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The Business of Inspiration: A Magical Technology of Prefiguration

Kasper Tang Vangkilde

Dominant modern imaginaries of the future portray "that which lies ahead" as an inherently open and indeterminate horizon (Anderson 2010; Nowotny 2016). On the one hand, this openness and indeterminacy go together with a profound sense of *uncertainty*, as the future is perceived to disrupt and exceed the present. Thus, nobody can know the future since it will determine its own genealogy (Strathern 1992: 172). On the other hand, the openness and indeterminacy serve precisely as a potent impetus to pursue a certain understanding of the future, in that all meaningful action relies on a vision of plot and future developments (Hastrup 2007; Wallman 1992). In this sense, anticipation is essentially *potentiation*, meaning that once we have a view of the future, we are able to act (Strathern 1992: 178).

These implied effects of an open and indeterminate future are distinctly pronounced in modern capitalism. For quite some time, the future has figured as deadly serious in the world of business, being potentially valuable, highly contested and, as such, by no means to be disregarded.

K. T. Vangkilde (✉)
Department of Anthropology, School of Culture and Society, Aarhus University, Aarhus, Denmark
e-mail: etnkvangkilde@cas.au.dk

In their bestselling book *Competing for the Future* (1996), for instance, Gary Hamel and C. K. Prahalad contend that "[i]n business, as in art, what distinguishes leaders from laggards, and greatness from mediocrity, is the ability to uniquely imagine what could be" (1996: 27). Accordingly, what I shall here term "technologies of prefiguration"—that is, more or less systematic practices of knowing and prefiguring the future—prevail today in corporate organizations in the form of scenarios (e.g. Chermack 2011), trendspotting (e.g. Laermer 2002), big data analytics (e.g. Ohlhorst 2013) and so on. Although Helga Nowotny may certainly have a point in arguing that "[t]he future is the ultimate inexhaustible reservoir of uncertainty for the inhabitants of this planet" (2016: vi), such technologies seek precisely to cope with or overcome uncertainty by prefiguring the future in distinct ways. In this sense, they are indicative of a more general human "craving for certainty" (ibid. 1).

This craving is a central driving force behind not merely scientific reason and rational order but also magical practices. As is often noted, Bronislaw Malinowski famously argued that magic is found "wherever the elements of chance and accident, and the emotional play between hope and fear have a wide and extensive range" (1948: 116); or, in other words, in activities characterized by unpredictable and uncertain forces. Magical practices, then, share with processes of science and rationality the endeavor to acquire a degree of control and certainty over what otherwise appears uncontrollable and uncertain. While anthropological discussions have often conceived of these endeavors in terms of a modernist distinction between rationality and irrationality—typically with science associated with the former and magic with the latter—Steffen Jöhncke and Vibeke Steffen have recently suggested that we need to move beyond this dichotomy and find a more neutral vocabulary when discussing different forms of reasoning. Their solution is the concept of arationality (2015: 32–35):

> The ability to act in culturally appropriate or practically sensible ways, without necessarily being in need of explicit, rational legitimacy—nor being able to produce it, should it be demanded—may be referred to as *arationality*. In many cases it is impossible to say whether a given form of acting or reasoning is rational or not—but moreover, this question is beside the point. (ibid. 34)

In addition to the fact that this approach avoids the value-laden connotations of rationality and irrationality (ibid. 33), and instead focuses on humbly understanding how people try to make sense of their world in various ways (ibid. 34), it also underscores that different forms of reasoning may coexist and be entangled in practice (ibid. 10–11). Indeed, the title of this book, *Magical Capitalism*, captures precisely this point: the coexistence and entanglement of economic logics, magical practices, organizational order, technologies of enchantment and so on.

