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BEAUTY IS...

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ARTICLE

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LOOKING FOR THE MEASURE,
THE AESTHETICS AND THE NORM
IN PHOTOGRAPHER JULIA HETTA'S
FASHION REPRESENTATIONS

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BEAUTY IS...

LOOKING FOR THE MEASURE, THE AESTHETICS AND THE NORM IN PHOTOGRAPHER JULIA HETTA'S FASHION REPRESENTATIONS

Abstract

Walter Benjamin aptly describes the dual role of photography, since its invention, saying that “photography stakes a claim to art as soon as it appears as a commodity”.

Although fashion has become the subject of significant philosophical and sociological study over the past 150 years, it continues to be a taboo, or merely too lowly a subject for academic consideration – even in modern – day cultural studies.

The reason is clear: fashion does not pose an argument; it entices and seduces, constantly looking for a new aesthetic paradigm that will embody the eternal polytheism of Beauty.

Photographer Julia Hetta adopts many of the tools and practices of classical painting to capture the paradox and ambiguity of the concept of Beauty, which Victor Hugo likens to Death, noting that: “Death and beauty are two things profound, so of dark and azure, that one might say that they were two sisters terrible and fecund, possessing the one enigma, the one secret.”

Hetta illustrates the dualism of the modernist subject with appeals to the imaginary of an insurmountable innocence and purity, as this is captured in depictions of the classical ideal; and precisely therein lies the originality of her gaze.

She develops a personal style in photography, featuring strong elements of drama and theatrics. She illustrates the current, the innovative, the radical in the field of human presence and clothing, recalling the cultural deposits of times past, but also imbuing her creations with new rules that detect a subjective and complex beauty.

Keywords

photography

painting

fashion

beauty

photographer
Julia Hetta

INTRODUCTION

"...likewise for the dreaming collective, which, through the arcades, communes with its own insides. We must follow in its wake so as to expound the nineteenth century in fashion and advertising, in buildings and politics as the outcome of its dream visions."

Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project* (p. 389)

Walter Benjamin aptly describes the dual role of photography, since its invention, saying that "photography stakes a claim as an artform as soon as it appears as a commodity." (Benjamin, 2019, p. 384). Moreover, he expresses the following opinion in the *Letter from Paris (2)*.

"Disderi¹ knew that photography is a commodity. But this property is shared by all the products of our society (even painting is a commodity). Beyond that, Disderi understood what photography could contribute to the commodity economy. He was the first to use the method of photography to throw back into circulation goods that had more or less been kept out of it; such as, first of all, works of art. Disderi had the ingenious idea of securing a state monopoly on the reproduction of artworks collected in the Louvre. Since then, photography has made available for sale more and more samples from the field of visual perception. It has conquered and given to commodity circulation objects that until then had never been part of it." (Benjamin, 2019, p. 385).

An extremely important branch of commercial photography has always been, and still is, fashion photography, as this field in particular has undertaken to serve the fantasy constructs of the fashion industry, while at the same time it has been part of discussions concerning the fabrication of the feminine identity and representation based on social gender. Early portraiture and the *carte de visite* had already established ways of photographing people, in fashionable or dramatic clothing, which were also adopted by early fashion photographers (Ewing, 1991, pp. 6-10).

Photographer Julia Hetta adopts many of the tools and practices of classical painting to capture the paradox and ambiguity of the concept of Beauty, which Victor Hugo likens to Death noting that: "Death and beauty are two things profound, so of dark and azure, that one might say that they were two sisters terrible and fecund, possessing the one enigma, the one secret."

In the book *On Beauty*, Umberto Eco writes in the introduction that "'Beautiful' – together with 'graceful' and 'pretty', or 'sublime', 'marvellous', 'superb' and similar concepts – is an adjective that we often employ to indicate something that we like. In this sense, it seems that what is beautiful is the same as what is good, and in fact in various historical periods there was a close link between the Beautiful and the Good" (Eco, 2004, p. 8).

