The ‘New Look’ Woman in the City and on the Street as Represented in Fashion Photography

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Abstract
Post-war fashions of the 1940s and 1950s are frequently regarded as overtly feminine, signifying a return to traditional gender roles. In particular, Christian Dior’s ‘New Look’ of 1947 and its subsequent imitators symbolically represented feminine virtues of constraint and compliance due to the structural design of garments that stylised the female body in an hourglass silhouette redolent of the nineteenth century. In part, fashion photographers, including Cecil Beaton and Richard Avedon in the late 1940s, contributed to the prevailing mythology of the New Look, whose studio-based images of the style aimed to inspire luxurious and aristocratic fantasies of feminine glamour. However, representations of this style are often contradictory. Specifically, the article argues that an alternate image of the New Look and associated fashions was also present during this era, where the backdrop of the city that featured in the photographs of Norman Parkinson, Willy Maywald, and Georges Dambier during the 1950s asserted women’s mobility in the public arena at a time when socio-political forces sought women’s return to the home. Drawing on Margaret Maynard’s framework for interpreting fashion photography outlined in ‘The Fashion Photograph: an Ecology,’ in which she establishes how meaning is produced through resemblance to other images, this analysis considers previous representations of fashion and the city in relation to the so-called ‘New Woman’ or ‘Modern Woman,’ a figure who has appeared cyclically in the socio-cultural imagination as a symbol of change, female emancipation, and mobility. Through analysis of photographs taken by Parkinson, Dambier, and Maywald the study investigates how the rhetoric of mobility, dynamism, and modernity associated with the ‘New Woman’ and the ‘Modern Woman’ was adopted in relation to the ‘New Look’ woman in order to affirm her presence outside the domestic sphere. In doing so, it demonstrates that the streetscapes, shopfronts, and urban architecture that formed the backdrop of 1940s and 1950s fashions marked women’s visibility in the city as a self-affirming action. In revisiting the possibility of the New Look as having qualities that can be aligned with female agency through dress, this analysis contributes to current discourses regarding the complex relationship between fashion and feminism, where tensions between pleasure in self-adornment and feminine narcissism, and considerations of consumer culture and economic mobility, continue to characterise women’s relationship to fashion.

Key Words

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1. Introduction
In the years following World War II women were encouraged to return to traditional body ideals and social roles.1 Fashion of the era functioned to mark out femininity with two
main silhouettes that reshaped the female body with confining foundation garments: Christian Dior’s ‘New Look’ (Image 1) and its many imitations characterised by full skirts, wasp-waists and padded hips, and Jacques Fath’s fitted bodice, slim-line straight-skirts and cinched waists. While the term ‘New Look’ was coined by Carmel Snow, editor in chief of Harper’s Bazaar, in relation to Dior’s Corolla line of 1947, it became broadly applicable to all of Dior’s creations of the late 1940s and early 1950s as well as those by his imitators (both famous and anonymous designers). With this in mind, I adopt the term ‘New Look’ to describe fashion of the 1940s and 1950s that displayed the stylistic return to the constrained female body, with bodily discipline and an idealised hour-glass silhouette achieved through controlling undergarments and the structural design of clothes.

Numerous fashion historians have examined the New Look with regards to its contradictions and controversies. For example, the dress historian Margaret Maynard examines how the New Look was marketed to Australian women as a pleasurable and sensuous style of dress, coinciding with post-war ideologies that women should return to the home after engaging in war-time work opportunities. The historian and fashion theorist Peter McNeil pays similar attention to the role the New Look played in attempts at symbolically refocusing attention towards women's sexual and reproductive capacities along with considerations of class, austerity, waste, glamour, and excess that the fashions embodied due to their extravagant use of fabric and labour. Elsewhere, the style has been described in relation to particular adaptations of the look and women's reception of it; for example, the cultural studies scholar Angela Partington's study of the way that working-class women re-configured the style in Britain to make it appropriate for active pursuits, and the film and television scholar Stella Bruzzi's examination of the ways in which Hollywood cinema modified the New Look as a persistent means to portray romantic femininity as well as sexual pleasure and empowerment.

