

‘On the cusp of something huge’: Anticipatory subjectivities in freelance fashion work

Time & Society
1–22

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DOI: 10.1177/0961463X241258520

journals.sagepub.com/home/tas



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Abstract

This article draws on an (auto)ethnographic study of a group of freelance fashion professionals, known as ‘fashion agents’, with a particular focus on their relationship to time. It aims to elucidate the temporalities that permeate their work lives and shape their subjectivities, which I coin as *anticipatory subjectivities*. Such subjectivities, I posit, are emblematic of the conditions of flexibilisation, precarity and hopeful investment in the future characteristic of contemporary cultural industries and, more broadly, late capitalist knowledge economies. I propose that agents’ life-worlds are permeated by a *promissory regime* – i.e., living in anticipation of constantly deferred, adjourned and unsecured rewards. Such a regime produces subjectivities that are premised on a hopeful emotional investment in the future, coupled with a preparedness for, and a capacity to navigate, incalculable risks. Another feature of the ‘timescapes’ that agents have to negotiate is the simultaneity of multiple fluid, unstructured and often conflicting temporalities and tempos, which requires a particular kind of time-competence. Finally, the article also foregrounds the importance, in agents’ temporal orientations, of *kairos*: the right, opportune moment. Such a moment is normally perceived as being just about to happen; yet, it cannot be orchestrated or precipitated. As a result, one of agents’ key temporal experiences is that of waiting, which de-subjectivises them and inhibits their capacity to act.

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Together, these time-orientations – anticipation, managing multiple temporalities and a hopeful waiting for *kairos* – underpin and foster subjectivities and forms of affective labour that sustain the cultural industries; they are also emblematic of the temporal conditions of late capitalism.

Keywords

anticipation, fashion, cultural work, *kairos*, waiting

Wow, what a day. Met (and took photographs with) a woman who was one of the nude models in Helmut Newton's [celebrated fashion photographer active in the second part of the twentieth century] 'Sie Kommen'– she is still around! Not sure what she does now?

A.J. came over again and spent a good half an hour looking at one of my brands, but he's hard to read – I cannot gauge how serious his intentions are.

Then bumped into Y and Z in the street late at night; they are talking to an investor in Shanghai about a project– store cum gallery/art space – showed me some very impressive 3D renderings of what it will look like if it goes ahead, said we could think of doing something together with the showroom. Maybe an installation with old trunks like the one we did for [fashion brand] in 2011? (Do I get to go to Shanghai?!)

On days like this, I get this sense of buzz and excitement, like I'm on the cusp of something huge right now. I feel like I'm in the middle of something that will become important. But then, to be fair, this feeling appears every fashion week, and nothing life-changing has happened yet, has it? (Diary, 1 March 2016)

This article draws on an (auto)ethnographic study of a group of freelance fashion professionals, known as 'fashion agents', with a particular focus on their relationship to time. It aims to elucidate the temporalities that permeate their work lives and shape their subjectivities. Such subjectivities, I posit, are emblematic of the conditions of flexibilisation, precarity and hopeful investment in the future characteristic of contemporary cultural industries and, more broadly, late capitalist knowledge economies which are permeated by a *promissory regime* (Beckert, 2020: 320): a predicament where promised, adjourned and deferred rewards sustain the present; forecasts are volatile and changeable; and one of the key professional skills is the ability to anticipate a trend that has not yet become popular and invest time and effort in developing this potential. Forms of affective labour (Hardt 1999) associated with sustaining a hopeful investment in an (unsecured) future, with managing various, often conflicting,

tempos and with a capacity for waiting, I argue, are what sustains such economies. These forms of labour are enabled by the *anticipatory subjectivity* that this article is concerned with. Fashion agents, a professional group hitherto largely ignored by sociologies of culture and work, are a uniquely suitable case study for thinking through anticipation and/or work-based subjectivity.

Just like literary and acting agents and similar cultural intermediaries, fashion agents are entrepreneurial knowledge workers *par excellence*. They are mediators between apparel designers and retailers, there to demonstrate and sell seasonal collections to retail buyers during fashion weeks. The agent scouts trade events in search of emerging design talent; approaches the most promising designers and ‘signs them up’ for representation. Once a brand is officially ‘signed with’ an agent, the latter’s tasks include presenting its latest collection to retail buyers in trade shows or showrooms during key fashion trade events held in metropolitan centres such as London, Milan or Paris, known as ‘fashion weeks’; brokering the deal with the buyer, negotiating the conditions of sale and the brand’s position on the shop floor or in the online store; and overseeing dealings between the brand and the retailer. Moreover, the agent coaches the designer, advising them on how to tweak their offer and price point in order to make their collections more sellable. The agent, then, is an interface between fashion’s facets as ‘art’ and ‘commerce’. In some cases, agents also communicate with the press on behalf of designers and initiate their collaborations with other creative practitioners. Most agents are self-employed or run their own limited companies and work for different clients (brands or multi-brand agencies, also called showrooms) on a seasonal, temporary contract basis. Some are paid a fixed retainer sum; others only receive a commission on sales.

My study was informed by my decade-long (2006–2016) experience of working as a fashion agent prior to moving to academia, but, with the exception of the diary entry that opens this article, the data analysed below was collected at fashion week events in Paris over five field trips in 2017–2018. During the first three field trips, I worked as an agent for two showrooms and was thus an (overt) observant participant. On the remaining trips, I carried out a multi-site ethnography, observing a total of nine showrooms in Paris’s Marais district, shadowing a total of ten agents, and spending time ‘deep hanging’ (Geertz, 1998) with many more. I also carried out in-depth interviews with thirteen agents. Originally, I had intended to conduct more, but abandoned this plan after I realised that sit-down interviewing was not the most fruitful strategy for my research, and ‘spontaneous, informal conversations in the course of other activities’ whereby ‘the dividing line between participant observation and interviewing is hard to discern’ (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007: 108) yielded much richer data.

