

Critical Studies in Fashion & Beauty

Volume 14 Number 1

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Aims and Scope

Critical Studies in Fashion & Beauty (CSFB) engages analytically, critically and creatively with fashion and/or beauty. At times lumped together conceptually into ‘the fashion-beauty complex’, this journal acknowledges the problems associated with collapsing these terms, such as: (a) the conflation of fashion and beauty, concepts which encompass varying degrees and types of agency, change and dynamism; (b) the implicit reinforcement of white hegemonic femininity (and hence, the exclusion of masculinities, people of colour, older adults, differentially abled individuals, and queer and transgender subjectivities); and (c) the blurring of distinct industries. At the same time, the body is the centrepiece of fashion and beauty alike – in cultural representation as well as in everyday life. *CSFB* seeks to foster more diverse and inclusive ways of understanding the embodiment of aesthetics and politics. It does so by dismantling hegemonic assumptions and propelling fresh theoretical and methodological approaches to the study of fashion and/or beauty.

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INTRODUCTION

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Ambivalences, tensions and questions of im/materiality in fashion and beauty

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Abstract

Several cross-cutting themes run throughout fashion theory: ambivalence, tensions, and immateriality and materiality, within the larger framework of capitalism. In this introduction, we interlink these themes by

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arguing that immateriality is inextricably entangled with materiality. The material flows through capitalism require negotiated meanings in everyday social interactions, yet cannot resolve the underlying tensions involved. Pursued by some, resisted by others, capitalism's profit motivation always involves tensions and ambivalences. While we emphasize the material ground of fashion and beauty practices, also in relation to the formation of identity in all its ambiguity, the digital realm invites and highlights immateriality. Yet, in the end, we maintain, materiality is and must remain stubborn.

trans
masculinity
capitalism
liquidity
new materialism
ambiguity
digitality

As this issue developed, we were impressed with the ways in which each article, essay and review offers major contributions to critical fashion and beauty studies. While they seemed to be so different from one another topically, we realized that in addition to their individual import, they collectively shed new light on critical, conceptual tensions that likely propel not only fashion and beauty systems, but also critical studies thereof. Here, we refer to cross-cutting themes that run throughout fashion theory such as ambivalence, immateriality/materiality and capitalism (Wilson 1985; Davis 1992; Kaiser et al. 1991; Rocamora 2011, 2018; Kaiser and Green 2021). In this introduction, we attempt to interlink these themes by way of the works in this issue, arguing that immateriality is inextricably entangled with materiality, which is and must remain stubborn, albeit in diverse and changing forms.

In 'Zygmunt Bauman and the unbearable lightness of fashion', Katie Baker Jones points to the ways in which Polish-British sociologist Zygmunt Bauman's work engages several contemporary dialectics – including the tensions between heavy/light, solid/liquid and secure/free. Both the articles by Qingyue Sun ('New femininities and self-making in contemporary Chinese beauty influencing') and co-authors Kyra G. Streck and Kelly L. Reddy-Best ('Trans YouTubers and DIY undergarments: "Queer-and-trans-world-making-and-sharing" within the fashion system's informal economies') address body fashioning as a form of production that circulates digitally to viewers, who may well adopt some of the fashioning practices on their own bodies. These fashion and beauty systems challenge any direct dualism between materiality and immateriality. Drawing on the contributions to this issue, we begin with a brief discussion of ambivalence and tension in fashion theory, and then proceed to the notion of immateriality in relation to materiality and capitalism.

Ambivalence and tensions in fashion theory

Writing from a feminist perspective in the 1980s, Elizabeth Wilson, stated: '[w]e [...] both love and hate fashion, just as we love and hate capitalism' (1985: 14). Fred Davis (1992) argued that fashion is linked to ongoing cultural tensions, or what he called 'identity ambivalences' (e.g. masculinity vs.

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femininity) that are unresolvable and hence offer ongoing fuel for dynamics of change. Building on their ideas, Kaiser, Nagasawa and Hutton (1991) submitted that in conjunction with capitalism, cultural ambivalences foster symbolic ambiguities (e.g. gender fluidity) which, in turn, require negotiated meanings in everyday social interactions, yet cannot resolve the underlying tensions involved, and hence the ongoing change is fuelled, as well, by capitalism's profit motivation.

