Anneke Smelik

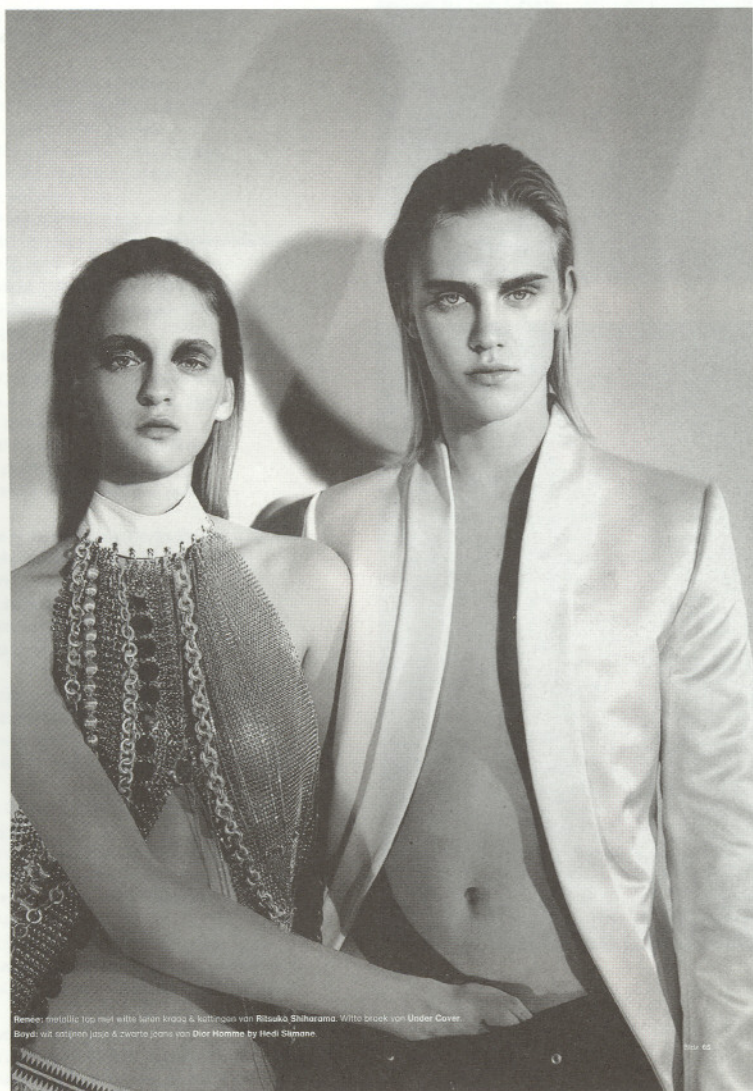# Fashion and visual culture

Renée: metallic top met witte luren kraag & kettingen van Ritsuko Shiharama. Witte broek van Under Cover.
Boyd: wit satijnen jasje & zwarte jeans van Dior Homme by Hedi Slimane.

1. Foto *Blvd.*, april 2003

Fashion as a system of meaning

'Design is Dasein'
(Henk Oosterling)

Fashion cannot survive without the media. Its success as both an art form and a commercial enterprise depends upon attention in the media. The media have played a vital role in shaping fashion into the complex cultural phenomenon it has become. Photography, and later film and television, have medialised fashion. Fashion has become an intrinsic part of today's visual culture, and vice versa. Fashion magazines, glossies and women's journals cannot exist without fashion, but fashion also cannot exist without these magazines. This chapter looks at visual culture and the ways in which fashion is 'fashioned' by the media. The first half of the chapter gives a theoretical background to understanding contemporary visual culture. The second half of the chapter provides an introduction to the many ways that media theory can be used to analyse and understand fashion.

Visual culture

Since the invention of photography, film, television, video, CD-Rom and the Internet, we have rapidly shifted from a written culture to a visual culture: 'We live in a culture of images, a society of the spectacle, a world of semblances and simulacra' (Mitchell 1994: 5). Contemporary visual culture is both ubiquitous and complex. The image no longer stands by itself, but is informed by multimedia; it is usually integrated with text and music. A fashion photograph comes with a caption or an accompanying text. A fashion show doesn't work without music or a choreography of moving bodies. Apart from their multimedia aspect, images also circulate in a global media society in which all kinds of genres and media are mixed.

Precisely because this visual culture is so dominant on the one hand and so complex on the other, we need theoretical tools in order to be able to understand images, including images of fashion. To do justice to the complexity of visual culture, it is necessary to pose questions on the basis of an interdisciplinary framework: questions about significance and ideology; identity and visual pleasure; technology and economy. Theoretical insight creates media literacy. We can thus acquire an attitude towards the media we use every day that has aptly been described by Laura Mulvey as 'passionate detachment' (1989: 26). Before supplying a number of analytical instruments in the second half of this chapter, I would first like to place visual culture within the framework of postmodernism.

I
Theoretical framework

Postmodernity

Although the term 'postmodernism' is often described as vague and indeterminate, there are definite ways in which it can be characterised. Here I make a distinction between a) postmodernity, b) postmodern philosophy and c) postmodernism as a movement in art and culture (Van den Braembussche 2000).

First of all, postmodernity. Postmodernity refers to the age we are currently living in, particularly the information society that has arisen since the sixties. It is a question, then, of an historical period in which we live. The information society can be characterised as 'postcolonial': after the Second World War, the colonies in the Third World achieved independence at a fast rate. This society is also 'postindustrial': heavy industry has been replaced by the exchange of services. From the sixties onwards, these services have increasingly been characterised by information technology, set in motion by the advent of the computer. Science and technology are indispensable and give shape to our society. While the industrial society still functioned largely around property (who has control of the means of production?), the information society

is mainly about access ('xs4all': 'access for all') – access to information, that is to say, to knowledge. Postmodernity means a networked society in which everything and everyone is connected with each other via mass media such as television and the Internet.

Another characteristic is globalisation. Globalisation has taken place with the media (you can watch CNN and MTV all over the world) and with capital (you can use cash machines anywhere in the world). And with fashion. Benetton's multi-racial campaigns show the more benign face of globalisation, but, to be fair, they have also drawn attention to the more dismal effects of globalisation.

