Femininity and Fashion: How Women Experience Gender Role Through their Dressing Practices

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The aim of this article is to outline how the aesthetic experience of individuals constitutes nowadays a way of “doing” gender for them (West and Fenstermaker, 2006). Using the results of a qualitative survey carried out in France between 2013 and 2014 (32 women, 28 men), we will focus on one type of aesthetic practices: the dress choices of women. Ever since their childhood, women are encouraged to think about the image they express themselves through their clothes. This is why, their reflexivity on this subject is intense. After presenting the normative precepts that frame feminine appearance today, after highlighting the importance of aesthetic gender norms that promote certain dressing practices and condemn others, we will bring forward the multiple ways of living their gender role via their dressing practices of the women we met. Through their dressing choices, women appropriate their bodies. Whether they are in a process of adequacy or distance with the gendered beauty standards, their speeches and practices reveal how the construction of a certain appearance via clothing (moving during their life) is a central element of their identity building.

Keywords: body, dressing, women, gender, identity

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Introduction

In all societies the body is ‘dressed’, and everywhere dress and adornment play symbolic, communicative and aesthetic roles. Dress is always ‘unspeakably meaningful’ (Wilson 1987: 3).

Nowadays, the body is seen in western societies as something that has to be unique and reflecting identity construction (Bromberger et al. 2005). According to social representations, using their appearance, women and men have to express their singularity. However, this quest of aesthetic authenticity is not an easy one in a society where there are strong body gender norms (Braizaz 2018). In what ways do aesthetic practices could support singularity while women and men are surrounded by clear and significant beauty standards? This was one of the key questions from a qualitative survey conducted between 2013 and 2014 about the aesthetic experience of individuals. The purpose of this survey was to study a subject that has been denounced, criticized and judged for a long time, whether in the social world or in the academic area, particularly in France and Europe. Indeed, it took a long time for the sociology of the body to gain legitimacy as a credible research field. In fact, the body and the beauty practices were ignored by sociologists for several years (Memmi and al. 2009). For this reason, it is only in recent times that researchers have studied the intentionality of body practices (and therefore of aesthetic practices). At first, in France in particular (Boltanski 1971), for sociologists, the “body” was only conceived as “a measurement or achieving instrument of the social order” (Memmi and al. 2009: 13). Moreover, the prism of alienation has long been predominant in the sociological analyzes (Wolf 1991). Individuals (and especially women) who engage themselves in aesthetic care would be considered as victims of gender asymmetry, media propaganda and overbearing beauty industry. Besides, “feminist work on fashion has largely been critical of fashion as a tool of male domination” (Brennan 2011). Nevertheless, in recent years, new approaches emerged. First of all, beauty has been considered via the concept of an “aesthetic capital” by certain researchers (Hakim 2010), that is to say as an act of rational consumption, achieved in particular by women. More nuanced, another approach proposes on the one hand, to give value to the relations of power which underlie certain aesthetic practices while not omitting, on the other hand, to be interested in the individual subjective experiences of the men and women concerned. Kathy Davis’s writings on cosmetic surgery patients in the Netherlands are part of that approach. This researcher considers both surgery as “one of the concrete expressions of women’s oppression” (Ghighi 2016: 82), while insisting on the non-passivity and “critical awareness” of her interviewees (Davis 1995).

In the past decade, fashion studies have been a dynamic field (Kawamura 2018). More and more fashion and dress scholars chose this kind of perspective, as evidenced by the title of the book of M. E. Roach-Higgins, J. B. Eicher and K. K. P. Johnson: Dress and Identity (published in 1995). Further example, in their collective work, A. M. González and L. Bovone underlined the importance to consider “dressed body” as a “basic element of identity” (González et Bovone 2012: 67) and dress choices as “personal narratives” for individuals (Ibid. 2012: 71). “The objects we choose (such as clothes) are [...] opportunities to place ourselves socially via a situated practice, to communicate with the outer world our belonging or exclusion, or even our ambivalence and instability” (Ibid. 2012: 71). Nowadays, the research orientation on capacities to act of individuals through clothing, on development of agency via dressing practices is vigor-
ous. This may be demonstrated by taking a quick look at the vast literature exploring nowadays dressing practices as resistance tools (Karimi 2018; Fortier 2017; Arthur 1993).

This comprehensive perspective is the one we have chosen in the aim of understanding the aesthetic experience of individuals. Without denying the strength of the collective dimension of beauty norms, we had focused our sociological view on the subjective experiences, on the “individuals’ practical capacities to act in situation” (Martuccelli 2010) in the construction of their appearance. We oppose our approach to visions defending a rigid social determinism of beauty practices: the latter, too reductive, cannot highlight the plurality of contemporary aesthetic experiences. By adopting a comprehensive point of view on the aesthetic experience of men and women, in line with the work of sociology of the individual, our ambition is to give “(special) attention to the ordinary life of individuals, to their existences, their trials, to what their behaviors meant for these individuals” (Martuccelli et Singly 2012: 11). Our desire is to carefully describe the stories and aesthetic trajectories of individuals (in this article, especially women), in order to outline their room for maneuver and reflexivity. In a society where the intensification of the process of individualization constitutes a new interpretative key of the social world, the first common thread on which our research is based is to predict that the relationship that everyone develops with their body, appearance and look, is fundamental. Thus, we join the authors for whom body has become - more intensely - in the course of the twentieth century, a banner of personal identity (Giddens 2004), “the most striking sign of an individualized self” (Vigarello 2012: 192; Le Breton 2010). To us, the aesthetic experience of individuals, their quest of aesthetic singularity, constitute a central component in the context of their identity construction. Thus, this article will be in line with the recent affirmation of Samantha Brennan2: “Fashion mattered” (Brennan 2011).