My participants were recruited through connections I had amassed during my time working in the industry. My heterogenous sample reflected the ethnic, age

and gender diversity I had encountered in the agent community during my time there: my informants' ages span from mid-twenties to mid-fifties, their racial backgrounds are East Asian (Chinese and Japanese), Black Caribbean, mixed race and white, and there are over 15 nationalities in my sample, with some people holding more than one citizenship. All my participants visit Paris for the fashion week four times a year, but, with one exception, none of them live there – a typical scenario for this occupation.

In this article I propose that freelance fashion work, ridden with constantly shifting incalculable risks and replete with unpredictable threats and opportunities, fosters an *anticipatory subjectivity*, one that enables agents 'to live as subjects in the domain of the not-yet, and to see anticipation as both opportunity and tyranny' (Adams et al., 2009: 250). Such a subjectivity, I argue, is a vehicle for negotiating the conditions of 'risk society' (Beck, 1992), where a '[p]olitical economy of ambivalence' produces 'basic existence and lifeworld marked by endemic insecurity' (Beck, 2000: 3–4) and radical uncertainty. The concept of anticipatory subjectivity will, I believe, be relevant for the analysis of work-based subjectivities in other creative industries – and indeed in other sectors of the economy, since creative workers have long been 'held to exemplify the working lives and generalized practices of the "worker of the future"', due to embodying 'the new form of constantly labouring subjectivity required for contemporary capitalism [with its] requirements for people fully to embrace risk' (Banks et al., 2013: 3).

To unpick the multiple temporal modalities that produce agents' subjectivities and lifeworlds, I utilise Barbara Adam's (1995, 2008) 'timescapes' framework, which considers a number of elements involved in the culturally shaped understanding and experience of time, such as:

- Time frame – bounded, beginning and end of day, year, lifetime [*sic*], generation, historical/geological epoch;
- Temporality – process world, internal to system, ageing, growing, irreversibility, directionality;
- Timing – synchronisation, co-ordination, right/wrong time;
- Tempo – speed, pace, rate of change, velocity, intensity: how much activity in given timeframe;
- Duration – extent, temporal distance, horizon: no duration = instantaneity, time point/moment;
- Sequence – order, succession, priority: no sequence = simultaneity, at same time;
- Temporal modalities: past, present and future – memory, perception/experience and anticipation (Adam, 2008: 7–8).

The components of 'timescapes' that are particularly relevant for my own investigation are 'time frame' (i.e., the temporal boundaries of the fashion weeks and

of certain tasks); ‘timing’ (i.e., the right time for action, be it signing a new brand or approaching a buyer who is already in the showroom); ‘tempo’ (i.e., the pace and intensity of work and the ability to switch between various velocities); and ‘temporal horizon’ (i.e., agents’ relationship to the future). The following sections will address each of these aspects in detail.

Why fashion work and time?

‘Few phenomena embody the notion of time as well as fashion’, argue Evans and Vaccari (2020: 3). By its very nature as an industry reliant on a ‘rapid and continual changing of styles’ (Wilson, 1985: 3), fashion is intimately bound up with time, speed and duration. However, most extant studies consider the temporalities of fashion trends and cycles as experienced by consumers of fashion, rather than the temporal dimensions of the fashion industry as a workplace (although see Entwistle, 2009; Entwistle and Rocamora, 2006; Entwistle and Wissinger, 2012; Wissinger, 2007 and 2009). This article seeks to redress this omission; it documents the way fashion professionals deal with time in their work and considers how their subjectivities are shaped by, and responsive to, the various temporal regimes they negotiate.

Time, timing and a proficiency in managing varying temporalities is crucial to the work lives of most fashion workers. As ‘the favourite child of capitalism’ (Sombart, 2004 [1902]: 316), fashion encapsulates what Evans and Vaccari (2020: 12) define as ‘industrial time’: the ‘clock-time’ of industrial production, the standardised time of international trade, the modernist time of continuous acceleration, with a schedule governed by an unbendable and rigid calendar in which collections need to be designed and demonstrated months before they will end up in stores. Fashion’s symbolic values are predicated on the passing of time, the change of seasons, transience and rapid obsolescence of trends and the idea of *zeitgeist*, of something being ‘very now’, i.e., just right for a particular moment in time.

As well as the present, the imminent future is also a crucial temporal dimension for fashion. Anticipating and forestalling a close future are the essential components in the work of fashion professionals who try to grasp ‘the incipient and inarticulate tastes which are taking shape in the fashion consuming public’ (Blumer, 1969: 280). Agents in particular capture and transmit such ‘incipient tastes’, constantly searching for something that has not yet become valuable but has the capacity to do so soon. Their future-orientation and an ability to see ‘a potential’ is thus crucial for their success, and is one of the defining features of anticipatory subjectivities.

At the same time, anticipating a trend too far in advance can be just as disadvantageous as missing it. ‘I should have waited a few seasons’; ‘Her collection was too ahead of its time’ are reflections I have heard repeatedly from agents who signed and unsuccessfully tried to sell an emerging brand that did not

perform as well as they had expected, only to experience a breakthrough at a later date (and often with a different agent) while still producing the same aesthetic. ‘Catching’ a budding brand or a nascent trend at a particular point in time, just – but not too long – before it is likely to generate mass interest, is paramount to an agent’s career progression. Timing – the idea of knowing ‘when is the right time’ for something – is therefore extremely important. This aspect of agents’ work will be explored below with reference to the ancient Greek notion of *kairos* (Rämö, 1999).