The prevailing mythology of the New Look, with its excesses and impracticality, continues to be of hyper-femininity and a return to the domestic sphere, yet representation of this silhouette and its associated symbolic virtues of constraint and compliance may not necessarily be a straightforward equation. The article explores the contradictory representation of the post-war woman in fashion photography of the 1940s and 1950s, who, while dressed in garments conceived as overtly and traditionally feminine, is depicted as an active agent of modern urban life. In particular, it claims that the backdrop of the city that featured in the era’s fashion photography asserted women’s mobility in the public arena.

The visual culture of couture that the New Look promoted is generally conceived to be epitomised by glamorous studio shots, featuring aristocratic women poised in exaggerated poses amid ornate salon décor. As the fashion historian Christopher Breward argues of Cecil Beaton’s and Richard Avedon’s New Look images, ‘their glossy perfection disguised the part they played in ensuring that elite visions translated into wider commercial worth.’ However, the article contends that the alternate frame of the city was just as significant to the representation of the New Look. Select photographs taken by Norman Parkinson, Georges Dambier, and Willy Maywald are considered here as representative of fashion advertising and magazine editorials that linked women to a narrative that affirmed their presence outside the domestic sphere, where streetscapes, shop fronts and urban architecture form the backdrop of 1940s and 1950s fashions.

In making this argument, I examine previous representations of fashion and the city in relation to the so-called ‘New Woman’ and ‘Modern Woman,’ a figure who has appeared cyclically in the socio-cultural imagination as a symbol of change, female emancipation, and mobility. While the fin-de-siécle New Woman has often been labelled a largely textual configuration and fantasy figure, and the Modern Woman a construction of 1920s and 1930s fashion publicity, these figures have become cultural icons of modernity, representing an active woman of increased independence and opportunity. As such, I am not so much concerned with the lived experience of the New Woman or the Modern Woman but rather with how her cultural iconicity has been translated in visual construction. Adopting Maynard’s framework that positions fashion photography as an ecology of images, that is, ‘a rhetorical practice, informed by provisional, external engagements and framing procedures that play with relational contrasts,’ the article finds that fashion photographers of the 1940s and 1950s drew on the visual rhetoric of the ‘New Woman’ and the ‘Modern Woman’ to position what will be termed the ‘New Look’ woman as socially and physically mobile despite her dressed appearance of traditional feminine restraint. Through visual analysis of these photographs, this investigation...
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seeks to understand how the New Look was represented to women in modes beyond the retrograde ideals of nineteenth century fashion with which the style is commonly aligned.

Further, in reconsidering the New Look woman within the context of the city, I examine how these images emphasise what the cultural historian Liz Conor terms ‘feminine visibility,’ highlighting women’s configuration as spectacle and self-apprehended image, evidencing how the fashion image serves as a mechanism to explore evolving notions of female identity. As such, this study contributes to on-going discourses, as identified by the visual culture scholars Hilary Radner and Nathalie Smith regarding the complex and contradictory relationship between fashion and feminism, where women’s agency through dress can be interpreted as highlighting aspirations of independence and mobility, as well as expressing concerns regarding the importance of sexual attractiveness and women’s role as consumer to be counter-productive to women’s emancipation.

