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One Photograph

Fashion, Plastic and Myths in Color

Alexis Romano

Abstract

This short article examines a photograph in a 1956 catalogue for the French department store Galeries Lafayette in the context of the country's postwar modernization, Paris renovations and the development of the readymade garment industry. It relates the production of image to the construction and dissemination of fashion and femininity in the print media. In particular, it notes how the use



Figure 1. Galeries Lafayette Catalogue, Spring-Summer 1956 © Les Galeries Lafayette, Paris.

of changing technologies in image production, notably Kodachrome color film, shaped and exposed these constructions. Drawing on the notion of myth, as formulated by Roland Barthes, this article asks how the image spoke to modernity's inherent contradictions, notably between old and new, in its depiction of bodies, plastic and synthetic fabric. Finally, it shows why this was particularly relevant in the culture of postwar France.

Keywords: 1950s readymade fashion; postwar France; plastic; color photography; Kodachrome

Tone on tone, a photographic image of two fashion models placed against the faded backdrop of Paris reveals multiple layers of color, space and modernity. Included in a 1956 catalogue for the French department store Galeries Lafayette, it followed the example of many fashion magazines that used the city of Paris in their symbolic construction of fashion. Magazines visualized Paris' well established fashion hegemony and situated their readers in the capital, in terms of current events and happenings, the actual retail locations of the pictured clothing, and, through imagery, as an imagined place for their use. Readers of the Galeries Lafayette catalogue, through the purchase of relatively inexpensive readymade dresses, like those pictured here, could themselves access the privileged spaces of the capital, described on each page as "Paris, capitale prestigieuse de la mode ..." Yet the soft rendering of the city, in the style of aquarelle paintings sold to tourists, transformed the city into a mirage. Removed by a color tone, the dresses – in their all-over, floral-patterned printed fabric of synthetic "poplin nylon" – expressed a similar falseness. Moreover, clothing that hindered movement and contained the body through buttons, belts and underskirts, reinforced the artificial quality of the models, pert yet frozen in space.

The models' ever so slight dissonance in relation to their surrounding space exposed shifts in image production, the clothing industry, and Paris' physical landscape, in the throes of postwar urbanization and renovation, that pushed the city to its periphery and new suburbs in the 1950s. Yet it was traditional Paris represented in the catalogue's pages – that of its monuments, nineteenth-century architecture,

and Medieval cobblestoned streets – with no hint of its newly car-ridden streets and highways, and modernist new-builds. Illustrated faintly, the models' setting seemed old and static. They, in contrast, were brightly-lit and dynamic, seen through the camera lens. During this time, illustration in French fashion publications waned as photography featured increasingly, shaped concurrently by changing technologies – from handheld cameras to advances in color film and the moving image – and genres such as photojournalism.

This intersected with a period of growth in the readymade clothing industry in France, which countered the centrality of the country's elite made-to-measure haute couture trade. As the identity of the industry shifted to re-conceptualize fashion within the framework of industrial modernity and the "everyday," it negotiated between traditional ideas of fashion and womanhood and new discourses, that drew on technology and an active femininity. These values were attached easily to readymade fashion, produced industrially and readily available in shops. But often, images that were meant to crystallize and disperse these ideas, exposed fissures in their construction. Similarly, the Galeries Lafayette catalogue, with its mix of illustrations and photography, spoke to the "in-between" identity of industry, anchored comfortably in past notions of Paris' iconic and painterly presence, as it subtly inserted new technologies in dress and image.

With the tool of Kodachrome film technology, color was used increasingly in advertising and commercial photography. Perhaps paralleling art photography's fraught relationship with color up to the 1970s, scholarly commentary on color photography has been sparse until relatively recently.¹ An exception is Sally Stein, who has noted its rise alongside "color mass culture" from the 1930s.² Citing her

research into the New Deal's FSA Kodachrome slides specifically, she reflects on what this meant for the public's understanding of its place in a "market-driven world."³ The burgeoning American ready-made Sportswear industry figured prominently within, on which Rebecca Arnold has written explicitly about magazines' deployment of color in image construction and reception.⁴ Alongside the less developed readymade industry in 1950s France, polychromatic imagery would have undoubtedly also been perceived as linked to its more commercially modern yet culturally inferior overseas counterpart.

In the *Galleries Lafayette* catalogue, plates printed layers of color – to describe the vibrant blue and lilac tones of the catalogue models' clothing, and their lipstick of deepest red – each adding more surface detail and texture. Such colorful visualization and surface focus strove to mask industrial realities. It was as Roland Barthes described *Elle* magazine – a postwar creation rooted in American print media – in the mid-1950s partly for its distinctive use of highly saturated color photography, as "a real mythological treasure."⁵ Earlier in the decade the writer Colette Audry similarly characterized *Elle* as "a marvellous mosaic of technicolour" meant to captivate and distract from the realities of life.⁶ For Barthes, journalists filled empty signifiers with new meaning to create a "type of discourse" that conveyed a myth.⁷ His formulation of myth, as it served to gloss over France's rapidly changing (and Americanizing) postwar society via a new material and visual culture of consumables, could extend to the visualization of readymade clothing in the catalogue. The models' dresses, with their crisp synthetic material veiled under a printed pattern of flowers intimated painterly, handcrafted creation. The dress concealed its nylon core, just as the press promoted both the modernity and traditional elegance of synthetic fabrics such as Tergal and Crylor, created in 1954 and 1955.⁸ Likewise, the department store's label would have hid any trace of a manufacturer. As such, the catalogue welcomed

modernity in a reassuring way. This was especially pertinent in postwar France, where, according to Kristen Ross, "modernization, unlike in the United States, is experienced for the most part as highly destructive, obliterating a well-developed artisanal culture."⁹

Color, which attached both to the past and present, helped to mediate these conflicts. Color photographs filled the reader's desire for realistic representation, yet also transported her to a fantasy realm where the performance of fashion and luxury could occur. However the rigidity of the models in the catalogue impeded their access to the city behind them. Diverging from that "decisive moment" in photography, as formulated by Henri Cartier Bresson in 1952 to describe the fortuitous merger of action, subject and everyday time, these images reveled in inertia. Echoing the synthetic material of their dresses, the models materialized a new plasticity.

