Fashion Photography

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The production system behind fashion photography is a collaboration among many sectors in the fashion industry. A photographer takes fashion pictures, usually of models wearing clothes. Garment firms produce the clothes, which are intended to be worn by consumers. Present at the set—that is, the place where the pictures are taken—are often a makeup artist, a hair-stylist, and a fashion stylist, all of whom may have assistants. The pictures will be processed and edited on a computer, and they will go through many hands before being shown to a wider audience that normally consists of the readers of a magazine, those who see advertising campaigns, customers who purchase from mail order catalogs, or viewers on the Internet. Some fashion pictures may also find their way into art galleries and museums. As a consequence of the proliferation of fashion pictures, the visual culture of fashion photography has affected other visual media, such as music videos.

Although the visual element of the pictures is what gives meaning to the term *fashion photography* and constitutes this visual culture, it is necessary to take the system of fashion photography into account to understand the development of fashion photography and its role within both fashion and photography. Research on the system of fashion photography is limited, in contrast to the relatively extensive literature on fashion photographers and their pictures. The development of fashion photography can be understood as a result of economic factors (consumers who could afford to buy magazines), new technology (which enabled improvements in printing and better photographic material that made shorter exposure times possible), and development in terms of photographic styles.

HISTORY OF PHOTOGRAPHIC TECHNIQUES

The technology of photography was developed in the mid-nineteenth century. The word *photography* has its origin in the Greek language and means "to write with light." It is a technique that captures reality using light, which results in storable prints. In the early days, the exposure time was so long that only still-life pictures could be taken, and people had to be positioned with the help of fixtures to reduce their bodily movements to make the pictures sharp. In the early twenty-first century, pictures are largely produced digitally. Fashion photography as it is known in the early twenty-first century became technically and practically possible only at the end of the nineteenth century. It is not one of the oldest genres of photography, although people, of course, have been photographed wearing clothes since the first pictures were taken. It is possible to trace the origin of fashion photography, as part of the industrial production of fashion, to the development of the technique that made it possible to print photographs on paper. These techniques were developed in the 1910s. In the early

phases, fashion photography was not glamorous; it was mostly a way to document clothes. Fashion modeling as a professional occupation did not yet exist. The models were often women working in the designers' ateliers, and, socially, such work was almost at the same level as prostitution. This has changed dramatically, and since the 1980s models have achieved celebrity status comparable to that of movie stars.

The early look of fashion photographs, for example, those taken by Edward Steichen in the first decades of the twentieth century, is best described as a replication of earlier portrait photography. Fashion photography was from the onset positioned between commercial and artistic photography, a tension that can be identified even in the twenty-first century. It slowly began to create its own visual narrative as well as engaging with artistic movements; for example, the fashion photographer George Hoyningen-Huene took part in numerous avant-garde art exhibitions in the 1930s and 1940s. The role of fashion photography was noticeable in fashion magazines: In the 1920s, *Vogue* was already hiring photographers such as Hoyningen-Huene. He, together with photographers like Horst P. Horst, Man Ray, Erwin Blumenfeld, and Cecil Beaton, contributed substantially to the elevation of fashion photography as a genre. They achieved this by taking pictures that were evocatively erotic and gave flair to the clothes at the same time. They introduced more styles and techniques, such as solarization, a method of exposing the photos to daylight for a fraction of a second during development, which was one of Man Ray's hallmarks. His photographs, with recognizable influence from the classical period, often play on the relationship between humans and machines and portray the model almost as a statue that wears clothes. His photographs were carefully staged and usually shot in an upper-class milieu. The photographers at this time were usually from the upper classes, and the combination of time to experiment, access to resources, and professional models, as well as the facility to print and spread the pictures to relatively large audiences, made it possible for them to develop individual photographic styles that were taken up outside the realm of fashion photography.

PHOTOGRAPHIC STYLES

Collective style refers to the way photographers take pictures, which may transcend individual photographic genres. Pictorialism—that is, pictures that resemble romantic paintings—is an example of a collective style that was used by photographers such as Robert Demachy and Edward Steichen. When a photographer has developed a personal photographic style, the pictures often refer back to his or her earlier pictures, so that one can observe a resemblance in the technique. This is the case for the work of portrait and fashion photographers Mario Testino and Mikael Jansson. If photographers' styles begin to refer to each other, they may constitute collective styles, such as the so-called heroin chic style of the late twentieth century.

