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For definitive version see Eugenia Paulicelli, Veronica Manlow & Elizabeth Wissinger (eds.), *The Routledge Companion to Fashion Studies*, Routledge, New York 2022

# Aesthetics of Fashion

Giovanni Matteucci

## **Abstract**

This chapter addresses the meaning of an “aesthetics of fashion,” and the reasons for its struggle to emerge as a legitimate topic. Fashion certainly deals with aesthetic elements, yet these are not easily attributable to the canonical categories at the center of the traditional understanding regarding the fine art experience. Given that fashion’s formulation of beauty generates consumption, thus demanding incessant product innovation and reinvention, value in this domain hinges on embodied practice rather than detached contemplation; hence, the devising of an aesthetics of fashion is mainly grounded in praxis as opposed to theory. Therefore, fashion as a topic worthy of philosophical investigation has long met with scepticism. Yet, fashion undeniably has its own aesthetics. The concept of an aesthetics of fashion, was first broached and developed by novelists and artists in the 19th century. Today, as a result of having acquired so much importance, the agenda of these particular aesthetics has inevitably triggered its overall conceptual reassessment, even on a purely philosophical level. Furthermore, it is precisely this aesthetic efficacy that accounts for fashion’s increasingly pervasive impact on our current reality, allowing for the crucial role of aesthetic praxis both in the articulation of identities, and in the dialectics between social groups, unfolding in much the same way as it does in the art world.

## **1. Fashion’s Challenge to Philosophy**

It would be misleading to maintain that up to the end of the 18th century fashion had been completely neglected by philosophy. In his helpful survey on the topic, Stefano Marino (2017) discusses philosophers like James, Lotze, Spencer, Alain, Simmel, Benjamin, and Fink who were among the most well-known thinkers to draw crucial ideas from fashion analysis, testifying to the significance of the phenomenon and the import of this relative concept apropos of certain social and cultural issues. Nonetheless, despite the prominence of such thinkers, their reflections on this specific subject remained on the margins of mainstream debates for a long time. Most deemed it a frivolity, an intellectual divertissement rather than a legitimate problem worthy of proper philosophical consideration.

Philosophy’s tenacious distrust of fashion has obvious historical roots. In an essay of 1990, Karen Hanson questioned the reasons behind the “philosophical fear of fashion,” clearly noting that negligence stemmed from the issue of embodiment inherent to this phenomenon,

conventionally subjected to marginalization—if not downright dismissal—by Western thought. Philosophy has always sought to capture the stable and lasting (not the ephemeral and perpetually flowing), the deep and essential (not the superficial and accidental), the ideal and spiritual (not the corporeal and material), the active and reflective (not the passive and instinctual), the immortal and eternal (not the fleeting and temporary) components of human reality and experience. Since this long-standing tradition is based on values diametrically opposed to those constitutive of the concept of fashion, philosophy has inevitably argued against recognizing fashion as a serious object of study as it epitomizes the aforesaid canonically-defective aspects fittingly relinquished by humankind in its pursuit of “perfection,” in keeping with a strongly idealizing anthropological vision underpinning much of Western culture.

Even though our cultural tradition has not changed since the publication of Hanson’s essay, the circumstances of our existence, more specifically our lifestyle, have been altered. In the last decades, fashion *per se* has gained considerable traction as a serious object of philosophical analyses. To a certain extent, if current traditional obstacles seem surmountable it is because we now understand that the predicaments arising from treating fashion as a serious topic of study are not related to its characteristics, but rather reside in an anthropological stance resoundingly refuted by contemporary reality, while being inconsistent with the human condition in general. Indeed, this scheme has led to the neglect of elements worthy of attention and consideration. In short, the problem concerned theory (the philosophical tradition) more so than reality (the phenomenon of fashion). Consequently, the admittedly few, yet in instances authoritative philosophers who in the last two centuries have pioneered attempts underscoring the importance of fashion from a theoretical point of view, can now be read in a new light (for some of them, and above all Simmel and Benjamin, see Lehmann 2000). Initially viewed as marginal contemplative episodes aimed at embarking on theretofore unexamined subjects, these musings were instead early signs of necessary transformations in philosophical thought. In contrast, the growing and deep-seated relevance of fashion in the present life-context stresses the urgency of attaining a firm cognizance of these methodologies.

