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Old News? Understanding Retro Trends in the 21st Century Fashion

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Abstract. The paper explores the conditions of innovation in contemporary fashion through a case study of 'retro' understood as the revival either materially, immaterially, or literally of past trends in fashion. By clarifying the difference between retro as a trend and history as a source of inspiration, the paper looks at the dynamic of retro as an ambiguous presence in fashion. Because while fashion is generally defined by innovation and novelty, retro appears to counteract this basic premise and hence suggests that the very foundation of fashion may be changing. The subject is discussed by joining media representation of retro fashion with a wide range of theories on retro in fashion from a multi-disciplinary range of sources.

The paper aims to develop categories and clarify terminology within a historical framework for understanding retro as a condition for future practice of design. The key themes of the paper are: The trend mechanisms driving retro; the paradoxes of secondhand fashion; the past in the present as a condition of cultural production with Walter Benjamin's notion of 'the tiger's leap' and 'the labyrinth' as leitmotifs; the distinction between retro trend and subculture; the reduced time lag in fashion and the effects this has on fashion cycles as organizing vehicle for the fashion industry.

The end of innovation? In the article "*The Shock of the Old*" reporting from the runways in 1993, fashion editor at the *International Herald Tribune (IHT)*, Suzy Menkes stated: "What's new in fashion? You should be asking, 'What's old?'" (March 21, 1993). This tendency towards old news in fashion appeared to trail all the way through the 1990s.

Having just entered the new millennium, Menkes laments the continuous focus on the past in the article "A Vintage Year, or Merely Retro?" (February 10, 2000). With special reference to the Fall/Winter 2000 collection by designer Marc Jacobs, she asks: "But this is design? Remaking vintage clothes piece by pattern piece? Line by topstitched line? Jacobs needs to take a forward leap into the 21st century."

More than a decade later, the retrospection has shown no sign of loosening its grip on fashion or even design as such. Fashion is still full of old news. So how should this retro tendency be understood in terms of the conditions for innovation and the future practice of fashion design?



Image 1. The presence of retro is seen not only in fashion and design, but also in music, television, and even street art.
Image by author.

Is retro new? Retro does not seem to be a new phenomenon, so to speak. The 1990s saw a retro trend (Brown 2001, Gregson and Crewe 2003, Palmer and Clark 2005), as did the 1980s (Jameson 1982, Polhemus 1996, Koda and Martin 1989) and the 1970s (Davis 1979). In fact, retro seems to be a recurring trend phenomenon throughout fashion history (Baines, 1981). So what constitutes a retro trend in general and what characterized the retro in the 21st century in particular?

While the etymology stands clear, 'retro' being Latin for 'back or backward' (*The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, 1110*), the meaning of the word in fashion varies. As cultural anthropologist, Heike Jenß points out in "Sixties Only: The Consumption of the Past in a Retro Scene," there does not seem to exist a common understanding of the term (Palmer and Clark, *Old Clothes, New Looks, 179*). In an attempt to arrive at a clearer definition, I will attempt to organize retro in three categories. Overall, retro is understood as revivals in primarily fashion as well as design:

1. **Material revival.** This category is concerned with the physical, material revival of an item that has been excluded from the fashion system as some point, and which has often been previously owned. 'Vintage' will be used when referring to material revivals.
2. **Immaterial revival.** This category is concerned with the immaterial expression of retro i.e. the reinterpretation of former styles or looks. Immaterial revivals are seen at all levels of the fashion system: High-end, midrange and fast fashion. Designer labels such as Marc Jacobs, Levi's, and Dolce and Gabbana are examples of how immaterial retro has been incorporated into new designs.

3. **Literal revival.** This category is concerned with the literal revival of a past trend in the sense of a direct copy of past fashion items. This is seen when Gucci and Sonia Rykiel re-release exact copies of classic items from their archives. An interesting example of the literal revival is offered by Diane von Furstenberg – perhaps capitalizing on the existing retro trend – who re-emerged in 1997 by re-launching her famous wrap-dress from 1972. The literal revivals are also seen in the field of design such as when Danish designer Verner Panton's Flowerpot-lamp was put back in production in 2000.

