

Emily Segal
**Mercury
Retrograde**

01/06

It is also possible to put Mercury into modern terms. He is the Modulator. Modulation is the principle of impressing information onto what would otherwise be random, meaningless action in the physical world. For example, a pattern imposed upon radio waves converts the waves from being mere noise.¹

When Mercury is in retrograde, the planet Mercury appears to be moving backwards in the sky. This backwards motion is an optical illusion – the planet is not actually reversing its course, but rather appearing to do so from the perspective of the Earth. But even though this retrograde motion is an illusion, Mercury is still the god of information, governing speed, communication, transportation, and ideas. And in astrology, when Mercury goes into retrograde, the powers of the planet reverse their influence. Information goes haywire. Emails fail to reach their destinations. Dick pics get sent to dads. At least that's how Mercury Retrograde has been traditionally described.



Jiyeon Lee, *wherever you will go*, 2010. Digital collage.

Over the last few years, many people have commented on how the effects of Mercury going into retrograde have amplified in intensity. I personally happened to notice not through a particularly heinous accidental Tweet or other conventional communication act but because I was having serious fashion problems: a profoundly nasty time getting dressed. It wasn't that I thought I looked bad (I did look bad), but that getting dressed was falling apart as an information system – as a live decision-making process that incorporates both known and unknown variables such as weather patterns, body size and emissions, and unexpected lifeworld eruptions in a serially executed, open-ended, evolving parade of acquisitions, assemblages, and adjustments.

In traditional horoscopes, hating your look was a symptom of Venus retrograde, in which



Top: Rihanna carries a Louis Vuitton bag designed by Frank Gehry. Bottom: shoes reblogged from trillaparade (Photo: George Elder).

vanity misfires. But this period of fashion dysfunction was happening when Mercury was in retrograde – it was about information rather than vanity. And this aligned with the way I'd come to interpret fashion over the last few years. The rise of fast fashion, as well as the globalization of both trade and visual codes, had contributed to a situation where the intellectual property of fashion eclipsed its physicality. Before, fashion physically dressed people first, and communicated with them second. Now it began to communicate with them primarily, and cover their bodies as an afterthought. Put simply, fashion turned into information.

As the *fast* in fast fashion implies, the companies' comparative advantage lies in speed, not brand recognition, garment durability, or reputable design. They have changed fashion from a garment making to an information business ... Zara "can design, produce, and deliver a new garment and put it on display in its stores worldwide in a mere 15 days," and this flow of information is by far the most significant thing the company produces, far more important than any piped pinafore, velveteen blazer or any of its other 40,000 yearly items. ²

In practice, this speed extends to merchandising as well: Zara managed to turn

over the majority of its inventory in New York City stores to all-black within two weeks of the September 11 attacks. Zara is the brand most famous for transforming fashion into information, from a social medium into social media. Yet even Zara's innovations have in the meantime been out-virtualized by a scenario in which data and garments have reached parity.³ Seen this way, it makes total sense that fashion should glitch under Mercury Retrograde. As an information discipline, fashion is now ruled by Mercury, not Venus.

Of course, since the nerves carry modulated electrochemical waves around the body, they too are ruled by Mercury. They carry data to and from the brain and to the organs to regulate the response of the organism to the changes within the outer world.⁴

In a knowledge economy, where all businesses are information flows, perhaps everything is governed by Mercury. This would explain the increasing significance of Mercury Retrograde. No longer a particular astrological transit, Mercury Retrograde could be seen as the name for the zeitgeist, a curt summary for a global cultural situation in which an information/knowledge-based economy ("Mercury") was in a state of perma-crisis

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A crop circle appeared near Aeroporto Torino in Turin, Italy on June 23, 2015. Photo: Zanola Valeria Photography



The "miracle pine," a 173-year-old survivor of the 2011 tsunami in Japan, died from excess saline and was then reborn as a monument in 2013. Photo: Associated Press.

(“Retrograde”).

This isn't a state of pure glitch or chaos where nothing works. Rather, it favors or greases certain transmissions: old or returning ones. In contrast to fashion's "passion for novelty at all levels of existence," Mercury Retrograde is an anti-novelty aspect.⁵ Don't sign contracts, unless they're old contracts. Postpone, but don't cancel, your upgrades. Return to the scene of the crime.

