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Nostalgia as inspiration for fashion design – Designing the present of future through nostalgia

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Abstract Nostalgia is a recurring theme throughout the creative process of many fashion designers (Mollow, 2004).

According to Tilburg, Sedikides & Wildschut (2015), nostalgia can particularly favour and encourage creativity. Thanks to their research on creativity and literature, based on a nostalgic daydream of the present and the future, they have come to the conclusion that nostalgia can be a very efficient tool to spur on a creative process.

But how does nostalgia fuel a creative approach in fashion design? How does the past merge with the present to formulate fashion’s future?

This phenomenon will be explored by using nostalgia as a starting point for the creative process of three designers, as well as for three of the author’s creative projects in fashion design: the 3D Tutu, the 3D dress and the mathDress.

This research aims to concretely demonstrate how nostalgia can be applied in the conception of a garment collection for fashion design students or professionals, and how to gain a deeper insight on this emotion without losing one’s self in it, or feeling overwhelmed.

Keywords Nostalgia, Inspiration, Fashion, Design, Creativity

Introduction
How could we forget a garment that evokes a memory even more beautiful than the events that actually happened? How could we fail to be moved by a garment that evokes our collective imagination, through the weaving of its intended use and sheer physical aesthetic? By applying the postulate that nostalgia is a common human emotion, we can affirm that it reaches our passions and as such, colours each person’s memories (Saint Augustin, trad. 1861). Should the emotion of “nostalgia” be included as a source of inspiration in creative curriculum in fashion design education?

Nostalgia, etymology, definition and semantics
The term “nostalgia” has Greek roots; it is actually made up of two combined words: nostos, “return”, and the suffix – algia (algos), meaning “pain, suffering”, and in its modern application means “a decline caused by the violent desire to return to one’s home country”.

So the term “nostalgia” conveys a feeling of sadness, caused by being at a great distance from one’s native country. It also evokes a wish to return to the past, the melancholia of missing a thing, a state, a life that one has known or had, or that one has not known or had; much like an unsatisfied urge. (www.cntrl.fr)

Recently, writer Milan Kundera has utilised this word in the sense of “the suffering of ignorance” in his novel entitled Ignorance, published in the year 2000: “You are far, and I do not know what you are becoming. My country is far, and I do not know what happens there.” The writer goes on to explain that, according to its Greek etymology, “the term nostalgia therefore is a suffering, caused by the unquenchable desire to return (to your country)” ; however, by observing the regionalisms of various European languages, many nuances can be observed in each language’s semantics.1

Nostalgia in fashion design – to convey a far-away (native) country, a by-gone era
Nostalgia is a recurring theme in the creative process of many fashion designers (Mollow, 2004). It seems obvious that nostalgia is a social phenomenon; clothing styles which imitate costumes of the past and popular films with nostalgic themes demonstrate that nostalgia can be experienced collectively. Davis (1979) explains that although nostalgia is a collective manifestation, it is also an emotion and that feeling

1 Milan Kundera further points out that because of its Greek roots, the majority of Europeans use the word “nostalgie”/“nostalgia”, but states many other terms with roots in the local or national language bring a different semantic.
nostalgic is an individual experience. In order to demonstrate an advantage of nostalgia, he further explains that when we feel the threat of uncertainty, nostalgia can act as an umbrella by “reassuring us of past happiness and accomplishment and, since these still remain on deposit, as it were, in the bank of our memory, it simultaneously bestows upon us a certain current worth, however much current circumstances may obscure it or make it suspect.” (ibid)

Among the designers and couturiers whose creative spark was fuelled by nostalgia, Madeleine Vionnet\(^2\) and Madame Grès\(^3\) both found tireless inspiration in an era neither of them had experienced: ancient Greece. Both of their signature styles were grounded in neo-classicism; one of the two used draped geometric shapes cut on the bias of the cloth, overtly inspired by formal elements of the Greek “peplos” (Kirke, 1998) while the other used tight, controlled pleats (pis Grès), mimicking antique architecture: silk was her marble and the woman’s living body, her column (Benaim, 2003).

Later, Christian Lacroix fills countless notebooks where he finds inspiration for his Haute Couture collections. The books contain numerous collages that evoke nostalgic, inspirational moments captured in his hometown, as well as artistic influences. His very first Diary of a Haute Couture collection (Mauriès, 1996), which he painstakingly elaborated after a friend’s suggestion during the Spring/Summer 1994, clearly demonstrates his creative process through an accumulation of collages showing various places, eras, patterns and textures, juxtaposed on each page, and eventually, on each outfit. His first Haute Couture collection diary opened on the enigmatic image of his birthplace (ibid). Lacroix, while creating his collections, was introducing a vision of our collective imagination; a vision of an imagined past, based on a number of visible seams.” (Fukai, 2002) Initially drawn to the world of sculpture, she draped her styles directly on the bodies of her clients, and cut directly into the cloth, without a pattern. The Grès style evoked “Greek costumes, and were presented without any ornamentation, embroidery or accessories. This deliberate choice renders her styles classics, in the true sense of the term.” (Seeling, 2000).