Furthermore, timeframes are vital for the practical and logistical functioning of the fashion industry in its entirety. The fashion market relies on presenting and selling seasonal collections with extremely short shelf lives at biannual – or, more recently, quarterly – international gatherings of retail buyers and press, such as Paris Fashion Week. As the timeframe within which seasonal collections can be sold is so limited, the pressure on agents at fashion weeks is extremely high: items that have not caught retailers’ attention within the 1- to 3-week sales window during the fashion weeks *will never be sold* (it is highly unusual for designers to show the same styles in the next sales session as this would give buyers and press an impression that the collection is ‘stagnating’ – a death sentence for an emerging brand), while the next opportunity to make any sales (and thus, for agents, to earn a commission) will not come until the next round of fashion weeks, i.e., in three or even six months’ time. In other words, within the space of one to three weeks, both agents and designers are making (or not) their next three or six months’ earnings. During these weeks, the stakes are extremely high, and so is the sense of urgency and excitement. This need to adhere to a strict and standardised industrial calendar (Evans and Vaccari, 2020) leads to a particular temporal awareness, which will be discussed in the next section.

Time frames, time-sovereignty and time-reflexivity

In her study of freelance graphic designers, Von Osten (2011: 143) notes that these professionals opt for a flexible, albeit precarious, self-employed career because a 9-to-5 job suggests to them a ‘regimentation of time [that] seems paternalistic’. The same goes for many self-employed workers in the creative industries, including fashion agents. They appreciate the ‘freely chosen time-framework’ (Beck, 2000: 60) offered by flexible freelance working patterns, as these are perceived to be an expression of ‘the cultural value of shaping “one’s own life”’ (p. 60), allowing for a ‘reappropriation of time’ (p. 59) by the worker. Such time-sovereignty (Beck, 2000) was cited by all my respondents as one of the most important and valuable aspects of their work lives. ‘I wouldn’t want anyone deciding for me where I need to be and when’; ‘Sometimes I might work at night if I feel like it, but spend the day going to galleries’: these were common reflections in interviews.

As many extant studies of freelance work have shown, such time-sovereignty inevitably comes with increased time-reflexivity and time-responsibility; a feeling that one must ‘make the most of their time’, turning it into ‘productive’ time whenever possible. Thus, in Gill’s (2009: 171) study of media workers, respondents reported feeling guilty and anxious if they had spent two hours ‘surfing the internet’ rather than working, enhancing their skillsets or looking for new business prospects. This attitude echoes Binkley’s (2009a: 69) discussion of the temporalities of entrepreneurial subjectivities where ‘assuming full responsibility for the temporality of their own conduct, managing risks and projecting their futures against opportunistic horizons tailored to their own unique projects’ are key. My own informants, too, readily admit that being in control of their time does not mean working less; on the contrary, a lot of the time they work in excess of 40-h weeks, and during the fashion week this increases to well over 100 h per week. The sense of urgency, stemming from the fact that the fashion week offers such a limited time frame for developing business contacts, is the main reason for such intense work patterns.

Besides, finishing work time and switching into non-work mode is not always straightforward. Distinguishing between ‘productive’ and ‘unproductive’ time is generally difficult in the creative industries, with their ‘extensification’ and ‘overflowing’ (Jarvis and Pratt, 2006: 331) of work into spaces and times that are traditionally reserved for leisure and private life. As my respondent Hiro put it, ‘I have a way of functioning that is very *contaminated* – there is no separation between work and life’.

Boltanski and Chiapello (2005: 152) have pointed out that the imperatives, for the late capitalist entrepreneurial subject, of ‘[n]ot wasting time involve reserving it for establishing and maintaining the most profitable connections ... as opposed to squandering it in relations with intimates or people with whom social intercourse brings only pleasure of an affective or ludic variety’. Within the creative industries, however, the distinction between ‘people with whom social intercourse brings only pleasure’ and ‘profitable connections’, as per the quote above, is not straightforward: *most* people are potential work contacts, and every connection, however informal, has the potential to turn into a collaboration. Therefore, all social time is *potentially* productive time, even if it is not, as of yet, obviously configured as such.

This becomes particularly apparent during fashion weeks. During this period business interactions happen not only in showrooms and fashion shows but also in public spaces such as streets, cafés, bars, restaurants and nightclubs. Entire areas of Paris, such as the Marais district, become sets for knowledge exchange and professional connections. Hence, times that would, under regular conditions, be considered as ‘time off’ (for example, having dinner or going to a party after work), are, in fact, work times too. This quote from Gael further illustrates this:

Last time during menswear [fashion week in Paris] we were sitting in a café, and a couple of Spanish people sat next to us [Gael is Spanish, and works primarily with the Spanish market]. They were stylists. What are you gonna do? Are you just gonna sit there and not talk? It's fashion week, you know, you're meant to do that [engage in professional conversations]. I couldn't help but: 'Hey, who are you?' We exchanged contacts and so far nothing has come out of that, but you never know!
(Interview with Gael and Hermione, 16 March 2018)

Of course, this does not mean that fashion professionals always *experience* social interactions as work obligations. 'Hanging out' or 'social intercourse' is often not perceived as productive time, or as something done in response to the demands of the workplace; there is pleasure in it, which should not be underestimated if we want to take into account agents' lived experiences. Banter often lasts longer than would be necessary for any productive reasons, purely for the pleasure of 'sharing a good moment', as Patrice has put it.

