The Dress: Temporality, aesthetic judgment and accomplishing identity in Parisian couture dressmaking

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“Tomorrow begins the anguish of living up to, and if possible surpassing yourself”

Who are we? When are we? How do we change, and yet stay and be recognised as (relatively) the same? Such seemingly simple questions have been at the centre of growing literature on identity in organization studies over last decades (Czarniawska-Joerges, 1997; Lerpold et al., 2007). While early accounts in the field saw identity as a relatively static and unitary phenomenon, which as such was open to manipulation by organizational actors toward distinct strategic ends (e.g. Albert and Whetten, 1985), more recent scholarly engagements begun to approach identity as a processual phenomenon. In particular, a number of authors, from Chia (1996) to Gioia and Patvardhan (2012), argued that rather than being fixed, organisational identities are always in flux, with change, not stability, as the empirical organisational reality (see Tsoukas and Chia, 2002). As such, it was suggested that in order to understand organisational identities in more nuanced ways, there was a need to attend to the daily flow of activity as it happened in relations, which also implied a sensitivity toward the temporal elements and features implicated in such processes of situated organising. In particular, as Hernes, Simpson and Soderlund (2013: 5) argued, “there is a need for increased attention to the various encounters in organisations characterised by emergence, playfulness and inquiry, and the dynamics by which such events reach back into the organisational past while at the same time weaving the fabric of the future”. Yet despite the acknowledged importance of investigating identity via the processual lens as a means of understanding the phenomenon in a more nuanced ways, with the exception of authors like Pratt, Rockmann and Kaufmann (2006) and Schultz and Hernes (2013), rich empirical studies exploring the accomplishment of identity in
action over time are rare. Rarer still are studies that investigate organizational identity on a ‘micro’ relational level, while also recognising and paying particular attention to distinct relations and objects implicated in such processes of becoming.

Building on this perceived gap in the literature, the article engages with a particularly notable empirical scene of action, namely the making of a centrepiece ‘Bride Dress’ during the preparation for the 2010 autumn/winter Jean-Paul Gaultier couture fashion show, as seen in Loic Prigent’s (2010) ‘The day before’ documentary. We do this in order to explore analytically how constant flows of creativity and/in interactions unfold to temporally accomplish an identity, via coordination practices through which joint sense and aesthetic judgement are negotiated and temporarily settled. In doing so, we engage with the literatures on process (Joas, 1996; Hernes and Maitlis, 2010; Schatzki, 2001; Simpson, 2009; Hernes, 2014), and organizational aesthetics (Strati, 1999, 2008; Guillet de Monthoux, 2004) in order to reflect on the temporally-sensitive and implicated process of relational becoming of not just the dress in question as an immediate object of negotiation, but also of Jean-Paul Gaultier (as a brand and as a particular expression of creative identity). Importantly, as we depict below, the direct question of identity is barely expressed during the process of creation observed. The actors, including the designer himself, do not explicitly ask themselves ‘is it Gaultier?’ at any point. They merely create, via relational negotiation, what they “like”, and what “fits”, now and temporarily, with a particular emergent idea of the “Gaultier signature”. Considering in depth the creation of the Bride Dress thus allows us to depict in a rich way both the crafting of identity via a particular kind of relational ‘identity play’ (Pratt, 2012), but also the temporal negotiations, aesthetic (re)accomplishments and precarious normative resolutions that situately accompany it. As a result, we give support to the analytical suggestion that ‘becoming’ in relation to identity is a constant relational search to make sense in a way that is still ‘you’, but a new you, i.e. to (re)make a particular sense of the past in the material present, in order to speak to a particular future self.

Process, identity and aesthetics: A literature review

Identity as a phenomenon has been subjected to increasing concern in the field of organisation studies in last several decades (Czarniawska-Joerges, 1997; Lerpold et al., 2007). In particular, the focus has been on challenging established notions of
identity as a stable, fundamentally cognitive expression, as suggested in Albert and Whetten’s (1985) classic depiction of identity as “that which is central, enduring and distinctive about an organisation”. As Hatch and Schultz (2002: 1004) argued, “organisational identity is not an aggregation of perceptions of an organisation resting in peoples’ heads, it is a dynamic set of processes by which an organization’s self is continuously socially constructed from the interchange between internal and external definitions of the organisation offered by all organisational stakeholders”.

Identity as a collective situated process

As part of this movement, identity has increasingly been explored processually, as a process of becoming, rather than a fixed being – a thing out there (Chia, 1996; Gioia and Patvardhan, 2012). As such, it has joined the growing ‘process school’ in organisation studies, as a loose collective of scholars inspired by process philosophers like Whitehead, Bergson and James, as well as Heraclitus, and “interested in understanding and showing how the world is a world of organising, how things swell, how life – including human lives – never reaches the settlement we presume or hope it might” (Helin, Hernes, Hjorth and Holt, 2014: 2; see also Tsoukas and Chia, 2002; Rehn, Strannegard and Tryggestad, 2007; Langley and Tsoukas, 2010). As Schultz, Maguire, Langley and Tsoukas (2012: 3) argued in relation to identity specifically, “conceptualising identity as process calls for other metaphorical images [than “essence”, “entity” or “thing”], such as identity as “flow” or “narrative” or “work” or “play” – that is identity as continually under construction”. In other words, the authors suggest that attending to identity construction in a processual way implies closely investigating “those processes of social construction through which actors in and around organisations claim, accept, negotiate, affirm, stabilize, maintain, reproduce, challenge, disrupt, destabilize, repair, or otherwise relate to their sense of selves and others” (ibid). Importantly, such processes are both temporal and spatial: they are of a certain time (including historical) and a certain space.

