

Deconstructing the Pleasures of Superfluity in Fashion

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Abstract

This abstract proposes the creation of a short artistic film based on my MA Fashion thesis written at the Royal College of Art. It addresses the problem of the aesthetics of superfluity in the fashion industry through autoethnographic research.

The problem: You have stated in your 'call for papers' document: 'Small labels with big goals work in a market that is simultaneously occupied by global players, while being dependent on the creative ideas of designers who do not work primarily looking for profit.'

I hope to expose and investigate the inherently unsustainable power dynamics present in this structural relation on which the fashion industry operates. Achille Mbembe states in *The Aesthetics of Superfluity*:

'Superfluity does not only refer to the aesthetics of surfaces and quantities, and to how such an aesthetics is premised on the capacity of things to hypnotize, overexcite or paralyze the senses... It also refers to the indispensability and expendability of both labor and life, people and things. It refers to the obfuscation of any exchange value that labor might have'

The aesthetics of superfluity in the fashion industry has disastrous consequences for workers and climate crisis alike, making this a pressing question of our times. This film seeks to clearly identify dominant narratives in the fashion industry that contribute to the aesthetics of superfluity. It does this through the documentation and recounting of a specific experience, in which I was one of 12 Royal College of Art students invited to a talk through of exhibitions at the McQueen flagship store in Old Bond Street.

I was highly skeptical of the power dynamics played out during this experience, and became increasingly aware of the obscuring of labor throughout the talks. This film hopes to challenge the dominant narratives around haute couture luxury and the fabled solo designer genius, through clearly identifying the tactics of intimidation used through the obscuring of labor in McQueen's *Roses* exhibition.

'Many hands touched this work'

'McQueen is all about community'.

I felt the first statement negated the second. The reduction of workers to 'hands' disturbed me. If McQueen is all about community, why is this community and their labor invisible? Why do we hear only about the labor of the fabled genius designer: Burton or Lee? This work is not a pointed attack at McQueen but at the structures that underpin the destructive aesthetics of superfluity. It takes the house and its narratives as a marker for dominant narratives and modes of operation today in the industry: the house is, indeed, part of luxury fashion conglomerate Kering. I undertake this research in an attempt to deconstruct the power, pleasure and thrall the aesthetics of superfluity have over us. Identifying the mechanisms by which these aesthetics work gives us opportunity to resist, and to imagine alternative ways in which fashion brands could be structured today.

Methodology: In order to approach this issue I use an autoethnographic research method, which has allowed me to understand the politics of the body in the setting of contemporary culture. I use a Foucauldian feminist framework, that, appropriately for the domain of fashion, understands power to be socialised, embodied and everyday. This lens of thought takes seriously the power of fashion in the everyday context. The personal becomes political, a key in feminist movements originating from the 1960's second-wave. The self is understood through this methodology as a cultural production and a window into contemporary and historical cultural forces. I took seriously the observation of my own thoughts, feelings and sensations that were produced within me during this experience as grounds for legitimate academic research. I hope that this feminist approach to epistemology can be taken seriously within an academic context.

This methodology is based upon feminist scholar Laura Mulvey's idea that 'the deconstruction of pleasure is a radical weapon'. The pleasures of the aesthetics of superfluity are overwhelming: in this case, the setting of the luxury store, the exclusivity of the products, the technical genius of the couture garments on show, and the obscured labor involved in their production, all contributed to an overwhelming sense of awe and pleasure, but also a sense of exclusion, that I was very aware of and interested in investigating further. The mannequins pedaling an ideal body, excluding our bodies, playing on our lack, producing in us the sensation that by purchasing these goods we can become something that we are currently not.

Summary of results achieved demonstrating the relevance of the research for theory and practice: The results of this investigation include a call for an exposition of the labor involved in the production of fashion across all sectors, for the crediting of workers and for a truly collaborative and community focussed approach to the structure of fashion brands. Ironically, the house of McQueen, in a rather self-congratulatory fashion, stated its pride in exposing the creative process in the exhibition 'Roses'. I acknowledge this is a step that couture houses are now taking, but argue that the 'hands', the people who are essential to the work's production are still invisible, and that this must change.

Keywords: aesthetics of superfluity, labour, cultural criticism, psychoanalytic feminism, resistance.

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