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THE LIBRARY AS THRESHOLD: LIMINALITY IN THE CONTEXT OF FASHION RESEARCH.

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ABSTRACT | The academic field of Fashion Studies is a relatively new one and has been traditionally defined by its scholars as a mixed, hybrid and layered area of study. Merging various and sometimes unexpected disciplines, methods, and approaches; Fashion Studies have therefore been the protagonist of a long-lasting debate on their positioning within academia. With this paper, I argue that the state of in-between-ness which distinguishes this area of study permeates not only its identity as a discipline, but also as a research practice, ultimately characterizing the spaces in which it is carried out as well. The contribution employs key concepts such as liminality and thresholding to investigate the spatial qualities of fashion research and of the fashion library, with the objective of defining them as fundamentally intermediary, ‘entre-deux’ and transgressive. These theoretical premises find their actualization in the analysis of International Library of Fashion Research (ILFR), a public library dedicated to fashion printed matter founded in 2020 by editor and curator Elise By Olsen and hosted since November 2022 by the National Museum of Art, Architecture and Design of Oslo (NAM). Observing the intertwining of the digital ramifications of the project and its physical space, the peculiar positioning in fashion’s geographies and the proximity to an established cultural institution, as well as the heterogeneity of the collection and the multidisciplinary team that guides it; ILFR can be identified as inherently decentralized, capillary and in-becoming, and therefore the ideal site-of-passage for fashion research.



1. Introduction

The research intends to contribute to a recent momentum of interest towards fashion archives and repositories, and their role within the study of fashion cultures. This study investigates the practice of fashion research and the space in which it is conducted, namely the fashion library, through the theoretical framework of liminality. The aim is to uncover the spatial, symbolical and practical qualities that, I argue, facilitate and inspire the use of multimethodological approaches and decentralized perspectives on fashion research.

In the first chapter, I will focus on the definition of liminality by engaging with a solid theoretical framework, with the scope of applying this notion to the context of fashion research. To do so, I will start by tracing an overview of Fashion Studies to sketch a portrait of its disseminated and cross-disciplinary positioning within the academic disciplines' landscape. From these theoretical premises, it will then be possible to investigate the practice of fashion research and the space of the fashion library as composite, capillary, and liminal thresholds.

The second part of the paper will apply the theoretical web introduced in the first chapter to a specific case study, that of International Library of Fashion Research, a repository for fashion printed matter founded in 2020 by editor and curator Elise By Olsen and open to the public since November 2022. The features of this specific library, I claim, encapsulate at best the state of becoming and in-between-ness shared by Fashion Studies, fashion research and the fashion library, establishing itself as an ideal space for research in the field.

What I offer here is by no means an exhaustive or complete investigation on the topic, but a mere introduction which I hope can inspire further explorations on fashion repositories and their role on fashion research.

2. Liminality and Fashion

2.1 Fashion Studies: A Decentralized Discipline

In 1991 fashion historian and curator Valerie Steele famously published an article titled “The F Word” on the American magazine *Lingua Franca*, highlighting the status that fashion had among the academic lineages at that moment in time. Nameless and utterly unmentionable, fashion as a discipline for critical reasoning made its debut on a media outlet officially dedicated to intellectual discourse in the form of a cut-off word, a highly symbolical letter which ironically played with the concepts of censorship and academic propriety. More than twenty years later, scholars operating in the field still participate in a heated debate on the positioning of fashion within the realm of research, successfully unveiling both the criticalities of imposing fixed categories in academia and the struggle of navigating this landscape to gain proper recognition.

Foremothers of the discipline are figures such as independent researcher Elizabeth Wilson, who through her seminal book *Adorned in Dreams* (1985) gave a first contextualization of fashion within theoretical frameworks; or cultural studies scholar Agnès Rocamora and visual culture theorist Anneke Smelik, whose anthology *Thinking Through Fashion: A Guide to Key Theorists* (2016) offers a compendium of theoretical interventions on the concept of fashion. In the introduction to the book, the editors define Fashion Studies as “an interdisciplinary field that refers to the understanding of fashion in its broad meaning, including influences from history, philosophy, sociology, anthropology,” (Rocamora & Smelik, 2016, p.3) a view also shared by art historian Christopher Breward (1995), cultural theorist Efrat Tseëlon (2001), and cultural anthropologist Heike Jenss (2016). The names here cited are just a few of the personalities who feed the discussion around the topic, nevertheless, they effectively demonstrate the heterogenous plethora of backgrounds that forged leading voices of the field before the advent of specialized educational career paths, which are also a relatively recent phenomenon.