New Women and Modern Women in the City

In ‘Fashion’ (1904), the sociologist Georg Simmel was one of the first scholars to identify the relationship between fashion and the city. Simmel noticed that the rapidly growing cities of the nineteenth century created a maelstrom environment that provoked the individual to assert personality through both uniformity and distinction in dress. His observations regarding the relationship between fashion, modernity, and the metropolis remained intrinsic to the performance of urban life throughout the twentieth century. Strangely, while fashion and the metropolis appear to be inextricably linked, women’s presence in the city has often been considered problematic. For example, in the nineteenth century the flâneur or dandy often undertook the project of understanding modernity. These prominent figures of literature and popular culture gendered the city as the social and professional domain for masculinity, where women were largely written out of participating in this public arena. While contemporary scholarship by the cultural historians Deborah Parsons and Janet Wolff has identified the existence of the flâneuse in the city as the middle-class fin-de-siècle shopper, the cultural studies theorist Elizabeth Wilson’s The Sphinx in the City (1996) underlines that much discourse concerning women’s presence in the metropolis at this time envisages her ‘as temptress, as whore, a fallen woman, as lesbian, but also as virtuous woman in danger.’ Such representations echo concerns that women’s presence in the city was a moral and political threat to the patriarchal construction of the metropolis, where industrial capitalism contributed to the separation of the public and private spheres and women were confined to the domestic realm. Despite this anxiety, the city has often appeared in popular-culture images and texts that depict the ‘New Woman, a social phenomenon and literary type of the late nineteenth century. The art historian Ruth Iskin’s analysis of the fin-de-siècle flâneuse in early advertising demonstrates that ‘posters which depicted urban women with agency participated in reshaping women’s identities in the 1890s and early 1900s,’ as these images reflected the New Woman’s desire to enter the public sphere but also portrayed women participating in urban life. As Iskin contends:

Though these changes were much contested, portraying active modern women in the city was less threatening in a commercial poster... than in a political context. Posters could thus visualise attractive icons of modern women in the city and through them such images were assimilated into mainstream culture.

Iskin’s analysis centres around a number of images that depict women strikingly attired in hats, gloves, and corseted gowns as they promenaded the city streets. Posters for biscuits, bicycles,
and soap are remarkably similar in their portrayal of the fashionable femme shopping in the urban environment.


For example, the woman depicted in the French-Romanian artist Frederic Hugo d’Alési’s 1895 illustrated poster for a lithographic exhibition (Image 2) is described by Iskin as
‘defined by her cultivated gaze and fashionability, she performs both with the expert touch of
the actress who is observed by an audience.’ While Iskin is concerned with how the woman is
represented as an example of the flâneuse, it is worth emphasising that the New Woman
portrayed in this advertisement, and others like it, such as those by Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec
of La Goulue (1892) and Jules Cheret’s Dubonnet posters (1895), couple fashion, the city, and
feminine visibility and spectatorship as symbolic of female independence at a time when
‘respectable’ women rarely walked unchaperoned.

Representations of New Women in the city allowed women to venture beyond the
boundaries of private space into the public sphere and symbolically represented female agency.
A similar argument can be made for the 1920s and 1930s ‘Modern Woman’ who appeared in
the post-World War I popular consciousness as the flapper or la garçonne. Epitomised by her
slim, streamlined silhouette and cloche hat or bobbed-haircut, the ‘Modern Woman’ of
literature, advertising, and magazine publicity was economically, socially, and physically
mobile. As the historian Mary Lynn Stewart contends ‘the modern woman became a resonant
symbol of emancipation.’ As with the ‘New Woman,’ the ‘Modern Woman’ was a contested
figure; in particular, her perceived androgyny sparked critical discourse concerning women’s
social roles in post-war society. Her short skirts afforded physical mobility and her short hair
symbolised the erasure of gender boundaries.