2 Practically unknown to the general public, Vionnet will own a fashion house from 1912 until 1939. She was an innovative business owner, who influenced the business world at the start of the 20th century. (Bissonnette, 2015) Hers was the largest fashion house of the between-wars era; at one point, she employed almost one thousand workers. (Demornex, 1990).

3 Alix Grès marked the fashion world from “the first half of the 1930, by consistently creating finely draped dresses inspired by ancient Greece and cut from silk jersey, by adopting a technique that allowed her to reduce the number of visible seams.” (Pukai, 2002) Initially drawn to the world of sculpture, she draped her styles directly on the bodies of her clients, and cut directly into the cloth, without a pattern. The Grès style evoked “Greek costumes, and were presented without any ornamentation, embroidery or accessories. This deliberate choice renders her styles classics, in the true sense of the term.” (Seeling, 2000).

4 Born in Arles in 1951, Christian Lacroix studied Art History at Université de Montpellier. Originally, Lacroix intended to become a museum curator – he became a couturier before coming back to his first love. His references to Arles were a recurring theme in his collections. In his creative process, Lacroix fills his notebooks, season after season, with references, collages, idea associations and drawings that help him create his next collection. (Mauriès, 1996).
Figure 1. Danseuse d’Herculanum, (museo Archeologico di Napoli), by Sailko (2016). Feminine costume – Dorian Peplos. Example of peplos wide wool rectangle draped: “the pleated top part can cover a first baggy effect formed by a belt.” (Boucher, 1965) The cradle of civilisation, antique Greece inspired the designer through the principle of cloth being draped over the body, thus allowing a vast range of motion and enhancing its natural curves, without any trickery. (Kamitsis, 1996).

Figure 2. Robe Hiver 1920, Modèle 700, dit “Robe Quatre Mouchoirs” (Four handkerchief dress) (c.1918). Photo Les Arts décoratifs, Paris / Patrick Gries, All rights reserved, c.2009. Inspired by the “Greek peplos, a simple rectangle of fabric fitted to the body with ties at the shoulders and a knot at the waist, that falls in graceful and supple pleats.” (Kamitsis, 1996).
Figure 3. Robe Hiver 1920, Modèle 700, dit “Robe Quatre Mouchoirs” (Four handkerchief dress) (c.1918) ¼ scale replica of the dress made by Pao Lim (2016) and photo by the author, 2016. Inspired by the Greek peplos, the Four handkerchief dress is held together “at its corners on the shoulders and sewn vertically on the bias”. (Golbin, 2009).

Figure 4. Robes du soir Grès en jersey de soie ou de viscose blanc (A/H 75-76, P/E 1975, P/E 1952, c.1962, P/E 1976, c.1956, P/E 1964), photo by the author, 2011. The inspiration for these dresses was Hellenistic statues; the pleating is cut and mounted on a base garment, which acts as a structure for the draped and pleated effect, as observed by the author in V&A Museum archives. During her six decades of creative output, Grès “worked obstinately on the same dress, always the same yet always different.” (Saillard, Lécallier & Cotta, 2011).
Figure 5. The Temple of Olympian Zeus, Athens (174 BC – AD 132), photo by AlMare – Retouched work from Chrisfi, 2008 (“List of ancient Greek temples”, 2016). The essence of Alix Grès’ work is the French neo-classical style, where silk was used as marble and the woman’s body, as her living column. (Benaim, 2003).

Figure 6. Anciens Monuments d’Arles en Provence, photo from Christian Lacroix: The Diary of a Collection by Patrick Mauriès, Thames & Hudson Ltd., London, 1996. Born in Arles in 1951, Christian Lacroix studied Art History at Université de Montpellier. Originally, Lacroix intended to become a museum curator – instead, he became a couturier. His references to Arles were a recurring theme in his collections. (Mauriès, 1996).
Figure 7. An example of the numerous collages from Christian Lacroix (1993), photos from “Christian Lacroix: The Diary of a Collection by Patrick Mauries, Thames & Hudson Ltd., London”, 1996. In his creative process, Lacroix fills his notebooks, season after season, with collages of references, idea associations and drawings evoking nostalgic inspirational moments captured in various places, eras, patterns and textures that help him create his next collection. (Mauriès, 1996).

Figure 8. 3D Tutu (2014), co-creation with May-Li Khoe, Ben Cramer and the author, photo by Christine Butler, 2014. Exhibitions: Matter That Moves, gallery Hotel Particulier, 12th September 2014, Manhattan, NY, and Making Patterns, gallery space of SoHoArt Culture District, 24th July to 17th September 2015, Manhattan, NY.
Figure 9. 3D Dress – Dynamism of a hand waving (2015), by 3dTrio (with Sasha de Koninck, Leila Ligougne and the author), photo by Stephan Moskovic, 2016. This dress was inspired by Cristobal Balenciaga’s sculptural drappings, between 1950 and 1960. Exhibitions: Re-Making Patterns, gallery space of Seaport Culture District, 10th to 17th September 2015, Manhattan, NY, and World Maker Faire New York, at NY Hall of Science, 26th & 27th September 2015, NY. The 3D dress was designed at Eyebeam and 3D printed at Shapeways.

