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Less than Zero. Impersonal Affect in Hedi Slimane's Auteurial Style

*Menos que zero. Afeto impessoal no estilo
autoral de Hedi Slimane*

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[81] **[abstract]** This article proposes a critical reading of the photographic work of Hedi Slimane (Paris, FR, 1968-) by teasing out the relation between his photographic (dis-) engagement with his subjects and the employment of an impersonal style of affect. I begin with an overview of the emergence of the fashion creative director as a stardom figure at the turn of the 21st century, and I proceed with an inquiry into the auteurial iconography fabricated by Slimane in the last ten years. Tackling the intricate bond of style and masculinity against the backdrop of queer theoretical concerns, I offer an analysis of his main photographic anthologies from the last ten years. I conclude with a reflection on Slimane's self-narratives in the context of the relationship between biography and historiography.

[keywords]

Hedi Slimane, photography, queer, affect, style.

[resumo] Este artigo propõe uma leitura crítica do trabalho fotográfico do diretor criativo Hedi Slimane ao desvendar a relação entre seu (des-) envolvimento fotográfico com os seus temas e o emprego em suas imagens de um estilo de afeto impessoal que reduz a participação do espectador ao mínimo. Inicio minha análise com uma visão geral do surgimento do diretor criativo como uma figura de estrelato na indústria da moda na virada do século XXI, e prossigo com uma investigação sobre a iconografia autoral fabricada por Slimane por meio de suas fotografias nos últimos dez anos. Enfrentando o intrincado vínculo de estilo e masculinidade contra o pano de fundo das preocupações teóricas *queer*, ofereço uma leitura crítica de suas principais antologias fotográficas dos últimos dez anos: *Rock Diary* (2008) e *Anthology of a Decade* (2011). Concluo este artigo com uma reflexão sobre a autonarrativa de Slimane no contexto da problemática relação entre as biografias dos designers e a historiografia da moda.

[palavras-chave] Hedi Slimane, fotografia, queer, afeto, estilo.

Style, the utopia of those with almost no place to go.
 –D. A. Miller, *Jane Austen, or the Secret of Style*

In contemporary "fashionscapes", borrowing an expression coined by fashion theorists Vicki Karaminas and Adam Geczy (2012), the figure of the celebrity creative director has gained unprecedented momentum. Fashion designers, usually at the helm of fashion houses within big corporations, have gradually gained status and stardom by way of experimenting with media other than fashion, primarily film and photography. This serves for them a twofold purpose: signalling auteurial continuity across multiple media and extending the brand's "product image" into a lifestyle image. The term "creative director", in the context of a fashion house, has come to indicate the multi-faceted role of the "head designer" who, in addition to overseeing the conceptualisation and design of the collections, is also in charge of building the brand's image through channels that previously exceeded his/her expertise. Progressively since the early 1990s, in the wake of the pervasive impact of fashion advertisements on popular culture and society at large, the rise in popularity of the figure of the star fashion designer, and the broadening of scope of fashion by means of the new fashion media, the role of the creative director has been undergoing a shift. Instead of merely overseeing the collection design process, the creative director (for instance, just to name a few, Tom Ford at Gucci, Christopher Bailey at Burberry, and Hedi Slimane at Saint Laurent) is responsible for managing the fabrication of a brand's image as well as of its distribution and dissemination across various media. He/she has become a hybrid figure at the intersection of design, communication, and business. As Slimane himself put it,

creative directors in the current fashion industry have one foot in the studio, the other in the store, and both eyes on the stock exchange. [...] Creative, strategy and management are now interconnected, and there is a lot at stake, including the image of an institution, thousand of employees and the responsibility toward shareholders (YAHOO STYLE, 2015).

The figure of the fashion creative director can be traced back to the appointment of Tom Ford (Austin, Texas, EUA, 1961-) at the helm of Gucci in 1994. He reshaped the stagnant image of the brand with a design aesthetic previously unknown in the company's history, and he designed and photographed scandalous advertising campaigns that quickly acquired a cult status. After his ten years long tenure at Gucci, he founded his eponymous label and began a successful career as a film director. His films, ad campaigns, and design collections are all imbued with a style and taste that are peculiar to his original aesthetic and are instrumental to updating and enriching his visual language through multiple media. Karl Lagerfeld (Hamburg, GER, 1933-) can be considered a precursor to the formation of the contemporary fashion creative director. Alongside his role at the helm

of Chanel, where he has been since 1983, he has designed theatre costumes, outfits for the concerts of worldwide famous singers and performers, and produced advertising campaigns for Chanel, Fendi, and his eponymous line Karl Lagerfeld, as well as photographs for fashion magazines and music album covers. Karl Lagerfeld, Tom Ford and Hedi Slimane, have been committed for decades to create, manage, and curate their respective design, photographic, and even cinematic works as a means to "brand" their own vision and aesthetic.

Hedi Slimane (Paris, FR, 1968-) can be credited for having taken this role to its ultimate configuration in the new millennium. He was the creative director for Dior Homme from 2000 to 2007 and for Saint Laurent from 2012 to 2016. On January 21, 2018, luxury goods conglomerate LVMH announced that he would soon take the reigns at Céline. Due to the popularisation and democratisation of fashion through the internet, the creative director gained celebrity stardom. Documentaries chronicling the work behind the scenes of runway shows gave further visibility and attached a patina of sensationalism to this kind of professional as the main actor in the creation of designs, trends, and attitudes. The creative director himself/herself largely benefitted from such a mediatisation in that not only did he/she gain increased popularity and economic power, but also was handed the opportunity to use social media to communicate his/her vision and ideas and to get inspiration from multiple sources, as well as, finally, to use his/her online presence for casting new faces for their catwalk shows, ad campaigns, and photographic work.