And, if there is one dimension of social life for which “fashion mattered”, it is gender, as many academics demonstrated it (Bard 2014)3. The body is one of the vectors (if is not the most important one) through which we express, among other things, the gender facet of our identity. And over the last few decades, changes in body gaze have had a significant impact on how some individuals perceive and shape their appearance through the lens of gender (Butler 2006). Today “gendered socialization is not (or not any more) the imposition of habitus of gender that would shape the subjectivity of all” (Macé 2010: 503). In this article, femininity will be conceived as a “gender role” (we can even talk about an aesthetic gender role), echoing the concept definition of “social role” by D. Martuccelli: “The role establishes a link between social structures and the actor, linking patterns of behavior to different statuses or social positions, thus ensuring the stability and predictability of interactions, as it signals the expected behavior of individual depending on the place [here the gender] it occupies in a given social system” (Martuccelli 2002: 141). The conceptualization of femininity with the theoretical tool of “role” enables to study the aesthetic practices of women, as expression and construction tool of their gender identity. The theoretical tool of “role” permits to not underestimate the importance of the “gendered” normative framework of beauty (of the influence of valued femininity models), while opening the analytical way to the study of the different “ways” of living one’s “aesthetic gender role”. Indeed, it is, among other things, spaces and lability in the aesthetic achievement of femininity that will be central in this article. This use of the concept of femininity as a “social

2 In this text, this scholar advocate how dress practices could be a political instrument to defend queer visibility.
3 As Elisabeth Wilson wrote it: “Fashion is obsessed with gender, defines and redefines the gender boundaries” (Wilson 1987:117).
role”, an “aesthetic gender role”, allows to have a non-ideological view on aesthetic practices, to get out of the usual tensions peculiar to this object of research (especially within the feminist community⁴).

In this article, to study how the aesthetic experience constitutes a way of “doing” gender for individuals (West et Fenstermaker 2006), we will focus on one type of aesthetic practices: the women’s way of dressing⁵. According to Mary Ellen Roach-Higgins and Joanne B. Eicher, dress is “an assemblage of modifications of the body and/or supplements to the body”. “Dress, as defined, includes a long list of possible direct modifications of the body such as coiffed hair, colored skin, pierced ears, and scented breath, as well as an equally long list of garments, jewelry, accessories, and other category of items added to the body as supplements” (Roach-Higgins and al. 1995: 7). From a very young age, women are encouraged to think about the image they express of themselves through their clothes, jewelries, adornments, etc. (Guyard et Mardon 2010). This is why, their reflexivity on this subject is intense. First, we will explain, according to our survey, what are the major issues that guide (or confuse) women throughout their “dressing path”. We will highlight the importance of aesthetic gender norms that promote certain dressing practices and condemn others. We will see how these gender norms are often related to the women appearance regarded as “erotic” or “sexualized”. Then, in the second part, we will point out the heterogeneity in the reception of these models of femininity by women. Through their dressing choices, women appropriate their bodies. Whether they are in a process of adequacy or distance with the gendered beauty standards, their speeches and practices reveal how the construction of a certain appearance via clothing (moving during their life) is a central element of their identity building. We will present a typology trying to reveal the diversity of women stances about dress that we encounter during our survey. Each of these stances - these four ways of living their gender role via their dressing practices - illustrate the struggle of women who desire to build an appearance reflecting their singularity, their personal itinerary, in a society where gendered beauty standards are still constraining.

**METHODOLOGY**

Our study was conducted in the form of semi-structured interviews in which our main theme was to highlight the modalities of the gendered aesthetic experience of individuals (costs, benefits, experiences, strategies in relation to self and others). We met 32 women and 28 men, aged 21 to 52, declaring themselves as a couple (hetero or homosexual) and living in France:

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⁴ “The thesis is that fashion is oppressive, the antithesis is that we find it pleasurable. […] Either the products of popular culture are the supports of a monolithic male ideology, or they are there to be enjoyed and justified. […] While feminist with one voice condemn the consumerist poison of fashion, with another they praise the individualism made possible with dress” (Wilson 1987: 233; 236)

⁵ “Only the name of an individual (where distinguished by gender) can compete with dress as an effective social means for communicating the sex of an infant (or a person of any age)” (Marie Ellen Roach–Higgins and Eicher 1993: 17).

⁶ In this article, we will – in most cases – prefer the term “dress” in line with the work of M. E. Roach–Higgins and J.B. Eicher, because several terms proffered as alternates (appearance, adornment, apparel, clothing, costume) “almost inevitably introduces personal or social value” or “impose restrictive value judgement regarding aesthetic quality” which the term dress does not (Roach-Higgins and al. 1995: 9-10).
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Paris (7), Ile-de-France (28), regions (25). A heterogeneity of social classes has been chosen. Respondents recruitment was essentially achieved by word of mouth (within our network of interpersonal skills). This corpus was built gradually, and, at each interview, we tried to vary the sociological characteristics of individuals, in particular in terms of social and cultural level.

