

In my End is my Beginning
Dialectical Images in Times of Crisis
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Home Away From Home

The Crisis and Escape Addressed by Hussein Chalayan's *After Words* Fashion Show

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Abstract Fashion often mirrors societal crises, embodying both human finitude and the hunger for renewal. Ernesto De Martino's anthropological perspective highlights how crises challenge cultural continuity. Hussein Chalayan's 2000 collection, *After Words*, exemplifies fashion's power to address such themes, using garments to represent the displacement and survival of war refugees. Chalayan's conceptual approach underscores fashion's potential to provoke thought beyond conventional imagery. By blending creative, anthropological, and sociological insights, fashion can profoundly engage with and reflect on societal upheavals.

Keywords Crisis imagery. Fashion. Anticlimax. Dichotomy. War.

Summary 1 Introduction: Why Fashion Can Relate to Crisis. – 2 Hussein Chalayan's Fashion Show. – 3 Overcoming Desensitization to Crisis Imagery Through Anticlimax. – 4 Conclusions.

1 Introduction: Why Fashion Can Relate to Crisis

The notion of the end of the world is notoriously catastrophic for both single individuals and humanity as a whole, that is to say the social and cultural fabric our species has woven over the centuries of inhabiting this planet. What is particularly interesting about Ernesto De Martino's view on this theme is that his anthropological approach to

the end of the world and the inevitable catastrophe that would cause it diverges from a sympathetic sociological-anthropological analysis of what witnessing one's own end would mean for humanity. Instead, De Martino is concerned with the fear of loss that would accompany the disappearance of the cultural universe constructed by humanity over millennia. From this perspective,

the ending is simply the risk of being unable to exist in any possible cultural world, the loss of the possibility of being operationally present in the world, the narrowing - to the point of annihilation - of any horizon of worldly operability, the catastrophe of any communal project according to values. (De Martino [1977] 2019, 244)

The end of the world, however, is only the final and most extreme consequence of far more common and less definitive crises from which humanity always manages to recover by reconstructing and revitalizing its cultural society in agreement with new needs. According to De Martino, it is precisely human culture and its products that enable the survival of the human presence, which goes beyond the survival of the individual (which is obviously not guaranteed) and allows for the persistence of a fundamental cultural base for a restart, a new beginning. It is in the crisis, De Martino discusses, that one can find a dichotomous aspect of human nature: its inclination toward finitude and, concurrently, its hunger for existence, or more precisely, humanity's awareness of its own finitude, coupled with its desire for immortality and survival.. This helps to understand how, in the face of every critical conclusion, whether it is severe or not, humans always find a way to move toward a new beginning.¹

Various cultural fields have addressed themes of crisis, ranging from cinema to literature to visual arts, and beyond. However, it is rare to consider fashion, the art of clothing, as one of these, even though an important parallel can be drawn between fashion and the dichotomous nature of humans just discussed. Fashion, in fact, survives thanks to its dual nature, which consists of its tendency toward social equality and, simultaneously, its need for individual differentiation. As Georg Simmel already wrote in 1910:

1 Lombardi Satriani (in Bori et al. 1979, 244) writes: "Human culture in general is the solemn exorcism against this radical risk [of being unable to exist in any way]", while Cases (in Bori et al. 1979, 233) notes: "Even if... the operator and all of humanity were to disappear an instant after the work was completed, this immense material catastrophe can do nothing against the permanence that the work, according to its value, has founded on rock: the actuality of the act... has rendered the world immortal beyond any possible cosmic catastrophe (De Martino 1977) [...] We must 'act' to transform and reverse the catastrophe".

When even one of the two social tendencies that must converge to create fashion - the need for cohesion on the one hand and the need for differentiation on the other - disappears, the creation of fashion will cease, and it will be the end of its reign. ([1910] 2015, 27)

It is important to note that when Georg Simmel refers to the need for cohesion, he is alluding to the *trickle-down* theory, according to which the diffusion of fashion trends is rooted in social relationships, based on the assumption that

fashions are always class fashions, that the fashions of the upper class distinguish themselves from those of the lower class and are abandoned as soon as the latter begins to adopt them. (27)

However, this theory no longer fully aligns with contemporary social structures (there are still those who look up to and are influenced by affluent classes or celebrities, but many groups deliberately choose to go completely against the standards set by higher classes, with the only difference now being economic). An interesting point is that while the *trickle-down* theory is now anachronistic, the dichotomy Simmel identified as fundamental to the existence of fashion is still, and perhaps more than ever, applicable and relevant. In 2013, fashion was once again defined as

simultaneously inclusive and exclusive. Some actors may want to create differences, i.e., act to diverge from what is existing or too common. This is best interpreted as an act of individuality. Others aim to ensure that they too are on the bandwagon, which is to say that fashion may also be seen as an act of collectivity. (Aspers, Godart 2013, 186)