Applying the characteristics of postmodernity to fashion, we get the following picture. In the past, fashion was dependent on fabrics like silk, cotton and cashmere – as well as inspiration – that the West imported from its colonies. In the seventies the Hippies came along with their renewed interest in non-Western clothing. With the deconstructivist fashion of Japanese designers like Yamamoto in the eighties, the first non-Western designers broke open the closed, elitist fashion world. Now they have been succeeded by other designers such as Hussein Chalayan, Xuly Bët and Alexander Herchovitch. With the

Fashion Weeks in India and Africa, fashion has become globalised.

When we look at the fashion industry, the picture is even clearer. Whereas the Dutch fashion industry was originally established here in Holland itself – in Enschede for example – it has now largely moved to low-wage countries in Asia or the former East Block. Look at the label in your sweater or trousers and most likely you'll find 'Made in Taiwan' or something similar. Globalisation results in cheap clothing and enormous profits in the West, but also in protests against exploitation, such as against the Nikes made by small children in Pakistan. These abuses signalled the start of the No Logo and anti-globalisation movements.

Postmodern philosophy

Secondly, postmodern philosophy. Two notions are important here: 'the end of the Grand Narratives' and 'the death of the traditional subject'. These words suggest that Western culture is going through a crisis. According to the postmodern philosopher Jean-François Lyotard, Western culture is no longer able to tell any 'Grand Narratives', by which he is referring to the end of ideology. This implies that ideologies ('isms' like Marxism or Feminism, but also religions such as Christianity) can no longer

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2. Benetton, advertising campaign for United Colors, spring/summer 2002
3. Micha Klein, *Joy, Artificial Beauty*, 1997/1998, collection Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam
4. Andy Warhol, *Light Blue Marilyn*, 1962

Fashion as a system of meaning

provide modern man with a meaningful frame of reference. Ideology finds itself in a crisis of legitimatisation, no longer able to announce the truth or to proclaim a future utopia. This does not mean, of course, that everyone has given up their beliefs; on the contrary, we are actually seeing a return to ideology and religion. But, Lyotard argues, nobody can impose that belief or that ideology on others as the one and only truth. People who still try to inflict any kind of truth upon others are called fundamentalists nowadays.

The end of the Grand Narratives is not just a negative process. For most people it is liberating to be freed from a one-sided, enforced truth. What's more, it has led to a blossoming of 'small narratives' in postmodern culture. Now that there is no one dominant truth, many people have the right and freedom to tell their stories, including those who previously had few opportunities to do so, such as women, workers, blacks, young people. You see the same development in art: there is no longer one dominant movement but a multitude of directions. And we see the same pluralism in fashion. No longer a 'Grand Narrative' dictated by a single fashion king, or even by just one city, but a multitude of perspectives coming from many designers, in various cities and different parts of the world.

The end of the Grand Narrative also has consequences for the view of human subjectivity. The traditional notion of the individual is that he (it was almost always a he) represents an autonomous and coherent entity, endowed with reason. It was mainly psychoanalysis that put an end to this notion. According to Freud, the human being is not at all governed by his reason, but rather by his unconscious. And it was Marx who claimed that it is our class that determines who we are. We may think we are individuals, but in fact we are defined by our class, ethnicity, age, sexual preference, religion, nationality and so on – the list is endless. In fact, then, we are not really an autonomous and coherent entity. This is why postmodernism no longer refers to an 'individual' but to a 'subject'. A subject, moreover, that is split, fragmented, splintered. As a piece of graffiti in Paris in the eighties put it, 'God is dead. Marx is dead. And I don't feel so good either'.

A more positive way of formulating this idea of fragmented subjectivity is by analogy with the network society: the subject, the self, always stands in relation to an other. Instead of being autonomous we are all incorporated in a fabric of complex and mobile relations. Our identity is to be found, as it were, on a node of communication cir-

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cuits. The postmodern subject is thus characterised by a dynamic and a diversity that were alien to the traditional individual. This change in the position of the human being has had the same effect as the end of the Grand Narratives: many more people can now make a claim to subjectivity who were previously excluded, such as blacks, women and homosexuals. This can also be witnessed by the recognition of art and culture produced by women, people of colour, and artists from the so called 'Third World'.

This development has resulted in a much greater freedom in the formation of human identity. Just look at pop culture, where someone like Madonna assumes a different image with the regularity of a clock. Today you can play with your identity by gender bending, for example. Or by crossings with other ethnic cultures, such as Surinamese or Dutch Muslims who borrow elements from the American black hip-hop subculture. Fashion is an important component of the play with identity. In earlier days it was your gender and your class that determined what you had to wear, and there were strict rules that were not so easy to transgress. These rules now only apply to the Queen. Everyone else stands in front of the wardrobe each morning to determine which clothes match his or her mood: baroque, gothic, sexy, or maybe businesslike today after all?

Postmodernism
Thirdly, the term postmodernism as applied to art and culture. A crucial characteristic of postmodernism is the fading distinction between high and low culture. Over the course of the twentieth century the traditional notion of culture has been freed from its connection with elitist art. Scholars nowadays employ a broad notion of culture, based on Raymond Williams's famous expression 'culture as a whole way of life' (1958). Here it concerns a view of culture as a practice within a social and historical context.
The rigid distinction between high and low

culture is no longer tenable. In any case, it was always largely based on the controversy between word and image in Western culture, where the word is seen as the expression of the superiority of the mind and the image as expressing emotion and the baser desires of the body. The shift from a textual to a visual culture means the image is no longer viewed in purely negative terms but is valued for all its positive powers and the experiences it evokes.

Moreover, 'high' culture and 'low' culture cannot be unequivocally linked to particular disciplines (read: literature versus television). Every art form has its low cultural expression. Just think of the portraits of the gypsy boy with a tear running down his face or pulp romantic novels. 'High' is stepping off its pedestal: *haute couture* is influenced by street culture. 'Low' is upgraded and receives attention in newspaper art supplements or is exhibited in the museum. Advertising photos from Benetton, computer art by Micha Klein and fashion photos by Inez van Lamsweerde have all been shown in Dutch museums.

