

Refashioning the Male Body

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There is a long and ignoble history, from the Classical thought of Plato to the Enlightenment philosophy of René Descartes, of associating man with rationality and woman with the body and nature. But, of course, it would be quite wrong to assume that the male body has been somehow insignificant in the visual language of modernity.

The male body is conspicuous in the iconography of the 1930s and early 1940s. In the decades running up to the Second World War, powerful male figures—stripped to the waist—rend chains, wield hammers, clasp bayonets, or brandish flags. Shifting ideologies of gender have written and rewritten themselves onto the male body throughout the twentieth century and into our own.

As Klaus Theweleit describes, the masculine body of the early twentieth century is frequently transformed into a steely carapace, or sublimated into a mass of uniformed soldiers. By becoming a machine, it denies its own corporeality becoming:

“a physical type devoid of drives and psyche whose instinctual energies have been smoothly and frictionlessly transformed into functions of his steel body [...] Each and every feeling tightly locked in steel armour.”

The mechanized man so vividly evoked by Theweleit is a figure who could only have emerged from the processes of modernity: the “rational” systems of organization, control, and scrutiny that – as Michel Foucault describes – came to govern male-dominated institutions such as factories, prisons, the military, and asylums from the enlightenment onwards.

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But in the new millennium, as the economic, gendered and ideological structures governing our lives have shifted and evolved, this modernist mode of masculine embodiment and the associated values of hegemonic masculinity have been increasingly challenged.

Over the past two decades, contemporary culture, particularly those image clusters around fashion, have increasingly drawn attention to men's bodies. As images of the male form have proliferated, issues of identity, aesthetic labour, sexuality, and competing ideologies of gender have come to the fore.

The film theorist Laura Mulvey in her seminal essay *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* of 1973 wrote:

In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its phantasy onto the female figure [...] the male figure cannot bear the burden of sexual objectification. Man is reluctant to gaze at his exhibitionist like.

And yet, the male figure in contemporary fashion from the catwalk to the advertising hoarding has certainly come to connote "to-be-looked-at-ness" in Mulvey's memorable phrase. How and why has the fashionable male body increasingly subjected itself to the gaze? What visual and embodied pleasures has this permitted men?

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On the runway for spring summer 2019 Maison Yves Saint Laurent presented a series of mostly monochrome looks enlivened with touches of silver, red, and soft pink, the close cleaving (vaguely 70s

silhouette) and chiffon shirts drawing attention to the models' slender physiques.

A year earlier, in Paris beside the Palais de Tokyo, a catwalk collection was unveiled that foregrounded the male form even more emphatically: at Rick Owens a parade of lean bodies proceeded along a specially constructed scaffolding walkway – their fragile figures juxtaposed against the voluptuous art-deco statuary that framed the presentation. Brief shorts exposed narrow thighs bound with strange, bulging leather accessories; and an otherworldly, futuristic look was created by tunics featuring translucent panels and capacious abstract volumes that further emphasised the models' slighthness.

Since the turn of the millennium, designers as diverse as Raf Simons, Hedi Slimane, Juun J, Grace Wales Bonner and Alessandro Michele have employed waif-like models to conjure up an ambiguous, liminal aesthetic that seemed to speak of a renegotiation of gender identities in the twenty-first century.

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At the same time that these adolescent waifs have come to dominate the menswear catwalk, however, a strikingly divergent form of fashionable masculine presentation has emerged in the context of social media, reality television, in an expanding fitness culture, and through cultural intermediaries such as vloggers, instagram-users and celebrity sportsmen. On television, the male contestants of *Love Island* – a competitive reality-dating programme filmed in Majorca – have come to typify a certain kind of spectacularised 'spornosexual' look characterised by a gym-honed, muscular, smooth, tanned and often tattooed body. This physique – highlighted by close fitting, brief and revealing garments – points to

the body as an increasingly crucial site for identity formation amongst young, working-class men, while simultaneously demonstrating the growing role of aesthetic labour in an economy of eroticised masculinities.

This paper seeks to make sense of these two contrasting modes of embodiment in the context of shifting forms of gendered practice and a rapidly transforming economy. Where did these dual forms of representation come from? What does this foregrounding of the male body – whether slender or pneumatic – tell us about the nature of masculinity today? And how might alternative and more diverse modes of embodiment emerge in the future?

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Over the past two decades, the male model on the runway has transformed beyond all recognition. Where once pneumatic, muscular bodies and square jaws predominated, today a fragile, attenuated, adolescent physicality prevails: a corporeal style that speaks not of strength, dominance and certainty but of vulnerability and ambiguity (and which sometimes invites a fetishizing gaze).

This spring/summer, two female designers speaking at the unveiling of their respective collections, independently drew associations between the slim male body, and the politics of masculinity: Miuccia Prada spoke of the importance of articulating “a new form of sexiness” through the male body, while Donatella Versace – the creative director of a label once closely associated with the Olympian physique of the 80s – spoke of resisting the politics of toxic masculinity stating “I want to talk to many different people, to talk about vulnerability, to create a conversation”.