In this chapter, I set out to explore processes of inspiration, so often emphasized as imperative in various forms of cultural production. My argument is that these processes of inspiration constitute a distinctive technology of prefiguration by which creative agents deal with the inherent uncertainty of the future. Or, in other words, the common endeavor to become inspired is a particular way of overcoming the challenge of an unknown future in modern capitalism by prefiguring it and, thus, making it actionable. As I shall demonstrate by drawing on my previous research among fashion designers (Vangkilde 2015, 2017), the practice of inspiration cannot be accounted for in rationalist terms. Rather, it constitutes an *a*rational form of reasoning which, as magic, works toward desirable ends in ways that go beyond and challenge dominant rationalist conceptions. More specifically, I contend that processes of inspiration among fashion designers are essentially anchored in an animistic ontology—that is, a world in which not merely humans but also nonhumans are perceived as being alive—which forms the basis for a shamanic practice by which fashion designers become possessed—or *in*-spired—by what they refer to as the *zeitgeist* or "spirit of the time." Crucially, this entails that they acquire a distinctive sense of the time, which turns them into prophetic agents able to prefigure and act on the future. Magical capitalism, indeed.

A Purposeful Naïveté: Taking Inspiration Seriously

Whenever a novel remarkable cultural product—be it a film, a book, a piece of music or a fashion collection—is created and acclaimed for its distinctive vision and originality, it is by no means uncommon that the

media will probe into the underlying sources of inspiration. Thus, we know that practically anything can be inspiring: places, people, music, books, art, dreams, emotions and so on. "The list is endless," as one book puts it (Vrontikis 2002: 7). In fashion, for instance, Giorgio Armani was once inspired by the mountains of Mongolia and China (Davis 1992: 128), John Galliano by images from the time of Napoleon (Mete 2006: 284) and Alexander McQueen by an orchid photograph (Armstrong 2007). This fascination with inspiration is perhaps not all that surprising. After all, would it not be more surprising if laypersons and scholars were *not* intrigued by such mysteries as to how a Chinese mountain or an orchid photograph could be transformed into a dress or blouse, and why the sources of inspiration were precisely those objects and not, say, a beautiful lake, a peculiar bike, a Claude Monet painting, or something else? Apparently, the famous British fashion designer, Alexander McQueen, stumbled upon the orchids in a coffee-table book. Or, perhaps more accurately, the orchids stumbled upon McQueen. Because, as he explained, "[t]hese were so striking and strange that they *leaped out* at me" (in Armstrong 2007: 361, emphasis added).

Indeed, there is something magical about inspiration. The term itself derives, like the term spirit, from the Latin *spirare*, which means "to blow" or "to breathe." More specifically, in-spiration thus means the blowing of spirit into a subject or the possession of a subject by a superior power. In this sense, the term has clear religious connotations, being closely associated with aspects such as divination, prophecies, possession, mystical experiences and so on (Moffitt 2005: 3). While it is common to link inspiration to a romantic myth of artistic and poetic creativity, the *locus classicus* of this conception is an intriguing dialogue in Plato's *Ion*, in which Socrates questions Ion, a prize-winning rhapsode, that is, a professional performer of poetry, about his practice and skills. During their dialogue, Socrates develops the argument that Ion's impressive recitation of the poetry of Homer cannot be based on knowledge or mastery but is rather attributable to a divine inspiration. As Socrates puts it: "You see it's not because you're a master of knowledge about Homer that you can say what you say, but because of a divine gift, because you are possessed" (*Ion* 536c in Cooper 1997: 943).

Historically, inspiration has thus been broadly understood to denote the possession of an individual agent by some transcendent power (Clark 1997: 2). Not least in the field of art and poetry—or cultural production more generally—the ability to become inspired has commonly been perceived as a unique and privileged gift that is only granted to a few and, importantly, is simply essential in order to attain creative excellence (Moffitt 2005: 14–15). During the period of the Romantics, for instance, acts of creation by artists or poets were largely seen to be a kind of message from God or some other spiritual being, with the artist or poet serving as an emissary of the divine (Negus and Pickering 2004: 2–3). As a medium, in other words, a creative person was primarily defined by the capacity to let some divine authority speak through oneself. Such ideas have not been left unchallenged, however. In 1846, Edgar Allen Poe argued strongly against the idea of intuitive creativity, emphasizing that poets prefer to give the impression that their creations are the results of "an ecstatic intuition," while they "would positively shudder at letting the public take a peep behind the scenes, at the elaborate and vacillating crudities of thought … at the cautious selections and rejections—at the painful erasures and interpolations … which, in ninety-nine cases out of the hundred, constitute the properties of the literary *histrio*" (quoted in Clark 1997: 1).