However, though much of the literature is focused on exploring how new firms create or establish an organisational identity (e.g. Lounsbury and Glynn, 2001), or established firms engage a novel identity in order to stimulate strategic change (e.g. Corley, 2004), so far comparatively little attention has been paid to studying settings in which continuous construction or reconstruction of identity is part and parcel of what the organisation and its work is about. Similarly, while considerable scholarly
engagement has been undertaken to address rising questions regarding managing organisational identities for external audiences, including branding and ‘corporate identity’ (e.g. Rindova and Schultz, 1998; Hatch and Schultz, 2001), similar engagements with unfolding processes of making sense of those identities in situ to begin with are relatively rare. Finally, considerable work has been done to situate identity analytically as a product of organisational actors’ narrative constructions (e.g. Czarniawska-Joerges, 1997; Rhodes and Brown, 2005; Brown, 2006; Ibarra and Barbulescu, 2010), for instance by newsmakers (Karreman and Alvesson, 2001), managers (Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003), lawyers and teachers who also manage (Simpson and Carroll, 2008), a rugby team on tour (Cunliffe and Coupland, 2012), or senior banking executives in the aftermath of the financial crisis (Mueller and Whittle, 2012). As Schultz, Maguire, Langley and Tsoukas (2012: 3) also argued, the great value of such recent research is precisely its relational and dynamic approach to understanding the phenomenon. However, while discourse-focused accounts are able to offer us more fluid, agent-driven depictions of identity construction, they nevertheless remain limited: telling us how members or others speak in relation to identities, but not necessarily how they do, in interaction.

We thus instead take a ‘micro’ processual view identity construction, one which attends to situated interactions by organisational members (see for instance, Pratt, Rockmann and Kaufmann, 2006). Such an approach crucially does not presuppose the organisation as an agentic actor (e.g. Glynn and Watkiss, 2012) but rather, in line with practice studies (see Sandberg and Tsoukas, 2011; Nicolini 2012), engages a relational epistemology in which members, in relation, negotiate, define and temporarily accomplish both organising and themselves. It also attends to the inherent immediacy of processual views attuned to flows of activity, in which identity itself can be witnessed and understood via “fleeting snapshots of a process in constant motion” (Gioia and Patvardhan, 2012: 51). In other words, it urges a return to “the inner becoming of things” as our subject of study (Bergson, 1911: 322, cf. Shotter, 2006). However, while attending to the flow of processual activity allows us to understand identity in the here-and-now, in order to engage with practice in a strong way (Nicolini, 2012), such ‘zooming in’ into the ‘micro’ of daily activity must also be met by a subsequent ‘zooming out’ (Nicolini, 2009), in which such activity is analytically situated in the midst of particular historical, institutional and temporal frames (which themselves are not stable, ‘out there’ things). This also echoes the
‘wholeness’ as one of the key aspects of processual thinking, that is the whole world as connected, rather than separated into distinct entities (Helin, Hernes, Hjorth and Holt, 2014; see also Sandberg and Tsoukas, 2011 on Heidegger’s concept of entwinement and the logic of practice).

The temporality of identity processes

Such an approach therefore necessarily requires that we take temporality seriously (see Ancona, Goodman, Lawrence and Tushman, 2001; Orlikowski and Yates, 2002; Hernes, Simpson and Soderlund, 2013). However, as Pratt (2012: 27) has argued, “while time is certainly not absent from identity research, it is often used in a somewhat static manner. […] In addition[,] beyond research on identity work or identity construction, explicitly theorizing about time in identity research is relatively rare, [while] empirically tracking identity in and around organisations is rarer still”. Nevertheless, or perhaps precisely as a result of such observations, such attentiveness has been argued as very much in demand: “there is a need to develop our understanding of the flow of time in identity and ask how past, present, and future are connected” (Schultz et al., 2012: 5). Schultz and colleagues go on to argue, building on chapters in their edited book, that “temporality might be studied either as shifting interrelations between self and others over time or as sequences of individual identity definitions, which are changing as the positions of individuals change from situation to situation” (ibid). However, such templates still risk a certain stability, which may be limiting when it comes to how we can better understand temporality in situ. This was also Pratt’s (2012: 27-28) critique, who argued that “past, current and future identities serve largely as guideposts for attention [in the present literature] rather than showing how present identities becomes (sic) past and how past and future identities become enfolded into the present”.

This echoes a central focus of the broader process community, in which scholars “stick with things and the experience of things, rather than reaching into a more certain, stable, and invariant world of ideas” (Helin, Hernes, Hjorth and Holt, 2014: 2). It also enables us to also speak to central questions in the process literature concerning tensions between stability and change. In doing so, in a tradition of Heidegger and Mead, we also importantly observe temporality as it unfolds, placing no a priori definitions or boundaries or what constitutes past, present or future, and seeing them as never-still and ever-reconstituted phenomena (Simpson, 2009; Hernes,
Instead, we leave room for members’ actions in context and their situated negotiations as standing for empirical boundaries and expressions of such phenomena as only ever that.

As a result, we take a different analytical approach, by focusing not purely on changing relational definitions, or indeed self-constructions, over time, but on both those processes *in situ* and in relation to a distinct object as material expression of identity: the Bride Dress. As such, we add a valuable *materiality or an object-sensitivity*, to complement the customary relationality and temporal sensitivity of the process approach. This is for instancevaluably explored by Schultz and Hernes (2013), who engage with Mead’s concept of “material of the present”, or objects through which past and future identities are brought together, though their analysis is focused on identity claims by managers in the LEGO Group, where material expressions like documents play a largely supporting role. In a process perspective, objects are not stable ‘things’, but rather continuously emerging artefacts that constantly evolve through uses, abuses, embezzlements, plays, modifications and recreations. They are thus relational in the sense that they do not exist ‘out there’ but only in relation with actors, as a manifestation of how they use it and who they are as users and makers. Organizational objects are therefore fleeting manifestations of identities. Consequently, they are not only ‘rational’ productions designed to express certain aspects of an organization in functional terms, but also creative expressions encompassing a strong aesthetic dimension, thus necessitating consideration of aesthetic judgement in such processes of becoming. It is to better understanding existing academic considerations of the latter that we thus turn to next.