Historians have often dismissed the modern woman as an apolitical figure who was
preoccupied with fashion and consumerism. However, the historian Mary Louise Robert’s
analysis of French style in the 1920s demonstrates that post-war fashions symbolically
functioned ‘as a visual analogue of female liberation...fashion constituted a semi-autonomous
political language that served as a maker as well as a marker of the modern woman.’ A similar
analogy can be drawn to the imagery of the Modern Woman as represented on the covers of the
fashion magazines Vogue and Harper’s Bazaar during the 1920s and 30s. Illustrations by
George Lepape, Pierre Mourgue, and Erte for these magazines depicted the ‘flapper’ fashions
alongside automobiles and framed by cityscapes, thus visually aligning the Modern Woman
with the concept of modernity and personal freedom. As Roberts argues, ‘to buy and wear the
new styles...was to participate in a social fantasy of liberation.’ Whether this image
represented real political effect is debatable, while the Modern Woman’s fashion had political
significance for women’s emancipation in the cultural imagination, the desired effect of the
streamlined silhouette still required restrictive foundation garments despite the abolition of the
corset, and these new fashions have also been understood in terms of the emergence of modern
consumerism that exploited women for profit. Nevertheless images of female visibility in the
public sphere of the city presented women with an iconography that equated fashion and the
metropolis with progressive modernity. As Roberts asserts, ‘the visual alignment of la femme
moderne with an ethos of mobility,’ produced ‘a cultural landscape in which a vivid new kind
of woman – powerful, active, and adventuresome - could be represented.’

George Lepape’s illustration of the model and photographer Lee Miller in front of a
Manhattan skyline for the March 1927 issue of Vogue (Image 3) is an example of how the
modern woman image was aligned with the city to represent a larger discourse concerning
identity and power in relation to fashion and female visibility. Here Miller is depicted as
spectator engaged and active in the city that surrounds her. Directing her gaze outward towards
the viewer she appears confident of her place in this public sphere. That the city does not dwarf
her with its towers but rather echoes her form and dress in terms of the similarity of their
elongated lines and further suggests that the modern woman was at home in this world rather
than in the domestic environment. Similarly, Erte’s November 1933 cover for Harper’s Bazaar,
suggests a modern woman comfortable in her city surrounds. The cover features a well-heeled
woman with bobbed hair, her bright orange attire standing out amid the geometric lines of
skyscrapers and tuxedo clad men. While she is self-aware of her position as the object of her many suitors' gaze, she is unfazed by this attention and appears wholly confident. Her fur-trimmed coat and sparkling jewellery convey wealth and power suggesting economic independence. That both Lepape's and Erte's covers portray the modern woman walking the city at night glamorises her perceived sexual emancipation and suggests that the modern woman challenged the moral rectitude associated with women's presence in the city. As Conor contends the modern woman:

was often depicted as seeing herself as an object of desire and as capable of evoking strong sexual responses: she saw herself as sexual....The entry of women in metropolitan space was shaped by representations of feminine types who were not at home in the home...this was her way of partaking in the adventure of the city, the excitement of sexual attraction, anonymous display and urban style.25

Both the fin-de-siécle 'New Woman' and the 1920s 'Modern Woman' were often represented in the context of the urban environment, where the city and its symbolic associations of freedom and change were connected to fashion. This dynamic can be interpreted as part of the rhetoric of advertising and consumer culture, where Martin Pumphrey, the literary and cultural studies scholar, asserts, fashion encouraged women to become involved in modernity in terms of image and lifestyle enjoying new freedom 'not in terms of career or political action but in terms of a carefree leisure.'26 While the 'New Woman' and 'Modern Woman' images may not have reflected women's true political and economic positions, they provided an iconography of fashion as a liberating force of social and sexual freedom by connecting cultural icons of women to the city. In other words, while the images of the 'New Woman' and the 'Modern Woman' presented by advertisers and fashion magazines may have only presented women with a fantasy of liberation that was inherently tied to consumptive practices, nevertheless this imagery fuelled the cultural imagination in representing women's mobility and agency in the public sphere.

*Image 3: George Lepape, *Vogue*, 15 March 1927 © Condé Nast*
3. **The New Look Woman’s Representation in Fashion Photography**

Dior’s ‘New Look’ of 1947 has been much discussed in fashion history with regards to its representation of luxury and glamour after years of wartime austerity, as well as how it visually indicated a return to decorative feminine ideals after a period that necessitated more utilitarian styles of dress. Epitomised by a tight bodice and a flared, flowing skirt that dropped to below calf length, the style was often described by Dior in terms of extreme femininity:

