

Critical Studies in Fashion & Beauty

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INTRODUCTION

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Encounters: Fashion and beauty, fashion and art, fashion and social justice

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Abstract

We propose a thought experiment to introduce the three articles in this volume, focusing specifically on fashion's encounters with beauty, art and social justice, respectively. Using a both/and approach, we

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consider the ways in which 'encounters' encourage open questioning and debate, when one pairs fashion with beauty, fashion with art and fashion with social justice. Rather than framing the concepts in these pairs oppositionally, we argue that encounters become possible because they resonate or echo – conceptually, aesthetically or affectively – in ways that are nonbinary and nonlinear. As a result, new provocations and lines of inquiry can emerge.

intersectionality
thought experiment
poststructuralism
Black feminist thought

What happens when we pair fashion with concepts such as beauty, art and social justice? To introduce this volume, we suggest a kind of thought experiment that we see emerging from the three articles herein, which collectively argue for the need to analyse fashion's encounters with beauty, art and social justice, respectively. The articles in this volume thus inspire our imperative to consider 'encounters'. By encounters we refer to an open approach in which two or more fields can dialogue, by questioning one another, discussing, perhaps even arguing. The encounter is possible because something somewhere resonates or echoes. That 'something' can be conceptual, aesthetic or affective, but in all instances it is neither binary nor linear, but rather intersectional (Crenshaw 1989; Collins 2019) and rhizomatic (Deleuze and Guattari 1987).

An encounter undoes the underlying binary opposition through the use of both/and analysis from various intersectional approaches in critical fashion studies (Kaiser and Green 2021): both fashion and beauty, both fashion and art, both fashion and social justice. The deconstruction of binary, either/or thinking can be traced back to post-structuralism as well as feminism (Rocamora and Smelik 2016: 9). Starting from the critique of the false universalism of the Eurocentric, masculinist notion of the subject, as in Simone de Beauvoir's thought ([1949] 2011), feminist theory questions the dialectics of sex and hierarchical gender binaries. It offers a variety of new discursive encounters across differences and diversities. The rejection of binary thinking has been further explored in critical race theory (hooks 1990). African American feminist theorist Patricia Hill Collins, for example, argues that encounters articulate 'a rejection of binary thinking and an acceptance of the both/and conceptual stance in Black feminist thought' (Collins 2000: 152). In a legal context, Kimberly Crenshaw (1989) had developed the concept of intersectionality to highlight the interplays between race and gender; feminist scholars have since extended such interplays across multiple subject positions, such as race, gender, class, sexuality and beyond.

By stimulating a way of thinking that is inclusive, both/and, this approach of 'encounters' opens up to curiosity and investigative approaches: what happens when fashion encounters beauty, or art or social justice? And vice versa, what happens when the field of beauty (or art or social justice) encounters the field of fashion? Gilles Deleuze puts it quite beautifully: 'Something in the world forces us to think. This subject is an object not of recognition but of a fundamental encounter' ([1968]

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1994: 139). In writing about art, Deleuze and Guattari ([1991] 1994) understand the encounter as creating alliances. Such alliances may happen across and beyond boundaries, taking us into new fields and new ways of thinking. The notion of the encounter is then not so much or not only about the deconstruction of binaries, but rather the affirmation of the new: it affords new topics, new ways of thinking, new angles or approaches. In this volume, the articles point in various ways to the creative synergies, contradictions and lingering limits of the encounters that emerge from both fashion and beauty, both fashion and art, and both fashion and social justice.

Fashion and beauty

Thinking critically about the concepts of fashion and beauty together opens up a number of questions that are, of course, highly relevant to this journal. Both fashion and beauty have been problematically linked together with hegemonic (white bourgeois heterosexual, young and thin) femininity, as feminist critiques have documented and surpassed (e.g. Craig 2001, 2021). To what extent can the ‘fashion-beauty complex’ (Bartky 1990) be de-linked from femininity? What do we learn, and what do we gloss over, when we hook fashion and beauty together with a hyphen? We would suggest caution in lumping them altogether, given the very different material and production practices involved in the apparel and cosmetic industries. Yet undeniably they become interlinked in everyday life fashioning of personal appearances, which involve clothing and accessories, as well as makeup and hair products.

