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# Self as œuvre/other: Parisian fashion bloggers and the new *culte du Moi*

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*Author's note: This article was written in early 2010—hardly the first days of the fashion blog, but before it had become as omnipresent as it is today. And before its commercial, transactional function had been perfected by a few particular technological developments, which quickly normalized the ethos of the fashion blogger's *culte du moi* into the everyday life of even the least fashion-obsessed, and which continued the dogged cultural march towards obscuring the distinction between editorial content and advertising. In other words: before Instagram and before the smart phone's self-facing camera.*

*“Car la Photographie, c'est l'avènement de moi-même comme autre.”*

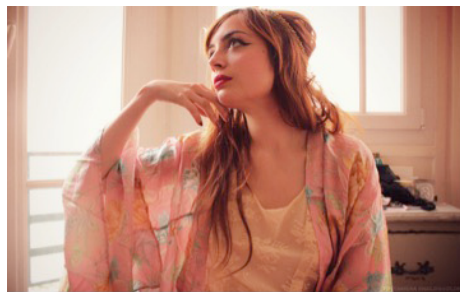
Roland Barthes, *La Chambre claire*

In his preface to Lamartine's *Méditations poétiques*, Baudelaire expresses what would come to be known as the ethos of the *culte du Moi* of the nineteenth century Romantic French writers: “Je n'imitais plus personne, je m'exprimais moi-même pour moi-même.” Insisting at once on the originality of the author's essence and the pure expression of his person, Baudelaire's remark gives way to a conception of the liberated poet as he who turns inward to reflect the true nature of man through his artistic production. Given the weight of such a task, it is no surprise that Baudelaire both feared and scorned the emergence of photography as an art form. Though the camera threatened to usurp the status of the painter rather than that of the author, Baudelaire's description of photography as art's most mortal enemy is especially prescient in light of a particularly noxious fusion of literary and artistic production: the fashion blog. In what can be seen as a marriage between Baudelaire's Romantic doctrine and his mechanical adversary, the persistent craze of the fashion blog adopts photography as the very means of devoting oneself to a new and redefined *culte du Moi*.<sup>1</sup> Replacing the poet's introspection with flagrant exhibitionism, the fashion blogger's oeuvre consists of daily or near-daily

“outfit posts,” or series of photographs (sometimes more than a dozen) of the blogger strutting and posing in her latest sartorial ensemble. Despite the equal-opportunity credo of the Internet, the fashion bloggers with the most clout (or the greatest number of devoted readers leaving comments on their posts) are those who hail from the fashion capitals of the world. The “blogueuses de mode” of Paris have established themselves as passionate proponents of the new *culte du Moi*, wherein the self-as-oeuvre is applied to a system of virtual artistic production. Void of material presence, existing but on the screens of computers, the fashion blog echoes in form and in content the notion of the female artistic production as being limited to the corporeal self, yet it is a corporality that at once is present in its imagery and absent in its virtuality.

Without going into the cultural value or non-value of the fashion industry itself, or whether such a trade was ever—to borrow Guy Debord’s words—“lived directly,” the fashion blog must be recognized as the very distancing through virtual representation described in his 1967 *La Société du spectacle*. The thrill of dressing oneself up is stripped of that which makes it thrilling: seeing the reactions of those who witness the outfit. Vanity spirals further inward and collapses into itself as it transforms from an interactive experience to a solitary exercise. Though “outfit posts” are often met with hundreds of effusive comments, the real pleasure for the blogger-subject is no longer looking at herself being looked at by others, but looking at herself as a virtual miniature representation of her own person.

Louise Ebel is a twenty-something art history student who since 2008 has maintained one of the most popular Parisian fashion blogs, titled after the nickname she bestowed upon herself: Miss Pandora. In the blog’s earlier years, she frequently mentioned the “mémoire” she was working on at l’Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales, a study of “le corps contraint de la femme au XIXème.” Her outfit posts are for the most part staged thematically. Using her favorite nineteenth century paintings as inspiration (always portraits of women, more often than not nymph-like and draped in sheer cloth), she attempts to recreate these works of art by dressing as a modern-day version of the painter’s subject and placing



Louise Ebel. Reproduced with permission by Louise Ebel

herself in a setting that resembles as closely as possible the background of the work. Along with her reinterpretations of artwork, Ebel often includes images of the paintings themselves, paired with cursory explications of relevant artistic concepts (she especially likes the sublime), thus reminding her reader of the seriousness of her blog art and underlining the validity of its didactic purpose, whereby she becomes the teacher of the history of art to which she is so attached.