## **2. Fashion’s Challenge to Aesthetics**

The breaking down of the philosophical taboo regarding fashion is ongoing, though it has yet to be completed. Surprisingly, still totally missing is the contribution provided by a part of philosophy that we logically expected to have taken place before that of other disciplines, namely aesthetics. Although not particularly numerous, the various studies of fashion by philosophers of the 19th and 20th centuries, sometimes deep and evocative, focused on facets unrelated to aesthetics. In fact, most cultural and social arguments—notwithstanding a small number that examined experiential and conceptual structures underlying the phenomena of fashion—managed, for the most part, to carefully avoid a line of reasoning based essentially on aesthetics. To this day, it is still unusual for actual aesthetics scholars addressing this phenomenon not to do so in an exclusively fragmentary manner (among the rare exceptions: Moreno-Márquez 2010, Gecky and Karaminas 2012, King 2017, Matteucci 2017, Iannilli 2017). For several decades now, essays on philosophical aesthetics usually either make little mention of fashion, or simply disparage it by reducing it to a moment of general aestheticization, or that of the dissemination of a particular aesthetic.

This is probably the result of an original sin. In fact, aesthetics was born as a philosophical discipline from a very radical gesture, i.e., the exclusion of the dimension of practicality from the determination of pleasure considered to be strictly aesthetic. He who effectively and finally anointed aesthetics as being part of philosophical knowledge, organizing the speculative framework wherein aesthetic reflection has mainly dwelled hitherto, i.e., Immanuel Kant, affirms that aesthetic pleasure is, in fact, a pleasure “without interest” in what is judged through taste (see for instance Kant 2000: 150). But if we look at the field of fashion, the interest in something that is offered to our experience appears nothing short of dominant, both in production, with all its economic and commercial motives, and in its use, with all its consumerist and hyper-consumerist connotations. And since interest is the foundation for the aesthetic pleasure generated by the experience of fashion, a philosophical knowledge faithful to the axiom of disinterested pleasure inevitably tends to remove such an experience from the scope considered as its purview (see also Negrin 2012).

The 18th-century reduction of aesthetic pleasure to disinterested pleasure was justified by many arguments. It was in that period that the sphere of “fine arts” was being distinguished from that of “mechanical arts” consisting of production techniques geared to making useful objects. Therefore, this meant seeking to isolate a pure, free, independent beauty from other forms of beauty conflating practical and commercial purposes. This distinction was effected even if it meant sacrificing or ignoring how useful and practical components were actually involved in poetry, painting, music, architecture, etc. Aimed at defining aesthetics by abstracting any connection with worldliness, this strategy certainly enabled the powerful development of philosophical reflection with respect to the arts, but precluded an adequate overall consideration of aesthetics in its many ways of being concretely manifested and realized in human experience. Barbara Carnevali (2012: 127-160) illustrates to what extent the divorce between the economic and the aesthetic domains has influenced the culture of the last two centuries, making it difficult to understand both pre-modern reality (pre-bourgeois) in which they were strongly intertwined, and contemporary reality in which they are properly merged (see Iannilli 2019).

One effect of this fundamental configuration is the fact that the first aesthetic reflections on fashion of some conceptual depth arose in the 19th century not so much in the field of philosophy, but more so in that of literature. Balzac, Wilde, Baudelaire, d’Annunzio, Carlyle, Mallarmé manifested their interest in the phenomenon of fashion and often in its aesthetic implications, not only in their literary works, but also in writings surely requiring speculative engagement. Examples include almost purely theoretical essays, like Baudelaire’s famous *Le Peintre de la vie moderne* (*The Painter of Modern Life*) and Oscar Wilde’s *Philosophy of Dress*, not to mention the *Dialogo della moda e della morte* (*Dialogue between Fashion and Death*) in Leopardi’s *Operette morali*.

On the one hand, these authors could count on a robust tradition: that of a practical knowledge of customs already expressed in early modern literary writings (Paulicelli 2014). On the other hand, they intercepted the qualitative shift stemming from a new historic-cultural context they were witnessing, which makes one think of fashion in its current sense as a phenomenon mainly pertaining to the last three centuries (a notoriously controversial thesis, however precisely for this reason, a significant one). Anyhow, they testify how as early as the 19th century a concrete, urgent need was felt to grasp something that, although apparently eluding the

knowledge system, clearly revealed a specific and powerful ability to impact the aesthetic reality these writers belonged to. The concrete aesthetic culture of the last two centuries has found a powerful catalyst in fashion, which “officially” removed from aesthetic theory understood as mere philosophy of the fine arts—inevitably and exceedingly captivated those compelled to operate in the aesthetic field. A growing phenomenon in Western context, fashion is ironically considered less and less relevant by institutionally-backed scholars appositely equipped to theorize on this subject.