Despite such harsh critique, inspiration continues to figure as a critical component in accounts of creativity in cultural production. This may be closely linked to a modern quest for self-expression and entrepreneurship, along with endless celebrations of originality and novelty in contemporary capitalism. While it is beyond the scope of this chapter to explore the intricate links between modernity and inspiration (see Moffitt 2005: 11–32), it is evident that tips and tricks to gain inspiration remain widely shared and discussed as a distinct way of working (see e.g. Swanson 2006; Vrontikis 2002). If one listens to fashion professionals and several fashion scholars, for instance, sources of inspiration are considered essential for nurturing creativity and originality, for which reason managers are occasionally urged to be more proactive in encouraging a focus on inspiration (Eckert and Stacey 1998; Mete 2006). Accounts of the significant role of inspiration in the creation of new cultural products are thus pervasive. John Lennon, for instance, also once stressed that "real

music … the music of the spheres, the music that surpasses understanding … I'm just a channel … I transcribe it like a medium" (quoted in Negus and Pickering 2004: 3).

A key question is, of course, how we are to approach such descriptions. In *The Theory of Inspiration* (1997), a detailed study of the relation between inspiration and composition in Western Romantic and post-Romantic poetics, Timothy Clark emphasizes that writers may very well be notorious for drawing on romantic myths of creativity, but their explanations nonetheless "demand better consideration than the forms of dismissal or evasion they have hitherto received" (ibid. 9). He goes on to suggest that the most novel, but clearly also most risky, approach "is, with qualification, to take writers' claims to inspiration seriously" (ibid.). This resonates with certain trends in anthropology, closely associated with the ontological turn, which have gained currency by urging anthropologists to take things and phenomena encountered in the field seriously instead of substituting them with recourse to more well-known conceptions, thus explaining them away. In one version of this approach, laid out in *Thinking Through Things* (Henare et al. 2007), the key to taking things seriously is to adopt a strategy of "purposeful naïveté," which seeks not to limit in advance the anthropologist's conceptions and vocabulary (ibid. 2; see also Latour 2005: 47–49). If, as Eduardo Viveiros de Castro puts it, "[a]nthropology is that Western intellectual endeavor dedicated to taking seriously what Western intellectuals cannot … take seriously" (2011: 133), it is essential that we, as anthropologists, seek to *pass* and *think through* what we study in order to approach an understanding of it. In other words, creative agents' descriptions and experiences of being inspired, of being somehow in a state of possession, may perhaps appear somewhat odd or nonsensical to us, but if this is so, then that problem is ours, not theirs (Henare et al. 2007: 6); that is, we may simply not know what they are talking about (ibid. 12).

On this basis, my intention in the rest of this chapter is to delve into how inspiration unfolds in practice in the business of fashion and design. While it would clearly be possible to analyze and, in a sense, deconstruct the descriptions and experiences of being inspired as mere expressions of a romantic myth of creativity, this analysis would fail to take seriously what the designers themselves take seriously, relegating their perceptions and experiences to pure romanticism. Instead, I seek to adopt the strategy

of purposeful naïveté by seizing on any astonishment as an analytical opportunity to challenge and open up common ideas of what modern capitalist practices comprise. Building on Brian Moeran's recent argument that fashion is "underpinned by all kinds of magical practices" (2015: 26), I shall argue that processes of inspiration are grounded in an animistic ontology that underlies three essential components of inspiration: a condition of being, a mode of engagement and an experience of possession. I expand on each of these in the next three sections in order to advance the argument that inspiration constitutes a magical technology of prefiguration.[1]

A Condition of Being: Staying Open to the World

During my eight months of ethnographic fieldwork among fashion designers and product developers in a leading international fashion company, I joined a small group of designers on a number of their so-called inspiration trips. On one occasion, the designers had just received the disappointing message from the Creative Director that their work in no way progressed as expected. It was, therefore, decided that they needed to get away from the office in order to seek new inspiration. On a Wednesday morning, we thus headed toward Milan with the plan of visiting a range of museums, bookstores, furniture shops, fashion stores, restaurants and bars. In what follows, I present a brief snapshot from our day in the north Italian city.[2]

Having visited the first museum, we discover a bookstore, as well as a store offering clothing, arts and crafts, right next to the museum. When we enter the stores, the designers walk around more or less separately, looking carefully at all the different things. Not all of these are, of course, equally exciting, as some of them are almost ignored while others are perceived as much more fascinating. Among the latter are not merely shoes, bags, clothes and other fashion accessories but, just as often, or perhaps even more so, things of a quite different nature. Katja, for instance, is very interested in a book which she finds extremely cool. She shows me a few pages of it, in which pictures of CD covers from hard rock and heavy metal bands are surrounded by pictures of entirely different things, such

as a flower, a teddy bear, a puppet or the like. She explains that she really likes this odd and surprising combination, and Louise adds that it is always so exciting when you see something that you have not seen or thought of before.

