

Fashion Stories: Emily Apter, Rhonda Garelick, and Anne Higo...

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SPEAKERS

Emily Apter, Casey Wayne Patterson, Anne Higonnet, Margaret Cohen, Rhonda Garelick



Casey Wayne Patterson 00:08

Welcome, and thanks for joining us in this episode of Cafe, the Stanford Center for the Study of the Novel podcast. In this installment, our host Margaret Cohen is joined by guests Emily Apter, Rhonda Garelick, and Anne Higonnet to discuss the relation between fashion as a social skin and modernity. Emily Apter is the Silver Professor of French and Comparative Literature at NYU. Rhonda Garelick is Dean of the Parsons School of Design at the New School. Anne Higonnet is a professor of Art History and Archaeology at Barnard College. This conversation was recorded on January 9 2020, shortly before our guests gave papers and a panel titled "Fashion Stories." After Margaret asks her question, Rhonda answers first, then Emily, then Anne. We're thrilled to be sharing this conversation with you, so thank you again for listening in as we scholars have a friendly chat among ourselves.



Margaret Cohen 01:02

I'm really interested in your papers, that you all brought up some aspect of classicism or neoclassicism, when you sent me the paper topics, and I'm wondering, is there a spirit of the time or were you talking to each other or what might have inspired that?

R

Rhonda Garelick 01:19

Well, I actually changed my paper topic after some conferring with our colleagues. And I realized that we had all been thinking about fashion and classicism and I had not planned to do this paper, but then hearing from the others, I realized it was more appropriate. And I've been thinking about classicism in fashion, and neo-Hellenism in particular for a while. And my take on it has everything to do with that social justice aspect of fashion that you and I were talking about before, which is that, I think Greek...stories, let's call it, but we're talking about Greek drama, and myth, are a part of our DNA, in a way, in the Western world anyway, right. And I think we react to politics, through story and through fashion. And for me, fashion has a kind of Pantheon, and a series of narratives that are deep in us that we express whether we realize it or not. And it's a kind of everyday person's mythology. And for me, that's the beginning of the conversation about the accessibility of fashion studies, which I think is a democratic thing. And it is part of my teaching, but it's also part of my writing work as a journalist, in addition to being a scholar, I feel it reaches a wider audience and includes many more people, especially many more women, in important conversation.

E

Emily Apter 02:37

I actually saw a catalog a big book called Goddess. And this is, of course, one of the mythologies that you grew up with. But I was also interested in the structure of pleats. And so one, one of the things I'm going to be talking about today has to do with that, but, I'll say a bit more, but drapery, pleats, how that gets kind of imprinted on fabric.

A

Anne Higonnet 03:06

In a ways we're echoing what Rhonda was saying, fashion is cyclical, we all know that. And this beginning of a cycle that is deeply embedded in our ideas about time, is the story of ancient Greece. And so I think often, when there's a very big social change, which fashion expresses, you get a return to some version of that ancient Greek story. And part of what I'm looking forward to in our talks is that we're each talking about a different cycle, in which the ancient Greek story is invoked. And to pick up on what Emily was saying, in a way the, the metaphor of the pleat, I think, is a very good one to add to the metaphor of the cycle, because we, we sort of keep pleating, that story of, of classicism in new and different ways.

M

Margaret Cohen 04:10

What about the body? I mean, I feel if you ask me, "What are things you associate with

classicism," I would bring up democracy and the [...], I would bring up myth and story. And I would certainly think about the celebration of the human body, which, in the 21st century, here we are in Silicon Valley in the age of AI, all sorts of cyborgs. I wonder if that doesn't have something that is at some way at stake.

E

Emily Apter 04:40

So I actually will be discussing this a little bit more in my paper. But one of the things that interests me is the way in which stone drapery becomes a kind of embodied materialism. And I was also reading an essay by Brooke Holmes. I don't know if you've come across her work. She did a catalog--or I guess it was a collected volume, called *Liquid Antiquity*, which is quite wonderful and it doesn't deal with fashion, but the, the whole way in which time is pleated in, but it becomes a form of embodied materiality, that sculpture was-- created this miracle, which is stone drapery. How do you really do that? How do you create an impression of fabric? And then it goes on from there, is it a kind of skin? So I think we can get into the way neoclassical fashion in the 19th century, plays around with the proximity, first of all have a kind of organ or nudity that comes through the cloth because the cloth is gossamer or its fabric. But then it's also in a sense, like a Greek body, that is both perfect and polished, so there's the rough and the smooth that come into this, the the qualities of, of a kind of sculptural embodiment, which is transforming. So the the other question is mutation. And I've actually been thinking that using the work of the trans artist named Cassils, who creates an embodied... first there's a kind of relationship to stone, there's a struggle with the clay stone, but for his--they's--body is also slicked in clay. And so there's this mutational sense of, of stone as a medium of sort of walking statuary. And it gets into these questions of the way antiquity tries to, to philosophize, embodied materialism, or materialities. And fashion is a form of frozen drapery or a kind of body form. It both mutates, but it also has this peculiar sort of arrested quality.