> We were emerging from a period of war, of uniforms, of women-soldiers built like boxers. I drew women-flowers, soft shoulders, flowering busts, fine waists like liana and wide skirts like corolla.27

Dior’s floral language suggested the fragility of women and, according to the historian Diana de Marley, ‘expressed the type of woman most governments in the West were looking for...from being all-capable, women were now told to become decorative stereotypes.’28 The style could be seen to resemble a modernised version of a nineteenth-century silhouette that required corsetry and crinolines to achieve the desired effect of an hourglass figure. The fashion historian Valerie Steele concurs, noting of ‘from stiletto heels and waspie girdles to white gloves and aprons, women’s fashion promoted restrictive images of femininity.’29

The 1947 New Look was not the only fashion of the post-war period to convey constrained femininity. Dior’s long-line and Y line, and Jacques Fath’s slim-line suits and dresses all required women to restructure their bodies with corsets and girdles to achieve the wasp-waist. The hats, gloves, and stiletto heels that accessorised the New Look also portrayed an image of female bodily discipline and control. The idea of constrained femininity that these fashions represented was promoted in numerous popular sources, including the American fashion designer Anne Fogarty’s *The Art of Being a Well Dressed Wife* (1959). Fogarty’s book conveys the importance of disciplining the mind, body, and emotions as well as the need to master an at-home style to perform wifely duties. Her ultra-feminine ideology has been recognised by Steele, where statements such as, ‘take advantage of the opportunity your kitchen offers for expressing your wifely qualities in what you wear’ illustrate the rhetoric of how the New Look fashions were adopted to convey traditional female roles.30

Similarly, the fashion historian Ann Hollander identifies the connection between the New Look and the constructed feminine ideal of housewife and mother, where ‘the style itself created a trivial quality for fashion and implied the shallowness of women, still being automatically viewed as The Second Sex.’31 The allusion here is to Simone de Beauvoir’s seminal publication *The Second Sex* (1949), which was significant to the development of second wave feminism. This has particular resonance, as numerous fashion historians have suggested that the New Look was an antithesis to de Beauvoir’s ideas that women’s dress and concern for appearance was ultimately tied to her position as ornament; for de Beauvoir, fashion was a site to display a woman’s sexual worth as well as her husband’s wealth and status.32 Despite Hollander’s assertion that the New Look epitomised a restrictive image for women, she recognises a place for fashion photography to recast the symbolic meanings attached to particular modes of dress. In particular she argues that Richard Avedon’s photographs recognised women’s desire to assert agency regarding how they were perceived, whereby they:

> Acknowledge how hard it is for a woman to become self-aware and self-possessed...and perform well in her own eyes. He demonstrates that...a photographer can hold his canny mirror to show that clothes and mirrors are
always her allies, but mainly Avedon shows that the quality of the performance depends on her and springs from within.\textsuperscript{33}

I argue that the idea of women's self-apprehension and awareness of femininity as a construction, that Hollander describes in relation to Avedon's work, is emphasised in images from the same era that employ the city as backdrop. Furthermore, this directly contrasts with the dominant perceptions of the New Look and haute couture fashions of the 1940s and 1950s that were often portrayed in such a way as to highlight associations of luxury and glamour.