After some time, we continue on to another museum, which is hosting an exhibition entitled "The New Italian Design." This exhibition presents a number of designers in such areas as product design, food design, graphics and much more, and, again, the designers are highly enthusiastic. As in the stores, it is not only things like handbags, jewelry and other accessories that attract the designers' attention. Rather, it is often other kinds of design that they find really fascinating. One creation, in particular, called *Un Seconda Vita*—A Second Life—inspires Rebecca. At first glance, the creation shows a broken bowl but broken in a particular way so that each of the broken pieces becomes a small plate. Rebecca explores the creation carefully, and she emphasizes how she finds it truly fascinating that something gets a second life. Might this, she ponders, be applied to fashion as well? In much the same way, the other designers are also highly attentive to whatever we pass through, activating all their senses in the process. Things are touched, materials smelled, people observed and so on.

After a few hours, we decide to turn our attention to Milan's famous shopping areas. Since our plan is flexible, we spend the next hours going from shop to shop, looking at all sorts of things, including furniture, antiques, interior design, books, art, expensive designer clothes and mainstream fashion. We visit all those stores which, for one reason or another, attract our attention; for instance because of a great amount of weird stuff in the window, an unusual interior design or something else. In these stores, the designers eagerly explore and discuss a large number of things, both the minor details and the overall construction of what they examine. In this respect, looking and touching are not always enough, as certain items of clothing must even be put on in order to see how they really look and feel.

Let this brief description suffice to emphasize that the designers demonstrate a quite extraordinary attention and responsiveness to everything and everyone around them; not only people and things but also buildings, sounds, atmospheres and so on. Creations in museums, clothing in fashion stores, people in the streets and so on are sensuously explored in every

possible way, almost as if nothing like it has ever previously existed. Whereas I was surely inclined to see *entities*—fixed and complete, however odd or remarkable they appeared—the designers always saw *potentials*, constantly exploring what things might become rather than what they were. Catherine explained this to me surprisingly clearly:

> I think that it is very important to always look at things in a new way and never take things as they are. You have to be really open-minded, and I think that you always have to, you know, look at everything that is happening around you, take everything inside in a way.

In an interview, Lisa, another fashion designer, joins in: "You have to have a certain feeling about trends. You have to have a sensibility to see which things exist right now, so that you can say that 'now, it is enough about those things; now, we need to have something new.' Yeah, a special sense maybe."

Importantly, these statements should not just be seen as a matter of being "attuned to an impressive degree to modern developments," as Herbert Blumer once put it (1969: 279) but of relating to the world in a very particular way. On their inspiration trips, the designers appeared much like a kind of "urban hunter," tirelessly in pursuit of things, people, pictures, atmospheres and other constituents that could provide food for thought. As Tim Ingold stresses, people who hunt for subsistence generally have a very intimate knowledge of the landscape and its plant and animal inhabitants (2000: 111). But even more than this, they are also often associated with animism (e.g. Ingold 2000: 111–131; Viveiros de Castro 1998; Willerslev 2007), one of the earliest concepts in anthropology, which is traditionally known to designate the human tendency to endow nonhuman entities with human characteristics (Descola 1996: 87; Willerslev 2007: 2). Ingold convincingly emphasizes, however, that the distinctive feature of an animist ontology is not so much the point that life is *in* things but rather that things are *in* life, caught up in a continual process of coming into being (2007: 31). Animism as a condition of being, Ingold elaborates, "could be described as a condition of being alive to the world, characterized by a heightened sensitivity and responsiveness, in perception and action, to an environment that is always in flux, never the same from one moment to the next" (2006: 10). In other words, in this

condition of being, the world is a nascent world, continuously about to disclose itself for what it is.

