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## Probing ephemeral futures: Scenarios as fashion design

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### ABSTRACT

Linking scenario thinking and fashion design this paper explores connections to design scenarios, highlighting the role of ephemerality. First, we develop the time issues of fashion design based scenarios from the perspective of the ephemerality of contemporariness. To explore ephemeral transformations in scenario thinking we propose a conceptual framework and introduce fashion-design transformation types. We extend the “tailoring voting” conversation issued from Oxford Futures Forum 2014 to discuss prospective transformations in decision-making processes. We finally explore the implications of such a perspective for scenario planning and fashion design.

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### 1. Time, scenarios and fashion design

When being “truly contemporary”, truly “belonging” to our time, our fashionable contemporaries seem to be able to stand inside and outside of time, to be able to tell us not only when *now* is, but also what the future is. “The time of fashion, therefore, constitutively anticipates itself and consequently is also always too late” (Agamben, 2009, p.48). And rare are those creators able to recurrently decode and translate *l'air du temps* as Karl Lagerfeld or Alexander McQueen. The difficulty in being able to anticipate and being always “too late” seems also to be the lot of the scenario planner: with the applause of one’s contemporaries lending plausibility (Ramírez & Selin, 2014), to one’s stories at the same time as they have to point towards something new. With methods and methodologies for organising modalities for future planning – that is of concretising the ephemerality of the not-yet as a way of expressing the now – scenario planners would have to be both untimely and contemporary. Every act of announcing fashionability is immediately lost to unfashionability: here is outlined the risk in declaring, and the poise one must have to be comfortable in making such a declaration.

Meanwhile, juxtaposing the concepts of “fashion design” (that is the process through which fashions are designed) with scenarios in the sense they are used in geopolitical and strategic theory seems at least, from an ontological viewpoint, to be counterfactual. On the one hand, fashion design is often viewed as the process of making sense for short-term, if not evanescent lifestyle products and revolutions in cultural expression, linking fashion and change (Pedroni, 2013). On the

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other scenarios more often explore the long view (Schwartz, 1991); how the current interests of various stakeholders might be modified by either known trends and discontinuities or future uncertainties (Wright & Cairns, 2011). However both are artefacts that explore narrative and identity, each is constructed with explicit and embedded notions of time and culture and both contemplate something different from the status quo. Therefore in this way there is a commonality in fashion, design and scenarios. Each presents a vision of possibility that either attracts or repels us.

At the Oxford Futures Forum 2014 a small group of designers and scenario thinkers explored this juxtaposition through the development of a scenario we called “Tailoring Voting”, which served as an artefact to be supplemented by our discussions. This scenario proposed for the election of politicians in Western systems to become more tightly related to consumption choices, and as a consequence would become closer to fashion in its practice than it was to the articulation of scenarios of coherent policy. From this juxtaposition and the scenario we created we framed the following research question: can the design considerations of scenarios on the one hand and fashion on the other might be understood and evolved through consideration of both their commonalities and their differences? In the paper, we discuss the theoretical issues of fashion design based scenario thinking from the perspective of the ephemerality of contemporariness (Section 2). Further to explore fashion-based transformations in scenario planning we propose a conceptual framework and introduce fashion-design transformation types (Section 3). Later we extend the Tailoring Voting scenario to discuss how decision-making processes may be transformed (Section 4). Finally we discuss the implications of connecting fashion design and scenarios (Section 5), which emerge from this particular scenario and the juxtaposition of fashion design with scenarios.

## 2. Fashion design and the untimely life of ephemeral experiences

The Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben explores many “constructions of time” in a short essay titled “What Is the Contemporary?” (2009). In section five he begins thus: “A good example of this special experience of time that we call contemporariness is fashion” (p.47). Fashion is therefore defined or pushed forward in a way that relates to Nietzsche’s concept of the untimely; “those who are truly contemporary, who truly belong to their time”. Agamben explains after reading through some of Nietzsche’s *Untimely Meditations* (Nietzsche, 1997 edition), “these are those who neither perfectly coincide with it nor adjust themselves to its demands” (Agamben, 2009, p.40). This suggests that there are some who can stand aside from the time that they are in and the constraints that it imposes. With this in mind designers, in the widest sense of that term, are both contemporary and untimely. They are able to look upon, identify and “grasp” the possibilities brought by a perspective that is at once inside and outside time, that is “now” and the future. Fashion, Agamben says – “the introduction into time of a peculiar discontinuity that divides it [time] according to its relevance [attualità] or irrelevance [inattualità], its being-in-fashion or its no-longer-being-in-fashion” (Agamben, 2009, p.47) – is perfectly untimely, and thus contemporary. Agamben adds another consideration of fashion’s contemporariness. Following the same gesture by which the present divides time according to a “no more” and a “not yet”, it also establishes a peculiar relationship with these “other times”—with the past and the future. Fashion can therefore “cite”, and in this way make relevant again, any moment from the past. It can tie together that which it has divided: recall, re-evoke and revitalise that which it had declared dead (Agamben, 2009, pp.49–50).