"The Beautiful is always strange...it always contains a touch of strangeness, of simple, unpremeditated and unconscious strangeness, and it is that touch of strangeness that gives it its particular quality as Beauty," observes Charles Baudelaire.

FASHION: IN OR OUT OF IT?

"Fashion is the perpetual repetition of the new in the mass-produced form of what is always the same." / "...likewise for the dreaming collective, which, through the arcades, communes with its own insides. We must follow in its wake so as to expound the nineteenth century in fashion and advertising, in buildings and politics as the outcome of its dream visions."

Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project* (p. 389)

According to Walter Benjamin, "fashion prescribes the ritual according to which the commodity fetish demands to be worshipped" (Benjamin, 1999, p. 8). At the beginning of the 20th century, there was a growing interest in the centrality of the body and by extension in its clothing and, hence, fashion. In the 21st century, in the postmodern age of image dominance, the acceptance or rejection of fashion is superseded by a rational reaffirmation of aesthetics, which highlights a series

1. André Adolphe-Eugène Disdéri (1818-1889). Entrepreneur who commercially exploited the possibilities of mass reproduction of portraits. Among other things, he invented the *carte de visite*. Benjamin also refers to Disdéri in *The Arcades Project*.

of contradictions that govern fashion, in combination with an individual's social identity or personal aesthetical or political coordinates. If fashion confines to the surface of things, the aesthetical exploration carried out through photographic representation of a subject aims at a different approach to 'beauty' (or the search for it). It gives substance and content, not necessarily to the frantic search for the new, but to a different reconstruction of the image of the subject. Moreover, the question that preoccupied art scholars and philosophers, i.e., whether photography is an artistic or a technological product, has become obsolete since fashion, cooking and other expressions of the "art of everyday life" have taken their place in artistic practice.

Fashion means way, manner, mode – the *modus* by which an individual can adhere to the norms of a social formation. Fashion trends are characterized by contemporary and rapid or gradual change (under the influence of political, economic, sociological and technological factors). Its treacherous character lies in the fact that fashion seems temporary and therefore harmless. In reality, fashion is the timeless stylized way of life, because fashion weaves the normative framework within which life is organized, using the process of identification as its dominant structural element. It is the social imprint of the way in which an individual behaves in his or her everyday dealings (Wilde & Poe, 2019, pp. 49–50). According to Ronald Barthes, the tyranny of fashion is ironic: it makes us believe that it is all about freedom, life, love, when all the while we unconditionally surrender to the seduction of the lifeless fetishistic object. Currently, the old-fashioned, the lack of style, dandyism, street fashion etc. are nothing but the confirmation of the normative – albeit seemingly eccentric – fashion system. In the end, even in the most deviant sartorial choices, fashion triumphs, and photography is called upon to capture these ephemeral and eccentric paradigms in order to endlessly produce 'clothing events' and new forms of life.

Although fashion has become the subject of significant philosophical and sociological study over the past 150 years, it continues to be a taboo, or merely too lowly a subject for academic consideration – even in modern-day cultural studies. The reason is clear: fashion does not pose an argument; it entices and seduces.

For cultural semiotician Roland Barthes (1915–1980), who does not succumb to the "myth of the insignificant object", fashion constitutes a "total social fact". The latter is a concept of sociologist Émile Durkheim (1858–1917) and, later, of ethnologist Marcel Mauss (1872–1950), which Barthes borrows to highlight the intertwining of fashion with all social phenomena and institutions (economy, law, power, religion). But above all, for Barthes, "clothing concerns all of the human person, all the body, all the relationships of Man to body as well as the relationships of the body to society" (Barthes, 2013, p. 90). The body which, without clothing and decoration (e.g., tattoos), would be a phenomenon devoid of meaning and significance. Barthes does not miss the opportunity to refer to Hegel's *Aesthetics* (1829), where the German philosopher argues that clothing transforms the human body from a simple tangible object into a meaningful means of communication.

