Fashion in the age of Instagram

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In the Dries Van Noten exhibition at the Muse des Arts Décoratifs in Paris is a video that stitches together sequences from 20 years of his runway shows -- a "supercut," in online argot. On a tour of the show not long ago, Mr. Van Noten nodded along as memorable moments flashed: male models pedaling bicycles, women stalking the length of an enormous dinner table. But what stood out most were the ghostly points of light illuminating the audience's faces in the recent shows.

It was, Mr. Van Noten said, their smartphones.

The professional photographers on the risers facing the runways now represent only a fraction of those furiously jockeying to document each outfit, accessory and bit of set dressing. Nearly every show attendee, from the front row to the standing section, now arrives with phone in hand and Instagram account primed.

So unremarkable is a smartphone camera in every hand, said Danielle Sherman, the creative director of Edun, that when she commissioned a director and a fleet of 20 borrowed iPhone 5s to create a video of her fall 2014 show, hardly an eyebrow was raised. "No one said anything or questioned it, or even noticed it," she said.

This is fashion in the age of Instagram, a heady era in which digital media is changing the way clothes are presented and even the way they are designed. As shows are calibrated to be socially shared experiences, and fashion itself is rejiggered to catch eyes on a two-dimensional screen, some skeptics wonder what is being lost or sacrificed as fashion becomes grist for the digital mill.

Beyond question, the advent of digital media has fundamentally altered fashion, the designer Alexander Wang said: "The way that we shoot it, the way that we showcase it and the way that we make the clothes and design them changed."

Digital media has also changed the way fashion is reported, consumed and shared. Trade papers and websites that once held court as the home of collection coverage have had their turf invaded by individuals. "I see the shows on Instagram now," said Eva Chen, the editor in chief of Lucky.

"In some sense, every single person in the audience is their own media outlet," said Keith Baptista, the managing partner of Prodject, the creative agency that produces runway shows for clients like Mr. Wang, Giorgio Armani and Ralph Lauren. "They're all capturing these moments in this live experience to tell their own stories." (Consider that Ms. Chen, for instance, currently has more followers on Instagram than her magazine does.)

Creating a unique -- and, by extension, shareable -- experience for jaded showgoers has become part of a designer's mandate. Shows are designed to wow not only those in attendance, but also all of their followers. (That could be considered a necessary return on investment because, according to Julie Mannion, the president for creative services at the public relations and production firm KCD, a major show can cost $2 million to $8 million, in some cases reaching as much as $10 million, and last fewer than 10 minutes.)
Few shows can compete with Chanel's for over-the-top theatrics. But the company set a higher bar for itself in February, when it erected a Costco-size supermarket stocked with some 100,000 Chanel-customized faux products. (The hams in the meat case, for example, had labels printed Jambon Cambon, a nod to the street on which Chanel maintains offices and a store.)

Before the show, spectators goggled through the aisles, taking supermarket selfies before the models, pushing shopping carts down the runway, filled their baskets. It was the show that launched 1,000 Instagrams, with "likes" in similar proportion: a photo from Susanna Lau, a.k.a. the blogger Susie Bubble, received more than 2,670, more than double that of many of the other shows she snapped; one by Ms. Chen had 2,330, several hundred more than the several others in close Insta-proximity.

The fervor was such that the collection itself was somewhat eclipsed. (Perhaps aware of the attention the mise-en-scène garnered at the expense of its fashion, Chanel declined to speak about its sets.)

It is not only the richest labels that think big. Mr. Wang has earned a reputation for social-media-friendly spectacles. In February, his show closed with robotic-looking models rotating on a platform as blasts of heat changed the color of their thermo-sensitive garments, a moment tailor-made for Instagram. "We try to think of the pictures that are going to come out online," he said, "what the photographer pit takes versus what the audience sees."

The picture, Mr. Wang added, is "something we always take into deep consideration, even developing a collection. Sometimes, I have to admit, as a designer, you get into this trap of thinking about clothes for a picture rather than what's going to go into the market or showroom."

The attention now paid to digital extends beyond scenography and staging. It has crept in, say designers and critics, to the design of many collections. Tiziana Cardini, the fashion director of the Milanese department store chain La Rinascente and a contributing editor at Italian Vogue, has noticed the change.

"Fashion has become bi-dimensional," she said. "It's just flat. I see that designers, especially young designers, are considering the shapes and volumes in a totally different way; the colors, also. I think they pay much more attention to the photogenic value of an outfit." Asked why, she replied, "It's the web, definitely, that has changed the language."

Young editors, too, have been conditioned to think of fashion in the flat plane of the digital screen.