For the most part, scenarios and fashion events are constructed in a way that invites, as Ramia Mazé proposed it during discussions at Oxford Futures Forum 2014, to look for the future from a “supervalence” perspective (Mazé quoting Grosz, 1999), a means of stepping outside the experienced present, futurity providing a critical distance (Mazé, 2014, p. 1). This stepping out also refers to cultural thinker Lauren Berlant’s “supervalent thought”, which enables us to supplement ideas so that we can walk around them, to make a place for experimental thought that is “not only inconvenient to the reproduction of power and its symbolizations but to our image of power and the fantasies that make us think that we can make worlds for our idealizations” (Berlant & Cooke, 2013, p.695). Not to mention the seminal original but substantially different concept from Freud’s Dora case, “a supervalent thought is a thought whose meaning resides not only in its explicit phrasing, but in the atmosphere of intensity it releases that points beyond the phrase, to a domain of the unsaid. A supervalent thought produces an atmosphere in the world, makes an opening in the potential for apprehension, consciousness, and experience” (Berlant, 2007). Atmosphere or distance established temporally, such a perspective invites to “to re-examine the present but also to imagine, materialize, intervene and live particular alternatives” (Mazé, 2014). As a result, contemporariness would need to be extended and supplemented out of present actions.

This exploration of contemporariness provides an alternative framing for considerations of institutional identity and political arrangement. It is possible, then, to posit scenarios that suggest success in the contemporary political model (bearing in mind the complexities involved in what it is to be contemporary that we have highlighted above) revolves around the creation of new “collections” expressing the multifarious complexities of the values, meanings and practices designed through the reading of public sentiment, consumer choice mapping, Big-Data-mining and representation in the 24-h news cycle. This is what is/will be/might be involved in being political. The “untimeliness” of any political scenario will thus highlight the current plausibility of future possibility, which becomes more probable with every act of participation in the “collection”. These “collections” are political-material embodiments with politicians, consumers, voters, commentators and even objectors as mannequins: all offering pathways forward to serve the public interest as well as a camouflaging in the quest for access to the levers of institutional power. It is our contention, therefore, that the different ontological and transcendental actualities within which scenarios and fashion design operate can, indeed, become entangled, so that we are left with scenarios becoming fashion and fashion becoming scenarios at the same time, implementing to our issue Deleuze

and Guattari's perspective (Deleuze & Guattari, 1991). Where the points at which their "untimely" temporalities touch, offer new conduits for the change for each. This contains an important point for any manager seeking to encourage change through innovation in their organisation. The mapping, planning, setting on the journey and navigation demanded by any strategy becomes complexified in this entanglement, thus providing proof (if it were needed) of Serres's (1982, p.107) observation that strategy is first and foremost a *topology* and that the design framework that underpins any given set of scenarios requires consideration of complex contextualities, the nature of the transformation being considered and processes of change that are required. We have, here, already gestured at what will come later in this paper, it is worth taking a little time to consider the methodological and conceptual issues announced by this bringing of fashion and scenarios into collision, especially as they relate to change and transformation.

### 3. Ephemerality and transforming scenarios: Methodological and conceptual proposals

From a methodological perspective, both scenarios and fashion design can be developed from a longitudinal viewpoint. Linking the past, present and future, longitudinal theory of method developed by strategy and organisation theorist Pettigrew (1987, 1990) proposes a conceptual framework for the understanding of change processes. The purpose of the longitudinal method is to analyse in-depth change processes from polar cases in an attempt to reveal temporal interconnectedness. Both within the inner and outer context of change, the longitudinal methodology explores various multifaceted dimensions of change processes as they pertain to extreme situations, critical events and social dramas, and it pays particular attention to actors' moves and actions, in particular leadership transformations through time.

