A Study on the Aesthetics Characteristics of Retro-Futuristic Fashion

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Abstract   This research establishes a framework that defines the main features and conception of Retro-Futurism in fashion. The purpose of this study is to analyze and compare retro-futuristic fashion trends in the second half of the 20th century and determine the different concepts and aesthetics that compose the idea of Retro-futurism in its entirety. The research method is based on the analysis of the concept of retro-futurism within fashion, and its historical development through literature review and photo examples as a way to understand how the idea of retro-futurism has constantly impacted the development of this area. As a result, the historical journey of retro-futurism through fashion, from primitive times to the present, has served as an inspiration to create new technologies and styles through clothing, where alternative futures are used as a way to understand the past and also, served as inspiration for designers to create a utopic and nostalgic atmosphere

Introduction

At the beginning of the 20th century the enormous economic, technological, and scientific progress caused great changes in the way in which human being produced their vision of the world. The Avant-Garde movement became one of those changes, as a reaction to the continuing instability and negativity produced during the first middle of the 20th century. The driving vision of this movement has changed the way society understands the realities of the past and present as well as the future.

According to Luque (2015), the origin of Futurism within the Avant-Garde movement was derived from the Italian artist and writer Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, who published the 'Manifiesto of Futurism" in the newspaper 'Le Figaro´ in 1909. This Manifesto proclaimed the celebration of advances in technology and science, exalting the construction of a new era. In addition, the Futurist Movement found itself in a deep discontent with the past and its tradition, eventually leading them to the attempt of starting the creation of an ideal future. The idea of Retro-Futurism could be defined as the movements that originated during the decade of the 1970s that focused their attention on the past, due to pessimistic views and expectations about the future. As a result, these movements tried to recover those futuristic concepts imagined previously. However, it is important to comprehend that the creation of Retro-Futurism does not praise or idealize these past futuristic ideas. The conception

of Retro-Futurism assimilates these new interpretations of the future through the understanding of both the positive and negative features of the past concepts, which brings us to the present (Roselló, 2013). In contrast, with the popularization of science fiction during the early 20th century and its growing expansion over the subsequent decades, these types of concepts began to be used in very diverse areas, including fashion. The constant growth of this type of genre within literature, cinematography, or art had an enormous impact on how fashion exemplified the vision of the future recreated in the literary works and films of the past time. The space fashion of the 1950s and 1960s or the futuristic costumes from the cinematography after the decade of the 1970s are some of the examples of how during the last century, Retro-Futurism has become an indispensable tool for the understanding of the past vision of the future and its influence in the present. The purpose of this study is to identify and analyze the different forms or characteristics of retro-futurism in fashion, as a way to get a deeper comprehension of this concept and understand its influence on fashion during history. This study is based on the analysis of the different ways in which Retro-Futurism has been comprehended, to demonstrate how futuristic styles from the past continue serving as a tool to create futuristic designs in current fashion.

Literature Review

The Meaning of Retro-Futurism

The concept of Retro-Futurism was formed through the union between two words, "retro" and "futuristic", both directly related to the conception of time. As Roselló (2013) explains, in the first case, the word "retro" comes from Latin and, it refers to the act of imitate or reproduce objects from past times. On the other hand, even "futuristic" refers to a future context, due to the disappointment with present time, the idea of future is understood and created from a past perspective (Roselló, 2013). Due to the influence of avant-garde magazines from the 1980s and 1990s, the American publisher Lloyd Dunn first introduced the term "Retro-Futurism" in 1983. Later, during the exhibition titled "Yesterday's

Tomorrows: Past Visions of an American Future" performed by the Smithsonian Institute in 1984, the concept of Retro-Futurism was further explained through a collection of popular images of the future (Donnelly & Hayward, 2012). Although several decades have passed since the creation of this concept, there are still some difficulties in finding articles, books, or any other type of academic content that provide in-depth insights into the meaning and concept of Retro-Futurism. After analyzing the historical background of this concept and examining all its components, it will be easy to understand that the idea of futurism began as a way of breaking with the past and starting a new beginning. Futurism caused great changes in the way art is conceived and any other expression of it. This idea of futurism could remind of the concepts in the historical background, as a way to imagine or draw that perfect future.