*Enacting communal identities through aesthetic judgments*

Inspired by seminal works of Baumgarten and Kant, the organizational aesthetic approach has led to considerable academic work exploring bodies, sensory experiences, beauty, elegance, and sometimes ugliness in organizations (Gagliardi, 1990; Dean et al., 1997; Strati, 1999; Gherardi, 2000; Ewenstein and Whyte, 2007). Central to this approach has been consideration of aesthetic judgements by which actors subjectively express their appreciation (or lack there of) through arbitrary projections. As Strati (1999: 112) argued, “the constantly ongoing process of negotiation in everyday organizational life often involves assertions that are objective, universal and verifiable, but are instead utterly personal, one which convey something
otherwise unsayable. This ‘something’ is represented by their aesthetic judgements, which have little to do with explicit description of organizational phenomena”.

Aesthetic judgements are thus not singular and/or factual statements about what actions or objects actually are, but rather how actors perceive and appreciate them in situations. Consequently, aesthetic judgements are sites of negotiations on how to use, transform, shape or create organizational artefacts. As Strati (1999: 102-103) went on to suggest, “the process of social construction of these organizational artefacts displays the simultaneous presence in and organization of a plurality of organizational aesthetics which preclude the assertion of one single organizational aesthetic, namely the one desired by the dominant power group in the organization (…) Aesthetic judgement does not exert its influence on organizational life by virtue of its objective truth, but by virtue of the negotiative dynamics conducted so that it takes one form rather than another”. While being negotiated, aesthetic judgements can converge or become attuned to one another, allowing for a collective action to occur on shared aesthetic grounds. Importantly however, these grounds are not specified in a unitary fashion, but necessarily contain suppleness and difference.

Although inherently subjective, aesthetic judgements are, according to Kant, also “communicable” and “communal”. In other words, they can be, not only expressed, but also understood and shared despite their subjective natures. Aesthetic judgements fundamentally express the existence of an aesthetic community in which actors express similar or compatible appreciations: of beauty, of value, of what ‘seems right’ (Strati, 1999). These communities do not simply produce attuned judgments - these are constantly emerging through their expressions, negotiations, convergences and divergences. In this process, actors come to belong, enter or exit depending on the proximity of their judgements with the shared taste among an organization that partly defines its identity. Once again, this process is far from being stable. As Gherardi (2009: 535) argued, “the elaboration of taste (…) involves taste-making, which is based on ‘sensible knowledge’ and the continual negotiation of aesthetic categories”. According to Strati (1999), actors socialize themselves to the subjective, yet shared, truth of taste and beauty of the organization, and produce concomitant convergences through socialization, and differences through their personal interpretations.

When shared aesthetics emerge, convergences strengthen the identity of the collective. As Gadamer (1986: 39) argued in relation to arts: “the artist no longer
speaks for the community, but forms his own community insofar as he expresses himself. Nevertheless, he does create a community, and in principle, this truly universal community (oikumene) extends to the whole world”. Without necessarily extending aesthetic communities to the whole world, one can see with Kant the necessity for sharing subjective appreciations in order to maintain collective actions through relational experiences of identity. As Cohen (1985: 118) put it, people “construct community symbolically, making it a resource and repository of meaning, and a referent of their identity” (cf. Strati, 1999: 138).

Yet how is such communal and identity work accomplished in relation to situated processes of aesthetic judgement? Strati (1999) examines several aesthetic categories that have been identified in philosophy and that constitute “interpretations of the lived present and of the imagined future, as if they were co-present in the man’s aesthetic understanding of that particular organizational life” (Strati, 1999: 118). In our case, ‘beauty’ and ‘sublime’ are highly relevant, and constantly used expressions in the fashion industry. The first one, according to Strati (1999: 130), “relates to feeling, to the imponderable and inexhaustible, and it is endlessly reinvented (poieîn)”. As for the second one, “the sublime highlights the beautiful in organizational life, but it does so by imbuing it with mystery, sentiment and turmoil. Rapture and turmoil together characterize a person’s intense aesthetic participation in an organizational event, and the pathos that it arouses in him/her” (Strati, 1999: 187).

Beauty and sublime are particularly extreme aesthetic categories that will require for actors of the community to have strong cohesive aesthetic judgements on and about what they do and produce. The objects that emerge in these contexts will become ephemeral statements of what the organization is, who actors are, and how they come to define themselves as “this-not-that” (Sacks, 1980). As they evolve with negotiations of aesthetic judgements, these objects will function as temporal enactments of the organizational (or member, in ethnomethodological terms) identity. They can be as stable as a logo (although representations and emotions attached to it constantly change), or as ephemeral as last season’s dresses. In order to explore them in attuned ways however, attention to their situated accomplishments in situ is needed.

**Methodology and empirical setting**
As briefly described above, this paper takes as its empirical source Loic Prigent’s documentary series ‘The day before’. In particular, we have specifically chosen Prigent’s account of Jean-Paul Gaultier’s fashion show as a unique and particularly analytically compelling case study (see George and Bennett, 2005), or single-case narrative (Abbott, 1992), in which to examine empirically processes of identity construction and aesthetic judgement. We thus employed a theoretical logic of sampling (Glasser and Strauss, 1967), in which we made use of an existing case (a documentary) - one that we had no involvement with as researchers, but which we nevertheless felt could tell us valuable things about our phenomena of interest. As such, our empirical employment of a case study approach is somewhat uncommon. This is not because we defined and approached a specific case analytically by first asking ‘what is this a case of?’, as common in inductive case research (Blumer, 1969; Becker, 1992), but because we rely on a case ‘out there’ – one which we did not create ourselves, but consumed and interpreted without access to its underpinning ‘data’, that is the material not seen in the final documentary (see Ragin and Becker, 1992). Therefore, though we would suggest that employing this particular case to empirically examine the phenomena under question is analytically justifiable, it does imply certain limitations regarding interpretive validity, as well as more obviously analytical generalisability, which we wish to openly acknowledge.

