibition was curated by Anna Bergman and Nils Harning and held at the Hallwyl Museum in Stockholm in 2018, emphasizing the handicraft and the individual designers behind them. Photograph by the author

More recently, in conjunction with the 100th anniversary of Swedish filmmaker Ingmar Bergman's birth, the Hallwyl museum exhibited "Bergman à la mode", an exhibition that was dedicated to the film costumes made for Bergman's turn of the century films, including *Fanny and Alexander* (Bergman 1983); *Cries and Whispers* (Bergman 1973); and *Wild Strawberries* (Bergman 1957). It was also dedicated to the costume designers who had worked on the films, and accompanying the exhibition was a rich catalogue that to a large extent was based on interviews with the designers or with people who had worked with them (Bergman and Harning 2018). Here, the work behind the costumes was emphasized and the *métier* of costume designing was being fleshed out, pointing at the very handicraft that is entailed in costume making. According to the head of the museum, Heli Haapasalo, it has been their biggest success ever in terms of visitor numbers. Fashion attracts—but so do ordinary garments, and so do film and stage costumes. Not only for their being spectacular, extravagant, exclusive and unavailable, as in the case of the more designer focused exhibitions mentioned above, but for their capacity of being part of our histories, and of our cultural heritage (Fig. 1).

The museum, then, constitutes a fruitful framing for exhibiting fashion and garment as part of our cultural heritage—and in its extension, fashion and garments may help inform us about the making of garments as a possible sustainable handicraft that we may in fact return back to. As Karyn Jean Harris pointed out already in 1977: "[...] costumes like other specimens of museum quality are part of our culture and heritage, and most people have an inner desire to learn more about their ancestry as well as to relive some of their own personal memories" (Harris 1977, p. 1). In addition, the museum can constitute a most needed platform for engaging with the indeed urgent humanitarian and environmental problems that fashion production and consumption together have generated.

### **Mediatization and commercialization**

The recent increased inclusion or embracing of fashion in the museum context is of course related to the increasing meaning that fashion is given, economically as well as culturally. Fashion—visualized everywhere—constitutes a discourse in itself, and as such, fashion is always and clearly *mediatized*. This discourse is made possible by and thrives on the media—and here, I am not only referring to social media and the internet, but also to older forms of media such as printed media, film and printed media. Among all of these new and old mediated forms of displaying fashion, the fashion film stands out as an interesting example in the way it manages to expand the old fashion photography and more traditional film genres. Expanding the possibility of still photography, borrowing heavily from other media and other film genres in a most intertextual sense, the fashion film is characterized by both immediacy and *hypermediacy*: it refashions older media while at the same time being itself refashioned by older media. To this fashion as a discourse, one can include various cultural and educational sectors, since they uphold, create and feed into this discourse. Universities, fashion and design schools, theatres, the cinema industry and *museums* are hence instrumental in the very sustaining of fashion as a discourse in our society.

And fashion and garments *do* matter. As has been pointed out, clothing and fashion constitute an important part of our past and our cultural heritage. Fashion items, images, and individual garments can tell a lot about a certain time's zeitgeist; they tell of economic growth and economic decline; about craftsmanship and of mass production; of living conditions and aesthetic ideals; and not least of class and gender differences and transgressions. And costumes for theatre, film, opera, ballet and television are—just like fashion is—part of this cultural heritage: they are fundamental parts of a larger whole and of various artistic and commercial productions. In addition, they are tactile products created by various artisans, from costume designers, dyers, scenics, to cutters and tailors. Stage costume, like fashion, is the product of collaboration, of collective endeavors by individuals without whose work our visual and material culture would limp. Professor Elizabeth Wilson, author of the now classic book *Adorned in Dreams: Fashion and Modernity* from 1985, argues that:

*Clothes are among the most important aspects of human cultural life. In almost every known society its members have adorned their bodies, so that the body itself becomes a cultural object. These bodily coverings have a significance far beyond their utilitarian function to protect from heat or cold. They represent the individual; dress, face and hair or head covering are what we see when encountering a stranger; they convey essential information. They are used to include or exclude, they betray wealth or poverty. They enhance or conceal sexuality and in some cases gender. Thus, they perform social and psychological functions at both a collective and individual level. In addition to that, clothes play an aesthetic role. Skill and artistry create beautiful costumes made from exquisite textiles that deserve to be classed as art just as much as ceramics or jewelry. Therefore, the collection of items from the fashions of the past and present, including folk dress, uniforms and ceremonial dress as well as the changing fashions of successive periods, provides a precious record (in an email conversation with the author in 2016).*

And Kaat Debo, Director of the Fashion Museum in Antwerp (MoMu), Belgium, instead stresses a more the economic and business-oriented approach when asked about the importance of creating fashion museums:

*Fashion museums combine an art historical approach with an active participation in the creative industry that fashion is today. These two poles of fashion as an applied art make fashion appealing and relevant for contemporary audiences. A fashion museum not only helps to document the fashion scene of today and to write the fashion history of previous decades, but it can also function as an active partner in the dissemination of fashion theory/education, sociological analysis or philosophical reflection on fashion/costume. Fashion museums, through their exhibitions, public programs, community building, publications, international communication and research, have an important impact on the construction of a fashion city's identity (in an email conversation with the author in 2016).*

Debo knows what she is talking about: the instalment of MoMu was made possible with governmental money and in close collaboration with the city's strong fashion capital, its fashion heritage and its fashion industry. MoMu is a prime example of the symbiotic relation between the (fashion) museum and the fashion industry and fashion consumption. Because this is also an aspect that is absolutely crucial to the exhibiting of fashion, garments and costumes: most fashion is commerce, whether the actual object which is produced to be sold or the representation, that is, fashion in its medialized form, and once the actual garment gets selected and saved in a museum collection, and displayed for an audience, it is not only its historic, social and symbolic value that increases—so does its economic value.

Fashion, on display in the museum context, is most often both art and commerce. It is there to be studied, enjoyed, and visually consumed for its own sake as “the remaining outer shell” of people who have lived before us, as Halls so accurately once would put it (Halls 1968). But it can also be there for the pure spectacle of a more contemporary kind of allure, extravaganza and genial handicraft and beauty—as in those exhibitions that focus solely on the collections made by one fashion designer, as in the case of, let say, Valentino, Yves Saint-Laurent or Giorgio Armani. In these instances, the boundary between the museum—as a space designed for displaying and informing practices—and the fashion industry, which is dedicated to production and consumption, becomes blurry, not least because the industry is often being involved financially in order to make fashion exhibitions possible. In many fashion exhibitions devoted to allure and the spectacular, the museum space risks turning into a commercial space—although the objects on display are not for sale. Already in 2003, did Christopher Breward reflect upon how the museum space, “the hallowed spaces of art” had come to “realise[d] the economic benefits of coming on like exclusive boutiques”, and that this should “remind us that *culture and commerce are more closely related* than some critics would like” (Breward 2003, my italics). And in the case of designers creating their own museums (and/or exhibitions), a recent example would be the Gucci museum in Florence, Italy: here, the blurred boundary between art and commerce is no boundary at all. In this museum the promotion of aspirational consumerism becomes obvious, and as Petrov points out, “In these cases, the ontological difference between museal and commercial fashion is narrowed,

and both display environments become so closely aligned as to be almost indistinguishable” (Petrov 2019, p. 61).

It would be naive to dream about fashion exhibitions and fashion museum that are completely detached and disconnected from the commercial aspects that are intimately tied up with fashion and fashionable garments. Yet, it is not credulous to argue for a museum practice that dares to engage with the pertinent environmental and human crisis that the fashion industry to a large degree is responsible of. Neither would it be ingenuous to stress that informative and inspirational exhibitions can make a difference via inciting spectators to become responsible, and solidarian, consumers.