This dichotomous nature of fashion can draw a parallel with the intrinsic dichotomy of mankind and can show how it can relate to that and deeply understand this particular aspect of it, in order to be able to play a full role in addressing crisis themes, engaging with them and exploring their various aspects in the most unconventional ways. In fact, just as human beings continuously seek existential meaning in a world that pushes them towards crisis and transformation, fashion undergoes a similar process. Each time a trend becomes dominant, the necessity to surpass it arises, leading to a kind of death of the old fashion and the rebirth of new styles. In this way, fashion perfectly mirrors the nature of humanity, which, when faced with an ending, always searches for a new beginning. Thus, crisis, whether for the individual or for fashion, becomes an opportunity for renewal.

2 Hussein Chalayan's Fashion Show

One of the most successful examples demonstrating how fashion can address crisis themes is undoubtedly Hussein Chalayan's Fall/Winter prêt-à-porter collection titled *After Words*, presented at London Fashion Week in February 2000.

For this project, the designer began reflecting on the recently ended Bosnian War and the consequences that conflict had on the population, who were forced to abandon their homes to save their lives, facing a personal (and often more than just personal) human and cultural apocalypse before attempting a new beginning elsewhere. The topic resonated personally with the artist, whose Cypriot family had to leave their homeland and move to London due to the Turkish invasion of Cyprus. As the designer himself stated:

This was around 1999, and I was initially inspired by the war in Bosnia and by the people being displaced from their homes. That actually reminded me that we experienced the same thing in Cyprus. I wasn't born then, Cyprus was divided in 1974, but these events happened in the Sixties. I connected it to the idea of a universal upheaval of having to leave your home at the time of war. And what I wanted to do was to look at how you protect your possessions by having them as chair covers or how you can put the objects in a room into the pockets of your clothes and take them with you. So it was about that: carrying your home with you. (Salibian 2020, n.p.)

Therefore, in addressing the theme of forced abandonment of one's home, combined with the dramatic attempt to save as many everyday objects as possible, driven by the sole desire to start anew in a safe place, Chalayan created a performative action designed to provoke clear, painful, yet creative and highly innovative reflection on the plight of war refugees. During the show, he presented a series of garments with a strong Eastern European flavor, evidently designed to be practical in case of conflict or flight, such as coats with pockets large enough to hold a handbag or a weapon, which immediately made the central theme clear. The models walked in a setting reminiscent of an ordinary, modest living room, which featured a shelf, a television, and a table surrounded by four chairs. At the end, four models entered the scene wearing gray slips, and as they approached the chairs, they removed the covers and wore them, as they were cut to serve as garments when needed. The chair frames were folded into rectangular shapes with handles, becoming suitcases. The last model walked down the runway until she reached the table, the only remaining object, and stepped into the center of it, beginning to lift it, revealing an accordion-like structure that, attached to the model's waist, had formed a wooden, conical skirt. The entire

living room, when necessary, could follow its owner in flight.² It was a highly moving performance that told of a social tragedy deeply ingrained in the collective imagination, strongly embedded in history and contemporary reality, capable of engaging and provoking reflection in the spectator, who, unexpectedly, during a social event, was hit by a cold shower of awareness. The aim of this intervention was to address the theme of crisis through a fashion show that encapsulated the sense of the finiteness of life as it has always been known by those forced to flee their land and culture, and the hunger for existence that drives the desperate attempt to start over elsewhere.³ With this show, Chalayan was able to describe and narrate a catastrophic scenario of crisis, conflict, flight, abandonment, hope, and rebirth, accurately presenting the dichotomy that resides in human nature with avant-garde garments that focus on the concept they want to express rather than on wearability or aesthetic appeal. It is, in fact, possible here to speak of conceptuality, because, following what Hazel Clark says, conceptual fashion identifies “the primacy of ideas over appearance” (Clark 2012, 67), an aspect that can certainly be considered close to the art world⁴ and that both seek to emphasize, with the aim of moving away from the outdated notion (of which fashion is the most pointed victim) that these fields are primarily tasked with producing beauty,⁵ when in fact they evidently possess communicative potential at both the social and political levels, capable of engaging and impacting the viewer, and sometimes even surpassing documentary approaches.

2 “Perhaps alluding to the double meaning of *prêt-à-porter* – ‘ready to wear’ or ‘to carry’” (Degen 2016, n.p.).