Breward's analysis of haute couture as captured by the iconic photographers Richard Avedon, Irving Penn, and Cecil Beaton reveals that the representation of these garments was directed by a cinéma vérité approach. For example, Penn used the stark background of the blank studio wall in his photograph \textit{Fath Detail}, Paris (1950) to highlight form, texture, and precision, while Beaton constructed elaborately theatrical and glamorous tableaux set in salons, parlours, and museums, for example his photograph of \textit{Charles James Ball Gowns} (1948).\textsuperscript{34} Avedon's approach differed in that he often set his scenes outdoors in order to highlight carnivalesque and fetishistic elements of dress.\textsuperscript{35} The images Breward describes convey an unrealistic fantasy construction of ideal femininity, presenting women as ornate decorative objects not unlike their surrounds, or as bodies to be observed for their fetishistic sculptural forms.\textsuperscript{36} However, I contend that the city and street as backdrop to 1940s and 1950s couture offered a conflicting vision of these fashions where the dynamism of the city conveys an immediacy and realism that is contrasted with the fantasies and dreams of many studio-based images. That is not to say that fashion photography of the street does not present a desirable image of glamour, only that this image is a more readily available experience of fashion in everyday contexts. While Olivier Zahm, the founder/owner of the French fashion and culture magazine \textit{Purple}, proposes that fashion photography is considered 'instinctively suspect of superficiality, inauthenticity and gratuitousness,' it would seem that fashion photography that engages with the realism of the street is less likely to be characterised in this way.\textsuperscript{37} In engaging with this realist style, Elliott Smedley, the stylist and fashion editor, argues that fashion photography has 'stripped bare the fantasies and the superficial ideals that the fashion industry had formerly felt compelled to portray and disseminate.'\textsuperscript{38}

This assessment is particularly true of contemporary street fashion photography; however, it also has some bearing on the way Norman Parkinson's photographs of models clad in couture walking the streets of New York can be interpreted. Parkinson's \textit{Traffic} featuring then model Ivy Nicholson (1957) uses the backdrop of architecture and automobiles to suggest the modernity of the woman portrayed.\textsuperscript{39} The image has a snapshot quality suggesting the realism of the scene as well as its immediacy. Parkinson's framing of the image conveys a reciprocity between the woman's dress and the speed of city life by blurring the sweep of her coat. This technique draws attention to the relationship between fashion and the city, where both can be seen to represent change, freedom and activity. Wilson similarly alludes to the contradiction of the city as a background to 1940s and 1950s women's fashion in her evocative description:

Although the New Look was supposed to be so feminine, there was a weird masculinity about it all. The models were as tall as guardsmen in mufti, or City men leaning against furled umbrellas. They wore the highest high heels, and hobble skirts with sharply jutting hips and flying panels which bore faint memories of Gothic architecture, but the hard hats looked like city bowlers.\textsuperscript{40}
The general perception of the New Look is that it symbolised women’s return to the home after the Second World War. As Wilson argues, there was much consternation surrounding the new fashion, where ‘women MPs from the Labour Party spoke out against its attack on the freedom of women, its “caged bird attitude” and its emphasis on “over sexiness.”’ Yet, the backdrop of the city or the street contrasts with this perception, for the rhetoric of the urban environment has been consistently connected to an emancipated woman, as demonstrated by the illustrated images of the nineteenth century New Woman and Modern Woman of the 1920s and 1930s. I contend that iconography of the city is adopted by photographers of the 1940s and 1950s to convey themes of liberation in relation to the New Look.

In particular, Willy Maywald’s photographs of Dior’s garments appear to draw on the rhetoric of the New Woman and the Modern Woman. For example, the Dior model standing in front of a black Buick automobile wearing a Tulip line ensemble defined by a wasp-waist and stem-straight skirt (Image 4), recalls the plethora of advertising imagery from the 1920s that used the backdrop of the car in the city to suggest female mobility and modernity. For example, Georges Lepape’s January 1925 illustration for Vogue portrays a lavishly dressed Modern Woman framed by the art deco streamlines of automobile and architecture. As Robert’s argues of such imagery, ‘advertisers, novelists, and social observers pictured women (much more than men it seems) behind the wheel of the car, creating a visual image of female mobility and power.’ Thus despite the model’s seemingly confining Dior garment and its symbolic association with feminine constraint, the ‘New Look’ woman is visually equated with the Modern Woman through her visual approximation to the sleek and sophisticated machine.