Considering the harsh backlash in the United States and parts of Europe against discussions of gender and sexuality, and especially against gay, queer and trans people, we are proud to include reviews and articles on those topics in this issue. Not only are these contributions topical and timely, but they also retain the ambivalences and tensions that we wish to draw out rather than to resolve. The stunning cover image for this issue poignantly reveals the beauty as well as the tension of gender ambiguity. Moreover, we have included articles and reviews about the practice of fashion and beauty in (formerly) communist countries critiquing the sometimes all-too-glib celebration of conspicuous consumption under capitalism. As Zygmunt Bauman heeds, fashion is pivotal in providing material tools for shopping around in the mall or supermarket to put together one's 'liquid' identity (Bauman 2000: 82–83). Yet, as Katie Baker Jones argues in her discussion of Bauman's work, fashion's complicity in the consumerist processes of contemporary capitalism has resulted in a system that is unjust, inhumane and unsustainable.

The exhibition and symposium review essay by Sarah Gilligan, 'Fashioning masculinities: Critical reflections on curation and future directions in masculinity studies' vividly illustrates how gender dynamics fuel fashion change. Although Fred Davis emphasized the uneven 'borrowing' from menswear to womenswear, Gilligan's essay and the associated cover image for this issue feature instead dramatic elements of traditionally feminine garments such as ball gowns worn by celebrity men (Billy Porter, Harry Styles and Bimini bon Boulash), albeit with some degree of masculine tailoring in Porter's and Styles' ensembles. In Gilligan's essay, she reviews the 2022 exhibition, *Fashioning Masculinities: The Art of Menswear*, at the Victoria & Albert Museum in London, and argues that it marks a significant curatorial and cultural moment. Curated by Claire Wilcox, Rosalind McKeever and Marta Franceschini, the exhibition explored the shifting landscape of menswear by focusing on the intersections among fashion, art, time and gender. Gilligan critically reflects on the curation of the *Fashioning Masculinities* exhibition and the accompanying two-day symposium co-convened by the V&A and the Masculinities Research Hub at London College of Fashion (UAL). She argues for the need for interdisciplinary research and curation on menswear and masculinity studies to explore a plurality of intersectional identities. Both the exhibition and the symposium show the importance of engaging diverse audiences across the sector with rich stories of making, wearing and fashioning identities. Gilligan concludes that there remains considerable scope to move beyond a focus upon historical and luxury designer menswear, to include the often invisible and untold narratives of ordinary and everyday dress.

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Qingyue Sun also addresses gender ambivalences and tensions in her article on China's beauty economy, which she argues has generated legions of influencers based on the rapid, post-Mao development of 'hybrid beauty assemblages' and multiple 'types' of beauty that feel contradictory. For example, she analyses what she calls a 'split femininity' between cuteness and sexiness, following traditional ideals of Chinese beauty and the influence of western beauty canons for women, respectively. Moreover, she argues that female beauty influencers may assert agency through their interventions and makeovers, but at the same time perpetuate problematic, hegemonic gender scripts involving integration of, and the struggle between, traditional and western beauty standards. Sun's work recalls the western feminist ambivalences articulated in the 1980s by Elizabeth Wilson (1985).

Sun's findings and argument remind us of Agnès Rocamora's (2011) earlier study based on qualitative interviews with personal fashion bloggers. In this study, she characterized the blogging digital media space as one of subject/object ambivalence, reflecting the tension between having a 'female voice on appearance', while also reproducing 'the mirror's panoptic logic and the related duty that weighs on [the personal fashion bloggers] to work on their appearance' (2011: 422). She later analyses the tensions between bloggers' need to be and be seen as 'authentic', trustworthy sources of product endorsement while also potentially becoming complicit with capitalist enterprises (Rocamora 2018). Part of this analysis revolves around debates about 'immaterial labour', which may not be recognized as work but rather leisure and, further, that circulates virtually and hence is viewed as 'immaterial'.