In particular, this documentary allows us to richly see action as it unfolded, but we cannot claim that this represents in any way ‘all’ of the action, or meaning, that was observed, or can be said to be the case. In order to address this, following Becker’s (1998: 103) advice on dealing with secondary data, we reflected on “where the data came from, who gathered it, what their organisational and conceptual constraints are, and how all of that affected what the table [or in our case film] I’m looking at displays”. In addition, we cannot and do not wish to claim that what we analytically conclude is present in all organisational settings, i.e. that we can generalise beyond this case. In this way, though analytically rich, our case here echoes the problem Becker (1998: 70-71) identified as commonly faced by archaeologists and palaeontologists: “they find some bones, but not a whole skeleton, they find some cooking equipment, but not the whole kitchen; they find some garbage, but not the stuff of which garbage is the remains”. Both points are explicitly addressed in the final section, as part of our acknowledgment of necessary limitations of this study.
That being said, though the use of documentaries and films more broadly speaking in organisation studies is still relatively rare, a number of scholars have increasingly engaged with such material, as part of a movement toward understanding organisations differently or more richly by exploring new methods by which we could come to know them (Foreman and Thatchenkery, 1996; Hassard and Holliday, 1998; Champoux, 2001; Buchanan and Huczynski, 2004; see Buchanan and Bryman, 2007). This has been especially valuable in relation to settings that are usually difficult to access, such as back stages of fashion shows depicted by Prigent, which have thus far remained underexplored in the literature in relation to unfolding processes of creation. In particular, using a ‘fly on the wall’ approach enabled by exclusive levels of access, Prigent depicts in rich detail the final twenty-four hours before a fashion show for a range of designers showing their 2010 collections, including Jean-Paul Gaultier. In particular, he and his camera men and women follow the designer or designers across their atelier as they make their final preparations, depicting how they engage with their staff, work with models and clothes, make sense of what they are going to do, reflect and occasionally break down as well. As Jean-Paul Gaultier notes when asked why he accepted being followed by Prigent, “we see many fashion journalists who are fashion journalists, which is fine, but they will only be able to talk about the flounce or the length. He sees it differently, as something social but with humour and distance while having a good understanding. All that is very pleasant, to meet someone who has something to say, and says it well. And in the end, it is not my movie, it’s his. I was very moved when I watched it. Seeing things and people that I hadn’t noticed, talking in a way and about certain things that I didn’t know how they happened”.

In other words, Prigent’s gaze is valuable precisely because it is not merely another depiction of fashion’s well-known ‘front stage’. Instead, he also depicts that which is rarely seen: by the public, as well as those closest to the process, including the designer himself. Through Prigent’s eyes, we are thus able to follow and see the doings, thoughts, laughter, stress, and private moments of a range of members within the atelier as they prepare for the big show, from seamstresses to interns, models to heads of PR. Indeed, it is the visual tracing of their mutual interactions over this time period that allows us a unique insight into this normally largely unseen domain of creation and creative work. In addition, we also see the backstage of the show itself, as well as the media, buyers and other ‘front stage’ (Goffman, 1969) actors as the show itself commences and the work comes to its final (immediate) end.
In doing so, the study meets some of the suggested ways in which processual scholars are encouraged to attend to the empirical settings under their gaze. For instance, Helin, and colleagues (2014) noted that “process philosophy encourages us to follow the goings-on of organisation, finding a world of swelling, falling away, erupting, and becalming without rest”. In other words, taking inspiration from process philosophy in empirical work necessitates attunement to the ‘sound and fury’ of activity as it unfolds, paying as close attention as possible to the relational twists and turns, and letting them speak by attending to the how, without bracketing what they might be saying a priori. Furthermore, Gioia and Patvardhan (2012: 57) noted that “we are inclined to suggest that a comprehensive study of identity-as-process would be well served by capturing both the snapshot quality of identity, and the motion-picture quality that details the processes of patterning and construction that lead up to (and also constitute) these snapshots”. In other words, the implied suggestion here is that in order to capture the analytical nuance needed, examining such processes within a specific, notably rich context of activity, i.e. a compelling case study is needed (see Ragin and Becker, 1992; George and Bennett, 2005). It is precisely this ability to both observe individual snapshots, in this case, the Bride Dress as a particular material expression, and the motion picture of relational activity of creation as it unfolds, that Loic Prigent’s ‘The day before’ documentary allows us to attend to.

**Scenes from ‘The day before’: Jean-Paul Gaultier and the Bride Dress**

“It is all the time a sort of … yeah, a sort of schizophrenia … we are never in the real time. Fashion is like that, it is about always being ahead, upstream of time. It is a relationship with time. The fragility of time. That’s what fashion is: time that is passing”

(Jean-Paul Gaultier in Prigent, 2010)

On the first day of July 2009, Jean-Paul Gaultier has just finished presenting his 2010 men’s ready-to-wear collection. The post-show festivities are barely coming to an end, but Gaultier already has to start putting together his *haute couture* collection. This fashion show will be the most important of the year, and is scheduled for the afternoon of July 8th. Though Jean-Paul Gaultier has only 7 days left, there are no dresses ready – or even close to being ready. Despite this, the atelier appears busy,
but calm, since not being fully prepared a week before is the apparent norm for haute couture. Dozens of dresses are in the process of being put together, but no one knows which ones are going to be on the runaway in seven days’ time – not even Jean-Paul Gaultier himself.

Setting the scene: Jean-Paul and the stakes of showing fashion

At the very beginning of his film on the preparation of Jean-Paul Gaultier’s 2009 haute couture fashion show, Prigent tries to somehow summarize the “Gaultier signature” as a fixed, though still elusive aesthetic expression. He highlights striped jersey patterns, sharp cuts, skirts for men, and a taste for provocation. Alongside this synthetizing attempt, illustrations are offered. These strikingly show how constant, yet still different the renewal of this “signature” is.