I witnessed this when shadowing Patrice on an extremely busy day. He left the showroom, which was in the process of being set up for the fashion week, to collect food for his staff from a nearby restaurant. Rather than exchanging money and quick hellos with the restaurant owner, Marie, and rushing back to the showroom (which I had expected him to do), he sat at the counter, ordered a drink and conversed with her, her staff, and, at some point, another customer for about 20 min, sharing local gossip involving other small business owners. He only left when she jokingly pointed out the food he ordered would be getting cold. That evening Patrice stayed in the showroom until 1.30 in the morning (I left at 1 am). He clearly could have saved the time he spent talking to Marie (and possibly other bits of time spent on other social interactions throughout the day) and thus reduced the time he spent at work, but he did not want to. It is worth mentioning that Marie and other local business owners were his key informants about gallery spaces becoming available for rent in the area, which gave him a competitive advantage in terms of being able to host his showroom in the location with the best footfall of buyers and press. However, it would be simplistic to reduce this interaction to instrumental considerations of the importance of 'contacts'.

Some of the labour performed by agents, then, can be seen as 'the maintenance of everyday life' (Baraitser, 2017: 49): their practices 'maintain the connections between people, people and things, things and things, people and places' (p. 49). In that sense, they are a form of reproductive labour: Patrice's banter with Marie reproduces the fabric of the local community (while also potentially generating property leads, but that is not its primary aim). Moreover, one of the time-competences (Glennie and Thrift, 1996) agents need to possess includes knowing when to shift from such reproductive to more clearly productive labour. The flexible, unstructured, overflowing temporal regime that exists within fashion and

other creative industries is drastically different from the more traditional and structured regime of 9–5 employment and requires a ‘skilfulness of temporal practices’ that allows for a ‘multiplicity of time-senses and time-disciplines’ (Glennie and Thrift, 1996: 275). The following section will consider such multiplicity in more detail.

Tempi and velocities

Patrice and Milena are looking at the showroom’s busy appointment schedule for the next few hours, trying to work out which of the assistants is best assigned to each buyer. ‘Remind me who’s [the store name] coming at 12?’ ‘It’s that long-haired guy from Kyoto’. ‘Oh, him! You know what, Paul can [look after] him. Bloody hell, the appointment will probably last 8 h then but at least they have the same speed!’ They giggle. I ask them to explain the joke to me, and Patrice obliges:

‘You know how [slow] the Japanese [buyers] normally are? Well, Kyoto is – multiply [this slowness] by 10. It’s the old capital, you know, all old crafts, all slow living, nah, nah. But this guy ... Honestly, I’ve never seen anything like it. Zero de tension [this is how Patrice normally characterises people who are generally slow in their behaviour]. He does like this...’

From here, Patrice performs a pantomime. He very slowly walks towards a shoe on a display unit. He picks it up, still moving in the same sedate way; brings it closer to his face, then carries it further away from it, puts it back on the shelf and stares at it intently, picks it up again and slowly, carefully turns it over to examine it from different sides, all while pulling faces that suggest deep and intense reflection. He then puts it on the floor and crouches next to it, props his chin with his hands and gazes at the shoe. After about 15 s of contemplation, he moves it slightly, so that it is now facing him at a different angle, and continues to peer at it. Milena and others are watching him; their laughter grows louder. Patrice can no longer sustain his performance, so he gets back up, puts the shoe back on the display unit and concludes:

‘I mean, Paul and he will be perfect together’ (Paul is a showroom assistant whose unhurried way of thinking and doing things is often a source of frustration and jokes and will eventually lead to him getting sacked). (Fieldnotes, 1 March 2018)

During the fashion week, timings and tempi are crucial. The above excerpt demonstrates how important it is for agents to capture and reflect back the velocity and ‘vibe’ of their clients, adjusting their own behaviours and moods accordingly. Everyday interactions in showrooms have a dramatic variety of speeds: some buyers have very tight schedules with over 10 appointments per day scheduled

in different parts of the city; they whizz through collections, spending only several minutes or less at each stand, which means the agent needs to have an ‘elevator pitch’ ready in order to stir their interest in the limited time they have. Others, like the Japanese buyer discussed by Patrice, can only work in a meticulous, unhurried, contemplative manner, and will be deterred by a brisk approach. A good agent is one who can rapidly pick up on the temporal needs of their client and fine-tune their demeanour, thus switching between different tempi multiple times a day. Such fluency in multiple temporal regimes is part of the agent’s embodied knowledge that is a prerequisite of succeeding in fashion’s inherently pluralistic temporality which stems from the industry’s global nature and outlook.

Indeed, different tempi often correspond with different cultures, and it is the international nature of the fashion week that makes it necessary for agents to constantly recalibrate their velocities. As Patrice noted, Japanese professionals are more likely to operate at a slower pace. I witnessed Japanese-born and internationally raised Naoko, who established her career as an expert in dealing with the Japanese market, instruct an assistant on serving Japanese customers in a showroom: ‘He [sic] will be walking around for a while looking at things, and it’s important not to approach him until he’s put down his bag or got his pen out. Just let him linger, let him be. Once he’s put [his bag] down, he’s ready for your help – then you can ask him if he wants a rail [to make a selection of garments]’. If, however, an agent adopted the same approach with a European buyer, this would likely be seen as too laid-back and uncaring.

These examples raise the issue of cross-cultural readings and understandings of time. They also highlight how agents’ cosmopolitanism and cultural sensitivity become prerequisites for successfully carrying out their tasks. Being conversant with a variety of cultures and therefore instinctively able to adapt to a multitude of cultural norms and behaviours is a necessary component of agents’ soft skills. Managing multiple velocities has been discussed as a form of affective labour (see Baraitser, 2017; Tsianos and Papadopoulous, 2006), and it is one of the several forms of such labour that are necessary to navigate the globalised knowledge economy. Other forms include the labours of anticipation and waiting, which I will now turn to.

