Fashion as Mood, Style as Atmosphere: Literary Non-Fiction Fashion Writing on SSENSE and in *London Review of Looks*

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Abstract

Amongst the discourses that describe, construct and critique fashion, one form, which we might deem a kind of literary non-fiction that attends to how fashion, dress and social moods entwine has thus far largely escaped scholarly notice. While fashion criticism often attends to the "moods" a collection addresses, this mode of writing, primarily circulated on digital platforms, considers how clothes place us as social, affective beings within culture and everyday life, and elucidates the ways fashion interacts with one's person in fanciful and sensory ways. Written in response to its writer's perspective and experience, such writing uses literary devices to render palpable what clothes do, how it feels to long for a garment or lose one's taste for dress. In this way, it helps us to understand what an attunement to fashion and/or dress looks and feels like in practice. This chapter argues that this literary non-fiction writing on fashion and dress reveals how social moods and clothing interact. It primarily considers two contemporary examples: the fashion writing published by Montreal-based luxury e-tailer *SSENSE* and writer Ana Kinsella's newsletter *London Review of Looks*.

Introduction

A language of "mood" is often employed in fashion writing to explain how certain styles come to feel right in a given time. In fashion criticism, moods are often invoked to explain a designer's personal inspiration or why a collection fits the

current moment, their response to a shared cultural climate forming an atmosphere to envelop us this season. In her review of Khaite Spring/Summer 2021, Cathy Horyn (2020) suggested that the collection, with its darkness and 'strong, mostly unfussy shapes [… confronted] all the shifting moods of this time'; whereas in a different time, season and mood, Andre Leon Talley wrote for American *Vogue* (January 1990) that 'a storm of white is brewing in the international waters of fashion.' No longer content to send 'riots of colors' down the runway, designers were showing clothes in white. Rifat Ozbek showed eighty completely white garments, feeling 'oversaturated with color […] this was the only way out' (Talley, 1990, 242). Many shared his feeling that season, indicating that these designers, including Karl Lagerfeld and Isaac Mizrahi, were attuning to something beyond individual preference.

Elizabeth Sheehan, writing about fashion in modernist fiction, explains that 'in French, mode also refers to mood', a linguistic common ground that suggests fashion's suitability to provide 'ways to feel out the construction and contingencies of the "just now"' (2018, 12). In practice, designers may materialise a social mood through their work, which feels "right" to fashion critics, who contextualise this shift for readers and encourage them to appreciate why this collection is important right now. Fashion draws mood to the surface where it can be seen, transforming something immaterial and perceived into something that can be worn, felt in a different way and, crucially, observed. In other words, fashion 'holds and produces knowledge about the present and future, which may be inexpressible in another mode' (Sheehan, 2018, 12).

I use the term “mood” here, following Martin Heidegger, and others, ‘to convey an overall orientation to the world that causes it to come into view in a certain way’ (Felski and Fraiman, 2012, n.p.). Moods circulate socially, perceptible to many yet felt and experienced at the site of oneself. After Heidegger, to contemplate mood is to attend to the pre-cognitive, the ways we experience the world as beings bound up in it: ‘to be human, then, is to be contextualized in a world. But that world is not “private” in any sense [… We] are contexualized in a culture and in history’ (Guignon, 1984, 234). Clothing, often considered by scholars as a material extension of our embodied self, offers a rich site to explore the ways feeling, history and culture entangle in our sense of self. At the same time, writing that attends to these dimensions of dressed experience helps us to see these entanglements in practice, as it weaves personal experience of dressing with the influence of the wider world, which, in an unending cycle, also impresses upon and shapes dress.

In this chapter, I consider fashion writing that reveals the ways moods weave a moment in time with fashion and dress. Unlike other forms of fashion journalism with which we are more familiar, like criticism, designer profiles or trend reports, it is not a distinct sub-genre of fashion writing; it is best described as a kind of literary non-fiction that attends to the ways mood intersects with fashion and dress. Such writing has proliferated in the digital era, perhaps due to the emphasis on individual perspective encouraged by media such as fashion blogs, user-generated social media and personal essays, which enjoyed a resurgence in popularity in the early-mid aughts.

