INSIDE THE CAPSULE OF ARTISTIC PRACTICES
Wearing and Performing the Moving Image

Abstract
This article focuses on the multi-media artwork *The Capsule* by the Greek film director Athina Rachel Tsangari, which was commissioned by the non-profit organization DESTE Foundation for Contemporary Art in the context of a project that bridges fashion and other art forms. Through an analysis of both the installation piece and the film that comprise the artwork, the article argues that *The Capsule* introduces a methodological tool for the understanding of artistic practices: a concept named after its own title and adapting Andrew Pickering’s notion of the ‘mangle of practice’ from the context of the production of scientific knowledge to the one defined by two artistic expressions – fashion and cinema – which are often regarded as commodities yet they negotiate in a profound way the processes of subjectification within fixed social norms. The goal of the article is to prove how this particular interaction between fashion and cinema will help us perceive them as primarily performative media, as opposed to representational ones.

Keywords
Mangle of practice; apparatus theory; performance/performativity; Greek filmmaking; Athina Rachel Tsangari.

1. INTRODUCTION

In 2007, the DESTE Foundation for Contemporary Art, a non-profit organization founded by the Greek art collector Dakis Ioannou and ironically named after the imperative form of the verb ‘to see’ in Greek (δέστε), initiated a project that would deliberately challenge the public eye. The project entitled “DESTE fashion collection” was born of the aspiration “to create parallels between the actual objects and their interpretations, leading viewers to a deeper understanding of how fashion can be perceived by the experienced eye” (according to its official statement¹), and consists in a series of commissioned artworks. Every year, the Foundation picks a different visual artist to collaborate with its fashion department and asks him/her to work with a selection of different fashion objects from its annual acquisition (named ‘the capsule collection’ due to its limited size and the confined display area), in a remediating project where haute couture clothes and accessories become the raw material for the creation of individual art pieces.

In 2012, DESTE appointed for the first time² a filmmaker, Athina Rachel Tsangari,

¹ Amsterdam School of Cultural Analysys, Universiteit van Amsterdam – e.mademli@uva.nl.
³ The list of the artists commissioned by DESTE include the design studio Diller Scofidio + Renfro, the poet Patrizia Cavalli, the photographer Jürgen Teller et al.
as the intermediary agent between the static archive of wearable objects and the fluid dynamics of the moving image. Her interpretation of the ‘capsule’ led to a project of the same name that merges different thematic and methodological binaries which are often found in the discourse around fashion, film, and its intersections – such as nature and technology, tradition and modernity, light and darkness. In the following paragraphs, I will suggest that this ‘capsule’ is the mangle of artistic practices. I borrow the concept ‘mangle of practice’ from Andrew Pickering, who used it in the context of the production of scientific knowledge. Pickering developed this concept in an attempt to highlight the performative perspective of science, as opposed to the representational one. While the representational idiom is based on the premise that the objective of science is to “represent nature, to produce knowledge that maps, mirrors, or corresponds to how the world really is”, and hence it often excludes its material, social and temporal dimensions, the performative idiom starts from the idea that “the world is filled not, in the first instance, with facts and observations, but with agency”. My hypothesis is that similarly, fashion and cinematic practices are often regarded as finished products, perceived on a great scale primarily as representational media that may or may not reflect the ‘real’ world, but they necessarily refer to it. I hereby draw upon Pickering to suggest that if we try to understand the connection between fashion and cinema as a constant process of doing and making, we render ourselves capable of discerning different modes of subjectification through an apparatus. My method consists in interpreting a conceptual tool introduced in the field of the Sociology of Science in the field of Visual Studies, through a close analysis of an individual film that was made in order to bridge different fashion objects with cinematic grammar and syntax.

Pickering insists on the importance of the dialectics between ‘resistance and accommodation’ in the introduction of new knowledge components into the network of material and conceptual, social and technological agents that partake in the evolution of any scientific practice. He defines resistance as the “failure to achieve an intended capture of [material] agency in practice”, whereas accommodation is the human strategy counterbalancing this failure, which includes “revisions to goals and intentions, as well as [...] to the human frame of gestures and social relations that surround it”. An analysis of Tsangari’s Capsule will demonstrate that the ‘capsule’ is the translation of the ‘mangle’ in the field of particular artistic practices. This ‘capsule’ initiates from the material objects, recognizes the layers of social implications that are associated with them, and exploits the cinematic as a method of destabilizing standardized performances of fashion and film alike.