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Moreover, the postmodern disintegration of the barrier between high and low culture boosted the adoption of street styles and independent motifs within mainstream fashion. The anti-fashion androgynous aesthetic introduced into the mainstream by Hedi Slimane with his Dior Homme collections in the early 2000s attests to the ultimate overlap of indie and mainstream as well as the redeployment of the latter for commercial purposes. Slimane himself has played a quintessential role in blurring the boundaries of independent and popular culture by creating a stylistic repertoire that taps into both indie and mainstream: from this perspective, he is the epitome of the celebrity creative director who masters the skills of imbricating art and commerce, high and low-brow, in the context of consumerist culture. As a fashion designer, he is widely celebrated as an outcast, an *enfant terrible* who imbued the fashion scene at the turn of the 21st century with rock'n'roll and a dark decadent aesthetic; as a photographer, he is praised as a fine reporter of youth subcultures (ALETTI, 2008). In both fashion and art worlds he is associated with a high degree of "coolness". His tendency to go against the tide of normative trends and leitmotifs, however, found (not so paradoxically in postmodern times) a welcome, and highly remunerative, reception among powerhouses (such as Dior and Yves Saint Laurent) and shareholders.

My brief inquiry into the work of a fashion creative director and his stylistic strategies towards originality and success appears particularly salient in light of a recent news item (April 5, 2018) according to which Hedi Slimane won a multi-million lawsuit against the luxury group Kering, owner of Saint Laurent, which apparently had breached a clause guaranteeing compensation for the designer of at least ten million euros per year¹. The work of Hedi Slimane, along with that of many other well-established fashion creative directors, is commonly associated with cutting-edge realism and an anti-fashion aesthetic. His own celebrity persona has catalysed huge support and enthusiasm both among the public and the fashion press, which understand him as an outsider *vis-à-vis* the conservative élite of fashion insiders². Mentioning the financial backing of such creative professionals serves as a reminder of the precariousness of the grounds on which the fabrication of the creative director's public persona rests. Further, this article takes the stance that demythologising from a queer theoretical standpoint the creative photographic work of Hedi Slimane might contribute to a deeper understanding of the affective dynamics underlying the consumption and appreciation of art and fashion photographs.

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Affective collectivity and indifference in Slimane's photographic world

Hedi Slimane's photography is characterised by an uncompromising refusal of colour. The use of black and white is a significant aspect to consider in relation to the affective content of Slimane's photography, and it serves a manifold purpose within the aesthetic logic of his work. As film theorist Glyn Davis noted in his exploration of indie cinema, the use of black and white can function as a marker of independence from the dominant system: it "carries connotations of 'art-istry'" *vis-à-vis* the visual style of the commercial mainstream (DAVIS, 2011, p. 31). In addition to indexing auteurship, it also confers a layer of realism to the images while concomitantly freezing such images in the past as events that have already occurred. Furthermore, it serves the purpose of historicising the image and sanctioning it as timeless. This happens because the black and white enhances a sense of stillness and reduces the registering of affect on the body of the subject to a bare minimum: with black and white, in fact, we are not allowed to see pallor, blushing, or other colour and texture components that normally emphasise or frame our micro-expressions. This is not to say that black and white is less expressive than colour in photography, but rather that it is less mimetic, insofar as it contributes to conveying moods and enacting atmospheres without relying on the increased textural nuances and haptic qualities allowed by colour. As scholar Katherine Wallerstein has argued in relation to the black-and-white realist fashion advertisements of the 1990s,

Black-and-white photography [...] heightens the sensation of lack, for to use black-and-white in an age when we have color photography is itself a rejection of fullness, of the filling happiness of colour. To withhold colour is to dwell in a lack, to emphasize starkness, angularity, and hardness over easy, happier softness (WALLERSTEIN, 2015, p. 146).

Moreover, the use of black and white in Slimane's photographs is aligned with the monochromatic coding of the minimalist aesthetic in fashion of which Slimane was a pioneer³. It has also been noted how Slimane's "chromophobic sensibility" is "rooted in the traditional, generic use of black and white to document rock music" (REES-ROBERTS, 2013, p. 22). From a different angle, film theorist Richard Dyer, striking a relation between white bodies and black and white in photography has stressed how dark, hard-hedged tones are generally used to depict individuals of lower classes (KUCHTA, 1998). Following this line of interpretation and rearticulating it in regards to Hedi Slimane's photographic subjects, I would argue that Slimane's teenagers are meant to evoke an imbrication of class and affect which we encounter, for instance, in Bret Easton Ellis's Los Angeles characters in *Less Than Zero* (ELLIS, 1985). The use of black and white contributes to the sanctioning of this relation. Both Ellis's and Slimane's teenagers do not belong to lower classes (they are most likely students or artists in L.A. from middle class families), but they occasionally style themselves with clothing signifiers of the working class as a means to signal a staged disaffection from mainstream culture and music.

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Partying is for them an affective arrangement for enacting a sense of belonging to and with each other. They attach themselves to a fantasy of freedom: from their parents, their schools, and any external expectation. In particular in *Rock Diary* (SLIMANE 2008)⁴, an anthology dedicated to music fans and concerts, teenagers gather to experience collective, or public, emotions. Slimane seems to be interested in the constitution of affective collectivity through the phenomenological experiencing of a situation of heightened emotional tension. They are immersed in an atmosphere of ecstasy wherein they "lose themselves". They are gradually losing themselves in a collective embodied atmosphere of excitement. By doing so they also loosen the bonds with the moral behavioural patterns expected outside of that very situation in their everyday life. It is through this affective experience that they can forge an intimate collectivity: they identify with each other through the temporal refusal of the world that lies outside their concert venue. Such identification might happen through the recognition of each other in the communal momentary rejection of the norms embedded in the scripts of their lives. They are enveloped in an atmosphere of intensified affect wherein they can form attachments based on a mutual recognition.