For fashion design as we have been characterising it here, the longitudinal approach offers the possibility to analyse the context of the process connecting inner rhythms and outer changes. Different levels of analysis help to go beyond historical chronology, as well as beyond events and products that are the visible parts of fashion design: to be both contemporary and "untimely" as we outlined above. From a future-oriented perspective, the main objective is to find novel models from and for fashion design. The longitudinal perspective views scenarios as action processes to be transformed (Marchais-Roubelat and Roubelat, 2008, 2011a) in a context of ever-changing rules (Berger, 1957). Within that framework, scenario methodology includes stakeholders' actions (Wright & Cairns, 2011) and transformations (including consumer behaviours) as drivers for change in action processes. This approach of valuing the creative feedback of key stakeholders and other actors, is familiar to that involved in design-driven/-led innovation, particularly the processes, practices and principles collected under the name of "design thinking" (Brown, 2008, 2009; Martin, 2009; Neumeier, 2009; Verganti, 2009; Lockwood, 2010; with a fine overview by Johansson-Sköldberg, Woodilla and Çetinkaya, 2013). It is noticeable that fashion has not been a strong participant in this "design thinking", however fashion firms have offered great cases of business model innovation (for example, Zara, Santos, Specter, & Van der Heyden, 2009; Hansen, 2012; Buck, 2014) that has many of the hallmarks of "design thinking": especially fast integration into product development of customer feedback through capturing, analysing and acting upon opportunities evinced by their consumption choices. In a comment that might otherwise have come straight out of a handbook of "design thinking" by design consultancy giant IDEO, Pablo Isla the chairman and chief executive of Inditex, the group that owns Zara as well as seven other fashion brands, says, "Our business model is the opposite of the traditional model [...] Instead of designing a collection long before the season, and then working out whether clients like it or not, we try to understand what our customers like, and then we design it and produce it" (quoted in Buck, 2014, [www.ft.com](http://www.ft.com)). If anything, the hyper-contemporariness of Zara's business model has disrupted the regular two stylistic updates per year (Autumn/Winter and Spring/Summer) of the traditional fashion calendar, to a much more complex four or more collections per year. As an analyst told Suzy Hansen in an article for *The New York Times* (2012), "They broke up a century-old biannual cycle of fashion [...] Now, pretty much half of the high-end fashion companies" – Prada and Louis Vuitton, for example – "make four to six collections instead of two each year. That's absolutely because of Zara" (Hansen, 2012, [www.nytimes.com](http://www.nytimes.com)). Between "understanding what our customers like", designing, producing, supplying, strategising for all this and making sure that you are not totally behind any of the future-facing trends enacted across the rest of the market, lies a complexification of time and space that we have been emphasising so far.

To address different time issues, we propose a typology of scenario transformation modes (Table 1, extended from Marchais-Roubelat and Roubelat, 2011a): transfer (shift from one scenario to another by framing new rules), stalemate (impossibility of voluntarily quitting a scenario), oscillation (going to and fro between several scenarios) and phase lag (one or several actors follow a rule other than that of the scenario). Each of these transformation modes can be used to frame the way a particular set of scenarios is designed or how it is evolved, depending on the action. A transformations architecture (Table 1) has been designed to connect short-lived transformations (often the subject of scenarios) and prospective fashion design types. In this framework, scenarios of the "transfer mode" will describe possible consequences of successions of ephemeral changes. Such descriptions are particularly important, for example, in scenarios that explore the rapid migration from enterprise architecture centric models to mobile enterprise application platforms. Stalemate scenarios refer to those that consider interstitial changes, stakeholders being trapped in routinized transient spaces, whatever their duration, either ephemeral or of a long one like in a slow fashion perspective. Oscillation based scenarios are organised through ephemeral cycles from recurring collections or random fashion, while phase lags are based on ephemeral recycling of past changes, such as vintage collections or one-to-one Big Data-based long tail. To these transformative categories we have added a further mode, that extends Eelco Runia's "fleeing forward" (Runia, 2010, 2014) and attempts to illustrate the notions of "untimely"

**Table 1**Transforming scenarios: ephemeral transformations and fashion types. (Adapted and extended from [Marchais-Roubelat and Roubelat, 2011a](#)).

Scenario transformation mode	Nature of transformation	Transformations architecture/prospective fashion design types
Transfer	Shift from one scenario to another by framing new rules	Successions of momentary changes/ever-changing novel styles
Stalemate	Impossibility of voluntarily quitting a scenario	Fragmented parallel short range changes
Oscillation	Going to and fro between several scenarios	Interstitial (transient spaces or spaces created by convergence) changes/slow fashion
Phase lag	One or several actors follow a rule other than that of the scenario	Ephemeral cycles/recurring collections Random mutations/random fashion Often linked to macro conditions of boom/bust
Fleeing forward	Sudden “event based” jump out of action	Implementation of theoretical model by those in power (workable or not) Short lived recycling of past changes/vintage collections (nostalgia—the myth of the cycle) Radical redefining of contemporary/jump into the unknown of attractive fashions

contemporariness described by Agamben. “Fleeing forward” suggests a jump into the unknown, producing a radical redefining of contemporary, where stakeholders would be attracted.

In the following section we explore how these different modes of transformation and prospective fashion types might play out either separately or together in the scenario we created for this purpose.

