

Eva Flicker / Monika Seidl (eds.)

Fashionable Queens

Body – Power – Gender



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Introduction

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In April 2013 the Netherlands welcomed a new King, and his wife Maxima was elevated to the status of a Queen; a month later she adorned the title page of *Vogue Netherlands*, a national version of the globally distributed magazine synonymous with the latest trends in fashion. The caption of this special edition read *Maxima. The Birth of a Queen* and the black and white photograph showed a bright-eyed smiling Maxima looking slightly off-frame against a white background, wearing a white, sequined low-cut evening gown. The new queen was not posing but was depicted in full motion energetically mounting invisible stairs. Her head was positioned in the middle of the capitals VOGUE, taking the place of the letter G. The picture was taken when she stepped out at an earlier engagement (Adams) and was photo-shopped for the occasion. Royalty was signalled via a sparkling tiara that held back Maxima's hair. Implicating that the queenly body can be a fashionable one and vice versa is underlined by featuring royal women in fashion magazines. Queens and covers of fashion magazines are, however, not necessarily synonymous, although attractive young aristocrats, like Charlotte Casiraghi of Monaco embellish the occasional cover

Female beauties associated with fictional queenliness fare much better. In 2009, *Vogue Australia* celebrated its 50th anniversary with a special edition. The four different covers that were and distributed throughout *Down Under* showed sketches of the same blonde woman wearing a variety of mostly black clothes. The rather abstract representation of fashionable clothes through the simplistic design of the covers suggested manifold interpretations of the nature of fashion and did not restrict the consumer to one specific reading of the image. The sketches were modelled after the Australian Oscar-winning actress Cate Blanchett. With her embodiment of Elizabeth I in Shekhar Kapur's highly acclaimed movie of the same name, the thespian came to be known worldwide. Her representation of the Tudor queen has since then been considered one of Blanchett's most prominent acting performance, ensuring a starring role in the sequel a few years later. In the movie, the queen's political success, as well as personal struggle, is largely mirrored in her clothes, which were - to a great extent - recreations of dresses Elizabeth I is seen wearing in official paintings. However, Blanchett is not only known as an actress who represented a historical queen in a very vibrant biopic via the use of clothes, the Australian is a fashion icon in the media as well. By frequently walking the red carpets of the world in dresses from well-known designers, or by gracing covers of famous fashion magazines, Blanchett has manifested her position in the fashion industry. Deriving from Blanchett's example, this two-fold approach to fashion and being a fashionable queen, meaning that not only politically powerful females, such as queens or chancellors, but also *ordinary* women use clothing as a tool for power, is mirrored in the present book.

Generally speaking, fashion has been around for centuries, has graced and marked the human body in a variety of ways and has posed as an integral part of people's lives. On a strictly linguistic level, fashion is first and foremost defined in the Oxford English dictionary as "a popular or the latest style of clothing, hair, decoration, or behaviour" and on a very material level has evolved into a multi-million business all around the world. From the centres of fashion such as Paris, Milan or New York, to regional traditions and personal customs, the way to dress can be seen as a vessel for self-fashioning, for imposed conventions from the surrounding cultures or simply as a necessity of life. The practicability of apparels, however, is not compulsory in the field of fashion. Long lived trends in the industry have shown that *haute couture*, the art of sewing exclusive and exquisite clothing, carefully crafted with time-consuming handiwork, has a deep-seated position among experts. Although *haute couture's* utility can be questioned when used outside the catwalk environment, *haute couture* is as essential to the fashion industry as is its counterpart *prêt-à-porter*, the clothes of everyday life.