Queer theorist Marco Pustianaz has termed this affect-laden suspension from outside politics that occurs in the context of the disco, "pausal politics". His brilliant reflection on the affective experience of dancing and its "whateverness" in relation to politics can be fruitfully applied to Slimane's music fans. He wrote:

The movement-together of dancing bodies has often been devalued as non-political: escapist, hedonistic and unproductive. I call it "pausal" politics not only because it is a pause from politics, but also because it is a politics of the spare time, a "nightly" politics. [...] Paraphrasing Rancière, dancing the night away is a "night of labor", a time where a different kind of work is produced, i.e. a work that will not count as work. This bodily movement may not be the "alliance of bodies" on the streets visibly reclaiming a public space, but is nonetheless a collective technology of space production, intensely sexualized (PUSTIANAZ, 2018, p. 22).

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By repetitively and obsessively shooting teenagers at concerts from any possible camera angle, Slimane seems to be interested in the articulation of a collective space that takes the form of a site of affective belonging through a (temporarily) non-belonging to the outside. By immortalising their sweating (with occasional close-ups on their skin, so we can see up close their sweat and their pores) and their body contact (kissing and hugging), Slimane reports photographically on the formation of a highly sexualised space of heightened affective intensity. Or, borrowing another expression from Pustianaz (2018, p. 24), in this case paraphrasing Agamben, the "'coming community' of dancers" is held together by collective emotions in their immanent capacity to unite individuals by affectively detaching them from the outside.

Slimane's shots capture teenagers in the midst of something. Hardly ever are they posing for portraits, although these occupy a place as well in Slimane's oeuvre. Photo collections such as *Rock Diary* (SLIMANE 2008) and *Anthology of a Decade* (SLIMANE 2011) and depict teenagers in the act of, perhaps unconsciously, creating a community. Caught in their actions, their socio-economic circumstances appear anodyne. They are partying (in *Rock Diary*) or simply hanging out together (in *Anthology of a Decade*). Such hanging out is indeed a movement, an oscillation towards a new experiential stage, a point in transition towards the fulfilling collective experiencing of each other. Hanging out means ungrounding the demands of using time productively, according to the expectations set in place by society. In not abiding by such demands, they linger in a detemporised temporality which allows them to prioritise the affective salience of the now over the opacity of the future.

The slow, and yet dynamic, movement of staying together in an action is aesthetically sealed through the adoption of looks that act as reminders of their membership to a group or subculture. In this sense, the grunge clothing worn by these teenagers operates as a transposition of embodied moods, i.e., the feeling of disenchantment with the dominant culture and the self-disenfranchisement from its aesthetic and moral codes. The very clothes (e.g. skateboarding sneakers, striped or vintage-looking t-shirts, and low-hung pants with visible boxer underwear), hairdos (punk shaved heads or longer untamed surf-style hair) and skin adornments (nose rings and tattoos with skull motifs) of Slimane's teenagers have unceasingly penetrated into his collections for Saint Laurent, becoming the actual leitmotifs of his design aesthetic and functioning as vectors of an ideal transformation of normative looks and moods.

In all of Slimane's photo books, and in particular in *Anthology of a Decade: U.S.*⁵ grunge is framed within a larger Americana aesthetic. An American ethos pervades the photographs as these are populated by paraphernalia such as American flags, guns, bullets, and occasional cowboy hats (which altogether constitute different sub-series, such as *American Flags* and *Gun Directory*). An Italian by origin, raised in France, who migrated to the United States, Slimane imbues his images with a subtended fascination for all things American as these exude ideals of freedom and democratic values. However, by way of marking a certain rawness, or roughness, the aforementioned objects inscribe the stylisation of the photographic subjects as teenage rebels within a broader normative frame. Possible discourses on creative longing beyond the rigid schemes of normative thinking and looking are short-circuited by the framing of such teenagers within a butch masculine rhetoric epitomised by guns and national flags as symbols of virility.

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The photographic sequences intersperse shots of different subjects with close-ups of military items. The latter syntactically punctuate the narrative of the former. The potentiality for Slimane's teenagers to eschew or oppose any association with the State and its symbols is deflated by their own visual inscription in the underlying sentimental rhetoric of the American dream. As Slimane is obviously responsible for the photographic montage of his series, he is also responsible for leaving these teenagers bereft of any actual subversive potential in the scope of their representation. Within these sequences we also encounter images of hypermasculine U.S. soldiers. How can these ethically coexist with the pictures of laid-back skaters or surfers, who would be most likely indifferent to, if not actually impatient with, the vocabulary of war with its masculinist tropes of strength, power, and virility? The romance of the (possibly queer) teenage outsider is flattened, or even crushed, under the normalising weight of the American dream.