Femininity is being watched

Socially, femininity is the norm from which it contemporaries, men and women, judge that a woman is one. (Molinier 2006: 34)

Today, what are the aesthetic precepts and assignments that actively participate in the way women manage their dressed bodies? By analyzing the discourses and practices of our respondents, two inseparable normative facets surrounding the contemporary feminine appearance could be highlighted. They are characterized by the opposition between an “aesthetic power” (to use one’s body as an asset in a society that values self’s image), and “injunctions about restricting visibility” (controlling the limits of this power, notably the power of seduction). The combination of these two facets requires for women a long-term learning process. Since their youngest age, women are subject to prescriptions altogether ambivalent. On the one hand, they are encouraged to “work” on their beauty, to build a dressed body that is “adequate” to their gender and thus, to acquire a whole range of aesthetic skills that can benefit them in their daily lives. On the other hand, this gendered appearance – if it can represent a resource in the context of certain interactions – is also regulated by strong constraints. Indeed, regardless of how times change, the standards of feminine beauty broadcast codes of conduct as to what women can or cannot do with their own body. And in this regard, representations about women’s sexuality have always been a central explanatory element for the social establishment of aesthetic injunctions for women (Vigarello 2004; Sohn 2011). Our field investigation is no exception here and the analysis that we will propose concerning the two normative facets of the appearance of women (body “power” versus “constrained” body) will reveal the strong interweaving between feminine beauty practices (in particular dressing choices) and representation of women’s sexuality.

Without the eyes of others, “all men’s trade of sympathy or dislike, of intimacy or coldness, would be reduced immeasurably,” wrote Simmel (Simmel 1981: 227). For sure, the visual power is undeniable in a society that has experienced an exponential intensification of the social gaze since the sixteenth century. Nevertheless, simultaneously, the idea of body work as a factor of self-esteem is equally a strong value of our days. Taking care of one’s beauty for one’s own well-being (and not to please others) have been a contemporary leitmotiv since the democratization

Three major social categories have been distinguished. Throughout this article, we will describe as “+SC” individuals from well-to-do social classes with a high level of degree and income (9F, 11H). “MSC” (middle social class) interviewees have a medium level of qualification and receive a net monthly salary of between EUR 1200 and EUR 2000 (10F, 8H). Finally, the people we will call “-SC” (working classes) do not have a secondary school diploma or have a medium level of qualification and receive a net monthly income less than or equal to the French minimum wage (13F, 9H).
of beauty cares in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (Vigarello 2004). In our survey, the vigilance regarding the perceived self-image has been mentioned more widely in the speeches of women respondents than in the speeches of men respondents. Moreover, women more often evoked the distinction between their dress for the interior (of their houses) and their dress for the outdoors (in the street, at work, etc.). Linda, one of our respondents, will even tell us that it is essential for her “to be pleasant to watch”, a statement that appears (according to our interviews) unthinkable in a man’s mouth.

The goal is multiple. I think there is an objective of how others perceive me, the image that I want to send back from me and I also think that there is a question of pleasure. For once, something more futile, all that goes through the notion of pleasure. Yes that’s it. The self-image, the image that I send back. And there is also a question of respect for others, of oneself too. (Virginia, 34, +SC)

The insistence of women is worthy to be highlighted. Pleasure to reflect an appearance which satisfies us, search of coincidence between wanted image of oneself and perceived image of oneself, respect (this term was highly recurrent) of others or rather aesthetic standards, the reasons invoked reflect how aesthetics practices are used by women as a rational, relational, social tool, and although described as subjective pleasures; both aspects echoing. In any event, the priority is (obviously) always given to oneself, to one’s uniqueness, to one’s own tastes, desires, constraints. Women’s responders affirm this hierarchy of the aesthetics care’s goals; the self’s well-being must prevail, or at least the look of others must be at its service. In other words, as Anaïs, 27 y.o, points out, the mechanics is to “see yourself through other’s eyes”. The use of “well-being” as an argument is therefore chronic, but it relies almost systematically on others; and behind this idea of “well-being” lies above all a quest for recognition. Indeed, “dress, because it may be seen in social encounters before conversation can be initiated, has a certain priority over discourse in the establishing of identity” and at the same time announce social positions (Roach-Higgins and al. 1995: 12).

I think that the first reason is oneself, it is to please oneself, that I think is the first reason. And after that it’s also giving an image, according to its status, in relation to its job, to the people around ... After that it can be to please too, here I think that there is first of all the self and then we think of others. (Deborah, 38, +SC)

Far from feminist ideals, the gaze - especially of men but also of women - is commented on, sought after. In consonance with a quote of the poet John Berger: “women see themselves as observed” - (Rocamora 2007: 117). This idea, according to which the feminine identity in the public space is “watched”, echoes strongly our empirical data. In the background, behind this attention in the eyes of others, there is thus a “challenge in seduction” as expressed by one of our interviewees in her own words. “Well-being” can therefore be described as “functional” for many women met; it describes the feeling of being at ease with his “self-confident” appearance, especially in the context of interaction with others. “The self-image is not built in the only face-to-face with the mirror but under the gaze of others. [...] From near and far, they send us daily messages. Which are so many judgments, often discreet but cruel. The mirror only sanctions

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8 This actual aesthetic paradox alternating benevolence for oneself and respect of collective norms for others, was analyzed by researchers through the media discourse, and more particularly through “women’s magazines”, which have been experts in justifying aesthetic asceticism in order to increase autonomy and freedom of identity’s expression (Giet 2005). “The gender press calls for self-realization, but, openly or underground, the body is first and foremost the privileged mode of access to others. [...] Implicitly, (magazines) justify all the efforts proposed to female readers, who are finally called to parry and work their body only to seduce the other ”(Ibid.: 139-140). In this quote, authors wrote about “female readers” and not “readers” because this attention to the gaze of others - if it also concerns men - seems more “verbalizable” for women.
what one has thought to hear and understand and that one seeks to decipher in one’s reflection “ (Kaufmann 2013: 15).