Historical Background Theory of Retro-Futurism

Shamanism : During the start of humankind, the hostile environment generated a necessity for human beings, which were in a constant fight for survival. Due to this, shamanism became a part or tool that provide a vision of the future and new methods to survive. As Ochoa (2002) explains, this provided humans with the security to survive and gave them dreams and fantasies from which the first myths and legends were created. Through them, nature, their environment, their community, their past, or their future could be interpreted, idealized, and understood. Movements such as the Hippie Movement from the '60s could be re-interpreted as a retro-futuristic view from shamanism, as Mora (2018) explains, through this movement young people sought pacifist and idealized vision of the world, where they reconnected with nature and, connect with the whole.

Primitivism : The idea of Primitivism in the Retro-Futuristic framework is highly related to movements from the Avant-Gardes as the Primitivism Movement from Russian Futurism. As Jared (2002) explains, Primitivism arises from the interest of modern artists for expressions related to the tribal or the primitive, expressions related to the wildness, commonly related to the outside frame of Western civilization. Primitivism in Russia encompassed the realization of local objects of primitive forms and a futuristic

dynamism but based on tradition, in which simple and colorful forms stood out. Nevertheless, this futuristic movement could be also considered as Retro- Futurism, since primitive artists used the elements from archaic times to construct a new vision of the future.

Paradism : In contrast, the subsequent development of great civilizations and cultures during ancient history (Egyptians, Romans, Greeks, etc.) would bring great advances to humanity and above all, great development of the concept of time and space, developing more deeply all those ideas generated in the tradition of prehistoric cultures. Most of these cultures developed stories of life and death along with the paradise idealized by human beings since ancient times, which is closely related to our conception of time and space (Ochoa, 2002). In turn, through it, a futuristic image and aesthetic related to the passage to the next life is developed. In a way, we could consider that the eternal mystical idea of paradise and the idealized life of the beyond becomes a retro-futuristic conception since much of these idealizations of life after death contain that utopia based on nostalgia that is projected cyclically through the ages.

Utopism : Related to this, it is interesting to point out how the later futuristic visions that were created and promoted by the development of science during history, are constantly based on that paradism and ideal perception of the future, which are strongly related to the most spiritual part of the human being. As an example, the connection between science and spirituality from the Renaissance served as a base for the development of future interpretations and retro-futuristic forms, like those from space travel, moon landing, technological and military race during the '50s. Besides, as Quesada (2001) states, throughout the last century the utopian visions within politics attempted to bring their visions of the future to reality, as in the case of Nazism and the Soviet Union, which incoherently created utopic visions of society from different times and spaces (nostalgia and nostalgia of the future) instead of from building it from present reality. Davidson (2019) explains that retro-futuristic ideas are also known as hopeful retro-futurism, and they could be considered as dangerous due to their relation with the creation of those utopias connected with issues as sexism, racism, lack of democracy, etc.