It is hard to conceive, I believe, of a more accurate way of describing the heightened sensitivity and responsiveness of the designers in Milan. Like numerous other hunters, the designers are present at the continuous birth of the world (ibid. 12)—that is, at the fact that things are *in* life— for which reason they are not turned in upon themselves but *open* to the world around them (cf. Ingold 2007: 31–32). A designer, it was both stressed and enacted, has to be open-minded, never taking things as they are, always approaching life as a process of on-going generation. Faced with the uncertainty of designing, here and now, what is yet to come, it was not merely critical that the designers left their daily surroundings in order to immerse themselves in a setting marked off from the ordinary. What is more, they related to this setting in a particular way, almost as though they, at each moment, opened their eyes to the world for the first time (cf. Ingold 2006: 12). One significant aspect of the processes of inspiration thus entailed a distinct condition of being alive and open to the world (Fig. 8.1).

Fig. 8.1 With heightened sensitivity and attentiveness to everything and everyone around them, a group of fashion designers are on a so-called inspiration trip to Milan

A Mode of Engagement: "Talking with" Things

In Milan, it was clear that not everything was considered fascinating and inspiring. Certain things were more attractive than others, almost irresistibly drawing the designers' attention to them. As art historian James Elkins notes, it is sometimes as if some things possess such an irresistible effect that they tie us to them by little wires (1996: 19). He puts forward the rather provoking idea that, instead of saying that humans are doing the looking, we might argue that objects are trying to catch our eyes, their gleams and glints being a sort of hook that snares us. In this sense, to go on an inspiration trip is to be "like fish who like to swim in waters full of hooks" (ibid. 20). Of course, the designers are the ones in pursuit of things but, to turn our customary assumption upside down, suggesting that things catch our eyes rather than, or just as much as, our eyes capturing things is, I believe, a thought-provoking yet apt invitation in the light of the above animistic condition of being.

In the ethnographic studies, some of the most intriguing instances of animate things concern stones. Nurit Bird-David describes, for instance, how a man from the Nayaka, a hunter-gatherer community of South India, relates that his sister-in-law was one day sitting under a tree when a stone jumped into her lap (1999: 74). We also know that stones among the Ojibwa have been experienced to follow a human around a tent, as well as to respond to a question (Ingold 2000: 97). Certainly, to a Western ear, such an experience may sound strange, but perhaps it is more common than we tend to think. Is it merely a coincidence, for instance, that the designers often explained that they were *attracted by* a particular thing, thus ascribing the force of the attraction more to the thing than to themselves? Similarly, the things perceived to be inspiring were always described as wild, crazy, attracting, eye-catching and so forth, always causing a stir and thus *capturing* the designers' attention. At one point, the Creative Director even put it in this way: "I really go through the things. I let these things jump on me. I am absolutely open-minded. Whatever is coming, is coming." The distinctive feature of an animistic condition of being—that is, the perception of things as being *in* life— thus entailed a particular mode of engagement, which amounted not to a one-way but to a two-way relatedness, meaning that the designers were

highly attentive to the ways in which the things responded as they explored them (cf. Bird-David 1999). In the same way, we recall how Alexander McQueen described that the orchids *leaped out* at him.

In an interview, Catherine elaborated on this engagement. She suddenly looked at a lamp in the corner of the room and emphasized that she could easily take this lamp as her source of inspiration. "You can get something out of it," she said. "You can do a collection with this lamp as an inspiration … I could see, for example, big white tops, and then really thin trousers … And then this round shape of it, you could try to have this as a topic going through as well." Like the engagement with things on inspiration trips, Catherine explores the lamp carefully—its color, its materials, its construction and so on—and, in this process, the lamp stares (Elkins 1996) or speaks (Holbraad 2011) back, as it were, making a difference to how Catherine envisages a fashion collection. In a paper intriguingly entitled "Can the Thing Speak?," Martin Holbraad argues that things may be said to have their own language, which consists of their material characteristics. These, he contends, "can dictate particular forms for their conceptualization" (2011: 18), meaning that things may be able to yield their own concepts and speak for themselves, if you will (ibid. 17–19). As Catherine explores the lamp, it speaks back in this sense, thus providing a distinctive perspective on how a fashion collection may be envisaged. As a kind of effect of the lamp, Catherine sees big white tops, thin trousers and something with a round shape.