Democratisation and commercialisation are also crucial to the discussion of 'high' and 'low'. Increased prosperity and dissemination via the media have brought art and fashion to within almost everyone's reach. The enormous numbers of visitors to major exhibitions testify to this, as does the 'festivalisation' of big cities. Culture is 'in' and is eagerly consumed in large quantities. Moreover, commerciality is no longer associated exclusively with low culture; it has penetrated high culture, as can be deduced from the weekly top ten lists for literature, the piles of CDs of music by Bach and Mozart in the local supermarket, Audi's sponsoring of the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam, or Karl Lagerfeld's designs at H&M.

Another postmodern feature is intertextuality, which amounts to the idea that a text always refers to other texts. Every text is a web of quotations, borrowed words and references. This term does not, of course, simply represent a narrow view of text; ima-

Fashion as a system of meaning

ges likewise ceaselessly refer to each other. Advertising spots refer to videoclips, which borrow from television series, which in their turn quote films, which are themselves based on a novel. And that novel refers again to a play by Shakespeare, and so on and so on. It's an endless game. Madonna's video clip 'Material Girl' refers for example to Marilyn Monroe's song 'Diamonds are a Girl's Best Friend' in the film 'Gentlemen Prefer Blondes'. In an advertisement for Estee Lauder perfume, the model walks through a digital field of flowers that is identical to the one Madonna walks through in her videoclip 'Love Profusion'. Nicole Kidman, in the commercial for Chanel No. 5, does a perfect repeat of her role in 'Moulin Rouge'. Some directors, such as Baz Luhrman or Quentin Tarantino, have made intertextuality their trademark. A large part of the visual pleasure in contemporary culture is based on recognition: the more references you can place, the more clever you feel as viewer.

Some theorists, such as Frederic Jameson, call the postmodern form of intertextuality a 'pastiche'. A pastiche is a textual or visual quotation which merely repeats; sheer quoting is the name of the game. The reference has no deeper meaning because all historical connections are abandoned. This can also be found in fashion. If you look at a John Galliano creation you can recognise myriad quotations: from other cultures (ethnic prints), from other times (nineteenth century silhouette), from street culture ('bag lady' with shopping cart and plastic bags) and even from the circus (clown-like make-up). Everything is thrown into a big pile while elements are wrenched from their historical time and geographical context.

A term often used in this connection is 'bricolage', which literally means making do. We've become a 'cut & paste' culture, where everyone can tinker about and scramble together their clothes and even their identity. Postmodern culture is thus characterised by pastiche and bricolage. It's not always an easy matter to indicate the significance of this cultural phenomenon, but it does make fashion playful and flexible, without it being compelled into an overruling 'Grand Narrative'.

A final characteristic of postmodernism that I would like to discuss is the transition from representation to simulation. We have already seen that postmodern pastiche – quoting, borrowing and referring – does not necessarily have any deeper meaning. This is because postmodern culture no longer represents, but simulates. This process is dependent upon the role of media technology.

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5. Estee Lauder, *Beyond Paradise* advertising campaign, 2004, fragment
6. Madonna, clip *Love profusion* , 2004, fragment

Anneke Smelik / Fashion and visual culture

Inez van Lamsweerde

1963 Amsterdam (NED)

In 2003 the magazine American Photo put together a list of the 25 best photographers in the world. That list contained one Dutch name: Inez van Lamsweerde. Both an artist and a fashion photographer, she has ignored the dividing line between art, fashion and commercial work from the very beginning. And successfully. Her work is shown in many glossies such as The Face, Vogue and Arena Homme Plus (editorials and advertising campaigns) as well as in international museums and galleries. Her signature is clearly recognisable in both areas.

Inez van Lamsweerde once said in an interview that she was obsessed with beauty. It's always people she photographs – or recreates, to be precise. Her digitally altered creatures are alienating. Too smooth, too clone-like, too impersonal to be fully human.

She often bases her work on ideal female images from the mass media and the body culture in connection with gene technology, surgery and bodybuilding, the manipulation of the body, identity and sex. In the series 'Final Fantasy' (1993) three-year-old girls posed coquettishly in satin underwear but with the mouths of adult men superimposed on their faces. The cloyingly sweet eroticised tot turns out to be a child demon. The series 'The Forest' (1995) shows mild-mannered passive men with women's hands, and the women in 'Thank You Thighmaster' (1993) are really mutants who resemble mannequins, without body hair and with a neutral skin surface where nipples and genitals are supposed to be. The camera doesn't lie? You certainly hope it does.

Many models in Van Lamsweerde's fashion photos are hyperstylised, exaggerated stereotypes, perfectly beautiful, without irregularities and without individual features. They move in a hyperrealistic setting in which the whole effect sometimes suggests the work of Guy Bourdin (for example, see the series 'Invisible Words' in Blvd 2, 1994). But her oeuvre is more versatile than that of the old master, so it is also less likely to be related to a certain time period.

Inez van Lamsweerde graduated from Amsterdam's Rietveld Academy in 1990. That same year she got her first photography assignment, the results of which appeared in Modus. In 1992 she received the Dutch Photography Prize as well as the European Kodak Prize (gold in the categories Fashion and People/Portraits). Since the early nineties she has been working almost entirely with her husband, Vinoodh Matadin.