R

Rhonda Garelick 06:44

It's really funny that you are talking about that particular kind of material body, embodiment of fashion, because today I'm going to be talking about Martha Graham's famous piece *Lamentation*, which you may remember has a solo dancer, enrobed in an elastic tube, essentially, which then becomes her second skin. And the dance is a series of geometric three dimensional forms that she makes spheres and triangles, as the dancer dances with and struggles under this tight elasticized fabric, and it winds up suggestive of both birth and death, and any number of struggles in between. And when Margaret said a moment ago, something about the resonance of fashion with democracy and the current moment, I think it's important to remember that fashion, neo-Hellenic fashion, is very connected also to fascism, not just democracy, and the vogue for Hellenistic aesthetics

during the rise of fascism in the middle of the 20th century, I think has some connection to why we're having this conversation now. And I've been thinking a lot about the current political moment globally, but also, especially at home. And although I, I'm sad always to bring up the name of the current president, I think of Donald Trump in a way, and I say this, with all due respect to the transgender community and not sound--I want to put every caveat on this at first--but there is something transgender about the current president, in that I believe he invokes certain codes of traditional femininity, but harnesses them in a spectacularly damaging way that I think has to do with fashion and has to do with women and has to do with classical architecture and everything else we're talking about, in a kind of negative evil inverse of other movements.

E

Emily Apter 08:45

That's, that's a lot to try to get my head around but one thing, and we promise we won't dwell on Trump, but there's a kind of back to the 80s feeling of the trophy woman, the woman has gigantic shoulders, a lot of flash and glam and the, in a sense, the the rise of a certain figure who's come back, roaring back, like a nightmare from from the 1980s, bringing with it the, all kinds of codes around predation and, and what you can get away with, and this in some ways goes against the, what for me classical the classical turn in fashion historically represents, which is something more to do with fluid clothing on bodies that have been freed from corsetry, that have been--so it may be an idealized democracy or a kind of idealized sense of a goddess being someone who is free--the Athena model--who is free, but it seems to me that the, this gets reproduced in the fortune gowns of the very early, the 20th century, early 20th century. Where, you know, we're getting away from, from the S-curve into something that is more free flow and less conventionally defined. But with the political marking for me of the 80s was something that was, it could be classical in the sense that there were these gold robes and sort of regal costuming, but that the the hyper structure of it somehow re-corseted the woman in them as opposed to...I mean, it's complicated because it was also when women were massively entering the workforce. So all of these things, go, I think, go to show you that there's no way one way to read a fashion style.

A

Anne Higonnet 10:44

Well classicism has always been very gendered. So the statuary ideal of the ancient Greek man is the revealed body, the classical ideal of the woman is simultaneously revealed and masked ,or pleated, encased in some kind of gown that in the form of statuary becomes really hard and rigid. And, and those two opposing poles I think, are usually in play when classicism comes back. And it's often very liberatory, as you say, the neoclassicism of the French Revolution, or the fortune dress, or the Martha Graham. But then there's always

the reaction against that, the horrified reaction against that which expresses the revelation of the body as a kind of terrifying nudity, which has to be ...has to be turned back.

E

Emily Apter 11:44

So I have a question for you, Margaret, what was behind your idea for this panel, when you were what was the inspiration for it?

M

Margaret Cohen 11:51

To put my cards on the table, I wanted to do a panel at the Center with a feminist subject. And I thought long and hard about how to bring people in who would, given people's complicated relationship, which is totally mystifying to me, but to the word "feminism," who would come to such a panel without having any kind of negative reaction to it. And I thought about, the first thing that was on my mind was sexual assault, was consent, was Me Too, to try to think about some sort of a panel about Me Too in the novel. And of course, one of the things that the entire 19th century novel as one long Me Too, you know. But then I... it felt very assertive and confrontational. And, you know, I wanted to think of a topic that would bring up feminist issues of empowerment, but--and and constraint, both--but not discourage people from coming. And so that was how I ended up with fashion.