We are also struck by the extent to which academic literatures on fashion and beauty are often fairly distinct from one another, with few cross-references. Often, these cross-references subsume the other concept into the theme of the work: examples of beauty into fashion studies or those of fashion into beauty studies. Critically speaking, neither fashion nor beauty are level playing fields. Yet there are important distinctions; the cultural hegemonies associated with beauty cannot be separated from issues of skin colour, hair texture, weight, height and other factors related to the body (Craig 2021), whereas processes of style and fashion, including the use of cosmetics, tend to afford more agency on a daily basis. Still, there are limits to both fashion and beauty as everyday processes, based on resources such as income and stylistic know-how.

In the first article in this issue, ‘The expanding beauty regime: Or, why it has become so important to look good’, Giseline Kuipers develops the concept of ‘beauty regimes’ to argue that since the late nineteenth century, such regimes have become more and more imperative. Drawing on the ideas of sociologists Max Weber and Norbert Elias, she links the ongoing ‘upping the ante’ in processes of beautification to the rising standards of evaluation associated with capitalism and related notions of modern progress. For example, technological advances in visual media, from photography, glossy fashion magazines, Hollywood film and television to social media have accelerated pressures to ‘look

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good'. Similarly, consumer culture accelerates the need to buy more beauty-related commodities, such as cosmetics (especially for women). The expected looks, however, themselves change, as she explains, through processes that follow the logic of fashion. The standards for beautification increase steadily, in a kind of 'rat race' that involves buying more but never satisfying the desire to look good. Hence, there is ample reason to question the linear notion of progress associated with modernism.

Fashion and art

In a recent *New Yorker* article, Molly Fischer (2022) writes: 'Fashion often turns to other fields to burnish its intellectual credibility and lay claim to eccentricity that defines commercial appeal' (44). Assuming that Fischer is referring to avant-garde art, given the context of the article, the question emerges for us: is anyone else tired of this debate – generally framed as a hierarchical binary opposition? In other words, is fashion art? Or, rarely, is art fashion? Does fashion really need art for legitimization and claims for eccentricity? In a time when designers like Viktor & Rolf call themselves 'fashion artists' (2018), these questions seem no longer relevant. Indeed, the debate is quite old, dating back to the 1960s, where generally the argument runs that fashion, because of its intimate link to the body and to the daily practice of dressing, did not receive the serious respect it deserves. The question (is fashion art?) gained traction within fashion studies as it got established as a critical field of study. In one of the first volumes of the journal *Fashion Theory*, Sung Bok Kim (1998) sought to legitimize the realm of the aesthetic as it had until then been systematically overlooked in fashion studies. The question was again addressed a decade later by Sanda Miller (2007), who provided a theoretical and aesthetic basis for the study of sartorial fashion. The book *Fashion and Art*, edited by Adam Geczy and Vicki Karaminas (2012), explored the many crossovers between fashion and art. They pointed to the main difference between the two disciplines: the issue of time. Whereas art is supposed to be timeless, fashion and the fashionable are always linked to the ephemeral (2012: 6). Yet, argue Geczy and Karaminas, art and fashion are not separate entities, but rather 'coordinates in a populous, mobile, and complex aesthetic firmament' (2012: 12).

The various artistic movements of the historical avant-garde already saw dress design as an art form and took the design of clothes as an opportunity to do so (Stern [1992] 2002). One of the key figures here was Sonia Delaunay, the Ukrainian-Jewish designer and artist (1885–1979). The second article in this issue by Sonia D. Andraş, 'Fashioning simultaneous migrations: Sonia Delaunay and interwar Romanian connections', challenges any idea that fashion and art are separate spheres and that fashion requires legitimation by art. Andraş points to how what she calls Delaunay's 'simultaneous migrations' pervaded her own biography as a designer, artist and complicated hybrid personal gender and national identities. While the focus of the article is on Delaunay's interactions with Romanian artists during the inter-war years in Paris, it also reveals how the 'Simultaneist'

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aesthetic she fostered earlier with her husband, the painter Robert Delaunay, paralleled her own biographical migrations and multiple roles. For example, Sonia Delaunay easily crossed any boundaries between the two-dimensionality of the canvas to three-dimensional, fashionable and modern clothing, in part to support her family. The gendered hierarchy between two-dimensional paintings and three-dimensional garments (notably, associated with women's bodies and work) becomes evident in Sonia Delaunay's diverse array of art and design accomplishments. This gendered hierarchy has haunted, and still lingers, although decreasingly, in the art world and to a lesser extent in the fashion world, although art (like fashion) is certainly not immune to the forces of economic survival and/or gain.