#### 4. Transforming ephemeral futures: Insights from Tailoring Voting

Designed during Oxford Futures Forum 2014, “Tailoring Voting” is a future-oriented conversation in three parts. It is centred on a scenario where the democratic process goes beyond mimicking (at least in the minds of some) the dictates of fashion; it actually becomes an on going and evolving fashion show. In this scenario campaign managers become fashion designers and the politicians the models. Success for both designers and models comes from persuading consumers to “vote”, seasonally through the purchase of products aligned to any given fashion portfolio. In this world both the offerings and the results are both captured and reflected through access to Big Data algorithms. Fashion, politics and voting thus become seamlessly integrated into peoples lives and reflect the values and choices they preference in the food they eat, what they wear and how they decorate their environments. If one accepts that cultural preference and identity are reflected through these choices and behaviours and there is considerable evidence that this is so ([Potvin, 2010](#)), then the future political environment would be more reflective not only of how we are but who we are becoming.

In exploring and evaluating this scenario, Section 4.1 discusses the driving force at work, as well as possibilities it raises: seasons’ collections, long-range decade specials or directions to be taken on issues of the moment. Section 4.2 examines the modes and nature of the transformations and their architecture, and Section 4.3 explores ephemerality through the looking glass of designers’ actions. From a scenario planning perspective the objective is to explore modality and understand how the rational and progressive is influenced by the ephemeral and instinctive. For design the intent is to explore new connections between fashion types to better understand both transformational capability and potential.

##### 4.1. Tailoring Voting: Ephemeral futures in data-driven politics

What could politics learn from fashion design within a context where Big Data would be considered as a driving force? This future scenario may not be as far away as we think. Imagine: Big Data is crunched in real time to give accurate characterisations of consumers behaviours based on evaluations of all their choices. What we buy, browse, “like” and retweet, on which side of the street we walk and the elements in our world on which our gazes linger, all of this Big Data and more is noted, captured and analysed. And what we buy, browse and so on, paints a picture of us, our selves, our identities. We become the result of the choices we make; even the choice to cast a glance over one person or brand, however fleeting. And the choices we make can be made to have affects for which we must be held responsible. Such an issue is rife in discourses of sustainability, but it can be taken further, diversified into other aspects of life.

Imagine further: it is a fact that participation in democratic process in the UK has been declining, with voting since 2000 lower than any time since 1945 ([UK Political Info, 2014](#)). If only 65% of those with the right to vote in the 2010 UK General Election, did so it seems that Big Data might solve the participation problem. As identity can be extruded from what Big Data knows about us this analysis can be extended to show political leanings. This kind of linkage is not unthinkable. Political research in the US in 2013 ([Wilson, 2013](#)) shows that drinkers of brown spirits were more likely to vote Republican, and drinkers of clear spirits Democrat. [Khan, Misra, and Singh \(2013\)](#) in “Ideology and Brand Consumption” identified particular everyday consumer choices with traits of conservatism. They write: “Our empirical results, based on extensive field data, provide strong evidence that more conservative ideology is associated with higher reliance on established national brands (as opposed to generics) and a slower uptake of new products. These tendencies are consistent with traits typically

associated with conservatism, such as aversion to risk, scepticism about new experiences, and a general preference for tradition, convention, and the status quo” (Khan et al., 2013, p.332). The assumption – for those in binary oppositional political systems – is that not choosing these things (that is, being open to the new, risk taking, engaging with radicalism) is therefore liberal or Democrat. Without having to enter a polling station, a future democracy may crunch our numbers to show how our choices determine a political position. Would be politicians of course work to promote consumer choices that would support their election. This “election through behaviour” has the benefit of ensuring that we, as consumers, are making a political choice every time we shop, and that the consequences of these choices will be expressed in the type of government that takes power. This is a world where every act of living in this world truly has political consequences.

This reduction of the political sphere – what the political historian Arnold Toynbee referred to as a society’s “master activity,” (Toynbee, 1961, p. 660) – to consumer choice, under one reading, reflects the decline of idealized liberalism and socialism (Runia, 2014) and the fragmentation of what little remains into multiple interpretations and approaches. This includes the extension of markets and market oriented thinking into spheres of life once thought beyond their reach (Freedman, 2005, p. 93) and the “identification of (the perception) of freedom without reference to its social consequences” (Sandel, 1998). However given rising income inequality (Piketty, 2014) there is a possibility of democratic societies losing their way, as labour, talent and capital collide (Martin, 2014). In this scenario the political sphere loses its centrality, its role as the “master activity”. The consumption-driven, Big Data-based ephemeral process would not necessarily mean the dead-end of thinking. Nor can we suppose that such market-based policy-making would not be challenging or competed for by new ideologies? Indeed the rise of a number of social media driven cause based movements would suggest otherwise. What might emerge from fashion design creates designed “snapshot artefacts” that have deep connection with the consumer or the citizen’s behaviour, and new patterns that would have to be supplemented or could be disintegrated through the slow fashion time of the living – beyond factitial – interactions between stakeholders.