R

Rhonda Garelick 12:57

I'm so glad that you shared that, frankly, with us, because I don't know about my colleagues, but even now, I get blowback about some of the topics I choose to write about, both in the academic setting and commercially, which all suggests that there's something shameful, something lesser, something embarrassing about taking seriously fashion in any way. And so the idea that fashion, as a topic, would be more acceptable, is, it's almost funny to me, because it's so often the subject of ridicule, or dismissiveness. So, that feminism would be too objectionable, but fashion might sneak it in, reproduces in some way, the, the idea that there's something sneaky about fashion, but in a jujitsu move, we can harness that, right. And one thing I said to Margaret earlier is that I grew more passionate about taking this seriously as a big part of my writing life, when I started giving talks around the country about my last book, which was a sort of political study of Coco Chanel. And I would speak to women's clubs and museum patrons and luncheon groups and all kinds of non-academic groups largely composed of women. And I would get grandmothers and granddaughters and sisters and college roommates. And they would rush up and tell me how much they loved thinking about this topic together, how they, you

know, read a book and book club together or how they knew it was important to talk about these things, but no one had told them it was and so their husbands or fathers or boyfriends had made fun of them. And they felt suddenly this was a safe place where they could indulge something greatly pleasurable to them, but also feel empowered that they were always already thinking about something meaningful. And to think of--and my students respond similarly, and I have many students officially studying fashion as graduate students and they tell me, their family and friends deride them for this, and so it's a strange way of telling, not just women, but largely women, that what you're already thinking seriously about matters. And you matter. And what you do every day to present yourself to the world is not a secret that you need be ashamed of, but something that is worthy of real intellectual consideration.

A

Anne Higonnet 12:59

Yeah well, I think you're touching on two really important things that can only now be said. So one of them is that clothing is something that everybody puts on every single day, or maybe two or three or four times a day. So it's a subject of aesthetics and design that affects every single person on the planet. And then the gender component is that I think many women, and maybe some men, too, are looking back on the history of fashion. And instead of sweating the small stuff, like the rise and fall of the hemlines, they're thinking about really big issues, like the women who within the bounds that were set, were tremendously creative and inventive. And in, in the history of fashion, there are many untold stories of tremendously, tremendously creative, original women.

E

Emily Apter 16:19

I got very interested in the clothing designs of Claude Cahun, who was in the 20s, she, there's a, there's a fantastic photograph of her in partial profile mirrored in a black and white checked coat, which of course, in context, she invented many costumes. She was a photographer and kind of performance artists and kind of Cindy Sherman avant la lettre, her but what, what was intriguing too is to--it embarked me on thinking about geometries, and the use of modernist geometries, where instead of women being part of a decor that was decorative, it was combined with a new approach to structure. So I mentioned the S-curve before, but these were often boxy, or they were trousers, sometimes they were borrowed cultural influences that, that were linked to folk art or to masked figures or to dance or, but the point is that they were going way outside the frame of reference of strict fashion evolution. These were developments that were happening as aesthetically that we're both inside a kind of mainstream fashion history and outside of it in that they took their impetus much more from, say, corbusien modernism: white walls, interior design, there was something-- and then of course, we can evoke the name of

Sonia Delaunay, whose treatments of fabric—and it's of course, also a commonplace that so many women who couldn't get a foothold in, as major artists, were, earned money or gained recognition through through fashion design or textile design, Anni Albers, and the list goes on and on. But it was interesting to me that there's this kind of geometric feminism that is also non-binary. It's not something that breaks down easily. So it isn't just a question of volumetrisms, or the use of camouflage and the dazzle as a, the borrowing of military onto a woman's body, but that it was actually something, an embrace of something abstract that was kind of brainy as opposed to...it became a kind of wearable art, which which has seen another trajectory and through many decades with Commes des Garçons, with, you know, all kinds of approaches to volume to, to geometries, to how how bodies look degendered in any familiar way.

A

Anne Higonnet 18:49

As soon as you abandon derogatory labels, like "decorative," and you start to think about what happens within fashion history and what women have done within fashion history, you realize that they're reinventing the body over and over again, and they're always pushing at the boundary between masculinity and femininity, acceptable and unacceptable gender, and in a way, like, what more more important topic could there be?