Today Van Lamsweerde and Matadin live and work chiefly in New York. The most recent developments in their work suggest a preference for less reconstructed photographs. In 2002 they took nine black-and-white photos of the members of the theatre group 'Mug met de Gouden Tand' (Mosquito with the Gold Tooth). In 2003 they produced a nude calendar for Vogue. All without digital effects.
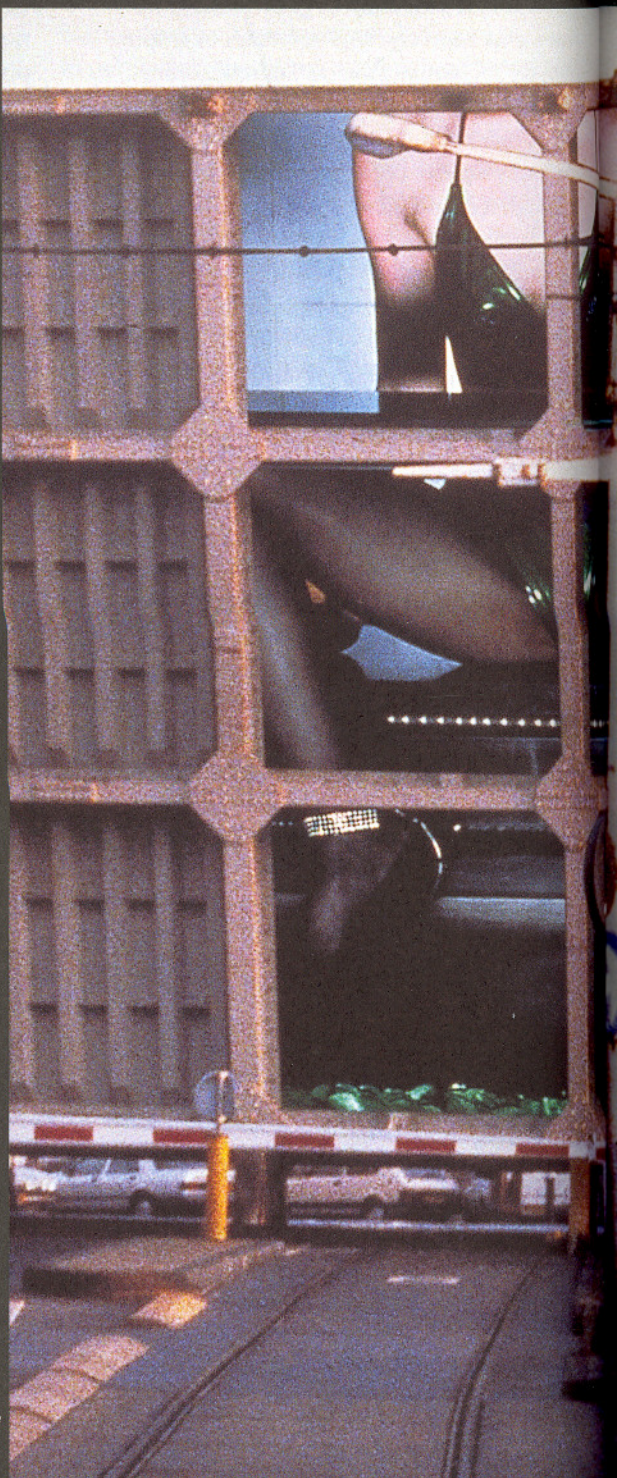
Literature:
Hainley, Bruce. 'Inez van Lamsweerde', *Art-Forum*, October 2004.
Inez van Lamsweerde 'Photographs'.Deichtorhallen Hamburg: Schirmer/Mosel, 1999.
Jonkers, Gert. 'Inez en Vinoodh', *Volkskrant Magazine*, 22 February 2003.
Rauw op het lijf. Rotterdam: Nederlands Foto Instituut, 1998.

Schutte, Xandra. 'Perverse onschuld', *De Groene Amsterdamer*, 10 September 1997.
Terreehorst, Pauline. *Modus: Over mensen, mode en het leven*. Amsterdam: De Balie, 1990.

Illustration:
Inez van Lamsweerde, *Devorah and Mienke*, 1993

In the old conception of art, with Plato or Kant for example, a work of art refers to something deeper or higher beyond reality. Every work of art is unique and hence irreplaceable. As early as the 1930s Walter Benjamin argued that the role of the work of art was changing because of reproductive technologies. With the invention of photography and film (and later television and the Internet), any image can be reproduced infinitely. A copy of Rembrandt's 'The Nightwatch' always remains a copy of a famous, original painting, whereas a copy of Man Ray's photograph of Kiki as a violin has no original. In the age of mechanical reproduction the distinction between original and copy therefore disappears, and with it what Benjamin calls art's 'aura', namely that which makes a work of art unique and original. For fashion, reproductive technology initially meant an enormous stimulus, since images of designs could be disseminated via the mediums of magazines and television. But in fashion, too, the copy has now overtaken the original design. A day after the fashion shows in Paris or Milan, the photos are already on the Internet and six weeks later H&M can sell replicas in their shops.

In Pop Art, Andy Warhol played with the idea of the copy by producing silk-screened images of cans of Campbell soup or icons like Marilyn Monroe. Another example of the loss of aura is the disappointment all of us may feel when visiting Da Vinci's 'Mona Lisa' or Vermeer's 'Girl with the Pearl Earring' in the museum. We've already seen so many reproductions in books, films, on mugs, towels, with moustache and beard, or as a doll, that the original is hardly a match for these. Only if you actually succeed in experiencing the painting in the silence of the museum (but can you ever with all those tourists around you?), you may still find the original aura.

In the seventies, Jean Baudrillard went a step further than Benjamin by claiming that not only art but also reality is changing under the onslaught of the media. He argues that the ubiquity of the media turns reality into a simulacrum, a copy of a copy. The simulacrum abolishes the difference between 'being' and 'appearing'. Think of someone pretending to be sick – this person actually starts to display signs of sickness, so that it is no longer clear what is real and what is fake. It's the same with postmodernism: our culture is so thoroughly 'medialised' that our experience is determined by the media. Media do not reflect reality, but construct it. Or to put it differently: media do not represent reality, but simulate it.

We all know this phenomenon from our own experience. When we're on holiday in Greece, for example, we exclaim that the sea is as blue as on the postcard. Our experience is determined by an image, in this case the postcard. If we're on safari in Kenya, it seems as though we've landed in a National Geographic TV programme. And when we say to our beloved 'I love you' we can't help feeling we're acting in a soap. Umberto Eco therefore says that we are assuming a permanent ironic attitude in postmodern times. We can no longer innocently say 'I love you', because we've already seen and heard it a hundred thousand times on TV. The words have lost their meaning as well as their authenticity. But what we can do, according to Eco, is say it with irony: 'As Ridge in "The Bold and the Beautiful" would say, I love you'. While reality shows on television try to simulate life as much as possible, life itself has become one big reality show, in which being and appearance can no longer be separated. In art and in fashion we can see a longing for authenticity, as a nostalgic reaction to the culture of simulacra. People want something 'real' again in a postmodern culture in which the dividing line between real and unreal has become wafer-thin. The question, however, is whether such authenticity is still possible. Such is the power of the simulacrum that the media have created.