We can define what is expressed in the writings dedicated to fashion by aforesaid extraordinary authors as a kind of *operative* aesthetics. Basically, it represents the reflexive-pragmatic equivalent of the phantasmagorical reality that dominated the urban and metropolitan scenarios persistently evoked by great 19th-century literature, described and narrated in every national variation. It could therefore be said that the *aesthetics of fashion* were not absent for long, but were kept strictly outside the sphere of relevance attributed officially to *philosophical* aesthetics. The only exception was the limited, but long-lasting (see Miller 2007), debate on whether or not to include fashion in the fine arts system, along with poetry, painting, music, architecture, etc., taking as a starting point the same ideological system that existed at the origin of philosophical aesthetics, thereby corroborating suspicions of fashion as an impure phenomenon from a theoretical point of view, and thus reckoning it as unworthy of real speculative consideration *per se*.

The very fact that from a theoretical point of view it has only been considered in a limited manner—and then mostly in extra-aesthetic arguments—reveals that fashion is a real problem not just for philosophy in general, but above all for aesthetics. Rather than reinforcing its taboo, its removal if anything heightens its urgency. If we look at the current cultural and social reality, it becomes impossible not to attribute to fashion such a problematic significance precisely from an aesthetic point of view. Fashion is one of the most important factors in promoting and shaping taste in the age of widespread aestheticity. The orientation of preferences is determined in a radical manner by mechanisms related to fashions in any sector of modern life much more than ever before, at least in Western culture documented by history. There is therefore a further contradiction that deserves to be considered: in order to understand the present condition of human reality it seems not only impossible but also ruinous to avoid examining fashion in its intense aesthetic capacity, in its being a vector of aestheticization (American English spelling) that connotes the global context of the 21st century. But in order to do this we need to question traditional categories of aesthetics modelled on other phenomena, which unlike fashion were supposed to be able to be isolated in their purity, just like the fine arts. Fashion seems to need not just a new aesthetic consideration but likewise a new consideration of aesthetics.

### **3. Aesthetics of Fashion and Fashion’s Aesthetics**

The label “Aesthetics of Fashion” sounds like an attempt to programmatically determine a specific area of study. First it indicates the analysis of concepts and their implications, not only at a conceptual level, yet equally relating to fashion favouring the plane of aestheticity (i.e., in a broad sense, questions concerning contents of experience and cultural products that variously intersect with sensitivity, imagination, pleasure and displeasure, and thus taste, the idea of beauty and its natural and artificial manifestations...). This can be pursued on a pragmatic level starting with stimuli offered by current circumstances, and developing “operative” aesthetics provided by

authors such as Balzac, Baudelaire, Wilde, d'Annunzio, and so on. Nonetheless, this endeavour can, and perhaps should, explicitly address at a purely philosophical level the difficulties such an area of study must confront in order to even surface in the current debates. To this purpose, it should preliminarily free itself from a series of prejudices deriving from its tradition, as previously stated.

Subsequently, it becomes important to consider a second manner of interpreting the label "Aesthetics of Fashion," noting how it could raise a set of questions that fashion itself poses from a specifically aesthetic point of view and in the perspective of a requalification of aesthetics in general. In this sense we can speak of "Fashion's Aesthetics." Here the first question to be raised is how fashion implies aesthetics, i.e., which type of reflective-conceptual reconnaissance relative to aesthetics does it entail, or even more radically, what conception of aesthetics does it demand. With its many manifestations, fashion certainly has to do with elements like style, shape, taste, and beauty. But is it true that these elements, because of the way they act in this environment, are easily attributable to canonical categories that stand at the center (American English spelling) of the experience of the arts as traditionally understood, and that are widely and unreflectively embraced by common sense? If these differences exist, do they render compatible or, to the contrary, incompatible the aesthetics implied by the first and the aesthetics implied by the second? In short, which aesthetics do not simply "refer" to fashion, but are rather *fashion's own*? And if it were true that fashion compels aesthetic reflection to question some of its tenets, is it not throwing a new and different light on various traditional topics as well, mostly those related to the sphere of the so-called fine arts during at least the last two and a half centuries? And finally, what relationship can there be between fashion's aesthetics and the aesthetics dictated by other contemporary phenomena equally inextricably entangled with both extraordinary technological advances of the latest generations and the new social regime of the so-called "aesthetic," "artistic" and/or "artist" capitalism in the age of globalization (see Böhme 2016, Lipovetsky and Serroy 2013)?