While the three categories offer distinct insight into the constitution of retro, they also overlap. Some retailers such as H&M and Top Shop have had both immaterial and material categories of retro in their stores. However, the three categories should still provide some structure to the understanding of retro.

Secondhand fashion. The history of secondhand clothes – understood as an item of clothing changing owners – is presumably as long as the history of fashion itself. However, the motives for reusing clothes have varied and have not always been related to trends. Historically, one of the key motives has been pure necessity due to scarcity for instance after a war or because of poverty. Reuse is present throughout the history of Western culture but in contemporary society, it is primarily seen in developing countries.(1)

Tradition in many Western cultures has also played a central role in the practice of reusing discarded clothes. In general, the custom for a bride to include 'something old, something new' is often upheld. Here the use of secondhand offers a sense of continuity and heritage.(2) Secondhand clothes have also been employed in counter-cultural strategies by for instance punks and hippies (Goulding 2003, Steele 2006, Polhemus 1994) to express anti-establishment or anti-globalization beliefs.(3)

Vintage refers to secondhand clothes related to retro as a trend. This material revival covers the entire spectrum of fashion. As Alexandra Palmer explains: "vintage' is used to identify an enormous range of clothes, from a couture dress of the 1920s to last year's 'must have' Fendi baguette bag." (Clark and Palmer, *Old Clothes, New Looks*, 200). However, vintage in this paper refers to more than the material revival of high-end fashion and antique or museum pieces. Vintage also refers to generic brands sold in vintage boutiques where buyers have handpicked the items they considered to be vintage. Here, the vintage items are subject to trend mechanisms to a larger extent than with the high-end pieces. And finally, there is thrift store vintage, which is more ambiguous since it might be considered either vintage or waste depending on the context. Included in the material revival category is also the notion of heirlooms, dumpster finds, gifts, and flea market items which operate on the edge of the fashion systems.



Image 2. The rise of the secondhand fashion market challenges the established fashion system by being old, used, and previously discarded.

Image by author.

Vintage paradoxes. There are a number of paradoxes associated with vintage, which are important to foreground in order to achieve a deeper understanding of retro in 21st century fashion. I will briefly outline the paradoxes of the term. The most immediate ambiguity concerning vintage is the conflict between the *durable* qualities assumed in vintage clothes similar to those of vintage cars and wine, while trends in fashion are defined by the exact opposite quality namely constant *change*.

The very fact that something that was once produced within the fashion system and later rejected only to be re-incorporated as vintage years later is paradoxical in itself. Many vintage items were originally mass-produced. However, when rediscovered as vintage, they are desired for the exact opposite reason namely that the vintage items are considered one-of-a-kind and therefore unique. When this perception of uniqueness then goes on to become a mainstream phenomenon, the ambiguity only seems to grow stronger.

Another paradox is present in the tendency for secondhand clothes to become fashionable at a time when more people have access to more new fashionable clothes than ever before at least in the Euro-American markets due to globalization and increase in living standards. However, vintage might in fact be regarded as a product of globalization. Because fashion becomes available to larger consumer groups, it is increasingly difficult to distinguish oneself from the mainstream through the established fashion circuits. Therefore other means of social distinction are sought as. In fashion history, there has been a tendency to achieve social distinction through demonstration of economic status as the social premium (Veblen 1899; Simmel 1904). However, what the consumer is able to demonstrate by wearing vintage is a sense of style and a surplus of time as a more contemporary social premium for creating social distinction. In other words, the skill of discovering vintage among the mass of secondhand coupled

with the prime commodity of the late 20th century namely time adds to the distinctive power of vintage.(4)

It is important to note here that there is also some confusion in the relation between 'retro' and 'vintage' as terms. In "The Vogue of Vintage: Victim of its own success" (*IHT* March 23, 2004). Jessica Michault offers a possible description of the difference: "Retro applies to anything with the look of the past, from an Edwardian caplet to a pair of '60s platform shoes. Vintage, on the other hand, carries a similar resonance to furniture described as 'antique'; experts believe that clothing, too, must have an appropriate, if not official, time lag." While I will return to the role of time lag in contemporary fashion, retro here is concerned with the immaterial revival, an imitation of style, while vintage is understood as a material revival of an original. In "A Vintage Year, or Merely Retro?" (*IHT* February 10, 2000), the terms are contrasted in a different way. As the title also suggests, Suzy Menkes associates retro with a repetitive, negative tendency and vintage with a timeless, positive quality. However, in a later article by Menkes, vintage seems to have a negative connotation: "It was just a pleasing nonvintage flea market look at Miu Miu" ("Wrapping up Milan," *IHT*, March 2, 2004). This might suggest a tendency for the term vintage to be going out of fashion perhaps due to saturation and over-exposure. On a more general level, it also attests to the slipperiness of fashion terminology.