Betty Autier of *Le Blog de Betty* eschews the didacticism of thematic reinterpretation in favor of the supremacy of the image itself. In comparison to Ebel, Autier adheres more closely to Barthes' notion of the photograph as pure deictic language. There is no theme or lesson wrapped into her photo shoots; her pictures ask nothing of her reader beyond, *Look! At Me!* (in Barthes' words, they make up "un chant alterné de 'Voyez', 'Vois', 'Voici'"). Autier's only requisite for posting an image seems to be that it show the prettiness of her face, and the reader of her blog need only click through a few pages to know what she looks like from every possible camera angle. Still, she resolutely attempts an aura of candidness in all her images, as if she weren't posing for her own personal website, but rather just happened to have her imaged captured for a "Street style" blog. Her sartorial style, too, delivers a message of insouciance. Less overtly sexual than Ebel's looks, Autier paints herself as desirable without trying to be, a punk-rocker even—she often wears spiked bracelets and studded shoes.

Though her images' guise of candidness is somewhat transparently an artifice, Autier's textual content is undeniably upfront about the purpose of her blog. She is unashamed of her own materialistic quests: she writes primarily as a means of continuously updating an ever-growing list of clothing and accessories she would like to purchase, claiming frequently to have dreamt about these goods, salivated over them for weeks, repeatedly "refreshing" shopping websites to make sure a coveted item has not sold out if she does not yet have enough money to buy it. Autier's readers anticipate these purchases along with their heroine, congratulating her when she is finally able to obtain something she has been longing for. Apart from her shopping updates, Autier's writing is unabashedly prosaic: her weekend plans, a discussion of the weather, important news like "J'ai coupé ma frange!" The pedantic verbosity of Ebel marks one extreme of the textual content of fashion blogs; at the other end are the laconic banalities of Autier. While several other French *blogueuses* fall somewhere in between this verbal spectrum, there is one element that no fashion blogger ever omits: the outfit label. At the end of each post, the outfit or outfits worn in the

corresponding images are systematically itemized: the reader learns where each article of clothing may be purchased.

What is regularly omitted, and what the reader cannot help but ask given the sheer abundance of photographs and the frequency with which these blogs are updated, is information about the photographer. How do these bloggers find such devoted collaborators, and so often? Ebel is one of the rare few to credit her photos with the name of the person who took them, yet this can be no doubt contributed to her relative fame and success as a blogger—she tells us in her *A Propos* that photographers are sometimes friends, sometimes strangers who contact her via Facebook or Twitter to set up a shoot. But for lower-tier fashion bloggers, the reader must make her own guesses—a steadfast boyfriend? A cajoled younger sister? Who else would so willingly disappear in the production of the blogger's artistic oeuvre and her exhaustive display of self?<sup>2</sup>

As exhaustive as these auto-portrayals may be, it is nevertheless clear to the reader that they are at the same time partial. In his essay, "The Curve of the Needle," Theodor Adorno notes the way in which sound technology allowed the recorded performance to be artificially perfected, cut and spliced into a coherent state of flawlessness. This process of curation functions the same way in the fashion blogger's selection of her photographs. Though never acknowledged by the blogger, the reader understands the meticulous selection process of the multi-image blog post by the absence of any flawed photographs. Sometimes, there may be an "imperfect" shot of the blogger, but it is always deliberately so—a carefully angled shot of a "funny face", the long hair caught on camera as it whips carelessly behind the suddenly turned head.<sup>3</sup> These shots of perfected flaws work to dismantle what is clearly a punctilious curatorial process. Considering how very many photographs *do* make it on to these fashion blogs, one can only imagine how many less perfect images were discarded (or saved for the private collection of the blogger) along the way.