Moreover, sequences of individuals in Slimane's anthology (in particular in *Anthology of a Decade*) are occasionally interrupted by close-ups of guitars, cigarettes, and tattoos (usually with punk motifs). This visual accumulation of objects can be traced back in Slimane's oeuvre to *Stage* (2004), a reportage on bands such as Franz Ferdinand, The White Stripes, and Arctic Monkeys, among others, where cables, mixing desks, guitars, drums, keyboards, pedals, and other stage paraphernalia, were incessantly shot to constitute an inventory of inanimate objects. In *Anthology of a Decade: U.S.* objects like cigarettes and tattoos are inserted in the visual narrative as a way to articulate stylistically the grunge nature of the other images we are looking at. They are a useful punctuation that highlights for us the rhythm and the overall form of the sequence. They add a layer of trashy realism (in *Rock Diary* the same function is played by photos of toilet paper and empty bottles on the ground at concert raves) to the images of human subjects that dominate the anthology. They aid the anthology in conveying meanings associated with the rock'n'roll aesthetic. Such objects do not have a subjective value (and I will show how the subjects themselves are devoid of any emotional value as well): they mean nothing to the photographer, the subjects, or to us. They serve as transmitters of moods, evoking the glamorised rawness of subcultural lives. Put differently, they are concretisations of moods to which the spectators can attach themselves to as a means to further enable their identification with the photographic subjects.

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The overarching cultural history of youth largely relies on narratives that construe teenagers ("teenager" was indeed invented as a social category that served to construct a social group as well as economic and political subjects of youngsters) as "fighting against the established institutions of the life of the young [...] radicalizing cultural conflict in political conflict" against the State apparatus (CRISTANTE, 1995)⁶, as "a foreign body with respect to the status quo [...] because the instinctive impulse of youth is to be against, never for" (BONAMI, 2003, p. 11-12), or, with bourgeois connotations, "as the age of the possible, and of possibilities, [...] the age of values, of ideas" (D'ERAMO, 2003, p. 183). Differently, according to a less ideological historical narrative that is attentive to the non-politicisation of youth, the refusal of the political can be traced back to the post-WWII teenager (SAVAGE, 2008a) and, notably, to the "daze and confusion" that pervaded kids' lives during the 1970s (SAVAGE, 1994).

By tapping into the repository of American symbols and assembling a repertoire of objects historically associated with national pride and nationalism, Slimane encases his disaffected youth in a universe of signs that articulates their presentation to the spectator as non-antinormative. Adolescence, in other words, eventually comes to signify, through the lens of the photographer, more "a hallmark of American culture" (SAVAGE, 2008b) than a potential figure of destabilisation of the *status quo*. Slimane's pho-

tographic account of adolescence, indeed, disaligns itself from historical accounts of youth that link the latter to symbolic forms of resistance and the challenging of ideology (HEBDIGE, 1979); conversely, Slimane's visual framing of the disaffection and potential rebelliousness of youth can be situated in the context of Savage's recollection of political blankness, that is, within a general ethos of indifference. Here indifference is a structure of feeling that permeates teenage life by providing solace, away from the ethical demand of making one's life politically or socially meaningful.

A style of affect: impersonality

In Slimane's photographic work, and in particular in his two main photo collections from the last decade (*Rock Diary*, 2008, and *Anthology of a Decade*, 2011) we encounter images of American teenagers, primarily skateboarders and surfers, hanging out, chilling out, or partying at concerts, intermitted by American soldiers, and a coterie of artists, musicians, and writers admired by Slimane (Gore Vidal, Kenneth Anger, John Lydon, Brice Marden, Ed Ruscha, Nate Lowman, Christopher Owens, Randy Randall, Beck, Robert De Niro, Raymond Pettibon, Larry Bell, and others). The artists in these series are usually portrayed facing the camera, whereas the teenagers are often shot from other angles with a documentary approach: Slimane works with them like a reporter, offering the spectator a glimpse into their lives, alongside a tradition of documentary photography that has its main references in the realism of Larry Clark and Nan Goldin. He does not establish with them the same intimacy that might be involved during a sitting. Rather, he is interested in capturing their own life and intimacy, which he attentively observes from very close by and yet from the outside.

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I have explained how, in particular in *Rock Diary*, Slimane is interested in sealing, photographically, the movements of young music fans outside of the linear temporality of the world. The act of photographing is a gesture that seeks to eternalise those instances of affectivity taking place during concerts. These moments of ecstasy are captured in the form of fragments: in the photographic sequence, there is not a linear narrative, or, we could even say that there is not a narrative at all. They are bits of time extrapolated from a temporal event (that of the concert). Slimane mixes and combines such temporal fragments not in a chronological order, but rather according to his own personal preference in the process of montage. His snapshots are shot and assembled in a way that does not allow us to identify the spatio-temporal coordinates of the event that is being captured⁷. Indeed, rather than capturing an event he is analogically orchestrating an affective scene, projecting his subjects into a lateral temporality that evades the rhythm of the productive life. As Vince Aletti (2008) pointed out in an essay for the exhibition catalogue of *Rock Diary*, "Slimane works through accumulation — doubling, splitting, repeating, juxtaposing, and sequencing images; shattering narrative but assembling something more evocative and resonant: an archive of glimpses into the

way we live now". Aletti is certainly on the right track, especially as he goes on to argue that Slimane's photographic books "have the rhythm of a musical composition, with recurring motifs, serene passages, and passionate peaks" (ALETTI, 2008).

Not only do the event's pieces appear to be assembled quite randomly in Slimane's photographic sequences, but also the choice of the subjects seems rather arbitrary. In other words, we are not given any clues as to why he might have chosen certain subjects instead of others. I argue that the success of Slimane's photographs of teenagers as well as the wide public identification with them, is due to the very impersonality of said subjects as these are presented to us by Slimane. In other terms, I am suggesting that Slimane employs an impersonal style in order to represent (in what might seem like a paradox) a sense of collective belonging among his detached photographic subjects. The depiction of such a collectivised affectivity ultimately fosters an identification (or, perhaps, instils a fantasy of belonging) in the viewer. In Slimane's anthologies the characters hardly ever have a name: "skater", "California boy", "California girl", "American teenager", "California surfer", "two surfers", "teenagers". These are the titles of his pictures. By not sharing with us their names (and, most likely, not knowing their names himself), on the one hand, he attempts to render generic and thereby historicise these very images, and on the other, he elevates these boys and girls to "figures". As if to say: it does not matter who this particular boy/girl is, what matters is how he/she matters for you based on what he/she stands for.