While certainly more niche in the fashion journalistic landscape, such fashion writing reveals something important about how we use clothes to comprehend ourselves in relation to the world, as well about fashion itself. Writers of these pieces often draw from their experience or observations to explore what is latent in dress, the forms of knowledge it produces and holds that are often beyond the realm of language. In this way, such writing gives 'textual form to sartorial ways of knowing and feeling' (Sheehan, 2018, 12). It does not seek to persuade the reader to buy (or buy into) incipient trends and is largely disinterested in the dominant circulations and happenings of the fashion industry, as is more commonly found in the mainstream fashion media. Rather, it attends to how clothes and fashions make us feel—or the feelings from which looks arise; and, as such, it draws more from the conventions of literature than fashion journalism: it alludes to; it is poetic. Employing metaphor and rich description, writing on fashion's moods entwines consideration of personal experience with wider social and political events in a way that is neither personal essay nor reportage. In short, it is writing that attends to how clothes, which are sometimes also fashion, place us in conversation with ourselves, with other people and the times in which we live.

In such writing, to borrow from philosopher Gaston Bachelard, we see how 'man is half-open being' (1994, 222), attuned to and receptive of the world, enmeshed in and influenced by it, yet always understood from the vantage point of a perceiving self that is clothed. This way of thinking the self through dress is predicated on being attuned to clothing. For Heidegger, much of the world is hidden to us, until our interests cause us to pay attention: 'an attunement is to be awakened' (1995, 63). Not all people are attuned to the same moods; or to extend the concept to the

social, it is possible to be attuned to some shared moods and not others; or for some people to find it necessary to dress towards how they feel on a given day, whereas others do not. Riffing on Heidegger's metaphor that to be attuned is to be tuned in to, scholar Sara Ahmed explains, 'we can close off our bodies as well as ears to what is not in tune' (2014, 18).

The ways that moods circulate through groups of people or nations has been elaborated by scholars within literary studies and cultural studies, building on Heidegger's concept of *Stimmung* (attunement), which attended to individual rather than social moods. My work here follows these authors, thinking of moods as ambiguous emotional states that permeate us like weather: as Ahmed notes, 'a mood is thus rather like an atmosphere: it is not that we catch a feeling from another person but that we are caught up in feelings that are not our own' (2014, 15). The rightness of a new fashion is predicated on how well it materialises this shared feeling. For many, clothing offers a means of situating the self individually and socially. And for some, attending to the weather of fashion—how people on the street are dressing, say, or why a transparent Lucite bag, so impractical yet so *fun*, suddenly feels just right—offers a way of thinking about what clothing means, and how it helps us navigate being in the world. The atmospheres that we carry with us, described by Heidegger as a quality of "withness" makes 'moods become almost like companions: what we carry with us is how we are carried' (Ahmed, 2014, 15), language that unintentionally evokes clothing, being also that which we carry as it carries us.

Writing Fashion's Moods

Fashion writing attending to mood is often found in texts that favor a poetic and idiosyncratic approach to considering fashion in time and place. The interwar period is one during which this kind of writing flourished, perhaps as part of the fashion industry's encouragement of a mood of liberation and decadence to be enjoyed by the middle and upper class female readers who formed the primary audience for the titles that published this writing. Whether this mood was actually experienced by these readers is another question; rather, what we encounter in these examples of writing are mood's organisational and affective qualities (see Hemmings 2012), as these writers compelled readers to recognise fashion's vision of the contemporary moment and respond accordingly—in other words, to get in fashion's mood.