Fashion and social justice

Fashion and beauty, and fashion and art, may have been interlinked for a longer period of time, but the explicit link between fashion and social justice is a more recent encounter. The concept of social justice involves the basic ideas of fairness, respect and opportunity for all. It extends across subject positions such as race, gender, class and sexuality. Social class has been a staple ingredient in early understandings of fashion (Veblen [1899] 2007; Simmel [1904] 2003); however, the ways in which clothes serve as a surface to express political ideas in written messages are about half as old, dating to the latter half of the 1960s. Subsequent analyses have recognized multiple, overlapping oppressions through various critical lenses: critical race theory, cultural studies, decolonial critiques, disability studies, intersectional feminism and sustainability studies. Critical fashion studies draw on all of these lenses and integrate them with the very materials of fashion; the labour, and environmental impact of textiles and clothing production, distribution and consumption. This includes the individuals' and communities' use of – and experiences through – the body, style and fashion (Kaiser and Green 2021).

Understandings of fashion and social justice alike and together have been shaped by social movements such as anti-racism, anti-sweatshop activism, disability rights, environmentalism, feminism, human and labour rights and LGBTQ+ activism, including AIDS activism. In the third and final article of this issue, Nancy Gebhart and Kelly L. Reddy-Best trace some of these histories since the late 1960s in their analysis of written messages on T-shirts, in 'Slogan T-shirts: Liberalism, abolition and commodity activism in the Midwestern United States'. They draw on two case studies of T-shirt-activist manufacturers and distributors: Raygun, a for-profit company based in Iowa and For Everyone Co., a not-for-profit collective based in Minnesota. Both companies communicate messages of social justice through their T-shirt slogans, but Gebhart and Reddy-Best compare Raygun's general, progressive – and sometimes ironic and ambiguous – themes and collections with For Everyone Co.'s very focused attention to prison abolition and the death penalty in the United States. While both companies contribute profits to social justice causes, there are some interesting differences between them that point to the limits of linking fashion with both social justice and profit-making.

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Together, the articles in this volume reveal the value of thought experiments when considering the encounters between fashion and – respectively – beauty, art and social justice. Both-and analyses foreground issues of creativity, economic survival and gain, as well as institutional issues. All three of the articles in this volume navigate fashion and their encountered concepts in grounded, nuanced and critical ways.

The reviews in this volume similarly grapple in their analyses with the contributions and pleasures of the works they interrogate. They also deal with the institutionalized constraints experienced by their creators.

Alexis Romano's book review of *Black Designers in American Fashion*, edited by Elizabeth Way (2021), highlights the largely untold stories of African American fashion designers and their creative works, from enslavement centuries before the 1860s to recognition in Paris beginning in the 1970s. Throughout, most if not all of the fashion designers experienced structural racism in the industry and in society.

Maaïke van Tienhoven's review of the exhibition *Global Wardrobe, the Worldwide Fashion Connection*, at the Kunstmuseum, The Hague, the Netherlands, features the ambiguities associated with a European fashion history exhibition that attempts to address inclusivity and appropriation. Her analysis points to the difficulties associated with breaking out of colonial regimes, such as those of the encountered and entangled histories between the Netherlands and Indonesia.

Sandra Mathey García-Rada argues that the exhibition on the fashion designer *Thierry Mugler, Couturissime*, Musée des Arts Décoratifs, Paris, is not only an exploration of the designer's work, but also effectuates a reintegration of his name into the history of fashion. Mugler is presented as one of the most innovative French designers and a key figure in the recognition of Paris as the global fashion capital in the late twentieth century.

Finally, Satarupa Bhattacharya's review of the art installation *Kallol Datta, Volume 3, Issue 2* at the Experimenter gallery in Kolkata, India, parallels some of the encounters between fashion and art as we addressed them above. The artist and designer Kallol Datta built a collection of Indigenous clothes worn by underrepresented people in India and Japan. He then abstracted these clothes into works of art using traditional materials and methods, foregrounding the garments as art pieces and enabling viewers to engage with shapes, forms and materials.

In closing this introduction to the volume, we invite other, future 'thought experiment' submissions to the journal. Of course, there are multiple opportunities to contemplate encounters. And what happens to the analysis when three or more terms (both/and/and...) are contemplated and analysed using diverse methods? For example, what does the interplay in cultural discourse among fashion, beauty and health obfuscate or bring to light? Are third terms more than just tag-alongs? Do they open up new understandings and critiques? What ambivalences, such as those between oppression and pleasure, remain unresolved? Or what institutionalized restraints still operate? As another example, what about fashion, art and social justice? We would love to hear your thoughts and analyses.

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