

The Art of Fashion Writing

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The language of fashion magazines is lively. Furs are 'to-die-for', colors are 'drifty dreamy' and looks are 'leotard simple.'¹ In his seminal text, *The Fashion System*, Roland Barthes describes this play of language as "...a vulgarized literary tradition, from rhyming games ... or commonplace comparisons".²

The last three decades have witnessed a reevaluation of fashion, both in terms of its credibility as an area of academic investigation and its importance in Western culture,³ which has caused its reconsideration within popular culture. Today, fashion can be found when flipping through art and fashion magazines. The art press, however, locates fashion within wider social and cultural dialogues, reflecting upon the social, cultural, psychological and economic implications of dress.

Pierre Bourdieu's theory of fields offers an insightful starting point for understanding the media field paradigm, arguing that society is divided into semi-autonomous fields that are structured around the basic opposition between:

- 'Heteronomous' pole: economic and political capital (forces external to the field)
- 'Autonomous' pole: cultural capital unique to that field.⁴

Fields, then, can be distinguished both in regards to the specific capital that are valued therein and by their degree of autonomy from the dominant political and economic forces.

Locating journalism(s) within field theory is complex. Its unique power to investigate other fields - from politics to music - impacts on the profession's autonomy, and thus, the criticality of the writing it produces. Other theorists have already examined how specialist fields of journalism, particularly those related to consumer affairs, such as motoring, share closer interests with companies than with news reporting or political journalism.⁵ This logic rationalises the assumption that the objectivity and depth of journalist practice varies according to the field that it enters.

In her essay 'Is Fashion Art,' Sung Bok Kim notes a major difference in fashion writing between the art and fashion media.⁶ This example runs against the assumption that the criticality of journalist practice depends on the field explored; both art and fashion journalists report on fashion. Rather, it is the 'genre' of media - in this case the art versus the fashion press - which determines the criticality of the journalism produced.

There have been widespread writings on the similarities and differences between the art and fashion industries. Critic Michael Boordro, in his essay 'Art and Fashion,' stages one side of the debate: "Art is art and fashion is an industry ... art is above commerce ...

Fashion is not art...”⁷ Boodro’s distinction between art and fashion is based primarily on the commercial nature of fashion.

As part of what has been described as postmodernism, the acknowledgment of fashion as a cultural artifact gained impetus in the 1980s within visual arts. The art press began to publish articles on fashion and continue to conceptualise fashion as art. However, this does not suggest that the two industries are the same, but rather, that the overlap between them is increasing. Richard Martin acknowledges the differences in their relationships with commerce. “One of the good things about fashion is that its commerce is blatant. The art world generally likes to be very discreet about commerce”.⁸

Perhaps exploring the fashion and art press’ disparate relationship with commerce can assist in understanding the divergent practices of each media. Corporate interests have entered into an increasingly direct relationship with the practices of journalists. The ways that conglomerates dissolve the boundaries of journalistic practice are commanding. Fashion journalism, particularly, reveals that the limits – which have divided professional practise from corporate interests – are being stretched. The work from cultural theorist Angela McRobbie has been instrumental in understanding the pressures faced by fashion journalists.⁹

In an interview with McRobbie, an ex-fashion editor of the *Guardian* said “It would be more than my job’s worth to run a feature which suggested that major fashion houses in were relying on a chain of sweated labour even though the story had surfaced across the American media ...”¹⁰ The problem was not newsworthiness, but that the fashion editor needed to maintain good relations with the fashion house as a source of information. This incident is not exceptional; on various occasions McRobbie records stories that would not be published for similar reasons. The result within the pages of fashion magazines is timidity in the face of controversy and social conservatism on the politics of fashion.

Art journalism

There has been little to no investigation into the commercial and cultural pressures faced by journalists working within art magazines. However, it is useful to understand how the public perceives a cultural industry as this can provide insight into the restrictions that that media potentially faces; in addition to market demands, and demographics, the media has to conform, to a degree, to the logic and interests of their audience, as to ensure healthy profit margins.

The primary motivation of art and art criticism since the late 1960s has been the deconstruction of the monolithic myths of modernism and the disbanding of its oppressive codes of practice.¹¹ Modernism, within a traditional art historical context, promotes the innate superiority of the Western art institution, which was founded on Eurocentric ideals.¹² Since then, new art forms have opposed the leading cultural

products of modernism, vehemently deviating from its clearly prescribed aesthetic categories in favour of hybridity, diversity and cultural specificity. Thus, the ethos of postmodernist art is to unveil all forms of social inequality. Whereas fashion magazines are inward looking and loyal to their traditions, art magazines are continually striving to critique history; challenging their viewer to think differently; making them aware of the dangers of safely idealised narratives that have turned people, places and experiences into subjects to be mined.

Within fashion journalism, 'structures' – both economic and cultural – have restricted the possibilities of the meanings produced. In the art press however, the interplay between the symbolic and economic dimensions of public communications is seamless. Unlike the fashion press, the construction of meaning is not moulded at entry level by the programmed asymmetries of social relations.

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¹ Laired Borelli, "Dressing Up and Talking About it: Fashion Writing in Vogue from 1968 - 1993", *Journal of Fashion Theory*, (Volume 1, Issue 3, 1997): 254

² Roland Barthes, *The Fashion System*, (Berkeley: University of California Press), 237

³ Llewellyn Negrin, *Appearance and Identity: Fashioning the Body in Postmodernity*, (New York: Palgrave and Macmillian, 1998), 1.

⁵ Peter Elliot, "Media Occupations: An Overview," in *Mass Communications in Society*, James Curran, ed. (London: Arnold, 1977),

⁶ Sung Bok Kim, 'Is fashion art', *Journal of Fashion Theory*, (Volume 1, Issue 3, 1998): 254

⁷ Michael Boodro, "Art and Fashion," in journal *Artnews*, (September, 1990): 120-7.

⁸⁸ David Turner, "Couture de Force," in *Artforum* (March, 1996): 15.

⁹ Angela McRobbie, "The Return to Cultural Production. Case Study: Fashion Journalism", in *Mass Communications in Society* (ed.) J. Curran and M. Gurevitch, (Arnold: London, 2000)

¹⁰ McRobbie, 264.

¹¹ Abigail Solomon-Godeau, "Photography After Photography," in *Art After Modernism: Rethinking Representation*, Biran Wallis (ed). (New York: David R. Godine Publishing, 1984), 75

¹² Solomon-Godeau, 79.