#### 4.2. Routinizing ephemeral fashions and transformations

A number of issues emerge from this, we shall highlight two: first, how can we be sure to which political party each of our everyday, non-stop choices as consumers belong? Second, at which moments do we assure the removal of a government and the introduction of a new one, if politics is happening at every instant? If the political is really about fashion design, how does it express coherence in a world where the notions of style, trend and the future fuse, as expressions of innovation in rapid motion? Might it emerge as a series of collections, from a multitude of designers arranged around themes and presented through transient snapshots of the future? In a world where Spring/Summer 2015 collections can be seen parading through the Fashion Weeks of early Autumn 2014: moments of the future inserted “in the crannies of the present” (Whitehead, 1961, p.191). With its own stories of the future implanted in the drudgery of the everyday, politics as fashion at once materialises its strategic foresight (articulated as trend) and takes us on journeys that weave through presents and futures, and pasts, with old fashions recycled through vintage collections and “retro” references. All of this of course is informed and accelerated by Big Data: as it is crunched to highlight valuable one-to-one connections, or where to perform random mutations. In a future where *all* consumption is overtly, explicitly and intentionally political, the outcomes of political choice in terms of its relation to government need to be designed anew. Gone are the five-yearly road shows, television shows and party political broadcasts. In come the five-yearly (or fewer) catwalks, magazine spreads and product placements: narrative collections designed to express the varieties and vagaries of political possibility. This is not simply metaphorical. We posit that when crunching Big Data can determine with a high level of accuracy one’s tendencies, or can track patterns in the seemingly haphazard acts of everyday choice-making, these choices and tendencies need informing regularly and can inform, in a regular and open way, which ephemeral proposals from the long tail or from random fashion best reflect our views. Of course, the “catwalk” is just one vehicle for such an informing, and garments just one set of materialisations of political value.

Tailoring Voting is particularly useful as a construct for discussing the future of politics in a data driven world. Where data such as voters’ interests and preferences, shopping patterns and Internet searches, among others, become available to various political actors (who still rely heavily on one-dimensional electoral polls).

The future scenario we plot is one where Big Data meets fashion design processes, formats and outputs, and again meets with scenario transformation. It creates a new way of thinking about the way we construct and use time in future politics underpinned by Big Data. One of the implications of Tailoring Voting is the ability to play with different time frames in the same political sphere: regular seasons’ collections are supplemented by a succession of short-lived design expressions related to particular political issues or crises, incorporating as well the decisions to be discussed and made; decade-long special collections suggest interstitial changes between socio-political paradigms and the longer-term strategic enactments that these elicit. But it could go further. In theory, Big Data algorithms would suggest “specials” either routinized or randomised, to make seamless and unapologetic the connection between consumer behaviour and its political expression. There may be a reaction to this never-ending kaleidoscope of change, and one that is already taking place: the slow fashion movement. Yet there may be a way of articulating such a movement in a way consistent with the Tailoring Voting scenario, especially as both offer a new way to think about the political sphere through a long-range and sustainable perspective, while marketing specialists Sanjukta Pookulangara and Arlesa Shepard’s recent work (2013, 2014) proposed to introduce through slow fashion sustainability in fashion design.

Nevertheless, there appears to already be a backlash against data driven politics, where Big Data open a way of even though it has yet to reach its full potential. Some argue that big data is destroying the meaning of social action and politics

(Morozov, 2014). Lessons from the fashion world can be instructive in suggesting how this might be countered. A cyclical balance between baroque and minimalist styles can be observed in fashion: Thierry Mugler and Rei Kawakubo/Comme des Garçons in the 1980s, Martin Margiela and Tom Ford for Gucci in the 1990s, Marc Jacobs for Louis Vuitton and Rick Owens in the 2000s are characteristic examples on that. Abrahamson argues that in management, techniques and processes undergo similar cycles, as management fashion setters “continuously redefine both their and their followers collective beliefs about which techniques lead rational management progress” (Abrahamson, 1996, p. 257). We see such cycles already in the political sphere: Reganomics, Blair’s 3rd Way and Gorbachev’s *Perestroika* perhaps being illustrative. And that it will continue although the fashions will be more fleeting. Therefore seeing politics through the fashion lens might sharpen the consciousness of what is mutable or otherwise, by both the advocates of particular fashions and those who elect them.

