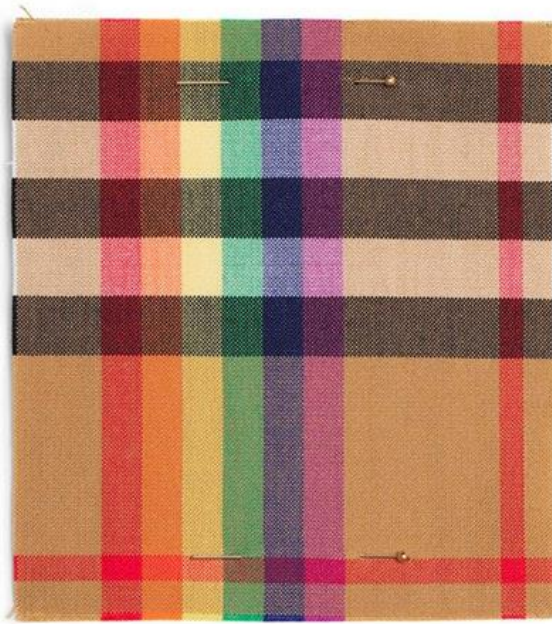# Timekeepers

by Silvia Bombardini

Burberry, FW18

"Fellow man! Your whole life, like a sandglass, will always be reversed and will ever run out again, – a long minute of time will elapse until all those conditions out of which you were evolved return in the wheel of the cosmic process … the whole fabric of things which make up your life. This ring in which you are but a grain will glitter afresh forever". Friedrich Nietzsche described in these terms the eternal return, of the universe and all of existence, and of ourselves as *grains in its glittering ring*. But we need not embrace theories of predeterminism, whereby humans are as bound as Sisyphus to repeat their lives ad infinitum, to recognise that whilst time unspools forever forward it spins upon itself too. Summer returns every year, every day returns the hour of Noon. Clothing also returns. Fashion is punctual, and like a timepiece, it seeks to record the passing of time, to 'keep time' in its infiniteness within the limited scope of its permutations. A sundial's shadows nonetheless can only stretch so far. In *The Psychology of Clothes*, written in 1930, John Flügel argued that clothing is *"destined to be but an episode in the history of humanity"*, for as our species reconcile with the

body in its nakedness, dress becomes obsolete. But until then, for as long as we can conceive of the continual existence of clothing, any one style for all its ambitions of newness is doomed to come back, perpetually whenever the orbit is complete.

It's a fate that goes against fashion's own nature. It was 1894 when Thorstein Veblen singled out *novelty*, after *conspicuous expensiveness*, as the second principle of dress: to wear nothing that is out of date, and only ever wear it for a short time. A principle that, *"in the most advanced communities … expresses itself in the maxim that no outer garment may be worn more than once"*. An economist, as well as a sociologist, Veblen understood the capricious replacement of styles among the bourgeoise of his time as *"an aggressive wasteful expenditure"*, that served the purpose of flaunting their fortune. The lifespan of fashion shortens therefore, as the wealth of society grows. Ten years later, in a similar way though not quite alike, Georg Simmel would read into the fashions that so rapidly come to pass, the material residue of class struggle. He noted that *"just as soon as the lower classes begin to copy their style, thereby crossing the line of demarcation the upper classes have drawn … the upper classes turn away from this style and adopt a new one, which in its turn differentiates them from the masses"*. But Veblen and Simmel had seen nothing yet. In his 1928 book *Economics of Fashion*, Paul Nystrom, a marketing professor at Columbia University, christened the *"philosophy of futility"* that would define what was back then the new industrial age, when much new wealth was built – as a habit of recursive consumption to soothe the fatigue and boredom of suburban life, the monotony of Henry Ford's assembly line, not so unlike Sisyphus' task. Consumption, that is, was to become for consumers an end in itself. It would be then Joseph Schumpeter in the 40s who famously declared that it was not creation at the heart of capitalism, but *"the perennial gale of creative destruction"*. Caught in the whirlwind of the free market economy, styles come and go in a blink, airy and volatile.