Besides, as Roselló (2013) states, the generation of new retro-futuristic ideas did extend the concept to new futuristic worlds and imaginary that persist until today. For example, during the '80s, new worlds were generated through negativist and apocalyptic images that led to cyberpunk, steampunk, and other similar concepts. Therefore, through the study of retro-futuristic aspects as images of the future related to the essence of human beings, nostalgia, their
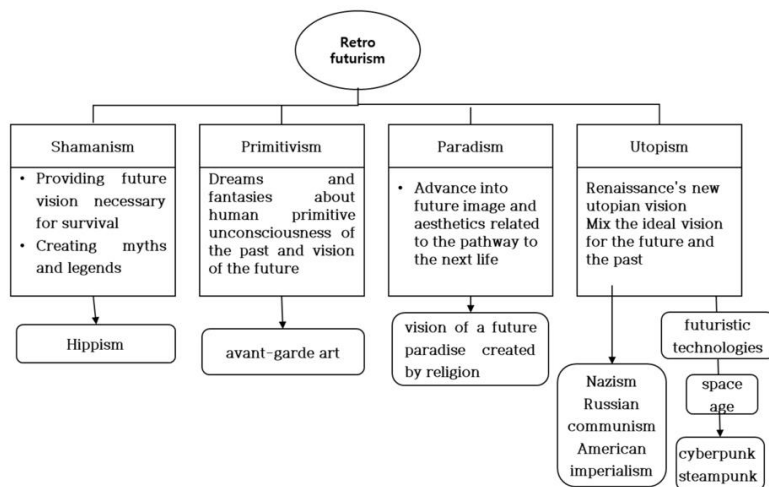

Figure 1. Summarize the retro-futurism characteristics derived from the historical background theory

fantasies or dreams, utopic vision, believes, etc. it is possible to comprehend its essence and development during history. Moreover, the progressive development and connection of similar retro-futuristic ideas during the different historical visions of the future, show a great comprehension of the idealization of times and spaces that result in the generation of retro-futurism. Through the following scheme, this research tries to summarize and connect the different aspects or features of retro-futurism found during this historical review. Through this, it has been possible to generate different keywords that will form the basis of this research (keywords as: futuristic fantasy, religion, shamanism, hippie, paradise, avant-garde, tradition, primitive, folklore, science, utopia, military, politic, future space, science fiction, space age, cyberpunk, steampunk and futuristic technology). These keywords from the literature review and historical analysis have been gathered in four different categories, which have been selected and divided as follows, in order to gather the main features of retro-futurism in four different groups. The retro-futuristic characteristics derived from the historical background theory are summarized in figure 1.

The Visual Cases of Retro-Futurism

As we have seen before, the idea of retro-futurism has had a great impact in very diverse fields. Due to this, this section focuses on the study of the impact of this concept in areas such as art, architecture, design, cinematography, literature, and animation. Through this, this research tries to deepen the understanding of this term and, in turn, give greater visibility to the different ways in which the retro-futuristic aesthetic has been interpreted. Design, art, and architecture. The impact of retro-futurism in art is highly influenced by the Italian Futuristic Movement, which promoted the image of future societies linked to technology and machines. As Sian and Lucas (2018) explain, Retro-Futurism is considered a trend related to science and technology in the field of design, based on those representations of the future created in the past by literature and cinema. All those images of colossal cities with extremely tall buildings, robots, and vehicles capable of flying are generated from the concept of Retro-Futurism. The lack of a specific time or space associated to this concept,

transforms it in an alternative vision of the existing reality. Those alternative realities, became a critical element in the development of science fiction and fantasy during the last centuries, generating a wide variety of alternative realities, spaces, and times that we keep using until today. Through Alberto Robida's illustration (Figure 2), we can see a retro-futuristic image of the opera in space, where the year 2000 was imagined as a total advanced, technological, and spatial period. On the other side, the futuristic artists showed a different perception and vision of the future. As is shown through Giacomo Balla's works (Figure 3), there is a common use of religion, science, and avant-garde art in part of his creations. The use of esoteric-scientific practices typical of alchemy (which had futuristic characteristics at its time) previously studied, is linked to ancient mythological elements such as the god Mercury represented by his personification as a planet. This piece, therefore, converts the ancient image of Mercury together with alchemical practices
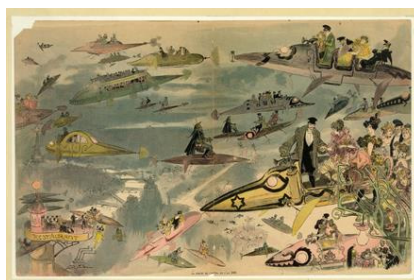