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According to Lyotard, the first and most prominent theorist of figural-ity, the figural determines the subject as the product of desire (LYOTARD, 1971). It resists language by privileging the alimention of desire over discursive explanation. It alludes to a sensorial dimension that language simply cannot produce: it delivers "sense" rather than a contained meaning. Figurality has to do with the senses, evocation, and desire more than with logical thinking, that is, with a straightforward delivery of meaning. As architecture theorist Vlad Ionesco put it, the figural fosters "the *visible* fluctuations of desire" *vis-à-vis* the "*readable* regularity of language", and, as a concept, it "questions (negatively) the stability of the presentation but also proposes (positively) an *open notion of form* as a linear variation of desire" (IONESCU, 2013, p. 144-154). Slimane's teenagers are figures of coolness⁹, carefreeness, and overall indifference to the world that lies beyond their community circle. That is what Slimane's fans recognise and relate to.

We are not provided any insight into the life of his subjects: in addition to not actually knowing anything about their identity, we are not offered a glimpse into their psychic or emotional life either. What we are given is the (illusion of) immersion into their collectivity, wherein individual differences

and circumstances are shattered. Slimane freezes moments of collective rapture and elevates them as affective modes of being in the world. He captures instants in the life of subjects who have no specificity: they are proffered to us as tassels of an indie life to which we might want to attach ourselves as a way to escape the dullness of the present. Moreover, these subjects do not show any feelings: they are usually shot from the back, from far away, or anyway from angles that only rarely enable us to see their eyes. Each of them could be anyone else in the same group. Slimane's technique testifies to the disavowal of subjectivity (of the individual teenager) in favour of the celebratory representation of the collectivity (of cool indie teenagers). The focus is on the resonance of the affective communal world of the American teenagers standing as figures of nonchalant indifference to the matter of the world. Thus, they can resonate only minimally with us in that we are not bestowed with any insight into their actual psychic or emotional life. Slimane's affective style of impersonality coincides with a poetic of reduction aimed at letting the spectators find their own minimal resonances with the subjects.

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Slimane's minimal, or impersonal affect assumes a cultural valence for it catalyses the deflated social energies of a moment: no figures of resistance from the underworld, his characters are, rather, emblems of embodied indifference towards the matter of the world itself. There is no lyricism. Or, perhaps, the lyricism lies indeed in this under-performance of feelings. Slimane's rock anthologies are albums of anti-heroes: the characters who populate his visual chronicles are thrown into a depersonalising index wherein they are not given a name or a description. Here rock'n'roll does not proffer any countercultural appeal. Rather, it indexes a void of indifference left by the emptying of social significance in the rock'n'roll aesthetic, which is here reduced to a pose, a mannerism with scarce affective grasp. Such a rerouting of meanings (behind and within the rock'n'roll aesthetic) into flattened representations hints at the postmodern conflation of the independent and the mainstream, as well as the capitulation of the former into an act of style with a faint anti-normative pulse. This could aptly be situated within the queer affective economies of 1990s visual culture as a legacy of the rejection, impersonated for instance by the characters of New Queer Cinema, of the legible feelings presented by mainstream society. It is also indebted to the so-called "heroin-chic" visual trend in 1990s fashion photography, in particular to the work of Corinne Day, whose subjects were often "realistically" portrayed in their ordinariness as figures of alienation or boredom.

I construe Slimane's photographic oeuvre as a consistent performance of unaffected style that by depersonalising his subjects renders them analogues of any possible viewer, thereby speaking to a wide and undifferentiated audience. Slimane does not seem to take any stand through his work on what his preferred subjects might be on an emotional level: regardless

of their sexuality, as long as they embody a rock'n'roll attitude they serve as appropriate conduits for the contagious proliferation of "indie coolness"⁹ which he advocates via his public persona, fashion shows, and photo series. What is presented in front of our eyes is, borrowing an expression from literary critic D. A. Miller (2003, p. 91), "the dazzling spectacle of Style" in its capacity to play with, and in this case, obfuscate the feelings of the subjects, standing in place of personhood. According to Miller, in fact, style possesses a sense of exclusive self-sufficiency. It is inherently utopian insofar as "it shuts out the world that would otherwise shut out the stylothete" (MILLER, 2003, p. 67). He suggests that this is concomitantly the beauty of style and the nature of its melancholia: style in fact, according to Miller, "always harbor[s] a dialectical reminder not just of that excluded self it had to give up, but also of that included self it never had, and so never *will* give up, for it is what we might properly call its ego ideal" (MILLER, 2003, p. 67).

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Slimane's affectless style is in striking contrast with the dramatic style of Tom Ford's photographic and cinematic work, which "places homosexuality in an arena of style and sensual apprehension that is hypertuned to ambient feeling" (WALLACE, 2014, p. 30). Sensuality and glamour suffuse clothes, settings, and bodies in Ford's photographic and filmic *mises-en-scène*, to the point that "gayness [...] is retooled as a universal vector for public feelings of aspiration, including the aspiration to feeling itself" (WALLACE, 2014, p. 39). I suggest that Slimane works in an opposite way. Instead of constructing glamorous characters and compelling narratives, he employs anonymity and impersonality as stylistic gestures that seek to elevate the collective experience of his characters to universality. Whereas Ford stages his subjects into meticulously researched settings so as to imbue the scenes with uniqueness and thereby foster aspirational longing in the viewer, Slimane works through the very lack of all these elements. He fosters "unfeeling" as both a collective mode of cool and detached carefreeness and an affective register of public engagement with his subjects.