Nor are these designers alone in placing the thin male body at the centre of an attempt to redefine the aesthetics and meanings of masculinity. Designer Grace Wales Bonner produces work that

responds to the hyper-masculinized stereotyping of black men in popular culture stating:

I've seen enough images of black men looking really aggressive, very hypersexualised or "street." That's not how I think about men at all. Those aren't the men in my life.

Since 2015, Wales Bonner has engaged in a provocative, adoption of androgynous styles showcased on slender models. Her exploration of black aesthetics draws on the sophistication of the Harlem Renaissance, the energy of 60s and 70s Malian and Nigerian fashions, and the courtois refinement of Ethiopian royal dress. In her debut collection Ebonics, crystal chokers gleamed against bare skin while willowy models made the black-power salute. In one striking outfit a white waistcoat and cummerbund worn without a shirt drew attention to the model's sinuous body—his bare arms sparkling with bijouterie and streaked in iridescent blue.

Elsewhere, at Craig Green, the asymmetric apertures and openings of deconstructed garments frame slim bodies in unexpected ways, while at Juun J. abbreviated shorts reveal long slender legs.

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So where did this silhouette grow from and what does it mean?

The model of desirable masculinity of the 1980s defined by muscularity and popularised by such figures as Bruce Weber and Herb Ritts was, by the mid-1990s, increasingly challenged in youth and alternative culture. In music, the mode of self-presentation adopted by figures like Richey Edwards of The Manic Street Preachers, Kurt Cobain of Nirvana, and Brett Anderson of Suede had very deliberately differentiated itself from the images of desirable masculinity that dominated mainstream fashion and film of the period. So too did the alternative fashion photography of Corinne Day, Willy Vanderperre, David Sims, and Collier Schorr, with its focus on adolescence, nudity, sexuality, and grungy social realism. And

from the late 1990s onwards up-and-coming menswear designers like Raf Simons, Hedi Slimane, and Helmut Lang presented a new slim silhouette on street-cast models.

The slender, frequently androgynous form of embodiment favoured in these hip cultural forms gestured to the rejection of an orthodox, patriarchal masculinity in favour of something more questioning, vulnerable, and chaotic.

To frame it in poststructuralist terms, these skinny, effeminate figures, represented the antithesis of the “phallic order” – as symbolized by the upright, rigid, disciplined, hard, muscular bodies that came to prominence in the 1980s – in favour of a more chaotic, affect-laden, corporeality that relates to Julia Kristeva’s notion of the abject.

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By the turn of the millennium, this ambiguous male archetype had moved decisively into the spotlight (not least on the catwalk of the newly founded Dior Homme).

In an Autumn/Winter 2001 edition of *Arena Homme+*, an article entitled “Adam’s ribs” asked:

Who puts the slim into Slimane’s shows? It’s a transformation to confound Darwin [...] the male model has transformed into a much sleeker animal. Gone are the grinning, pumped-up, all-American-types that dominated the Eighties [...] In their place we have the less burly, more surly European skinny-boy.

Slimane’s intervention in men’s fashion at Yves Saint Laurent and most importantly at Dior Homme represents the point at which the

skinny male model moves from the periphery to the centre of men's fashion. By the early 2000s, the lean, supple physical type championed by Slimane had begun to gain currency. Soft, draping, fluid fabrics caress the skin of slender menswear models on the catwalks of Capasa, Slimane, Simons, and Helmut Lang, suggesting a more sensing, sensual, embodied form of subjectivity. As fashion journalist Charlie Porter put it in 2001:

Slimane is heralding a more sensitive interpretation of male self image at odds with the pumped-up gym stereotype that has dominated menswear for the past two decades.

In the work of these designers, then, there is a concerted effort to overturn the standards, assumptions, and aesthetics of normative masculinity, to reject and replace them with something else: a celebration not of strength, dominance, and conformity, but of a much more ambiguous, liminal gender identity. And this renunciation of hegemonic masculinity in the world of men's fashion connected to a broader cultural shift in the early years of the new millennium. Sociologist Eric Anderson—conducting ethnographic fieldwork amongst British and American men between 1999 and 2004—found striking, unexpected changes in masculine identities were taking place, as young men increasingly embraced identities that were more affectionate, more diverse, less delimited by sexism and homophobia, in which behaviours historically categorized as feminine were given licence. Anderson has used the term inclusive masculinity to refer to these new forms of identity.

The corporeal fashions of the new millennium seemed to permit young men (in particular) to access a set of subjectivities, vulnerabilities and emotions that had been forbidden them hitherto. And these embodied aesthetics have remained popular throughout the 2010s in various indie, emo, hipster and other subcultures. But as this body style has become increasingly dominant in high-fashion

imagery, such celebrations of youthful indeterminacy and vulnerability all too easily transform into an objectifying gaze.