Now that I have given an outline of postmodernism as a frame within which

fashion functions, it is time to look more closely at instruments that can be used to analyse images. These analytical methods all come from poststructuralism, the theory underlying postmodernism.

II
Analysis

The semiotic sign

Poststructuralism was informed in the sixties by semiotics, psychoanalysis and Marxism. Poststructuralism is also referred to as 'the linguistic turn', since language formed the model for the development of these theories. De Saussure's writings on semiotics helped to develop a structuralist analysis of the 'grammar' of any system, whether a myth, advertisement, film, fashion or novel, as in the work of the anthropologist Lévi-Strauss, the early Barthes or the film semiotician Metz (Sim 1998). The central idea that language is paradigmatic for meaning is followed by virtually all postmodern philosophers. According to the psychoanalytical theories of Lacan, even the unconscious is structured like a language. Although some philosophers pointed out that language and signification are fundamentally unstable, as in the deconstructionism of Derrida, or in Lyotard's postmodern loss of 'Grand Narratives', text remains the central focus in poststructuralism. Everything in fact is interpreted as 'text', including image, music or fashion. While semiotics initially concentrated on literature, scholars soon started focussing on the field of popular culture, such as architecture, fashion, music, sport, women's magazines or the video clip – to mention a few examples at random.

Semiotics is the theory of 'signs' (from the Greek 'semeion', meaning sign). A sign is the smallest element that carries a meaning. Language is the system of signs that we are most familiar with, but traffic signs or, as Barthes has shown, fashion are also sign systems. A sign consists of a signifier (in French, signifiant), the material carrier

of meaning, and the signified (in French, signifié), the content to which reference is made. The letters and sound of the word 'dress' form the signifiers, which refer to the content of a concrete dress. Signifier and signified, form and content, together create meaning. The relationship between signifier and signified is almost always arbitrary; there is, after all, no reason why something is called a dress in English, a 'jurk' in Dutch, and a 'japon' in French.

A sign always refers to something in reality. The first meaning of a sign is denotative; it is the meaning you can look up in the dictionary. But things seldom have just one meaning; most signs have many secondary meanings. These are called connotations. In that case, the denotative sign, the signifier and the signified form a new entity, a new signifier for a new connotative sign, as in the following diagram:

SIGNIFIER	SIGNIFIED	CONNOTATION
SIGNIFIER	SIGNIFIER	DENOTATION

A well-known example is the red rose. At the denotative level it is simply a flower with leaves and thorns. In order to become a sign of love, the denotative meaning of the flower must become in its turn a signifier. The sign then forms the basis for a connotative, second meaning: love. Why? Because it is agreed upon in our culture that the rose, especially the red rose, symbolises love. An Amnesty International poster adds a third meaning to this well-known symbol by surrounding the thorns with barbed wire and placing the words 'violence ceases where love begins' halfway up the stem. The flower thus becomes a symbol of love and non-violence, while the thorns stand for violence. (Please read the table from the bottom up).

Anneke Smelik / Fashion and visual culture

SIGNIFIER: red rose as love	SIGNIFIED: thorns with barbed wire love	SECOND CONNOTATION: love is the reverse of violence
SIGNIFIER: red rose	SIGNIFIER: red rose	FIRST CONNOTATION: My love for you
SIGNIFIER: rose	SIGNIFIER: Flower with thorns and leaves	DENOTATION: Flower of the species *Rosa*

The multimedia image is an extremely complicated sign and can convey meaning in many ways. A still image, such as a fashion or advertising photograph, has the following signifiers:

- perspective (camera position: angle, distance)
- framing
- photographic aspects such as exposure, rough grain, colour or black and white
- composition or 'mise-en-scène' of what is depicted: setting, costume, make-up, attitude and actions of the model, etc.
- text: caption or legend

A moving image, such as film, television commercials, video clip or fashion show, has, all of the above aspects, plus even more signifiers:

- movement of the models or actors; choreography
- camera movement (pan, tilt, dolly, tracking)
- editing
- sound (dialogue, added sounds like creaking door)
- music

Any analysis requires us to briefly check all these elements, since they influence the meaning. Only then can you determine the denotation and the connotations. A close-up has a different effect than a long shot. Camera movements direct the viewer's gaze. Quick editing evokes tension. Music creates atmosphere, as does lighting. This type of formal analysis soon reveals that the image is never simply a copy or a reflection of reality, even though what the camera records is real. Yet so many technological and aesthetic choices enter into the registration that reality is always moulded and constructed. The aim of analysis is to make this construction transparent.

Digital images
A formal analysis can be deepened even further by using the semiotics of C.S. Peirce, an American who developed his theories at the same time in the early twentieth century as De Saussure in Switzerland, without their being aware of each other. Peirce's semiotics is used more often for analysing images because he focuses less on text than De Saussure does. Peirce argues that there are three sorts of relationships between the signifier and the signified: iconic, indexical and symbolic. An iconic relationship means that there is a similarity or resemblance between the signifier and the signified. An example of an iconic relationship is the portrait: the image (the signifier) resembles that which is portrayed (the signified). An indexical relationship presumes an actual connection between signifier and signified. A classic example is smoke as the signifier of fire, or the footprint in the sand as the signifier of the presence of a man on an 'uninhabited' island. The symbolic relationship corresponds to what De Saussure calls the arbitrary relation between signifier and signified: the red rose is a convention, based on an agreement. Yet this remains a moot point, because the rose has an iconic relation to the female sex organ. It is this resemblance that has probably led to the rose becoming a symbol for love.

All three relationships apply to the mechanically reproducible image, like the photograph or film. An image is always iconic since that which is depicted shows a resemblance to the signifiers: every photograph is a portrait of a person or an object. Something that is photographed or filmed is also always indexical: there is a factual

Fashion as a system of meaning

relationship, since the camera records reality – with the camera you prove that you've been somewhere ('I was here'; the visual proof that tourists bring home as their trophy). Finally, the image, like language, has symbolic meanings, which are created through an interplay of the many audiovisual signifiers mentioned above.