2. THE CAPSULE AS THEME AND PRACTICE

The director presented the work in two different instalments. The first one was a window installation at Barney’s in Midtown New York, where a composition of a grid, a

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3 Ibid., 26.
4 In Michel Foucault’s work, the analysis of the power that turns individuals into subjects has distinct modes – the modes of inquiry/sciences that introduce the human subject as an object of knowledge; the dividing practices that are located within the subjects themselves and render them in normative and deviant parts; and self-governing practices that reintroduce the subject anew. All three aspects of subjectification form part of Pickering’s discussion of the mangle. M. Foucault, “The Subject and Power”, Critical Inquiry, 8, 4 (1982): 777-795.
set of double-binding mirrors and two simultaneous – yet separated by optical filters – projections (one in slow motion and one at a normal pace), transfigured an emblematic commercial space into a mystical opening of shifting temporal and spatial perspectives of female figures moving in an unidentifiable environment. The second part of the project was a medium-length film, which premiered one month later at the Locarno International Film Festival. It was not only the format of the film that challenged the conventions of the festival and distribution circuit (since the films that run between 30 and 60 minutes in length tend to be commercially sidelined as not properly fitting in standardized screening slots), but also its tone and structure. Cleverly branded by the Match Factory sales agency as a ‘Greek gothic mystery’ tale, the film Capsule is a substantive example of genre hybridity that brings together elements from coming-of-age and vampire films, along with embedding hand-drawn animation and digital visual effects into live action shots.

This two-fold project was more than an experiment in mixed media and an expression of the desire to “follow the example of many modernist filmmakers who translated their works into installations conceived for exhibition in galleries while continuing making films for traditional theatrical releases”. Both the installation in a shop window and the two-dimensional venture in storytelling address the question of the dialogue between fashion Commodities and the cinematic in a literal and figurative manner – in the former case by making the ‘capsule’ a palpable device that engages a random passerby to see through glass, and thus turns him into a conscious voyeur; and in the latter, by exploiting the ‘capsule’ as a narrative space that embraces the heroes in an organic way, as if the film setting is a vessel or a wearable shell. In Tsangari’s own words, her location choices in her filmography run the gamut of confined insular places. She is interested in “a capsule of some sort. It could be a spaceship, a summer house, a prison cell. It could be a tunnel, a bank, a box office, an elevator”. On the one hand, the installation piece overtly establishes a link between fashion as a field of exposure and cinema as a physical and symbolic cavity through the emulation of an early film device (the designers of the installation claim that their construction is a contemporary variant of a kinetoscope), a technique which results in a displacement. The cinematic apparatus is set within – or, rather, is encapsulated by – the formerly protected area of display, performing in an unprecedented way the medium-specific interplay between light and darkness and ‘mangling’ its agency, and commenting on Pickering’s observation that “within the representational idiom, people and things tend to appear as shadows of themselves”. Yet, in spite of the importance of the material aspect of this synthesis, it is also the dynamics of the narrative, immaterial world that reveals uncharted common territories between fashion and the moving image, with clothes being utilized as plot devices and elements of the mise-en-scène being introduced on screen like wearable technologies of the body.

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3. THE CAPSULE AS METHOD AND NARRATIVE

The premise of the film is the initiation of six – similarly shaped but sufficiently distinguishable – young women into a series of rituals orchestrated by another female, the hostess – who is individuated by her extravagant outfit and particularly her golden collar. The six of them are housed in a secluded mansion next to the sea where they learn how to dance, take goats on walks, dance and sing to the sound of pop music, sleep with a quail egg between their teeth, and confess their secret desires to their alleged leader (Fig. 1). As the plot unfolds, the viewer gets to know that the purpose of the visit of these creatures to the compound is their transition to the state of ‘womanhood’ (a process of Foucaultian subjectification par excellence) and that the rituals are survival trials in which the woman who excels in her duties will inherit the role of the hostess/matriarch. “All of you, you don’t know what you are... You are women. I am your origin, you are my replicas... Like all of you, I was once a woman. I ask you to relieve me from my destiny”, says the character who is impersonated by the award-winning, prolific dancer and actress Ariane Labed. The dramatic plot culminates in a confrontation during the ultimate trial, in which the ancestor kills the chosen woman with a bite on the neck, and then finds herself sitting on her throne and waiting for the next group of newcomers, for the next repetition of the circle of life. Following this circularity, the film closes with a variation of the opening sequence. The circular trope and the quest for the circular alternation of roles as a driving force of the Capsule is in absolute alignment with Pickering’s analysis of the laboratory and his argument that “the notion of circulation points immediately to an aspect of the multiplicity of [scientific] culture”\(^{10}\), also suggesting the multiplicity of the viewing subject.