3 To demonstrate that in times of crisis, the human instinct to preserve one’s daily life (as much as possible) as a foundation for rebuilding is inherent, one can refer to a work by Simmel from 1904, where he discusses judicial conflict, though this concept can be extended to the reaction to any form of conflict, “the self-preservation of the personality which so identifies itself with its possessions and its rights that any invasion of them seems to be a destruction of the personality; and the struggle to protect them at the risk of the whole existence is thoroughly consistent” (Simmel 1904, 508).

4 This is certainly not the place to discuss whether fashion can be considered a form of art, a topic on which the debate is particularly heated.

5 “Both the artist and the scientist are driven by the desire to understand, to interpret, and to communicate their understanding to the rest of the world. The artist, let it be trumpeted, is not interested in decoration, and it is only because Non-Artists have worked as though decoration, fatuous reminiscence, and eye titillation were the highest ends of art that many persons still find themselves accepting or rejecting an artwork largely in terms of whether it is beautiful to the eye. Of course art can be beautiful, but not if it seeks beauty as its chief end. So [...] can science be beautiful though no one would suppose that even a mathematician is actuated fundamentally by the goal of beauty” (Nisbet 1962, 69). “We can already see the parallels with fashion, which should not be defined merely as the production of clothes, but also on the basis of fashion’s preeminent relationship to time – past, present and future [...] giving it the capacity of a silent reflector of culture and society” (Clark 2012, 68).

3 Overcoming Desensitization to Crisis Imagery Through Anticlimax

Documentary images are often used as the primary means of visual dissemination of any event, even the most traumatic ones, such as a conflict or natural disaster. However, these types of images, which are undoubtedly the most raw and truthful available, are not always the ones that leave the greatest impact on the viewer. In contemporary society, there has developed a habit of viewing images of tragedy that have desensitized the eyes of spectators, who, being habitually bombarded with images of devastation and suffering, can no longer be genuinely moved or disturbed by them (partly for self-defense). For this reason, an unexpected and anticlimactic presentation of tragedy is increasingly likely to impress or shock a viewer who needs images anyway to recognize, pinpoint, and manage many external facts, precisely because

the image is ascribed the ability to fix something that would otherwise be dissolved and scattered in the multiplicity of our experience, or the ability to make visible something we would otherwise avert our gaze from due to its horror. (Angelucci 2018, 69)

After Words can certainly be included in the set of works just described. In a society saturated with images, and even more so with images of violence, Chalayan hides suffering rather than showing it - he only hints at it, suggests it, implies it, making it all the more powerful. During the show, nothing alludes to an ongoing conflict - only the guns bring the mind to violence, but on this occasion, they are used to demonstrate the functionality of a pocket; thus, the audience does not see elements that might make them think of ongoing hostilities, yet as soon as the models wear the furniture, the reason, the context, the suffering becomes clear, each imagined differently, yet felt equally by all. *After Words* does not show the crisis, the tragedy, but compels the mind to think about it, to transport the viewer to a place from which that feeling can no longer be escaped.

Chalayan's fashion show in this sense can be compared to the work of Adam Broomberg and Oliver Chanarin, who in 2008, at the front in Afghanistan, created a series of "action photographs" (Innes 2014, 88) one of which was titled *The Day Nobody Died*. Although this series of photographs was taken in a war zone and thus should document what is happening, they are completely abstract. In the case of the photographers, the theme was not the desire to address a private or familial issue; rather, the desire to create this type of photography was driven by the need to evade American censorship (it was not tolerated that Americans see photos depicting their troops in difficulty or American soldiers killed or injured) and by the desire to criticize traditional photojournalism and the frequent aestheticization

of tragedy. To create their photos, Broomberg and Chanarin used a 50-meter-long, 762-centimeter-wide roll of photographic paper stored in a light-tight box.

In response to each event that would normally be documented and disseminated by the media [...] we would unroll a 7-meter segment of paper and expose it to the sun for twenty seconds. (Baker 2014)

thus obtaining non-figurative images that only recalled the colors present in the scene of the shot. To understand what is being observed, the title becomes fundamental, the only precise information the artists provide to their audience. In this specific case, the image was created on the fifth day they were at the front, the first day when no one died: "It was a profound pause to the chaos which the artists compare to the calm eye of a storm" (Bucknell 2017, n.p.). Again, the viewer's focus is not on the image itself, which does not accurately tell what it is supposed to convey, but on what the image allows one to infer - specifically here, the improbability in that context of experiencing a situation that is almost taken for granted in peaceful zones: not seeing anyone die during the day. As Bucknell states,

the viewer has no opportunity to witness and subsequently forget about harrowing documentation of the artists' trip. Instead, they are haunted by its absence. (2017, n.p.)