Development of retro and vintage. In order to understand vintage as the material revival of retro, it is important to note certain events and developments that are considered to be drivers for vintage and by implication have also boosted retro in the 21st century.

The watershed moment for vintage is considered to be when Julia Roberts wore a vintage Valentino dress when she won the Oscar for "Best Actress" in 2001. Fashion writer Jessica Michault quotes designer Valentino for saying: "The huge impact that Julia Roberts made in my vintage dress will never happen again." And Michault continues: "She did not just make an enormous impact as a fashion statement, but she created the vogue of the vintage dress so much that today also a dress of this season worn by Jennifer Aniston at the Golden Globes was labeled 'vintage' by the press" ("The Vogue of Vintage: Victim of its own Success," *IHT*, March 23, 2004). However, even before Roberts, the celebrities' taste for vintage was boosting the trend. As fashion writer James Sherwood explains already in 2000: "Celebrity endorsement has made vintage mainstream" ("Miami is Heaven for Vintage Fashion", *IHT*, October 12, 2000).

The development among collectors also had an impact on the vintage phenomenon. Since the 1980s, what was regarded as collectible has been widened to include anything from garbadine pants to Hawaii-shirts, which broadened the understanding of what could be regarded as vintage. When an auction house such as Sotheby's started having fashion auctions in the mid-1970s, it further contributed to validating clothing as valuable, which also served to stimulate the development of vintage in fashion.(5)

Vintage fashion was also boosted by the coming of the Internet and e-commerce, which opened private closets, collections, and warehouses from everywhere to everyone with an Internet connection and a credit card. Vintage clothes started to move in completely different ways and became far more accessible. Consumers could see what was available regardless of where they were geographically and it became easier to determine what was valuable because sites like eBay played a role in stating the market value.

Subculture and trends. Retro can be regarded as a trend or as part of a subcultural identity. A trend is by its very nature always changing, and therefore trend as a term is notoriously difficult to define. Generally speaking, trends in fashion are concerned with the visual shape and form of garments – the style, silhouette, material, color or pattern – or the way these garments are worn (Brannon 2005; Mackinney-Valentin 2010). Trends are the visual manifestation of trend mechanisms, which are motored by a series of needs and agendas ranging from social identity (King 1963; Field 1970; Simmel 1971), market logic (Callon 1998; Brannon 2005), shifting perception of gender and beauty (Laver 1959; Entwistle 2000), and the construction of zeitgeist (Nystrom 1928).

While retro as a trend is organized by these trend mechanisms, retro subcultures refer to a more stable dress practice where social groups adhere to a lifestyle of a different decade, as seen with for instance the Rockabilly subculture of the late 20th century. As described by anthropologist Ted Polhemus: “Retroland, where people in the 1990s live out their lives as if it was actually 1955.” (*Polhemus Stylesurfing*, 93).

Heike Jenß demonstrates a similar understanding of retro in her study of a retro subculture “whose members practice a lifestyle marked by an affinity to ‘everything sixties,’ which is expressed in their daily dress practice, domestic interior, lifestyle” (Clark and Palmer, *Old Clothes, New Looks*, 177). Here retro is less about trend mechanisms and more about the self-performance and the construction of individuality within the framework of a subculture (Clark and Palmer, *Old Clothes, New Looks*, 177). However, though retro in the subcultural sense is opposite to retro as a trend, the two are also connected in a commercial perspective when the fashion industry capitalizing on subcultures to drive the retro trend.

Generally speaking, the interest in vintage moved from being part of a subcultural strategy and collectors’ items in the 1990s to being the material revival of the retro trend through the Noughties.