The wan liminal adolescent bodies celebrated in magazines like *10 Men*, *Man About Town*, and *Another Man* with the “boy collapsed”, “boy lost in forest” scenarios of their photo-shoots and pages of shirtless “fresh-faces” conform all too closely to the feminist theorist Martha Nussbaum’s seven point taxonomy of objectification characterised by “denial of autonomy, inertness, fungibility, violability, ownership, and denial of subjectivity”.

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Significant though these representations may be, let’s turn away from the catwalk and high-end magazines for a moment to assess those corporeal fashions transmitted via the mass media instead.

As part of this year’s world cup – for example – footballers from across the globe have descended upon Russia bringing with them a set of sartorial and aesthetic practices that may unnerve the reactionary Russian authorities. In the figures of Cristiano Ronaldo, Neymar de Silva Santos, and Toni Kroos with their rippling musculatures; tanned, waxed, and tattooed bodies, and carefully coiffed hair, we see how new techniques of the body have entered into the mainstream: football representing a site in which modes of body maintenance – technologies of the self that were once peripheral or taboo have gained a mass audience.

In 2014 the journalist Mark Simpson coined the portmanteau term ‘spornosexual’ to allude to the aspirational, artfully honed male bodies popular in sport and pornography and widely emulated by working class young men.

Like the metrosexual and New Man before him, the spornosexual emerges at the confluence of new types of representation and new forms of gendered practice. A figure created out of media discourse, but who corresponds to real changes in the lived experiences of men in the 2010s. And his aesthetic—derived from the idealized heavily crafted bodies of sportsmen, reality television personalities, and pornographic actors—is connected to the growing acceptability not only of working out, but also of hair-removal, tattooing, artificial tanning, teeth bleaching, and other forms of bodily remediation.

Of course, there are very clear connections between spornosexual aesthetics and images of the male body that became popular in the 1980s. But unlike the 80s in which notions of authenticity and nostalgic references were key to the commercialisation of the male form, the spectacularised male body of today is distinctive in the way that it speaks to values of attractiveness, success and fun – and in its explicit constructedness!

Spornosexuals aren't aiming for a look that is "natural", artless or unassuming (or that appears to be so). And indeed, critiques of this body style in journalism and popular discourse are often centred upon its lack of "authenticity". There's a sense that by drawing attention to the constructedness and performativity of orthodox masculinity spornosexuals threaten its apparent naturalness and disrupt the economy of gendered looking.

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The British reality television programme *Love Island* in which, in the first episode, female contestants choose from a number of male potential matches based solely on appearance represents an intriguing case study where issues of spectatorship, sexuality, corporeality and aesthetic labour come to the fore. Perhaps part of

the fascination commanded by this show, lies in the way that it schematises a set of broader cultural and economic shifts. In the contemporary world of work, in intimate relationships, and in media representation the male body is commodified as never before: *Love Island* represents a spectacularised version of dating app Tinder in which the swipe to the left or right becomes visible for all to see! Similarly, the rise of the service and knowledge sectors, of freelance, portfolio careers and of the digital economy has further increased the premium on beauty for both men and women. Whether in low-paid bar, retail or hospitality work or in the more prestigious fields of consultancy, PR, and marketing the management of appearance has become increasingly crucial.

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Scholars like Hannele Harjunen who critique the rise of the “neoliberal body” argue that as the logic of the market extends ever further, we have come to see our physical selves, and those of others, as branded products. And while I share some of Harjunen’s concerns, I think it is equally crucial that we are attentive to the ways that modes of resistance, and progressive change can also emerge in the context of popular culture, including in relation to the body.

The spornosexual style – like other forms of fashionable masculinity – permits men to self-author, and to engage in the work of identity without fearing the accusation of inauthenticity, effeminacy or illegibility. In this sense, the proliferation of body styles and identities in late modernity – whether waiflike or bronzed and buff – has allowed men to challenge the values of hegemonic masculinity and of the inexpressive, affectless and instrumentalised mode of embodiment that dominated much of the twentieth century. New attitudes to embodiment have enabled men to take pleasure in and make meaning through their bodies. But despite this greater

freedom, the male form in fashion and popular media has often lacked variety: he has been either very athletic, or very slim, but almost always young, able-bodied and cis.

Today, albeit tentatively, a greater range of physical types are slowly beginning to enter into men's fashion imagery as the industry responds to a demands for greater diversity and inclusion, and as forms of self-representation with their origins in social media, Instagram and vlogging begin to impact upon fashion proper. So called 'plus-size' bodies, disabled bodies and trans bodies – bodies that have been marginalised in most forms of mass-representation and that have rarely been portrayed in an affirmative, aspirational or positive light are beginning to be seen with greater frequency. Whether or not such images amount to tokenism, the emergence of bodies that have been rendered invisible into the limelight of the catwalk and photoshoot, point to fashion's role in renegotiating gendered-identities and in contributing to a pluralisation, queering, and expansion of masculinities in the twenty-first century.