Fashion as the ceaseless and frantic pursuit of the 'New' was not always so; this is a phenomenon of modern societies. What used to exist in traditional societies (e.g., during the French monarchy) were local costumes and strictly coded clothing that indicated social class, profession, religious ritual. No one ever saw the body naked, with the exception of certain religious representations that gave nudity a transcendental, spiritual dimension. After the French Revolution and the spread of democracies across Europe, there was a burgeoning homogenization of dress, which only allowed for differences to emerge in small 'details' (see, for example, the phenomenon of dandyism). For men, the black-and-white suit of the pious Quakers became – and remains to this day – the official dress for work and festive ceremony. As far as women's fashion is concerned, the phase of early capitalism saw women's clothes losing all signs of work-related features and adopting all the fetishistic signs of their husbands' wealth, while later it became more adapted to the working woman and more functional. With political equality came the progressive undoing of the sartorial differences between the sexes: Marlene Dietrich or Madonna in men's suits; Jean-Paul Gaultier's partner in a skirt.

In the late 19th century, Eastlake saw photography as ever-present and classless, a popular mode of communication. In her 1857 text, *History of Photography*, she wrote:

“[Photography] is made for the present age, in which the desire for art resides in a small minority, but the craving, or rather necessity for cheap, prompt, and torrent facts in the public at large. Photography is the purveyor of such knowledge to the world. She is the sworn witness of everything presented to her view... What are her studies...but facts...facts which are neither the province of art nor of description, but of that new form of communication between man and man – neither letter, message, nor picture – which now happily fills up the space between them?” (Eastlake, 1857, p. 93)



Figure 1. Cover of the magazine *La Dernière Mode*, 1874

In 1874, the French Symbolist poet Stéphane Mallarmé wrote and published a fashion magazine entitled *La Dernière Mode*, believing that fashion was a constituent element of modernity.² Fashion (mode, in French) and modernism, or modernity, are not only etymologically related, but constitute an indissoluble mesh of structural and historical vectors. Let it be noted that Mallarmé’s fashion magazine relied on the analogy between the poetic word, as an empty signifier, and the garment, this *almost nothing* that is culturally vested with an excess of meaning.

As Heinrich Heine stated as early as 1822, fashion is the ultimate example of modernism. For the first time in the history of Western civilization, the eternal and the ephemeral were no longer a simple metaphysical antithesis, as Baudelaire defined beauty (1863). Concepts such as the contingent, the fleeting, the playful, the silly, the shocking, the fetishistic, but also the logic of citation, recycling and, lately, sampling, are not only features of modernity but also of fashion.

As early as the beginning of the 20th century, sociologist and philosopher Georg Simmel considered the fundamental paradox of modernity to be the simultaneous homogenization and differentiation, massification and individualization. With his essay *Fashion* (1904), Simmel philosophically and sociologically analyzed the phenomenon of fashion in the context of his broader research into objects and aspects of everyday life in modernity. Constantly in touch with social developments (although a popular essayist, the academic establishment always kept him on the sidelines), he insightfully pointed out elements and characteristics of this phenomenon. He analyzed the dualism that characterizes the modern subject as being ‘in fashion’ even as he or she strives to be ‘out of fashion’.

He characteristically writes that “the peculiarly piquant and suggestive attraction of fashion lies in the contrast between its extensive, all-embracing distribution and its rapid and complete disintegration.” In its right to be unfaithful to itself.

The very character of fashion demands that it should be exercised at one time only by a portion of the given group, the great majority being merely on the road to adopting it. As soon as an example has been universally adopted, that is, as soon as anything that was originally done only by a few has really come to be practiced by all – as is the case in certain portions of our apparel and in various forms of social conduct – we no longer speak of fashion. As fashion spreads, it gradually goes to its doom. The distinctiveness...is destroyed as the fashion spreads, and as this element wanes, the fashion also is bound to die.

(Simmel, “Fashion,” in *International Quarterly* 10, 1904, p. 138)

Today, fashion appears as the conformism of deviance, the democratization of the different. The regression from excess to normality, with the body as the central point of reference emerging as the place of internalization and display, decoration and resistance. Fashion (*mode*) of the ‘new era’ becomes *modus*: a personal experience and knowledge of ‘how’. A search for identity and a narrative of life (Tzirtzilakis, 2018).