Here, the fashion museum can take inspiration from work life museums that successfully manage to display working life and engage audiences to learn about and reflect upon the situation of workers in various kinds of productions and industries. Although these museums often embrace a historical perspective on work and life, they can serve as important and inspirational points of reference. This is especially true for museums that focus on previous generations of textile workers and their work and life conditions, such as for example the Museum of Work (*Arbetsmuseet*) in Norrköping, Sweden, the Historical Museum in Bielsko-Biala, Poland, or the Museum of Work and Life in Woonsocket, Rhode Island, USA.

## Conclusion

Coming back to where this article started, to Siemsen, one can contend fashion is still one of the most important arenas in which life and art are intimately connected. One can also assert that the museum constitutes a prolific space where this connection gets visualized and embodied: in that specific space we can learn about past times, and about past lives—and we do so through the display and the study of fashion as a socio-economic, cultural and aesthetic phenomenon and of specific garments. The wearing and tearing, the changes over time, and the very production and consumption of garments, tell of a recent past—but they can also tell about our own present. Fashion and specific garments can also tell of the lives that have produced them: from the seamstresses working in fashion houses creating slow haute couture, to the textile and factory workers making fast fashion for underpaid wages and under exploitative, and at times life threatening, circumstances. Yesterday—and today. And while, these two examples of production realities have not been at the center of attention when museums have invested in exhibiting fashion, there have been a few exhibitions that have focused on technology and handicraft, such as the exhibition “Measure for Measure” at the Royal Ontario Museum in Canada in 1989, or the more recent exhibition “Manus X Machina” held at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York 2016.<sup>3</sup> Rather, as I tried to have show here, it has been the more specular and the glamorous that has been given center stage—emphasizing, over and over again, the very allure that fashion, whether wearable or unwearable, holds on us, as spectators—and as consumers.

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<sup>3</sup> As Petrov has demonstrated, in earlier periods, fashion or costume exhibitions were more investing in educating and informing about the production and the handicraft behind the objects on display. It was common that new “fashion technologies” were exhibited not only in the museum contexts, but also, in various kinds of world exhibitions serving to promote national industrial innovations. See Petrov 2019.

Yet, couture and fast fashion production realities constitute two examples that perhaps better than others can represent and exhibit how fashion is connected to *life*. Wearing garments is one thing, producing them is another. If the valuation of slow and immaculate handicraft—as an artform—on the one hand, and the exposure of inhumane exploitation of garment and textile workers in the fast fashion industry on the other, can be focused on in future exhibitions to come, the museum can, without a doubt, play a more important and pivotal role than it does today. Visualizing and explaining these two production realities, informing us visitors about what is sustainable and what is not through the exposing of atrocities that have happened and still happen to textile and garment workers and to the environment while advocating a more sustainable and human fashion production, may serve to change the status quo. The museum—through insightful curatorial practices—can inform and persuade spectators about the necessity of going back to a “wear and tear” culture, and to make us demand that the fashion industry stops being one of the most exploitative, backbreaking and polluting industries worldwide. Because the fashion industry—despite its many efforts to convince its consumers that it is “going green”—is not.

The museum, as a memory institution with a strong pedagogical and informative impetus, can—must—play a central and formative role in educating the public of what the fashion industry actually *does* to our environment and our fellow human beings, and also, to point out what can be done to try and change the status quo. Like documentary film and critical, investigatory journalism, the museum can constitute a powerful arena for engaging and awakening the public—because, as history has shown, the fashion industry, nor our governments, are not going to do so. If museums were really to embark on this route, then fashion as a phenomenon will—more than ever—be able to pinpoint how intimately life and art are connected, and also, how a changed, more human and solidaristic fashion system can come to make life *livable* for those who work to produce what we wear.

**Acknowledgements**

Not applicable.

**Authors' contributions**

LW finalized the manuscript based on a keynote presentation given at the ICCT Conference held at Yonsei University, Seoul, in 2018. The author read and approved the final manuscript.

**Funding**

Open access funding provided by Stockholm University.

**Availability of data and materials**

Not applicable

**Competing interests**

The author declares that no competing interests.

Received: 8 August 2019 Accepted: 24 December 2019

Published online: 05 June 2020

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