In addition to these scrupulously haphazard shots, several comments made by Ebel and Autier in various interviews formulate a narrative that works towards the same purpose. This narrative proposes the fashion blogger as a real-life, imperfect idol, the anti-model model, a heroic proponent of self-acceptance. In an interview featured on the Teen Vogue website, Autier states her *raison d'être* as being the liberation of self-conscious dressers. Her blog's (now defunct) "mission statement" was defined as follows: "Try, test, don't be ashamed of wearing a piece of clothing you have a craving for (especially for French girls who are very bashful regarding fashion and their look)!" There is

no shame, Autier tells us, in self-contradiction, no disgrace in abandoning one “look” for another. Indeed, it is the chameleonic nature that most effectively defines the self of the fashion blogger. *Personal style*, the oeuvre of the self, is an ever-evolving entity, effectuated by a process of never-ending shopping: old clothes are cast aside as soon as they are photographed, new ones filling the closet every day.<sup>4</sup>

In his 1965 novel *Les Choses*, George Perec employs the language of copywriting to represent the absolute power of commercial desires over the lives of protagonists Jérôme and Sylvie. Ebel, Autier, and the majority of fashion bloggers have (unwittingly, it seems) adopted the promotional language—both visual and verbal—of women’s magazines to sell not only themselves, but a way of life. Interspersed among their own images are photographs which instruct the reader how to live fashionably: close-ups of the food they eat, still-life presentations of their jewelry and trinkets, carefully strewn across doily-covered bureaux, the vintage-framed daguerreotypes hung *Gallery style* on the walls of their bedrooms. Additionally, the *blogueuses* are selling Paris itself. The locations of photo shoots range from the city’s most famous gardens to the chicest passageways of Saint-Germain, from the ornate spiraling staircases of buildings they don’t live in to the shadowy underbelly of the Eiffel tower. Ebel takes her role as cultural custodian one step further, to the interiors of museums. She writes:

Je vous ai déjà parlé de mon projet d’explorer Paris, en continuité avec ma dialectique mode et art. Et bien, j’ai aussi l’intention de vous faire découvrir les musées intimistes et insolites de Paris. En tant que passionnée d’art, j’ai toujours eu une grande histoire d’amour avec les musées. J’aime y flaner (sic) des heures, ou au contraire quelques dizaines de minutes, afin de m’impregner (sic) de l’atmosphère.

She goes on to explain that while it was at first difficult to be allowed to take photos within the museum walls, her fashion fame has now accorded her special privileges—she is often invited by smaller museums and galleries to stage her sessions in what appears to be a mutually beneficial arrangement: she is able to vamp for the camera while standing in front of real Art, while the sometimes struggling museums gain exposure to an eager audience and advertise upcoming exhibitions. The arrangement simultaneously markets the subject and her location, while conveniently cultivating Ebel’s status as a curator not only of clothing, but of culture as well. This cross-marketing is echoed throughout the community of

bloggers themselves: they often repost successful pieces from other bloggers' websites in what is at once a flirtatious homage and a ploy to gain more traffic by cross-pollinating their readership.<sup>5</sup> Like Sylvie and Jérôme and their group of indistinguishable friends, or "disciples," who connect with each other through the means of identical acquisition, the most popular Parisian fashion bloggers, while careful to hone their own signature looks, often end up promoting the same articles of clothing.<sup>6</sup> Far from being a coincidence, this marketing synchronicity is explained by the fact that most fashion bloggers today often do not purchase the clothes they are hawking but receive them as "gifts." The reader is asked to accept the blogger's relationship with the sponsoring company or designer as purely human, an emotional bond that is consummated through material offerings.<sup>7</sup>

*L'art de vivre*, for Sylvie and Jérôme, entails the acquisition not only of socially signifying commodities, but also of the historical narrative these objects claim to possess: in an attempt to compensate for the lack of "tradition" in their lives, they attribute an almost mythical value to the history of antique furniture and vintage clothing. At the same time, they remain willfully ignorant about the history that is happening around them, most notably the Algerian War. It is perhaps unfair to expect fashion bloggers to write about anything but fashion, but one cannot help but note the extreme disregard for current events not related to the realm of pretty things. The world these bloggers inhabit is shrunken in its indifference to reality at the same time that it is swollen with a certain sense of globalism: their multicultural, transnational readership generally posts over a hundred comments on each of Ebel and Autier's blog posts. But the historical present is not of interest beyond the swapping of trends and tastes. Like the characters in *Les Choses*, and, perhaps more pertinently, like the Romantics who originated the *culte du Moi*, the *blogueuses* of Paris seem to suffer from a sharp nostalgia for a time long past.