Digital technology has put the indexical relation under strain, because we can no longer know with certainty whether an image is analogue, and thus standing in a factual relation to reality, or digital, made in the computer without an existential relation to reality. Digital images thus create confusion. In semiotic terms: they maintain the iconic relation, for they look just like photographs and display a similarity between signifier and signified. But digital images are no longer indexical. This is what happens in Diesel's 'Save Yourself' photo series. We see tiny models who look like people (iconic relation), but all the same seem unreal. Their skin is too smooth, the postures too rigid, the eyes too glassy. We suspect soon enough that the image has been digitally manipulated, which disturbs the indexical relation – these are not actual shots of real people. The tension between the iconic and the indexical relationship draws attention to the tension between

real and unreal. And this creates a symbolic meaning. Together with the text, the photographs comment ironically on our culture's obsession with remaining forever young.

Sometimes the digital manipulation is immediately clear, as in this picture of Kate Moss as a cyborg: a *cyb*ernetic *org*anism. Because this is clearly an impossible image of a half human / half machine figure, we don't get confused about the indexical status of the photograph. Its symbolic meaning is immediately apparent, which here too represents a comment on the artificial ideal of beauty. It is typical of digital photography to create images of people that are like cyborgs, since many art and fashion photographs in today's visual culture explore the fluid borders between man, machine and mannequin.

Looking and being looked at I: the voyeuristic gaze

Fashion is deeply involved with eroticism and sexuality. To analyse this we can turn to psychoanalysis, which determines how we shape our desires. The most classic model for desire is the Oedipus complex, which regulates how the child focuses its love of the parent onto the other sex and projects feelings of rivalry onto the parent of the same sex. This is more complicated for girls

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7. Diesel, 'Sleep' from the Save Yourself advertising campaign, autumn/winter 2001
8. Adje's Fotosoep, Kate Moss Cyborg, 2005

Anneke Smelik / Fashion and visual culture

because they at first experience love for the mother and later have to convert this into love for the father, while the boy can continue his love for the mother without interruption. The Oedipus complex is particularly applicable in stories, in both literature and film, but in the fashion world it actually plays no crucial role, and so I won't be going into it any further here.

More relevant to fashion is the eroticism of looking. According to Freud, any desire or sexuality begins with looking, or what he calls *scopophilia* (literally the love of looking). The desiring gaze often leads to touch and ultimately to sexual activities. Although it has a rather dirty sound to it, *scopophilia* is a quite ordinary part of the sexual drive. Film theorists were quick to claim that the medium of cinema is in fact based on *scopophilia*: in the darkness of the movie theatre we are voyeurs permitted to look at the screen for as long as we like. There is always something erotic in watching films, in contrast to television which does not offer the same voyeuristic conditions since the light is on in the living room, the screen is much smaller and there are all sorts of distractions.

Laura Mulvey (1975) was the first theorist to draw attention to the vital role of gender in visual pleasure. The active and passive side of scopophilia (voyeurism and exhibitionism respectively) are relegated to strict roles of men and women. As John Berger, in his famous book *Ways of Seeing*, had already argued, 'men act and women appear', or rather, men look and women are looked at. According to Mulvey, this works as follows in classical cinema. The male character is watching a woman, with the camera filming what the man sees (a so-called 'point of view shot'). The spectator in the movie theatre thus looks at the woman through the eyes of the male character. The female body is moreover 'cut up' into fragments by framing and editing: a piece of leg, a breast, the buttocks or the face. The female body is thus depicted in a fragmented way.

We can therefore say that there's a threefold gaze that collapses into each other: the male character, the camera and the spectator. Mulvey argues that the film spectator always adopts a structurally male position. It is important to realise that the filmic means, such as camera operation, framing, editing and often music as well, objectify the woman's body into a spectacle. In Mulvey's words, the woman is signified as 'to-be-looked-at-ness'. At the same time the filmic means privilege the male character so that he can actively look, speak and act.

Mulvey takes her analysis even further

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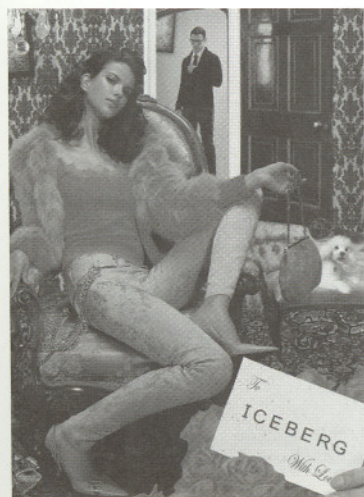
10.

9. Iceberg, advertising campaign 2004
10. Davidoff, advertising campaign for *Cool Water Men*

Fashion as a system of meaning

with the help of psychoanalysis. The voyeuristic gaze upon the female body arouses desire and therefore creates tension for both the male character and the spectator. Moreover, the woman's body is disturbing because of its intrinsic difference from the male body. Freud would say the female body is 'castrated', but we can put it somewhat more neutrally: the female body is 'different'. In a society dominated by men, women are the sign of sexual difference. In most cultures, it is (still?) the case that the woman-as-other, namely as other than man, endows sexual difference with meaning. Otherness, strangeness, difference always instils fear. The otherness of women incites fear in men at an unconscious level and this fear needs to be exorcised through culture, in film or art. According to Mulvey, this happens in cinematic stories in two ways. Firstly, through sadism where the female body is controlled and inserted into the social order. Sadism mainly accompanies a story and acquires form in the narrative structure. The erotic gaze frequently results in violence or rape. Nor is it accidental that in the classic Hollywood film the femme fatale is killed off at the end of the movie. No happy end for any woman who is sexually active. Only in the nineties is she allowed to live on at the end, like Catherine Trammell in 'Basic Instinct', or in television series like 'Sex and the City'.

The second way of exorcising the fear evoked by the female body is through fetishism. In that case the female star is turned into an image of perfect beauty that diverts attention from her difference, her otherness. The camera fetishises the woman's body by lingering endlessly on the spectacle of female beauty. At such moments the film narrative comes momentarily to a hold.

