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# ON NEW BEAUTY

**Lev  
Manovich  
and  
Margarita  
Kuleva**

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**LEV MANOVICH:** Every few years someone comes and says: "New architecture, new photography, new art, new body." I really wonder what that is. How does it go further than what we had hundreds of years ago? Compared to societal diversity and bodily practices, in terms of fashion we live in the most boring period, which can be traced back to the 19th century. During this time, industrialization and urbanization took place, and as a result, gender roles as well as dress styles for both women and men began to shift and change. While in the 18th century men dressed up in richly decorated camisoles and wigs, starting from the 19th century, men's costumes suggested austerity and modesty and were executed in dark colours. This completely opposes the way women tended to dress: they were expected to wear large corseted dresses in richly decorated fabrics and fashionings to express their socio-economic rank. Despite exceptions, mass fashion still reproduces the stereotypes of male and female. Just compare the colours of women's and men's sneakers.

**MARGARITA KULEVA:** After all, there is nothing 'new' in our relation to newness. The fashion institutes – fashion weeks, brands, magazines – should present novelty on a regular basis. I would like to suggest contextualising this and focusing on the following question: Who gains most from us continuously pursuing newness? For a large part, being at the vanguard of progress depends on a difference in speed and attention economy. For example, a glossy magazine, as an established institution, may signal trends, especially micro-trends, comparably later than TikTok or Instagram platforms and users.

**LEV:** Yes, you could say that this is often associated with Modernism – or to use the words from poet Ezra Pound: "Make it new." Artists were expected to come up with something completely new. Therefore, the art of the 20th century is considered to be a series of 'isms'. Fashion was guided by similar principles for a while, with brands pushing for innovative styles each season. For instance, this year the mini skirt is in fashion, next year it is the maxi – and everyone is purchasing new items. Every season there are new trends being dictated to consumers.

However, in the 1990s, this started to break down: people in fashion capitals started to combine expensive clothes with mass-produced and second-hand items. There are still fashion shows and seasons, but there is no single dominant style for the season anymore. Fashion magazines are switching from being dictators towards being experienced observers: out of numerous design shows they highlight dozens of trends. Though, many designers refuse seasonal fashion shows and release

items beyond the logic of the seasons. For example, Saint Laurent, Giorgio Armani and Marc Jacobs do not participate in fashion weeks and organize shows according to their own schedule.

**RITA:** The speed of fashion production has indeed increased incredibly, and collections are presented much in advance of the moment they will actually become available for purchase. I could never really understand what the point of these delays is. We are told what will be fashionable in the future, but who would wear what has already become history once we find out about future trends.

**LEV:** In its golden age, the fashion industry was less pressured by the demands of mass production. But now, a new generation of Chinese companies have emerged: Shein is bigger than Zara, and they make collections even faster – in just 8 days. Here, production and distribution get even more strained. While most industries are guided by the old model, the release of the product and preparation for it takes a year.

**RITA:** Do you think this has an effect on our understanding of beauty? Does this shift make it more diversified?

**LEV:** Sure. Across time, the ideals of beauty have been changing continuously. Take, for instance, the exuberant femininity of the Rubens era and compare it to the androgynous figures of women of the 1920s. Although beauty standards changed, people in each period tried to look in accordance with contemporary beauty ideals. Then again, when Japanese designers and the 'Antwerp Six' turned up in the 1980s, a deliberate rejection of clas-

sical beauty held sway in fashion; anti-fashion, that is. Modern fashion goes even further and offers intentionally ugly items as fashionable. For example, ugly shoes.

**RITA:** Yes, I see your point. Well, I assume nowadays we can afford to be ugly to some degree, as each of us exists in more than one space in terms of style. It's way easier to experiment sometimes. I suppose our body is becoming more and more fragmented, existing simultaneously in several realms. For example, I have eye patches from a French-Korean company that have been developed especially for making selfies. The brand focused not on beauty in realtime, but on an image for social media. Then we also have digital clothes, which are only suitable for photographs. Or, for example, the fragmentation of the body that occurs in Zoom, where the participants see each other only waist-up. This definitely affects the way we understand our bodies.

**LEV:** Well, you are talking about what is going on at the moment, but last autumn, my students at the Higher School of Economics made a project about

the future. They researched what will happen to fashion between 2030 and 2050. One of the groups suggested that in the future only digital fashion will matter; only what happens in the metaverse. Well, that seems absolutely impossible to me. So much of our social life is about offline interactions. The way we turn up in front of others is a sign of status and belonging. It's charisma, it's seduction, and I have no idea what could make people stop spending time and money on it. Beauty is a tool. It helps with your career. In Asia, for example, it's just inappropriate to look ugly – it's like going out and smelling bad. There is a clear idea of what beauty is. Even tattoos people have are tiny and invisible, in order not to attract too much attention.