2. In this idiosyncratic ‘handmade’ fashion magazine, Mallarmé wrote all the articles himself using a range of feminine and masculine pseudonyms, including Madame Marguerite de Ponty and many more.

PHOTOGRAPHY AT THE SERVICE OF FASHION

"...the photograph... is the ultimate Particular, the sovereign Contingency... the Occasion, the Encounter, the Real, in its indefatigable expression."

Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida* (p. 4)

John Tagg described the development of photography as a "model of capitalist growth in the nineteenth century" (Tagg, 1988, p. 37). The rise of the commodity culture in the 19th century greatly influenced the way in which this technology was developed and used. In Tagg's essay, the ways in which photographic genres were affected by capitalism is explained on the basis of the high demand for photographic portraits in the 19th century among the growing middle and lower middle classes, who desired objects that symbolized high social status. Photographic portraits were affordable, while at the same time alluding to the aristocratic social superiority of the past that "having one's portrait done" signified. Tagg describes how the daguerreotype and, later, the *carte de visite* established a branch of industry that boasted a huge clientele and was governed by the "taste and acceptance of the conventional devices and genres of official art" (Tagg, 1988, 50). The commercialization of photography dampened any potential creativity of the new technology, as it sought to reproduce a set of conventions that were already entrenched in portrait painting. And yet, it was not only the opinions and desires of the customers who visited photographic studios that encouraged the obsession with conventions but, as McCauley points out in her study of commercial photography in mid-19th-century Paris, it was also the effort of the small business owners of these photo studios to establish themselves as part of the bourgeoisie and support photography's claim to be recognized as high art (McCauley, 1994).

Suren Lalvani has also highlighted the way in which 19th-century photographic portraiture functioned as a powerful expression of bourgeois culture, through the pictorial conventions regarding both clothing and body posture. President Lincoln, for example, is said to have believed that Brady's *carte de visite* of him helped him win the presidency. Thus, in the 19th century, the photographic portrait acts as an example of the influence of bourgeois thought, in terms of both form and style, as well as an example of the development of the "privileging of vision" (Lalvani, 1995).

Currently, studio portraiture insists on similar conventions of display. The development of photographic technology has been influenced by commerce, as have the types of photography. 'Instamatic' technology, for example, was clearly developed in order to expand the use and ownership of cameras. Subsequently, this technology limited the kinds of photographs people could take (Slater, 1983).

Fashion is cultural technology that reveals (uncover) through concealing (covering up). It is a mechanism of socialization, since the individual participates in a shared sensory experience. This means that, on the one hand, fashion transmits beliefs, cultural norms and values of a specific social authority at a certain point in time, and, on the other hand, it invites the individual to reproduce – through imitation or assimilation – shared rules or patterns of behaviour in order to be part of a social group. During the process of socialization, the individual becomes separated, often violently, from him- or herself (Wilde & Poe, 2019, p. 47).

Thus, fashion functions as a normative system that subdues the human body to strict codifications, especially when it appears to 'liberate' it from them.³

The essence of advertising in general, and advertising photography in particular, is to turn something seemingly mundane into an exciting and impressive image.

The advertising photographer is a peddler of dreams and aspirations – oftentimes his own. Commercial photography of this kind entails carefully "creating an elaborate yet intimate image that invites the viewer to almost imagine a story rather than just see the objects in the shot" (Ward, 1990, p. 6).

3. In his text "The Philosophy of Dress," Oscar Wilde writes: "Fashion, again, is reckless of the individuality of her worshippers, cares nothing whether they be tall or short, fair or dark, stately or slight, but bids them all be attired exactly in the same way, until she can invent some new wickedness" (Wilde, 1885).

The fashion industry is yet another tool through which we can see the development of a society of the spectacle. In *The Face of Fashion*, Jennifer Craik (1994) gives an account of the techniques of fashion photography, from the early 19th-century photographic pictorialism and the constructions of the 1920s and 1930s (which increasingly represented women as commodities) to the growing dominance of the fashion photographer in the 1960s and the influence of film techniques, which resulted in less and less clothes and more and more eroticism in fashion photography during the 1970s and 1980s (Wells, 2004).