The past in the present. Retro may refer to the revival materially, immaterially, and literally of past trends as part of trend mechanisms, but it also relates to the fundamental premise of looking back as part of a creative process as seen in all cultural production including fashion. Historic awareness is always present in fashion at some level just as it is in literature, music, art and so on. To clarify the difference between trend and creative premise, I will start by outlining the understanding of history and tradition in relation to creative and cultural expression.

Reflections on the role of the past in the present are widespread in academia. Useful insight in the relation between creative expression and the past is offered by author and poet T. S. Eliot (1888-1965) in the essay “Tradition and the Individual Talent” (Eliot, *The Sacred Wood*) from 1922 in which he reflects on the relationship between poetry and tradition, the poet and the past. Here he argues that ‘the past is altered by the present as much as the present is directed by the past’ (Eliot, *The Sacred Wood*, 41). Translated from poetry to the realm of fashion, Eliot is describing the premise as a dialectical process between past/fashion history and present/fashion designer.

While this observation is concerned specifically with the role of the ‘individual talent,’ i.e. the designer, other perspectives on how the past and present mutually constitute each other must be brought in to widen the perspective.(6) As Harold Koda and Richard Martin argue in *The Historical Mode* (1989), the role of the past in the present is described as a premise: “Every decade flirts with period recreations” (Koda and Martin, *The Historical Mode*, 9). Every cultural expression comes out of something and must necessarily, whether explicit or implicit, consciously or subconsciously, relate to what came before in a process of “reconstitution, reexamination, and revelation of the past” (Koda and Martin, *The Historical Mode*, 7).

In “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” (Benjamin, *Illuminations*, 261) Walter Benjamin (1892-1940) uses the term ‘tiger’s leap’ – “Tigersprung” – as a figure that might serve to illustrate the presence of history as a premise in and through fashion: “The French Revolution viewed itself as Rome incarnate. It evoked ancient Rome the way fashion evokes costumes of the past. Fashion has a flair for the topical, no matter where it stirs in the thickets of long ago; it is a tiger’s leap into the past” (Benjamin, *Illuminations*, 261).(7)

In addition to introducing the theme of Græco-Roman dress, the quote shows how fashion through this *tiger’s leap* is always a result of a negotiation between past and present. However, the image also brings out Benjamin’s political agenda that makes fashion an accomplice to the class system of capitalism, as the text continues: “This jump, however, takes place in an arena where the ruling class gives the commands” (Benjamin, *Illuminations*, 261).(8)

While the constant negotiation between past and present is enrolled in morals and politics for Benjamin, the tiger’s leap still offers potential for describing the general premise of fashion.(9)

Time and labyrinths. Another aid in distinguishing retro as a trend from the condition of creative expression is the exhibition and book *Spectres: When Fashion Turns Back*, for which Benjamin was also an inspiration. As the title suggests, the exhibition explores the complex relationship fashion has to recollection, influence, history, and genealogy. Particularly enlightening is Benjamin’s image of the *labyrinth* to describe the development of time and history in fashion in the attempt to understand history as the premise of fashion as different from retro as a trend. As Caroline Evans argues in the book:

“Benjamin described how he once drew a diagram of his life as a labyrinth. The metaphor of history as a labyrinth allows the juxtaposition of historical images with contemporary ones; as the labyrinth doubles back on itself what is most modern is revealed as also having a relation to what is most old. Thus distant points in time can become proximate at specific moments as their paths run close to each other.” (Clark, *Spectres*, 19).

What is being described here is the premise of fashion as always taking the historical into consideration. The labyrinth is a space in which the distinction between near and far is distorted and the passage through the labyrinth might seem disorienting. As an image for the link between fashion and history, the labyrinth seems apt. In relation to *Spectres*, the labyrinth as this disorientation or “drunken space” (Hollier, *Against Architecture*, 58) is understood as the designer’s process of getting lost in history, so to speak, as a means of finding the way in creation. In *The Fold* (1993), Gilles Deleuze also explores the concept of the labyrinth in its capacity as a Baroque figure, and describes it as ‘an

infinite series that forms a webbing of time and embraces all possibilities' (Deleuze, *The Fold*, 62). This understanding of time in fashion as 'webbed' and the inebriated space is seen among fashion designers around the turn of the millennium such as Dries Van Noten, Jean-Paul Gaultier, Comme des Garçons and Matthew Williamson to mentions some of the designers featured in the *Spectres* exhibit.