The reciprocity between aesthetics of fashion and fashion's aesthetics is obvious. In fact, in building a theoretical reflection on strictly aesthetic elements of fashion we cannot ignore its specific aesthetic content if we want to avoid applying an incorrect criterion to the phenomenon being investigated. And the measure of this potential error is effectively summarized by the gap between the two manners of questioning the experience of beauty: on the one hand, using traditional aesthetics as a philosophy of the fine arts, and on the other hand, resorting to the aesthetics of fashion. As pertains to philosophy of art, beauty qualifies the outcome of expressive techniques geared towards the creation of objects or events that are to be experienced so as to guarantee the sustainability of their intangible absoluteness over time. Conversely, in the case of the aesthetics of fashion, beauty qualifies experiences triggered by the consumption, acquisition, adoption, desire and display of a product whose symbolic value is activated chiefly through individual behaviours that are nonetheless always exhibited to others. The beauty of a painting is contemplated (beautiful is the object or the configuration we contemplatively enjoy), and art is the creation of it; whereas, the beauty of a fashionable dress is actually worn or imagined, in consumption or in desire (beautiful therefore becomes the experience of enjoying it, the effective experiential articulation in and of itself), and fashion is the practice of it. Preserving a painting in a museum certainly does not mean taking it away from art nor preventing the experience *of* it, while preserving a fashionable dress in a museum means taking it away from fashion, and thus preventing one from having an experience *with* it. And, herein lies the problem: both the

experience of a painting and the experience with a fashionable dress are actually modalities of aesthetic practice.

#### **4. A New Aesthetic Agenda**

We touch here on an essential point. If fashion is the manner in which beauty generates the consumption of commodified goods thus always requiring a new production, if therefore it entails a notion of aesthetics based on its use rather than its contemplation, it requires a conception of it founded on practices rather than on ideas or idealities. This remark would be sufficient to understand the difficulty of philosophy in general, and of philosophical aesthetics in particular, in dealing with this matter. While philosophy has usually privileged thematic and conceptual categories over practical structures of experience, only a system of aesthetics able to juggle notions that do not lose their operational and pragmatic component seems equipped to understand phenomena like fashion. Fashion can thus become a relevant transformation factor for aesthetics in general.

Using an example can be helpful to prove this point. As previously discussed, often the primary task of an aesthetics of fashion consists in locating fashion in relation to the art world. This strategy presumes a stable definition of art that can be equally applied to fashion. Yet today we are witnessing the complete reverse of this situation. In the current art world, individual subjectivities (celebrated from the end of the 18th century to the half of the 20th century, as the creative genius, the critic and the spectator refer to fewer and fewer material works.

As Yves Michaud (2003) nicely put it, art itself today has been sublimated in an atmosphere that connotes experiences and experiential devices more than objects in the cognitive sense of the word. It requires the participative collaboration of diverse individuals in every moment of its life cycle: from production, to evaluation and appreciation. Hence, this general reflection on art should serve as a launching pad for the formulation of useful structures aimed at developing a methodology addressing the phenomenon of fashion. In fact, if back in the days of the couturier Paul Poiret fashion regarded art as its own cultural legitimation, currently it is art that finds in fashion a model for its development and full achievement. And it does so not by getting contaminated but by being properly innervated by a “logic of fashion” that has become the salient feature of dominant production, which is simultaneously economic and cultural, and inscribed within a hyper-modern society situated in the age of globalization (see Lipovetsky 2006).

Fashion carries into effect a logic that can work also when categorial and substantial determination is lacking. It manages the articulation of appearance as the emergence of trends that act as orienting points of relevance without impeding the continuous flow of a reality which is increasingly intertwined with virtuality, thus emphasizing its own processual character. This intrinsically practical know-how is precisely the competence that today’s aesthetics strives to make sense of, while also calling into question its own categories.

Fashion is a crucial testbed for this purpose. It is in an aesthetic manner that it solves the important question of extracting sense also in the absence of contents that could be defined cognitively. It does so by insisting on “tacit,” “embodied,” “non-representational” elements that are significant from the perceptual, expressive and emotional point of view (see Entwistle 2009: 129-139; and Eckersley 2008), thereby offsetting the obsolescence cycle and compensating for the lack of definite and stable structures. In the spiral of fashion, consumption takes place due

to the compulsion to repeat the experience of consumption itself as it is emotional and socially aggregating, hence according to intrinsically aesthetic coordinates. Its aim, although still linked to practical concerns, is not the satisfaction of a specifically determinable need to which the purchased good merely responds. For this reason, the experience of fashion, in its characterization radically differing from the canonical view of aesthetics as a philosophy of art, paradoxically becomes paradigmatic of the current forms of art experience. And, in fact, today art works are purchased, just like fashion items, as the pledge of a direct and emotional encounter with those who have produced them rather than on the basis of a formal or content-oriented appreciation, and so “not for conformist or speculative reasons, but for emotional, relational ones” according to Gilles Lipovetsky. Furthermore, Lipovetsky states that “[in] such cases the purchase expresses a personal link, a choice, an emotional way of positioning oneself in a milieu. It reflects an expressive, user-friendly individualism” (Lipovetsky 2006: 87).

