# Femininity and the rise of 'ethical fur': How fashion designers create alternative understandings of value and construct gendered identities

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## Abstract

The consumption of fur fashion is a deeply gendered phenomenon. This gendered nature derives from multiple sources and spans from more traditional, status-oriented fur usage to the more recent (pro and anti) politics of fur. In this contribution we investigate how gendered identity is constructed in a relatively new market segment: ethical fur fashion. The term 'ethical fur' is controversial among practitioners and not clearly defined. It encompasses a great variety of notions. Using the examples of four female fashion designers, we seek to identify relational dynamics throughout fur fashion designers' professional biographies which link female identity to ideas of being caring, ethically responsible and alternative to the mainstream of fur fashion.

Keywords: fur, fashion, ethics, gender, consumption

*"It's not traditionally women's work and certainly the fur industry is not run by women. But this effort, this ethical fur effort, seems almost exclusively to be run by women" ('ethical' fur fashion designer #1, interviewed in March 2017).*

## Gender and the fur industry

The highly gendered nature of fur clothing – the design, manufacturing, retailing and consumption of fur attire – is a long standing topic in studies of fashion. Traditional fur consumption, concentrating on craft-made high value items like coats, signifies status, but also gender difference: Bought by men, fur clothing is predominantly worn by women, thus displayed on female bodies and reflecting in turn on the economic status of men. In more conservative societies, practices of gift giving and inheritance often involve fur clothing, stabilizing ties of reciprocity as well as lines of social differentiation (Magee, 2015).

On a symbolic level, the female body has served as a projection plane for multiple images, emotions and values present in the discourse surrounding fur. The association between female sexual desirability and fur has been established for over a century (most notably since the publication of Sacher-Masoch's novel Venus in Furs in 1870) (Emberly, 1997). It is

perpetuated through fur fashion photography and advertising. However, when environmentalism, feminism and other emancipatory movements took off in the 1970s, fur, together with other animal-related issues, became the subject of a heated conflict of images and values, focalizing once again female bodies: "Acting as a form of "guilt politics," [the animal rights group Lynx] urged women to reject fur in order to exhibit a morally as opposed to a materially superior status, thus giving birth to a new ideal of femininity, the moral or ethical woman." (Bolton, 2004, quoted in Beard, 2008: p.451). Beard continues to argue that although these politics did not result in the eradication of fur-fashion, animal rights group were successful "in making the wearing of fur socially unacceptable to a wider audience, giving rise to the idea that being ethical could also be fashionable" (ibid.).

Most notably, anti-fur campaigns run by the animal rights organization People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA), focused on the female fur consumer as an object of stigmatization. Rather than criticizing the producers, traders and financial beneficiaries of fur (predominantly male), anti-fur imagery portrayed the fur-wearing woman as cruel, ugly and excessive, thus drawing on centuries-old imaginations of feminine morality and immorality (Skov, 2005). Even though fur attire in recent years has become more diverse and increasingly includes men's garments (typically via trimmings and collars), symbolic projections remain entirely focused on the female body.

For female fashion models, being pro or anti-fur is a career defining choice which is announced on professional profiles and social media accounts. However, 'switching sides' and staging the move visibly can also be part of publicity strategies adopted by high-profile fashion models and designers alike. Thus, while Naomi Campbell, once famous for 'rather going naked', turned into the face and body of furrier Dennis Basso's advertising campaign in 2011, Giorgio Armani announced the brand's withdrawal from fur early in 2016.

## A new perspective: Gender and 'ethical fur'

In this contribution, we add a new perspective: the rise of 'ethical fur' and its implications for positioning strategies and identity constructions of female designers who use or reference fur in a specifically 'ethical' manner. Since the late 1990s, and in response to changing societal attitudes towards fur as well as successful anti-fur campaigns, the fur industry, specifically the marketing organizations of European and North American fur breeders, have employed a new strategy. It entailed engaging with fashion design and re-contextualizing fur, moving from traditional production and consumption practices towards the world of branded luxury, fashion mass markets and fast fashion (Skov, 2005; Rantisi, 2014a). As a consequence more female creative labour (fashion design) was introduced to a domain hitherto characterized by male creative labour (traditional craft-based design and production[1]) (Rantisi, 2014b). While the production and trade of fur skins has reached all-time highs in recent years, traditional furriers have been the main losers of this shift in the way fur is produced and consumed. Female-dominated fashion design labour is therefore perceived as an intrusion into an otherwise male domain. However, the associational set-up of the fur sector, particularly the very influential trappers' and breeders' associations who act as key stakeholders of fur design centres and marketing organisations remain male dominated. Such