Whether seeing fashion in a strictly binary opposition of practical versus impractical or fashionable versus unfashionable, the meaning that is attributed to clothes, especially in the Western context, is undeniably influential and commanding. In 2010, Eva Flicker and Monika Seidl addressed the importance of women's clothing by organizing a conference on the topic of *Fashionable Queens: Body, Power, Gender*. The collaboration of the University of Vienna's department of English and American studies and the department of sociology gave way to a rich, diverse and highly informative two-day event in Vienna with renowned speakers and intriguing topics (www.univie.ac.at/fashionablequeens). Finding its roots in the conference's speeches and highlighting the intent of fashion as a signifying medium, the present book will uncover processes in which clothing has been adapted to underline the frequently powerful intents of women, who (un)consciously used and use clothes to underline, subvert, negotiate and re-enforce notions of gender, class and power. Thus the book aims to provide an exploration of fashion's hybrid nature between mediality and materiality.

Fashion

The use of fashion to grace the body in ways the wearer pleases, has not always gone without saying. Although different strict clothing conventions must be maintained in specific contexts in the 21st century, the separation of classes mirrored in the choice - or rather enforcement - of garment onto the individual was already present in medieval Europe. Back then, the evolution of a somewhat more global market gave rise to the import of exquisite fabrics and precious stones from the East. In an attempt to regulate the subsequently emerging tendency to display wealth through garments and adornments and to allegedly preserve morals such as

modesty, which were thought to be diminishing, the state and the church initiated so-called sumptuary laws. These laws forbade classes of lower standards to wear certain luxurious attire, a notion previously found in ancient Egypt, where exclusively Roman citizens were allowed to wear a toga. However,

“... these laws served precisely to strengthen the role of clothes as an important social marker as they created relatively clear criteria for the social status of various objects. With the increasing weakening of class division and greater social mobility, however, the battle to maintain such rules was lost” (Svendsen 38)

Up until the 19th century, people of the working class were not granted the same access to fashion as other, higher classes due to economic reasons. However, with the rapid growth of mass production and subsequently mass consumption, and the possibility of producing garments without the expenses previously encountered, fashion spread to the lower classes and the common people. Whereas these citizens hitherto only had one set of clothes, the lower prices of fabrics enabled them to broaden their focus in the domain of fashion as well. This, however, did not mean that class distinction was no longer visible in people's dress but rather expanded the opportunity to distinguish between the classes (Svendsen 37-39).

The separation of social classes based on clothes in times of mass consumption brings about another phenomenon which is still rooted in contemporary Western societies and what is now commonly termed as the Trickle-Down theory. This approach tries to explain how fashion is first spread among the upper classes, who have the financial means to buy exquisite and exclusive clothing. By doing so, they separate themselves from less financially potent customers and gain a status of exclusivity. However, through mass production and consumption, lower classes gain the ability to copy the style of the upper classes relatively easily and the clothes quite literally trickle down the social ladder. With the absence of distinctiveness and uniqueness, the previous pioneers in fashion aim for a new style and another way to distinguish themselves from the lower classes (Bernard 130-131). When considering the essence of fashion in general, Simmel states that,

“... [the] very character of fashion demands that it should be exercised at one time only by a portion of the given group [...] as soon as anything that was originally done only by a few has really come to be practiced by all [...] we no longer speak of fashion.” (Simmel 302)

By creating new styles within the domain of class separation, the re-establishment of visual markers of social difference does not seem far-fetched. This means that whenever discussing fashionable clothes, an exclusivity of the subject can be assumed or else it would not have the distinct feature of being *in style* but rather of being plain ordinary.

Fashionable Queens

Nevertheless, the phenomenon of fashion alone cannot suffice in the discussion of a *fashionable queen*. What explicitly constructs the fashionable queen is the exclusivity of the female body, the feminine aspect and the powerful use of clothing when sported by a woman. Skirts, dresses, trousers, shirts, blouses and all other garments dress the female figure alike, but they have different implications within the Western culture.