Take, for instance, Diana Vreeland's famous column 'Why Don't You…' for American *Harper's Bazaar* during the 1930s. Writer Judith Thurman (2011) likens these columns to the style of Symbolist poet Stéphane Mallarmé, whose writing (and, by extension, Vreeland's) 'demonstrates that it is possible to fabricate an experience of revelation from which the conventional meaning has evaporated like a volatile spirit, leaving an essence only the sense can grasp [… As they] both understood, that is what great clothes do' (2011, 33). 'Why Don't You…' comprised of a series of poetically-framed provocations for *Harper's Bazaar*'s readers, who Vreeland invokes as wealthy, frivolous and spirited as fashion itself. Her writing projects the appropriate fashionable air—glamorous, confident, monied, heedless—as she describes how one ought to dress in the country, say, or simply to suit the times: 'Why don't you… realize that this wonderfully creative woman [Elsa Schiaparelli] is expressing our life and times in her little suits and dresses… and realize that it is up to you to match her genius by adding perfect details to make

them part of you?' (Vreeland, 1937a, 83) Such pronouncements convey the fashionable mood permeating *Harper's Bazaar,* also evident in issues of *Vogue* of the period: one of impulse, of adventure, one's whims realised with fanciful garments and furnishings that live briefly until the feeling of their "rightness" has passed.

The column was commissioned by editor Carmel Snow, who Thurman credits with making *Harper's Bazaar* 'the most popular, but also the most stimulating, magazine of its kind [… tingling] with the shock of the new' (2011, 33), reflecting Thirties fashion's flamboyant capriciousness not only in its content but also its style. Politics is flattened into aesthetics—in one column, Vreeland praised Unity Mitford's 'bare knees and long white knitted socks' while taking tea with Hitler—and class (upper) and race (white) assumed in her exhortations to American women to 'rinse your blonde child's hair in dead champagne' (Thurman, 2011, 29) or 'try clipping long flat diamond clips all the way down one side of your hair' (Vreeland, 1937b, 132).[1]

[1] Thurman's comment on Vreeland's admiring reference to Mitford is worth quoting here: it serves as 'a reminder that perfect taste is not always insurance against moral vulgarity' (2011: 29).

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‘Why Don’t You…’ was discontinued during the Second World War when it no longer suited the mood of fashion, or the times, suddenly seeming, according to Vreeland, ‘a bit frivolous’ (Thurman, 2011, 30).

Another writer attuned to the close relationship between fashion and mood was Cecil Beaton. In his memoir, *The Glass of Fashion*, Beaton observed that ‘fashion, the ephemeral, shares the last laugh with art, the eternal’ and he knew, like Proust, ‘how much the fleeting expression of fashion or fancy can reflect something beyond its limited time, something haunting that whispers of the nostalgia of human impermanence’ (1954, 2). British *Vogue* published his prose in the 1930s and 1940s (although he is most remembered for his photographs). In one piece, Beaton reflects on the disjuncture between pre- and post-war concepts of the fashionable feminine ideal. He decrees that the ‘post-war belle’ whose beauty was angular, *jolie laide* and unconventional had replaced the pre-war ideal of classic, mature femininity, reflecting the seismic changes women experienced due to the First World War. The pre-war feminine ideal was closely tied to domesticity, morality and motherhood, and was challenged within Great Britain by social changes such as women joining

——— (1937b) ‘Why Don’t You…’ *Harper’s Bazaar* [US], Vol. 70, Iss. 2691. January 1937, 132.

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the workforce as part of the war effort and gaining enfranchisement from 1918. The privations and horror of the war coupled with modernism as an artistic and cultural movement gave rise to the fashion for a slender, elegant and strong-featured femininity. This shift was jarring to the previous generation who were, according to Beaton, sartorially out of step with the times and thus unable to appreciate modern beauty. To these 'elders' with an 'antiquated view' (1930, 7), Beaton wrote,

> we can only say: 'But we like no chins, we prefer high foreheads to low ones, we prefer flatter noses and chests and schoolboy figures […] hair is made sleek on purpose to show the shape of the skull; small dimpled hands make us feel sick (1930, 7-8).