It is perhaps only with the works of Richard Avedon and Irving Penn that one can talk of fashion photographers who came to have a strong influence on photography in general, outside of fashion photography. They entered the industry in the late 1940s, when the dominating era of haute couture came to an end,

correlating with a more democratic and available fashion, at the same time as more magazines were published. Penn and Avedon elevated themselves as creators through taking photographs that were artistic works in their own right and not merely pictures of certain clothes. Their photographs were clearly brought together in narratives that were part of their personal style. They, together with, for example, David Bailey, Hiro, Helmut Newton, and Deborah Turberville, put the model at the center of the pictures. The models, as a result, became more than statues; they were central and highly integrated components. David Bailey's models were photographed in motion, which meant that the images' technical quality could not match that of studio pictures; however, they instead conveyed emotions and the mobility of a more active woman.

When the model received more attention—which was clearly seen in the way British model Twiggy achieved fame in the 1960s—the clothes became less central in fashion photography. Newton's pictures of nude models on the catwalk are the quintessence of fashion photography transcending fashion, which can most clearly be seen in the book entitled *Big Nudes* (1981). In the 1970s and 1980s, fashion photography became one of the forces that demystified fashion and dethroned it from the high position of beauty, style, and class.

Pictures of models looking like drug addicts, or fashion addicts, at the beginning of the second millennium, such as those taken by Jürgen Teller, Mario Sorrenti, Wolfgang Tillmans, and others suggest that fashion photography has gained autonomy and that it cannot simply be viewed as an extension of the fashion industry. The fashion photographer Terry Richardson, who, for example has photographed campaigns for the fashion brand Sisley, has put himself in front of the camera and thereby shown the centrality and power of the fashion photographer.

If the pictures of the 1970s and 1980s were romantic and full of glamour, the fashion photography of the 1990s and the early twenty-first century looks quite different. It is a much more brutal and frank photography, with direct flash that makes the pictures look like amateur photography and with models shown in shabby hotel rooms. This change in the visual style has created a greater distance between the wealth that fashion has traditionally displayed and the reality experienced by many of the younger generation of photographers, who do not necessarily come from the privileged social backgrounds characteristic of the earlier generations of photographers. Many fashion photographers have also engaged in other forms of photography for private or artistic purposes, which also helped to elevate their status as photographers. There is no doubt that a few well-known photographers, not least those mentioned previously, through their pictures, names, and deeds, have had an impact on the history of fashion photography. The reason why some photographers have done this cannot be attributed to their own skill or genius alone. It is also because of an audience made up of those who celebrated them and endowed them with status. In other words, one must look beyond the internal narrative of fashion photography and see who influenced whom in order to understand why the pictures look the way they do.

To account only for what the stars of the industry do is not sufficient for the study of photography because it leaves out their less-famous colleagues. The photographers who never make it as fashion photographers despite thousands of hours of training in schools, in darkrooms, as assistants, and in front of the computer

are the majority, but their attempts leave few, if any, traces in the history of fashion photography. The system of fashion photography is much larger than the famous and glamorous few.

THE PRODUCTION SYSTEM OF FASHION PHOTOGRAPHY

To understand the fashion industry, it is necessary to know that all the participants in this cultural economy depend on each other, and in this case the results (the photographs) depend on several actors working together. In fashion photography, the photographer and, to some extent, the fashion stylists—especially if they are fashion editors at well-known fashion magazines—receive the most acknowledgment for the published pictures. The photographer owns the legal rights to the pictures, which further points to their centrality. Other participants, such as models, hairstylists, makeup artists, and assistants, have less influence on the look of the pictures. Fashion models, for example, may spend weeks working for free and, between jobs, going to so-called go-sees, where they meet potential customers.

Aspiring photographers usually attend photography school and then work as assistants to photographers before they enter the market. During this period, they begin to build up their portfolio of pictures. Some photographers cater to all kinds of customers, but to get an assignment for a fashion magazine, the pictures must be very focused and made according to one style. To generate these portfolios, a person who wants to become a fashion photographer must work with aspiring models, hairstylists, and others who also need a portfolio of photographs to show potential customers what they can do. This means that there is an economy of sorts—though largely without money—that is driven by the wish to enter the real market for paid work. These teams of potential entrants join forces, and if they are judged to be good enough, they may get the chance to publish what is called a *fashion story* of about eight pictures. A fashion story is published in the editorial section of a magazine.