In this way, the designers are evidently not approaching things as passive objects for their explorative gaze. Quite the reverse, things are actively responding, for which reason the engagement constitutes a mutually responsive relatedness characteristic of an animistic condition of being. As Bird-David describes what she calls an "animistic epistemology" that is epitomized in the phrase that the Nayaka are "talking with" things:

> 'Talking with' stands for attentiveness to variances and invariances in behavior and response of things in states of relatedness and for getting to know such things as they change through the vicissitudes over time of the engagement with them. To 'talk with a tree'—rather than 'cut it down' [the modernist epistemology]—is to perceive what *it* does as one acts towards it, being aware concurrently of changes in oneself and the tree. (1999: 77)

This kind of "animistic epistemology" characterizes also the designers. Their close practical engagement with a number of things is likewise one of "talking," in that the designers are highly attentive to the ways in which the things respond as they come closer to them, look carefully at them, touch them, smell them and so on. The lamp, *Un Seconda Vita* and other things are thus being both "looked at" and "looked from" in the same process (Elkins 1996), in the sense that the designers explore the things, the things respond to their exploration, and the designers come to see a fashion collection in a particular way. The key point is, in other words, that the things afford (Gibson 1979) certain possibilities in the engagement with them; that is, they form part of a "circuit of affordances," as Moeran has aptly phrased it, which both inhibits and enables the creative processes (2014).

Much of this analysis clearly challenges basic modernist conceptions and certainties, not least the distinction between subjects and objects, humans and nonhumans (see Latour 1993). Indeed, it may appear counterintuitive to assert that things are alive, responding and jumping. As Ingold explains, it is customary for people in the West to conceive of life as a qualifying attribute which only some entities and not others are seen to possess (2000: 96). Insofar as the properly modern way of dealing with things is to perceive them as belonging to the category of "lifeless" objects detached from "lively" subjects, it follows that much of the above does not really make sense. In an animistic condition of being, however, the key point is that life is not conceived as a property that entities may or may not possess a priori to their engagement in specific fields of relations. Rather, it is the other way around: things are perceived to be alive (some of them even to be persons) *as* and *when* and *because* people engage in and maintain relationships with them (Bird-David 1999: 73; see also Ingold 2000; Willerslev 2007). The quality of life is revealed after the fact, so to speak (Ingold 2000: 97), that is, things are alive *not* as outward expressions of life as an innate property, but as the effects of being bound up together with the designers in contexts of practical engagement. In this mode of "talking with" things, certain things and not others are then perceived to be inspiring, being wild, crazy or extraordinary, because they respond in such stimulating and powerful ways that they enable the designers to envisage a fashion collection from a new and unprecedented perspective (Fig. 8.2).

Fig. 8.2 Certain things may be so inspiring that they "speak" to you. "Talking with" a lamp, for instance, may enable a fashion designer to envisage a fashion collection from a new perspective

A State of Possession: Becoming *In*-Spired

An important question is still hanging in the air: how do the designers determine, as Patrik Aspers asks, "among the things that they are inspired by, what actually to do" (2006: 749)? Faced with this question, it is typical to hear designers object that "this is so difficult to talk about" (see also ibid. 750). Moreover, they often refer to a certain bodily feeling, which may be described as a kind of "gut feeling" or "fingerspitzengefühl" (cf. Aspers 2006: 756; Entwistle 2009: 131). "You have to have a certain feeling about trends," as Lisa said earlier. This may immediately call to mind Pierre Bourdieu's notion of a practical sense or "feel for the game," which denotes the "capacity for practical anticipation of the 'upcoming' future contained in the present" (1990: 66). This capacity is produced by

experiences of the game (ibid.), and one could clearly argue that good designers acquire such a capacity by being so engaged in the field of fashion that an anticipation of the future becomes possible.

