

# THE ENIGMA OF FASHION

Saturday 9 March - 4:30 PM - Nite Owl Theater

Introduced by Fashion in Film Festival curator Marketa Uhlirova

The Enigma of Fashion features works by early film pioneers and artists as well as avant-garde and commercial filmmakers including Segundo de Chomón, Sonia Delaunay, Hans Richter, Lewis Klahr, Christine Noll Brinckmann, Jacques Baratier and Martin Creed. With an absence of - or disregard for - conventional storytelling, these films animate clothes, mannequins and magazine cut-outs, allowing them to assume lives of their own and assert a powerful sense of their reality as material things. Here, clothing and artificial bodies are shown in the very physical processes of their creation or destruction, as well as rituals such as spinning, flying, folding and unfolding. They are removed, at least to a degree, from fashion's social and cultural contexts that normally give them their purpose and meaning. With their functions suspended, they appear instead as dreamlike, playful and elusive, becoming potent carriers of fascination, desire, emotion and sensual pleasure.

## Transformation (Métempsycose)

France 1907. Dir. Segundo de Chomón & Ferdinand Zecca for Pathé Frères.

Segundo de Chomón's 1907 trick film *Transformation* is among the first films to anticipate costume change as one of cinema's enduring fascinations. The film's French title *Métempsycose* derives from Metempsychosis, a popular stage illusion of the turn of the 20th century. Created by Walker and Pepper as an update of the earlier Pepper's Ghost, it saw objects magically transmogrifying into other objects. Among other attractions, Chomón's film shows a butterfly-woman open and close her arms in order to reveal an array of ornamental patterns on her cloak and bodice. Such a display of design and color permutations is closely related to another contemporary stage act, "the cloak slide" (aka "Le manteau magique") in which magic lantern slides would be projected onto a woman-screen (a woman dressed in a white body stocking and a cloak with white lining).

## Keller-Dorian: Film Gaufré (Sonia Delaunay)

France 1927. Dir. Unknown for Sonia Delaunay. With Sonia Delaunay.

This rare fashion film is an exquisite showcase of Sonia Delaunay's "Simultaneous" dresses and fabrics, quite possibly made at the artist's Parisian studio and home at 19 Boulevard Malesherbes. Dating around 1926-7 and filmed using the tricolor additive Keller-Dorian process (later also known as Kodacolor cine film), the film presents Delaunay's geometric designs in rich colors. Having gradually shifted focus from painting to textile and clothing design in the early 1920s, and advocating the production of unique, one-off pieces, Delaunay treated her design work - and clearly also film - as an extension of her artistic practice. This short film was one vehicle with which to make her case that there should be no hierarchy between fine and decorative arts: among other things, Delaunay used it in her lectures about the influence of painting on clothing design.

## Ghosts Before Breakfast

Germany, 1927. Dir. Hans Richter. With Werner Graeff, Darius Milhaud, Willi Pferdekamp, Hans Richter.

Hans Richter's late Dadaist film *Ghosts Before Breakfast* challenges the realism of filmic image with abstract and graphic forms. Clothes here are some of the everyday objects that turn against their users between the eleventh and the twelfth hour. A bow tie travels around the neck, undoes itself and despite efforts to hold it down it slips away with the collar. Hats fly off gentlemen's heads (Richter being one of them) and have to be chased after. Beards appear and disappear. Positive film changes into negative. The eleventh hour belongs to objects' ghosts which muck about with their users in order to disorient and baffle them.

### **The Future Eves**

**Dir. Jacques Baratier, France, 1964.**

**With original soundtrack by Georges Delerue. 16 mins.**

In his famous 1919 essay "The Uncanny", Sigmund Freud considered "wax-work figures" and "artificial dolls" as the epitome of the familiar made strange. Dolls and mannequins, whilst unliving, emulate living beings - something that has secured them the legacy of an endless source of fascination in literature and the arts. Informed by surrealist poetics, Jacques Baratier's 1964 documentary-cum-experimental-film *Eves Futures* captures a sense of the uncanny in his portrayal of the process of making shop mannequins. The camera lavishes attention on figures without limbs or heads as they are worked on individually, stored in their dozens in a large warehouse or piled up on a heap. A deliberate conflation of the inanimate with the animate - so dear to the surrealists - is the film's leitmotif: shots of living women are continuously juxtaposed with those of mannequins molded and chiselled or ruthlessly drilled into, making explicit a tension between sensuousness, eroticism and violence. Shot in black and white, the dreamlike mise-en-scènes are meticulously considered, with Georges Delerue's original soundtrack that enhances the dark and moody atmosphere. (Lucy Moyses Ferreira)

### **Understanding**

**UK 2016. Dir. Martin Creed. With Martin Creed.**

*Understanding* is a music video accompanying British artist Martin Creed's single of the same name. Included in his 2016 album *Thoughts Lined Up*, the video was created around the same time Creed erected a giant revolving neon sign *Understanding* in New York City. Serving a dose of gentle humor characteristic of Creed's work, the playful video sees the artist repeatedly transform, sporting an array of different hair styles (including the much-parodied man bun), accessories and outfits (including a skirt suit). At times these multiple reincarnations and fashion objects are stacked up or layered to populate the screen. Will the real Martin Creed please stand up? As he recently put it (referring to his New York sculpture): "I'm trying to look at the outside world and not trust my own interior world ... I'm not sure if it's possible, but I try."