Generally, fashion can be considered as crucial when marking a woman's feminine features. To understand what it means to be feminine or masculine, Butler's ideas have to be quickly recalled. Deriving from the notion, that the sex/gender binary is in fact performative and therefore dependent on culture, Butler claims that "the sex/gender distinction and the category of sex itself appear to presuppose a generalization of 'the body' that pre-exists the acquisition of its sexed significance" (Butler 175). She goes on to argue that this foresees a passiveness of the body "that is signified by an inscription from a culture source figured as 'external' to that body" (ibid.). Here, Butler refers back to Foucault's discussion of a similar topic, in which he claims that "the body is the inscribed surface of events" (Foucault 148 as quoted in Butler 176). Connecting the discourses of the body and femininity, it can be observed that dominant articulations have been subject to change over time. However, Macdonald puts forward the following description, which can be applied to various versions of the feminine body as discursive formation, despite their contingency on time and context:

"The body's traditional centrality to feminine identity can be subdivided into a variety of codes of appearance: ideal bodily shape and size; appropriate forms of make-up and cosmetic care of skin and hair, and the adornment of the body through clothes and accessories." (Macdonald 193-194)

Emphasizing the last aspect for the present book, namely the adornment of the body through clothes, the realization that attire is indeed fundamental to the understanding of femininity in Western cultures becomes evident. Whereas it seems uncommon for men in Western societies to wear certain garments such as dresses or skirts (with exceptions such as the kilt, of course) without evoking the implications of drag or gender bending, it seems almost impossible for a woman to find a piece of clothing that would in its essence conjure up the same feelings. The universality of women's fashion therefore appears to be endless. These seemingly unlimited possibilities, however, do undoubtedly not work for everyone and were at stake at different times in history. In medieval times, the only clothing choice for women, regardless of class, was a simple dress with the social status mirrored in the embellishments and luxury of the gowns. Although this certainly has changed, restricting women to certain cuts of clothes can be seen throughout the ages and when thinking of school uniforms around the globe, having to wear a skirt instead of being able to choose freely is a feature of many young girls' daily lives.

Restricting females to skirts only no longer seems natural in the 21st century. However, when it comes to one of the most essential garments in fashion today, namely the trouser suit, it becomes quite obvious that it has not always been regarded as proper attire for women. It is clear that the options for women to dress in a more versatile way have broadened; however, the trouser suit was not always acceptable in society. Actresses such as Greta Garbo wore trousers in private for activities such as hiking, still, she did not dare to bring this newly found fashion item for the female onto the red carpets of the world. It took another woman who was daring enough to make this outfit socially acceptable: the German actress Marlene Dietrich. Although at first, critics claimed that Dietrich only wanted to draw attention to herself as a publicity stunt, it became clear quite soon, that she simply liked her new style and the freedom of movement that the suit brought with it (Berry 145). In an interview, the actress underlined her point of view by claiming that,

“... [w]omen’s clothes take too much time - it is exhausting, shopping for them [...] Then the styles change - and it must all be done over again, every few months. It is very extravagant to dress as most women do. Men’s clothes do not change; I can wear them as long as I like.” (Dietrich quoted in Berry 145-146)

Clearly underlining the practicability of the trouser suit over other dress conventions previously dominant in women’s fashion, whether it be due to the constantly required renewal of the wardrobe or the versatility when it comes to movement, Dietrich gave way to a new understanding of a new garment for women. Craik has claimed that

“... [t]he ways in which bodies are fashioned through clothes, make-up and demeanour constitute identity, sexuality and social position. In other words, clothed bodies are tools of self-management.” (Craik 45)

This self-management is clearly paired with another feature, which is prominently highlighted in Dietrich’s trend. The position of German actresses in establishing a new way of dressing for women among society clearly marks the powerful nature not only of clothes but also of their wearers. In this sense, body and garment cannot be seen as two completely separated terms but rather as an effective tool for power if used appropriately. The French fashion designer and founder of the Chanel brand, Coco Chanel, once allegedly said about herself, “I don’t do fashion. I AM fashion” (Vogue.co.uk 2013). Assuming this quote to be true, she therefore quite clearly embodied the manifold and especially powerful features this form of self-expression and self-management brings about.