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\(^{10}\) Ibid., 59.
In the first shot of the film, a cluttered pile of chairs starts moving slowly as if it were a living organism, until a naked woman is revealed from under it. “Material agency is captured by material objects, that separate from us as creatures of flesh and blood”\(^{11}\) in a set of scenes that seems to interpret literally what Pickering calls “the dance of agency in conceptual practice”\(^{12}\). The concept of the Capsule is unravelled as a dance, as henceforth each woman is firstly introduced naked on screen, and then establishes her position in the diegetic world through different choreographic gestures of undressing, wearing either conventional apparel or alternative non-garment guises. Indicatively, a character is found hidden behind the facade of a statue representing a woman from an ancient Greek tribe, who presents her chest to the sun. Subsequently, shots in which immobile objects – the thick surface of a blanket on a bed or a thin raincoat waving in the wind – are animated as if there were living beings trapped inside them, struggling to break out, alternate with shots in which women emerge from other women’s bodies – a woman pops out of a mouth, barking on a tongue, or appears sitting inside a head, after a hand removes a woman’s visage as easily as a detachable mask. Finally, a woman appears disguised, wearing a fake, hand-drawn moustache. The integration of the women into a homogeneous group is facilitated through the wearing of a uniform that has contrasting colours and was originally designed by the director herself: black dresses reminiscent of institutional robes adorned with detachable white collars, inspired by the harsh, bare landscape which serves as a physical background for their transition to womanhood (Fig. 2).

![Figure 2 - The Road to the Sea, The Capsule (Tsangari 2012). Film still by Despina Spyrou](image)


\(^{12}\) *Ibid.*, 21, 129. Pickering’s choice of the word ‘dance’ is related to the unpredictable, interactive play between humans and non-human elements that alternate in different processes of signification and practice methods.
The recollection of the natural, the ‘real’ world that is tightly associated to Pickering’s perception of the ‘representational idiom’ is central to this piece. The landscape is iconic, but not easily identifiable, as it is devoid of landmarks: the rocky cliff that terminates in a concrete platform could be located anywhere on the Greek coastline. Its totality and monosemantic property are called into question. We learn from the production notes that the shooting was set on Hydra, an island in the Saronic Gulf that has a very strong presence in Greek and international cinema. Tsangari seems to opt for an intertextual reference when dressing her characters in black dresses. The film that is arguably the most strongly associated with Hydra is Michael Cacoyannis’s *A Girl in Black/To koritsi me ta mavra* (1957), one of the first Greek films to receive international acclaim. At the same time, the director notes in an interview with *Hazlitt* magazine that she started building the film around the female figure robed in a specific kind of dress, which is heavily loaded with filmic and social connotations: “The first image I started with was these women in black. All women in Greece eventually become women in black because they lose someone. It’s something that’s part of your visual landscape growing up. Mourning”\(^1\). This is the destiny of Cacoyannis’s main character (*A Girl in Black* ends with a crowd of women dispersing after a funeral\(^1\)), and also the future of the women-to-come – besides, in the diegetic world of the film, the matriarch predetermines that “the last thing [I] will teach [...] is how to lack”.

