

[PS]

A curated volume of three single-handed **love** letters has offered you, the reader/listener, an insight into my personal correspondence with fashion. A system I - as you might have come to tell - both **love** and hate at the same time. The format of **love** letters manifested itself as leeway for the normative, offering the possibility of an alternative methodology on the intersection of fashion and embodiment. Me taking matters into my own hands to - for once and for all - [re]claim my sense of agency. But first things first, let's retrace the steps that brought me to this point.

The catalyst of this introspective research journey was "[The Deceptive Mirror: The Dressed Body Beyond Reflection](#)" [2022] by Associate Professor in Sociology Lucia Ruggerone and Assistant Professor of Fashion Studies Renate Stauss, a tremendous thought-provoking and pinnacle article as it would shape all that was to follow from thereon on. Reading up on the phenomenon of mirrors and their eloquence in fashion, I noticed how the thought of a mirrorless life started to intrigue me more and more. So, instead of this 'what if' forever lingering on my mind, I decided to ban mirrors as well as any other reflective surfaces from my life for a grand total of seven days. This in itself was an utterly formative experience, only confirming just how dominant the visual sense is, not only within fashion but in society at large. In today's day and age - referred to by Lucia Ruggerone as an 'ocularcentric' or visually oriented society - we mostly perceive rather than experience fashion.<sup>1</sup> And to some extent, this visual focus jeopardises the relationship we well could have with both our bodies as well as garments. According to Ruggerone, a big part of the idea that we have of ourselves is a visual one, derived from looking at ourselves in the mirror.<sup>2</sup> Drawing connections between mirrors and fashion's hyperfixation with the visual quality of clothes, Ruggerone goes on to note that we developed this way of relating to clothes which is all about representing our egos.<sup>3</sup> Fashion plays an important role when it comes to identity and self-expression. But the more these dimensions are tied to images, the more, Ruggerone explains, the *feeling* of fashion tends to be lost on us.<sup>4</sup> With the face representative for the act of looking, the gaze, all that's visually perceivable, the body seems to have become no more than a means to an end. The end being for the body to merely exist by virtue of the face, obliterating its own sense of 'being' in favour of [anticipated] gazes and looks.

So, embodiment was my entry point. However, having already dabbled into this field of interest prior to this master thesis, quintessential sources such as Joanne Entwistle weren't part of my methodology this time around. Instead, actually working with and through my body - as opposed to against it - enabled me to unlock an embodied insight beyond a mere theoretical one. Which ultimately is what I want to show you as a reader/listener of these letters, that a sense of agency is indeed possible and within reach, if only you allow yourself the time and space to consider the **LANGUAGE** of your very own narrative. And so embedded within the three letters are those core concepts that - alongside embodiment - proved to be invaluable to my research: **love** and **LANGUAGE**. Proposing to myself - and ultimately to you, the reader/listener - the following question:

*Can you seize **LANGUAGE** as a matter to go beyond the visual [sur]face of fashion?  
To give back [a] body to fashion and in turn [re]claim a **loving** sense of agency  
for both your body as well as your garments?*

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<sup>1</sup> Lucia Ruggerone, interview over Zoom in light of my mirrorless week experiment incited by the article "[The Deceptive Mirror: The Dressed Body Beyond Reflection](#)" co-written with Renate Stauss, October 10, 2022.

<sup>2</sup> Ruggerone, interview over Zoom, October 10, 2022.

<sup>3</sup> Ruggerone, interview over Zoom, October 10, 2022.

<sup>4</sup> Lucia Ruggerone, "The Feeling of Being Dressed: Affect Studies and the Clothed Body," *Fashion Theory* 21, no.5 (2016): 574.; Ruggerone, interview over Zoom, October 10, 2022.

The element of **love** almost coincidentally came into the picture. It wasn't until I read feminist writer Alva Gotby's *They Call It Love: The Politics of Emotional Life* [2023] that I started to notice the innumerable correlations there are to be discerned between the feminine weft of emotional labour in terms of **love** and care for others and **love** and care tied to fashion. Especially the following passage about halfway through the book struck me:

"Feminised emotional labour relies on a set of bodily techniques, such as the ability to perform supposedly genuine smiles on demand.

[...]

This natural niceness depends on women's physical presentation of normative femininity.

[...]

The gendered body, while appearing as a natural given, is in fact the result of labour.

[...]