Along the lines of Miller's disentanglement of the nexus of style and affect, we can intend style as the surfacing of a gesture, an attitude; a form rich in emotiveness that shapes one's surroundings while simultaneously being informed by them. Style is affective (and effective) in that it percolates into the relational movements implicated in our everyday life while also being partly a product of the very infrastructures within which it operates. To think of style unconventionally in terms of the unwillingness to expose subjectivity (rather than, as traditionally occurs, in terms of the subject's expressivity) allows us to read Slimane's auteurial style in terms of an obliteration of personhood. For Slimane, the "vacancy of the person" (MILLER, 2003, p. 35) serves the purpose of foregrounding the enactment of affective collectivities.

(Queer) identifications and vampiric longings

As I have illustrated in the previous sections, American teenagers are the icons in Slimane's imagescapes. Slimane has created a fantasy around the (predominantly white male) teenage skateboarder/surfer: that is, a fantasy of indifference to the matter of the world embodied through attitudes that display "coolness" through rock'n'roll signifiers. Like any fantasy, this can merely be approximated and, most likely, never attained. In other terms, a fantasy forecloses the very same possibility of attaining the ideal it stands for. As queer theorist Leo Bersani explained, the desire to be *like* often coincides with the desire to *possess* (BERSANI, 1996). In this sense, an identification always encompasses a desire to reproduce and to appropriate a certain image. As feminist theorist Diana Fuss observed, "identification may well operate in the end not as a foreclosure of desire but as its most perfect, and most *ruthless*, fulfillment" (FUSS, 1992, p. 737). As I will further unpack, since we know nothing (starting from how they possibly feel) about Slimane's subjects, the spectator (Slimane's fan) might reasonably latch onto their style as a means to appropriate their image.

The kind of spectatorial relation established by Slimane's photographs of teenagers is one of vampirism, as this was theorised by Diana Fuss to describe the multilayered engagement of a spectator with a fashion image. Vampirism is a mode of looking that

demands both separation and identification, both a having and a becoming – indeed a having *through* a becoming; [it involves] neither immediate identification nor unmediated desire but rather a complicated and unstable exchange between already mediated forms (FUSS, 1992, p. 730).

As one possible reception of Slimane's photos, this translates for the spectator into the desire to *become* the other (the, usually white male, subject in the photo) by way of incorporating it, or, to put it more accurately in psychoanalytic terms, to introject its imago. Vampirism is "both other-incorporating and self-producing" (FUSS 1992, p. 730) insofar as the psychic interiorisation of the other, by way of (fetishistically) consuming it visually, results in a self-fashioning against the backdrop of the image of the other. More pragmatically, Slimane's male fans and consumers erotically consume his photographic subjects by feeding off their style: they "incorporate them" by way of reproducing their style and taking up their attitudes. The appropriation and reproduction of style is their best strategy to approximate as much as possible those subjects. By adopting their looks and attitudes, they *live through* them: they experience the utopia of *becoming* them by *looking like* them. Style, or self-styling, allows the spectators to fashionably embody the moods vehicled by Slimane's photographic subjects.

Queer theorist José Muñoz wrote *a propos* of Larry Clark's teenage lust that "Clark's camera has often been trained on the bodies of nude and semi-nude young white boys in both urban and rural settings" (MUÑOZ, 1998, p. 168). In his, as well as in Slimane's iconography,

women's bodies function as little more than props [...]. Clark's use of the female body attempts to stave off the specters of homosexual desire that haunt his images [...]. Furthermore, they are positioned to re-format and unload the queer energies that abound in both the photographer's images and in his pronounced fascination with young men (MUÑOZ, 1998, p. 168, 173).

I believe this well applies to Slimane's aesthetic objects as well. Albeit less explicitly preoccupied with his subjects' sexuality, Slimane is largely inspired by Clark, and he uses female bodies as mere punctuation in his work. The relationship he is pointedly interested in establishing is with his male subjects, a gang of carefree teenagers whose identity appears contained by the very space inhabited by their bodies. Through Slimane's lens and thanks to his montage in the photo series, his characters' identities are performed by their style, which can be synthesised as: rock'n'roll attitude with bare to none exposure of feelings. According to D. A. Miller, style is inherently in contrast with "substance". As adamant as such a statement might sound, it actually illustrates quite well the operationality of style in Slimane's characters: they embody a usually identical attitude which acts "in excess" of their "substance" (namely, their psychic and emotional life). We are not offered any insights into the latter and what we are presented with is the enactment of an iterative style as a mode of articulating collective identity and belonging in the closed circle of teenage subcultures.

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Slimane's snapshots function as repetitions *ad infinitum* of the same tropes and therefore they congeal into his signature auteurial style of black and white unaffectedness¹⁰. Whereas his photographic subjects are often caught interacting or partaking in the same activities, the photographer's camera often looks to have been left behind. I posit that Slimane's photographs evince that he is not a "leader of the gang" as is the case, for instance, of designer-photographer-filmmaker Goscha Rubchinsky (ROBERTS, 2017) insofar as he is not one of them. Additionally, having been raised in France, the only access he has had to the American subcultures he photographs occurred most likely as he started photographing them as an adult, or, via consumption of music and popular culture when he was younger. I do not intend to make a point about Slimane's personal identity, but rather I am foregrounding the fallacy of the rhetoric of being "one of them" by way of implying a rather self-evident inconsistency between his standing as a successful creative director and the life of the subjects he photographs, from which he is *de facto* personally (socially and economically) disengaged.