Time-horizons: looking for promise

We don’t look for established brands. We need to see a promise of something that hasn’t yet happened. (Excerpt from an interview with Patrice discussing how he selects brands to represent, 28 January 2018)

So yeah, it’s my first day working for her [Eleonora, an agent] but I don’t yet know what exactly I will be doing. It was like, ‘let’s see where it goes and how we both

feel'. You know what she's like: if she sees potential, she'll jump on it and figure out what to do with it later. And I think she saw potential in me. (Fieldnotes from an encounter with a new freelance contributor in Eleonora's showroom, 1 October 2017)

Herbert Blumer (1969: 280), who was one of the earliest sociologists to consider the role of fashion intermediaries in the production and dissemination of fashionability, suggested that one of the key roles of such intermediaries was reading, and responding to, 'incipient tastes'. The idea of incipience is central to fashion's imaginaries, as evidenced by the language of fashion media that is routinely peppered with expressions such as 'up-and-coming', 'rising star', or 'names to watch'.

Such future-orientation in the fashion industry is premised on a constant search to 'discover' the 'next big thing', as well as on a necessity to build relationships that extend into the future. Some connections may only come to fruition years after they were established, and even if it is not quite clear yet what form this fruition might take, relationships are seen as worth maintaining because of their as yet undefined potential future usefulness.

Patrice: We are connected to a guy in Sweden who does interior design and he came to see the showroom ... He's a model for one of our brands. He's not in fashion – he's in interior design – our designers just like his face...

Me: Oh yeah, the bearded guy? I saw him yesterday. Wow, you spent a long time with him, didn't you? I thought he was some big buyer!

Patrice: Yeah, well, no he's not. He is in interior design. But maybe in 5–10 years we will find a way to collaborate. (Conversation with Patrice, 4 March 2018)

Patrice's attitude here is exemplary of an entrepreneurial disposition with its 'embodied, mundane orientations toward temporal futures, according to the calculating dispositions required of ... reflexive social life' (Binkley, 2009b: 90) and its propensity to *see every encounter as an opportunity*. This disposition – one that is instinctively and routinely oriented towards the future; which is invested in it and constantly prepared to manage both the opportunities and the threats that it may bring – is one of the building blocks of what I propose to define as an anticipatory subjectivity.

Agents' lives are future-oriented not only because they are always looking for promising brands or potential collaborations, but also because they're constantly borrowing from the future financially. Rather than selling actual garments that buyers pay for and take away with them, agents present samples of collections that are yet to be produced (during my fieldwork in July 2017 they were

selling collections that would arrive in stores in spring 2018). Orders that are made in the showrooms during fashion weeks will only be paid for months later, immediately before, or even some months after, the garments have been manufactured and shipped to stores. Therefore, the orders that buyers place are no more than promissory notes, and as such they are often not honoured. A large part of an agent's work life outside of the fashion week consists of chasing retailers for confirmations (about the quantities of their orders) and then chasing after payments. Payment, when it is finally made, goes directly to the designer, and only after that will the designer pay the agent his or her commission (assuming that the designer honours the commitment at all). This means that a deal signed at a fashion week will only bring dividends to agents approximately a year after it was struck, once collections have been manufactured (at least six months after the fashion week due to production times) and shipped to stores, and designers have received their payment from retailers (usually within three months after the shipment).

In this sense, the agent's entire work life is permeated by a *promissory regime* (Beckert, 2020: 320): even the most fruitful of fashion weeks won't bring them instant financial results; rewards for work are always deferred. With the promissory regime, predicated on an 'ongoing deferral' (Adams et al., 2009: 247) of rewards, comes uncertainty: orders placed at fashion weeks can, and very often do, get cancelled; stores might fail to pay on time, or at all; and the designer may be unable to produce the ordered items (for example, because the orders did not reach a minimum necessary to buy the fabric in bulk, because the manufacturer has gone bankrupt, or for a number of other reasons). All these, very real, threats are constantly present and entirely outside of the agent's control.

Agents are, then, reflexive subjects (Lash, 1994) who are always managing risks, constantly determining new opportunities and threats. A quote from Hermione's interview illustrates this particularly well: 'Our business plan changes every month!' The disposition that allows for a peculiar relationship to the future, premised on always looking for potential and opportunity as well as continually assessing future risks, has been discussed by Adams et al. (2009: 246) as one of the key life skills of the late capitalist subject. As they explain:

One defining quality of our current moment is its characteristic state of anticipation, of thinking and living toward the future. [...] Key dimensions are: *injunction* as the moral imperative to characterize and inhabit states of uncertainty; *abduction* as requisite tacking back and forth between futures, pasts and presents, framing templates for producing the future; *optimization* as the moral responsibility of citizens to secure their 'best possible futures'; *preparedness* as living in 'preparation for' potential trauma; and *possibility* as 'ratcheting up' hopefulness.

Anticipation has been widely discussed in sociology as way of coordinating and negotiating futures (Tavory and Eliasoph, 2013; Tavory, 2018). It is seen as both an experience – a ‘feel for the game’, or ‘protention’, as Bourdieu (2000: 128–129) defines it, drawing on Husserl (2012) – and as a rational aspect of action (Weber 1968) or a ‘predictive practice’ (Mackenzie, 2013; see also Anderson, 2010), but the latter view generally prevails in the social sciences, implicitly or explicitly (see, for instance, Elias, 1992; Schutz and Luckmann, 1973). Conversely, the recent literatures within the humanities (e.g., Ahmed, 2010; Berlant, 2011) focus on anticipation primarily as an affective state – which does govern action but not through rational, self-interested and intentional ‘projects’ as Weber would have it – and it is precisely this conceptualisation of anticipation that interests me here. The ‘calculative and anticipatory disposition toward the future in the outlooks and conducts of everyday actors’ (Binkley, 2009b: 87) is one of the key facets of agents’ outlooks on life. Strongly oriented towards the future, forever prospecting and hedging bets, these anticipatory subjectivities are produced by an investment in the future as much as by an impossibility of making solid plans.