The diverse scenario of fashion researchers is well exemplified in “A Fashion Studies Manifesto: Toward an (Inter)disciplinary Field” (2023), a contribution signed by Dean of Fashion at Parsons School of Design in New York Ben Barry and Graduate Program Director of the School of Fashion at Metropolitan University of Toronto Alison Matthews David. In the paper, the academic duo employs an autoethnographical methodology to comment on the state of the art of Fashion Studies, recounting their personal parabola towards fashion as former PhD students in Management and Art History. In their recounts, both strongly agree that the mixed methodologies applied to their work as researchers, theorists, and educators of Fashion Studies “opened up new possibilities of research” (Barry & Matthews David, 2023, p.11) and stimulated a productive dialogue between seemingly antipodal specialisations. Directly quoting the words of authors Eugenia Paulicelli, Veronica Manlow, and Elizabeth Wissinger (2021), Barry and Matthews David concur that “if ever a subject both called for inquiry and resisted classification in a single field or method of inquiry, fashion would be it,” (Barry & Matthews David, 2023, p. 2) concluding that the study of fashion should not be a prerogative of few experts. Distancing from a sectorial and fixed division of specialties, the authors therefore identify Fashion Studies as an ideal arena for academic convergence and overlapping: “Fashion Studies is about fostering community, collaboration, and inclusion, not about disciplinary boundaries.” (Barry & Matthews David, 2023, p.17).

Another example that clearly highlights the composite nature of this field is the investigation conducted in 2012 by author and Associate Professor of Fashion Studies Francesca Granata, which unravels the methodology adopted for her Doctorate thesis. Her project, which applied Bakhtin’s theories of the Grotesque within the framework of fashion practices, “needed a range of methodological approaches, poached from a variety of fields and disciplines, including material culture, visual culture, as well as performance and film studies” (Granata, 2012, p. 68). Expanding Rocamora and Smelik’s definition of fashion from interdisciplinary to “multi-methodological” and “inter-media” (Granata, 2012, p.75), Granata reasserts the state of in-between-ness of Fashion Studies within the realm of research. From an object-based approach to qualitative research, passing through philosophy, cultural memory, and ethnography; the author unpacks the complexities of conducting research in this area and concludes that a mixed-method approach is beneficial to the study of fashion due to its natural hybrid identity.

From this brief introduction to Fashion Studies, it is clear how this discipline is fundamentally decentralized, and privileges contamination, if not a total hybridization, between areas of specialization. Moreover, it is significant to underline how both the “Fashion Studies Manifesto” and Granata’s investigation make use of a specific terminology, that of spatiality. In the first reference, the writers define Fashion Studies as “both bordered and borderless in practice,” (Barry & Matthews David, 2023, p. 3) introducing the words ‘in’ and ‘out’ to communicate their fluctuating posture within the academic sectors and the propensity to blend areas of study by activating different disciplines and practices. Granata, instead, traces conceptual parallels between the theories applied for her research and fashion practices in general, finding a common ground in the idea of liminality and threshold. By acknowledging the heterogeneity of Bakhtin’s theories, which supported her Doctoral thesis, she concludes that this mixture of references and backgrounds “remains particularly apt for a study of a ‘discipline’ (such as fashion) that exists itself at the borders.” (Granata, 2012, p. 79).

2.2 Fashion Research as a Liminal Practice

To better understand the spatial features that denote Fashion Studies and apply them to fashion research at large, it is fundamental to define the concept of liminality. One of the seminal publications that contextualized this notion in the realm of research is *Landscapes of Liminality: Between Space and Place* edited by Dara Downey, Ian Kinane, and Elizabeth Parker; a compendium of articles that present possible implementations of the concept within Humanities. In the introduction to the book, the editors retrace the history of the term starting from the Latin etymology *limen*, which suggests “a ‘harbor’, [...] a ‘threshold’ or ‘passage’ to be crossed.” (Downey et al., p. 10).

The volume then cites anthropologist Arnold van Gennep as the first figure to use liminality as a concept, applied to the process of becoming that every individual experience while participating in sacred rites of passage. But it was Victor W. Turner, through his cultural studies approach, that popularized the term

within the academic sphere, speaking of the spatio-temporal, symbolic and transformational passages of becoming that distinguish the process of community-formation. Since the 70s, the concept of liminality has been a constant presence in theoretical experimentations, to the point that the authors criticize the widespread misuse of the concept yet embrace the fact that the term cherishes a natural “malleability,” as well as the “ability to signify in multiple, even contradictory ways” (Downey et al., p. 4). These elements are ultimately the features that make this specific notion so pervasive and applicable to any study subject.