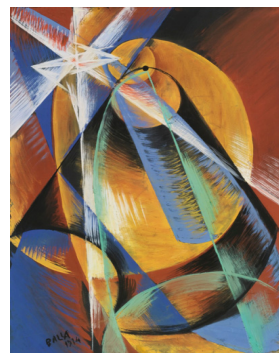Figure 2. Alberto Robida, Going to the opera in the year 2000, 1882 (Wikimedia commons, n.d.-a)

Figure 3. G. Balla Mercury passing before the sun, 1914 (Wikiart, n.d.)

into a retro-futuristic vision of the past, which is drawn under the futuristic aesthetics of the Italian avant-garde. The use of robotics and technology became a source of inspiration for many fields as cinematography and literature. The film titled 'Metropolis' (Figure 4), generates a retro-futuristic vision since it creates a reality of the future through its past perspective. In this film, the social confrontation between the working class and the intellectual class is discussed, a theme of the early 20th century but from a future space and time. Later, this imaginary became the inspiration for the creation of Steampunk Retro-Futurism and its importance in

literature, cinema, and comics. Moreover, the great technological developments during the last half of the 20th Century became a source of inspiration for the creation of new futuristic realities.

The political changes during the last century brought tragic changes in society, politics, economy, and culture. As an example, the figure of Hitler in this work from Lazinger exposes the retro-futuristic bases of Nazism. As we can see, Figure 5 of Hitler is adorned under a glorified image of medieval aesthetics (armor, banner, and horse) that is nothing more than that idea used by the Nazis to generate a future based on the glory of the past. In opposition to Nazism, Stalinism and Communism generate their future by discarding the past. As it is shown in this illustration from the 1950s, a clear interpretation of the spatial future is generated during the 'Space Age'. These images created during the decade of the 50's served as inspiration for the generation of future concepts and retro-futuristic themes within science fiction during the next decades (Figure 6).

Retro-Futuristic Aesthetics in Fashion History

It is interesting to highlight how futuristic visions within fashion remain constant. Perhaps, this is due to how fashion shows the structure of society and the lifestyles of a particular moment and space. Futuristic projections have been varied over time; however, it is essential to point out how the avant-garde and technological and scientific advances of the 20th century have produced a huge change in the way in which the future of fashion has been understood.

Figure 4. Fritz Lang, cover of the film 'metrópolis', 1927 (Wikipedia, n.d.)

Figure 5. Hubert lanzinger, The standard bearer, great german art exhibition, 1937 (Wikimedia commons, n.d.-b)
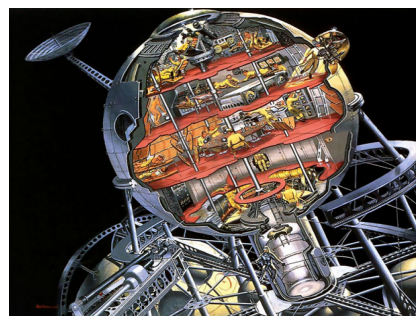

Figure 6. Chesley Bonestell, Space station, 1950 (Bonestell, 2019)

As Flanagan (2013, p. 25) states in the case of the Italian futurist movement, which encouraged dynamism and speed, fashion was considered a social phenomenon through which it was possible to expand its vision of the future. Although this movement occurred in very diverse areas, every field shared this same vision. As Emily Braun explains, the futurists wanted to introduce elements such as the dynamism of the lines or the speed represented in their art pieces, in the forms of the movement of the human body and the dynamic life of modernity. Therefore, new textile designs were generated, especially asymmetrical patterns that could express the dynamism of the body. In addition, they were interested in expanding their ideas about fashion as a way to convince and gain followers for their movement. Due to this, the manifests generated three great theoretical principles about futuristic fashion: extreme colors and patterns, confrontation or challenge, and greater functionality of clothing that favored comfort in modern life. (Mitchell, 2004). Fashion became a new art form, especially due to the involvement of artists such as Balla or Depero, who felt a deep interest in performance, where costumes had a main role as a way of transmitting, communicating and creating messages and atmospheres. From all of that, fashion created from avant-garde movements such as French surrealism, Italian futurism, Russian constructivism or German Bauhaus, had a huge impact on the separation from the past and the present as a way to generate a new way of understanding appearance and the way of dressing in all phases of life, highlighting the use of symmetry and the mixing of opposite textiles or components. This fits with the variety of futuristic images from retro-futurism, where an attempt is made to create an alternative to the future direction marked by society.