Anticipatory subjectivities in a promissory regime

As important as the future is, it is by no means certain or easy to project into. On the contrary, it is experienced by agents as unpredictable, or, to use Adam and Groves’ (2007: 10) definition, ‘empty’: not a direct outcome of the actions in the present or the past, but a separate entity often severed from the present altogether and impossible to control.

Zygmunt Bauman (1996) has written about the idea of the modern subject as a pilgrim on a journey to self-fulfilment, who, in his (sic) journey, deployed ‘a ‘sense-making’ story, such a story as makes each event the effect of the event before and the cause of the event after, each age a station on the road pointing towards fulfilment’ (Bauman, 1996: 23). Such a pilgrim experienced time as a vector pointing towards a goal in the future, which he was on a quest to achieve. Bauman defines this sense of time as ‘the time of the modern living-towards-projects. Like life itself, it was directional, continuous, and unbendable’ (Bauman, 1995: 87). In Bauman’s view, this sense of time belonged to Modernity and became obsolete in late modernity; however, other sociologists have also discussed similar temporalities as experienced by contemporary subjects, but only by those of certain class and gender. Thus, Crang (2001: 193) proposed that members of the middle class are more likely to ‘make a project out of life’ and drew attention to the middle classes’ dispositions that allow them to plot clear trajectories and ‘colonise the future’ (p. 194).

It is hardly surprising that precariously employed workers within the creative industries do not possess such dispositions; rather than seeing a future that can

be planned and achieved – ‘administered’, as Adam and Groves (2007: 80) put it – they do not have a clear vision, or a ‘journey’ plotted to reach it. This is true not only of fashion professionals but of various freelance creatives. Thus, Gill’s (2010) study of new media workers highlighted these professionals’ inability to imagine their futures in a realistic and meaningful way. When asked where they saw themselves in five years’ time, interviewees ‘would either point to imagined futures characterised by lifestyles of wealth and glamour (‘sipping champagne on my yacht’) or, alternately, they would depict no future at all (‘I really have no clue. I can’t see myself continuing’). Occasionally, a single individual might offer both kinds of response’ (Gill, 2010: 259). Gill links this response to the ‘material conditions of radical uncertainty’ (2010: 259), echoing Beck’s (1992) ideas of a ‘risk society’ predicated on managing incalculable risks, invoked earlier.

Similarly, my subjects have displayed a distinct lack of linearity in their thinking about the future. They have been vague when asked about both immediate and longer-term plans, and this concerned both personal and business futures. Hermione, who admitted to continually tweaking her business plan, proceeded to explain that she and her business partner Gael didn’t have a set vision of the future and were willing to be agile and responsive to whatever opportunities may come their way. Other interviewees came up with expressions such as ‘I will see how I feel’ when asked about their future plans. Just like Gill’s respondents, some jokingly conjured culturally ingrained images of wealth and glamour (living in castles, retiring on a private island, etc.) and often proposed ideas of a future entirely disconnected from the present (e.g., having a sheep farm, starting a food business or an animal welfare charity, etc.).

This relationship to the future is reliant on, and constitutive of, a subjectivity that is constantly in motion and eagerly navigates discreet, short-term, often dramatically different and possibly unrelated forms of present, moving between geographic locations, jobs, industries and circles. The future, in this paradigm, is severed from past and present and is not a direct outcome of either.

Because the future cannot be seen clearly, it can be imagined in all possible guises. One of the things that can be, and consistently is, projected onto it is the dream of a big breakthrough, a success incommensurate with the current situation: this can be seen in Gill’s (2010) respondents’ projections, as well as in the responses of my own interviewees cited above. Although their imaginings of living in castles or on private islands were mainly made in jest, they are not seen as entirely implausible, since stories of professionals who made incredible fortunes almost overnight are a part of fashion’s vernacular.

The discourse of ‘discovery’, of a life-changing event, encounter or connection is repeatedly invoked in fashion magazines and is central to fashion’s imaginaries (Mears, 2011; McRobbie, 2016; Mensitieri, 2020). It is also, as multiple sociologists studying fashion work have pointed out, an idea that makes many fashion professionals stick with their chosen line of work despite low returns,

extreme work hours and a lack of security. Thus, McRobbie (2016: 4) writes about ‘the euphoria of imagined success’ that permeates the lives of fashion designers and other creative workers; she talks about it as a new form of neo-liberal governmentality that keeps these professionals working. Similarly, Wissinger (2007: 257) points out that fashion models are ‘sustained by the lure of instant stardom around the corner’, which gets them through the ‘fits and starts [and] long lulls’ that the modelling business is predicated on; and Mears (2011: 20–21), examining her own work as a fashion model, recalls how she found it hard to quit modelling because it always felt as if she was just a step away from scoring her own ‘Big Job’ (Neff, Wissinger and Zukin, 2005), the breakthrough deal that would give her a big campaign and propel her to the status of a top model, at any moment.