In the volume, professor of English Robert T. Tally Jr quotes German philosopher Martin Heidegger through the association of liminality to the concept of the uncanny and their intrinsic “sense of homelessness” (Downey et al., p. x), while the editors echo Eric Prieto by stating that liminality can be referred to as “the ‘entre-deux’, or the ‘in-between’ that occurs between certain ‘established categories’ (Downey et al., p. 5). The spatial and metaphorical imagery of liminality could therefore easily be associated that of Fashion Studies, whose positioning in the academic realm is essentially ‘entre-more-than-deux’, simultaneously implying “some sense of boundaries, borders, or limits” (Downey et al., p. xi) and a fluid transgression of such. Moreover, the image of the “anteroom” (Downey et al., p. xii), of a cushion-space between a ‘here’ and a ‘there’ clearly resonates with the situation of being both ‘in’ and ‘out’ described by Berry and Matthews David in reviewing the background of fashion scholars.

I argue that if Fashion Studies share fundamental features with the concept of liminality, fashion research should undoubtedly be considered a liminal practice too, as it implies that fashion is itself a terrain for fluid hybridizations. In her review of the seminal book *Fashion Studies. Research Methods, Sites and Practices* (2016) by Heike Jenss, Anneke Smelik frames fashion research as a necessarily open and layered practice based on a multiplicity of perspectives.

“As fashion is made of both material things and symbolic signs, produced by individual and collective agents, which all merge through practices of production, consumption, distribution and representation, the study of dress and fashion necessarily covers a wide range of research issues.” (Smelik, 2017, p. 618)

Thus, whether for academic purposes, design processes or marketing manoeuvres; researching fashion necessarily implies the merging of disciplines, themes, methodologies, and approaches; taking into consideration both theoretical reasoning and practice-based attitudes. The fashion researcher could therefore be considered a transgressive figure, one who recalls “the form of the Deleuzian nomad, living in the intermezzo, ever deterritorialising without reterritorialisation, occupying smooth spaces subject to intense striation, over and over again.” (Downey et al., p. xi). Porous and decentralized, the fashion researcher therefore moves in a flux between structures and categories and occupies a space where “a boundary or border might become a threshold, but only when it is transgressed” (Downey et al., p. xi). In tracing the portrait of the fashion researcher, it could be remiss not to mention once again Granata, who in her article aptly quotes Mitchell’s definition of inter-disciplinarity: a practice which “causes moments of ‘rupture’ and/or ‘turbulence’ within established disciplines” (Granata, 2012, p. 79).

Furthermore, directly quoting fashion theorist Susan Kaiser, professor of Integrated Design Otto von Busch claims that “studying fashion is a both/and, rather than either/or” activity, as “fashion thrives on contradiction (conflicting truth claims) and ambivalence (conflicting emotions)” (Jenss, 2016, p.181). It is then clear how the inclusive and contradicting nature of fashion naturally guides its research methods too, which abandon all hierarchies or divisions in the process of acquiring references and sources. Von Busch then offers a visual representation of fashion research applied to the context of design, taking inspiration from Donna Haraway’s theory of diffraction based on an “approach to complex fields, which include both/and perspectives and contradictions” (Jenss, 2016, p.185).

Dwelling in the interstices between disciplines and methods, thriving in an abundance of sources and inputs; the fashion researcher can therefore employ diffractive modes of observation to stimulate intermediate, comprehensive, cross-cultural, and decentralized studies. If liminality “is itself an in-between space of potentiality,” (Downey et al., p. xi) researching fashion then mirrors this state of becoming by

edging the borders of the disciplines it encounters. In the next chapter, I will argue that since the practice of fashion research shares qualities with the concept of liminality, then the spaces in which it is conducted are ever more effective if they feature liminal qualities as well.

2.3 Thresholding the Fashion Library

From study collections to museums, from the ateliers to university workrooms, the spaces in which fashion research is conducted are varied and not standardized. For the purpose of this article, I will focus on the space of the library, as I argue it tunes in with the state of in-between-ness and the definition of liminality sketched in the previous chapters. Going back to Granata's contribution, the author traces a revealing outline of the difficulties faced when researching fashion by recounting her experience of the library.

“[...] one of the easiest ways for me to visualize the difference in disciplinary status between film and fashion studies was by observing how works on film studies were spatially self-contained within large research libraries compared with those on fashion studies. [...] retrieving books on fashion had me scouring between floors and wings, which gave a more exploratory dimension to the physical act of research, but it certainly made it more time-consuming!”
(Granata, 2012, p. 75)

Not only this image is exemplary in portraying the positioning of Fashion Studies within academia, but it also effectively illustrates the idea of ‘passage’ that fashion research implies, as well as expressing the urgency of creating spaces which could enhance—yet facilitate—this liminal practice. A specialized library of fashion therefore faces a crucial contradiction: it should unify its collection under the umbrella-term of fashion, yet it must also be broad enough to stimulate cross-disciplinary encounters.