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1 - The profession of the furrier is male in terms of habitus, image, self-perception and actual gender distribution of professionals. However, the traditional production of fur items also involves fur sewers or seamstresses who work for a furrier and according to his cuts and designs, putting them into practice. This labor is or was more frequently performed by women. This division of labor and the hierarchy imbued in it represents another aspect of the gendered nature of traditional fur production.

incumbent structures, while cultivating very old-fashioned ideas of femininity in relation to fur, seek to utilize the more extensive symbolic and reflexive space of contemporary fashion design for creating and marketing fur fashion. This is done by sponsoring and training designers who work with fur. Rantisi (2014b) finds that such arrangements serve to keep more female creative labour precarious while appropriating its value.

Along with increased design-orientation, fur associations have put an emphasis on countering accusations of animal cruelty by positioning fur as the ecological, responsible, and ethical choice: Being a durable, adaptable, biodegradable and regenerative material, fur is said to be more sustainable than its 'petroleum-based' alternatives. In addition, the industry stresses that most furs come from 'responsible farming' or from hunting and trapping in line with traditional, indigenous practices or efforts of ecologically necessary population control. Therefore, for a designer, using the term 'ethical fur' to mark out a unique market position in contrast to an implied conventional, 'unethical' form of fur places them in opposition to traditional fur sector representatives and may lead to conflict with key industry actors. Nevertheless, a growing number of independent brands and designers employ implicit or explicit notions of 'ethical fur' to position themselves on the market. We argue that such efforts are highly gendered and strongly connected to female identities, both in terms of the designer's professional persona and her biographical experience. We also argue that such 'ethical' identities are exacerbated and reinforced by media discourses: Once acclaimed as 'ethical', brands and designers find it difficult and/or unnecessary to escape the category. All designers we encountered who work with 'ethical fur' are women, reflecting the introductory quote. While some traditional male furriers have embraced fashion design and haute couture, their positioning is much closer to traditional ideas of fur and luxury.

We situate our contribution within literatures of ethical (gendered) consumption on the one hand, and gendered production and its ethical dimensions on the other hand. Ethical consumption has been problematized with regard to the complicated entanglements of identity, practical decision rationalities and ethical values (Barnett *et al.*, 2005; Beard, 2008) as well as the complexities of translating notions of ethical production and consumption into the management of value chains (Hughes, 2001; Hughes *et al.*, 2008). The problematically gendered and often feminized nature of production in garments and fashion commodity chains has been noted previously (Leslie, 2012; Rantisi, 2014b; Reimer, 2009; Werner, 2012). At the production floor level, the feminization of garments and textiles value chains in particular, has been explicated by a dependence on cheap, flexible and casual female (and often also racialized) labour that continues to rely on the 'nimble fingers' and exploitability of women workers in the global South. Beyond sweatshop workers, at the design stage, the high risk and uncertainty involved in the volatile and short life-cycles of fashion, has similarly made fashion design work prone to feminized labour.

In this contribution, we draw on publicly accessible sources such as media articles. We also use interviews with fur fashion designers which we conducted as part of our research project 'Geographies of dissociation – The social construction of value from a spatial perspective'. We use a small set of individual examples taken from our research on the fur industry, women who design and manufacture 'ethical' fur garments, to demonstrate that despite the extremely diverse of notions what the term 'ethical' can mean, some key themes connect female identity and 'ethical fur'-based positioning strategies.

# Gendered consumption, gendered production and ethical fur

The notion of 'ethical fur' does not refer to one well-defined concept. Instead it is a highly ambiguous term which encompasses a great variety of possible 'ethical' business, production, and consumption models. These draw on very different notions of what is ethical, some of which are contradictory. They may involve the re-using of fur-skins already available in various ways (up- or re-cycling), focusing on fur sourced in acceptable ways (e.g. hunting for population control), or even not using real animal-fur at all. In the following, we focus on several women fur-fashion designers, who give meaning and engage with the term 'ethical' fur in distinct ways, revealing the highly contested meanings of ethical consumption and its gendered nature.