It is worth looking at some shared characteristics of fashion photography that have been pointed out by various theorists in order to understand fashion photography as a distinct genre. Firstly, the ephemeral nature of fashion has had an impact on the fashion image. Evans and Thornton have dealt with this issue in terms of the ability of the fashion image to take “extraordinary liberties” and get away with images that are unnecessarily violent, pornographic, or offensive. Polly Devlin has pointed out the contradictory nature of the fashion image as it aims to be both timely and timeless: “Its subject is a product with built-in obsolescence, and the result may be an amusing, ephemeral picture or a monumental statement” (Devlin, 1979, p. 113).

There are other obvious contradictions in the fashion image. Rosetta Brooks has suggested that in fashion photography “we see the typical instead of the unique moment or event” (Brooks, 1992, p. 17). Yet, at the same time as producing the typical, fashion photographers aim at constructing a sense of what is original and unique within a particular fashion. They also try to produce images that go beyond the ephemeral realm of the magazine and the transitory nature of fashion, aspiring to a place in an art gallery or in a coffee-table book, for example.

The *Vogue Book of Fashion Photography* and the major Victoria and Albert Museum exhibition and accompanying catalogue *Appearances: Fashion Photography since 1945*, bear testimony to this conflict (Devlin, 1979; Harrison, 1992). Both contain a good collection of images of classical fashion photography, as well as historical essays that tend to be uncritical of the genre as a whole. Clearly there is tension between fashion photography and advertising photography, since most fashion editorials are commissioned by some magazine that is not directly selling clothes. Yet the undeniable commercial aspect of fashion is clearly separating it from ‘art photography’, although the latter does not lack an inevitable commercial context either.

The closer ties of fashion editorials to magazines rather than manufacturers also highlights the importance of the ability of photographs to project “a look, an image, a world” (Evans & Thornton, 1989, p. 82).

In creating illusory worlds, fashion photography has been influenced by all other types of photographic practice. Fashion photographers, such as André Barré, Irving Penn and Erwin Blumenfeld have been influenced by artistic movements such as Surrealism. Bruce Weber’s photos for Calvin Klein have been influenced by the work of Leni Riefenstahl. The power of photojournalism and documentary photography in the 1930s also influenced fashion images, especially as photographers moved between genres. Still, the fact that fashion photography focuses on something made-up and stylized rather than ‘capturing’ the moment – to which a documentary strictly adheres – does set it apart. Films have also influenced fashion photography, both in terms of content and the creation of forms and styles, and in terms of how we are able to read what would otherwise seem like a series of fragmentary and disjointed sequences of images in the context of a fashion editorial. By creating images and ‘looks’, fashion photography, in its quest to always find something new, different, glamorous and often ‘exotic’, has also been influenced by increasing international travel. This points to the fact that it is rather impossible to examine the various commercial forms of image-making in isolation. We live in a world dominated by lifestyle culture, the conventions of which are “neither fixed nor purposeful” (Wells, 2007, p. 229).

In addition to all of the above, the body is not worshiped exclusively in festive events as something unique and unrepeatable. In the age of technical reproducibility (photographs, internet, cosmetic surgery), it has been transformed into an incessantly overexposed and ‘hypercommunicative’ body.

The goal of Barthes's 'untamed' semiology is to highlight and even subtly shift the standardized and regulative images of the self that are massively and relentlessly produced through technical means. In an interview on French television in 1978, Barthes comments that there are at least two sides to unisex clothing – the sartorial levelling of the sexes: on the one hand is the disappearance of the gender difference in the clothed body; on the other, the gradual liberation of the body (neck, legs, waist, back) from the garment. Instead of the basic disciplinary fashion code of “male vs. female,” we now have a new, even more relentless, biopolitical code: “youthful vs. non-youthful.” Meanwhile, the young, beautiful, athletic, healthy and virtually naked body has not only erased from itself every trace of work, but also of mortality.