Utopic Retro-Futuristic Fashion

As Loscialpo (2014) explains through her study on constructivism and futurism of the 1920s, at the beginning of the last century Italian artists Ernesto Michahelles, known as Thayaht, along with other artists from Russian Constructivism, designed a short time series of overalls based on the idea of functionality and comfort, denominated as 'tuta' (Figure 7). These designs based on the simplicity and purity of the forms are generated as a separation from

contemporary style and stereotypes and social concepts of the time. The author compares this type of design with the content of the work of Thomas More (1516), Utopia, where in an alternative and idealized society, people wear practical and comfortable clothes, adaptable to any time or period of the year and where there is no need of more clothing; an idea closely related to the working social classes and their thought of suppressing individuality. This is shown as an element of great interest because through these experimental designs it is represented, as we saw before, that fusion between fashion and art as part of daily life and, in turn, understands fashion as a change-generating component. The mix between the futuristic tone of Thayaht, with the Russian Constructivists, shows the post-war context where, through overall design, it focuses on the idea of the social context of art and its importance within the industrial sector. The avant-garde, therefore, contains in its uniqueness, as Loschek (2009) states, the way to create an arena where social thought is demanded and proclaimed. These designs created by Thayaht and the Russian artists of the Constructivist, importantly mark that utopian vision of regeneration or reconstruction of a new world (Loscialpo, 2014).

Fantastic Retro-Futuristic Fashion

Fashion understood through Futurism, should not be simply comprehended as an aesthetic, style, or identity, but as a change in the form of social and cultural manifestation.

Figure 7. Thayaht wearing the tuta and 'forte dei marmi' sandals, 1920 (Paola, 2020)

There are numerous examples in the Italian culture before the futuristic movement, where fashion and dress are considered part of the culture and economy. Despite this, fashion not only represents dress but also behavior or lifestyles, which according to futurism, are considered essential characteristics for the futuristic objective of transforming space and shapes. Fashion and clothing, therefore, become a new way of understanding the world and reforming ideas such as masculinity or femininity and its influence on society. On the other hand, the expansion of the Industrial Revolution and the success of the working classes brought the predomination of dark colors in dressing, therefore, the styles originated during the futuristic movement and their various connotations within the social or public environment, have resulted in being proposals of great interest for fashion studies since through these ideas, new ways of understanding masculinity and femininity were generated. This is partly because through the ideas generated by the futuristic movement about fashion, the traditional role of women's fashion is taken away, to understand fashion as a multifaceted concept where gender and clothing are related. (Paulicelli, 2009). This could be also related to the retro-futuristic image of women and fashion in science fiction, especially in literature, whereas Grabias (2018) explains, in Steampunk as a sub-genre of science fiction, it incorporates the images of industrial steam-driven machinery, aesthetics of futuristic Victorian fashion, and encompasses fantasies and visions of a post-apocalyptic future world. On another hand, steampunk fiction also elaborates alternative fantasies, normally based on the Victorian historical period, generating a gender known as 'Neo-Victorian'. Besides, in this sub-gender the role of women changes to perceptions different from the Victorian Era, performing roles where women act bravely and independently, as heroes, a quite different vision from the general conception of women during this period of the history, generating a new vision based on retro-futurism. This modern perception of women leads us to its relationship with feminist movements and the fight for rights that sought peace and social changes during the 1960s. Especially, the Second Feminist Movement originated during this decade together with the constant international competition to reach the moon, inspired great designers to create styles and aesthetics that had not been popularized until then, such as the case of Pierre Cardin, Paco Rabanne, Andre Courrèges or Mary Quant (Figure 8). As was mentioned before in this research and as Kimball (2016) explains, the space race between the Soviet Union and the United States started in the 1950s (due to the launch of the Sputnik satellite in 1957 by the Soviet Union) and which was intensified during the decade of 1960s, it had a great impact on society and fashion, generating the well-known Space Age. During this period, a large number of garments such as miniskirts, googles, headwear along with dresses and shoes designed under futuristic aesthetics became quite popular. Similarly, this is directly related to the popularization of science fiction and television series such as Star Trek, which promoted the use of space-related costumes, the use of plastic textiles along with colors, and metallic materials that became the insignia of this trend. The collection made of silver and white PVC titled "silver moon girl 'trousers" by Andre Courrèges (Figure 9), the unwearable dresses made in modern materials derived from plastic or the helmets and garments made with vinyl and other plastic textiles by Pierre Cardin (Figure 10), turned the fashion of the decade of the '60s in a new, futuristic and unique trend.