But let's get back to how and when they return. In 1919, cultural anthropologist Alfred L. Kroeber published the results of a study for which he had perused issues of fashion journals such as *Le Petit Courrier des Dames* and *Harper's Bazar* – then with only one 'a' – dating back from his time to 1844. He painstakingly ordered in graphs and charts the average measurements of women's evening gowns for each year, in the hope to understand fashion's fluctuations – for which, he concluded, *"super-individual principles"* were responsible. Indeed, *"major proportions of dress change with a slow majesty"* he wrote *"sometimes with the even regularity of the swing of an enormous pendulum"*. There's a determinism to his metaphor that would please Nietzsche. What was once out of date is once more in vogue, what's out of date now will be in vogue again. Simmel already had noted the dialectical rise and fall of any one style, from rejection, to acceptance, to abandonment. Later on, James Laver, a British art historian, would attempt to draw a timeframe for our changing attitudes: he counted that ten years went by for a fashion that was seen as *indecent* to become *smart*, that it would be considered *hideous* ten years from then, and *charming* again in seventy years' time. It's now been eighty years since 'Laver's Law' was penned, and we can say with some certainty that the great lapses of time between one stage and the next, if they hadn't been overestimated then, have shrunk consistently over time. *"There may be a problem one day if the perfectly regular half-century rhythm of fashion were to change"* French philosopher Roland Barthes observed in 1966, *"a*

dress would then normally reach its shortest length in ten or twenty years, then pass through the apparent return of the long dress, and then the cycle would start again ... it would be interesting to study this phenomenon and link a shake-up of the rhythm to something happening in the history of contemporary civilization".

A 1925 satirical drawing by Ethel Hays predicts punk.

A lot indeed has been happening in our history since then, but one main thing in particular. The *slow majesty* Kroeber speaks of precipitates in the digital age. Online, *"anybody can access images of the latest designs seconds after they've been sent down the runway"* industry lawyer Susan Scafidi told *the Business of Fashion*, *"fast fashion retailers can often get their imitations into stores long before the originals hit the shop floor"*. There's no more time for influencers to adopt a new style before the masses – Simmel's cycle runs anticlockwise. But there's something else too we can hold the internet responsible for. For we live in what looks like lacklustre times, when optimism about the future is constantly put to test, the past seems in comparison simpler and brighter, as it perhaps always had and never was. But the world wide web works now as an opensource archive, it facilitates the pervasive state of nostalgia that already defines our generation. Bygone fashions come around again in a rush, all at once to hush and console us. The latest shows of Versace, Marc Jacobs, Tom Ford, have brought the 1980s back like the tide. 1990s logomania lives on at Fendi and Louis Vuitton. The 2000s, a decade whose styles according to James Laver we should find either *hideous* or *ridiculous*, and maybe we do, make a comeback all the same, with such staples as thigh-high Ugg boots at Y/Project, zigzag headbands at Prabal Gurung, and the matchy tracksuits of Juicy Couture, that hadn't been on the runway then but are now. Christopher Bailey, meanwhile, titled his goodbye collection for Burberry 'Time'. It's meant, as the brand's website puts it, to *reflect the past*, *celebrate the present*, and *herald the future*, at one swoop.

Because styles are so quick to go and so quick to return, what results is almost an illusion of stillness, of compressed timelessness. The fashion of our time appears to be constituted of a simultaneity of multiple fashions from times variously past, the whole of recent history twirling around. One wonders what 2018 will look like when it comes back, if it does, if it hasn't already – and how are we to move forward from here, or whether we should move at all, whether we haven't reached instead an apex of sorts. A moment of reckoning, a Nietzschean hour of Noon. Still we might find that we're less trapped than we feared in its glittering ring. This is unlikely to be the end of clothing that Flügel called for, but it's not so outlandish at last to wonder if we might not be nearing the end of fashion as we know it, until something totally new comes and takes its place.