Immateriality/materiality and capitalism

To understand the material aspects of dress, fashion and bodies, we only need to state the opposite – *immaterial*: not material, intangible, incorporeal, bodiless, unembodied and disembodied. Immateriality is contradicted by all of the contributions to this issue – not a surprise to scholars of fashion, beauty, textiles and clothing. The digital realm may tend to the virtual and the immaterial, but as revealed by Streck and Reddy-Best's article on DIY trans YouTubers, as well as by Sun's article on Chinese beauty influencers, it is hard to argue that bodies are not involved in digital media. The materiality is palpable in the influencers' or YouTubers' actual faces and bodies, the products that are made and used to fashion them, and presumably the bodies and faces of at least some of their followers. The clothing and beauty practices involve precise acts of making and using. The maker-consumer connection is quite direct and personal. Although direct, the connections still apparently involve tensions that trans YouTubers address and share.

In their study of, and curatorial collaboration with, DIY trans YouTubers, Streck and Reddy-Best's action-oriented research focuses on undergarments worn around or near the hips – undergarments the trans YouTubers make and share digitally in how-to videos, through what they call

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‘queer-and-trans-world-making-and-sharing’. In their article they bridge concepts of production, distribution and consumption, as well as gender-affirming embodiment. Using a mixed-method approach incorporating digital media analysis, oral histories and collaborative curation of an exhibition with trans YouTubers, Streck and Reddy-Best reveal how the DIY videos – themselves productions – may circulate virtually (immaterially) but are very much embodied.

While we emphasize here the material ground of fashion and beauty practices, also in relation to the formation of identity, the articles in this issue at least implicitly grapple with the ‘immaterial’ as a concept. However, immateriality, whether digital fashion, virtual wardrobes, beauty influencers or DIY YouTubers are in practice never separated from materiality, such as the body and clothes, or from material practices and products – such as make-up in the example of Chinese beauty influencers (Sun) or the DIY gender-affirming undergarments made, used and sold by trans YouTubers (Streck and Reddy-Best). These two articles shed important light on the extent to which issues of materiality and immateriality intersect and become so complicated.

The articles by Sun and Streck and Reddy-Best foreground the material ground of faces, bodies and identities, and as such they fit into the current debate on the ‘material turn’ inspired by re-centring matter and the materiality of things, technologies and bodies (Rocamora and Smelik 2016: 11–15; Jenss and Hofmann 2019; Woodward 2020). In one of our previous introductions, we argued that the material turn involves a turn (or return) to matter and materiality (Kaiser and Smelik 2020). From a new-materialist perspective, the aim of illuminating matter and investigating material agency includes the intelligent matter of the human body (Smelik 2018). This perspective also points to materially grounded processes of identity formation, which connect it to (neo-)Marxism and critiques of capitalism.

For example, as Katie Baker Jones argues in her article on the writings of Zygmunt Bauman, he acknowledged that most individuals encounter a variety of barriers and limits to building their identities freely. This means that his best-known concepts, liquidity and liquid modernity, do not refer to some free-for-all approach to identity, but from his neo-Marxist point of view, individualization is highly bound by social constraints. Bauman uses the concept of liquid modernity to characterize the fluid ways in which immateriality circulates in digital spaces and fosters the fashion system; these spaces have their own form of labour. Digital forms of liquid modernity include not only marketing and branding, but also non-profit venues of communicating and sharing outside of capitalism, bridging production and consumption in new ways in the twenty-first century (Rocamora 2011, 2018). The DIY trans YouTubers studied by Streck and Reddy-Best largely represent the latter non-profit approach, whereas the Chinese beauty influencers analysed by Sun tend to operate within the capitalist system.

Jones indicates that Bauman’s concepts of ‘liquid modernity’, ‘unbearable lightness of fashion’ and ‘perpetuum mobile’ all pertain to his concerns about, and critique of, capitalism. He is deeply

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worried about the ways in which 'liquid' capitalism deflects our attention away from the 'solid', material bodies doing the labour. Here we may refer back to the so-called immateriality of digital media and influence but, as Jones notes, with Bauman, there are unresolved tensions between liquidity and solidity, or immateriality and materiality. In the end, materiality remains an important factor, even if it is not visible to the public.