Taking everything together, the term *fashionable queen* deliberately constructs a woman to be in a position of power not exclusively but predominantly by the means of clothing. Yet this position of power is not restricted to the embodiment of royalty or political power exclusively, as the word queen might imply. A fashionable queen can rather be seen as a clearly two-fold term, which is also echoed in this present book.

In the first part of the book, the fashionable queen is explained in the context of the royal and the political queen, with the attribute of being a fashion icon or a powerful monarch who uses clothes to express (royal) interests. The essays presented here cover heterogeneous approaches and theoretical frameworks. Starting from an historical perspective on Anglophone culture, Birgit Neumann's essay "Queen Victoria and Political Self-Fashioning: Clothing Careers" revisits visual representation of Queen Victoria and critically questions how fashion gave way to the possibility of staging the Queen as both domestic woman and idealized icon of the British empire. She further emphasizes the position of Queen Victoria in the 19th century, when political sovereignty was no longer God given but rather a staging of political power, done - in the case of Victoria - by means of fashion. In the second essay, "From Princess Bride to Fashion Queen: Wedding Gowns as a Strategy and Spatial and Physical Staging Act", the author Lioba Keller-Drescher discusses present day royal weddings in the UK, especially highlighting those of Diana Spencer, Princess of Wales, Catherine, Duchess of Cambridge and Camilla Mountbatten-Windsor, Duchess of Cornwall. Keller-Drescher argues that the significance of the dress paired with the staging of the body and the spatial arrangement in the respective location create a lasting image of the future queen. Moving away from the British isles across the Atlantic, Stella Bruzzi addresses the significance of Jacqueline Kennedy's style in her essay "Jacqueline Kennedy: White House Queen and Enduring Style Icon". Her close reading, especially of the pink suit Jackie wore when her husband, the American president J.K. Kennedy, was assassinated in November 1963 and its appropriation in cinematic depictions and recreations of the event, sheds light on the uncanny nature of this fashionable ensemble. Diving into the world of politics, Eva Flicker's essay "Fashionable Gender Trouble in Politics" draws attention to the otherness of women in political situations. By focusing on the combination of fashion and the body, she uncovers gender relations and strategies of inclusion and exclusion in a close reading of visual material from official political gatherings.

Flicker's essay breaks with the focus on Anglophone cultures and moves to continental Europe via global media representations. The essays that follow are firmly grounded on European continental cultures. In her critical approach to Louise of Prussia in the essay "The Queen Stripped Bare: Louise of Prussia, Nudity, Fashion, and Political Iconography", Katharina Sykora discusses the problematic nature of the often paradoxical values the Queen had to embody around 1800. By stressing the importance of *mode à la grèque* and thereby contrasting her image to that of the discourse of nudity fashion, the dangerous and sexually promiscuous tendency of Louise of Prussia's persona is foregrounded. In the next essay titled "Productive Illegibility: Gender, Monarchy and Self-Creation in the Histories, Images and Fictions of Queen Christina Vasa of Sweden", Griselda Pollock revisits the nature of Queen Christina of Sweden and her representation on the big screen by Greta Garbo. By stressing the essentiality of

clothes and especially the potential for cross-dressing and gender-ambiguity in the cinematic representation, the monarchical body and the feminine body as well as the dispute that arises by contrasting these two are put into a dialogue by examining the romanticized filmic depiction of royalty and the status quo of early modern monarchies. In “Sisi & Sisters: On Stars and Style”, Michaela Lindinger takes a critical look at the Austrian Empress Elisabeth both when she was still alive and after her death when she was transformed into an icon of herself. Thematising Sisi’s choice of clothes as well as her struggle to preserve her youth, the empress and her style are seen in the light of her inspirations, such as Cora Pearl, the famous courtesan. The last two essays of the first part of the book are concerned with the French court of the 18th century and its most prominent figurehead: Marie Antoinette. In “Fashion Victim? Marie Antoinette (1755 Vienna, 1793 Paris)”, Barbara Vinken addresses how the French monarch mirrored the upcoming change in tradition for both kings and queens with regards to their clothes brought about by the French Revolution. She argues that rather than coinciding with God’s stamp on the prevailing aristocratic order, Marie Antoinette challenged the norm in various ways, one of them being the erotization of the queen’s body. The second essay dealing with Marie Antoinette, “Let Them Go Shopping: Marie Antoinette Moves from Page to Screen” by Pamela Church-Gibson, is concerned with the cinematic representations of the French queen in a variety of movies as well as the paucity of films with the Queen as amiable and kind-hearted heroine. Drawing attention to the costumes in the filmic depictions, the label queen of fashion is revisited critically.