This take on the past is not necessarily purely contemporary. A demonstration of how the presence of the past is seen in mid-20th century fashion is seen in the article "Counter Revolution" from 1947 featured in *Time* magazine, looks at the reaction in the US to the monumental presence of Christian Dior's New Look, which was presented the same year. The article offers an insight into how the past is always present in fashion in the labyrinthine way of embracing the possibilities of the past. In the article, an interview is conducted with Sophie Gimbel, designer and head of the department store Saks Fifth Avenue's *Salon Moderne*. She caused a stir at the time by reinterpreting the New Look with a shorter skirt and more comfortable waist that was, argues the article, perhaps even more popular than the original.



Image 3. Brand value in fashion is confirmed as well as undermined by vintage fashion by following a paradoxical paradigm of being novel exactly because it is old. Image by author.

What is interesting in this context is the way her use of historical material is described: "like all other designers, she constantly combs over the styles of the last 5,000 years. One of her most fertile hunting grounds is the Brooklyn Museum, which she likes because it lets her take costumes back to her shop for copying."⁽¹⁰⁾ Gimbel is quoted for saying that her inspiration for the current collection was found in everything from a man's hunting coat to a 75-year-old camisole. As she states: "This year's much touted 'domino coat,' which makes a woman look as if she were peering out of a tent, is nothing but the pyramid coat of 1866."

These renditions of past fashion seem to visualize both the presence of the dialectics between past and present as seen in the image of the tiger's leap as well as the drunken space of the labyrinth in which the paths of the past converge and diverge in negotiation with the present.

Retro as a trend. Having now established how the past is present in fashion through the images of the tiger's leap and the labyrinth, I will move on to how retro as a trend is defined on this premise.

Continuing the focus on the designers, I will attempt to illustrate the difference between the fashion premise and retro as a trend through the example of two different designers. Since 1970, American designer Ralph Lauren has consistently worked with an aesthetic associated with the American West and the myth of the cowboy coupled with the preppy heritage of American culture. While the collections have varied from season to season, Lauren has continuously worked with the palimpsest of the 'American text' so to speak. While this is also part of Lauren's brand story, the example still shows how a designer negotiates his past in the present as a premise of creation.

A designer working with the past in a retro trend context is Marc Jacobs who offers a good example with his Autumn/Winter 2000 collection, which was a ladylike jumble of Mary Quant floral-patterned PVC raincoats, geometric Courreges coats and jumper dresses from the 1960s. While viewed isolated, this might be seen as the tiger's leap. However, considering the history of Jacobs aesthetic, the grunge collections he did in both 1992 (For Perry Ellis' Spring/Summer 1993 collection) and Autumn/Winter collection 2006,(11) this pendulum swing(12) between ladylike and grunge suggests that historical references are used according to the trend mechanisms. That is not to say, that Lauren is not influenced by trend mechanisms and Jacobs does not operate on the tiger's leap premise of fashion.

Anticomanie and other retro trends. Retro trends are nothing new, so to speak, and neither is the theory about them. As Agnes Brooks Young wrote as early as in 1937: "Of course it is true that over many centuries and in numerous literatures there are to be found statements to the effect that fashions (in the contemporary meaning of trends), which were formerly in favor have reappeared after having been entirely out of use for many years." (Young, *Recurring Cycles of Fashion*, vii). While Young explores the possibility of laws of recurring trends through quantitative analysis of fashion plates in the period 1760-1937, she is referring here to the general presence of revivals or cycles throughout fashion history.

An obvious example for discussing the retro trends within a historical framework is the revival of ancient Greek dress. Not only is it one of the most persistent sources of revivals; it also became subject to perhaps the first retro trend ever when the Romans reinterpreted the style.(13)

In *Goddess: The Classical Mode*,(14) Harold Koda brings attention to the fact that "components of classical attire have appeared throughout Western fashion's six-hundred-year history" (Koda, *Goddess*, 18). The components might vary from construction (draping and cinching), columnar silhouettes, pleats, white, and decorative elements such as key and wave meander patterns (Koda, *Goddess*, 12-15).