## (i) Synthetic Fur

Artificial, synthetic fur is widely used in the fashion industry. Depending on the intentions of the speaker, the material is referred to as 'fake fur' (thus dismissing it an inferior imitation of real fur) or 'faux fur' (giving it a more stylish, elaborate ring). The role of synthetic fur is highly contested in debates surrounding the ethical implications of fur consumption: Does it represent a viable ethical alternative to real fur? Is it problematic in itself due to its origin in petroleum and its contribution to non-biodegradable waste? Or is wearing synthetic fur, by way of imitating and celebrating its look and feel, an endorsement of real fur? The examples of two female designers and their brands, both established in high fashion, serve to demonstrate the ambiguous nature of synthetic fur – the term we will use for the sake of neutrality – and ethical positioning strategies involving the material.

Stella McCartney, daughter of Paul and Linda McCartney, has championed ethical and ecological fashion since the beginning of her career as a fashion designer. McCartney is one of the most outspoken representatives of the fashion world and does not spare her colleagues when she addresses problematic issues. Her approach is holistic: In her own collections, she addresses issues such as longevity, the origin of materials, the ecological footprint of their production, and working conditions in factories. She also contributes to broader efforts to transform the fashion system. A vegetarian like her parents, she uses neither leather nor fur. In interviews, she frequently cites her upbringing, having lived on an eco-friendly farm as a child, as the defining influence for her stance on ecology and animal rights. Media-representations of her biography particularly highlight the maternal influence: Stella's loyalty and admiration towards her mother Linda who established a vegetarian food brand.

Until recently, Stella McCartney's creations did not feature synthetic fur. But in 2015, a year in which real fur was overwhelmingly present on catwalks, McCartney began showing creations involving synthetic fur. A key impulse, she explained in a 2015 interview with The Guardian, was the demand and preference of younger (female) consumers for the material: *'modern fake fur looks so much like real fur, that the moment it leaves the atelier no one can tell it's not the real thing. And I've struggled with that. But I've been speaking to younger women about it recently and they don't even want real fur. So I feel like maybe things have moved on, and it's time, and we can do fabrics which look like fur, if we take them somewhere else.'* (The Guardian online, 9 March 2015)

Stella McCartney received praise from animal rights organizations such as PETA, who themselves are divided on the subject of synthetic fur. Praise by campaigners, possibly even enrolment into their agendas, can contribute to the sharpening

of an ethical profile. London-based fashion designer Hannah Weiland established her brand 'Shrimps' in 2013. Its reputation is almost entirely based on her extravagant usage of brightly coloured synthetic fur. While the designer explained that her choice of material was triggered by a coincidental encounter and not by an explicitly ethical agenda, increasingly she responds to external appreciation of her brand as an ethical one by reproducing an ethical narrative in interviews. Hannah Weiland explained that she wears leather and plans to use animal-based materials in future collections. Nevertheless, through acclaim from animal rights organizations, her brand retains an ethical connotation. 'Shrimps' focuses on women's fashion. Though being pursued as a 'young' brand, Weiland insists that she caters to all age groups: *My mom wears [Shrimps clothes] and she's 60, my Nanna wears them and she's 92. I'm 26 and my sister's 20, we all wear them*' (Observer online, 2 November 2016).

## (ii) Accidental Fur

In the forested landscape of New England, road-kill next to highways is a common sight. Upon moving from Denmark to the US in 2013 [Fur-Fashion Designer #1] saw a responsible business opportunity in scavenging the animal carcasses and using their fur to make bespoke fur garments. As a Massachusetts Institute of Technology graduate with a focus on sustainable business development and an outsider to the fashion industry, in 2013, and, she relates her identity as a mother to starting her accidental fur-fashion business:

*'I was horrified of all the bodies on the street. I was a new mom, I was feeling very maternal, I was… that natural feeling that we have towards other things when we are filled with hormones […] and I thought what can I do that makes a difference in the world? Certainly around nature and animals because I have always cared very deeply for nature and for animals […] so fur seemed an obvious answer'* (interview March 2017).

Since the humble beginnings, media attention on her business model and her persona has been disproportionate to the scale of her business and international in scope. Her customers are primarily female, urban and upper-middle class consumers (she identifies them as 'Wholefoods'-clientele) and who want to consume ethically but still look glamorous. [Fur-Fashion Designer #1] does not actively use the term 'ethical' for advertising her collection (though others label her fur-garments this way), and rather refers to 'compassion' and 'responsibility' as distinguishing criteria of her collection.