Figure 10. mathDress (2015), organza silk squares dress and photo by the author, 2015. Model: Zola. An example of the algorithm created in Processing can be seen in the background, 2015.

Nostalgia as a starting point of a creative process in fashion design

According to Tilburg, Sedikides & Wildschut (2014), nostalgia can particularly favour and encourage creativity. Thanks to their research on creativity and literature, based on a nostalgic daydream of the present and the future, they have come to the conclusion that nostalgia can be a very efficient tool to spur on a creative process. This statement is observable in a number of fascinating fashion design examples through the 20th century, but also in my design work.

As a fashion designer, I have used nostalgia as a diving board to start various creative projects, namely two 3D printed co-creations and a bespoke dress.

In order to provide more context for this statement, the 3D Tutu was a first experimentation with 3D printing technology for all three collaborators. As we looked for the type of garment we would create, all three of us remembered our common experience of having studied dance in our childhood, and into early adulthood. The desire to create a tutu stemmed from this common memory. Comparing a 200 year-old tradition to a 3D printing technique and material never before used to create a tutu became our project’s leitmotiv.

In the case of the 3D dress, entitled Dynamism of a hand waving, the 3dTrio research group used references to Cristobal Balenciaga’s sculptural draping and on jacquard textiles. The shape of the dress’ hem is in fact the outline of a hand’s profile. This shape refers to the value of hand-made craftsmanship in the world of fashion.

In addition, the jacquard loom invented by Joseph-Marie Jacquard in 1801 has often been referred to as the “ancestor of the computer”, because of its use of perforated cards (Musée d’histoire de Lyon). 3dTrio aimed to pay homage to the traditional craftsmanship and methods employed in the world of fashion and textile, now being transferred to 3D technologies.

The mathDress is a wearable creation generated by an
algorithm programmed by the author in the Processing software. The juxtaposed silk squares echoes the see-through squares generated, their random colours and spin on themselves, as controlled by the user.

In this example, the starting point of the projects was a request by my daughter, who wanted me to create her high-school graduation dress; an important milestone in both our lives. Having visited an exhibition by Yohji Yamamoto, she gave me “carte blanche” to create a prom dress, which would enable me to express myself fully. The prospect of a “carte blanche” design was dizzying and made me want to take detours in order to gain a kind of distance; I therefore decided to program an algorithm in Processing.

Through the creation of the dress and by fitting sessions, I of course became aware of early memories of having watched my daughter grow up in the midst of my creations; but what probably surprised me the most, was that although I had often used draped silk squares throughout my creative work, the unconscious similarities with the work of Vionnet, which I had studied some twelve years previous, was quite striking. Not only is the “Four handkerchief dress” made of draped textile squares, hung on the bias, but the construction of the mathDress uses a similar assembling technique. The mathDress’ creative process is a concrete example of how the nostalgic state of mind can spur on creativity in fashion design, and produce quite unexpected results.

**Nostalgia in the teaching of fashion design**
Having studied fashion in three different schools and in various countries, I have observed that nostalgia isn’t an integral part of education in fashion design. However, I am convinced that the notion of nostalgia should be included in the creative curriculum. This is why, since last year, I have decided to add a nostalgia based project to my undergraduate classes in fashion design.

By allowing themselves to be consciously inspired by nostalgia through an association to a moment, a place, a person and/or emotion, the students are asked to develop a series of 5 t-shirts and conceptualise patterns and placement prints (abstract or figurative) that evoke their collection’s nostalgic spirit.

This five-week project is restricted time-wise, because after over eight years of teaching fashion design, I have noticed that students who choose sensitive and engaging subject matters have an easier time creating when a powerful emotion, such as nostalgia, acts as a bridge in their creative process.

Following this first analysis, I submit that in order to approach an emotion such as nostalgia, students should be asked to complete a relatively short project, of only a few weeks, which allows them to face and interpret the theme of nostalgia without stalling into a state of mind closer to melancholia. This way, they can add this tool to their creative treasure chest and it will in turn help to solidify, further and inspire their career as a fashion designer. According to numerous researchers, nostalgia seems to have many other benefits on creative work and on people. This fascinating emotion pushes me to further study the subject matter in my next research projects.

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**References**


5 The assembly technique of the mathDress is similar to that of Vionnet, namely in her Four handkerchief dress, which consists in placing the fabric squares, sewing them from the outside of the garment (rather than on the inside, traditionally) and letting the edges fall naturally to create the draping effect. (Golbin, 2009).