In her MA thesis *Beyond the Library: A Study of Fashion Documents' Archival Spaces*, fashion scholar Ilaria Trame unpacks the terminological and phenomenological complexities of the fashion library, disclosing the state of in-between-ness proper of this institution. In particular, the author acknowledges that the identity of a fashion library necessarily flirts with that of other existing repositories such as centers of documentation and archives, especially for what it concerns the contents of its collection. The fashion library, in fact, can host multiple forms of materials: magazines, fanzines, exhibition catalogues, books, documents, photographs; but could also expand its collection to ephemera—a concept I will analyze more in detail in the next chapters—or textile samples. To define a library of fashion therefore means to evermore engage with a liminal perspective, starting from its positioning at the borders of established centers of conservation and authentication.

“The margins of the term ‘library’ need to be broadened in order to become a comprehensive device to gather these variety of identities. I argue that its identity is strictly related to the types of materials that it preserves, and to the ways in which these objects are stored and put in communication with one another. It is specifically for this reason that the definition of a fashion library is still so blurred and multifaceted: there is an urge to acknowledge this heterogeneity and the multiple singularities in order to be able to define the main features and characteristics that compose a library of fashion.” (Trame, 2022, p. 8)

Similarly to documentation centers, the fashion library can host materials (such as ephemera) which are not canonically fostered by traditional libraries. It also mirrors the objectives of the archive by becoming a repository of objects and participate in what French philosopher Michel Foucault names “the creation of a system of statements” (Foucault, 1969, p. 34) by actively legitimizing its collection. Nevertheless, the fashion library differentiates from the museums' documentation centers for the materials included in its physical as well as digital walls are not apt merely to sustain a collection of artworks or garments. Simultaneously, it challenges the institutionalized heritage-making of the archive as its collection can be contaminated with unofficial knowledge as well, that is materials which stem from the everyday, the under-represented and the personal spheres.

The broadness of the term is evermore enhanced by its digital iterations, which continuously challenge the definition of what a fashion library should or could be. Trame mentions for instance the phenomenon of university libraries' Instagram accounts such as @bibliotecaiuav—the official social media of IUAV University of Venice's library—which display their collection echoing hyper-popular profiles dedicated to sharing images or videos related to fashion printed matter—which not coincidentally use the word 'library' and 'archive' interchangeably. It is also noteworthy to mention the proliferation of online guerrilla libraries, which offer complete scans of rare materials without considering copyright or distribution policies and regulations. From these examples it is clear how the concept of fashion library itself, as well as its actual collection, is then subject to multiple mutations and transformations. In Trame's words:

“The library can be seen as a device to reorient an understanding of fashion beyond the garment itself [...] and to redefine certain hierarchies of material typologies [...] that can speak for another, additional and parallel history of fashion, oftentimes complementary to the one written by the study of garments.” (Trame, 2022, p. 12)

Another feature proper of the library, is that it “demands a daily relation with the system of fashion in order to keep being relevant in contemporary times,” (Trame, 2022, p. 10) something that, I argue, is not necessarily required by documentation centers and archives. Emblems of this permanent dialogue between the library and the outer world are two specific genres of materials: ephemera and magazines. If the second object is quite self-explanatory, the first can be described in the context of fashion as “all those objects, documents, invitations, press releases, catalogues, lookbooks and flimsy materials that survive their original function” (Trame, 2022, p. 10). These objects are highly reactive to the cultural zeitgeist, as their production by the fast-paced industry of fashion grows steadily and consistently. Through their presence, both magazines and ephemera expand the idea of the library and are manifestation of the multiple identities, definitions and practices proper of the institution. Ultimately, the fashion library could be seen as an intermediate space of constant negotiation between the fashion industry and fashion research; an ever-changing threshold charged of interpretative possibilities.

Based on these premises, it is interesting to analyze the act of researching within the fashion library through the practice of thresholding as described by artist and lecturer Ally Bisshop. In her Doctorate thesis, based on practice-based research and sustained by Henri Bergson's theories of the threshold, Bisshop coins this term to describe a set of techniques that stimulate more-than-human relationships between artist and art. Without getting into the specifics of the single techniques, it is interesting to notice a resonance between her definition of thresholding and the act of researching within the fashion library.