It would seem that the New Woman was also a source of visual rhetoric for representing the ‘New Look’ woman. In particular, Maywald’s image of a woman in a Dior suit holding an umbrella while looking at kiosk magazines on the streets of Paris (Image 5) recalls Hugo d’Alési’s 1895 illustrated poster and his representation of the New Woman (Image 1). As Iskin argues, representations of the New Woman’s unchallenged presence in the city revised social constraints. While Maywald’s photographs refer to a different time where a women’s
unchaperoned presence in the city was not an issue, that the New Look woman is represented comfortably inhabiting these urban spaces arguably conveys that these garments were not necessarily as symbolically restricting as popular commentary insists.

In her study of 1960s fashion photography, Radner argues that the ‘Single Girl’ ‘on the move’ consolidated a new feminine ideal: ‘young, single, economically self-sufficient, the ideal incarnated the notion of movement, of a culture in transition.’ In her analysis of fashion photographs by Martin Munkacsi, David Bailey, and William Klein, she emphasises that the ‘Single Girl’ image is reliant on the photographic modes of ‘outside fashion’ where ‘the model is shot outside, often walking or running; she is active.’ For Radner, this activity suggests a liberating engagement with urban life ‘outside traditional patriarchal construction,’ yet must still contend with the constraints of consumer culture. The political and cultural writer Virginia Postrel similarly contends that the active model of outside fashion imagery is an icon of modernity and liberation, where she identifies the cyclic appearance of ‘the striding woman’ in fashion advertising from the 1920s and 1930s as well as the 1970s. Although Radner and Postrel do not discuss fashion photography from the 1940s and 1950s as engaging with outdoor activity a corresponding argument can be made in relation to the New Look woman in the city and on the street. For example, Willy Maywald’s photograph of Bettina racing down the steps wearing a floating ballerina skirt by Givenchy (1953) or Georges Dambier’s September 1952 image for Elle of Sophie Litvak wearing a softly draped winter suit at the bus stop both convey the New Look woman as purposeful and engaged in her city surrounds. As with her 1960s ‘Single-Girl’ counterpart, her action is carefully staged to offer a model self for the woman reader. As Martin Harrison, the art curator and writer, explains of fashion photography that occurs in the public sphere:

Women’s fashion magazines were the first medium to present images of women for the consumption of women, rather than men, and the women depicted in these photographs—who after all represented their readers—
began to be cast in active as opposed to the passive roles traditionally assigned to them in art.\textsuperscript{48}

In analysing images of the New Look in the city it should also be noted that they provide a framework to consider women’s visibility in public life, where the woman is represented as either an anonymous figure going about her daily business or as fantasy spectacle. Alistair O’Neil argues that there is a tension between women’s visibility and invisibility in the city that was powered by fashion, where 1940s fashion spreads of the single-girl office worker simultaneously convey individual anonymity and spectatorship.\textsuperscript{49}

\textit{Image 6: George Dambier ‘Suzy Parker Vitrine Lanvin,’ Paris 1952 © George Dambier}

I contend that women’s visibility in the city as a self-affirming action can be further observed in relation to examples of New Look fashions, in particular through images such as George Dambier’s photograph of the model Suzy Parker that cast shop windows as mirrors (Image 6). In these instances, the New Look woman is self-aware of her own image as feminine spectacle. However, Maywald’s and Dambier’s use of the mirror might also be seen to affirm women’s presence in the city. By making the window a mirror capable of holding the woman’s image and presenting herself looking at this image, we imagine that she is also observing herself in the city surrounds. Thus, the New Look woman is not only self-reflexively aware of her visibility in the city but also recognises her social freedom to belong in the street and observe the city around her. Just as the New Woman and Modern Woman became equated with the city as an adventurous and powerful image of mobility, the New Look woman in the city contributes to a continuous construction of fashion imagery as a liberating space for women to explore a space for resistance against the confining structures of ideal domesticated femininity that the New Look was conceived to represent.