In both these cases, in the fashion show and in the photos, what captures the attention and strikes the viewer is not the image itself but the tragedy into which the observer is catapulted, the context it evokes, whose fundamental importance is indicated by Mieke Bal (2009, 225), who writes: "contextualization is a constant semi-otic activity without which cultural life cannot function". But more importantly, it is precisely the importance of context in reading an image that underpins Didi-Huberman's argument in the first part of his *Images in Spite of All*. In this essay, the author reflects on four images clandestinely taken by a member of the Sonderkommando at Auschwitz in 1944, depicting piles of bodies killed in the gas chambers. Two of these were taken from inside the gas chamber, allowing the clandestine photographer to focus more carefully, while the other two were taken outside, hastily and in secret, resulting in images that are difficult to understand, except for the trees clearly distinguishable in a very tilted frame. To make these images more easily readable, it was thought to intervene and modify the framing and the alternations of light and shadow so that, at first glance, the subject of the photo would be immediately evident, the moment historically documented. Didi-Huberman vehemently opposes this type of intervention because

in these manipulations, what is eliminated is first of all the story of the circumstances in which they were taken: the clandestinity, the difficulties, and the fear behind this act – so desired – of photographing and bearing witness. Thus, by dissolving their darkness, their truth is eliminated. (Angelucci 2018, 71)

Once again, an indirect, ambiguous image proves to be an excellent ambassador of a message that is understood more clearly than if it were conveyed by an image with an obvious content. This is not to undermine the enormous usefulness of documentary images, but rather to draw attention to how sometimes “if real horror is a source of helplessness for us, horror reflected in the image can be a source of knowledge” (73).

4 Conclusions

Through the analysis conducted in this article, which seeks to explore the connections between images in times of crisis and the world of fashion, it has become evident that the latter can indeed serve as a powerful medium for addressing issues related to disaster. In today's world, marked by environmental, economic, and social crises, both individuals and the fashion industry are continually confronted with the dual pressures of impending collapse and the necessity of reinvention. Fashion, with its inherent dichotomy, balancing between the forces of inclusivity and exclusivity, as well as tradition and innovation, mirrors the human condition, especially in times of crisis. Just as humanity seeks renewal and reinvention in the face of existential threats, fashion too undergoes cycles of death and rebirth, constantly reinventing itself in response to external pressures. This dynamic makes fashion not only a possible reflection of societal anxieties but also a powerful tool for provoking critical reflection on issues ranging from war and displacement to environmental collapse.

The observed parallelism between fashion and human dichotomy can be considered a factor that enables fashion to remain firmly embedded in the present, in the *Zeitgeist*, while continually evolving alongside both society as a whole and the individual human experience. As a fundamental agent of change, a field that undergoes transformation each season while also possessing the ability to observe and interpret human environments, circumstances, and conditions, fashion is uniquely positioned to address, with awareness, the geographic, political, social, and environmental upheavals that humanity periodically encounters.

In conclusion, the intersection of fashion, crisis, and visual representation underscores the potential for addressing human suffering and environmental issues through aesthetic mediums. Fashion

holds the distinctive capacity to reflect and critique social crises by drawing on its inherent dualities. Chalayan's approach, which conceals rather than overtly displays the crisis, encourages deeper reflection and emotional engagement from the viewer, highlighting the importance of balancing artistic expression with authenticity. This example illustrates the potential of fashion as a medium for engaging with critical social and political issues, emphasizing the need for thoughtful, contextually sensitive representations that retain their communicative and empathetic impact without succumbing to mere aestheticization. Fashion, like the work of certain artists and photographers, can challenge viewers to confront the underlying realities of human suffering and survival in ways that are both subtle and profound. This capacity for indirect representation can be particularly effective in an era of visual desensitization, where more explicit images often fail to elicit genuine emotional responses.

However, the role of fashion in addressing crises is not always successful, as illustrated by the case of Chalayan, and it can prove particularly challenging, especially because the balance between artistic expression and authentic representation is delicate, as seen in cases like the Atacama Fashion Week, where an overly stylized representation blurred the line between activism and spectacle, thereby diminishing the urgency of the crucial issues at hand and fostering skepticism among the audience.

It is clear that, while fashion has demonstrated its ability to effectively engage with crises and reveal how it can "become an image of facts" (Coen Nicolini 2005, 5), there remains significant scope for further development of its methodologies and approaches. In this regard, close interdisciplinary collaboration with art historians, sociologists, anthropologists, and philosophers could prove invaluable.

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