Despite this skilled performance of feminised emotional labour across private and public spheres, femininity is seen as fundamentally passive."<sup>5</sup>

Gotby aptly describes how emotion "[...] includes relations of power, which can become internalised through emotional processes."<sup>6</sup> In itself, fashion can be seen as one such power structure, marketing seized to play one's emotional state. Despite its association with rationality and profit, Gotby articulates how capitalism is not 'a system devoid of feeling'.<sup>7</sup> In fact, capitalism depends on emotional reproduction: "The satisfaction of emotional needs is sometimes tied to access to commodities and services, and capitalism continually generates new needs that can only be satisfied through the market."<sup>8</sup> Those at the top tier of the industrial fashion system know all too well that "[f]or people to feel well, someone needs to create good feelings."<sup>9</sup> And so, in the knowledge that "[e]motions presume **LANGUAGE**," goods are attributed significance by means of [visual] **LANGUAGE**, turning 'unwritten' things into objects of desire through marketing.<sup>10</sup>

In *Fashion Myths: A Cultural Critique* [2013], Associative Professor Dr. Roman Meinhold unravels the etymological origin of the word **MYTH** [< Greek *mythos*] as an 'untrue tale'.<sup>11</sup> However, he immediately remarks on the ambiguity of how the **MYTH** of fashion - although very much aligned with a nature of untruthfulness - still upholds some sort of relationship to truth. They are forms of truth in that they pretend to be true, and in their outstanding pretending are believed to be precisely that. It's explained as such that these **MYTHS** come to us in the form of small tales, whilst also containing a core of truth.<sup>12</sup> Applying literary critic Roland Barthes' terminology here, these sorts of **MYTHS** are to be understood as 'linguistic deceptions'.<sup>13</sup> However, for those familiar with Barthes, I do not claim - although there will undoubtedly be some sort of common ground - to fully draw on his definition or notion of what he understands by '**MYTH**'. Here, within my framework, the notion is more so used as a poetic metaphor for fashion's emblematic use of **LANGUAGE**.

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<sup>5</sup> Alva Gotby, *They Call It Love: The Politics of Emotional Life* (London: Verso, 2023), 70-71.

<sup>6</sup> Gotby, *They Call It Love*, 3.

<sup>7</sup> Gotby, *They Call It Love*, 3.

<sup>8</sup> Gotby, *They Call It Love*, 3 and 25.

<sup>9</sup> Gotby, *They Call It Love*, 55.

<sup>10</sup> Gotby, *They Call It Love*, 2.

<sup>11</sup> Roman Meinhold, *Fashion Myths: A Cultural Critique*, trans. John Irons (Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag, 2013), 30.

<sup>12</sup> Meinhold, *Fashion Myths*, 30.

<sup>13</sup> Meinhold, *Fashion Myths*, 30.

The very system of fashion can be seen as a linguistic interweaving of things and signs, admittedly intangible, yet no less a system of signification. Meaning is given to things, things we as consumers in due course feel like we somehow need, precisely because of this awarded meaning. As explained by Professor of Social and Cultural Studies Agnès Rocamora and Professor Emerita of Visual Culture Anneke Smelik in the introduction to *Thinking Through Fashion* [2019], meaning is carried out by a sign, which in turn consists of a signifier and a signified.<sup>14</sup>

signifier	the material carrier of meaning
signified	the actual content referred to

What's particularly noteworthy here, is the mere arbitrariness of the relation between signifier and signified. There's no such thing as an intrinsic relation between both elements, but rather a matter of normative convention.<sup>15</sup> The notion of 'meaning' therefore to be understood as a [wo]man-made thing, instead of a non-negotiable fact. All of this rooted in **LANGUAGE**, which often is considered a rational tool to think about the world.<sup>16</sup> However, more often than not, the value of consumer goods - in this case fashion goods - is derived from a non-substantial linkage between a signifier and a signified, reconciled into a sign of certain esteem. These signs, which make for fashion's linguistic terms and conditions, tend to leave little room for interpretation. They are more so seen as matters of fact, when in essence they concern mere **MYTHS, MYTHS** we as consumers tend to consider truthful.<sup>17</sup> Their thought-out **LANGUAGE** pungent yet somehow soft to the touch of our being. Magnetic almost. Gently steering us into a one-way street of perception, a blind alley...