#### 4.3. Designers’ actions: Is there a living cat in the box?

Design-driven innovation as articulated by the management scholar Roberto Verganti (2009) is based on the idea that every product has its own language and meaning and that companies might “make proposals to customers about the future” and use the style of products and services actively in order to drive radical meaning-change (one of Verganti’s main examples of this is the lifestyle product brand Alessi). To the dyad “company–consumer”, Verganti adds the “interpreter” as a key actor mediating meaning between technology, culture and business: and for Verganti designers play this role perfectly. In fashion, some leading interpreters in the press scene are traditional players in delivering meaning such as Anna Wintour from *Vogue* US and Suzy Menkes, now at *Vogue International*, but for most of her career at the *International Herald Tribune*. They can make or break the path of a young designer and it is impressive to see the extent to which companies tremble at their opinion (Brassett, 2012). Suzy Menkes is of particular interest here as by. By training she is a historian, and a great part of her reputation comes from her capacity to see patterns through time and escape the ephemerality of the present. Better still, to seize the present in the light of past and the future. However such traditional purveyors of meaning have been augmented in recent times by bloggers whose immediacy to the consumer of fashion design/meaning has had as much to contribute to the complexification of fashion’s chronology as business model innovators such as Zara. Designer Norma Kamali tells *Independent Fashion Bloggers* (2012), “We love what bloggers are doing to change the structure of how fashion reaches the consumer. They are truly pioneers of the fashion world, and it’s a pleasure to watch the evolution of that change” (heartifb.com). With fashion bloggers occupying front row seats at catwalk shows alongside their traditionalist colleagues, they are not only gathering power in themselves, but also being folded into the more conventional business systems that they once served to critique. Thus favor is given to those that can step above and beyond the myopia of the now; to suggest patterns that assist in sense-making and help shape meaning beyond endless choice.

Many “fashion” creations nourish close links with the art world and artists are seen as important collaborators and interpreters. Some extend these links and establish a dialogue between fashion and arts rather than just using arts as a way to promote fashion. Miuccia Prada is among this rare breed and the Karl Lagerfeld ironic spring/summer 2014 catwalk staged in an art gallery, is a delicious criticism of the “*liaisons dangereuses*” between both fields.

Fashion design suggests that consumer and fashion actors’ behaviours are driven by patterns that evolve through time and also are reflective of the times that they are in. Fashion culture theorist Rebecca Arnold writes that “fashion is always the product of the culture that spawns it” and yet still “needs constantly to stay ahead, to entice the consumer with the temptations of the new, to distract a culture satiated with imagery by creating visions that experiment with and challenge conventional morality” (Arnold, 2001, p.125). Fashion, like any design, emerges from cultural forms and matter, as well as produces them. The fashion industry is a system in which various designers test random, some vintage based, some that “flee forward” and some that are increments on the now. Through shows, magazines and TV channels they compete for attention, investment, and so on. Where complex feedback loops from customer purchase patterns, consumer bloggers turned industry professionals, and intermediaries (creative, interpretative) impact such a system in evolutionary, creative ways (Brassett, 2005, 2013, 2015). It is the more complex networked nature of the relation between society, culture, politics and design – fashion design in the case at hand – that gives the lie to Verganti’s somewhat traditionalist position that places visionary interpreter/designers/studio heads as the founts of all creativity and the only sources for meaningful disruptive change. The folding of space and time into convoluted and multifaceted Baroque-style patterns that we see at work in both scenario planning and fashion produce networks in which it is impossible to find the prime movers or efficient causers of any creative act.

By creating a deliberate collision between fashion and scenarios that results in a seemingly dystopian future for politics in Western economies, we have been able to explore new creative directions for what at first appears to be unthinkable and unconscionable: to abandon voting and leave choice in the hands of Big Data crunching. Perspectives on the fashion design system (beyond litany) including: the role of the interpreter, the need to understand patterns, evolution through dialogue, variety and refreshment of the actors, helped our understanding of both what is and what might be possible in our political systems. What emerged for us from the experiment we carried out at Oxford Futures Forum 2014 was the realisation that in a political world where the legitimacy of 20th century liberalism and socialism has been substantially eroded, there remains the opportunity to play a different game. While our scenario of sorting political choices from the Big Data that our everyday lives generate might not seem democratic in the traditional sense, it might push political choice-making, and therefore responsibility, into the consumer (and other) choices we make all the time. And there are many instances of political, social and cultural choices informing, if not directing, the consumer choices we make. The considerations, or problems, of power

and control are not solved in this scenario or the design that collides with it: they are differently manifest, and in being so they might uncover vested interests in different ways. Thus the notion of politics as fashion provides an alternative lens through which to inspect what appear to be fast changing dynamics, widespread disillusionment and increasing instability in the political sphere. It posits the questions: is the world merely a stage and are we just actors on it (apologies to Shakespeare) thus confining us to a journey into nowhere land? Or is there the possibility that humanity might rapidly create some kind of cross civilizational philosophical platform that will enable the kind of “political” synergistic decision making our near-term future requires? Moreover if we choose the latter, can the understandings that have emerged from contemplation of fashion politics suggest our systems must evolve structurally; to reprise Toynbee can the master activity (politics) be in a position to “diagnose and learn from its own prospects” (Toynbee, 1961, p 534). That said, variety is a clear characteristic of the fashion eco-system: agile fast-fashion companies like Zara, Mango or Desigual have disrupted the industry by integrating just-in-time logistics and creating rarity from a customer point of view; luxury fashion houses deploy their impressive marketing efforts to frame tastes each season, albeit by encompassing modes of engagement that occurred outside of, and antagonistic to, them; Uniqlo has been smartly integrating technology in product lines and marketing activities; and so on. In terms of politics, we can view the large fashion houses as geopolitical players, where small and emergent brands, such as ISIS dressed in black and other aggressive players try to combine old and new ideologies and products, to mix irregular strategies and classic warfare. Through and beyond Big Data there is room to introduce ever-changing innovations in strategic and design thinking.