It is not without note that Ebel's nostalgia is specifically directed at the nineteenth century: it is the self-proclaimed inspiration for both her look and her life as a student and writer. In a blog post recounting her visit to La Musée de la Vie Romantique, Ebel's zeal for the museum is indisputable. Yet of the fifteen photographs posted, there is not one image of a painting in its entirety. Most portray her, or her friend Alix (another celebrated fashion blogger) as they find the most beautiful spots to pose in front of: they tilt their faces gently against the backlight of ornate window fixtures, they sit primly, legs crossed, in the outdoor garden. The text that accompanies the photos is uncharacteristically brief for Ebel; the main thing

she relays to her reader is a description of listening to the Chopin being played in the background, “en s’émerveillant sur la collection d’objets de George Sand.”

A fan of Jean-Jacques Henner, Ebel dedicates another post to his painting *La liseuse*. In her write-up of the shoot, she explains patiently to her reader how nineteenth-century literature allowed women to escape a domestic existence “pour rêver des destins fabuleux.” The photo shoot, understandably, does not reenact the painting. Instead, Ebel, decked out in a nautically striped skirt and a straw hat, poses on the bank of the Seine, and in only one of the post’s fifteen photos does she explicitly reference Henner by reenacting the liberating exercise of literary immersion. Yet without any apparent hint of irony from Ebel, we soon notice that in these images she is not reading, but gazing into pages of illustrations—tiny black and white sketches of ladies in nice dresses. Reading, Ebel conveys to us in all earnestness, is not a literary activity, nor even a textual one: “reading” is reading images. This is the exercise of the reader of fashion blogs: a distracted scrolling down an endless series of portraits. This distracted reading of images is indeed practiced by Ebel: in her *A Propos*, she confesses somewhat proudly to being able to spend up to three hours scrolling through Google Images. Autier says more or less the same about Flickr. Unlike Ebel’s sentimentality for the nineteenth century, Autier expresses nostalgia for a different period: the 1980’s. She is attracted to the decade of institutionalized economic selfishness for purely sartorial reasons (shoulder pads, sparkles, and studs), though its historical implications are no less significant in terms of the *culte du Moi*.



(Top to bottom:) Henner, *La Liseuse*. / Ebel as *La Liseuse*. / Ebel’s literary immersion. Reproduced with permission by Pauline Darley.



In his *Preface to Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*, Fredrich Kittler notes that the novelty of the storage capability of the phonograph and cinematograph “was their ability to store time: as a mixture of audio frequencies in the acoustic realm, as a movement of single picture sequences in the optic realm. Time, however, is what determines the limits of all art. The quotidian data flow must be arrested before it can become image or sign.” The importance of this time-storing function is the undercurrent of Beckett’s 1957 play, *La Dernière Bande*. Obsessed with the sound of his own voice, frustrated at his incapacity to effectuate any artistic production, Krapp’s tape recordings reflect his effort to store time as he ages unproductively. This is effectively the task of the fashion blogger, taken to the extreme: (almost) every day is recorded in images. But unlike Krapp, the *blogueuses* are able to disseminate their time-storing oeuvre, blasting each post out into the virtual sphere for all the world to see. The possibility of flipping through years of their lives, in an online collection of images more detailed and exhaustive than any scrapbook in history, appeals to the readers’ (and most likely, the bloggers’) desire to immediately turn the present into a visually stimulating and nostalgia-inducing past.<sup>8</sup> In the rare case that a blogger wears an article of clothing that she has already posted, she will often link back to the original blog post, to show the reader how the styling of the item is now different, but also to remind us of her past. This auto-linking permits us to jump back and forth through different reincarnations of the blogger-subject, to trace and narrate the evolution of her personal style, the evolution of her self.