[EN] dead end  
[FR] cul-de-sac  
[EN] bottom-of-the ['it'] bag

By means of associating meta-goods with certain commodities, our perception and understanding of said commodities are likely to morph into what eventually becomes a sort of 'truth'. This process, Meinhold elaborates, is mostly achieved by the very usage of advertisements, of which the **LANGUAGE** - whether visual or verbal - is believed to be truthful and in turn often internalised by consumers.<sup>18</sup> Linguistic internalisation as such can be explained by means of what philosopher Drew Leder in *The Absent Body* [1990] terms 'incorporation'.<sup>19</sup> Leder elucidates how the acquisition of any skill - in this case **LANGUAGE** - is a matter of processing something that once was external into something body's own.<sup>20</sup> The symbolic content of the **MYTH** is thus not only imported into the commodity, but to some extent also into the body. And so advertisements come into play to make sure that certain symbols are upheld by a mythical marriage between sign and significance; the intention always for a potential buyer to become an actual one. Fashion's 'higher good' thus to make it appear as if consumer goods and meta-goods are readily available to us consumers as a purchasable entity, visions concocted to then be sold as realities.<sup>21</sup> To make something seem a plausible outcome, when in fact, chances are, you may never find yourself starring in the scenario fashion spelled out for you. Not met with the promised 'good feeling'.

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<sup>14</sup> Agnès Rocamora and Anneke Smelik, "Introduction to Thinking Through Fashion," in *Thinking Through Fashion: A Guide to Key Theorists*, eds. Agnès Rocamora and Anneke Smelik (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2019), 8.

<sup>15</sup> Rocamora and Smelik, "Thinking Through Fashion," 8.

<sup>16</sup> Tine Melzer, *Taxidermy for Language-Animals* (Zürich: Rollo Press, 2016), 62.

<sup>17</sup> Roman Meinhold, *Fashion Myths*, 30.

<sup>18</sup> Roman Meinhold, *Fashion Myths*, 33.

<sup>19</sup> Drew Leder, *The Absent Body* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1990), 31.

<sup>20</sup> Leder, *The Absent Body*, 31.

<sup>21</sup> Meinhold, *Fashion Myths*, 32-33.

So, as time went on and a capitalist driven society established itself - of a mentality merely geared towards consumption - we've somehow come to find ourselves inflicted in what we could call a toxic relationship when it comes to fashion. Albeit that the industrial fashion system still somehow manages to make us feel emancipated within this very relation. Fashion as the ultimate manipulator, you could say, unfortunately of the kind we tend to be very forgiving towards. Or as Gotby so aptly phrases it: "**Love** has become a disciplinary force."<sup>22</sup>

So, deceived by fashion's strategic usage of **LANGUAGE**, we start to desire objects for their **MYTHS**, often tied to visual features with a normative undertone - hence fashion in the letters being addressed as Norma[n].<sup>23</sup> In a way, what seems to take place is what Meinhold terms 'a limited theft' of our goodwill or innocence as consumers.<sup>24</sup> In itself quite befitting in the context of **MYTHS** considering Barthes' referral to them as 'stolen **LANGUAGE**' - based on their characteristic of transforming meaning into form and, as such, a linguistic robbery.<sup>25</sup> Prone to fashion's compelling and convincing **LANGUAGE** - which appears and sounds so plausible - we can thus come to see **MYTH** for truth. And it certainly does not help that the amount of norm-affirming grids weaved into editorial spreads and advertisements is truly myriad. However, nothing states that these - ever so present yet somehow accepted - 'hidden in plain sight lies' can't be unravelled and demystified.<sup>26</sup> Although Leder in *The Absent Body* does note how **LANGUAGE** - as any other incorporated ability for that matter - has a tendency to settle down in our being as a fixed habit.<sup>27</sup> Hence [re]claiming a sense of agency being a true labour of [self]**love**. Something you need to maintain and put effort into on a daily basis. In the end, **love** is a verb, especially considering how cunning fashion can be.

