



How aesthetic logics shape a cultural field: Differentiation and consolidation in the transnational field of fashion images, 1982–2011



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ABSTRACT

This article presents a sociological analysis of the aesthetic logics of female fashion images, that is: the underlying cultural order structuring the combination of aesthetic elements into coherent styles. Drawing on a longitudinal, cross-national content analysis, we use multiple correspondence analysis to uncover aesthetic styles in British, Dutch and Italian fashion magazines. We find that the field of fashion images is structured by three dimensions: stylization; glamorous sexualization; and expressive sexualization versus withdrawal. Across time and place, styles are remarkably stable. We find little crossnational variation, but distinctive aesthetic styles for different magazine types. Over time, we observe a consolidation and crystallization of a transnational high fashion style that distinguishes itself from a transnational commercial style and more diverse local mainstream magazines. Our analysis shows how visual elements in fashion images are part of a multi-dimensional aesthetic system in which meaning depends on the context in which elements occur and co-occur. Thus, we develop a relational approach to the analysis of cultural symbols that takes into account the polysemic nature of aesthetic elements. We argue that (cultural) sociologists should take aesthetics seriously, as aesthetics forms a partly independent dimension that cannot be reduced to structural factors or field dynamics.

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1. Introduction

Cultural production is about aesthetics. All cultural products, from music to film and from literature to fashion, appeal to the senses in order to achieve a sensation of beauty, enjoyment or even “the sublime.” They do so by combining different aesthetic elements in ever-changing ways. Thus, music combines ingredients like melody, rhythm, instrumentation, harmony and lyrics; and visual arts rely on elements like colour, composition, texture, material, but also subject matter and degree of realism to please the senses. Fashion photography aims to create aesthetic appeal by combining the looks of (in most cases) attractive people, styled and dressed in particular ways, with the various elements that make up a beautiful or appealing image.

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This assemblage of aesthetic appeal in fashion photography can take many forms, including forms quite far removed from traditional understandings of beauty. A starkly lit image of a non-smiling woman with high cheekbones, hair drawn back, a fierce look, her thin straight body dressed in avant-garde fashion, evokes a different sensorial experience than a picture of a broadly smiling blond girl with tilted head and dimpled cheeks, wearing a colourful dress, photographed in a sunny outdoor setting. In cultural sociology, such differences are usually interpreted as the result of institutional contexts and societal dynamics. The first image is probably produced in a “restricted” cultural field (Bourdieu, 1993) where producers aim for unusual, interesting aesthetic sensations. It targets discerning audiences with the cultural capital to appreciate this rarefied beauty. The second image is more likely created in the commercial setting of the “field of mass production”, as it tries to please larger audiences with representations of beauty that are like everyday life, but better (Entwistle, 2009; Mears, 2010).

Cultural sociologists generally take differentiations between and within classes of aesthetic objects as the outcome of non-aesthetic factors: social, economic and institutional structures (Bourdieu, 1993; Peterson & Anand, 2004; Janssen, Verboord, & Kuipers, 2011). Changes in cultural fields are attributed to changes in social structure, running the risk of ignoring aesthetic changes that are “not reducible to class relations, ideology, or organizational arrangements” (Dowd, 1992: 131). While cultural sociologists have produced subtle and sophisticated tools for analyzing cultural production and consumption, they have made less progress in analyzing the cultural objects themselves (Cerulo, 1995; Becker, Faulkner, & Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 2006; Born, 2010; Marshall, 2011). Recently, interest in the analysis and measurement of cultural systems (Mohr, 1998) has been rekindled by the rise of “big data” and the development and refinement of tools for quantitative inductive analysis like topic modelling, multidimensional scaling and multiple correspondence analysis (Mohr & Bogdanov, 2013, DiMaggio, Nag, & Blei, 2013). Such techniques are perfectly suited for inductive analysis of the hidden patterns that structure cultural content – and thus, aesthetic logics – without a priori assumptions about underlying structural or institutional factors.

This article aims to take aesthetics seriously, by presenting a sociological analysis of the aesthetic logics of fashion images of female models: the underlying aesthetic order structuring the assemblage of aesthetic elements of photographs of female beauty into coherent “styles” or “tastes”. We argue that a full understanding of cultural fields requires studying the aesthetics of cultural objects as a separate, partly independent dimension. Using a content analysis schema designed to capture all aesthetic elements of a fashion image, we map the aesthetic logics of this field in three European countries (Italy, the Netherlands, and the UK), and the development of these images between 1982 and 2011. How is beauty represented in fashion images? What persons are shown, how do they look, how are they styled and photographed? Can we distinguish specific styles or clusters of recurring elements? To what extent are these styles related to institutional or structural factors?

The field of fashion images is a strategic case to study how aesthetic logics shape cultural fields. First, fashion photography is a relatively young and internationalized field. Variations in the field are less likely to stem from nationally specific trajectories and traditions than in older, more established art forms like literature or visual arts (Janssen et al., 2011). Therefore, we do not a priori expect cross-national differences. Second, as a visual art form, fashion photography is not language-dependent. This allows for standardized sociological comparison across time and national context without translation. Moreover, the visual nature of (female) fashion images increases its potential for cross-national exchange. Third, fashion photography is a popular and commercial art. Despite segmentation into avant-garde and mainstream styles, all fashion photography primarily is about making money and selling clothes (Aspers, 2001; Moeran, 2006). Therefore, all fashion images are bound by the need to be aesthetically pleasing. We therefore expect less diversity in organizational forms, target audiences or modes of institutional legitimation than in cultural fields with more institutionally separate highbrow and lowbrow forms. Moreover, we also expect less diversity than in other photographic fields such as news photography, as fashion images always need to be appealing.

Our analysis is based on the relational view that meaning emerges from relations between people, objects or categories, rather than from their inherent properties (Bourdieu, 1993; Emirbayer, 1997). Like words and sounds that only acquire meaning in their combinations with others (Mohr, 1998; Mohr & Bogdanov, 2013), visual elements become meaningful – and potentially beautiful – in the context in which they occur with other elements. Using multiple correspondence analysis, a technique that analyzes data as a system of relations of difference and similarity, we show how aesthetic elements in fashion images are arranged and combined to produce distinct styles. We find that underlying aesthetic dimensions of this field are only partly explained by institutional contexts or societal development. Moreover, they prove similar across countries, and rather durable over a thirty-year period that is marked by considerable institutional turmoil. Despite increasing globalization, commercialization, and expansion of the fashion, modelling and magazine industries, the basic aesthetic logics of fashion photography are remarkably constant across time and national context.

2. The aesthetic logics of fashion photography: towards a relational sociology of aesthetics

2.1. Towards a relational sociology of aesthetics

Sociological attempts to empirically unpack aesthetics are few and far between. Cerulo (1988, 1995) has analyzed the musical structure of national anthems, showing how combinations of musical elements (harmonies, notes, rhythm, etc.) represent different musical codes. Such codes consist of relationships between elements. The note Middle C, for instance, “sounded in isolation, has no significance for a listener”. It acquires meaning “with reference to the melody of which it is a part, or with reference to its choral accompaniment” (1988: 319). Other notable attempts to systematically analyze cultural

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