Perhaps the most famous writer of the period to consider the relationship of fashion to mood was Virginia Woolf. While Woolf also wrote for British *Vogue* (between 1924-1926), her five commissioned pieces focused on literature; it was in her essays, novels and diary that she reflected upon 'frock consciousness', or how 'emotions are produced by contact between objects, bodies, behaviors and atmospheres' (Sheehan, 2018, 27). Sheehan observes that in Woolf's writing, 'moods are often generated or expressed through *les modes* […] as garments locate people within existing networks of objects, beliefs and emotions, they make those networks and processes more perceptible' (2018, 28-29). Woolf's writing reveals the capacity individuals have to sense and know through clothing. In her story 'The New Dress', Woolf shows how quickly moods can shift as Mabel, attending a party, realises that the new yellow silk dress she'd had made for the occasion 'was not *right*' (1977, 53). What had, before the party, seemed original, a gown to set her

apart from the fashions she couldn't afford, seemed 'idiotically old-fashioned' once there, Mabel feeling like 'a dressmaker's dummy standing there, for young people to stick pins into' (1977, 54).

Mabel is not only out of sync with fashion, she is socially out of sync, the humiliation she feels in the dress separating her from the other partygoers, who she imagines to be pitying and laughing at her. As Sheehan has noted, Mabel's dress is an effort to 'stave off the mood of anxiety and disappointment that often envelops her' (2018, 41). Her dress, which made her feel beautiful in the dressmaker's shop, is not enough to overcome her anxiety. This mood arises 'neither from "outside" nor from "inside", but arises out of Being-in-the-world' (Heidegger in Sheehan, 2018, 42), as Mabel's feelings about herself prompt the commission of the dress and ultimately turn against her, illustrating how 'clothes, the things that intervene between our naked selves and the world, affect our sense of both' (Hill, 2019, 40).

Taken together, these authors' works differently illustrate how mood, fashion and individual dress entangle. Perhaps such writing has not widely flourished in contemporary mainstream fashion media because it does not encourage consumption, attending to what is 'ambient, vague, diffuse, hazy, and intangible' (to borrow Felski and Fraiman's description of moods, 2012, n.p.) rather than offering firm reports on what is new and desirable.

Contemporary fashion writing attending to mood is primarily published online. As it weaves a writer's subjectivity with fashion, it should perhaps be read in the lineage of other media that foreground personal opinion and fashion taste that have

proliferated in the environment of Web 2.0, which facilitated the emergence of many forms of independent writing that centered the personal and the affective. These include personal style blogging, online diaries and personal essays, and digital publishers such as *Refinery29*, *gal-dem, Racked*, *New York Magazine's The Cut* and *Fashionista,* among others, that privilege fashion writing drawing on individual experience alongside more recognisable forms of fashion journalism: reportage, product recommendations, and so on. That fashion blogging became such a popular alternative media in which to consider the importance of style and of clothing more generally surely cannot be separated from this development in fashion writing, nor can it be extricated from the preoccupation with the self and one's social and political identities that has flourished in the digital era (see Findlay, 2017). Interestingly, but perhaps not surprisingly, many of the writers who produce such work were involved in the early fashion blogosphere, either as bloggers themselves or as readers.

The rest of this chapter will closely consider two contemporary publications that are editorially distinct yet both employ literary prose to map the moods of fashion and dress. The first of these is SSENSE, the Montreal-based luxury e-commerce platform, singular amongst its retail competitors in its privileging of writing on culture, art and fashion, to the extent that its editorial content, rather than the fashion for sale, covers the site's landing page. Of particular interest here is SSENSE's fashion writing, which is informed by the collective vision of permanent editorial team Durga Chew-Bose (senior editor), Olivia Whittick (senior editor), Erika Houle (editor), Rebecca Storm (editor) and Romany Williams (stylist and

editor). According to SSENSE editor and writer Haley Mlotek (2020), the site's fashion writing,

> [privileges] the people who make clothes, who wear them […] artists and all kinds of cultural workers putting their experiences into words. It's discerning, with high standards, but there's a generosity [to SSENSE's approach…] everything is about the point of connection between the subject and the object.

This focus has led to the publication of fashion writing that often attends to a single fashion object or a color, as in the 'Color Story' series, the essays of which consider a particular shade recurring through fashion in a season or year, contextualising it within wider culture and explaining its significance.