“In its openness to indeterminacy, thresholding puts into question what we think we already know [...] when we enter into compositional relation with material. Instead, it provides the conditions for new knowledge and new techniques to emerge in the making, in the process of engaging and attuning to material forces.” (Bisshop, 2018, p. 9)

If we were to apply Bisshop's definition to the fashion library, thresholding the library would mean to engage in a relational and open-ended process of questioning with the objects of the collection, a dialogue which aim is to produce new knowledge and stimulate new kinds of research. I argue that this practice is innate to the fashion researcher when in dialogue with the library, as they are both rooted in the concept of liminality. As a practice of rupture and creative invention, states Bisshop (2018, p. 54-55), thresholding aligns both with the transgressive nature of the fashion researcher and of the fashion library. To conclude, it is clear how Fashion Studies, fashion research and the space where both meet—the fashion library—all share liminal qualities and are instances of decentralized practices, methods and spaces which stimulate a constant thresholding of their specific relations.

3. International Library of Fashion Research (ILFR)

3.1 The Foundation Process

The primordial state of International Library of Fashion Research can be pinpointed at the moment of encounter between Norwegian editor and curator Elise By Olsen and New Yorker cultural theorist Steven Mark Klein. In 2015, By Olsen's work as editor and curator was already well-renowned in the European publishing industry and overseas. One day, Klein contacted By Olsen through a three-word email that recited: "who are you?" (By Olsen, 2022, p. 58). Curious to meet the person that started her first blog at eight years old and founded her first magazine *Recens Paper* at thirteen, Klein initiated an epistolary exchange with By Olsen, which led to multiple encounters, conversations and exchanges of ideas and perspectives. Sharing a profound appreciation of printed culture, the duo found a common ground in discussing practices of publishing, collecting, and archiving fashion printed matter. In the 80s, 90s and 00s, Klein had in fact been a hungry hoarder of anything that was fashion-print-related and fed his personal archive accumulating brands' in-store catalogues, stealing discarded weeklies from his neighbor's doorstep (By Olsen, 2023, p.37), and acquiring now rare fashion publications and ephemera. In three decades, Klein generated a collection of more than 5000 objects, crammed in his Lower East Side apartment. Then, in 2020, during a call between the two, Klein nonchalantly asked By Olsen if she would have been interested in inheriting his whole collection.

In a matter of just few months, the collection was shipped, relocated, and established in the renovated building and former train station opposite the brand-new National Museum of Art, Architecture and Design of Oslo (NAM), the Stasjonsmesterboligen (Fig. 1 & 2), which agreed to host the library-to-be on its premises. This passage of the baton couldn't have been more symbolical: an entire collection was quite literally navigating across the ocean to become the foundation of an international institution. Going back to the theories on liminality, the repositioning of the collection could be associated to what Van Gennep identified as "preliminal rites," that is the ceremonial passage "that incorporates the individual(s) within the new symbolic-spatial state." (Downey et al., 2016, p. 7). I argue that Walter Benjamin's essay "Unpacking My Library" (1931) could be a suitable reference for this process. In the text, in fact, Benjamin describes the state of in-between-ness of his library, at a time in which it found itself amid a relocation in his new house. Evoked by the author's words are in fact a precise sense of transition, as well as the tactile-like notion of presence and persistence.

"Inheritance is the soundest way of acquiring a collection. [...] the attitude of an heir, and the most distinguished trait of a collection will always be its transmissibility." (Benjamin, p. 66)

The threshold that a book trespasses in the moment of acquisition, when it ultimately becomes part of one's possessions, is emulated in that of the inheritance process, which is described as the natural course of a collection: being passed on to other possessors. For Benjamin, "ownership is the most intimate relationship that one can have to objects," (Benjamin, p.67) and the materials purchased become secretly bounded to the acquiree, and vice versa. In his conclusion, the author offers an image which symbolizes the total union of object and collector, when he states that the collector 'disappears' inside the library. For the author, the presence of the original collector isn't lost in the process, it is hosted instead by the objects of the collection. This process, which lays in the foundation of a library, triggers questions related to the concepts of memory, identity, and temporality within the space, charging these concepts with a sense of becomingness and transition.

Shortly after the donation, in the fall of 2021, Steven Mark Klein ended his life. After learning the news, By Olsen stopped the process of relocation before slowly re-introducing her presence and that of her collaborators in Spring 2022. The library finally opened its doors in November 2022, and has since grown steadily gathering many private collections through donation process only. By Olsen not only considers the library as the physical and spiritual legacy of her mentor, but also as an entity in constant transformation, a malleable body that reacts through the contact of those who touch it, though "memory, symbiosis, sharing

and conversation.” (By Olsen, 2023, p.38). It is evident how the process of foundation and the subsequent establishing of ILFR is embedded in a state of liminality, it is the incarnation of a threshold in constant negotiation between the boundaries of “privacy, autonomy, and public access.” (By Olsen, 2023, p.38); as well as of memory, history, and heritage.