By inserting small moments of repel in which we may distance ourselves from the industrial fashion system - claiming we see through its narratives - the industry seems to have developed a strategy, a mechanism to give us the impression that we do act out of a sense of agency. However, exactly at that point, when we tend to feel 'self-sufficient', the fashion system is most likely to strike once again. Luring us back in by the attractiveness of a **MYTH** of some kind, consisting of linguistic signs that may anew engrain themselves within the tissue of our being. Isolated moments in time in which we seem indifferent to previous disillusion, as if robbed of any common sense. Which - nurtured to surrender to fashion's do's and don'ts - leaves us with a fixed idea of what's the 'done' thing.<sup>28</sup> Tediously under the constraints of what's in fashion at a particular moment in time, the body seems condemned to a life dedicated to the 'needs' of the face, perpetually complying to current fashion. Rather than by means of thread, fashion seems to be stitched together by **MYTHS**, woven into today's society as if an ever indispensable and imperative feature.

garments stitched together by threads  
**LANGUAGE** stitched together by words

fashion stitched together by **MYTHS**

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<sup>22</sup> Gotby, *They Call It Love*, 13.

<sup>23</sup> Meinhold, *Fashion Myths*, 73.

<sup>24</sup> Meinhold, *Fashion Myths*, 32.

<sup>25</sup> Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, 242.

<sup>26</sup> 'hidden in plain sight' as Barthes in *Mythologies* [1957] remarked how "[...] myths hide nothing: its function is to distort, not to make disappear"

<sup>27</sup> Leder, *The Absent Body*, 32.

<sup>28</sup> Thinking back to Drew Leder's process of 'incorporation'

Assuming that what is shown and/or told to us must somehow contain a grain of truth, we can come to find ourselves paralysed in time and space, all credits to fashion's conspicuous **LANGUAGE**. Now, imagine a wire shopping basket, the type you tend to see as an icon on the top right hand corner when you find yourself browsing online. Have you ever considered its resemblance to a **CAGE** before? Open-ended, I must add, but nonetheless a **CAGE**. Open-ended **CAGES** we as consumers - or at least our sense of agency - somehow seem to be trapped in, whether we acknowledge it or not. But why is it that we don't escape this **CAGE**, as it's open-ended therefore not physically tying us down? Over the past two years - by means of autoethnographic research as well as literature studies - I've become aware of the role **LANGUAGE** has to play in all this. Which led me to taking a closer look at the repercussions of linguistics on fashion as an embodied practice, of which the **love** letters are a written account. Caged in by what I refer to as 'magnetic **MYTHS**' - generally rooted in a normative understanding of fashion - many of us might find ourselves trapped within this 'consumer **CAGE**'. Trapped by the vast magnetic field of the **MYTHS** of fashion, stitched together by norms taught and passed down to us through **LANGUAGE**, whether it be visually or verbally. It are these fashion **MYTHS**, constructed by and in favour of the industrial fashion system, which ultimately make for a certain sense of embodiment to be denied to us. Garments physically so close to us yet mentally so far removed from us. As if our heart is no longer in it.

As I covered more and more ground, it became apparent also just how much of the construct of **love** in essence has to do with **LANGUAGE**. Mostly renowned for his writing on the intersection of **LANGUAGE** and fashion, I choose to familiarise myself with Barthes' work by means of *A Lover's Discourse* [1978], intrigued to find out how this particular book would relate to his overall body of work.<sup>29</sup> Written from a more fictitious perspective, the book doesn't as much impose one set meaning on the reader. Instead, the writer in Barthes was enabled to challenge the reader, letting them question and consider certain constructs one otherwise might not have done outside of this very narrative between **lover** and amorous other. By comparing the **lover** and the **loved** being, Barthes hones in on the importance of perspective and one's experience within an amorous relationship, unravelling the linguistic discourse of **love**. He does so even more by citing literature fragments such as those of Goethe's *Werther*. Formatted as an epistolary novel, *Werther's* story only contributes to the overall soundness of Barthes' literary choice. Epistolary novels being a series of letters between characters, it seems very fitting to deploy such a narrative when talking about **love**, as **love** letters can be considered the ultimate example of such storytelling. Although Barthes doesn't explicitly refer back to fashion as he does in some of his other works, the intricacies talked about in this book can easily be aligned with the sentiments and feelings we as consumers over time have come to cultivate when it comes to fashion.

However, one should never have to feel as if fashion's discourse interferes with their own sense of self. To a certain extent - by virtue of being part of what French Marxist theorist Guy Debord in 1967 so pointedly phrased the 'society of the spectacle' - our lives all somehow tend to be fixed within a certain framework, especially when it comes to our *emotional* maintenance.<sup>30</sup> Eagerly trying to fit every aspect of life into a grid welded together by ratio, traits of memory and movement are often overlooked. Two conditions ultimately connected to the body, therefore a sense of embodiment denied to us.