Perhaps the most comprehensive Græco-Roman revival was seen in the period from the 1790s to the 1810s – what Laver refers to as *anticomanie* (Laver, *Taste and Fashion*, 17) and Benjamin referred to as ‘Rome incarnate’ – as linked to the French Revolution (1787-1799). From the crowning of Napoleon Bonaparte as emperor in 1804 to the architecture of L’Église de la Madeleine in Paris, inspiration was sought in Antiquity. The political atmosphere at the time also seemed to be reflected in women’s fashion with inspiration drawing on togas and tunics as well as the omnipresence of white (Laver, *Taste and Fashion*, 21). Women’s bodies were liberated from the constricted corset that was replaced with lighter ones (short stays and regency stays). Shoes were flat and materials as light as nightgowns. The silhouette was flowing with the waist gathered just beneath the bosom – the *empire* waist – lending an overall impression of an ancient pillar. In tune with fashion, interior decoration was also influenced by *anticomanie* with the rise in popularity of pillars and white marble.

However, the classical elements during for instance the *Directoire* and *Empire* periods (15) are not static visual expressions, but rather they develop continuously during the course of the *anticomanie* trend in terms of for instance material, hemline, and décolletage.(16) While contemporary fashion is often described as ‘eclectic, fragmented, and surreal’ (Polhemus, *Stylesurfing*, 97), it is interesting that the notion of a plethora of trends exists so far back in fashion history.(17) As Marguerite de Ponty stated already in November 1874 in the fifth issue of *La Dernière Mode*: “Profusion is not confusion” (Furbank and Cain, *Mallarmé on Fashion*, 121).(18)

The reason for foregrounding the *anticomanie* trend is to illustrate that the revivals in a retro trend are not concerned with the premise of creative expression, the tiger’s leap. Rather the revival is used to feed the various strategies of the trend mechanisms. In other words, the continuous revival of classical fashion is not concerned with the imitation or recreation of the past as was the case with the retro subcultures. In this sense, the Græco-Roman style in particular and retro trends in general become a constantly growing assemblage of all the classical revivals.(19)

Since the publication of *The Classical Mode* in 2003, the Græco-Roman styles have continued to resurface. In the Spring/Summer 2008 collections, there was a strong presence of tunics and togas in Donna Karan, Alberta Ferretti, and Very Wang. And the summer of 2008 saw a surge of gladiator-sandals in Copenhagen as well as in the UK and USA. In January 2009, Style.com announced in its *Spring 2009 Trend Report*, that “Goddess Worship” (January 14, 2009) with Grecian draping would be a top trend. This suggests that the classical mode is the longest running trend in fashion history which in turn raises the issues concerning the speed of trends – or the lack thereof – and whether trends actually move towards a demise (Davis, *Fashion, Culture, and Identity*, 103-104).



Image 4. Trans American Trading Company in Brooklyn frames the process of sorting garbage from vintage.

Image by author.

Time lag. The apparent shortened trend cycles – giving rise to the ‘24-hour fashion news cycle’ (Magner, “The Death of Trends: Part II) and the notion of ‘everything being simultaneously out’ (Hochswender, “A Little Nervous Music”) – might be described as the key sources to a threat to trends in fashion. This raises the question of the importance of time lag in fashion trends. Here retro as a trend is a particularly pertinent case, because of the way it complicate notions of past, time, recollection, and continuum.

To establish a point of reference, I will bring up a chart made by James Laver describing the temporal organization of time lags in fashion, which he described in 1959 (Laver, “Fashion: A Detective Story”), and what was later termed “Laver’s Law” (Guffey, *Retro: The Culture of Revival*, 160).