This practice becomes aesthetic as an experience of repeated emotional and contingently sensorial gratification, which is not quenched by a cognitive acquisition. It not only makes the peculiarly aesthetic dimension of appearance hypertrophic, but it also emancipates it from metaphysical, ethical, or even merely cognitive constraints belonging to a different order. Thanks to fashion, aesthetics reveals an intrinsic anthropological primitiveness (or “primitivism”) in this process by means of an essential link to the body. Potentially perceived as being precisely a form of knowledge touching on appearance *per se*, in no way subordinated to a content ideally located beyond appearing, and thereby effecting its own radical accomplishment in practices which are always of an inter-subjective nature. By getting expressively and emotionally charged, as is the case with fashion, appearance becomes the threshold through which the biological and the cultural element penetrate each other. Resulting from the fact that functionality no longer concerns the organism as such, instead it now pertains to a whole inter-subjective interaction, and hence to an environment which is not only a biosphere, but also a bio-cultural ecological niche. Thus, it is at the aesthetic level that this peculiar intransitive and experiential significance of fashion emerges. This is specifically the kind of significance that risks being overlooked by other disciplines (from semiotics to sociology, from cultural studies to psychology), when they only focus on its transitive and epistemic meaning (by retrieving and furthering the distinction introduced by Zangwill 2011): from “sprezzatura” to “coolness” (see Russell 2011; Paulicelli 2014), the characteristics of “fashionable” seem to be attributed precisely to what remains by its nature indeterminable as far as it relates to the overall way phenomena manifest themselves rather than to a few specific contents. Consequently, when attempting a disciplinary, and therefore epistemic determination of these characteristics, although the accuracy of the description increases, the expressive force—that which renders elements of fashion captivating and fascinating by communicating an intrinsically (and productively) ephemeral aura—fatally decreases. Not by chance the captions of fashion magazines indulge in the evocative.

Consequently, it is precisely by virtue and not despite its working in the unavoidable horizon of contingency, that fashion as an “Adonic” experience (see Menninghaus 2003: 13-65; Matteucci 2017: 66-70) affirms itself at least potentially as the actualization of the emancipatory power of aesthetics. In this way fashion reveals the ability of aesthetics to validate what was once usually perceived as being primary and primitive as compared to this branch of philosophy focusing on the nature of beauty, from the individual project of personal identities to the definition of social roles, and even to the determination of economical values. It is not coincidental that contemporary individuals have found in fashions the forms of articulation of



their social identities. We only need to think of generations who have found in their way of appearing not only the sign, but also the very law of their identity, from hippies to punks. Moreover, think of the struggles waged by social minorities in which single battles often consisted in the “simple” claim to the right to manifest (and manifest oneself with) one’s own accentuated appearance, at times modest, at other times blatant. This explains the increasing social usages of appearance throughout the 20th century all the way up to sub- and counter-cultural experiences that took place over the last 50 to 60 years (see Edwards 2011: 103-119).

These factors can also help determine an aspect of fashion that is equally essential. Fashion is inescapably related to the processes of commodification and is therefore an economic phenomenon; it certainly conveys public prestige and is therefore a social phenomenon; it intrinsically displays personal identity and is therefore a psychological phenomenon; it fatally has to do with systems of communication and cultural expression and is therefore a phenomenon that is semiotic, anthropological, etc. But it effectively accomplishes all these functions in and through a gratifying experience that tends to be distinguished by categories like beauty, style, glamour and the like, namely by the enhancement of positive aesthetic pleasure based on the potential (one might say: required) shared appreciation that marks the sphere of taste. Hence, we can maintain that it is as a chiefly aesthetic phenomenon that fashion is *also* an economic, social, psychological, semiotic and anthropological phenomenon and even more. Consequently, it truly seems that an aesthetics of fashion that diverges from the traditional agenda of an aesthetics as a philosophy of fine arts is an urgent task in order to fully understand a powerful motive that practically monopolizes the current human condition.

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