The Less-Seen Connections Between Fashion and the Rest of the World

In her essay for SSENSE's 'Color Story' series, writer Sarah Nicole Prickett describes 'Pill Yellow' as a color of illness and delicacy rarely encountered in nature: 'pallid and palliative', pill yellow looks 'like it should autocorrect to a real color. A tint […] less yellowed white (old) than whitened yellow (vintage, but pristine)' (Prickett, n.d.). Prickett frequently encountered this shade on 2018's runways, at Calvin Klein, Jacquemus and Simone Rocha, and in the 'whispery dresses in sulphuric silk and chiffon at Sies Marjan' (n.d.) It also formed monochrome looks 'signaling a low-energy commitment' in the collections of Resort '19 and S/S '19, the 'vaporous citrine' wafting through lookbooks and down catwalks. She saw it in "real life", too, worn by Cardi B at the Met Gala, radiant and

visibly pregnant in bejewelled Moschino, and Catherine, Duchess of Cambridge in primrose McQueen at the wedding of the Duke and Duchess of Sussex (n.d.).

Instead of connecting designers' use of this color to their individual inspiration, Prickett—and the other writers in the series, whose essays consider trending shades like 'sporty pink' and 'burnout orange'—attends to its mood as it crops up in culture and in fashion: 'it's the noon-day demon: acedia. But then acedia is so often misdiagnosed as the blues' (Prickett, n.d.). 'Pill Yellow' touches on the personal as it, bowerbird-like, nests glimpses of the shade together to consider how its connotations have gradually accrued. It is the yellow of Faye Dunaway's car in Chinatown, 'custom-painted to match her pallor of temperament'; that of Prickett's grandmother's aspirin and her own lisdexamfetamine ('a subtle varietal of upper'); the desultory tint of Petra Collins' videography for Gucci. By attending to the vagaries of its connotations, Prickett maps what pill yellow has come to mean and what it *feels like*: the effect it strikes when encountered in fashion understood alongside the close weave of references that fortify its meaning and resonate wherever it stirs. Its instance seems to reflect to a wider malaise, a sense of cultural decline producing an ambient anxiety tempered by listlessness. Here, we see exemplified Ellis Hanson's argument that 'mood is the emotional correlative of an aesthetic or critical sensibility', being a 'more complex, more diffuse, more sustained emotional disposition toward the world more generally' than an affect (2012, 547). Of interest here is the mood the colour reflects, which circulates beyond the individual writers even as their work provides a personal map of references to explain the singular feel of each.

Collectively, the ‘Color Stories’ evoke and name the feeling prompted by a colour as it peregrinates through fashion. They do so in the ‘evocative, descriptive language’ Haley Mlotek identifies as germane to SSENSE’s editorial: ‘there a looseness and a bluntness in equal measure, which you really need when you’re writing about textures and materials in particular’ (2020). These dual elements, of specificity and open-ended poeticism, are especially well-suited to articulate the feeling of fashion trends: fleeting as they are, laden with immediate significance, and yet functioning more on the level of perception than of reason. Who’s to say why ‘manatee blue’, a soft, pale ‘grey-ish off-shade of blue’, should become the ‘color of anxiety’, as Rebecca Storm writes in her ‘Color Story’ (n.d.)? She reads the shade as a sign of impending environmental and cultural decline, identified in the color the discarded handmaids are made to wear as they clear toxic waste in Margaret Atwood’s dystopian novel, in the clothes of Yeezy FW18, the hue of Kim Kardashian’s preferred Instagram filters, and the color a pair of closed eyes see after looking at ‘footage of the California wildfires for longer than a minute’ (Storm n.d.). Here, Manatee Blue carries an affect, a crisis and a moment in time, as reflected in celebrity culture, fashion and politics. By contrast, Anupa Mistry catalogues the instance of ‘Regulation Red’ in late 2019, from MAGA hats to the legacy of colonisation to the blood-red bodysuits British-Nigerian designer Mowalola Ogunlesi showed for Mowalola AW ’19. For Ogunlesi, the ‘collection is about being exposed. It’s about being dangerous […] The feeling of it, the energy of it, is a constant mood for me’ (Mistry 2019). For Mistry, this color speaks of violence and surveillance, bloodied armour, the color of sin and resistance, and ‘the code around which our lives run— red light, red card, red alert, red eye, red tape, etc.,— [so] it follows that within fashion […] the hue signifies lawlessness’ (2019).