Although Mulvey's analysis dates from the seventies, her insights are still of considerable relevance for fashion today. The spectacle of fashion shows is almost totally constructed around looking at fetishised female bodies. Models have taken the place of film stars as the fetishised image of perfected femininity. Many fashion reportages make use in one way or another of the sexualised play of looking and being looked at. However, some things have changed since the time of Mulvey's analysis. Feminist criticism has indeed counteracted women's passivity in recent decades, and now we often see a more active and playful role for the female model. Not only is the woman less passive, but both fashion and other popular visual genres such as video clips have turned the male body into the object of the voyeuristic gaze. Now the male body too is being fragmented, objectified and eroticised. This is happening not only in fashion reportages but also on the catwalk. It may be interesting for students of fashion to take a closer look at how the male body is visualised, how passive or active the male model is, and how the gaze is supported by filmic or other means.

Ethnicity also plays a role in the game of looking and being looked at. Stuart Hall (1997) and Jan Nederveen Pieterse (1992) have produced an extensive historical analysis of the way that coloured and black people are depicted in Western culture. Stereotypes are abundant, as in the image of the exotic black woman as Venus or the black man as sexually threatening. There are still very few black models in the fashion world. Again, it may be useful for students of fashion to analyse how ethnicity is visualised because of this long history of stereotyping. Does exoticising the model, for example, emphasise ethnicity? Or does it involve an actual denial of ethnic difference? This happens for example in fashion photos of Naomi Campbell with straight golden hair, or wearing blue contact lenses. Here, the black model has to conform to the white norm of ideal beauty.

Looking and being looked at II: the narcissistic gaze

So far I have been talking about looking at the other, but psychoanalysis also has

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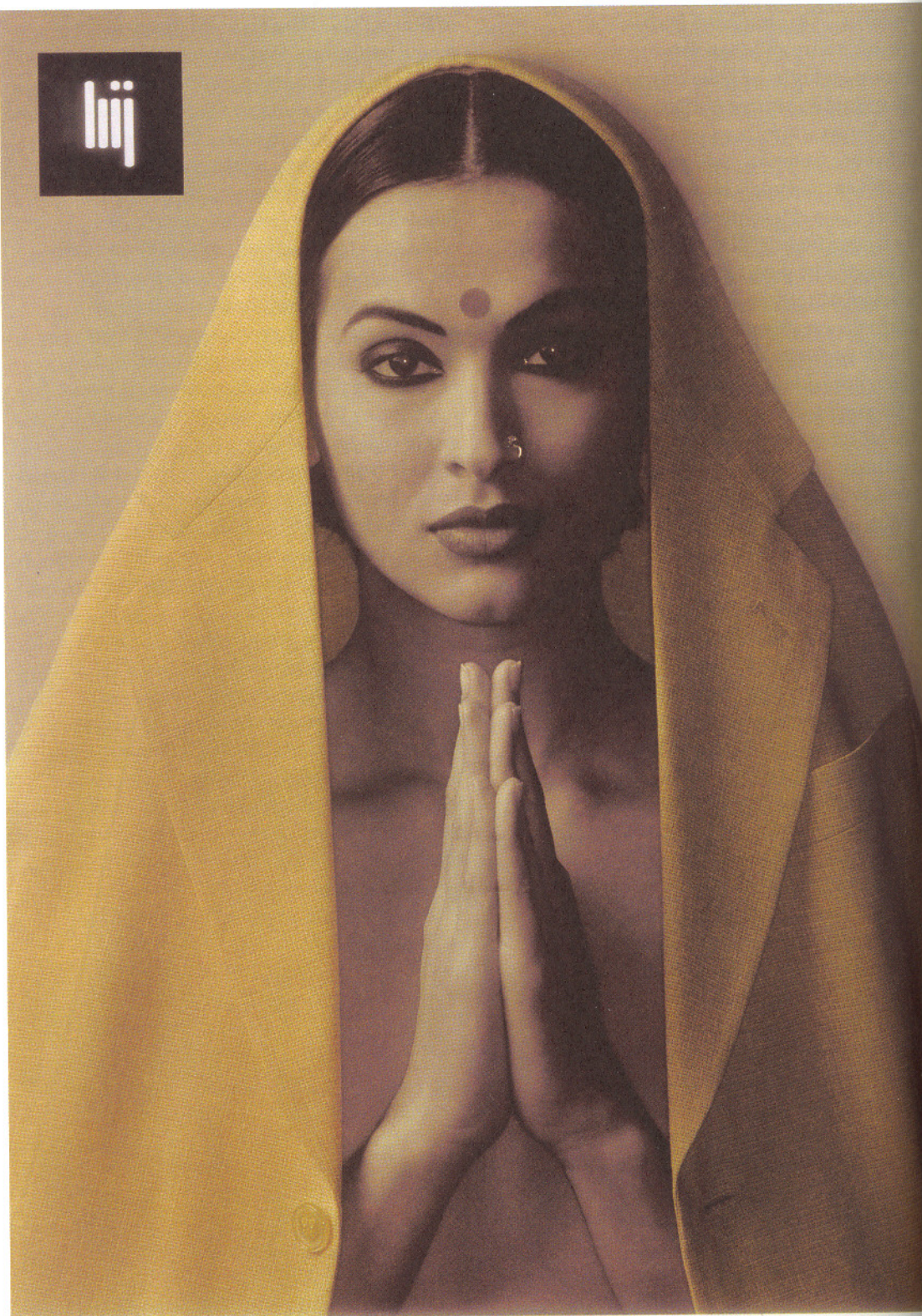
Kolbert in India geel 249,-

Fashion as a system of meaning

12.

13.

14.

11. HIJ (today: WE Men), advertising campaign
    1989, photo: Hans Kroeskamp
12. Naomi Campbell wearing blue lenses, *Elle*
    January 1994
13. Naomi Campbell with blond hair
14. Marcel van der Vlugt, *'Lo Specchio'*, Amica
    Italia January 1998

something to say about looking at yourself. As a baby you are hardly conscious of yourself, because that self, or in psychoanalytical terminology the ego, still has to be constructed. A primary moment in ego formation is what Jacques Lacan has called the mirror phase. A second important moment is the aforementioned Oedipus complex in which language plays a major role. The mirror phase, however, precedes language and takes place in the Imaginary, the realm of images. When you're between six and eighteen months, and so still a baby, you're usually held in your mother's arms in front of the mirror. In identifying with its mirror image, the child learns to recognise itself in the mirror and to distinguish itself from the mother. This identification is important for the construction of the child's own identity.