In an age whose most important language surrounds the primacy of disruptive innovation, Mercury Retrograde could be the development of a colloquial language around non-progress, non-newness, turning around and looking back, being visited upon by our

ancestors/demons/skeletons/ghosts of Christmas past. Mercury Retrograde is jammed with exes. It makes us vulnerable to our own discarded or stale identities – not as regression, but because the acquisition of new identities is stalled or postponed. We are forced into our old clothes; we cannot be styled ahistorically. Mercury Retrograde is “a person who wakes groggy and needs a little coffee first. He's walking into furniture.”⁶ By definition, this deity is not first to market. Nor is he brand-differentiated – Mercury Retrograde is generic in his sleepiness. His ability to control his own energy, and thus the energy of others, is depressed.

*An interesting point here: the nerves also transmit modulated waves, which carry data that has had its origin deep with in the psychic centers of the mind. This, in turn, is a creation of the psychic rather than the physical world. The nerves, therefore, also represent the only bridge between the psychic and physical halves of the universe that we can now comprehend. They are doubly Mercurial in that they are of both worlds.*⁷

How are you supposed to operate when the scripts you're running are not your own? The winter after my fashion failure, I went through withdrawal after the antidepressants I'd been taking began to spread an extreme visual shimmer across my entire perceptual field.

Was my withdrawal a kind of future nausea – a distortion of the manufactured field of normalcy as it stretches to accommodate the future? It was something more ambient than being strictly on-the-verge-of-barfing, more diffuse. The feelings of failure, the paranoia, the taking everything personally – I marveled at the granularity of it, the endless multiplicity of points onto which one could pin a suspicion or a proof of failure. A big theme was that I was a plagiarist, a person who takes credit for other people's work, and that I couldn't even do that well. Non-artist, bad marketer – a smoothie of contemporary nothing.

I had all these pills pre-tracing paths ahead

of me, like when I used to convene the tribunal of my multiple selves by pulling the hinged mirror doors of the bathroom cabinet around my face and watching my reflections multiply out of the seam: nine Emilys, twelve if I pulled harder. The tribunal: I could consult them. Each face a separate peace, another fate.

Was the Lexapro's visual shimmer my future nausea? Was it evidence of a torqued reality plane, the brain-chemical analog to the limited edition Frank Gehry Louis Vuitton bag Rihanna had been carrying?⁸ Was my interaction with the future evident in the shimmer or in the nausea induced by my attempt to abort the shimmer (by going off the meds)? At first, withdrawal felt like my head floating up, my eyes separating sideways, not quite flying away. Me, my brain, and two sets of eyelash extensions taking off, roping into the horizon; Twitter logo taking flight, Snapchat ghost disappearing.

Mercury Retrograde might suggest a new species of virality: the birth of the slow meme. Slow memes are viral entities that reproduce themselves through language. But instead of quickly reaching a hot tipping point, they replicate slowly and insidiously over a long period. Writing about Mercury Retrograde is funny because the phenomenon prevents or disrupts communication, rerouting it to more roundabout and inefficient channels. Mercury Retrograde is what we invoke when we are too inarticulate to describe our lack of articulation. By definition, Mercury Retrograde is always-already outmoded. Even as the spirit of the times, it tastes old. It will always feel too late to write about Mercury Retrograde, even as it compels its own description.

Mercury Retrograde comes as a new vocabulary for unfinished business. It charts an overlooked area of the innovators' dilemma. It's the opposite side of the “failure” so celebrated in a startup landscape; it is the disruptive twin of Disruption. Mercury Retrograde forces recognition of the true gaps and data loss that can't be repurposed into creative destruction.

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e-flux journal #65 SUPERCOMMUNITY — may–august 2015 Emily Segal
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1

Robert Hand, "Mercury, the Modulator," in *Essays on Astrology* (Atglen, PA: Schiffer, 1982).

2

Rob Horning, "The Accidental Bricoleurs," *n+1*, June 3, 2011 <https://nplusonemag.com/online-only/online-only/the-accidental-bricoleurs/>

3

Even in terms of price: buying a dress on Kim Kardashian Hollywood costs the same as buying one at Forever 21, and is much more efficient: you don't have to go through the trouble of buying it, putting it on your body, photographing yourself in it, and putting it on Instagram – it's *already* inside your phone.

4

Robert Hand

5

Gilles Lipovetsky, *Empire of Fashion* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002).

6

Sam Levinson, "Astrologer Says Mercury Retrograde Is Going To Mess Up Your New iPhone," *Elite Daily*, October 8, 2014 <http://elitedaily.com/news/technology/astrologer-explain-s-not-good-time-buy-iphone/90744/>

7

Robert Hand

8

See <http://content.purseblog.com/images/2014/10/Rihanna-Louis-Vuitton-x-Frank-Gehry-Twisted-Box-Monogram-Bag-4.jpg>