The second part of the book is no longer concerned with royal or political queens in the traditional sense but rather examines the potential of fashion when used by popular culture queens throughout the ages. The first essay in this section is titled “Column with a Slit: The Diva and her Dress” in which the author Annette Geiger emphasizes the essence of the column dress in the making of Hollywood divas of the 1930s and 1940s. Travelling back to antiquity to uncover the root of this particular garment, Geiger examines how the column dress constructs a female *super human* in the classical era of Hollywood in art and design. Patricia A. Cunningham’s essay “Irene Castle: Ragtime Dance and Fashion Icon” sheds light on the female part of the most famous dance performers in America, Irene and Vernon Castle. Apart from their success in the ballroom, Irene soon rose to fame in the fashion world, launching her own wardrobe and establishing herself not only as ragtime dancer but as an actress and fashion icon. The third essay, “‘Hiding in Plain Sight’: Fashion and Mimicry in Cindy Sherman’s (Non-Self-) Portraits” by Hanne Loreck, engages in a critical dialogue with the work of the artist Cindy Sherman. Loreck addresses how the artist stages femininity through garments but also how this symbiosis comes to life in Sherman’s characters, performed through their normality and eccentricity with the help of costumes, make-up and accessories. Gertrud Lehnert takes a closer look on a ubiquitous toy in her article “Fashion Queen Barbie”. She examines the centrality of Barbie’s position in

fashion as well as strategies of identification, the creation of desire and Barbie's role as a product in a product-centred world. By emphasizing the doll's changing appearances over the past 50 years, Lehnert discusses processes of self-fashioning and examines the spatiality of the fashionable body. Changing the medium and moving to the television screen, Laura McLaws Helms concerns herself with the American television program *Dynasty* of the 1980s, a soap opera which was largely successful for the rivalry between two of the main female characters. In the essay "Krystle and Alexis: The Princess and the Queen Bitch in *Dynasty*", McLaws Helms puts the characters of Krystle and Alexis in a dialogue with the costumes designed by Nolan Miller and sees the clothes as a mirror for the personal traits of the two women. The last essay, "Like a Queen: Madonna & the Stage as Court", Adam Louis Troidahl reads the pop star's performances of the last decade as pastiche which can often be considered to be self-referential. Critically applying Kantorowicz's Two Bodies theory, Troidahl explains Madonna's self-fashioning as a queen and argues that by the use of her body politic, the singer can be seen in the light of a post-modern religion.

Taken together, the essays collected here give a broad insight into the topic of the fashionable queen. Using different approaches and theoretical frameworks as well as a vast number of women and objects to study, the manifold implications that the combination of women and fashion can have and the immense variety of forms this discussion can take is presented. By addressing such phenomena, this present book offers a new way of thinking about publically significant women who exert, and at the same time subvert, their power through their garments and thereby reconsider notions of body, power and gender. To underline the universality of fashion, we will end on a general note in the words of the incomparable and previously mentioned queen of fashion Coco Chanel, "Fashion is not something that exists in dresses only. Fashion is in the sky, in the street, fashion has to do with ideas, the way we live, what is happening" (Vogue.co.uk 2013).¹

Note on pictures

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