“We can therefore draw up a chart and say: the same dress is indecent ten years before its time; daring one year before its time; chic (*contemporarily seductive*) in its time; *dowdy* five years after its time; *hideous* twenty years after its time; *amusing* thirty years after its time; *romantic* one hundred years after its time; *beautiful* one hundred and fifty years after its time. It would have been quite impossible to revive the fashions of the mid-twenties until thirty years had elapsed. Thirty years elapsed and behold! Those fashions or modes very like them came back again.”(20)

While describing the process of inclusion, exclusion and re-inclusion of trends in fashion over a span of 160 years, Laver attempts to add another level of order to the process. While this chart may have applied to the period preceding his historical context, it has evidently gone out of fashion when bearing in mind the Valentino dress on Julia Roberts in 2001 as a catalyst for vintage. In an article confirming the importance of the dress in relation to vintage,(21) Suzy Menkes dates the dress to the 1980s. Evidently, the dress falls outside Laver's Law, according to which it would reside somewhere between 'dowdy' and 'hideous'. Considering that the dress is in fact even younger dating from Valentino's Autumn/Winter 1992 couture collection (Michault, "The Vogue of Vintage: Victim of its own success"), this additional reduction of the time lag only emphasizes the point.

Time lag as an organizing principle in fashion is challenged in the face of retro. Time lag assumes a temporal gap – between new and old, in and out, inception and demise, innovators and laggards – and the difficulty in maintaining these dichotomies is a key challenge for contemporary fashion.

Is it all garbage? Retro as a trend brings up the interesting perspective of whether everything within the framework of fashion history is caught up in what is described as a "potentially endless cycles of de- and revalorization" (Gregson and Crewe, *Second-Hand Cultures*, 200). This would mean the elimination of the entire notion of 'rubbish,' (Gregson and Crewe, *Second-Hand Cultures*, 201) when considering vintage as the celebration of waste.

However, while retro as a trend does challenge previous standards of organization – such as the dichotomy of in and out – the answer would be negative to the question asked by Stephen Brown: "Is the Retro Trend the normal state of affairs?" (Brown, *Marketing – The Retro Revolution*, 15). The conception of new is more than the equivalent to an innovation, an invention, or a functional improvement. Retro is not old news, because as a trend it is always caught up in contemporary negotiations over social identity, shifting zeitgeist, and production cycles. Retro is not a static expression, but is materially, immaterially, and literally enrolled in a constant process of transformation and mutation. Most recently, the notion of material revivals have seen developments in more radical, democratic directions with the conception of the 'Clothing Library' that with an ambition of turning waste into resource encourages exchange of clothes for free. This development of material revivals in an anti-consumer direction is linked to the wider movement of 'Dumpster Diving' or 'Freegan' that aims to reduce consumption at all levels including food.

What we can learn from this exploration of retro in contemporary fashion is that it is a highly diverse and persistent phenomenon that appears to be constantly moving into new territory. The past and present have negotiated visual expressions for centuries and the persistence of the retrospection should not necessarily be equated with the end of innovation as the impossible condition for the future practice of fashion design. The constantly shifting retro formations appear to be operating according to an organic logic that is more concerned with *how* something is remixed, that *what* is being remixed. This immaterial focus on what is essentially happening between the material garments is part of what ensures that retro continues to be an innovative – albeit paradoxical – premise in fashion, today as in the future.

