

When the world goes topsy-turvy, fashion responds.
This time, it's with a riot of color, a mishmash of style
extremes and designers in their own game of Chess.
Basically, anything goes, says HARRIET QUICK

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Charles Dickens wrote in *A Tale of Two Cities*, his famous fable of civil unrest and social revolution, "...it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us..."

We love to believe we live in more exceptional times than the days of yore, yet the past year might just go down as one of the most tumultuous periods in fashion history. It seems the industry is literally ripping apart at the seams with a radical re-thinking of what to design and sell, as well as when and how.

So wonderfully colorful are fashion's current economic and social dramas that the next hit Netflix mini-series-in-the-making could well be titled *Pret-a-Deranger*, and play out something like this: a squad of silver-spoon-fed Gucci girls and boys set the scene, scampering through the cobbled streets of Versailles in lavishly trimmed hats, sparkling medallions and jacquard coats. They come across a tribe of Balenciaga acolytes wearing bubblegum-pink and tangerine spandex, glinting bicycle-lock necklaces, long, razor-edged stilettos and sporting short, blunt fringes. There is a communications blackout and all digital devices are rendered useless. There are no distractions with posting selfies, updating blogs or feeds, and the collision turns into a rave.

At dawn, a group of girls in tracksuits appears dancing to tunes from an analog-era ghetto-blasters. Then up pops the figure of Elsa Klensch, in a red Saint Laurent power-shouldered suit with gigantic gobstopper buttons. The pioneering television host, who helped popularize the world of fashion in the 1980s, declares a state of anarchy. The ravers storm the Palace of Versailles. The well-behaved, orderly court of fashion is forced to throw open the gates. Marie Antoinette is seen unlacing her bodice.

What the Dickens? Well, it could happen – these are extraordinary times, after all. For instance, in the latter half of 2016, the 70-year-old house of Dior – that bastion of the delicately perfumed womanly woman – inducted its first female designer, Maria Grazia Chiuri. She promptly designed a T-shirt emblazoned with, *We Should All Be Feminists*. Her predecessor, Raf Simons, is Stateside preparing a new era for the beleaguered brand Calvin Klein. In a very public debacle (let's face it, what's not public now?), Hedi Slimane sued the luxury group Kering for \$13 million following his 'exit' from Saint Laurent. His successor, former Versace designer Anthony Vaccarello, made his debut in Paris last October with a reprise of the power shoulder, lamé and leopard. The much-loved Alber Elbaz quit Lanvin as its creative director, quoting "irreconcilable differences", and was replaced by the couturier Bouchra Jarrar.

Meanwhile, Peter Copping exited Oscar de la Renta and Peter Dundas, after what seemed like a nanosecond, parted ways with Roberto Cavalli. Others opted for retirement, including Consuelo Castiglioni the co-founder and creative director of Marni (owned by Renzo Rosso's conglomerate, Only The Brave), with the young, unknown Francesco Riso taking the creative reins. The big, ongoing switcheroo is unprecedented and deeply confusing. Yet, it is exciting times indeed for contract lawyers, relocation experts, therapists and headhunters. This merry-go-round makes the Premier League look tame.

We can now look back nostalgically at the era when the creative lead bore the same name as the brand. Following both Ralph Lauren and Donna Karan's retirements (both architects of eponymous mega brands), the few remaining figureheads include Giorgio Armani, Tommy Hilfiger, Domenico Dolce and Stefano Gabbana, Miuccia Prada, and Carolina Herrera. Every top seat has officially become a hot seat.

There are quakes and fissures all around. The ecosystem of fashion, once controlled by a handful of arbiters of style, and a clique of photographers and models, has expanded exponentially. The digital space now allows everyone to dub themselves an editor, stylist, or photographer (to varying degrees of success) and the once set-in-stone hierarchy of front row and back row now seems defunct. Cue a tussle at the SS17 Milan collections that witnessed American *Vogue* fire-starting a debate on the jumped-up power of the blogger fraternity. It was a perfect political storm. To recap: Sally Singer, American *Vogue*'s creative digital director, made a small but poignant comment

about the ever-growing wave of style bloggers (both in the front row and outside shows, as legions of uninvited spectators waiting in the circus of snappers) with the message: "Note to bloggers who change head-to-toe, paid-to-wear outfits every hour: Please stop. Find another business. You are heralding the death of style." Social media darlings (many of whom are embraced on the pages of *Vogue*) rallied back with claims of "democratizing" the system. At least the delicious debacle – handbags and eyebrows at dawn! – offered temporary relief from the Brexit post-mortem and American presidential campaign.

These are riveting times, but let's not forget that they're not the first of their kind. Here's a little cold-shower perspective: the sight of ladies' ankles once made grown men fall over; and the arrival of miniskirts, pop and television outraged conservatives in the UK, who believed civilization was coming to an end and youth was going to pot. The drama continued even through the libertarian 1970s. The development of the designer ready-to-

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wear business was deemed a catastrophe by old-school haute couturiers who were unable to stomach the precept of 'mass' fashion. Skip forward to the 1980s and the arrival of high-street fast fashion, which was then considered the death knell for designers. *Au contraire* – the lifestyle super-brands emerged with ambitions to dress everything from our beds to yachts. Then came the recession and rave culture, and the whole hierarchy of taste and status was flipped on its head.

We weathered a further financial crisis in the noughties, when statement heels were suddenly usurped by sneakers and 'normcore'; now we have arrived in the era of individuality. Many voices and styles will make themselves heard and seen, and it seems we will do almost anything to prove that we are not slavish robots, as Karl Lagerfeld forewarned on the Chanel spring/summer 2017 runway (with its digital theme and models in Stormtrooper helmets).

Not so long ago the overriding concerns and debates in fashion centered around office v date appropriateness; vulgarity v good taste; kitten heels v stilettos; and that evergreen question, does my bum look big in this? Today, we are force fed 'game-changing' pieces; 24/7 dresses; office-appropriate 'pajamas'; statement hoodies; and a whole lot of girl-next-door cuties on Instagram gushing about obscure new labels and their daily avocado consumption.

What we are facing today is a tectonic shift in the aspirational value and – hell, yes – the purpose of fashion. Sustainability (involving heavy research and EPL accounting) and the technological revolution are two major forces that are altering the production, mediation, and methods of consumption. We must ask the big questions: what do we desire? Who do we admire? How much do we want to spend, and how long can we wait to wear it? Are we in such a rush to part with hard-earned cash? What is the product's provenance? The emotional bond we have with our wardrobes now exists way beyond the items. But until we find the answers to such queries, instability reigns supreme.

The result of instability? Escapist extremes: romantic meadow-sweet cotton gowns; theatrical leg-o-mutton sleeve doublets; and the resurgence of 1980s Dallas-era glitz. It appears wildly chaotic, yet also perfectly fitting, as fashion has always been a cipher of our times. Perhaps reassuringly, ingenuity and designs with staying power will always shine through. Now, let's get back to that fictional rave in *Pret-a-Deranger*. Apparently, Kevin Systrom and Mrs Zuckerberg are about to hit the decks. ♦