"What concerns me is the generational shift," said Ed Filipowski, the president for media relations at KCD. "So much of the younger generation does not look at the clothes for the first time with their eyes. They're trained to see clothes for the first time through photographs, two-dimensional as opposed to three-dimensional."

(Was it this tendency that Rei Kawakubo, the Delphic savant of Comme des Garons, was satirizing -- or celebrating -- in her fall 2012 collection, which consisted of felt garments flattened like paper dolls' clothes? "The future is two dimensions," was her explanation of the show.)

Both Mr. Filipowski and Ms. Cardini noted that the shift they have described is not necessarily a negative one. KCD, in fact, has implemented video "digital fashion shows" that exist only online, though Mr. Filipowski said that these are not meant to replace the traditional show.
The changes wrought by the flat screen do come with potential downsides. Though several designers mentioned the ability of Instagrammers to capture a garment at more angles than before, intricacies of cut and construction can vanish when reduced to two dimensions. Shows that may be gripping live may be done little justice on-screen. Junya Watanabe’s fall collection, all in black (notoriously hard to photograph), was composed of pieces of many fabrics sewn together to create a patchwork. On-screen, the nuances often failed to come through. Couture, relying as it does on minute handwork, may suffer even more. "People can’t see what couture is very well on a computer screen," Raf Simons of Dior complained to Interview.

Online ubiquity can also result in overexposure and copycatting. Phoebe Philo of Cline restricts photography, refusing to allow attendees to shoot smartphone pictures at some of her presentations and supplying news media outlets with her own photos only when the collections arrive in stores. In 2010, Tom Ford took a similar tack by barring photographers and cellphones -- the news media protested -- when he showed his first runway collection in years.

Tellingly, Mr. Ford eventually gave in. His recent shows during London Fashion Week were seen online as most shows are -- which is to say, in their entirety, nearly instantaneously.

While some labels still attempt to curb access -- "There are brands that actually will block cellphone and data signals during shows," said Mr. Baptista, the producer, declining to name names -- most willingly accept that the genie is out of the bottle, digitally speaking.

There are, after all, positive gains as well as potential drawbacks.

The London designer Mary Katrantzou has been aware of the possibilities of showing work online since her student days at Central Saint Martins. After she made a collection that included several bustles, she recalled Louise Wilson, the outspoken director of the school's master's program, bellowing: "The front, Mary! You only see the front on Style.com!"

Her brilliant prints and color palette, like that of many in her generation, may have been affected by the digital space, as Ms. Cardini suggests, but Ms. Katrantzou credits it for making her work stand out from the crowd on the web, effectively giving her an advantage over those designers who aren't attuned to the online palatability of their wares.

The digital world can also open a more direct line of communication between designers and their fans than was previously possible. "I want to share with people," said the dedicated Instagrammer Riccardo Tisci, the creative director of Givenchy, during a recent visit to New York. Mr. Tisci prefers to use the medium to share not necessarily his clothes, but the inspirations behind them, like the Gio Ponti architecture and design that influenced a recent pre-fall collection. "In Ukraine, a girl who doesn't know who is Gio Ponti" likes the collection "and doesn't know how I get to that," he said. "To see the beginning of the story is quite beautiful. I think Instagram, if you use it in the right way, it's a positive."

Designers are not the only ones embracing the freedom offered digitally. The stylist Carlyne Cerf de Dudzeele, a fixture in the industry, now hosts a YouTube show and is Instagramming merrily. Though she has worked with photographers like Peter Lindbergh and Steven Meisel, she recently took matters into her own hands for a fashion story in System magazine. Every photo was, as the opening page made clear, "Shot with my iPhone."
Her prefatory note enthused: "New World / No Retouching, No Assistant / No Budget, No Brainstorming, No Moodboard / Heaven!!"

And crucially for designers, in the new world, any phone can be an instant till. When Ms. Katrantzou introduced e-commerce on her website, she Instagrammed a photo of an embellished minidress called the Midnight Chrysa to her followers. It is "an imposing dress," she said, which costs $8,680. She sold three that day.

CAPTION(S):

PHOTOS: To produce a video of its fall 2014 show relying solely on images captured on the iPhone 5, Edun borrowed 20 smartphones. Hardly an eyebrow was raised. (PHOTOGRAPH BY PHIL KNOTT) (E1); Chanel erected a market stocked with some 100,000 faux products for its show in Paris. (PHOTOGRAPH BY VALERIO MEZZANOTTI FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES); Alexander Wang’s show included looks that appeared two-dimensional, left and top. In the finale, right, garments changed color on a rotating stage. (PHOTOGRAPHS BY NOWFASHION; ELIZABETH LIPPMAN FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES; JASON DECROW/ASSOCIATED PRESS) (E7)

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