Such inclination towards “ratcheting up” hopefulness’ (Adams et al., 2009: 146), as a feature of anticipatory subjectivity, makes the subject well positioned to withstand and navigate conditions of risk. The powerful belief that something extraordinary may be waiting ‘around the corner’ brings an affective dimension to many creative professionals’ relationship to time, creating a strong investment in the future that is coupled with an equally strong sense of uncertainty. This combination has been mostly discussed to date as a feature of all precarious lives rather than one specific to the creative industries. Thus, in the poignantly titled book *Cruel Optimism*, Lauren Berlant (2011) considers the late capitalist conditions where the fantasy of ‘a good life’ that is possible in the future is upheld against the backdrop of a crumbling social fabric and increasing instability. ‘What is at stake in optimism is an attachment and a desire to sustain it’, Berlant notes (2011: 13); the ‘cruelty’ of such optimism comes from the fact that it encourages a Sisyphean commitment to futures that are inherently unattainable. Similarly, Sara Ahmed’s (2010) *Promise of Happiness* investigates the strong ‘affective orientations towards the future’ (p. 162) predicated on a belief in, and expectation of, happiness. ‘[T]he futurity of happiness, how happiness offers us a promise, which we glimpse in the unfolding of the present’ (Ahmed, 2010: 160), she argues, creates a hopeful orientation to the future that encourages one to overlook the negative conditions of the present.

More recently, Mensitieri (2020: 192) has explored similar ideas in relation to the fashion industry. Drawing on interviews with a variety of fashion professionals, she notes that they consistently express ‘excitement, enthusiasm and adrenalin’ about the future, which, on closer inspection, do not appear rooted in their current lives: these emotions ‘didn’t seem to be triggered by actual experiences but by projections, by the fleeting impression of a dream that seemed to be within reach’. What’s more, these perceptions, in Mensitieri’s account, are carefully redacted: present concrete disappointments are ‘evacuated to leave room for a dream future or a future in the dream’, thus ‘maintaining a sense of excitement and involvement’, as well as ‘preventing [her research

subjects] from analysing the present' (2020: 192). These perceptions and orientations, I propose, are produced and maintained by the promissory regime that was discussed earlier: a set of narratives perpetuated by fashion's social world that puts forth an exciting, albeit indeterminate, promise of a glamorous, outstanding future.

The future invoked in such dreams and projections is dependent on an event that might enable it: an encounter, a call, a discovery. Agents live in a state of constant readiness and eagerness for such an event to occur. Such a constant lookout for a life-changing occurrence, coupled with a preparedness for the worst in case it does not occur, is a cornerstone of anticipatory subjectivity.

However, such an event cannot just happen anytime; to enable it, the right, opportune moment is perceived to be necessary. In time philosophy, it is described through the ancient Greek notion of *kairos*, which is crucial to an understanding of the lived temporalities of fashion agents, as the next section will demonstrate.

Timing: *kairos*

Yesterday there was a client in the showroom who was unsure about this piece [of clothing]. I could tell she was looking at it and thinking about it, so I pulled it out [from the clothing rack] and tried it on, unzipped it, then asked the designer [who was present too] to put on another, similar piece. And this way she [the client] was convinced [that the garment was valuable, and ordered 10 pieces]. But you know what? *If I hadn't been there at that point in time, it probably wouldn't have happened.* I needed to read this situation and react quickly – if you don't, the moment is just gone, they [the client] move on and the chance [to sell] is lost. (Excerpt from a conversation with Bryan, 1 July 2018)

The idea of a 'right time to act' was repeatedly invoked in my conversations with agents. In some cases, it referred to something as minute as noticing the customer's budding interest and allowing it to develop, like in the situation described by Bryan. In others, it referred to the agent signing the contract with an emerging brand, making the judgment that 'this is the moment in time when the brand has sufficiently developed and matured to be sellable, yet is not yet too commonplace to pique customers' interest'.

In ancient Greek philosophy, the right, or opportune moment to act is described through the concept of *kairos*. In Aristotle's work, *kairos* is 'a season when something appropriately happens that cannot happen just at "anytime" ... a time that marks an opportunity that may not return' (Kinneavy and Eskin, 1994: 132, quoting Smith, 1986: 3). *Kairos* has been linked to

crucial moments in archery and weaving (Onians, 1954), described as the moment when the bow-string is sufficiently nocked for the arrow to penetrate the target, or the moment when the shuttle can be passed through the threads on the loom.

‘[M]uch of our contemporary understanding of the Greek notion of *kairos* corresponds roughly to the English word timely,’ explains Rämö (1999: 317). He outlines the difference between *kairos* – a concrete, value-laden moment in time – and the other Greek concept of time, *chronos* – an abstract, linear time. He then goes on to discuss an analogy between the *kairos/chronos* dichotomy in the understanding of time and a similar binary opposition when it comes to space, *topos* versus *chora*, where *chora* is abstract space and *topos* is concrete place. Further, he proposes that entrepreneurship relies on a particular constellation of spatiotemporal events, along with an individual’s agency, which he calls *kairotopos*: ‘an ability to act judiciously and wisely at a concrete and opportune occasion’ (Rämö, 1999: 323) in a particular place.

The importance of being in the right place at the right time has emerged in many of my fieldwork encounters. It also became palpable in multiple situations that occurred over the years in my own work as an agent (see Melkumova-Reynolds, 2021). However, *kairotopos* is not simply about *finding* oneself in the right place at the right time. It presupposes exercising one’s agency in order to actualise the possibilities that are contained in this spatiotemporal configuration. If the agent doesn’t happen to be there, they won’t be actualised, but just being there is not enough either; it takes a voluntary action on behalf of the agent to bring these possibilities to fruition. Bryan’s actions described above are what Rämö (1999: 322) coins as ‘acting in a *kairotopos*-sense [which] requires a feature of voluntary action beyond official responsibility that encompasses circumstances that the individual is aware of and from which a choice is made’. *Kairos* is ‘a time of tension that calls for a decision’ (Rämö, 1999: 313).