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<sup>29</sup> Whereas most tend to start with *Mythologies*, *The Language of Fashion* or *The Fashion System*.

<sup>30</sup> Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle* (Detroit, Michigan: Black & Red, 1970), 7-20.

caged in by **TIME** [memory] and **SPACE** [movement]

memory - - - **TIME**

bodies/garments/thoughts, when considered relevant?  
or better, up until when?

movement - - - **SPACE**

bodies/garments/thoughts, taking up space,  
preferably as little as possible

the body sentenced to a restricted sense of embodiment  
by means of conspicuous **LANGUAGE**

Informed by three out of five alleged **love LANGUAGES**, each letter addresses an element of this metaphorical framework of the consumer **CAGE** - respectively **TIME** [memory], **SPACE** [movement] and **LANGUAGE** - which lend themselves very well to the construct of **love** letters.

**Love** Letter I - individual.collective.muscle **MEMORY** [quality time]

**Love** Letter II - **MOVEMENT** of bodies.garments.thoughts [physical touch]

**Love** Letter III - written.spoken.body **LANGUAGE** [words of affirmation]

Whereas to some extent **LANGUAGE** - in how it's applied in fashion - can be considered the antidote to all things rational, here I tried to seize it precisely as the antidote to what initially felt like this all-consuming, overwhelming sense of alienation. Ultimately to unfold into a genuine sense of **love**.

From **A**[lienation] to **Z**[oen]<sup>31</sup>

Bundled with **love**.  
Sealed with a kiss.

At odds with the visual rigidity reigning in the dominant fashion system, I do believe there to be a hidden eloquence and power of multitude to fashion. A stepping stone to affect - the emotive, sensorial - which according to Reader in Photography Eugénie Shinkle "[...] resists critique and lacks a precise theoretical vocabulary."<sup>32</sup> However, this by nature norm-defying feature could well be the reason as to why fashion is so reluctant to affect, as fashion as a system thrives off of norms - albeit shifting ones.<sup>33</sup> Precisely this denial of what we could identify as affect, informed the very format of this thesis. My emotional [im]balance given free rein. Whether unilateral or reciprocal letters, that was for you as reader/listener to uncover in the written/spoken tissue of my being. As well as the answer to the question proposed first and foremost to myself:

*Can you seize **LANGUAGE** as a matter to go beyond the visual [sur]face of fashion?  
To give back [a] body to fashion and in turn [re]claim a **loving** sense of agency  
for both your body as well as your garments?*

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<sup>31</sup> 'zoen' to be translated as 'kiss'

<sup>32</sup> Eugénie Shinkle, "Uneasy Bodies: Affect, Embodied Perception, and Contemporary Fashion Photography," in *Carnal Aesthetics: Transgressive Imagery and Feminist Politics*, eds. Bettina Papenburg and Marta Zarzycka (London: I.B. Taurus, 2012), 75.

<sup>33</sup> The notion of 'norms' seemingly open to interpretation when emerging from within the very system proclaiming them.

The question in itself - as is the **CAGE** - being open-ended, as there is no unequivocal statement from my side to be made here. In that sense it's somewhat of a rhetorical question, as I do not know any answer apart from my very own. In order for you to find out yours, it is your voice which will have to be heard and reckoned with. And so to achieve this, you will have to propose the question to yourself, declaring your **love** to yourself by means of your own [embodied] **LANGUAGE**. Written as semi-autobiographical letters - drawing from personal experiences and recollections subsequently interwoven with those of others spoken to on the very topic of norms and **MYTHS** within fashion - I hope to have compiled a compelling bundle of **love** letters that show the eloquence of **LANGUAGE** when availed instead of adhered to. For you to hear echoes of yourself in the letters, to feel heard and in turn intrigued to reach for your pen yourself.

From the growing addendum of **love** letters - of which the aim was to foster and rekindle relationships between people and their actual garments - it becomes apparent just how difficult fashion can turn out to be, but equally just how uncomplicated. Once we start to eliminate any excess noise - which in this case would be the dominance of the gaze [both of yourself and of others] - we are granted a preview of what it could [and dare we say, should] be like: wearing for oneself and oneself alone. The [sensorial] self ever at the heart of fashion, to literally wear your heart on your sleeve.