Here, the potency and ambiguity of colour seems to mirror the same qualities in social mood. Indeed, the one explored in here carried into 2020, intensifying through the Black Lives Matter protests and riots, the US presidential election, the nomination of Amy Coney Barrett to the US Supreme Court and the horror of the pandemic, making the urgency of 'Regulation Red' assume the quality of a forecast. The openness of these essays' engagement with the aesthetics of colour and mood allow them to ambiguously indicate towards politics rather than develop a sustained critique, leaving it to the reader to plumb the proposed significance of each hue.

The writing we find in the 'Color Stories' often parallels the work of the fashion designers mentioned: not only do they share a fascination with a single color, but in both, we see how observations and feelings are woven into a text (or collection) that addresses a moment in time. The writing crystallises a set of distinct impressions into a vague portrait, not just of the ugly feelings of the 20-teens—many of these colors relate to worry, illness, and exhaustion—but also the ways fashion designers have responded to them, making material the atmospheres of our shared cultural life-world.

Other pieces on SSENSE attend more closely to dress than fashion, taking as a starting point the relationship between person and object. In an essay titled 'Market Research: Vans' "OG Style 43 LX Sneakers"', Jazmine Hughes describes taking up skateboarding in the summer of 2020 as a way to channel the fear she felt living as a Black woman in New York City. In the beginning, skateboarding offered a new way of experiencing being in the world:

> I felt like a seasick sailor rediscovering land, stumbling on her own two feet […] It felt like ballet again once I got the hang of it, all that emphasis on foot placement, renegotiating the controls of my body. (2020)

She bought the original skateboarding shoes, Vans, in 'canary yellow, bright and loud as a bird' and it's these shoes she sees when she skates, as she looks down at her feet: 'the yellow screamed *Pay attention! Look out! Caution!*' (2020, italics in original). Permeating this piece are allusions to the dangers faced by Black Americans in this time and place: Hughes at home, thinking of the threats she received when a far-right news site 'turned its firehose onto [her]'; thinking, too, of Breonna Taylor, at home moments before her death 'in her pajamas, or her night clothes, or whatever made her comfortable'; Hughes skateboarding through June and 'wanting to be afraid of something else' as her friends are arrested at protests; watching *The Giverny Document,* a documentary by Ja'Tovia Gary, who asks the Black women on screen, '"Do you feel safe in your body, and in general?" One answers: "Not necessarily, especially not in New York"' (2020).

The essay isn't really about the Vans; it's about a woman meeting terrible circumstance head-on and finding a way to move through the world with the moods it engenders. It illustrates Felski and Fraiman's point that to speak of moods is to explore 'a feeling of I-and-world together' (2012), also an apt articulation of the sensation clothes engender as we wear them (see also Parkins, 2020). For Hughes, the canary-yellow Vans are key paraphernalia that facilitates her movement, as is the board beneath her feet, both serving to anchor her as she skims down the street,

‘a version of myself who is meeting this summer with a measure of fiction […] But what a perverse relief to experience a danger of my own creation. I never feel safe, but I feel free’ (2020).

I Want To Look Like This Now!

London Review of Looks is a newsletter by writer Ana Kinsella, emailed to around 1500 subscribers on an ad hoc basis and hosted by free newsletter service Tiny Letter. *LRL* does not carry advertising and as such, is independent of the commercial imperative of the mainstream fashion media. Kinsella started the newsletter whilst working as an editor at a fashion magazine.

> I love observing people and I wanted to write something that would interact with both that and kind of a sense of place as well, and so it was kind of my way […] of writing about fashion without writing about fashion […] writing about clothing in a way that wasn’t what I thought of as fashion writing. (Kinsella, 2020)

Each issue features four sections: ‘Look of the Week’, in which Kinsella considers a “look” (an outfit or garment) she has seen on an individual or on various people in London; ‘Look Forecast’, ‘a general trend report in a sentence or two’ that, like Look of the Week, is ‘emblematic of a certain period of time’ (Kinsella, 2020); and ‘Where to Look’ and ‘What to Look At’, which recommend places for people-watching and things to do and see in London.