In order to be “self-confident”, our respondents mentioned many times a specific imperative: to respect a “minimum level of femininity”. In other words, the goal of these women is to “to get the privilege that able-bodied women take for granted” (Brennan 2011: 126). Behind this idea, we find the two normative aspects relating to the feminine appearance: unavoidable and monitored. In the words of the women met, these two dimensions are omnipresent. To respect a minimum level of femininity is, first of all, to show a dressed body in accordance with what is “expected” of a woman to be perceived as a woman, not to “jostle” the social order (Roach-Higgins and al. 1995). Some excerpts from our interviews are therefore quite striking since we can perceive how the choice to support the constraints of the role of aesthetic femininity is thus crossed by the issue of “predictability in social life” inherent in the notion social role (Martuccelli 2002: 144).

It’s a masquerade and I’d like to tell myself that I can be me by being natural. And at the same time, I know that if I’m natural, I’m not considered a woman at 100%, and it annoys me, so I change sides but not in the painful aspects. I do not see why we should suffer. I have a girlfriend who made me try her heels 12 centimeters high, and I fell (laughs). (Cathy, 40, MSC)

If multiple models of femininity exist, there would be a minimal “base” to be respected, according to our respondents. Obviously, this “minimum level” has not exactly the same definition according to all women, and some “minimums” could frighten others. The key point here is the importance of this singular imposition. It is as if there was no choice, as if femininity implied a form of minimum requirement at all times. Admittedly, it is possible not to answer all the injunctions about self-care, however, a limit must not be crossed, the total absence of “proofs” of an aesthetic femininity sounds as highly discreditable in the mouths of our women respondents. It is for this reason that many of them declare themselves “still feminine”, even if they distance themselves from ascetic constraints. De facto, dress practices are most often experienced through the prism of “assiduity to one’s body” (Remaury 2000: 159) imposing rigor. For sure, some aesthetic practices are more appreciated than others, nevertheless, meanwhile the “pleasure” associated is mentioned regularly, we can see, in the discourses, how aesthetics firmness obligations is significant. The vocabulary used - “being presentable”, “being well physically” - thus reveals this imponderability. For the women we met, this omnipresent control answers to several functions. First, there is a desire to show one’s ability to take care of oneself. After years of socialization to the femininity standards, it would be appropriate to be “fit” to be feminine, to be regarded “as a woman”. By the way, a feminine woman is a woman from whom one can perceive the aesthetic “effort”. Also, even those who overwhelmingly reject legitimate standards of beauty say that it is not “so complicated” to be feminine. Today, “the ugly woman is no longer so guilty of having committed a fault, but of being what she gives to see of herself” recalls Claudine Sagaert (Sagaert 2015).

I think you can be presentable and feel good without spending an hour in the morning in your bathroom. You can now, with a few products, a little mascara and presto, it’s enough you can leave home, simply. [...] Femininity at the base… everyone can arrange themselves, a small cup, you have long hair, you can cut, to have something more fun… a little pencil, everyone can do it. (Sandrine, 35, +SC)

If this idea of “minimum level of femininity” illustrates the strength of the norm of aesthetic effort to which women are socialized, it also reveals how dressing choices of women are surrounded by injunctions restricting their visibility. Indeed, respecting a “minimum level of femi-
“ninity” could also be interpreted as a prescription to control its appearance, be sober, not to be excessively feminine. As a matter of fact, from adolescence, the dichotomy “good girl” versus “easy girl” guides the dressing practices of young girls whose body is thought from puberty as subject to male erotic gaze (Liotard et Jamain-Samson 2011). This life stage marks their entry into the adult world where gender norms strongly guide social relations; from that time, a social imaginary is built around a “respectable femininity” that will irrigate their aesthetic paths. Indeed, it exists a strong aesthetic “misstep” surpassing all others regarding the dressing choices of a woman, we will name it: “erotic ostentation infraction”. The situation is as follows: on the one hand, women are held responsible for showing a feminine appearance in accordance with the beauty standards, thus meeting the expectations of the gaze of others, to “make pleasure”, to work on their aesthetic sensuality; and, on the other hand, this responsibility can suddenly turn into guilt if women make the mistake of seducing aesthetically too ostentatiously. The sentence is then comical: their appearance is in default or in excess of eroticism, the offense is on the side of women. The vigilance about others discussed above then takes a new turn. It must be analyzed as inevitable because, in fact, the feminine aesthetic is inevitably the object of “looks likely to punish”... and women are perfectly aware of it. “Dedicated to seduction, women are often punished because of it” (Le Breton 2010: 7).