R

Rhonda Garelick 19:21

No, I agree. And I'm sorry, Margaret go ahead.

M

Margaret Cohen 19:26

No, I was just going to bring into dialogue, I think two different ways your answers have pulled: one is towards reinvention, embodiment, creativity and ability to make a place for yourself in a patriarchal society. And then the other direction, which I think you spoke to in the the comments you made about our president and his use of women and fashion, is as a way to constrain to confine to put up you know, a kind of normalization that is very disempowering.

A

Anne Higonnet 19:59

Action and reaction, action and reaction, over and over.

R

Rhonda Garelick 20:02

It's true. And yet I have another strange twist on that, because I'm not just thinking about

the women of the current administration, although I spend a lot of time thinking about their presentation and the aesthetics of the so called, the Trump women look, and there's a group called the "Trumpettes." I have a photo I can show you later of this group of Mar a Lago matrons who wear beauty pageant style sashes with the word "Trumpette" on them, but that's a separate and fascinating, fascinating topic. But I'm interested--

E

Emily Apter 20:32

Isn't that just the Fox News Look?

R

Rhonda Garelick 20:34

It is except that a lot of these ladies are in their 70s and are sort of reconstructed, surgically, prosthetically, cosmetically, to resemble the Fox looks, or Fembot look, sort of deuxième degree and it's a fascinating connection to the Doris Duke estate and the kind of inherited privilege they're trying to simulate for the president and through the president, but I'm interested also in what happens when a male strong man wannabe, adopts certain feminine grooming practices quite spectacularly and dares the world to notice. Paints himself with makeup, visibly dyes his hair badly, has a soft, fleshy body, while still performing a kind of uber-masculinity. I don't think those things are discussed enough. And while there is this cadre of pilatified showgirl type women around him, he seems to me the inverse, the excess the the bounty that is being refused to those women. And I think that has a lot to do--I think it's a 21st century reproduction of a kind of fascistic aesthetic from an earlier time when we had Mussolini and we had camps for athletics for young men. And I'm very interested in the inverted relationship of Trump's feminized grooming habits, and the women around him, which are now all around us, Fox News, and there were films about them and so forth. I'm very interested in the classical body, not just the draped body, but the masculine, beautiful, fascistic Aryan body. And its inverse in 21st century politics, particularly in America right now.

A

Anne Higonnet 22:25

Well we're at a very important turning point, I think in the history of fashion, in which all gender codes are being scrambled. And they're not all being scrambled in the same way. So there's Trump, of course there are transgender communities, but there are also phenomena like hyper masculine sports stars, male sports stars, who are dressing with a kind of flash and texture and color, which we haven't seen in masculine costume for a long time. So there are changes happening in the gender codes, not just on the left wing, progressive fringes of society. But I think you're right Rhonda, in all kinds of unexpected places and ways, in many marginal but also many very central pockets of society.

R

Rhonda Garelick 23:30

I feel that very much. And I wonder if it has anything to do with the advances and changes in reproduction, biology and science, medicine. We talked about this a little bit last night, people's bodies, the limits of our bodies are being expanded medically, and conceptually, and then sartorially too. I see that, I agree with you.

E

Emily Apter 23:49

What do you think, though, of generic fashion, norm core, unisex, athleisure? At this time, you know, in some ways, I feel like there's almost a wish fulfillment and talking about fashion, because we're in a supreme moment, where fashion is kind of off the table, at least for a lot of young people, it's not a topic of particular interest in terms of their every day. That's not to say the proof isn't, isn't in the details, you know, whether you have this kind of hoodie or that kind of, but it's still, in some ways, the with the collapse of retail, there's historically a moment where I see two trends that complement what we've just been discussing, which is the the acceleration or kind of exploration of non-binary in fashion, but it leads into something which is sort of generic fashion, fast fashion, anti fashion, a brand that's actually kind of empty because it's just another form of workout wear.

A

Anne Higonnet 24:48

Well one factor that a lot of these different phenomena have in common, I think, is the idea that you present yourself as an image. And in a way, fashion is completely off the table in an old style way, but in a new style way, it's more on the table than ever because it drives self presentation on Instagram and Tiktok. Fast fashion is more and more popular as you go down the age scale. And there's an energy fueling fast fashion that's really about how you photograph yourself in your clothes for a one time social media image.