Figure 1, 2. The process of transportation of the seed donation of Steven Mark Klein to the library’s premises. Photographs by Einar Fuglem, courtesy of International Library of Fashion Research.

3.2 From Digital to Physical, and Back

Before its physical opening in 2022, ILFR had already launched in 2020 as an Instagram profile and website, which became the first visual manifestations of the project. Alongside the fundamental information of the project—such as the mission, the team and board members, and the history of the library—the website hosts the collection’s catalogue, which is constantly updated through the process of classification and indexing of donations. The front and back cover, as well as a spread of every object of the collection are also photographed and uploaded to the site, supported by essential data such as material typology, location of production, names of practitioners and date of publishing. This process aligns with the investigation conducted by fashion scholar and curator Marta Franceschini in her 2019 paper “Navigating fashion: On the role of digital fashion archives in the preservation, classification and dissemination of fashion heritage.” In the contribution, the author stresses that, when digitalized, the materiality of the fashion object is lost and is replaced instead by its data.

“Digitizing museum objects means reproducing them as a set of information that defines them. Information can be easily isolated, perhaps shaping research paths and establishing commonalities that different objects may, or may not, have.” (Franceschini, 2019, p.72)

A point that Franceschini makes in her contribution is that the data stored in digital archives can offer “the opportunity for researchers and enthusiasts to widen their knowledge and wander into an incredible number of items from different disciplines,” (Franceschini, 2019, p.72) especially through the implementation of thematic pathways or curated selections of materials that gather seemingly unrelated objects under shared data. In the case of the ILFR, this is achieved on the website through the aforementioned sets of information—Brand, Publisher, Year, Location, Language, Material, Category, Practitioners, Collection—that can be filled and accessed transversally for each object. The library’s site also offers a series of curated pathways, such as the Homage to Donors series—which gathers the materials of a specific donation—, selections compiled by guest practitioners, groupings of the objects displayed in in-house exhibitions, and general thematic collections on designers, art directors or photographers. These thematic compositions offer additional object-led tracks, inspiring the act of ‘wandering’ throughout the digital platform and the subsequent trespassing of the same data sets that define each object. In this sense, the library’s website acts as a liminal terrain of dialogue between the physical boundaries of the objects and the openness of their metadata. Especially for what concerns the curating the digital space, the processes implemented by ILFR seem to tackle the theories introduced by professor Yrjö Engeström, which pinpoint in the object the node of interpersonal communication, unveiling new perspectives on the digital ramifications of such shared relations and shifting them from the canonical ‘object’ of fashion—the clothing or textiles—to other objects such as printed matter and their digital doppelgängers.

The Instagram page of ILFR, @fashionresearchlibrary, is also an interesting incarnation of the liminal properties of the project. In particular, the digital debut of the project—a post of the animated acronym ILFR—encapsulates the identity and essence of the whole project. The name itself name of “International Library of Fashion Research represents an incredibly broad definition that opens to multiple interpretations,” (Trame, p. 130) observes Trame in her research. The name in fact implies and suggests the natural state of in-between-ness of the project, which stems from a collection originally based in the United States, but which is now hosted in Oslo and is fueled by a network of international and multidisciplinary practitioners. The Library’s collection grows steadily as is the repository of world-wide donations. Antecedent to the physical space of the library, the digital tentacles of the project can therefore be interpreted as its visual manifesto, informing and subsequently representing the physicality of the space (Fig. 3 & 4).