LRL is a newsletter composed of glances, as strangers inspire Kinsella because their Looks were just right for the time and place when their paths crossed with hers. Through evocative prose, it reveals what a feeling for clothes looks like in practice: instinctive, an attunement to a feeling that others share and materialise in their outfits. Kinsella's writing style matches this subtle, capacious mode of communication, being thoughtful rather than declarative: *LRL* reflects, suggests, and circulates the atmospheres its author has perceived in her city. As readers, we encounter the fresh energy a change of season can invite, the ways this shift compels a transformation of clothes, and, perhaps, a transformation of the self; and we witness the momentary self-reflection prompted by glimpsing someone stylishly dressed

> in a beautifully-oversized tawny trenchcoat and delicate low-heeled sandals […] so casually elegant, so careful, and yet undone. She is in a pool of moonlight and I slow for a second and I think: Why am I not like her? (*LRL* #21)

LRL reveals how the choices we make in what we wear can be sensory, intuitive, imbued with memory and association, with what momentarily presses upon us and lingers, and guided by instinct towards something that feels *right*.

Despite the idiosyncrasy of the London locations where most of these looks were staged, readers from around the world have written to Kinsella in recognition of how *LRL* resonates with their experiences of their own cities. In interview, she shared that what she finds surprising

> on a continual basis is people who have no connection to London who read it and enjoy it, and […] might be like, 'you have said things that remind me of where I live in, you know, New Zealand or Northern Italy' […] Places you wouldn't think of as having a lot of the same characteristics of London. (Kinsella, 2020)

She attributes this to *LRL*'s depiction of life in a city but it may also be due to a familiar occurrence for city-dwellers, what Elizabeth Wilson identifies as 'the silent gaze that typifies city life' (2003, 135) in which dress, as apprehended by inquisitive glances at passers-by, is redolent with 'expressive clues […] that let the world know what sort of person you [are]' (137). The anonymity of a city may offer license for people to dress how they choose, but it also offers a dynamic visual field against which to define one's self in light of the possibilities embodied by those encountered. This, too, permeates, as Kinsella considers how London prompts self-reflection:

> there's a great pleasure in moving to London and watching the way you dress change. *I want to look like this now!* You think, spotting some perfectly elegant woman in a lace dress entering St John in the railway arches. Or, *I feel inspired by him!* looking at a man in a crisp red jacket move through the crowd, a half bottle of wine in one pocket. (*LRL* #33)

At the same time, these possibilities are framed by a sense of personal preference, the clothes we return to again and again that answer the question 'what *are* you anyway?' (*LRL* #31). Rather than realise the self suggested by taupe suede mules that languish in her closet, Kinsella describes the instinctive reaching for the familiar to live in instead: 'the ancient Birkenstocks, the worn denim shorts, the beloved sacklike dresses' (*LRL* #21). Kinsella's writing illustrates the affordances of clothes to suggest other ways of being, even if these possibilities don't make sense on us when donned, and how clothes create an atmosphere of comfort, of recognition, or a zip of excitement of dressing into a new sense of self.

Intriguingly, not only does *LRL* subtly refuse the mainstream fashion media's discourse of constant sartorial transformation, it shows how out of sync this depiction is with how most people live. Out of sync with London's 'steadfast unglamour' (*LRL* #24) are the December issues of fashion magazines 'imploring us to get glamorous for the festive season. *Haven't they seen us?* I think. *We don't really do that here*.' The magazines are in the right season but not the right mood; and instead, it is in the exchange of glances and impressions that new possibilities of dressing may strike as a proposition to be genuinely considered.