E

Emily Apter 25:34

It's interesting, Anne and I, earlier this year, went to the Metropolitan Museum to see a show on Camp. And there were, of course, some great clothing models. But when we got into one room, we were trying to figure out the installation and Anne made the remark that we couldn't really see the clothes that well, they were way up in these lit up boxes. And even when those that were more accessible on the ground floor were sort of placed very far back, there was, it was, it was like walking into a giant display or department store. But you had the point that it was all about instagrammable fashion, it was about taking your picture in front of the fashion. And so the whole idea of "it's not even just the

fashion items, it's the the way in which you insert your own look inside another box."

A

Anne Higonnet 26:28

And the Costume Institute is so clever. Every one of those boxes was lit with of an Instagram palette, digital palette, lighting, so that you could stand in front of it. And each mannequin was in an Instagram set.

R

Rhonda Garelick 26:47

I had mixed feelings about that show. Although I admit I enjoyed it. I also enjoyed that it was scented. I don't know if you noticed that it was a perfumed--

A

Anne Higonnet 26:55

Oh we went on a bad day! [laughter]

R

Rhonda Garelick 26:59

It was scented for sure! It wasn't the, it was, I don't know how they did it, but there was something. But lately, I have been tasked with some teaching assessment work, which means I go and I observe people in their classrooms and I watch what's happening. And I often take a seat in the back of the room, which means the students greens are facing me. And I can tell you that it's no discredit to the many instructors I've watched, that the overwhelming thing I see on those screens, you won't be surprised to learn, is not notes from the class, but shopping sites for clothes, for young men and women. And they are scrolling through shoes and the Instagrams of celebrities, but for fashion purposes, and then buying. And it's the see-now-buy-now phenomenon. And it's true that fashion, retail and runways and collections have all changed dramatically. But what is taking their place is this Internet relationship, which is like the photographable moments at the Met. But also the fact that you can look at your screen, your cell phone, your computer, no matter where you are, no matter what you're supposed to be doing, and you can imaginatively project yourself into the screen image and then take real world action, make a financial transaction virtually, and essentially ensure that you will then be able to emulate and copy what you have seen on screen, making the virtual real and the real virtual. And so if we're not talking about fashion in a university setting, we're just ignoring what's happening. This, to me, is--my students, it's true that it's a selected group, they are riveted by fashion, although it's not the fashion that we call fashion necessarily. And then when you have the attention of someone like Virgil Abloh, you know, you've got athletic streetwear, now, in the realm of the most rarefied couture.

E

Emily Apter 27:27

That gets back also to this idea of a kind of central paradox, which is, there's... it's fashion without fashion, in the sense of structure, tailoring, the whole question of what... of a kind of embodiment that is more oriented, that almost literalizes social construction, this is a construction that is different from, from, say, this the 60s, jeans and a tank top anti fashion, of course, it was a fashion too. But this is something that I think has less political resonance, because from what you're saying, you can be an influencer in your athleisure wear. It's just... where's the content of it? It's not as legible. It's not, it's legible more in terms of labels and brand naming and the influencer being a kind of brand that builds its brand through Instagram, through social media form, but it, it, where does this lie? In the fashion itself? Not so much. I think that that's the great tension that a new generation has to resolve for itself, maybe with the help of some wise elders knows. That the form, as you say, is so powerful and seductive for them, the social media form in which they present themselves. And at the same time, this is the generation that is waking up to the content of clothing in an extremely material way, because they're just starting to realize what the environmental impact is of the actual materials, the actual physical substance of the clothes that they buy, and the quantities in which they buy their clothes. And the labor conditions.

A

Anne Higonnet 30:38

The labor conditions in which the clothes are made. And the politics that govern those labor conditions could not be more substantive, and, and real and political. But there's a disconnect now between the form and the content of fashion. And maybe that's where we should like be making those connections for people.

M

Margaret Cohen 30:57

Thank you very much for this exciting conversation. I really look forward to your papers. Thank you.

C

Casey Wayne Patterson 31:11

Thank you again for joining us in this episode of the Center for the Study of the Novel's podcast Cafe. We would also like to thank Emily Apter, Rhonda Garelick and Anne Higonnet for their generosity in agreeing to this conversation. Thanks our team at the Center for the Study of the Novel: to An Truong Nguyen for their operational support. To our graduate coordinators, Victoria Zurita, Cynthia Giancotti, and Casey Patterson. To Erik Fredner for editing, consultation, and sound engineering. And to our host and director

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