In *The Arcades Project* Benjamin describes fashion’s obsession with newness as “a quality which is independent from the use value of the commodity.”<sup>9</sup> Technology’s own fetishization of newness has a much more convenient relationship to capital, as technological innovation cannot be so easily detached from its commodity’s use value. Yet as Benjamin’s characterization of fashion as “the mould in which modernity is cast” might just as perfectly be used to classify technology, the fashion blog’s compulsion towards novelty is revealed to be inherent both in form and in function.<sup>10</sup> The fashion blogger’s nostalgic longing for a slower, more authentic reality contrasts sharply with this paradoxical anticipation that is inspired by continuous technological advancement. Both the blog itself and the blogger’s personal style must be refreshed, changed, renewed, and continuously updated—pathologically so. The cycle of fashion has also been accelerated by the increased speed of technology: trends are disseminated, consumed, and disposed of at a rate that continuously gains momentum. Nostalgia then takes on a reactionary role to this fervent anticipation of technological (and sartorial) change and evolution. It is an attempt

to slow down time—like Krapp’s tapes, and thus, paradoxically, like blogs themselves, despite their concurrent work of speeding time up.

Inherent not only to fashion and Internet technology, this temporal tension again evokes the Romantic generation—at once longing for a more heroic past and insisting on the originality and novelty of their own experiences. So, too, does it call to mind what Barthes writes about the photograph’s own troubled temporality: “On dirait que la Photographie emporte toujours son référent avec elle, tous deux frappés de la même immobilité amoureuse ou funèbre, au sein même du monde en mouvement” (*La Chambre claire*, 20).

The fashion blogger reaches simultaneously for the past and the future, for the eternal and the ephemeral; the one moment she cannot relate to is the present, for, as Kittler, citing Heidegger, writes: “technology itself prevents any experience of its own essence.” But for the lucky reader, the fashion blogger’s essence survives its technological transmission and may be experienced by all—not only as a twenty-first century misappropriation of the original *culte du Moi*, but as a site at which converge the theoretical problems of fashion, Internet technology, photography, and Romanticism.

## Notes

1. Though wary of the technological innovation of photography because of what it meant for the future of art, Baudelaire’s views on fashion prove that he was neither a Luddite nor above an interest in the frivolous. In his *Salon de 1846*, he equates fashion—more specifically, Dandyism—to modernity. See: *De l’héroïsme de la vie moderne*.

2. Since this article was written in early 2010, it has become more common for (even relatively small-time) fashion bloggers to credit their images, though it is rare to learn anything about these photographers other than their name. At the same time, throughout their appearances on street style blogs, and especially during Fashion Weeks, fashion bloggers have become quite eager to propagate the image of themselves as photographers by wearing cameras around their necks. Barthes describes being photographed as being given life—perhaps the obfuscation of their day-to-day photographer’s identity, along with the reclamation (aided by applications like Instagram) of the role not just of *photographed* but *photographer*, may be understood as an attempt to incarnate both ends of this act of “filiation.” The fashion blogger aims to be at once artist and artwork; creator and muse; mother and child.

3. Some fashion bloggers who construct their entire image-persona based on these “outtakes,” posting only photographs that, through their intentional “goofiness,”

relay the subject's self-awareness of—and purported discomfort with—her status as an exhibitionist. The aesthetic rhetoric of the fashion blog usually takes on one of two forms—that which mimics the traditional physical and emotive lexicon of the professional model, and that which aims to evoke the “candid” photograph. By eschewing both of these approaches in favor of a sort of pre-adolescent, deliberately asexual campiness, this third breed of fashion blogger circumvents the vanity or narcissism she fears her reader may attribute to her. See, for example, the American Leandra Medine's *Man Repeller* blog, which explicitly presents itself—through its title, through Medine's clothing and through her demeanor as a model—as a rejection of aesthetic rhetoric as a whole. But as Gisèle Mathieu-Castellani reminds us in *La Scène judiciaire de l'autobiographie*: “Le refus de la ‘rhétorique’ est lui-même rhétorique” (27).

4. In *The Arcades Project*, Benjamin compares the ephemeral nature of fashion to its evergreen sartorial counterpart, the uniform. The uniform denotes a certain authenticity of Selfhood, as Lionel Trilling points out through the example of *The Sorrows of Young Werther* in his classic *Sincerity and Authenticity*: “Werther expresses his sincerity by a singular and apparently unchanging mode of dress—everyone in Europe knew, and many imitated, Werther's costume of dark blue coat, yellow waistcoat, and boots. [...] To the end and even in his defeat he held fast to the image of a one true self” (52). The fashion blogger, too, purports to present through her blog “one true self”—indeed, her popularity and livelihood depend on this sort of self-caricaturization—but for her, the opposite is true: the more ephemeral the clothing, the more fixed this projected Self.