There is a kind of attunement revealed here, what Kinsella herself identifies as 'a mode of how dress is perceived in a wider social sense' (2020), refracted through how 'living in a city [imprints] itself on the way you dress' (2020) and how this can travel through certain segments of the populace, garments and styles becoming semaphores for those who see and feel them. What these mean, why they look and feel right depends on many factors: the season, the time of day, and context in

which the Look is worn. In some instances, it is fuelled by repetition: consider the influence of a mid-length, straight-cut dark brown leather coat seen 'on Londoners, Instagram and Hadids', and then in Kinsella's office, and at a party in Dalston, until she is 'obsessed by the coat […] I see [it] every day; it always looks fantastic' (*LRL* #46). In this particular letter, Kinsella models the ways that the desire for certain clothes can sediment through multiple impressions until 'I start to think of how I'd wear one'; and in others, it is a sudden encounter that prompts desire, a stranger's outfit forming a proposition to reconsider one's self—spotty socks and a smock on a woman in an art shop, for example, moving Kinsella to daydream about how she'd dress if she were a painter. *LRL* shows how the individual fuses with the social, as multiple people pick up on the mood these Looks circulate and dress into them, even as these moods are experienced personally.

The moods of the city also permeate *LRL*, as the languid possibility of hot weather or the ways cities can wear one out, prompting daydreams of moving away, shape the attitude of Kinsella's observations. This is perhaps most prominent in the newsletters sent during the coronavirus pandemic, as the tedium of sheltering-in-place finds expression through Kinsella's loss of interest in dress. The perceptive openness that connected her to the city and its inhabitants palpably fades —witness her observation that 'clothes matter a lot less now that we're in our homes all the time' (*LRL* #54)—before deepening, in the next letter, to disinterest:

> There used to be a lot I could read into a Patagonia fleece […]; now I glance at the man in front of me in the queue and think, oh, look,

> a red promotional t-shirt from a JP Morgan charity fun run.
>
> Probably the only thing clean this morning. (*LRL* #55)

The mood of these letters is one of listlessness, wherein one longs for the 'wild serendipity' of London, now off-limits, communicated through Kinsella's apathetic descriptions but also materialised by the clothes observed—'my own horrible Levi's', the man in the queue's 'grey New Balances, the empty dark green Daunt Books bag in his hand for the groceries' (*LRL* #55). This particular newsletter reflects the uncertainty of how to dress that permeated everyday life during the pandemic and gave rise to articles such as 'Sweatpants Forever' by Irina Alexander, published by the *New York Times*. What starts as a profile of the rise of casualwear label Entireworld soon devolves into an obituary for the fashion system as we know it. Alexander describes the sped-up fashion production cycle as nonsensical, out of step with the seasons and constantly chasing novelty, quoting insiders who describe fashion as a 'vicious cycle' and 'exhausting'. To an industry already in crisis, 'Covid-19 hit. Consumers stopped having any need for fashionable clothing' (Alexander, 2020) and rather, it was Entireworld's sweatsuits and the 'homebody clothes' offered by other brands that suddenly appealled, as much for the comfort they promised as for the rejection of the non-stop churn of outré fashion they symbolised. The listlessness Kinsella feels in the Sainsbury's queue in her part of London seems part of this wider register of feeling, the 'openness to the world' intimated by mood here foregrounding its inherent 'permeability between the public and the private' (Hemmings, 2012, 528).

As *LRL* is a niche, independent publication with a relatively small readership, Kinsella is writing for a specific audience, people:

> interested in clothing in some way, shape or form that might not be interested in the fashion industry or the latest trends, but they are nonetheless interested in how they get dressed or how we get dressed on a broader level. (2020)

In writing from her personal experience, she makes available a way of understanding how clothes communicate interpersonally even as her own experiences are tailored towards the parts of London she frequents. While there are elements of Kinsella's feeling for clothes that reveal her own preferences and identity, the process her writing richly maps—of how clothes offer us perceptual ways to locate ourselves in relation to others and the world around us—is a common one for people living in any number of cities and finding themselves similarly attuned. Her writing also traces how these attunements occur: moments that clarify, people seen who crystallise something we have felt or dimly perceived, strangers whose impression lingers.

> It was hot out. By 10am I'd shed my jacket at the traffic lights and waited for them to change. A girl, or a woman, really, cycled past in a real look-look: a knee-length knife-pleated skirt and a fine sleeveless blouse, woven brown leather flats and a battered monogrammed Louis Vuitton bag worn crossbody. She had a dark

fringed bob and Ray-Bans. It was very Sartorialist 2008 and I nodded and thought, *perfect*. (*LRL* #32)