In the present context, however, I think that there is more to it than that. Rebecca, for instance, argued that "you have to know the time spirit. You have to have a feeling for the time, or era in which we're living." Almost as an echo, Catherine also emphasized how a designer always has to "be in the *zeitgeist*." As she continues, it becomes crystal clear why this is of such importance:

> So, you have to have this feeling for this time spirit in a way, because then you know basically what people are going to like in maybe one year … If you know a lot about what is happening in the world, you can also already imagine how things might be in one or two years' time. There are a lot of trend reports and things like this, but it's not only this. You have to kind of feel it or take it in.

Now, does this amount to what Bourdieu calls "a feel for the game?" Or to what sociologist Joanne Entwistle in a study of fashion buyers terms "tacit aesthetic knowledge" (2009: 139)? Although such concepts might prove illuminating in certain ways, the resulting analysis would suffer from a crucial flaw: namely, that of substituting an unfamiliar expression—for instance, the *zeitgeist*—for a familiar one—for instance, a feel for the game. But if we instead seek to take seriously what the designers themselves take seriously—that is, that you always have to be in or know the *zeitgeist*—then it ought to be clear that there is more to it than a feel for the fashion game. As the Creative Director elaborated:

> In a way, it's just to follow the wave, because, from my point of view, a designer is a kind of shaman. It is a person who has a possibility of catching something which is not really visible; something which is in the air, which everybody can breathe, but which only some people have the possibility, or the faculty, of translating into reality, into real and concrete things …
>
> It's not mathematics or physics. I strongly believe that there are energies in nature which are moving things, which are not visible, and which

few people have the chance to catch. That is the reason why I make the comparison between the designer and the shaman, because the shaman is also a person who moves from the regular level to another level in order to catch what is there and bring it back.

As untouchable and invisible yet in the air as something which every-body can breathe, but which only few people are able to capture and translate into tangible things, the *zeitgeist* is an omnipresent *medium* in which we are all essentially immersed as we continuously breathe it, not unlike the air, wind and weather which we likewise cannot touch but only touch *in*, as Ingold describes it (2007: 29). As a distinct type of spirit, we simply *are* in the *zeitgeist*. But if this is so, what is it then that makes certain people like the designers able to connect with it, and oth-ers not?

The Creative Director gives us a clue. While shamanism has been widely discussed, it is generally known to denote a spirit-medium, with the ability to serve as a bridge between the spirit world and the human world (Morris 2006: 17–18). As described by Ioan Lewis, a shaman thus constitutes "an inspired prophet or leader, a charismatic religious figure with the power to control the spirits, usually by incarnating them" (quoted in ibid. 18). As spirits speak through the shaman, spirit possession is an intrinsic part of the shaman's capacity to master the spirits (ibid. 24). Importantly, Viveiros de Castro argues that this capac-ity rests on a particular mode of knowing: animism (2004: 468–469). It is by perceiving an animate world and exploring it through a rela-tional stance—that is, by a entering into a reciprocal engagement in order "to take on the point of view of that which must be known" (ibid. 468)—that shamans come to be possessed by the spirits and, thus, to know and control them by adopting their perspectives. Shamanism pre-supposes, in other words, an animistic mode of knowing which essen-tially grows from the knower's reciprocal relatedness with the known (Bird-David 1999: 78).[3]

The designers' acute attentiveness to, and two-way engagement with, everything and everyone around them constitutes such an animistic mode of knowing. Since the *zeitgeist* is an omnipresent medium flowing

through us all, humans as well as nonhumans, it follows that it can be known and mastered only by attending to and exploring everything carefully. In fact, Catherine emphasized that connecting with the *zeitgeist* comes about by being highly attentive to the present, just like the Creative Director one day stressed that he is "always looking left and right." Connecting with the *zeitgeist* thus hinges on the designers' animistic condition of being according to which things are not merely alive and active but explored and known in a mutually responsive engagement with them. The *zeitgeist*, I argue, appears precisely in and through this two-way relatedness by which the designers "open" themselves to the forces and perspectives of the world around them. Thus, their animistic inclinations underlie a shamanic practice which entails an experience of a certain state of possession: of being essentially *in*-spired.