4. Conclusion

The conflicting image of the New Look woman in the city is that of a constructed feminine identity achieved through garments symbolically associated with discipline and restraint, positioned alongside ideas of modernity, dynamism, and progress, conveyed by the
image of the metropolis. This contradictory representation may well have a number of purposes within the wider visual culture that the woman is invited to simulate as part of her identity. Given that the New Look’s silhouette was based on an old look from the nineteenth-century, the backdrop of the metropolis gave the style a modern façade so that the female consumer might associate the New Look with change. Alternately, just as the iconic image of the Modern Woman was adopted by advertisers to appeal to and create an audience of female consumers by subtly transforming perceptions of women’s position in the city, the New Look woman may have been visually aligned with the consumer sphere of shopping. However, in saying this, the streetscapes, architecture, and bus stops that appear in Maywald’s, Parkinson’s, and Dambier’s images provide a less convincing visual rhetoric of female consumptive practice than the many photographs by Beaton and Penn that used luxurious and glamorous backdrops to accessorise the New Look.

Partington’s analysis of the way working-class women adapted the style to be comfortable and serviceable at work further signals the complexity of the New Look. Her study ‘contradicts the assumption made by fashion historians that the New Look was inappropriate for work or active pursuits’ and provides evidence that women felt the style ‘comfortable rather than restrictive or ornamental.’ That the women represented by magazine photography were imagined as wearing the New Look in the city and partaking in active life may have been a catalyst in part for working-class women to take up the style in everyday life.

I surmise that images by Parker, Maywald, and Dambier suggest that the New Look woman inhabits the city and is dominant within it. In each instance identified in this investigation, the New Look woman is not dwarfed by the buildings that surround her but rather is represented as central to the city’s bustle and dynamism. Parkinson’s and Maywald’s photographs, in particular, reinforce the link between the New Look woman, activity, and modernity. Arguably, these images represent what the historian William H. Chafe terms the ‘paradox of change,’ where women are depicted as both active in public life and associated with the domestic realm. The New Look woman in the city is thus reflective of the post-war period when ‘reliance on traditional images said a great deal about the difficulty of changing fundamental perceptions about sex roles.’ Just like her nineteenth-century and 1920s counterparts, post-war women of the 1940s and 1950s faced criticism based on their presence in the public domain and engagement with city life. While the New Look silhouette may have symbolically referred to women’s return to traditional female roles, in juxtaposing this image with the metropolis, women were offered a narrative of female agency that drew on the rhetoric of mobility, dynamism, and modernity associated with previous representations of emancipated figures, the New Woman and the Modern Woman. Undoubtedly, fashion photography holds a contentious position when examining relationships between fashion and feminism. Whether the commercial imperatives of the genre necessitate modes of hegemonic social control that are inherently designed to confirm women’s place within patriarchy and capitalist society is a question beyond the scope of this article, and one that is perhaps limited in understanding that fashion photography also operates within the framework of fashion as a social practice, whereby women assert a set of meanings to dress beyond those circumscribed by the fashion system.

Notes

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7 For discussion of the role of the New Woman in literature see Sally Ledger, *The New Woman: Fiction and Feminism at the Fin de siècle*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997).
17 Ibid.
18 Ibid., 339.
22 Ibid., 683.
23 Ibid., 684.
32 For discussion regarding the relationship between Simone de Beauvoir’s views on fashion and the New Look see Radner and Smith, ‘Fashion, Feminism and the Neo-Feminist Ideal: From Coco Chanel to Jennifer Lopez,’ 277; Wilson, Adorned in Dreams: Fashion and Modernity (London: Virago, 1985), 100; and Pamela Church Gibson, ‘To Care for Her Beauty, to Dress Up, is a Kind of Work: Simone de Beauvoir, Fashion and Feminism,’ Women’s Studies Quarterly 41, no. 1&2 (2013): 197-201.
33 Hollander, ‘Woman in the Mirror, 239.
40 Elizabeth Wilson, Adorned in Dreams: Fashion and Modernity, 46.
41 Ibid., 225.
45 Ibid., 129.
48 Martin Harrison cited in Hilary Radner, ‘Proper Women in Improper Places’ in *Spaces of Culture: City, Nation World*, eds. Scott Lash and Mike Featherstone (London: Sage, 1999), 89

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