5. This practice has for the most part died out since 2010. It seems to have been replaced by the various symbiotic relationships made possible on Instagram—“liking,” “tagging,” etc.

6. In his 1905 book *The Philosophy of Fashion*, Georg Simmel argues that fashion satisfies at once “the need for distinction” and “the need for social adaptation.” In other words, it allows us to simultaneously individuate and disappear into the collective, to stand out as we blend in. This theory is of course proven by the style synchronicity of fashion bloggers, but even more so by the fashion blog's cousin, the chronicling of street style, which ostensibly tracks distinctive looks but ends up purveying a relatively homogenous aesthetic (that is, one synchronized to the latest trends). See for example *The Sartorialist*, or the thematically curated reader-submitted photos in the *New York Times*' “Street Style” column.

7. In the age of the Internet marketing, when the same products find themselves pushed not only by overt advertising platforms but simultaneously—and more covertly—by an eager army of fashion bloggers, the question of how trends emerge might seem quaint. Scott C. Hemphill and Jeannie Suk explain the two traditional theories of how

trends take shape in their article “The Law, Culture, and Economics of Fashion.” The first is Georg Simmel’s top-down theory, whereby fashion “is adopted by social elites for the purpose of demarcating themselves as a group from the lower classes. The lower classes inevitably admire and emulate the upper classes. Thereupon, the upper classes flee in favor of a new fashion in a new attempt to set themselves apart collectively” (1156).

The second theory ascribes a much more democratic phenomenon to the emergence of trends. It is Herbert Blumer’s notion of fashion aesthetics originating through a bottom-up process, whereby trends are generated through disparate individual expressions that fuse together to form collective tastes, which in turn reflect the *Zeitgeist*.

Today, the advent of new trends results from a murky hybrid of these two theories: fashion is decidedly more top-down in that the products are being aggressively pushed through an increasingly large host of online advertising venues, combined with greater accessibility thanks to the explosion of low-priced “fast fashion” clothiers; at the same time, the birth of trends is in appearance “bottom-up” in that the individual consumers, especially fashion bloggers, are the ones ostensibly creating the fads as they take on the promotional work that—once relegated to advertisers themselves—is now built into the infrastructure of social media.

8. Here the fashion blog again intersects with Baudelaire’s thoughts on fashion, whereby outdated trends serve as markers of a time past; they are “inexhaustible containers of memories” (Benjamin, 7). And with Barthes’ notion of the *Spectrum* in *La Chambre claire*: to borrow Benjamin’s syntax, the photograph becomes a sort of container of the dead (death is, after all, for Barthes, the *eidōs* of the photograph).

9. In “The Concept of Fashion in *The Arcades Project*,” Peter Wollen goes further into Benjamin’s treatment of the parallels between modernity, novelty, and fashion, which the latter describes as “a sort of race for first place in the social creation. The running begins anew at every instant” (*Arcades Project*, P°, 7).

10. The fashion historian Angela San Cartier, author of the online *Clothing and Fashion Encyclopedia*, directs us to another of Benjamin’s important works that includes fashion theory, his *Theses on the Philosophy of History*. Here, he elaborates on how fashion’s deep-seated crisis of temporality is not just a two-directional tug-of-war between a nostalgic past and novelty-chasing future; there exists also a temporal friction between the static and the dynamic, from which his notion of *Tigersprung* is derived. San Cartier writes:

Through the sartorial quotation, fashion fuses the thesis of the eternal or ‘classical’ ideal with its antithesis, which is the openly contemporary. The apparent opposition between the eternal and the ephemeral is rendered obsolete by the leap that needs the past for any continuation of the present. Correspondingly, the transhistorical describes the position of fashion as detached both from the eternal, that is, an aesthetic ideal, and the continuous progression of history. Benjamin conjures up

the image of the “Tiger-sprung” to explain how fashion is able to leap from the contemporary to the ancient and back again without coming to rest exclusively in one temporal or aesthetic configuration. This generates a novel view of historical development. [...] Fashion is a crucial signifier that enables Benjamin to articulate the temporal instability that is, for him, constitutive of modernity.

See also: Lehmann, Ulrich. *Tigersprung: Fashion in Modernity*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2000.

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