The large and prestigious magazines, such as *Harper's Bazaar* and *Vogue*, offer lucrative contracts to the fashion photographers they hire. It is usually in these magazines that one finds the pictures that have become "classical" fashion shots. It is also in these magazines that contemporary photographers like Patrick Demarchelier and Steven Meisel publish their work. The majority of photographers, especially those struggling to enter the market, may work extremely hard to get assignments to do what is called editorial fashion photography for a small magazine, which may not cover the cost of producing the fashion story. Many magazines pay very little, and this raises the question why photographers, freelance stylists, and others do this essentially unpaid work.

Fashion magazines—and, to some extent, lifestyle magazines with sections on fashion—compete with each other, and each magazine has an identity in its particular market. Magazines that present avant-garde fashion, those that give photographers more aesthetic freedom, and established magazines such as *Marie Claire* and *Elle* have more status in the eyes of photographers than others. They are well known among those who buy magazines, and they also have large circulations.

Photographers tend to want to work with magazines that allow them the greatest artistic freedom and often value art and aesthetic freedom over money. Moreover, each magazine has a visual narrative represented by its history of published fashion

stories and the photographers published in its pages. Thus, a photographer who wants to publish a fashion story will try to find a magazine that may be interested in publishing his or her individual photographic style. In successful collaborations, there is a fit between the photographer and the magazine.

Acceptance by a magazine endows status on a photographer's name and the style that his or her pictures represent. These three components—personal name, style, and status—make up the photographer's market identity. The amount of status a photographer achieves is a consequence of the status of the magazines in which he or she publishes. Because pictures are published and made public, everyone knows the photographer's position in the market, or the segment of the market, and this is true of both photographers and fashion editors. Having one's work published in a magazine, even though it may not be economically rewarding, determines the aesthetic dimension of a photographer's identity.

The final consumers of the pictures—the magazine readers—passively take part in the system as an audience that may or may not buy what is offered. They have not ordered the pictures; they encounter them in public life and can only react to them. Few consumers know the names of the photographers, the models, or others who take part in the production of the pictures.

Buyers of magazines know the names of the magazines, and they generally know what they can expect to find inside the magazine in terms of articles on fashion, beauty, sex, and gossip. The market for fashion magazines has grown, especially since lower production costs have made them more available. In the twenty-first century, several large publishing houses publish local versions of the same magazine, such as *Elle* and *Vogue*. The fact that most European countries have an edition in their own language of, for example, *Elle*, suggests that while there may be global trends, fashion is always locally interpreted. Although there are a number of different European fashion markets, buyers of fashion magazines have access to magazines from all over the world. On the Internet, this information is even more easily accessible. Furthermore, fashion photographers, models, and stylists from all over the world work in major fashion cities such as Tokyo, New York, and Milan.

Some magazines, such as Italian *Vogue*, are seen as especially prestigious in the eyes of photographers. Regardless of which country the magazine is published in, a photographer's freedom is largely a consequence of his or her status. Furthermore, the status a fashion photographer achieves through this interaction can be

converted into money. Taking pictures for advertising campaigns is a primary source of income for photographers. Art directors at advertising agencies are in charge of the aesthetic dimension of the campaigns, and they hire photographers to take the pictures. Because large sums of money are involved, only well-established photographers with a record of accomplishments and status in the industry are considered. Taking the photographs for a fashion advertising campaign can cement a photographer's status, but this type of work does not allow photographers the same freedom as does editorial fashion photography.

Advertisement photography has a different logic than editorial photography, and the pictures tend to look different. Garment firms have a budget for advertisements, and advertising agencies compete with each other on the basis of ideas, given the budget. It is the task of the advertising agency to maintain—or sometimes change—the identity of the customer, the fashion company. A photographer who accepts this type of job joins a team that typically has already decided what the pictures should look like.

There is a structural separation within the fashion industry between the more aesthetic dimension, represented by editorial fashion photography, and the more economically oriented or commercial kind of photography, represented by advertisement fashion photography. The separation of art and commerce is the structural condition that enables photographers to develop their own ideas and to make fashion photography accepted as an art form. The separation also makes it possible to maintain the connection to the much-needed economic capital that is characteristic of the world of fashion. A fashion photographer can thus maintain two seemingly conflicting roles: a business person who makes money and an artist who creates for art's sake.

References and Further Reading

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Patrik Aspers