Figure 8. Twiggy wearing mary quant's glitter stockings as "victor in the space race", 1966 (Maitland, 2019)

Figure 9. André courreges' white sateen bunny jumpsuit with brass polka dots by Bert Stern and condé nast, Vogue, 1969 (Wordpress, n.d.)
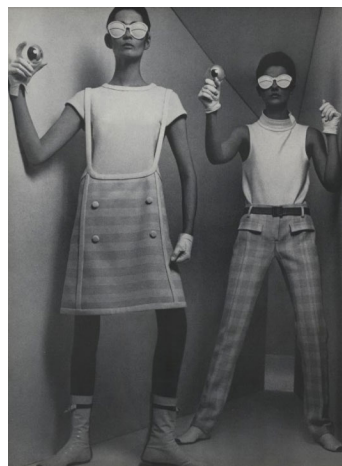

Figure 11. Space age mod style, william Klein, 1965 (Ramzi, 2014)

Figure 10. Raquel Welch wearing Pierre Cardin's vinyl miniskirt, necklace and plexiglass visor by terry o'neill, 1970 (Borrelli-Persson, 2020)

Scientific Retro-Futuristic Fashion

As Feldman (2009) expressed in her research 'We are the Mods' (Figure 11): A Transnational History of a Youth Culture", this subculture was an expression of young generations and their optimistic perception of the future. Their interests in modernity, jazz, and speed (especially motorbikes) transformed how young people understood society, politics, culture, and life, personifying the vision of

the new future and changes in society. This retro-forward perspective imitates styles and aesthetics from the past but added the technology and styles of the 20th Century. However, as the author explains, this movement was also strongly linked to the past and had a singular retro-forward perspective of fashion and music. This was due to its inspiration from the past Edwardian clothing and 1920s fashion style within futuristic styles such as those derived from the Space Age, Minimalism, or modern architecture. Similarly, the author comments how the new visuals and performances from the Rock and Roll bands from the '1960s were impregned of modernism and how through fashion, elements such as danger, speed, or energy were expressed. Besides, it is important to point out that these elements were, therefore, strongly connected to the Italian Futurism Movement's ideas and clothing. In a certain way, as Feldman explains, the Mod style has become a trend from the past, but also in the present and the future. Its inspiration from past trends and aesthetics within its strong interest in modernity and advances, structure this unique style as part of the retro-futuristic aesthetics. The fresh retro-futuristic impulse from these designers within the increasing popularity of science fiction developed and expanded this kind of aesthetics during the last decades. Besides, the creation of the idea of Retro-Futurism itself during the 1970s and the continuous interest in outer space resulted in the creation of