Although in 2009 Jean-Paul Gaultier is an extremely successful designer, whose house not only sells clothes, but also accessories and perfume, every collection is taken as a new challenge. As Prigent (2010: 4’30) puts it: “nothing is already won, and this collection will have to be the essence of the Jean-Paul Gaultier style. It must again seduce, move and astonish the crowd”. In addition, fashion shows are not simply predictable presentations of outfits for buyers and journalists; they are an event through which fashion is created and designers are (re)defined. For a designer as famous as Jean-Paul Gaultier, the stakes of an haute couture fashion show are extremely high. Once on the runway, each piece of the collection will be dissected, evaluated, discussed, criticized, published (or not), and bought (or not). Consequently, intense attention is paid to each dress put together. It is therefore even more
remarkable that, despite such high stakes, least of all for the fashion house’s bottom line, no dresses are yet ready for this show.

Indeed, given such stakes, one might expect to find a finely-tuned organizing machine to manage and support the designer, in order to ensure the show will be a success. All the more since these are complex events to produce, which require multiple actors to coordinate (Bazin and Korica, forthcoming). Yet, as Jean-Paul Gaultier himself recognizes: “already at my beginnings, I was known to be the worst organized, which is true. We were very few, and I really am not organized. Sadly I had to learn… this is very difficult, organization. And me having to organize other people! That’s even harder” (Prigent, 2010: 6’). Yet despite such misgivings, since everything is created on site without external contractors (a rarity in today’s world of fashion), Jean-Paul Gaultier has to organize other people, and quite a few of them too. Importantly however, as we will see, designers work in extremely close collaboration with their seamstresses in the atelier, relying on their expertise to produce what they have in their minds. As Mireille, Jean-Paul Gaultier head seamstress, puts it: “We are the hands, and he is the head” (Prigent, 2010: 8’20).

Creating a fashion show: Creative processes inside Jean-Paul’s ateliers

Importantly, every designer is different in his or her way of presenting ideas and producing dresses. Some draw, others stitch, while Jean-Paul Gaultier mimes and constructs dresses in space, working directly on live models. As Prigent (2010: 9’) puts it: “(he) is going to work without drawings or sketches. He will question the structure, proportions, matters”. This leads to an appearance of chaos around the model, in the process of which fabrics, structures and accessories are assembled, tried, displaced, modified, thrown away, and taken back constantly. As Mireille describes it, “nothing is definitive, we are researching” (Prigent, 2010: 9’20). As head seamstress, Mireille has to assist the designer during his corporeal creative storm, by following instructions, offering opinions, jointly experimenting on ideas, and, most importantly, memorizing corrections and additions in order to then explain to the other seamstresses what needs to be done. As seen below in the stills from the documentary, Jean-Paul does not make it easy: “today, as always, the imagination of the designer goes faster than the hands of his atelier” (Prigent, 2010: 9’40).
Crucially, through the collective and continuous creation process, Jean-Paul Gaultier is looking for something that “fits”, an aesthetic that satisfies him. Although he would never present a dress he does not want to, he is often reminded of the deadline for the fashion show itself. Thus, the out-of-time temporality of creation here coexists with the linear and constraining temporality of logistics and of pragmatic concerns. Equally, the energy deployed around dresses is as much about creating outfits, as it is about building a collection and presenting oneself. To Jean-Paul Gaultier, “that’s what is so extraordinary. The fact of so much attention, so much work, so much thinking, so much care, for something so ephemeral. That is beautiful as a gratuity act, not really because there can be repercussion afterward, though that can also be disastrous. Sometimes with a collection, one can completely screw himself, and maybe sometimes the company at the same time” (Prigent, 2010: 10’30).

In addition, this attention creates a temporality of its own, which is not oriented toward the fashion show, but rather toward the open-ended emergence of a dress that does not exist until a feeling of satisfaction is reached. Although inherently based on the quest for this aesthetic satisfaction, we see in the documentary that many other factors interfere. Otherwise, this process of creation could very well never end. Since perfection is only a fleeting criteria, non-creative constraints will help the creative process to unfold and produce or settle itself in a particular time and a
particular object – this show’s definite future. In Gaultier’s own words, “there is always something to do, to improve. It is mainly a search, I think. I remember a trench I did that took 30 fittings. 30 fittings, but that’s what it is. We could easily never come to an end. It is the search for perfection. Does it exist? Do we need it? That I don’t know…” (Prigent, 2010: 11’).

During the preparation, Jean-Paul Gaultier sees dresses as they come back and forth from the atelier. He works on them with Mireille and a few other people and when they reach a certain satisfaction, they go back to seamstresses who will to cope with the requests and expectations. Jean-Paul Gaultier is obviously at the centre of the creative process, but he heavily relies on Mireille to exchange ideas. Watching them work together gives an impression of deep tacit understanding, as she seems to often materialize ideas before Gaultier is able to express them. The head seamstress therefore does not only have an organizational function in-between the designer and the atelier, she is also part of the on-going flow of creation around each outfit. All along the creative process, she actively contributes to the constant emergence of the designer’s aesthetic, creation, and therefore identity.

However, although Gaultier is aware of technical constraints from experience, they are never taken into account a priori. As one member of the atelier confesses: “what he really precisely wants is far from obvious. And (the veil of the Bride dress) has to hold by itself… and that’s impossible”. (Question: Does it exist ‘It’s not possible’ for Mr Gaultier?) No (laugh) no, no” (Prigent, 2010: 15’55). Yet, constraints will be included in the creative process, or impose themselves upon it, as we will see.

In particular, that night, the collective process encounters an unavoidable breakdown. The French legalisation forbids shifts over 12 hours. Consequently, seamstresses who have been working on “their” dress all day have to turn them over to the night crew. This episode is always stressfully expected, and the discussions at the moment of transfer are always tense. As Jean-Paul Gaultier recalls: “I saw once, we had hired freelance workers to continue working on dresses (at night). When the [in-house] seamstresses had the dresses back in their hands, their dresses, when they saw the result…. it couldn’t have been that bad, but for them it was not as they would have done it. They undid everything. And we almost risked… there were models [dresses] that we couldn’t progress. Because the seamstresses were angry to see how it had been done by other hands. Everybody has her own hand, that’s the story“ (Prigent, 2010: 24’30). Breakdowns like this show how much creation of
dresses is never a simple succession of ideas, orders and technical application, but a constant process of interactions and relational collaboration, unfolding around central artefacts that are the dresses.

