Virtual shows: how the pandemic revolutionised the language of fashion labels

By Dominique Muret  -  28 May 2021

The pandemic and its attendant health protection measures have brought in-person events to a standstill for over a year, forcing luxury labels to entirely rethink the way they communicate, and how they present their collections. Tapping the increasingly widespread use of digital tools, labels have resorted to video shows with various degrees of success. FashionNetwork.com has analysed the phenomenon with Division, an international production company specialised in music and advertising videos, which notably produced the recent films by Saint Laurent, Lanvin, Balmain, Isabel Marant, Etudes and Y/Project.

“In less than a year, labels have switched from a photography to a filming culture, driven to produce more and more content for the web, the new showcase for luxury and fashion. Digital tech has been a real game-changer, the engine behind this revolution. The problem is that, until not so long ago, production companies and fashion labels did not mix,” said Arno Moria, co-founder of Division with Jules De Chateleux.

Forced to create videos as a matter of immediate urgency to take part in virtual fashion weeks, some labels turned to photographers and photo agencies, the creative professionals they usually collaborated with. Other labels turned to the event organisers that used to produce their catwalk shows, many of which reinvented themselves as video makers, or to other service providers. Few labels decided to work with fully fledged film directors.

One of them was Saint Laurent, one of the first labels to enter the film arena by presenting its men’s collection for the summer 2021 on September 9 2020 - outside of Paris Fashion Week - with a stunning short film by Nathalie Canguilhem, in which acrobatic models took to the Paris rooftops in a breath-taking aerial romp. It was also one of the first videos produced by Division in this new era of virtual collection presentations.

“The first question that arose was how to make a captivating catwalk video, knowing there would be no live audience. There's so much emotion, so much intensity in a show that it cannot simply be translated into the video recording of a live performance. It's like filming a concert without spectators, it doesn’t make sense. Also, a simple recording of a lengthy catwalk show can quickly become unpalatable for the general public. We needed to give the feeling of a live event by using fictional and semi-fictional elements to create tension, inventing a hybrid format [that was] part narrative, part simulated show,” said Moria. An innovative format labelled ‘défilmé’ (unfilmed) by Isabel Marant.

“With Anthony Vaccarello [the creative director of Saint Laurent], we decided to do something that would never
have been possible in normal show conditions. We really did bring a crew of models-stuntmen on to the Paris rooftops,” added Moria. “It was the film that kick-started the trend for digital shows. There’s genuine production know-how behind it and, above all, a director who can inspire the audience to fulfil their dreams,” said Gwendoline Victoria, former brand image director at Kenzo, who was hired by Division in September as their head of fashion films and content.
For the majority of the labels that approached us, it was the first film of this kind, and they wanted to make a real creative statement with it,” added Victoria. With three films, Saint Laurent has found its signature tone. After Paris, the French label took its aficionados to increasingly distant and spectacular shores, for example with the women’s summer 2021 collection, filmed in the Moroccan desert, and the more recent Fall/Winter 2021-22 collection, whose film was shot in Iceland with a breath-takingly authentic Dantesque scenery as the backdrop. An approach that enabled Saint Laurent to rack up higher and higher YouTube viewing figures for each successive film, from 3.7 million to 5 and then over 10 million.

Thanks to digital technology, the label owned by the Kering group was able to stage three fantastical shows, letting the magic of fashion and digital do their work. “It was pure expression, a label’s sheer evocative power,” said Moria. “[Saint Laurent] wanted to stage a show that was out of this world, that would never have been possible in real life. They used every special effect in the book to hoodwink the audience. But to breed desire, you need to be very demanding, and committed to quality. In Iceland, we had to field a production operation that was as extensive as it was substantial, together with paramilitary-style logistics,” he added.

Arno went on to say that “[Saint Laurent] experimented with a way of presenting collection images that had never been seen before. It took courage to dare to do so. It was extremely bold. Shooting the video in Iceland in the middle of nowhere involved several days of filming with a truly top-level production team. Not everyone can afford it.”

Following in Saint Laurent’s footsteps, other labels trod this path, each of them developing their own narrative, using a variety of styles and formats, from documentary to series, from video clip to live performance. “There’s a little bit of everything out there, it’s all very hybrid. [Filming] provides endless possibilities to tell a collection’s story, using camera movements, close-up shots to highlight products, even slow-motion sequences,” said Victoria.

“Previously, it was only down to pictures, with the great fashion photographers. Then came the crisis and Instagram, with its need for unrelenting novelty. The use of video and digital tech marked a turning point. For me, this is the main new development in the fashion industry. Films have triggered an overhaul in the language of labels, in the way they communicate and present their collections and products,” added Victoria.

Even with small budgets, some labels have stood out for their originality, like Etudes - Etudes

Many labels are busy looking for and testing the ideal formula, like Chanel, which is relying on its own production company and has opted for different solutions in the course of the year, as shown by the label’s latest two events. For the 2022 cruise collection show, staged at the Carrières de Lumières, a quarry-turned-venue at Baux-de-
Provence, the label went for a straightforward video recording, while for the previous collection, for the Fall/Winter 2021-22, it adopted a rather more narrative approach, the film recreating the atmosphere of the iconic soirées at Parisian night club Castel.

According to Division, producing a film isn’t actually more expensive than staging a catwalk show. On average, the cost of a show by a smaller label is around €50,000, while for bigger houses it can range from €800,000 to €3 million. A short fashion film can instead cost from €60,000 to between €500,000 and €600,000, if not more. “You can be creative irrespective of the budget,” said Victoria, noting that, when all is said and done, “producing a video is less expensive, and a film reaches a much larger audience.”

Victoria added that “this is really good for fashion labels. It opens up scores of opportunities and possibilities for the luxury industry. There are many more occasions besides catwalk shows: collection launches, a label's brand message, occasion-specific films, like those for Christmas. You can do everything, from showcasing products to telling stories. It will be difficult to go back to how it was before, to be content with mere video recordings. Not to mention that shooting a film makes it also possible to create plenty of social media content.”

It is down to labels therefore to find their own voice and tap the language of films to the full, a language that is infinitely richer and less rigid than that of advertising. “Mediocre, boring internet content is a liability. On the other hand, investing on quality, relevance, creativity and originality, and managing to fashion a script with substance and form, has huge potential. Quality content can contribute to helping labels become publishers, without them having to pay for media space to advertise and start a conversation about their brand,” concluded Moria.

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