new fantasies related to robots, aliens, and all those elements generated during the previous decade. As Vogue (2019) explains, during the end of this decade the aesthetics and styles from the 1960s and its classic vision of futurism got mixed with the increasing exaggeration and exuberance from the 1980s, becoming a transitional period for the transformation of the future perception in fashion. Similarly, during and after the 1980s these ideas related to space and

technology became more and more popular due to their influence and impact on the development of films and series based on science fiction. As we can see through the examples of Vogue (2016) films such as Star Wars, Blade Runner, and Tron became some of the examples that later would inspire a big variety of designers such as Thierry Mugler (Figure 12). In the same way, this increment in the popularity of science fiction kept constant during the next decades and, during the 1990s, those ideas and aesthetics related to space were developed to those typical images of extraterrestrials, the dark space or the unknown future, which served as inspiration for designers like Alexander McQueen (Figure 13) or Issey Miyake, to creates new styles based on technology, robotic, biomorphic or fantastical styles (Vogue, 2019).

Primitive Retro-Futuristic Fashion

The use of tattooing has been constant since ancient times, showing primitive cultures and their aesthetics full of symbolism. Figure 14 is a woman from the Berber ethnicity, from North Africa, wearing traditional tattoos used as beauty and identity marks on her face. Figure 15 is the Spring-Summer collection by Jean Paul Gaultier in 1994, where the model is dressed in a futuristic-tribal style, full of accessories, garments with prints simulating tattoos and piercings. This comparison could be interpreted as a retro-futuristic vision of the primitive aesthetics maintained through folklore and tradition, which has been renewed and re-interpreted in the last century by very different tendencies and movements, such as the primitivism of avant-garde studied previously or tribal fashion. As Cavin (2014) explains, primitivism should be considered as a more specific idea and presented as a basis. However, while orientalism is produced by opposition to the Western vision, on the other hand, primitivism is a representation of the lack of civilization. Orientalism, therefore, does not mean primitivism, but a form of alternative civilization, since the primitive is related to the moment before the origin of civilizations, writing, or history and, therefore, is linked to the vision of nature and the origin of the story. These constant reinterpretations of primitive and traditional clothing could be considered as retro-futuristic as, in the base, this kind of fashion re-constructs and renovates garments from the past, which have been re-understood under

Figure 12. Thierry Mugler's ss 1989 space style collection (Jana, 2019a)

Figure 13. Alexander Mcqueen fw 1999 robotic style collection (Jana, 2019b)

Figure 14. Berber woman from Algeria
(Rondeleux, 2015)

Figure 15. Jean Paul Gaultier (Vogue, 2015)

an alternative shape and vision. These new aesthetics were created under the idea of transformation of tradition, generating a futuristic version of it more adapted to the present and the close future. During the 20th century, fashion was separating in some way from primitive or past visions and, it was adapting and creating new aesthetics more related to the future.

Conclusion

This research has tried to expand and understand the concept of retro-futurism more deeply, trying to generate an alternative analysis of how this concept is understood. The influence of retro-futurism on history and other fields such as architecture, cinema, literature, and fine arts has allowed us to comprehend the diversity of aspects inside the concept of our study and the variety of ways in which it could be understood. Besides, through the analysis of history and fashion, it is possible to understand how retro-futurism is a concept that, despite being discovered and defined during the last decades, it has remained constantly in the thought and history of the human being, through which ideas and innovations have been generated and have been served as inspiration for the creation of the present and the future fashion. It is important to point out the fact that all those futuristic visions and interpretations created by humans, such as the creation of a paradise after death or the constant utopic views of the future in politics or society, are highly impregnated with retro-futuristic components, as all those futuristic perceptions are based in previous or past visions of the future. Due to this, it is possible to understand that a large range of futuristic creations are nothing more than retro-futuristic images. To conclude, the historical journey of retro-futurism through fashion makes us understand how from our origins in primitive times until today, the use of alternative futures created in the past has served as an inspiration to create new techniques and styles through clothing, through which designers were able to materialize all those social, political or cultural changes that have been longed through the idealization of utopic and nostalgic realities.

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