Although not constrained by the same legislation, Jean-Paul Gaultier leaves the atelier late a night for a few hours of sleep. When he returns in the morning, the dresses have evolved, both because of the work of the night shift, and because of corrections of seamstresses who already came back. 23 dresses still need to be finished before the show, which is scheduled for 3 hours later…

The show’s dashboard 3 hours before (dresses marked in red are still outstanding)

Creating ourselves: The Bride Dress as it emerges

Within any fashion show, one particular dress is more important than the others: the Bride Dress. The Bride Dress is usually shown at the very end, before all the models come back to the catwalk, and the designer bows. As Prigent (2010: 8’30) explains: “a specific attention is paid to the Bride Dress. It closes the show, synthetizes the collection. And it must be a peak of emotion for the high maintenance clientele of haute couture”. For this season, the overall theme chosen by Jean-Paul Gaultier as an inspiration is cinema, and specifically major mythical actresses. Consequently, there will be a “Garbo dress”, a “Bacall dress”, a “Marilyn dress”, and so on. As a synthesis, Jean-Paul Gaultier wants the bride dress to be cinéphile: he will project faces of these actresses on the veil while the model walks the catwalk. One of the seamstresses emphasises its poetic importance: “It’s magical, the bride. It is magic… It shall not be a failure…” (Prigent, 2010: 8’44). Yet, 24 hours before the show, the Bride dress is as far from being finished as the others.

At 10.30 on the day before, the bride dress comes back from the ateliers for a fitting. At this stage, it has a large veil with film roll on its side, which starts from the waist and goes up to form a rectangular movie screen around the model’s face, and
then floats freely in her back. A muslin flounce surrounds her waist and falls down alongside her legs.

Not satisfied with the veil, Jean-Paul Gaultier also questions the flounces around the waist: “Not sure it brings anything… I don’t know… Don’t know, don’t know, don’t know…” (Prigent, 2010: 9’33). They try to remove the muslin flounce, which brings out the golden spangle underneath.

Although Jean-Paul Gaultier is pleased with the result, he still does not like the structure of the veil. “I think what doesn’t work, sadly, is the ‘big screen’ effect” (Prigent, 2010: 9’33). They hesitate before removing it, as the veil is an unavoidable element of any bride dress. Jean-Paul Gaultier cuts things short after some hesitation: “The projection will be enough. Let’s drop it” (Prigent, 2010: 9’41). Mireille and
Jean-Paul Gaultier go around the model to dismantle the veil. While they remove stitches, he tries to drape it around her. While draping, the fabric of the veil is reshaped into a more classic structure resting on the model’s hair and going down around a head to her shoulders.

Shaping a conical veil from the model’s shoulders to nearly 50 centimetres above her is attempted. They like the idea. Yet, the structure to hold it up is not found. The seamstresses will have to find a solution back in the ateliers.

Almost 10 hours later, the dress comes back for a new fitting. The seamstress and the milliner, who are coming to present the results, are waiting before the fitting room, feeling stressed. As the milliner says: “We’re not relaxed (stressed giggles), what he really precisely wants is far from obvious. And (the veil of the Bride dress) has to hold by itself… and that’s impossible”. (Question: Does it exist ‘It’s not possible’ for Mr Gaultier?) No (laugh) no, no” (Prigent, 2010: 15’55). To cope with the stress, the seamstress jokes about Mireille being their “mummy” because they are scared to go present their work to Jean-Paul “daddy” Gaultier. They finally enter the fitting room after 10 excruciating minutes.

Although many elements remained, the overall appearance and shape of the dress has evolved. The conical veil has been adopted, and a holding structure of sorts found. The latter requires a new hairstyle to support the veil standing high enough.
At this stage, the dress has taken a new form. Beyond the new conical veil that finishes in a sort of cape, the muslin flounce is now around the chest of the model and the belt has disappeared. They struggle with the hairstyle that has to be perfectly right to avoid wobbliness. Moreover, the matter of the veil as a projecting surface remains an open question, because it will need to be thick enough for the projection to actually appear. While draping the model, Jean-Paul Gaultier thinks out loud: “Or… why don’t we do a stripe? Maybe a stripe with the same fabric…” (Prigent, 2010: 15’56).

Although the new state of the dress is appreciated, further improvements and changes are suggested. The milliner goes back to the atelier with the dress at a fast pace: “There isn’t much time left. That’s the issue…” (Prigent, 2010: 16’04). They seem sceptical about the deadline more than about the technical feasibility or the potential beauty of the result. But they hide their emotions to the designer and the head seamstress:
Around midnight, as dresses come close to some kind of satisfactory levels, the question of presenting them on the runway arises, and again brings its own problems. For the Bride Dress, Gaultier projecting faces of major actresses on the veil emerged as a key component of the ‘right’ aesthetic expression by the designer now. But a little before 1 am, during the first rehearsal, they realize that it blinds the model, who cannot walk.

The blinding projection on the veil of the Bride Dress

Since cinema is the central theme of the show and of this season, they feel the projection cannot be avoided: it is essential. Surrounded by the stage producers (in charge of the show’s scenography) and a few people from the company (PR, communication, sales), Gaultier expresses his anxiety, and brainstorms. Solutions are sought both on the technical side (modifications to the scenography of the show), the human side (changing the model), and the outfit (modifying the dress). This is suggests that the dress is not merely the fabric itself: it is a particular material
expression according to a certain vision, in certain space and time. Gaultier himself is concerned: “She cannot see anything… Will she be able to walk? (...) She looks completely terrified. Worse comes to worst, if it is slippery and risky, we could plan for someone to go with her… I wonder if we should take another girl…” (Prigent, 2010: 26’20). Despite the efforts of Gaultier, his head of technicians and a few other people, no definite solution is found, though the possibility for two assistants holding her hands appears to be more or less agreed. The Bride Dress goes back to the atelier with a new constraint to take into account.