## (iii) Fur as By-Product

Starting off as a stranger to fur [Fur-Fashion Designer #2], came in contact with the material during her studies in fashion design at Berlin's University of the Arts (Universität der Künste). In a project named 'Real Fake' carried out in collaboration with both real and faux fur providers, students were asked to reflect on the implications of using faux fur or real fur in their creations. In her assignment, [Fur-Fashion Designer #2] concluded that real fur is the more aesthetic as well as responsible choice.

*'I had no choice, apart from my natural appreciation of the material, than clearly saying that basically fur is much more beneficial in more than one respect. It is really sustainable, which you cannot say for all the plastic materials. And when animal rights campaigners shout "oh the poor animals"– at the end of the day it is a blue whale that suffocates of all the plastic waste. […] I just need to glance at [real fur] and I immediately see and especially feel: If you touch this, it is like a breeze, and if you compare it with the artificial stuff, sorry, I do not relate to it, I would never wear it'* (interview January 2016).

A senior furrier involved in the project introduced her to the craft. As a designer at the beginning of her career, she chose working with fur as a way to create a unique position. '[The usage of fur] does define me. […] It distinguishes me that I engage with it. Because none or hardly any of the young people really do it' (ibid). However, she felt uncomfortable with using farmed fur and instead sources her furs from meat-agriculture and hunting. Though not explicitly labelling her work as 'ethical fur', [Fur-Fashion Designer #2] understands ecological and animal welfare-responsibility as part of her brand identity.

*'In my business it's wild-caught foxes which are shot anyway, and instead of burying the skins, as hunters usually do, I take the stuff and use it to make great things. […] These are all animals which come from the food industry. The animals are killed for the meat. I eat the rabbit, too, and as I said it is more logical to me to use the animal from beginning to end'* (ibid).

Having been trained as a fashion designer and not a furrier, her approach to fur is unconventional. Regarding cuts, treatment and material combinations, she feels unbound by traditional professional norms which she defines in generational terms, but also in terms of gender:

*'Sure, the knowledge about the material is very important. But sometimes you have to break a structure to arrive at something new. And especially the more senior men who work with fur today would not dare to do certain things in practice.'* (ibid)

## Conclusions

In this contribution we linked gender and ethical production and consumption. We empirically explored the multiple and sometimes contradictory meanings of 'ethical fur' using the examples of several female (fur) fashion designers. As we could show, ethical fur is a female topic. While the number of cases is too small to claim universal validity or to come up with a consistent explanation, the examples offer intriguing insights into the dynamics of 'ethical' brand identity formations and their gendered nature. In sum, our findings resonate with Barrientos' study of gendered production networks, in which she highlighted women's role in raising quality at the production and the consumption side of cocoa-chocolate and thus showed the gendered societal embeddedness of both production and consumption in global production networks (Barrientos, 2014).

Female fashion designers who engage in 'ethical fur' apparently are embedded in multiple dynamic relationships and contexts, each of which is gendered, and which, by interacting with each other, reinforce gender identity. The first, and maybe the most surprising of these relationships, is the family context, specifically the maternal relationship (going both ways) with its strong impact on identity formation. Both the adoption or transfer of a caring attitude from mother to daughter and the experience of feeling maternal foster a professional ethos which resonates with very gendered ideas about being responsible and caring (see also Hall, 2016). The second relevant relationship is the one to other professionals – fellow designers or furriers. With fur as a traditional male, craft-based domain, being a female designer provides a degree of creative distance as well as obstacles to simply copying the traditional furrier's role. Being in some way alternative to or different from the mainstream of fur is an element of identity which can easily grow out of experiences made in the course of professional socialization as a female designer approaching fur. The third relation is the customer-relationship. The question of ethical fashion consumption – as fashion consumption in general – is gendered, too. The accounts of customer-interaction we found both in the media and in our own interviews exclusively make reference to female customers. With the two realms of production and consumption being so strongly gendered, the intersection of both and the discursive transactions occurring

at this intersection serve to reproduce gender norms. Finally, a brand's identity is also the product of ascriptions by the media. Thus, ultimately a fashion brand's identification as 'ethical' also follows gendered interpretative patterns, which are embedded in media discourses on consumption and fashion.

## Acknowledgements

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