Their objectification and impenetrability was due as much to their static poses as to their enclosed garments, with, as Arnold wrote of 1950s dressmaking, "focus placed on a hard body created by corsetry and shiny dress fabrics that suggested a metallic finish and touch."¹⁰ Images seemed to perfectly visualize the double meaning of the French "plastique," which also signifies physique, or form. Photographers' use of color in particular, connected the two. Although Kodachrome provided more possibility for nuance, here its saturated hues reduced definition and flattened form. Other than the sharp flash of dark hair and red lips, skin and garment were bleached out, and morphed into one thing. The color's distinct "glow," as Arnold described the printed effects of the dyes, heightened the hard, shiny qualities of both.¹¹

In this way the image illustrated the words of Barthes, who described how plastic replaced all forms and became "ubiquity made visible."¹² Advances in the plastics industries led to the gradual yet pervasive absorption of the material in France's industrial infrastructure and physical landscape, and the promotion of the country's modern, technical prowess.

Satirizing the media's language that endorsed plastic, Barthes described the material's ability to quickly and miraculously transform nature, from "the original crystals into a multitude of more and more startling objects."¹³ Plastic epitomized Barthes' notion of myth, for, like his empty signifiers, it was capable of taking any shape, from furniture to nylon.

Like the magical production of nylon strands, and that of their garments, the catalogue models were reproducible and alike, down to their accessories and red lips, yet distinguished by the color of their adornment and hair. Color gave the illusion of difference and access to Paris, despite women's actual petrified state in France, during a decade that privileged conformity and domesticity. And through advances in printing technology, color subtly moved readers between illustration and photography, or different lenses onto space and time. In the catalogue, meanings slipped and transferred. This adaptability, as it negotiated the choices and contradictions of postwar modernity, threaded together many areas, including fashion's discourses and technologies, and the identity of women.

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Notes

1. Although still comparatively rare, scholarly interest in color photography has increased during the past decade, seen notably in several publications connected to exhibitions, which take into account art photography and commercial print media in their technical, cultural and aesthetic frameworks. See Kevin Moore, *Starburst: Color Photography in America, 1970–1980* (Ostfildern, Germany: Hatje Cantz, 2010); Lisa Hostetler and Katherine A. Bussard, *Color Rush: American Color Photography from Stieglitz to Sherman* (New York: Aperture; Milwaukee: Milwaukee Art Museum, 2013); John

Rohrbach, *Color: American Photography Transformed* (Austin: Univ. of Texas Press, 2013).

2. Sally Stein, "Toward a Full-Color Turn in the Optics of Modern History" *American Art*, vol. 29, no. 1 (Spring 2015): 15.
 3. *Ibid.*, 17.
 4. See Rebecca Arnold, "Behind the Scenes with Louise Dahl-Wolfe and Toni Frissell: Alternate Views of Fashion Photography in Mid-Century America," *Fashion Studies*, vol. 1, no. 1 (2018): 1–35; "The Kodak Ensemble: Fashion, Images and Materiality in 1920s America," *Fashion Theory* (2019): 1–27.
 5. Roland Barthes, "Ornamental Cookery," in *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers (London: Vintage Books, 2009 [1957]), 89.
 6. Colette Audry, "Elle," *Les Temps Modernes*, vol. 7, no. 78 (April 1952): 1793. Both Barthes and Audry were referencing the way food was visualized in color.
 7. Barthes, "Myth Today" and "Ornamental Cookery," in *Mythologies*, 131, 89.
 8. See, for example, "Depuis cinq ans, cinq familles éprouvent chaque jour votre garde robe," *Elle*, 18 August 1958, 72–73. For more on synthetic fabrics see Valérie Guillaume, ed. "Introduction" and Industries, Techniques et Politiques Industrielles en Mutation," in *Mutations, Mode, 1960-2000* (Paris: Paris Musées, 2000), 13, 22.
 9. Kristin Ross, *Fast Cars, Clean Bodies: Decolonization and the Reordering of French Culture* (Cambridge, MA, London: MIT, 1995), 21–22.
 10. Rebecca Arnold, "Wifedressing: designing femininity in 1950s American fashion," in *Surface Tensions: surface, finish and the meaning of objects*, ed. Glenn Adamson and Victoria Kelley (Manchester: Manchester University, 2013), 127.
 11. *Ibid.*, 131.
 12. Barthes, "Plastic," in *Mythologies*, 117.
 13. *Ibid.*
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Institute of Art, and her book, *Pret-à-Porter, Paris and Women: A Cultural History of French Ready-to-Wear (1945-1968)*, is due out from Bloomsbury in 2021. It explores the development of readymade fashion, and how it connected to France's wider project of postwar modernization and reconstruction, and to conceptions of national and gender identities, and modernity.