Around 9.30 am, as the Bride Dress continues to be worked on, a Bride hairstyle has been found to properly hold the veil and aesthetically please Gaultier. As other fittings will have to be done to finalize the dress, the model has to be prepared in the morning by the hair stylist.

When Gaultier arrives around 10 am, he discovers the modifications of the Bride Dress. He seems satisfied with the ideas and solutions found without him: “Ok, so we don’t do it like that anymore. It’s way better this way. And is it higher than that? Because there is more length here…” (Prigent, 2010: 33’15).

As the fashion show is about to start, the creative temporality must come to a particular end, that is a particular present. Dresses that found their way into existence are going to be presented. Others that encountered obstacles had to be left aside, for reasons as diverse and trivial as not being possible to assemble, not producing a result
appreciated by Gaultier, or even not having a model on which they fit correctly. At that point, only details can be modified and yet, until the very last minute before models enter the runway, Jean-Paul Gaultier will try to perfect them: make them ‘fit’.

Last minute changes while the Bride Dress enters the runway

Gaultier himself recognises that the creative process has now come to an end: “It is done, there is nothing we can change. Even I we wanted to, we can’t. Plus, it is pretty good like that, honestly” (Prigent, 2010: 45’20). Importantly, after days of searching for perfection, aesthetic satisfaction thus seems to impose itself as more a result of temporal necessity of particular fixation, than a universal sense of normative ‘rightness’ that exists outside of time.

Discussion and tentative conclusions

Building on the key scenes presented above from Prigent’s documentary in relation to the Bride Dress, we can draw a number of early analytical conclusions. Firstly, we suggest that in this setting, the temporalities of creativity and identity are empirically and analytically expressed as rearranging the future by arranging the dress in the now, which at the same time involves perpetuating or making present a particular past (an elusive but very present ‘Gaultier aesthetic’). This echoes the definition of agency proposed by Emirbayer and Mische (1998: 963), that is “as a temporally embedded process of social engagement, informed by the past (in its habitual aspect), but also oriented toward the future (as a capacity to imagine alternative possibilities) and toward the present (as a capacity to contextualise past habits and future projects within the contingencies of the moment)”. However, it importantly departs from this somewhat structuralist definition (see also Orlikowski and Yates, 2002 on ‘temporal structuring’) by emphasizing the emergent, processual nature of such elements, in which past, present and future, as well as identity, are
perpetually becoming in relation to *collective aesthetic judgements* and *notable emergent objects*, which act as only-ever-momentary instances of otherwise-precarious structure. Namely, the past of Jean-Paul Gaultier’s previous collections does not have to continuous in the exact shapes and colours and every aspect of each dress. Instead, what we would suggest was recounted above is evidence of the continuation of the past that occurs in each situated instance of practical aesthetic judgment – pin the dress like this, not that; express the veil like this, not that; do we include some stripes or not – without the reproduction of a single specific past. Put differently, in each instance of aesthetic judgment, the highly relevant past is made anew. We therefore depict the creation of the Bride Dress as a temporally-informed story of becoming and being (of something, not something else) via a perpetuation and redefinition of taste or aesthetic judgments, as opposed to material expressions or affordances as settled normative accounts. In the flow of creativity, a dress emerges. This becoming in the present triggers a becoming of the future, as well as re-arranges the becoming of the past. Crucially, these are all situated, in-the-moment accomplishments: if the past, present and future become fixed (or structured), they do so only in relation to a certain temporal cut off (the time of the fashion show) and in situated aesthetic judgements made as the process evolves. Such an analytical conclusion therefore stands distinct from practice-informed empirical investigations of ‘temporal structuring’ by authors like Orlikowski and Yates (2002), for instance, which, while recognising the fluidity of on-going action, nevertheless introduces externally imposed temporalities reproduced via “institutional norms”, as out-there correct ways of doing.

Importantly, the temporal elements of this account are thus matched by the relevance of aesthetic judgement, as the other ‘side’ of the story. Namely, the object under question is temporally conditioned by the start time of the show, but its goal is a material expression of coherence or ‘fit’, which is aesthetically negotiated until a particular resolution is satisfactorily made. Material constraints (or indeed temporal ones, such as the fact that the show is scheduled for a certain time) never preside over the in-the-moment aesthetic judgement of the designer, who has to be satisfied by a final result, which crucially even he does not know during the process as it unfolds. What is ‘satisfactory’ here is thus both an expression of identity and of temporality: what ‘fits’ with and what is ‘us’ (or Jean-Paul Gaultier in relation), in this place, reflecting particular re-negotiated pasts, presents and futures. The “us” is essential: no
dress will be displayed without the designer’s complete satisfaction, though satisfaction emerges in relation to others. It is never a solitary affair. As Becker (1998: 50) nicely put it, “objects […] are congealed social agreements, or rather, congealed moments in the history of people acting together”.

Such early analytical conclusions echo to a certain extent Yanow’s (2000) work on the making of flutes. She offers a cultural view of (collective) learning, in which we observe flute makers passing the emerging object (flute) after each step to each other, unless it “does not feel right”, in which case they return it to the previous step for additional work. Sometimes though, as Yanow (2000: 249) clearly states, the practical judgment involved in ‘seeing’ something as something is an ex post deduction: “learning may be less evident in the moment than it is in the longer run”.

Instead, as outlined briefly above, we suggest that in the case of the Dress, each instance of practical, interactively accomplished judgment regarding its development enacts and situates the dress as not just something that is ours, in this moment, in this way, not that, but also something of a certain fit with an aesthetic sense (the past) and something of a possible future that is being created. In other words, each momentary practical judgment not only implies a normative settling that defines the here-and-now of aesthetic belonging, but in that instant, also a re-definition of a shared notion of the past, and a negotiated vision of a future, both (re)settled temporarily in that very act.