It’s very strong femininity once you come to adolescence, there are many eyes that can turn on you without your consent. Without you expecting it, and very aggressively. [...] In any case, there are some guys who tell you that, but not in a nice way, a little aggressive. And so it was both a gift but at the same time a risk too. I think I have protected myself from this thing, [...] to be beautiful, to please. And at the same time, it was a bit of a poisoned gift. (Alexia, 31, MSC)

After, if I want to get dressed now, I have no problem, but I do not want, if I dress too well, or if I show off too much, that I will under an excessive gaze of others. (Sandrine, 35, +SC)

Femininity typology: plural and subjective dressing experiences

More than a stable and continuous stance, be a man or a woman is a work within femininity and masculinity registers, without going into patterns, without falling into the clichés. And if there is a room for maneuver, it is imperative to stay at the controls of the gender’s gamepad to always remain oneself. (Macé and Rui 2014: 65)

In the second part of this article, we will focus more on the aesthetic trajectories of the respondents and more particularly on the ability of women to achieve deviations from norms and to take certain liberties with aesthetic and gendered role “expected” from them. In our society, women “are subject to intense aesthetic exhibition, whether on advertising posters, on screens, in magazines, in comics” (Nahoum-Grappe 2014: 95), which demonstrates the strength of corporal’s injunctions devolved on them. Nevertheless, our survey material reveals a certain heterogeneity in the reception of these models of femininity. “The body is neither an alienation, nor an instrumentalization, nor a liberation. It is (above all) an experience that marks our existence and makes for each an embodied self “ (Andrieu 2008: 83). The family history, the working life, the conjugal and friendly sociabilities, are all elements likely to impact the body experience of women and impact the “way in which (they) live their (aesthetics gender) role”(Martucelli 2002: 143). In order to grasp the diversity of these logics through the dressing practices of women we met, we will propose a typology grouping four positions of women con-
cerning aesthetic norms: “successful femininity”, “ironic”, “default”, and “fleeting” femininity. The establishment of these four positions is based on the “stylistic” of roles, a concept which “questions precisely some of the subjective aspects induced by the feeling of a rift between the individual and social life, when a social role is executed” (Ibid.: 206). Danilo Martuccelli’s concept of roles theory thus leads to the highlighting of four ideal-types built through the use of two axes: incarnation or distancing to the roles and, capacity (more or less) of the roles to shield individual from the social life. We will detail for each femininity mentioned above the elements (identified through the practices and speeches of our respondents) allowing us to position them in light of this typology.

**SUCCESSFUL FEMININITY: HEGEMONIC INTERIORIZATION**

This first ideal-type is “when the individual embodies its roles, which in return give him/her a strong feeling of relational security” (Martuccelli 2002: 230). Earlier, we were writing about “the irretrievable distance between what is desired and what is achieved” (Vigarello 2013: 105) to indicate the potential frustration that women may feel when they faced with constraining aesthetic codes that are difficult to achieve. This category, which we have named “successful femininity”, brings together, on the contrary, women who feel they master this distance and these codes. Their perceived image (of themselves) is not dissonant with their dreamed image and thus, they remove a form of “social prestige” from it. They are heavy consumers of aesthetic products (clothing and cosmetics) and their way of living in their gender role is marked by self-confidence - which we can put through for some with a high standard of living (allowing them to invest a lot in fashion for example without constraints), and for others, with a look matching with the “legitimate” beauty’s standards (thin morphology in particular) since their teenage years. Whether it is because of social or body “capital”, women of this ideal-type, create an intimate link between their feminine aesthetic role and their own interiority. We note they describe their dressing practices as particularly hedonistic.

Taking care of me is very important. It’s not a war. I have the impression of rather well dose, to do what it takes to both please me and at the same time return an image of me that is satisfactory. I feel at peace in my skin, you see, my style is assumed. I do not feel like asking myself 10,000 questions when I have to get
dressed. So I have a report that is rather healthy. (Virginia, 34, +SC)

While they recognize that this implies some constraints, they prefer to emphasize the correlated benefits. Their speeches are marked by the register of emotion, of sensations. They describe their practices via the semantic field of evidence. In that regard, the excerpt from Sophie’s interview below is particularly revealing for the reason that she used many times the expression “five minutes”, thus claiming the short time she needs to prepare herself, allowing her to position herself against artificiality ... But not only. Beyond this first analysis, we also understand in her remarks how the way she takes care about her appearance become for her a part of fun, not asking any particular effort: “it became something banal”.

Well now it has become a reflex. I feel better. I feel better when I’m well dressed, when I have some makeup. I feel good. After that, I think it’s back in my life. It’s to spend 5 minutes each morning, to watch what I’m going to put, it’s become a habit. [...] With time it has become part of my life and I will spend 5 minutes, 5 minutes to put on makeup, 5 minutes to put cream, 5 minutes, that’s all. It has become something banal. And I like that. And I would not see myself not doing it. It’s not essential but it’s important for me. I feel better like this. (Sophie, 30, MSC)

By exemplifying their gender aesthetic role, these respondents seem to “cultivate their interiority” (Martuccelli 2002: 231). They endorse a “stereotype” to which they adhere as they feel subjectively engaged. The path of Qhuyne is exemplary. After a teenage look under the sign of rebellion (baggy jeans with holes, hair discolored, rock’n’roll sweatshirts, etc.), which was perpetuated by this woman at the beginning of her adult life (until the end of her higher learning), Qhuyne got pregnant with twins and gave up her career ambitions to become a stay-at-home mom, abandoning at the same time all of her aesthetic practices. However, after a period of two years in which Qhuyne tells us that she has fallen into a form of depression, she decides to return to a professional activity and at the same time to an “aesthetic” activity. This is how she opts for a “working girl” style meticulously respecting the norms of ideal femininity. About fifteen years later, she recounts this time of her life in these terms: “I found myself”, “It was me”. Here, the dress practices assume a pivotal role of accompaniment in the identity building of our respondent who has made the choice to involve herself without limit in an aesthetic role that she considers in phase with a certain personality and social status.