### **Warner Corset Advertisement**

**USA 1910s. Dir. Unknown for The Warner Brothers Company. With electronic music by Ales Cerny.**

Warner's corset company was originally established in New York in the 1870s by brothers Lucien and Ira Warner. By the turn of the century they had relocated to Connecticut and were running a successful business catering to a mass market. In line with much of the company's print advertising, this film focuses on the interaction of a corset with water. Two children "accidentally" drop their mother's corset into a bath tub and then proceed to do it over and over: "Thank Goodness it's Warner's and it's rustproof". The film ends with a striking stop-motion animation sequence in which a corset magically rises into the frame and shows itself unrolling, fastening, and unfastening.

### **Tough Stockings**

**UK 1960. Dir. Unknown for British Pathé. With Maureen Pearson.**

A cross-breed between a process and advertising film, this newsreel item by British Pathé utilises industrial manufacture routines such as cutting, seaming, measuring and sewing as an opportunity to show off the qualities of stockings - their thinness, crispness and smoothness. This kind of close scrutiny is present throughout the entire film, including scenes in which the hosiery is carefully examined for its quality - scenes in which touching, feeling and dressing become almost ritualistic acts performed for the benefit of the camera. But far from being caressed as precious goods, the stockings here are also submitted to some quite bizarre, even drastic acts: they are pressed into walnut shells, draped over a cactus plant, brushed against a nail or taken for a walk stretched over high-heeled shoes. In order to demonstrate their resilience, they have to be put on trial.

### **There Is a Garden in My Head**

**Netherlands 1987. Dir. Karin Wiertz & Jacques Verbeek.**

The Dutch filmmaker duo Jacques Verbeek and Karin Wiertz's animations from the 1970s and '80s are undeservedly little known. Largely self-taught and self-funded, Verbeek and Wiertz constructed their own sets from any means available, DIY-style, developing their working methods by means of trial and error. Each new film to them was as an opportunity to devise a set of novel and unorthodox visual treatments. *There Is a Garden in My Head* is perhaps the most opulent of their films. Set to Bertus Borgers's music, it creates an intricate collage of animated flower and animal cut-outs meshing with a female figure who at times appears dressed in slide projections onto her naked body, or superimposed photographs of lush flora. Many of the artists' preparatory notes, sketches, artworks and photographs have been preserved by the EYE Filmmuseum in Amsterdam.

### **Electric Jungle**

**UK 2013. Dir. Mat Maitland for Kenzo.**

With its cacophony of overlaying lush vegetations, animals and animal prints that variously clash, interlock and creep onto a living female form, *Electric Jungle* could easily be taken for a contemporary response to Verbeek and Wiertz's *There Is a Garden in My Head* - if only its creator Mat Maitland had known it. Commissioned to promote Kenzo's 2013 Resort collection (and, simultaneously, to celebrate the rebooting of the brand by returning to its roots, referencing Kenzo Takada's boutique "Jungle Jap" in 1970s Paris), *Electric Jungle* animates clothes, textures and colours to eye-popping effect. Using the visual vocabulary provided by Kenzo's designers as a point of departure for a frenzied visual orgy of a digital collage, the film gives a masterclass on how the moving image can transport fashion into a strange universe, utterly its own.

### **Altair**

**USA 1994. Dir. Lewis Klahr.**

Against the background of Stravinsky's *Firebird*, artist Lewis Klahr's animation conjures up a melancholy world of post-war American consumerism - "the dreams that money can buy", to evoke another film title of Hans Richter's. The protagonists in Klahr's film are archival magazine cut-outs from advertising and editorial images found in six late-1940s issues of *Cosmopolitan*: a woman's hand showing off shiny nail varnish, an impeccably made-up model posing for the photographer's camera with her eyes shut, a bottle of whiskey, a sofa and a lamp, a black glove with a pearl bracelet, a brown men's shoe, a lipstick. All these signifiers of a commodity culture that was once the epitome of modernity are in Klahr's treatment destabilised; they lose their certainty and purpose, acquiring instead a distinct sense of elusiveness.

### **Dress Rehearsal & Karola 2**

**USA 1981. Dir. Christine Noll Brinckmann. With Karola Gramann.**

These two films were shot simultaneously in 1979 by the film theorist Christine Noll Brinckmann, then a visiting scholar at the Department of Cinema Studies at New York University. Both feature Karola Gramann who went on to become an acclaimed film curator, directing the Oberhausen Film Festival in the 1980s and after 2000 the Kinothek Asta Nielsen. Reminiscent of experimental underground cinema of Kenneth Anger and Jack Smith, Brinckmann focuses on Gramann putting on and wearing various garments and accessories. The films explore her "way of dealing with clothes and jewellery, her specific talent of using whatever she wears or touches as a means of self-expression". While both films were created using the same footage, they are different in nature and pace.

**This screening is part of LAYERING: FASHION, ART, CINEMA.**

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