## 5. Ephemerality, rituals and gurus. Implications for scenario planning and fashion design

During Oxford Futures Forum 2014, we developed a future-oriented conversation where different time scopes were interacting, with voting choices informed by “collections” following fashion-based modes of transformations, and political responsibility is stressed as an everyday consumer/citizen concern. In such a case, the seasons that have ritualised the fashion paradigm until recently – Spring/Summer and Autumn/Winter – would take on a different role as the paradigm within which fashion, its design and the meanings of it all shifts. As these temporal frames of the fashion design process are joined by longer trends of political change management, and these governmental rhythms are augmented and constantly challenged by the turbulence of continuous special collections and real-time consumer/citizen feedback, new rituals would result. Fashion design shows us that the relation between the different paradigms – contemporariness and newness, accelerating seasons and slow fashion, special collections and the art of the everyday – is an interplay rather than a competition. For the scenario process this suggests that more attention needs to be given to different time scales and rhythms and the role of rituals in futures thinking (Marchais-Roubelat and Roubelat, 2011b), in connection with the challenges underscored for fashion design (Eckman & Wagner, 1995). This shows that decision-making processes (such as the voting system of our example) are as fragmented and multi-layered as it is possible for scenarios to be (Wright & Cairns, 2011). For scenario thinking, the fashion design perspective as we have sketched it out can serve as a basis both to make sense of fragmentation, and to follow trajectories along a multiplicity of opportunities.

On the other side scenario planning offers fashion design a longitudinal methodology to assess how its paradigms may be challenged and transformed. If fashion rhythms, such as seasons and special collections, can be used to frame scenarios, scenario transformations suggest the need to discuss fashion design traditions, rituals and innovation processes at a systemic and worldview level (Inayatullah, 2008). Through scenario thinking, issues such as paradigm shifts, stalemates, oscillations, phase lags (Marchais-Roubelat and Roubelat, 2011a) and occasional fleeing forward into the future can inform new directions and rhythms, and render visible patterns in the ephemeral and interstitial creativity that can be utilised and manipulated for transformation in fashion design.

As Abrahamson suggests (1996), management literature is not exempt from the dictates of fashion, not to mention the rise and fall of strategic planning discussed by Mintzberg (1994). Scenario thinking as a management fashion has to be uncovered from that perspective too. Although it should be noted scenario planning has been reported to be extensively used “by government planners, corporate managers and military analysts as powerful tools to aid in decision making in the face of uncertainty” (Mietzner, 2005, p. 221), the analysis scenario planning functions and dysfunctions (Roubelat, 2009) reveals multifaceted practices and issues. This offers transformation abilities and mixes between its analytic and ideological functions. While the dramatic increase of the use of scenarios has been noted (Rigby & Bilodeau, 2007), its uses as well as its interest (“is it worth?”) has been extensively discussed (Inayatullah, 2009). In a mechanistic world view that privileges objectivity and reductionism, scenarios are often seen, as Napier Collins suggested, as “imaginative leaps into the future,” (Schwartz, 1991, p. xiii) and are thus seemingly unconnected to the world of spreadsheet-driven ideas and facts. It might also be because they explore context and exponential change beyond the control of the actors. In hindsight, the use of plausible, possible or probable scenarios, in a structural as well as a content sense, brings a speculative dimension to rational management progress that may or may not sit comfortably with the sense of external reality that is framed by accepted and often implicit epistememes. The implementation of scenario thinking often underuses the opportunity to step into a new epistemology—to recast paradigms trapped in a cone of plausibility (Miller, 2011) of human knowledge in order to imagine entirely different classes of “unthinkable” (Hames, 2007, p. 221) to “extend the boundaries of plausibility” (Kahn, 1966) and maybe to move beyond. As concerns about sustainability have come to the fore in cultural, social and political discourses scenario thinking has become more focused on responding to a particular set of known and challenging disruptive effects by stepping back or stepping down, rather than by stepping forward into spaces beyond those disruptive effects. This has

precipitated the appearance on the scenario equivalent of the fashion runway, a new style of scenario planner, future gurus who focus on the limits of the dominant western civilizational model, and propose the development of transformational narratives that explore the nature of time, form and identity as and through distributed or collaborative socio-economic constructs. These transformational narratives (for example: [Martin, 2006](#); [Porritt, 2007](#); [Rifkin, 2011](#)) might be described as dialogues at the intersection of scenarios and design, as they demand consideration of the possibilities lurking (sometimes disruptively, occasionally apocalyptically) beyond the knowledge limits of the current orthodoxy. When thinking about Herman Kahn who has been reported to have inspired part of Kubrick's doctor Strangelove, is this an oscillation? Or would it be the trend-based ability of futures thinking to produce guru thinking? But a forthcoming fashion could be the fragmentation produced by big data based "Tailoring voting", as applied to futures thinking.