A key element and catalyst of the ***Capsule*** is the dress worn by the matriarch\(^1\) when she first appears on screen; this is handed down to the chosen woman in the scene that will result in her death, and re-worn by the matriarch in the final sequence (Fig. 3). Juxtaposed with the black surfaces of the women’s uniforms, the use of a white, interactive dress highlights the impossibility of residing in a fixed, wearable subjectivity. Designed by the Canadian-based designer Ying Gao, this organza dress is a technologized garment from her *Playtime* series – which, following a *mise-en-abyme* scheme, is interestingly inspired by Jacques Tati’s film of the same title (1967), thus suggesting a cinematic line of descent. The thin fabric is connected to light-sensitive sensors, so every time that a thick beam of light flashes on its surface it starts to animate, rendering it impossible to be captured in a photographic still\(^1\). The wearability of this garment consists in its kinetics and its regeneration of ‘moving’ images. In a similar fashion, and by drawing an analogy to the narrative of the ***Capsule***, the film reproduces in the key sequence of the first encounter between the young women and their hostess a dramatization and reversal of the structure of the cinematic apparatus\(^1\). The visitors walk in a dark corridor, carrying torches. The viewers, sitting in the dark, watch on screen the flickering of the beams of light coming from the torch, directed straight at them, as if

\(^1\) “Arbitrary, Binary Evaluation – That’s Tyranny”.

\(^1\) Greek film scholar Vrasidas Karalis underlines the film’s “…electrifying atmosphere: the power dynamics of the small village, the secret lives of the inhabitants, the internalized oppression of women, the phallic machismo of the male population – indeed, the lack of any sort of moral energy in the public life of the community” (V. Karalis, *A History of Greek Cinema*, New York: Continuum, 2012, 77).

\(^1\) The director raises many issues of great interest for gender studies, as she suggests that the wearable identity of womanhood, which is adapted from the social body to the female body (through the cinematic), and the performance of the medium are entangled with the performativity of female sexuality. No matter its relevance, the gender perspective is not within the scope of this paper.


they are witnessing two opposing projections. In the following, over-the-shoulder shot, they are identified with the women, as their torches (whose lights are now extensions of the beam of the projection machine) trigger the interactive dress. The performance of the filmic image is invested with the performance of the vested subject and vice versa, suggesting that the practices of film and fashion encapsulate each other.

Figure 3 - The Interactive Dress, The Capsule (Tsangari 2012). Film still by Despina Spyrou

4. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this mobilizing multimodal work by Athina Rachel Tsangari is an inclusive, self-conscious, technological constellation – self-conscious in that it recognizes the archaeology of the cinematic medium and the social implications of its representational idiom – which prompts us to think of the intersection of fashion and film in a performative way. The Capsule is self-conscious because it recognizes filmmaking as a continuous process of doing that includes reflecting on the relation between human and non-human agency and the (pre)history and hidden narratives of the use of the technical medium. At the same time, it is conscious that garments are visual and tactile symbols of culture, and that the power of their material agency in establishing social norms is immense – but it can be subverted if we come to think of the garment’s performance and not its representation. “Within the representational, idiom”, Pickering points out, “people and things tend to appear as shadows of themselves”18 – just like in the movies.

As an extension, his concept of the ‘mangle’ aims at explaining knowledge as a dynamic process of negotiation between different groups of practitioners and social groups, and at shedding light on the dark environment of the technology labs: it is valuable in helping us to imagine a different kind of knowledge regarding interdisciplinary artistic practices. Respectively, the director conceptualizes the ‘capsule’ as a means of explaining how two seemingly different artistic practices converse; how certain individual experiments in the filmic image and the fashion design cross-pollinate; and how the performance of the filmic and fashion technologies relates to the performativity of the represented subject. The diegetic world of the film and the environment of the installation place the technologies of fashion and film in their social context; thus, the Capsule suggests that fashion and film are not mere artistic expressions that share many common aesthetic inquiries and reciprocally exchange methods and raw materials, but are based on ‘mangled’ practices: they have material objects as a starting point and they test their boundaries in our (im)material culture; they seek agency in material, non-human agents; they can be both literally reflective (generated by the interplay of light with surfaces) and reflexive (self-referential and speculative on their own methods and processes). The Capsule is an experimental film and a true laboratory of mixed media practices that brings to light socially constructed performances of art and its subjects; as a result, it becomes a conceptual tool for defining research methods in the intersections of fashion and film. In this way, the ‘capsule’ is a theoretical vessel that is not always easy to wear, but comes in many sizes, shapes and forms.