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Notes

1. Though as Karen Tranberg Hansen points out in *Salaula: The World of Secondhand Clothing and Zambia*, secondhand clothing in Africa is not just a question of charity or passive imitation of the West, but also relates to the process of negotiating social identity as a motor in trends. As she argues: “a cultural economy of judgment and style is at work in local appropriations of the West’s unwanted clothing” *Salaula*, 248. In other words, some of the same mechanisms at play with vintage as a trend in for instance Scandinavia are also present in the case of Zambia.
2. This is also the case with the Danish Royal family as seen with the veil Danish Princess Mary wore at her wedding to Crown Prince Frederik of Denmark in 2004. The veil was handed down to her from Queen Margrethe’s mother Ingrid who in turn had been given the veil by her mother.
3. A key publication in the field is *Old Clothes, New Looks: Second Hand Fashion* (eds. Clark and Palmer, 2005) that approaches secondhand clothes through a wide range of topics including themes of power, trade, and charity over a period of more than 500 years with a global perspective from India, the Philippines, Hong Kong, Germany and more.
4. This description of the paradoxes of the term vintage has appeared in a different version in my entry “Vintage” in *Berg Encyclopedia of World Dress and Fashion*, 2010.
5. Based on an interview with Megan Howard, manager of the vintage department at Trans America Trading Company, wholesale and processor of used clothing, wiping rags, fiber, and textiles, Brooklyn, NY. February 28, 2006.
6. An image describing this process is there ‘palimpsest’, where previous texts are scraped away to allow for reuse of the parchment. The result is a layering of texts, where the old texts are still visible through the new. This image translates well to fashion trends that are always a product of this ‘archeological’ process.
7. In *The Arcades Project*, (1972), Benjamin developed another concept that might also shed light on the question of the past as premise: The ‘dialectical images.’ This is not to be understood as a comparison between past and present but rather as an exchange in which the two in the process come to constitute a third meaning transforming past and present in the process. A more in-depth discussion of the use of Benjamin’s notion of dialectical images in relation to fashion is seen in Caroline Evans’ “Yesterday’s Emblems and Tomorrow’s Commodities” (2000).
8. In this way, Benjamin’s approach to fashion is similar to that of John Rae in *The Sociological Theory of Capital* (1834), Thorstein Veblen in *The Theory of the Leisure Class: An Economic Study of Institutions* (1899), Jean Baudrillard in *The Consumer Society: Myths and Structures* (1970), and Pierre Bourdieu in *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (1979).
9. The image has inspired several academic works most notably Ulrich Lehmann’s *Tigersprung: Fashion in Modernity* (2000).

Notes continued

10. Interview with Sophie Gimbel, head of Saks' Salon Moderne in "Counter Revolution" *Time*, September 15, 1947. Writer not noted in *Time's* online archive. Accessed on August 12, 2010.
11. A review of the collection is seen in "Grunge is Good" by Kara Jesella, *New York Times*, October 22, 2006.
12. Pendulum, as formulated by Dwight E. Robinson in "Style Changes: Cyclical, Inexorable, and Foreseeable" (1975), refers to the tendency for trends to swing from one extreme and then, when the possibilities are exhausted the trend swings to the opposite extreme. The classic example of the pendulum swing is the rise and fall of hemlines but the swing is also seen between formal and casual, slim and full silhouettes and so on.
13. After the Roman revival of Greek fashion, the two tend to merge into what Koda in *Goddess* terms 'classical' or 'Græco-Roman'. I will use the same terms. The book accompanied the exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum in New York entitled *Goddess*, May 1- August 3, 2003, curated by Koda.
14. xiv
15. French Directoire period ca. 1795-1804 and the Empire period ca. 1804-1820. Periods according to *Klædedragtens Kavalkade*, 76-81.
16. See for instance *Klædedragtens Kavalkade*, 141-144, and *Tigersprung: Fashion in Modernity*, 38.
17. An interesting point here is that anticomanie appear to represent a gradual development in fashion history towards more liberated conditions for women. This was, however, not the case. On the contrary, the empire dress gave way to more constricted forms first with the renewed focus on the waist with Biedermeier (ca. 1820-1835) and later with the crinolines of the neo-rococo period (1835-1879).
18. Interestingly the column talks about the "changes in fashion over the last few evenings." 121 suggesting that there was an understanding of changes in fashion happening rapidly even before the rise of mass fashion or even of pret-a-porter not to mention the conditions in the digital- and computer age.
19. In *Goddess*, a great many references to classical revivals in fashion are mentioned including: Paul Poiret (1910-1913), Madame Vionnet (1936), Madame Grès (1940, 1954), Balmain (1957), Balenciaga (1962), Valentino (1967), Halston (1972, 1974), Issey Miyake (1984), Prada (2002), Yves Saint Laurent (2002), Dolce & Gabbana (2003), Alexander McQueen (2003)

Notes continued

20. The chart was based on a study of fashion change – trends – through dated portraits, fashion plates, and contemporary caricature or illustrated journalism starting in the 1840s.
21. "It started with Julia Roberts and the graphic black-and-white 'vintage' Valentino dress from the 1980s she wore to the Oscars to critical acclaim. Since then, any star worth the name is swapping new designer clothes for old." "Fash File: Thrill of the Search, Joy of the Unique" *IHT* Suzy Menkes, June 5, 2001.