To go on an inspiration trip is, in this sense, to embark upon a certain spiritual travel, to paraphrase Moeran (2015: 132). Importantly, the key point of this is not merely that the designers gain a fine-tuned sense of what *is* happening but of what is *going to* happen. "If you know a lot about what is happening in the world," Catherine explained above, "you can also already imagine how things might be in one or two years' time." In this way, the future is not detached from the present but closely linked to it. Or, as Kirsten Hastrup describes the prophetic condition: "While situated in the 'old' world, prophets give voice to a 'new' one" (1989: 224). This position betwixt and between the present and the future is pivotal. As often emphasized by the designers, they must be ahead of the market but not too much ahead, because this will lead to fashion collections which consumers are not ready for. As such, they should not be *one* pace ahead but only *half* a pace, as the advertising professionals in Moeran's ethnography put it (1996: 138). Becoming *in*-spired by the *zeitgeist* is thus firmly anchored in a particular condition of being and mode of engagement in the present, but, crucially, it entails that the designers come to see, or see from, a future point in time. This means that they can determine what to do (or not to do) and, as a distinct yet not detached temporal moment, the future informs decisions and actions here and now (Fig. 8.3).

Fig. 8.3 At some point, the processes of becoming *in*-spired—that is, possessed by the *zeitgeist*—need to be materialized in a concrete prototype, for instance, an "open-lapel jacket"

A Magical Technology of Prefiguration: Foretelling the Future

In her recent book, *The Cunning of Uncertainty* (2016), Nowotny emphasizes how uncertainty is inextricably enmeshed with human existence, even to such a degree that a given certainty always remains provisional. While this is a general point, it has been suggested that creative industries, in particular, are characterized by a "nobody knows property," which denotes that demand is highly uncertain and success unpredictable (Caves 2000: 2–3; Moeran 2005: 172–173). Knowing and acting on the future is thus both an imperative and complicated affair, as "knowledge of potential outcomes of future-creating actions is inescapably uncertain and hence 'a contradiction in terms'" (Nowotny 2016: 7). By seeking to take

fashion designers' accounts and experiences of inspiration seriously, I have argued that this not only prompts us to see a world of business populated by entities and processes not commonly associated with modern capitalism: animistic tendencies, responding things, spiritual beings, shamanic practices, prophetic agents. What is more, the processes of inspiration essentially amount to a distinctive technology of prefiguration, in that the designers come to obtain a distinct sense and vision of the future that makes them able to act under inherent uncertainty.

The concept of prefiguration is most commonly related to the more specific notion of prefigurative politics, mainly connected with various social movements. In this respect, it refers to a political practice where the temporal distinction between a future goal and the present means to reach that goal is dissolved or conflated (Maeckelbergh 2011: 4); that is, the political ends are expressed or acted out through their means (Yates 2015: 1). As Luke Yates explains: "to prefigure is to anticipate or enact some feature of an 'alternative world' in the present, as though it has already been achieved" (ibid.: 4). While this is not entirely the case with processes of inspiration, the notion of prefiguration serves to emphasize that the future is not detached from the present, but, precisely, prefigured in it. In his discussion of "the voice of prophecy," Edwin Ardener likewise argues that prophecies are not really about *predicting* the future but about *foretelling* it: that is, a prophet not only discovers a new reality but conceptualizes and defines it (1989). It is in this sense that the processes of inspiration constitute a distinctive technology by which the designers explore and prefigure the future, thus rendering it present in the present, as it were.

As should be evident, this technology of prefiguration can by no means be accounted for in purely rational terms. Rather, it represent an *a*rational form of reasoning and practice that is aimed at obtaining a degree of knowledge and certainty over an otherwise unknown and uncertain future through particular magical processes. As Moeran shows in much detail in *The Magic of Fashion* (2015), the fashion business is replete with magical agents, spells and rituals. Processes of inspiration form part of these, serving as a kind of passage (cf. Hastrup 2004: 111) between separate worlds and viewpoints, between the well-known and the new, between the present and the future. In brief: a magical practice through which to overcome the challenge of the future in modern capitalism.

Notes

1. Although it has been shortened and slightly rewritten, the main part of the presentation and argument in the following three sections has previously been published in the *Journal of Business Anthropology* (Vangkilde 2015).
2. The fieldwork took place over eight months in 2007 in a European fashion company in the high-end fashion market, primarily in a subsidiary in Switzerland.
3. While the conception of the designer as shaman may perhaps appear surprising, it has also been taken up by Moeran, who presents a detailed discussion of various connections between a designer and a shaman (see Moeran 2015).

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