Elsewhere, in a recent analysis of virtual fashion shows, Rebecca Halliday notes how they may circulate in an immaterial way, but they first reside in 'cultural and biopolitical economies' that can then become 'translatable into economic capital and material commodities' (2022: 14). Profit-making may or may not be involved in the digital world. In this issue, Sun warns that the beauty influencers she analyses are rather committed to promoting the beauty industry in service of consumer capitalism. She even maintains that their social media works fit perfectly in the era of industrialized social media influencing, in which the women may seem empowered, but 'essentially fall into the trap of neo-liberal capitalism' and end up with a 'suspiciously neo-liberal-looking subjectivity'. This is quite far removed from the trans YouTubers, whose DIY practice challenge traditional forms of capitalism, but encourage instead alternative identity formation and social justice. These practices are clearly embodied in the distributive productions that are shared digitally, but do not necessarily support capitalist endeavours.

Capitalism is also highlighted in two contributions to this issue on beauty and fashion practices in formerly communist countries. Whereas Sun foregrounds the role of capitalism in communist China since the 1980s, where the turn to neo-liberal practices is quite noticeable, Magdalena Idem shows in her review essay, 'Grażyna Hase: The legend of socialist-era branding in Poland', how the Polish designer Hase had to strategically navigate between communist ideology and her need for branding during communist years. Hase had been one of the most important fashion designers in Socialist Poland (1947–90). Her ambition to create her own fashion under the auspices of a state institution from the 1950s to the 1980s led her to strategically navigate the communist system of fashion design and production. The 2022 fashion exhibition Idem reviews on Hase – curated by Agnieszka Dąbrowska at the Warsaw Museum in Poland – reveals the material hardships of production and consumption, and many of Hase's designs circulated visually to a larger audience who could not afford them but sought fashion news through the media. However, in the early years of Polish capitalism in the 1990s, it was not exactly any easier to create a brand. As Idem relates, it was a time of disillusionment with the post-transition fashion market that brought a flood of imported clothing from the West together with mindless consumption. The globalization of capital that happened worldwide in the 1980s had quite an impact beyond the capitalist 'West'. The stubbornness of materiality and material flows through capitalism cannot be disentangled from 'immaterial' modes of communication.

This issue concludes with two book reviews. In different ways, they both point to ways in which material and symbolic approaches to critical fashion studies need to be similarly intertwined from

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an analytical perspective (see Rocamora and Smelik 2016: 13). The first focuses on the historical, transnational circulation of French fashion, whereas the second highlights the industry's biases against large women's sizes. In her review of Elizabeth L. Block's book, *Dressing Up: The Women Who Influenced French Fashion* (2021), Emily L. Newman shows how American women helped to shape fashion history in their pursuit of French designers in the late nineteenth century. Hence, symbolic value of luxury Parisian fashion was not without consumer intervention.

Focusing specifically on material bodies, Scott William Schiavone argues that exhibiting body diversity is a form of respect and unquestionably a step in the right direction, in his review of *Fat Fashion: The Thin Ideal and the Segregation of Plus-Size Bodies* (2022) by Paolo Volonté. Schiavone's review and Volonté's book point to the significance of representations of 'fashionable' bodies and the material factors that have shaped the industry's reliance upon thin sizing and models, and point to new, more hopeful options for body diversity in fashion.

Questions of ambivalence, tension, immateriality/materiality and capitalism remain open-ended in critical fashion studies, but the contributions to this issue of *Critical Studies in Fashion & Beauty* offer fresh perspectives and new understandings. Emerging technologies and modes of communication offer opportunities for, but also work against, more equity and social justice for diverse bodies and material circumstances. Work towards such goals continues to be compelling and even urgent in critical studies of fashion and beauty; we invite further submissions that address them.

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Fairchild, 1997) and *Fashion and Cultural Studies* (co-authored in its 2nd edition with Denise Green, Bloomsbury, 2021).

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