Jay McCauley Bowstead (London): “Refashioning the Male Body”

Abstract

Contemporary men’s fashion has increasingly foregrounded a male body characterised by extreme slenderness and adolescent fragility, exposing it to a desiring and sometimes objectifying gaze. At the same time, ‘technologies of the self’ – working out, dieting, tattooing, waxing and tanning – have produced a new, muscular, hypersexualised ‘spornosexual’ physique. This paper addresses lacunae in the theorisation of masculinity and men’s fashion by investigating the ways in which shifting ideologies of gender inscribe themselves onto men’s bodies. It proposes that both spornosexual and waif-like modes of self-presentation have emerged out of a late-modern renegotiation of masculinity as male identities have become both more reflexive and more plural. A renewed focus on the male physique has acted to liberate men from the disembodied rationality of orthodox masculinity, while simultaneously commodifying and objectifying their bodies in sometimes problematic ways.

Designers and fashion producers have sought to deconstruct hegemonic masculinity by shearing away at conventional tailoring to reveal the body beneath. Meanwhile, the phenomenal, feeling, eroticised masculinities that have emerged in dialogue with fashion and beauty practices over the past two decades – from metrosexuals to hipsters – challenge hegemonic ideals by rejecting the steely, affect-less modes of embodiment that previously dominated. Nevertheless, the contested nature of these representations and practices is demonstrated by the hostility that they can provoke in journalism, online and on the street. The ‘queering of heterosexuality’ and the diversification of masculinity implicit in these emergent forms of embodiment will be explored with reference to contemporary fashion design and photography.