Every scenario and fashion design creates equally ephemeral artefacts that emerge from the social milieu in which they are produced. In this sense, in modernity, they can be seen as expressions not just of "time" in every way that time can be defined but also as institutional constructs where Chronos and power are inextricably intertwined in a social economic mindset where profit is everything. Thus in a world where Chronos, contractual relationships, economies of scale and mechanistic thinking are taken for granted, fashion design is dominated by luxury commodity brands, cynical media interests and meaningless retail event calendars. In a similar way, scenario creation might be trapped in strategic rituals that rival fashion's rhythms and either reflect "an endless quest by managers for a paint-by-numbers approach that would automatically give them answers" ([Freedman, 2013, p. 549](#)), or are ignored by professional managers who believe that the strict application of financial controls, portfolio concepts and a market driven strategy are the key to success in a world of supply and demand so that "advantage could be gained from economies of scale and technological advantage, priorities set and functions coordinated" ([Freedman, 2013, p. 578](#)). Yet with every dominant discourse there exists, on the fringes, non-traditional players who use both fashion design and scenarios to explore alternative narratives, offering a kind of pseudomorphosis in their glimpses of futures to come, and creative transformations or disruptions required to get there. With the emergence of the networked society they can now reach beyond the power and engage in "crowd sourced" deep design, in ways that hitherto have not been possible. In one reading, they are therefore at the forefront of the reframing of social and economic forms and providing us all a societal reacquaintance with temporality, timing and tempo, that allows both the untimely and ephemeral.

## 6. Conclusion. Towards further connections and further research

Transience, seasonality and the "influencing" role of niche – and sometimes ephemeral – actors are not just an accepted part of the fashion design discourse, they are its *raison d'être*. In contrast in the world of policy and management where scenarios are commonly deployed, objectiveness, strategy and track record are privileged in a way that downplays the ephemerality that fashion design celebrates. However scenarios provide a mechanism for decision makers to explore the effects of rapid change and turbulence and to contemplate possibilities that go beyond the accepted paradigms. They are a device to give decision makers permission to think more freely. In this way scenarios draw the actors closer to the world of fashion design, whether they realise it or not. The difference though, as Eric Abrahamson suggests, is that the "beautiful and modern" of fashion design is replaced in the mind of the management thinker with the "rational and the progressive" ([Abrahamson, 1996, p. 255](#)). Unless the *raison d'être* of scenario thinking would be to be both "beautiful and modern" and "rational and progressive", to supplement contemporariness.

This difference can obscure important lessons. In fashion design, the focus revolves around seasonal innovation and short life special collections that, in the moment, explore the relationship between products and attention. These explore and make explicit on-going narratives that drive our sense of contemporary identity and the social values that underpin that identity. In fashion, experimental interventions, interruptions and changes are seasonally rehearsed and embraced as a way of involving the public in the strategic lifestyle decisions that being at the forefront of contemporariness demands. Thus fashion design as a material manifestation of events that have both duration and change as well as express the stability of identity, like scenarios, participates in acts of planning at a longer range than the now. This is highlighted particularly with respect to trends analysis, insofar as it enables the simultaneity of competing versions of existing design styles and future predictions as they are both performed through various collections. In the narrative structures of scenario planning and the materialisations of fashion's foresight there is an opportunity to explore alternative thinking about matter and form, change and stability.

What has been argued therefore is that an examination of the overlap between fashion design and scenario thinking, and a deconstruction of the concepts that sit in that confluence – including ideas about perspective, narrative, identity, causation and time – provide understandings and reflections for both disciplines that might not otherwise occur. For example, in our chosen scenario "tailoring voting" we explored the rhythms and timescales of the fashion design process, including the issue of rituals as an alternative commentary in order to narrativise the socio-cultural, design and political issues that are impacted by the current actualities and future possibilities of technology. We consider how these senses of time, including timeliness, might be incorporated in scenario thinking and counterpoise these differences with decision-making framed by big data. Further we suggest that scenario thinking is far more influenced by fashion design than it would admit to and that it can learn much from those whose approaches to prototyping and technology are often rapid, open, non linear and future focused. Beyond the ephemeral conversations that Oxford Futures Forum 2014 aroused, this offers further reflections and research for the futures field, as well as for the one of design.



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