I was restarting a life in fact. For me, you see, I came into the professional environment, because I stopped 2 years for my children, and having a social life, to have a cross on what I envisioned in terms of research (she wanted to do a Ph.D), yeah, I thought, now, now you’re a woman, the joke is over (laughs). And then yeah, when I found this style of dress, I felt myself, and suddenly, that’s it, it’s me, with this thing. [...] I think that I was so much myself, I found myself, I was so good, I think that it had to be seen, and suddenly, they said to themselves (my family, my friends), that’s it, there she is, she has found herself. (Qhuyne, 45, MSC)

In addition, these respondents seem to protect themselves through their appearances. They like to change their dressing style, to surprise their entourage. Their aesthetic gender role is a screen on which they project several versions of “themselves”. Each situation is studied and associated with a specific clothing type. It’s about juggling and presenting a worked appearance, valuing the aesthetic “effort”. From this ability to adapt, they experience pride.

Because I like all styles too, during the weekend, I like to be in jeans- sneakers, and during the week, I mainly put on dress pants, with a blouse, things like that. It depends on the situations where I go. [...] I also like to have the impression of being, not several people, but to do as I want. (Linda, 37, -SC)

I actually like, in quotation marks, to take costumes depending on the evening, or the place, if tomorrow evening, in the evening, I rather want to be sexy or what, here, it will depend on my mood, and I’m going to
dress up. I do not always have the same outfits for all parties with my friends or with my family. (Qhuyne, 45, MSC)

As a summary, we could almost speak here of a “hegemonic (aesthetic) femininity” (Cogérino et Mansey 2010), as we designate respondents who testify their desire to “look as a woman”, to construct an appearance in adequacy with the culturally dominant femininity form. However, we preferred the term “successful femininity” for one main reason; because this term underlines the feeling of pride felt by women in this category who manage to coincide with the normative aesthetic model. It is this feeling - a result, among other things, of an internalization of the aesthetic role of gender - which distinguishes them from the second profile we will describe now. This second profile could also refer to the idea of a “hegemonic femininity” if we stick to the aesthetic practices implemented. However, there is a nuance because of the reflexive posture of the respondents that we will call “distanced”.

IRONICAL FEMININITY: HEGEMONIC COMPlicity

Precisely because fashion is at one level a game (although it is not just a game), it can be played for pleasure. (Wilson 1987: 244)

Women in this category demonstrate a distance from the feminine aesthetic role. They refuse the constraints they consider excessive. Yet, behind these demands, they are nonetheless aware of “statutory considerations relating to social roles” (Martuccelli 2002: 231) and don’t want to become “discreditable” in the public sphere due to a lack of femininity. This is why they renegotiate in their everyday life the aesthetic standards of gender, making the choice of certain dress articles and the avoidance of others. During our interviews, their speeches alternate between the desire for emancipation and the respect for a “normal” line of conduct in terms of appearance. These respondents, belonging to wealthy classes, insist, for example, on their degree of distance between their interiority and the aesthetic tasks of women at the present time. Thus, they compare their dressing practices with the ones of “other” women, who, according to them, are more involved and as consequence more submitted to aesthetics norms.

I’m trying to look good, but now I’m not trying to beautify myself, to be careful like other types of moms. (Anais, 27, +SC)

When you say you look neat, it’s the opposite of what I do, I’m neat when I leave home, but I’m not, I’m not, at the top, as could be certain girls all the time. As long as I have my clothes clean, that there are no holes in them, that I feel good about myself. When my hair is done and that my skin is clean, for me I’m neat. (Sandrine, 35, +SC)

Each woman has her own perspective regarding the aesthetic constraints of femininity. Alexia tells us that she had begun to wax rather late as a “political act”; Celia and Deborah will claim their attachment to clothing brands that privilege comfort first and foremost; Anissa will make it clear that if she likes makeup, she could totally miss out on it. The illustrations are numerous and, on this first part of speech, centered on a distance claimed, is added another one, based on the quest for compromise. To put it simply, our respondents do not want to be “dis-
cordant” in the context of their social relations. At the top of the social ladder, aesthetic femininity is considered as a key for success. It is thus a matter of matching the minimum level of practices (required by their status) and their personal representation of femininity - stemming from their family socialization (discourses and maternal practices) or professional (masculine sector for example). As highlighted by a very revealing vocabulary from Celia, our respondents opt for “combat suits that adapt to all types of situations.” They don't want to impose on themselves a drastic diet while making sure to stay slim and they want to choose “feminine” clothes but also comfortable, this is the contract they make with themselves. “Modern identity rests on the claim of authenticity that leads to criticism of statutory identity, of assigned identities. But at the same time, as it is impossible to get rid of them definitively, the individual can perform a trick of magic by disguising that he becomes even more himself. The big difference is that the mask is either mandatory or freely set” (Singly 2005: 50).