This suggests a departure from the view of practices as temporally evolving (and at times linear) sets of activities, or bundles of activities, in which action b follows action a, which then proceeds to a set of other actions to form a coherent whole we can identify as a practice (see Schatzki, 2012). Instead, we wish to suggest, reflecting on the creation of the Dress, that temporality also reveals itself in each instance of interactive judgment, in which who we were, what we are, and who we may be are conjointly negotiated and instantaneously settled. So temporality here is both ‘horizontal’ (processual evolution) and ‘vertical’ (instantaneously accomplished in reference to re-visioned past, negotiated present, and particularly evoked future), though we do not wish to suggest a uni-directionality or stability by employing such metaphors. Unlike in Yanow’s case (2000), the Bride Dress is less an empirical example of the knowledge regarding dress making, but more of aesthetically-informed (“that doesn’t look right”) practical judgment regarding who we are, which also assumes a particular reading of who we were and who we might be. In other words, the Dress is about the practice of being (still) Jean-Paul Gaultier, in relation to
a particular object as a prompt for and an expression of an accomplished identity grounded in aesthetic judgments.

Therefore, to the extent that identity in our analytical account is a “freezable thing”, as Gioia and Patvardhan (2012: 52) nicely put it, it is so only during the mere eighteen or so minutes of the fashion show in which these dresses, and the Bride Dress in particular, emerged onto the stage, and thus visibly ‘became’. Just as Jean-Paul Gaultier was fixing the dress a moment before the model walked onto the catwalk, once it left the catwalk the Dress will likely never be seen (and less likely) worn in this iteration. This also challenges any interpretation of the “congealed” nature of the Dress as an object, to borrow Becker’s (1998) phrasing referenced above, as fixed beyond a mere moment of temporary settlement, or of “social agreement”. Instead, the account echoes what Weick (2012: 145) characterized as Boje’s (2001) “minimalist account of organizing”, which “includes story (in Boje’s sense of antenarrative), ordering, action, sensemaking, and stabilizing, in the context of the impermanent and the temporary”. In other words, just as the Dress will move on to another identity as a purchased piece of wearable creation, so will Jean-Paul Gaultier immediately move on with his search for the next future self/selves. Consequently, in many ways, the Dress analytically represents a nuanced expression of the tensions underpinning much of processual thinking: between change and stability, presence and ephemerality, being and becoming (Tsoukas and Chia, 2002). As part of a process of self-becoming and expression of identity, the Dress and Jean-Paul Gaultier come to be in one instant, only for the designer to continue on with the flux of creation that is the inherent nature of his work. It is importantly an analytical account that thus expresses the very “both-and”, instead of either-or, framing of identity, which Gioia and Patvardhan (2012: 54) argued were needed for “more comprehensive understanding of our subject” (see also Gioia, Price, Hamilton and Thomas, 2010, who advanced a view of social construction of definitions and actor processes as mutually constituted).

Indeed, perhaps a more fitting description of what we observed in Prigent’s documentary is not identity construction, following the literature, but ‘identity playing’ (Pratt, 2012: 29), which does not have structurism implied in ‘identity construction’ or purposefulness of ‘identity work’. It is also particularly apt because it suggests identity processes can be fun and spontaneous, which despite the exhaustion exhibited at times, the process of creating the Bride Dress and the entire collection was. Our
empirical account also challenged the suggested drawbacks identified by Pratt (2012: 29-30) in relation to the ‘playing metaphor’, namely “these processes may not always be fun and spontaneous, and ‘play’ may not have the ‘stickiness’ ascribed to identity. Moreover, to the degree that organisations are purposeful, are we likely to see a lot of identity play in them?” Our answer, given the story of the Bride Dress, would be yes to all. In particular, if the objective of work is to create, and do so creatively, play may indeed be what your work, but also identity in relation, is about. This was certainty so, we would argue, in the case of Jean Paul Gaultier and his continued (re)creation of his brand. Instead of being a object of looseness, as Pratt (2012) suggested, ‘identity playing’ here was, if anything, a ‘sticky’ element: that which allowed Jean Paul and his team to constantly and continuously be and achieve their set out ends. As such, ‘identity playing’ here was also very much purposeful: it was the means by which set out ends were clearly to be accomplished. While we recognise that the same may not be the case for all empirical settings, it is not beyond reason to suggest that if we take the underpinning processual thinking seriously, such playfulness, as a particular kind of fluidity, may be present in not just obviously creative ones like this. In other words, if change and flow are ‘norm’ (Langley and Tsoukas, 2010), there is no reason to believe it would be limited to fixed settings.

In summary, as Helin and colleagues (2014: 4) suggested, “every belonging to a situation is a participation in a field of potential (all the multiplicities that the situation holds together via its many relationships) and the event ([in their case], painting a picture, viewing it, reproducing it) is the release of this potential into a becoming”. What our account has highlighted is the temporal elements, the fluid pasts, presents and futures, which come to matter in that field of potential when it comes to what Jean-Paul Gaultier may become, and the material expression of such resolutions, alongside relational processes of aesthetic judgement, in the Bride Dress as a specific temporal expression of identity in the here and now. As such, we have suggested that the process of becoming, as the central phenomenon of interest to process scholars, can here be witnessed as a process of figuring out what organisational members are creating in resolving together who they are; of stitching themselves together in a particular material expression, this time. Importantly, as we have seen above, in the case of Gaultier’s couture fashion show, this process of becoming has a real temporal cut off point of the show itself. It is thus about how much and what of themselves Gaultier and his team can jointly negotiate and materially express by this point, to be
momentarily present on that runway as this-not-that, in this dress, not any other, of this past and this future. Such temporal, conditioned fixity, may also be one notable empirical expression of the old question of stability vs. change when it comes to organisational processes of becoming, one that allows us to move away from ‘out there’ ontological structures by attending to continually fluid and precarious resolutions in situ, in time.

References