LOANS AND REBORROWING IN THE WORK OF PHOTOGRAPHER JULIA HETTA⁴

Almost all of Julia Hetta's photos are associated with classical painting, as well as with newer artistic trends and styles. Her works converse with an alternative enigmatic world, drawing references from situations, sensory qualities and atmospheres of the past. Working almost exclusively with natural lighting and long exposure times, Hetta imbues her subjects with a mysterious sense of peace and power. The use of light, color and textures transforms her fashion photographs into visual compositions of timeless appeal. She aims for a Renaissance kind of beauty, which, according to Girolamo de Michele, consists in the symmetry of the parts and in idealization through perfection of technique. At the same time, however, she focuses on mannerism and the manifestation of centrifugal forces towards an exploration of another, restless and unexpected Beauty, which emerges as an offshoot of a fluid cultural condition in the arts and in society (Eco, 2004, p. 214).

Her photographs borrow compositional principles, style and aesthetical content from classical painting. The flesh, whitish and translucent, seems illuminated by an inner light. The poses have the immobility of classical representations. Faces and objects look like still lives.



Figure 2. Julia Hetta for *Rodeo* magazine, 2011



Figure 3. Julia Hetta for Hermès children FW/12 campaign

4. Julia Hetta was born in 1972 in Uppsala, Sweden. She holds a degree in Fine Arts from the Gerrit Rietveld Academie in Amsterdam. She has published notable albums, has held several solo exhibitions and has participated in numerous group exhibitions. Her regular clients include Another, Double, Acne Paper and T Magazine, as well as the haute couture houses Lanvin, Jil Sander, Hermès and Chloé. In 2014, Hetta's work was featured in the FOAM exhibition *Don't Stop Now: Fashion Photography Next*, which showcased the most innovative next-generation photographers currently working in fashion (www.juliahetta.com).

The folds of fabrics are captured as reliefs with strong shadows, a primary feature of many of Hetta's works being the use of an almost chiaroscuro shadow-and-light contrast. Colours are saturated, featuring soft, harmonious juxtapositions. The dark background from which her figures emerge mainly evokes the mysterious atmosphere of Caravaggio's paintings and Tenebrism, the painting style in which darkness becomes a dominating feature of the image. This technique had been developed by several painters before Caravaggio, but he adopted it in an absolute way and is thus considered its outstanding exponent.



Figure 4. Julia Hetta for *Rodeo* magazine, 2011



Figure 5. Julia Hetta for Hermès children FW/12 campaign



Figure 6. (left) and Figure 7. (right) – Julia Hetta for Acne paper SS/11



Figure 8. (left) and **Figure 9.** (right) – Julia Hetta for Dior Homme Capsule Collection 2012

The concept of duration, uniqueness, stability, is subtly conveyed through indirect references to aesthetic and visual qualities of timeless, insuperable values. Thus, in Hetta's photographic and visual representation, fashion, a phenomenon characterized by fluidity and transience, acquires other characteristics. In the fleeting, ephemeral representation of a figure wearing a garment, Hetta employs carefully staged and structured shots that render it a sense of immortality and monumentality, as time freezes even when a dove is fluttering.



Figure 10. Julia Hetta for Numero Homme magazine



Figure 11. Julia Hetta for Another Man magazine SS/18



Figure 12. (left) and **Figure 13.** (right) – Julia Hetta for *Dazed & Confused* magazine, 2013

Driven by a sense of grace, she seeks new rules towards a subjective multiplicity of beauty, imbued with a sense of restlessness and alertness.

A beauty that is complex, refined, cultured and cosmopolitan, in search of the glow of the soul. A balance between proportion and disproportion, between the form and the formless, the visible and the invisible, the beautiful and the ugly, the true and the false (Eco, 2004, p. 221).

Hetta juxtaposes the transitory and ephemeral of a clothing collection to the unsurpassed charm of Renaissance patterns and, at the same time, she brings out the paradoxical and the unfamiliar through unexpected choices of spaces and objects.

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