

BOOK REVIEW

Jess Berry, *Cinematic Style: Fashion, Architecture and Interior Design on Film*. London: Bloomsbury Visual Arts, 2022. ISBN: 978-1-3501-3764-6 (online)

Reviewed by Sarah Stratton

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How is the fashion and spatial design you see articulated in films translated, through cinematic narratives, into a coded system of gendered identity, aspirational lifestyles or as tools of consumer culture? This is the provocation of *Cinematic Style: Fashion, Architecture and Interior Design on Film*. The author, Jess Berry, is an Associate Professor in Design History and Theory in Monash University's Faculty of Art, Design and Architecture and her research investigates visual culture, with a particular focus on fashion design in dialogue with other creative disciplines. In a previous publication, *House of Fashion: Haute Couture and the Modern Interior* (2018), Berry revealed how high-end designers employ style elements borrowed from art, architecture, and theatre to emphasise the elegant luxury of their brands.

Launched during Melbourne Design Week 2022, *Cinematic Style* continues this line of enquiry, to explore how fashion, interior design, and architecture create a persona on screen and a two-way reflection between the cinematic world and the real world. She does this via two assertions, referencing films from the silent era through to contemporary onscreen offerings: the first part: "Fashion and the Interior as Filmic Device", reveals how "a range of gender and sexual identities augmented through fashion, the interior and architecture have been made desirable to consumers through their appearance on film" (Berry 2022, 107) and in part two, "Film Interiors as Fashion Spaces", she considers how cinematic style is interpreted offscreen as merchandise for commercial consumption.

Berry begins by analysing how private spaces can be read on screen as allusions to female sexuality. These heterogeneous allusions are not without their challenges and not restrained to female subjects. Berry explains: "While material obligation, in the form of fashion and interior accoutrements are integral to the modern woman's persona and in particular her morally ambiguous sexual proclivities, it is disingenuous to think of this relationship as only pertaining to female consumer cultures" (Berry 2022, 39) and subsequent chapters focus on modern masculinity depicted for example in the bachelor pads

and attire of the heroes and villains in spy films such as the James Bond series (in the wonderfully titled chapter “Evil Lairs and Bachelor Dandies”) and the tactile glamour of queer culture, elegantly illustrated through her analysis of films including Tom Ford’s *A Single Man* (2009) and Todd Haynes’ *Carol* (2015) under the heading “Luxurious Longings: Queer Heterotopias in Décor and Dress”.

When considering the ciphers of architecture, Berry emphasises her point with the example of the staircase as a transitory device; of making an entrance, of rising to the occasion, or of descending psychological depths – from the cultivation of Eliza in *My Fair Lady* (1964) to the transformation of Emma in *I Am Love* (2009) as she discards the bourgeois material trappings of her married life for the rustic simplicity of life with her lover. The staircase as a device that creates anticipation, gradually revealing a subject or interior as one descends or ascends, is also used for commercial effect in many couturiers, most famously Chanel and Dior. Berry segues from this motif in the next chapter, “Windows and Screens: Cinema, Department Stores and Boutique Display” (think *Breakfast at Tiffany’s* [1961]), bringing the analogies between crafted identity and consumer culture full circle. In the final chapter, “Dream Spaces: Film Sets as Fashion Flagships and Experiential Retail Environments”, Berry highlights how “luxury brands commodify history and nostalgia through the borrowing of film sets and narrative contexts to leverage and enhance designer mythologies” (2022,11). The creative collaborations between film directors, designers, and architects, first noted in the silent films of Cecil B. DeMille, is also rotational, and demonstrated by the New York Tiffany storefront window designed by film director Baz Luhrmann and set designer Catherine Martin; or collaborations between fashion houses such as Wes Anderson and Prada.

Berry’s study is based on the premises that “the representation of gender and sexuality on screen is closely related to the aesthetic alignment of silhouettes, styles, and spaces to visually convey complex identity performances based in

concepts of masquerade and interiority” and that “cinematic style is calibrated to the fantasies of consumer desire, where self-actualization is represented as realised through alluring surfaces and spaces” (2022, 2). She considers filmic tropes through the lens of *architectural interiority* (Berry 2022, 4) and expands on this to reveal how design, in particular fashion and interior, are deployed in the projection of the modern identity. She builds on the scholarship of other leading cultural and feminist theorists and historians such as Sarah Berry, Judith Butler, Stella Bruzzi, Pamela Church Gibson, Mary Ann Doane, Caroline Evans, Lucy Fischer, Anne Friedberg, Rosalind Galt, Charlotte Herzog, Laura Mulvey, Hilary Radner, Pamela Robertson Wojcik, Mari Ruti, Merrill Schleier, and Anne Troutman but she acknowledges this is an area that still warrants considerable analysis and interrogation, especially in terms of objectification, diversity, and neoliberalism. She concludes with a generous critique of the limits of her thesis, and identifies areas for further investigation such as “the intersection between fashion and spatial design as they relate to gender and sexual identities as performed by everyday people” (Berry 2022, 156), rather than at the high-end which is the focus of this publication.

Sarah Stratton is currently enrolled in the Film, Media, Communications and Journalism PhD program at Monash University and was a former Associate Editor at *Colloquy*. Her research focuses on the evolution of creative work and critical thinking across the art and cultural sectors, especially the behind-the-scenes roles and how this knowledge is acquired, exchanged and articulated. This research interest comes out of long career in art and design, working at Queensland Art Gallery | Gallery of Modern Art and National Gallery of Victoria in senior advisory and communication roles, and more recently in managerial and strategic planning roles at Monash University. She worked with the author while she was Manager of the Department of Design between 2018 and 2021.