I know pretty much what kind of day I'm going to spend. What I'm looking for is to reconcile with a comfortable outfit for the whole day, and indeed, do not seem too lousy, I try to wear jeans that are clean or clothes that are rather ironed but I do not adapt specially. It's a bit of what I call combat suits, which adapt to any type of situation. (Célia, 36, MSC)

Here is an aesthetic negotiation because it is a question of visualizing an aesthetic femininity conciliating what others “expect” to see and what our respondents “agree” to show. Nevertheless, in this category we called as “ironic”, “the perception of the individual to be in the world [...] never coincides entirely with that which he/she gives himself/herself to others” (Martuccelli, 2002: 232). Indeed, the presence of a semantic field of “gaming” in the speeches of these women is highly significant. Our respondents talk about their appearance care lightly by emphasizing the playful dimension of their practices. The use of the word “play” multiple times has a twofold meaning: it is both a question of attenuating the binding character of their care, but also a way to show they are not fooled and are conscious of the strength of their appearance in their social relations. “It is therefore in its dimension of project that feminine beauty should be thought about, by asking the question of the meaning of this activity by which a woman models her image every day as the prerequisite for her entry into the world” (Froidevaux-Metterie et Chevrier 2014: 130-131).
It gets a little excitement, a bit, it already breaks the routine, and then we feel like another character that day. But, anyway, we play really hard on it. For example, I’m not going to dress the same when I’m going to a client presentation, or when I know I do not have an appointment. I also think that appearance is related to self-confidence. Self-confidence also comes through appearance. And it is also a very difficult exercise [...] you have to find the right uniform that day to be both very elegant and at the same time comfortable to speak in public. (Virginia, 34, +SC)

**Femininity by default: to undergo hegemony**

This third category includes women who want to respect the legitimate norms of femininity because this gender aesthetic role represents for them a strong part of their identity. But unfortunately, the way they incarnate this gender aesthetic role do not enable them to be shielded by it in their social life. In other words, these women admire the codes of aesthetic femininity and desire to implement them with force but their daily life clutter them and do not allow them to access the desired image of themselves. They are feminine “in default” which triggers their social malaise. This is particularly the case of Clara and Magalie whose aesthetic body paths have strong similarities. When they tell us about their aesthetic past, nostalgia seizes them; they tell us how much they liked themselves, how envious their silhouettes were, how much they loved juggling with feminine clothes. Then, following their pregnancy, an aesthetic break occurred, resulting in a deep feeling of shame, of failure. When Clara is asked to describe her appearance today she will answer us in one word: “nothingness”. However, their attachment to femininity is infallible and both want to “take control of themselves”; the gap between their real image and their desired image causes a disarray that they hope temporary, resulting from a “prioritization” of their mother role.

I’m not the most feminine of Parisian girls, I used to be... but today for lack of time, and also for envy, following pregnancies ... [...]. I have feminine traits, I see that I am a woman, but femininity is more than that. In absolute terms, it’s an ideal but it’s not my ideal. Well, if I’d like, if I had money all that. But, the reality is that, I have plenty to manage, and my priority is not that, I prefer to spend time with family. It’s always the same. But hey we’ll talk again in a year if you want, I would have made my diet (laughs). (Clara, +SC)

To a lesser extent, the relationship of Josiane and Nathalie to their feminine aesthetic role is also ambivalent. They also have the intimate feeling of not “succeeding” femininity. These women are admiring the fashion standards without having the capacity (mostly financial) to implement them.

It is true that when I look at a woman on the street, who is well dressed, who is like that, it is true that it makes me want to look like her. I say ‘she is beautiful this woman’ and yes it makes you want. And we say to ourselves, ‘yes, why do not I do it too’, and then I remember, that’s it (laughs). (Josiane, 46, -SC)

It’s not because a product is going to be fashionable that I’m going to run after it. But I admit that I like to watch the things that are done. [...] First, honestly we do not have a wide clothing budget, it is still seriously limited, so I don’t do... (Nathalie, 45, -SC)

Their freedom of action is reduced, leading them to a social embarrassment. Not being able to keep up with the models of femininity disclosed by the media, they imagine themselves mocked, devalued by the gaze of others. They “experience a major contradiction. Illegitimated incarnating (their) role, (they) feel moreover as weakly protected by it “(Martuccelli 2002: 234).
When others are watching me, I feel impressed. I would be able to dress in rags to not attract the eyes of others (laughs). It’s impressive. It’s what I think, the look of others is intimidating, it often destabilizes me. [...] For example, when I enter a room and that all eyes are on me, brrrr… But after all, it depends on the days. If I have a beautiful dress, heels, if I’ve got a beautiful make up, I say to myself it’s good, great, I handle it, but here it depends on the days, but if you feel in a bad mood, you say to yourself, oh my god, ‘why are they looking at me, what is wrong?’ So to be neutral, to avoid any look, yes I would be able to be as simple as possible. But I can’t be without makeup, I can’t. (Josiane, 46, -SC)

Fleeting Femininity: Escaping Hegemony

Fleeting, this adjectival well describes the way in which women (in this category) position themselves regarding aesthetic gender norms. We can portray their dressing practices as an unstable escape. They want to “experience a distance to the role, (but this distance) destabilizes them in an intimate way” (Martuccelli 2002: 235). Indeed, if they refuse to perpetuate what they call a “tyranny” or a feminine “masquerade”, they are nonetheless affected by the consequences of this choice when the eyes of others fall on them. As illustrated by Amelie’s response when we asked her to position herself on a scale of beauty - “How much would I put myself in? Uh … I don’t know. Surely there are things to change (laughs) I don’t know. With the judgments of others, I would put 6, 5 “ - it is not easy to assume a daily distance from feminine dressing norms because “the judgment of others” counts.