The agent’s role, then, is to facilitate the ‘condition in which both time and place are merged into a concrete and meaningful unity, into *kairotopos*’ (Rämö, 1999: 322). Agents, therefore, can be seen as *kairotopic enablers* whose task is to actualise the potential of a certain time and a certain place. As Gael and Hermione rather poetically put it, they see themselves as people who ‘create the possibility for a conversation to happen’. Their actions happen in concert with the agency exerted by specific spaces and specific moments in time. Agents’ role, as many of them see it, consists of enabling and encouraging such constellations to occur, and/or becoming part of them.

However, *kairos* presupposes only limited agency on behalf of the actor: it might not happen, and there is no way to precipitate it. One can only hope for a window of opportunity to open, and be there, ready to exercise agency, when and if it does; but one cannot make it open. All one can do is wait.

Waiting for *kairos*

When I ask, ‘how’s it been going so far?’, people in showrooms will speak about the uncertain, hopeful and equally unnerving state of ‘waiting to see what happens’: there have been some buyers coming through and some of them sound interested, but we don’t know if this interest will translate into orders. ‘Nothing has come out of this [encounter with a buyer] just yet but you never know what might do’; ‘I guess we just have to wait and see what happens’ are common responses. (Fieldnotes, 3 October 2018)

One of the key experiences of agents’ lives is that of waiting. Various types of waiting occur in their everyday activities, as well as in longer time frames. On a day-to-day level, agents are regularly faced with the necessity of having to wait for buyers, members of the press or other contacts who arrive late, or not at all, due to the chaotic timings of fashion weeks. Also, waiting for (and chasing) payment from store to designer, and the commission payments from the designer to the agent’s own account, are common threads in the fabric of agents’ everyday lives. But, importantly, waiting is equally fundamental to agents’ lifeworlds on a macro level: waiting for the first big order, which may or may not happen; waiting for a relationship with a buyer or a designer to come to fruition; or waiting for an (oft unspecified) life-changing breakthrough – which, in fashion, always feels entirely possible and very close to happening, as discussed earlier. In other words, agents are constantly waiting for the promises of the promissory regime to become reality, all the while knowing that this may well never occur.

A recurrent theme in extant analyses of waiting is that of a loss of agency. ‘Being trapped in waiting time’ (Lahad, 2019: 508) invokes a ‘sense of existential immobility’ (Hage, 2009: 7). When waiting, for something that may or may not materialise, becomes a sustained experience, it is bound to have a profound impact on subjectivity, demanding that the subject be able ‘to characterize and inhabit degrees and kinds of uncertainty – adjusting [...] to routinized likelihoods, hedged bets and probable outcomes’ (Adams et al., 2009: 247). This permanent preparedness is another tenet of anticipatory subjectivity.

Paradoxically, it is this very preparedness to act, the state of constantly projecting into an uncertain future, which inhibits the capacity for action. The lived experience of waiting suppresses the will to escape. As Lahad (2019: 505) concludes, ‘waiting produces compliant subjectivities’. Fashion workers remain in the industry despite living on the breadline and/or tolerating untenable workloads for years (see McRobbie, 2016; Mensitieri, 2020). This is not only because of their enchantment with fashion, but also because their constant wait for a breakthrough – a *kairotic* moment – wears down their ability to consider alternative career options.

I might add here that, as a former agent, I have an intimate embodied familiarity with this state: it took me 10 years to abandon my own wait for a breakthrough as a fashion agent and move into academia, where I soon found an eerily similar sensibility that keeps early career colleagues in fixed-term precarious contracts, hoping to get their first permanent post, for years or even decades; the lure of potential *kairos* is that irresistible.

Conclusion

Drawing on Adam's (1995, 2008) 'timescapes' framework, this article has parsed temporalities, tempi, timings and time-orientations that underpin fashion agents' lives and subjectivities. It has highlighted agents' increased sense of responsibility and reflexivity when it comes to time – a sense of duty to make the most of one's time: 'the time consciousness by which specific forms of conduct are oriented, and which appears, in the work of neoliberal governmentality, as the unique ethical substance of a practice of self-government' (Binkley, 2009a: 69). It has unpicked agents' capacity for managing multiple tempi and velocities, and conceptualised such management as a form of affective labour. Finally, it has analysed fashion workers' strong investment in fantastically imagined futures that are understood to be uncertain and unpredictable, and highlighted the importance, in their time perceptions, of the idea of *kairos*; the right, opportune moment. Such a moment, I have argued, is always perceived as one just about to happen; yet, it cannot be orchestrated or precipitated. As a result, one of agents' key temporal experiences is that of waiting.

Future-orientations akin to those paramount to agents' life-worlds have been discussed by several scholars in contexts unrelated to cultural and knowledge work, too. Binkley (2014: 57), for instance, has written about recent self-help literature requiring an 'adoption of a specific anticipatory disposition' enunciated through a 'capacity to anticipate, to keep one's eyes trained hopefully on the future', with '[o]ptimism about the possibility of happiness in the future' that 'infuses the subject with an emotional zeal, a happiness in anticipation of happiness'. The injunction to become an anticipatory subject, as per Binkley's suggestion, is increasingly becoming a cultural imperative that goes well beyond the realms of the cultural industries. The state of permanent anticipation, of preparedness for the worst combined with strong hope for the best, enables risk subjects to exist in an ongoing precarious present that refuses to become a future; sustaining their – our – 'cruel optimism' (Berlant, 2011) indefinitely.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: this research was supported by ESRC Standard Research Studentship.

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