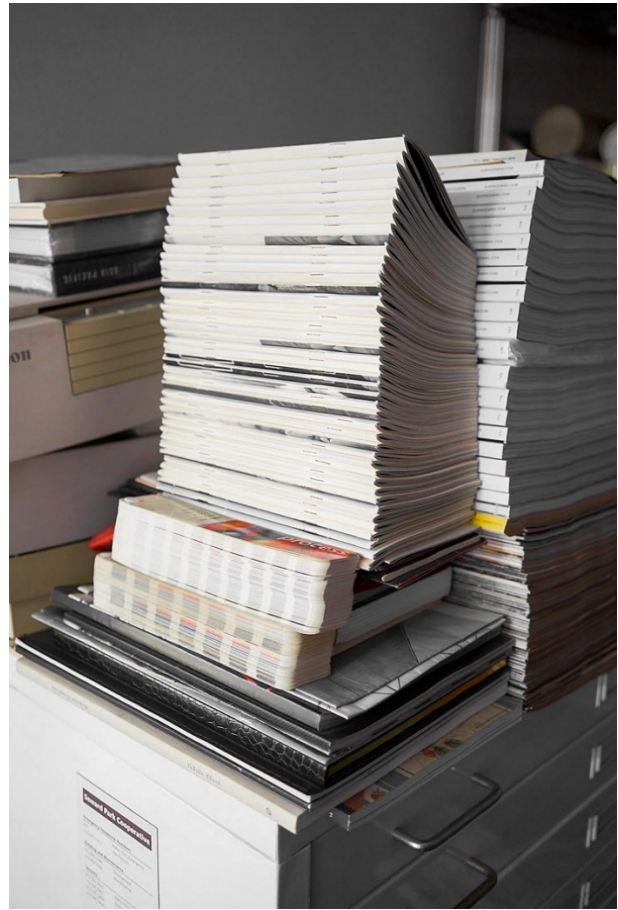


Figure 3, 4. Left: rare materials and ephemera part of the library's permanent collection. Right: publications from the seed donation of Steven Mark Klein. Photographs by Magnus Gulliksen and Akram Shah, courtesy of International Library of Fashion Research.

3.3 Between Location, Site, Place and Metaspaces

Even if the site for the library had been allocated by NAM in 2020 and its digital iterations had been up and running since 2021, the library officially opened its doors only on 29th November 2022, occupying the mezzanine and top floor of Stasjonsmesterboligen. For an analysis of the physical space of the library, it is crucial to apply the definitions of 'location,' 'site,' 'place,' and 'metaspaces,' theorized and contextualized to the realm of fashion by professor and architect Vésma Kontere McQuillan, which in fall 2021 was also appointed as Head of Spatial Design of ILFR. In the volume *Fashion Spaces: A Theoretical View* (2020), the author addresses in fact these definitions from a theoretical and fashion-focused perspective. Through these concepts, I argue it is possible to unpack the decentralist stance and the liminal posture of the physical library.

The location of the library would be its "coordinates of a real-worlds geographic position," (McQuillan, 2020, p.22) therefore its position in the urban landscape of Oslo and outside of the canonical European fashion epicenters. The site is instead the Stasjonsmesterboligen building, an ex-train station which is now part of NAM. Defined as "both the context for the object to be designed, and also the design of that object," (McQuillan, 2020, p. 24) I claim that the site could also be interpreted as the context for fashion printed matter, collecting and ultimately fashion research. Finally, the place can be defined as the ultimate thresholding status of the library, as it embodies the proximity to the NAM's archive and library and the fact itself of being hosted by a cultural institution—a feature that plays a central role in influencing continuous responses and dialogues between the collections of both the ILFR and the museum. This fluid relationship is also fed by shared experiences, such as the Fashion Research Symposium, a conference and cultural gathering organized by ILFR and hosted in the NAM's conference rooms every year in September since 2022. The first edition of the symposium was fittingly centered on the topic of *Decentralizing Fashion* (2022).

This brief introduction to the physical features of ILFR highlight even more the in-between-ness of this institution, which finds itself between the borders and boundaries of fashion geographies, cultural landscapes and institutional collections. Moreover, the concept of ‘metaspace’ becomes relevant to this analysis as it had played an instrumental role in the design process of the library’s physical space. Inspired by cultural theorist Alicia Köhl, who defines the metaspace as an “imagined space,” one which “cannot be localized, as it is abstract,” (McQuillan, 2020, p. 25) McQuillan pinpoints fashion’s current metaspaces in the digital realm. This concept was therefore crucial for the design process of ILFR, as at that point the only manifestation of the project was solely digital. Through an act of translation, McQuillan and her students of the Brandscapes courses she holds at Kristiania University of Oslo created the interior design of the library effectively blurring the boundaries between its site, place, location and metaspace (Fig. 5 & 6).



Figure 5, 6. Views of the library’s shelves and study space. Photographs by Magnus Gulliksen, courtesy of International Library of Fashion Research.

3.4 A Mediatic Collection

Focused on fashion printed matter and ephemera, the composition of ILFR’s collection is undoubtedly a fundamental interpretative key to disclose other liminal qualities of the institution. In By Olsen’s words, the library “aims to mediate the gap between the academic world and the spectators of fashion” by fostering objects which are “framed around the whole system of mediation and communication of fashion.” (Trame, 2021, p. 125) If fashion communication and promotion are fundamentally mediational disciplines of the fashion system, occupying the interstices between clothing and its cultural impact, designers and their buyers, crafts and their visual manifestations; then the objects resulting from this process can be considered inherently liminal.