I wouldn’t say I’m beautiful because I’ve always preferred inner than outer beauty. [...] Everything depends on the comparison you want, if you compare yourself to a model, you would say ‘oh well it’s dead, I’m at the bottom of the scale’, but if you compare yourself to ordinary people, there you are, you’d say, well, I’m no worse than another. Whatever, I would position myself lower than above (on a scale of beauty). (Elisa, 33, -SC)

Consequently, these women experience successive phases of pride (to assume a singular style) and phases of loss of confidence about their appearance (that is discordant in the public space as their entourage – or even strangers - underline it sometimes). On the one hand, not giving in “aesthetic effort” of femininity is a pride because for these women, their dressing practices are more sincere and honest than one’s others. They consider that they are not wearing a “mask”. This desire for transparency about “who they are” is synonymous with audacity for these women.

I am more authentic [...]. We have days when things are not going well, days when things are going well. And I think I need these moods, come on my face, on my appearance. (Sarah, 35, MSC)

On the other hand, transparency is not always easy to assume. One of our interviewees will tell us about their body self-acceptance for example: “I get what I deserve”, a revealing formulation of the (assumed) consequences of her distance to the aesthetics gender norms. Having complex, not feeling beautiful, these consequences are considered as the “normal” result of their particular dress and cosmetic choices. Our respondents explain it to us by laughing: “I do not find myself beautiful but at the same time I do not do anything for”. Like Lola, who throughout her interview explains how her aesthetic career is both marked by failed aesthetic tests and a relatively low body esteem.

When I look myself in a mirror I know I’m not horrible. I’m not ugly, but I think I’m normal, I’m not super pretty, super cute, I’m full of defects […]. I tried to put on makeup to do the same as others, in fact, to fit in, but it’s not me. I am more normal. […] Of course, I can dress sometimes skirt, skirts not too tight, otherwise I don’t feel ease, and the next day, I’ll be in wide pants baggy. I don’t really have a particular style. (Lola, 30,
Moreover, the respondents we have chosen to group in this category are mostly from working class people (two are farmers’ daughters, one’s parents are workers and one’s parents are taxi driver and cook) and all come from small towns. Although, it is impossible for us to talk about their relationship to appearance without addressing these family settings that have strongly contributed to their desire to overcome the aesthetic constraints of femininity, the financial aspect strongly impregnates their interviews.

Fashion has never attracted me. Maybe it was because I was educated in a family where we did not pay attention to fashion? My mother has never been very feminine either so does this condition? I don’t know [...] I would say that when it’s your money, you say, well, it’s better for me to have two jeans than only one that is expensive. I’m not looking at the expense either, if I want to please myself, I’ll do it. But I’m not the person who will do scrubs, stuff, makeup, jewelry, stuff. (Elisa, -SC)

CONCLUSION

To conclude this article, we want to underline two dimensions: one methodological, the other analytical. First, it should be noted that the development of these four women stances is based on two kind of data, on the one hand the aesthetic practices of the respondents, and on the other hand, their discourses on them. However, of course, we must indicate the non-homogeneity of the aesthetic experiences of women we met. Indeed, the normative injunction to respect feminine aesthetic effort concerns both the bodily supervision (mainly the thinness) but also the practices of the look (dress and cosmetic choices); and the correlation between these two items is not certain. It is perfectly conceivable for a woman to be particularly assiduous regarding the control of her weight, without engaging in feminine dressing practices (skirts, heels, necklines), just as the converse is true. So how did we analyze their way of experience their gender role through their aesthetic practices? To do this, we chose to focus our attention on the space between these two types of practices and the feelings of the respondents: does this gap create tensions in the subjective relationship to oneself or in relation to others? Based on this question, we can thus establish the following table:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>INCARNATION</th>
<th>DISTANCING</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>SHIELD +</strong></td>
<td><em>successful femininity</em>&lt;br&gt;Correlation between aesthetic body practices and dressing practices</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>SHIELD -</strong></td>
<td><em>femininity by default</em>&lt;br&gt;No correlation between aesthetic body practices and dressing practices and tensions with self and other’s gaze</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The second point we wish to underline concerns the distribution of social backgrounds among these four highlighted profiles. Indeed, if the figure of “successful femininity” turns out to be perfectly transversal, we can observe, on the other hand, that the women who are not “protected”/“shielded” (in their social life) by their dressing choices and appearance, essentially belong to lower classes. Likewise, the women from well-to-do social categories are more likely than others to adopt a posture of “hegemonic complicity” in their fashion practices. In fact, “even if every individual has a gendered body, it does not imply that he or she lives it with the same intensity as another person of the same gender” (Singly 2005: 49) and at this “game” of the stylistics of aesthetic gender roles, the variable of the social class does not seem neutral.

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