**RITA:** Speaking of the obligation to always look beautiful, I recall the stereotype of post-Soviet women who did not use to go out without a full haircut, makeup, even just to take out the garbage.

**RITA:** My point is that this matter is not related to women but to our relation to the public spaces we enter. For instance, I don't care how I look when I go to a next door supermarket, because I don't really care about my neighbors judging me. It's quite an anonymous environment for me. But, for example, if I lived in a small town, and my neighbors were the only ones I knew, then of course, I would prefer to wear my best. I can spend quite a lot of time in front of the mirror just for a Zoom call or to take a selfie for Instagram. Here, I care more about how people will see me. Beauty is not just make-up, it also entails good main-

tenance through exercise and beauty treatments. And, of course, enough cultural capital and erudition in order to perceive beauty in a contemporary way. After all, you can invest in it a lot, but still look old-fashioned. In that sense, beauty means a lot of work. Do you agree with it, and do you get tired of beauty?

**LEV:** It's not a stereotype, it really happened! I knew this type of woman in the 1990s.

**LEV:** Let me put it this way: I don't get tired of beauty, because for me it reveals itself in dozens of different types of aesthetics; from the Scandinavian interior with its different colours and textures of wood, to socialist brutalism and everything in between. And I really love what today is called 'warm' minimalist aesthetics. I personally get extremely tired with the semiotic fullness of the 'rich' spaces of the 1980s and 1990s, because they scream at you – while minimalism whispers in your ear.





**RITA:** Do you consider yourself beautiful?

**LEV:** If I'm in a good mood, I consider myself charming. Because I tend to be emotional, it seems to me that I have some kind of warmth. I think I have charisma in me. Though, speaking of beauty, there has not yet been a single selfie that I like. I'm always terrified of my own image. What about you?

**RITA:** It also depends on my mood, whether I like myself or not, but generally there are many things I like about myself. In terms of beauty and work, I like to see myself as a material; I like to work with myself. I am fully aware that probably, from the point of view of a mainstream glossy magazine, my beauty does not seem conventional. But what are these conventional beauty standards supposed to be for? For example, on Instagram Reels everyone tends to look very fit, smooth, symmetrical. Well, first of all, I find it weird rather than beautiful. Secondly, it is pretty clear how it is done in terms of technology. It is clear how to make such eyebrows, such a face; we are canvases on which you can paint various things, using make-up. This is about some data that you have, but also about your technological skills in terms of make-up and image work.

photos dominated Instagram – which I wrote about in my book *Instagram and Contemporary Image* (2016). Today, photographs of people have really become way more glossy, professional, and 'beautiful'.

Regarding Instagram trends, I wanted to ask you the following: there are classic styles of beauty, sexuality and eroticism, and Instagram is full of them. On the other hand, in the last 20 to 30 or so years, some other waves have turned up, including unisex clothing, LGBTQ+ aesthetics and oversized volumes like Raf Simons sweaters or Balenciaga jackets. These are different trends, but all together it create a movement that is an alternative to mainstream fashion, beauty, and so on. At the moment, the percentage of people who participate in these alternative movements seems relatively small, even in Moscow or London. Then again, plus size models are appearing in the mass fashion industry, older models are running the catwalk; there is more variety nowadays. What really matters is what will happen next. Is the long period of mainstream acceptance of the alternative starting or will it always be some kind of alternative? To me, these alternative aesthetics is sort of an 'academic' way to see one's body, where you are more detached from it.

**RITA:** Why detached? You accept your body, you work with it. As far as I am concerned it would be far more interesting to watch, react, interact with such a person. In my eyes, it's way more interesting to have sex with such a person, who works and knows themselves. The way I see it is when our mental and bodily experiences have more common ground, it makes a person far more beautiful. I find it much more attractive. Firstly, it seems to me that these alternative moments affect the mainstream, but at an incredibly slow pace. It's like the ocean that wears away the rocks. Uniqlo can claim whatever they want about their values, but their production scale is completely unsustainable. Their size range is not inclusive at all, neither is the separation into a men's and women's department. Ideas may seem new, but industries still work the old way. It requires much more work.

likely to be awful. There will definitely be a virtual London or New York, but there will also be 'bad' areas, which you simply dread going to. But it is coming, it's very close and it will be incredibly interesting!

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Lev Manovich and Margarita Kuleva – On New Beauty

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Responding to Lev Manovich and Margarita Kuleva