Slimane himself has affirmed that "I was precisely just like any of these guys I photograph" (YAHOO STYLE, 2015): if we accept Slimane's statement as true, then the kind of relationship he has with them is simultaneously one of identification and desire. This is indeed a homosexual kind of relationship projected across time. Judith Butler has explained how gender is troubled when we fail to follow the conventional routes that distinguish identification from desire (to identify as a girl means desiring a boy, and vice versa, to identify as a boy means desiring a girl) (BUTLER, 1990). Slimane recognises himself in the male teenagers he photographs. He sees himself as their double, or, conversely, he sees them as his doubles. At the same time (before, after, or most likely concomitantly with such a recognition) he desires them. Desire and identification are interwoven. Or, put differently, identification proceeds along the trajectory of desire.

[95] Slimane's identification may also be a psychic mode of phantasmatically preserving the object of desire. Since identification is at the core of ego formation, then the (lost) object of desire is hauntingly inherent to the ego itself. The kind of identification described here could more aptly be called incorporation or internalisation (BUTLER, 1995) insofar as the loss of the object of desire is refused (which is how melancholia operates) by way of assimilating said object. The loss in the external world is avoided through introjection, or interiorisation. The attachment with the object is, thus, never broken, but rather is maintained and solidified internally. The narrative of "being one of them" as a teenager is probably a misguided one. It is unlikely for us to desire that much (and Slimane's photographic interest in teenagers could be said to be "obsessive") something that we ourselves actually have been. It is more credible to assume, following Lacan, that we desire to be recognised as that which the Other desires (LACAN, 1998, p. 235). In this sense, Slimane's desire to be recognised as one of his subjects structures his personal desire for, and photographic interest in, that "someone" (the teenage skater/surfer). This transference, albeit not provable as a fact since we can never know for sure in what our desires are actually implicated, highlights the artificial nature of self-narratives in the fabrication of "authenticity".

Furthermore, in the only interview, already cited in this article, in which Hedi Slimane opened up about his personal life, he stated:

Many in high school, or in my family, were attempting to make me feel I was half a man because I was lean, and not an athletic build. They were bullying me for some time, so that I might feel uncomfortable with myself, insinuating skinny was "queer" (YAHOO STYLE, 2015).

Whereas Slimane can certainly be credited for having introduced through his androgynous silhouette and the casting of gender-fluid models elements of queerness in the fashion iconography of the early 2000s¹¹,

akin elements can hardly be found in his photographic work. The aforementioned quote is part of Slimane's self-reflection on his photography; therefore, he is referring to the teenagers in his pictures when he goes on to argue that he is moved by affinity in the choice of his subjects. We might believe with no hesitation that Slimane, as he himself explains, identifies aesthetically with the models of his catwalk shows as these often lack gender definition. However, the subjects that haunt his photographs are significantly different. The communities of skaters and surfers he shoots are far from embodying queerness, as instead do the army of models he has sent down the runway since the year 2000. Regardless of individual subjectivities, those teenage skaters and surfers do not defy the norm on the level of gender and sexuality. Slimane's gaze as a photographer is a gay one insofar as the iteration of shots of male naked bodies, with close-ups on body parts such as abs and napes, attests; however, the very subjects he photographs belong to communities conventionally associated with straight masculinity. If Slimane's attempt is, through his gaze, to queer said subjects, the montage of the series – interleaving sexualised images of male teenagers with (regular looking) girls and paraphernalia of American nationalism – contributes to neutralising such an attempt. Slimane's queering of his male subjects shrinks amid referents of masculinity that are conventionally not queer and that are reproduced photographically as they actually are, with no transfiguration. In other words, I am suggesting that Slimane ends up recontextualising his own (gay) gaze within a normative frame.

The practice of coding homoerotic desire as straight has a long history in black and white art and fashion photography: this can be traced back to the work of George Hoyningen-Huene (1900-1968), Horst P. Horst (1906-1999), and George Platt Lynes (1907-1955), among others (WAUGH, 1998, p. 58-76). Despite their respective differences, the aforementioned artists masterfully deployed light and shadows to mythologise the bodies of their subjects in order to sublimate their sexual exuberance through artistic effects. They consciously masked their sexual desire through technical stratagems that transfigured the models into mythological or biblical figures, which, however, can be construed now, retrospectively, as figures of queer desire. I propose that Slimane, within an obviously very distant socio-historical context from the latter, also plays with coding his homoerotic desire. He does so differently and he obtains a different result. His attempt to sublimate his anonymous anti-heroic subjects through a historicising deployment of the black and white and the capturing of "stolen" scenes from their everyday life ultimately collides, in fact, with the very framework in which they are situated. The very attempt to somewhat eternalise his subjects and elevate them as figures of coolness and carefreeness is problematised as the photographer's gaze gets reinscribed into a normalising framework of references.

Conclusion

This analysis reveals also how the discourses of fashion designers and creative directors in the scenario of contemporary fashion and celebrity culture are often, as I make the case with Slimane's projections, misdirected and untenable for the purpose of accurate historiographical reconstruction. Fashion historian Alessandra Vaccari has explored how fashion designers have a key role, which has been largely forgotten in the writing of fashion history, in shaping their own narrative by means of storytelling through a variety of channels (VACCARI, 2012, p. 20-44). In this scenario, Hedi Slimane occupies a singular position insofar as he has been rather distant and secretive from public engagements. What could be argued to be just a reflection of character, could also be attributed, conversely, to a well-pondered strategy of de-personalisation as a means to shape his aura¹². By confining himself to the backstage and choosing to let his collections and photographs "speak", he has triggered in the media a fascination for his private/public persona, nourishing the romantic myth of the introverted artist. In the very few interviews that he has given, however, he has been keen to highlight, as I mentioned before, his personal belonging and attachment to the circles of teenagers he privileges as his photographic subjects. Through an oblique route, that of critically analysing his photographic work, I have attempted to unearth, amid a broader reflection on affect, style, and masculinity, the problematic nature of such self-narrative as a means to show, more broadly, the possible limitation of accounting for personal narrative in the writing of fashion history. For the sake of clarity, I am not suggesting that we adamantly dismiss personal narrative, as much as tackle it with skepticism in view of its potential instrumentality in the fabrication of someone's persona.