For Lacan, it is crucial that this identification is based on the mirror image. He argues that the mirror image is always an idealisation, because the child projects an ideal image of itself. In the mirror the child sees itself as a unity, while it still experiences its own body as a formless mass with no control over its limbs. The recognition of the self in the mirror image is in fact a 'misrecognition'. The child is actually identifying with the image of itself as other, namely as a more ideal self that he or she hopes to become in the future. Just check how you look at yourself in the mirror at home: in fact you always look at yourself through the eyes of the other. According to Lacan, this is in a certain sense man's tragedy: we build our identity on an ideal image that we can never live up to. In his eyes, then, we are always doomed to failure at an existential level.

We can take the mirror very literally (it is striking how often mirrors feature in films, videoclips, advertisements and fashion photos), but we can also interpret the process more metaphorically. For instance, the child sees an ideal image of itself reflected in the eyes of its adoring parents who put him or her on a pedestal:

for your parents you're always the most beautiful child in the world. And rightly so. When we're older we see that ideal image reflected in the eyes of our beloved. We need that ideal image in order to be able to form and sustain our ego. It's a healthy narcissistic gaze that is necessary for our identity. That ego is never 'finished', however; it has to be nurtured and shaped time and time again. And this is helped by internalising ideal images.

The analysis of the mirror phase has been applied to many phenomena within visual culture. The film hero or heroine functions as the ideal image with which we identify ourselves. In the fashion world it's the models. In fact you could designate visual culture as a whole in this way: pop stars, models and actors all offer us opportunities for identifying with ideal images. Fan culture is largely based on this narcissistic identification. There's another side to it, of course. In a culture in which youth, fitness and beauty are becoming more and more important, the ideal image becomes ever more unattainable. Many people are no longer able to recognise themselves in that prescribed ideal image and are extremely dissatisfied with their appearance. That then leads to frustration and drastic measures like plastic surgery, or to ailments like anorexia and bulimia. In that case the narcissistic gaze in the mirror falls short of expectations.

Looking and being looked at III: the panoptical gaze

So far we have mainly been concerned with analysing the desiring gaze: the voyeuristic look at the other (the desire to 'possess' the other) and the narcissistic look at oneself (the desire to 'be' the other). It is also possible to make a more sociological analysis of the play of looks in society. This brings us to the historian Michel Foucault, who has made a thorough analysis of how power works. Instead of seeing power as something that the one has and the other lacks, he argues that in modern culture

power circulates in a continual play of negotiation, conflict and confrontation, resistance and contradictions. Changes regarding power are reflected in language. Whereas you were a victim in earlier days, now you're an expert of experience. In this way you give yourself a certain power, namely the power of experience, even if that experience is unpleasant.

One way of shaping power in our modern culture is by means of surveillance, or what Foucault calls the 'panoptical' gaze. He derived this from the architecture of eighteenth-century prisons which had a central tower in a circular building with cells. A central authority, out of sight within the tower, could observe every prisoner in every cell. The prisoners were also unable to see each other. The panoptical gaze means that a large group of people can be put under constant guard and scrutiny, while they cannot look back. In this way, says Foucault, they are disciplined to behave properly.

Today the role of surveillance and monitoring has been taken over by cameras. Everyone knows there are security cameras 'guarding our and your property' in the street, in stations and supermarkets, in buses and trams and in museums. The knowledge that we are constantly and everywhere being watched by an anonymous technology perhaps gives us a feeling of security (or the illusion of security). What is more important is that the panoptical gaze disciplines us to be orderly citizens. A large degree of discipline emanates from constant observation.

Just as with Lacan's mirror phase, we can interpret the panoptical gaze more metaphorically. It is not only security cameras that are creating a panopticum, but also the ubiquitousness of media such as television and the Internet. Crime watch programmes show us images from surveillance videos in order to catch 'villains', while reality programmes reveal how our fellow citizens commit traffic offences. Satellites orbiting in space keep a permanent eye on us. Mobile telephones are normally equipped with GPS (Global Positioning System) and always know where we are to be found. When I was on holiday in Italy, my mobile phone sent me messages like 'you are now in Pisa, where you can visit the Leaning Tower' or 'you are now in Piazza Signoria in Florence; did you know that Michelangelo's David...' and so on. For a moment I was that little girl again who knows that God is always watching over her. But divine omnipresence has now been replaced by an anonymous, panoptical gaze. Our surfing behaviour on the Internet and our purchasing behaviour in the supermarket are registered in the same way.

We can bring these three ways of seeing together. With the voyeuristic gaze we discipline the other; we all know that secret look which we use to approve or disapprove of someone at a glance. With the narcissistic gaze we discipline ourselves, through the wish to fulfil an ideal image. By internalising the panoptical gaze we discipline our social behaviour, as well as our bodies. Fashion plays an important role in this complicated play of gazes. You only have to wander around any school playground or look around you in the street to realise how fashion determines whether someone belongs or not, what the ideal images are, and how groups keep an eye on each other, disciplining each other as to 'correct' clothing. Through clothing I can make myself sexually attractive for the voyeuristic gaze of the other. Or I can subject the other to my voyeuristic gaze if I find their body and clothes attractive. I can use clothing to construct my own identity and emanate a particular ideal image. But fashion is more than just clothing. Fashion also dictates a specific ideal of beauty. That beauty myth determines how we discipline our bodies, for example by subjecting them to diets, fitness, beauty treatments such as waxing, depilation, bleaching and even to plastic surgery. In short, fashion ultimately affects the body too. We see an example of that in the digital photo series 'Electrum corpus'

Anneke Smelik / Fashion and visual culture

by Christophe Luxerau, which shows us how fashion is literally engraved on the skin: the logo has become our skin.

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