

Webnauts and New Myths

by Silvia Bombardini



Backstage at KTZ, FW15 – via 1883magazineblog.com

Long past its original problem-solving nature, the internet has at last become a collective ritual, and the young webnaut very nearly superstitious. *"If we are about to enter cyberspace,"* foresaw Mark Pesce in a 1995 interview with *Wired*, *"the first thing we have to do is plant the divine in it"*. Twenty years have been plenty for it to grow abloom, and today's World Wide Web is mysterious, mesmeric and mighty. As if it were ruled by a fickle pagan goddess, who poses as many questions as she answers in riddles, and is worshipped despite it all: we make an offering of our time, attention and care, and the young thus romantically inclined, disentangled ever more from traditional notions of spirituality, write hypertext poems and sing her prayers in the language of coding. Or sometimes literally, as in SoundSelf, the *synesthetic chanting* videogame by Robin Arnott. A tentative harmony of technology and mysticism appeals to the curious, inherently human longing that drives us towards it, for perhaps the first time in history on a unified global scale. Indeed, as social networks sow the seeds of new tribes, and worldwide nomadism establishes itself as a sensible millennial lifestyle, today's youth plunge their roots on virtual soil, and geographical distance as much as any other kind fades away online.

One might wonder if the earliest experience of fashion occurred when the basic purpose of clothing as protection against the elements became infused with the signifiers of coming from one village or the next, and the different beliefs this would have entailed, and the auspicious talismans and markings a traveller in particular would have been wise to carry. In this respect, it's through the lens of their urban and digital wanderings and with a youthful but informed aversion for all types of boundaries that this new-fangled network of tribes reimagines instead a widespread, inclusive and distant, mythical past.

Routine revivals of 20th century decades and the streamlined sinuosity of more recent styles both make way for a sort of chimeric, comprehensive folklore, that defies cultural appropriation by virtue of its creolised aesthetic, blending pre- and post while leaving behind all that went wrong in between. Gareth Pugh, after a decade of cemented space age reputation, opted to stage his rebirth by way of a solemn, immersive ceremony in New York, with the image of a rising hybrid phoenix as a backdrop, whose wings were unfurling in ribbons of silk. The looks he presented quoted characters in British folk culture as obscure as the Flag Crackers of Craven and Pearly Queens, 'Obby 'Oss and the Burry Man in South Queensferry, sharpened by Pugh's trademark geometrics and monochrome filter. Mary Katrantzou's spring 2015 collection indulges instead in a fanciful, remote nostalgia for times even further back: inspired by the supercontinent Pangaea, some 2000 million years ago or so, when there wasn't but one.

A certain primeval vibe, though sometimes disguised, is still more broadly pursued: as scientists dabble in the idea of de-extinction, and plan to have woolly mammoths walking around us perhaps too soon; coarse, fringed fabrics and hairy yarns suggestive of harsh prehistoric climates, surely more symbolic than necessary in present time, have made their appearance on the street as much as on the catwalk. Whereas a use of raw and arguably humble materials could surely relate to the will some young people have expressed in pursuing a more modest and natural way of life, it might just as well be due, if not more so, to a perception of refinement as interfering with spontaneity in the creative and ritualistic pleasure that dressing up can be. Some generous, almost impulsive use of adornments and charms and lustrous mineral sheen brighten the look up, as girls wear their hair long and naturally tangled, and blush across their high cheeks and nose as if mildly sunburnt.

The webnaut's wardrobe is tempered by a contemporary and sporty, no site-specific metropolitan styling, and carries IRL the intuitive pleasure that comes with belonging to a community, at a time when birthplace is but a vague and inconsequential memory to the cosmopolite youth. Techno music has long since been compared to a neo-tribal ritual of our age, and suitably tribal pan-ethnic patterns seep into club gear, athleisure and high street fashion, as effortlessly as a tie-dye print. Brand identity builds upon them, and if online tribes might appear less cohesive, more diluted and volatile perhaps than their ancestors, their soft power is exponential to the reach of a hashtag. Rubberized, digitally rendered or laser-cut, traditional motives are lifted from their historical and cultural context, but retain a fundamental purpose as signifiers

of affinity – and just as much, increasingly often now, a certain mystical, cryptic allure. ASTROLOGY IRL for one, currently sold at Opening Ceremony, revamps for Gen Yers one of the more universal and perdurable of myths: offering horoscopes and personalised apparel for each sign of the zodiac, with a soft vaporwave aesthetic of aptly spaced out graphics and fonts recalling late 90s WordArt special effects. A label like KTZ, itself an acronym of *Kokon to Zai* that is *east meets west* in Japanese, which gathered a cult following around arcane symbols boldly embossed over gothic sportswear, particularly thrives on this theme – and their fall 2015 round-up doesn't hold back, featuring hirsute furs and busy patterns of what could be oracle bones from some undisclosed fossilized wildlife. A direct link between a 21st century urban group and the hunter-gatherers of the classic tribe: that modern anthropology, somehow ironically, has come to reconsider as the "*original affluent society*", for its combination of leisure and lack of want.