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I propose that, peculiarly in Slimane's case, the pictures themselves offer us a great deal of information on the photographer's practice as a medium through which to not only establish a particular style but also write his personal history. I am arguing for a reading that is both "paranoid" and "reparative", using the terminology that Eve Sedgwick coined to describe two hermeneutic tendencies in cultural criticism, the former proper to early gay and lesbian readings, and the second inaugurated and favoured by herself (SEDGWICK, 2002). On the one hand, to dig in order to find possible aesthetic, ethical, and moral fallacies and disjunctures in an artist's oeuvre; on the other, to immerse oneself emotionally in a specific art work to bring to light its affective resonances. Following the first trajectory, I have outlined a conceptual conflict between Slimane's identity and that of his photographic subjects; following the second, I have unraveled the impersonality of affective participation on both the level of production and reception, arguing that "bare minimum affect" functions as an aesthetic strategy to render characters simultaneously impersonal and stylish with the ultimate purpose of appealing commercially to a vast audience and consumer base.

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¹ See: <https://www.businessoffashion.com/articles/news-analysis/hedi-slimane-wins-11-5-million-from-saint-laurent>.

² Fashion journalist Vanessa Friedman has identified and analysed a paradox in Slimane's work and career, i.e. the contradiction between the anti-establishment impetus of his collections, along with his reluctance to concede interviews to the fashion press, and his active branding strategies through conventional channels (such as advertising). She summarised this as follows: "He refused to give interviews, but invited journalists backstage after shows to pay their respects. He insisted on moving the Saint Laurent design studio to Los Angeles, but he also created a new maison in Paris. He swapped elegance for grunge on the runway, but actually merchandised his collections to the hilt, so there was plenty for everyone hidden under the post-angst aesthetic. [...] It's been almost like an extended piece of performance art, conceived to see how far he could push the industry and keep it coming back for more" (FRIEDMAN, 2017).

I would add that this paradox is rather common among those fashion designers whose work presents an anti-fashion aesthetic (e.g. Raf Simons). This could be linked to the overlapping of the indie and the mainstream and the collapse of the boundaries between art and commerce occurring within postmodern culture.

³ Art historian David J. Getsy has recently argued for the queer erotic potential of Minimalism, proposing that minimalist artworks open the meaning of the aesthetic engagement to the viewers by prompting them to establish their own bodily relations with the essential structure and forms of said artworks (DOYLE; GETSY, 2013).

⁴ Both *Rock Diary* and *Anthology of a Decade*, the two main anthologies examined in this article, were published (respectively in 2008 and 2011) over a period of absence from the fashion industry during which Slimane focused exclusively on his photographic work. *Rock Diary* came out one year after Slimane stepped out as creative director at Dior Homme, and *Anthology of a Decade* right before he was appointed at Yves Saint Laurent.

⁵ The *Anthology of a Decade* is a four-volume retrospective anthology on youth subcultures. It is divided into four books, each one covering a location relevant to Slimane's creative work: Los Angeles, Paris, London, and Berlin.

⁶ Cristante (1995) traced a history of youth as an extended period of post-war youth rebellion, embodied in the United States by rock'n'roll stars and Hollywood actors like James Dean and Marlon Brando, throughout the Beat Generation and continuing into the 1970s.

⁷ Temporality is inextricably connected to the ontology of the photographic image and it has been discussed at length in photographic history and theory. On the photographic "paradox of the unperformed movement", see: Duve (1978).

⁸ With "coolness" I refer to a nonchalant demeanour that indexes a carefree outlook on the world. In other words, a state of fashionable unconcern. It might be taken on as a pose and/or it might be perceived as "authentic", which happens when there is an ostensible congruency between one's self-fashioning and their personality. It is also a recessive aesthetic register for it is about a dedramatisation of emotional expressivity. This attitude might have a precedent in what Georg Simmel termed the "blasé outlook". The German sociologist described the blasé attitude as a psychic mood, proper to the experience of metropolitan life, consisting of a subjective and yet generalised passive and indifferent disassociation from external stimulations (SIMMEL, 1969 [1903], p. 52-53).

⁹ This expression is used by Lauren Berlant to indicate a tonality that saturates the queer narratives of films such as *Mysterious Skin* and *My Life on Ice* in the late 1990s and early 2000s (BERLANT; EDELMAN, 2013, p. 14).

¹⁰ Slimane himself has stated in an interview: "I constantly use my own vocabulary, and the sense of repetition of the same signs, and semiotic, the permanence of a silhouette, or proportions, and overall representation. I always believed in repetition, pursuing endlessly the same idea" (YAHOO SYLE, 2015).

¹¹ On the centrality of the cross-gender dynamic in the critical design practice of Hedi Slimane and its role in operating a radical paradigm shift in male fashion imagery, see the important work of Nick Rees-Roberts (2013).

¹² In recent fashion history, this phenomenon finds a legacy in Martin Margiela's politics of anonymity.

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