Thus, magazines, lookbooks, exhibition catalogues, fanzines and publications of all sorts can be seen as highly relational materials, establishing thresholds between the players and spectators of the fashion’s industry, system and culture. As mentioned, the library finds itself in constant conversation with the

external world of fashion, endlessly updating its collection to host the products of these mediational dialogues. The collection therefore seems to resonate with the interests of design director of ILFR and multidisciplinary designer Morteza Vaseghi, who pinpoints his focus on “everything that comes before and after clothes” (Vaseghi, 2023) offering an effective definition of the liminal features of fashion research, repositioning again the gaze of the researcher towards non-textile-based objects.

Introduced previously, the concept itself of ephemera is also deeply rooted in a state of in-between-ness. In the words of fashion scholar and Director of the MA Fashion Studies at Parsons Paris Marco Pecorari, who dedicated its Doctoral thesis and subsequent book *Fashion Remains: Rethinking Ephemera in the Archive* (2020) to the phenomenology and ontology of ephemera within the context of fashion museums and repositories, this term describes “flimsy, printed artefacts produced not intended to survive beyond their initial purpose,” namely, in fashion, “fashion plates, commercial receipts, invitations, fanzines, commercial photographs, gadgets, catalogues, posters and much more” (Pecorari, 2020, p.4). Living in a paradoxical state of subversion of their temporality and value, ephemera are in a way the incarnation of a threshold between their original function and their current place within a collection (Fig. 7 & 8).

An interesting and extremely rare example of the role of ephemera within ILFR is the case of calendars, usually created by brands as New-Year’s gifts for clients. A calendar, of course, expires the 31st of December of that specific year. But what happens when time passes, and the current year shares the same weeks and dates of a previous calendar? This is what happened for instance with the 16th issue of the experimental fashion publication VISIONAIRE, which took the form of a calendar of the year 1996. Sharing 1996 and 2024 the same dates, that issue of VISIONAIRE could be reactivated as a functioning calendar for the library guests and team. Sometimes, then, the ILFR also becomes a space of liminality for ephemera and publications, in a limbo between intermittent reenactments of their original purpose.



Figure 7, 8. Images of donated materials. Photographs by Amedeo Abello, courtesy of International Library of Fashion Research.

3.5 An “Indisciplinary” Team

The last feature of ILFR I intend to analyze to unveil the liminal properties of the institution, is its team and board members. The board is constituted by 24 members from different nationalities and backgrounds, a compound of expertise and knowledge that includes art critics and creative consultants, publishers and editors, curators and entrepreneurs, designers and photographers, professors, and graphic designers, as well as some of the most prominent figures of the fashion landscape. Moreover, the network of the library expands beyond the board into the Director’s Circle, a web of some of the leading names of the fashion’s system, industry and academia which actively participate in the growth and evolution of the project. Cross-generational, decentralized, inclusive, hybrid and global, the ILFR’s network tackles all aspects of fashion, celebrating its interstices, layerings, and margins.

Finally, I argue that the portrait of the fashion researcher sketched beforehand, characterized by transgressive approach to research and an anti-heirarchical scouting of sources, can be effectively associated with that of the team members of ILFR. Originating from disparate backgrounds and bringing each a specific expertise on fashion, the collective fuels the space of vivacious interpretations of fashion printed matter and its cultural and practical implications. Aforementioned Elise By Olsen, founder of ILFR, is an editor and curator; Else Skålvoll Thorenfeldt, co-founder and head of communications of ILFR, which is a former member of the original team at Maison Martin Margiela; Morteza Vaseghi, director of design of ILFR and multidisciplinary designer; Vésma Kontere McQuillan, head of spatial design of ILFR and architect and interior designer; and Ilaria Trame, head librarian of ILFR who is also a fashion researcher and scholar. Ultimately, one could define the ILFR (Fig. 9) as a co-design-driven project led by the collective work of various fashion practitioners, which paradoxically are often seen as ancillary figures (or the subject matter) to the field of fashion research, and less as its key agents and promoters.



Figure 9. On the left: Stasjonsmesterboligen, the building that hosts the International Library of Fashion Research. On the right: the National Museum of Art, Architecture and Design of Oslo. Photograph by Magnus Gulliksen, courtesy of International Library of Fashion Research.

4. Conclusions

This paper defined Fashion Studies as an inherently decentralized and liminal discipline, characterized by a state of in-between-ness and 'entre-deux'. Then, it made use of the definition of liminality and thresholding to investigate the spatial qualities of the practice of fashion research and that of the space in which it is conducted: the fashion library. These theoretical premises found their application in the case study of International Library of Fashion Research, whose spatial, conceptual and constituent properties express the fundamentally intermediary, interstitial and transgressive nature of the project. In conclusion, ILFR can be identified as inherently center-less, capillary and in-becoming, and therefore the ideal site-of-passage for fashion research.

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