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The Lens, the Mirror and the Frame: Glasses, Good Taste and the Material Culture of Looking

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ABSTRACT This article explores the material culture of taste, examining the ways that artifacts we look with (the technologies of looking) can mediate and produce our understanding of taste. Taking a phenomenological approach to shopping and luxury it examines how processes of looking closely, of connoisseurship and distinction are bound up with the performance of good taste. Drawing on Bourdieu's (1984a) formulation of "distinction," it unpacks the multiple modes of vision and roles of looking necessary to perform and maintain the capital of good taste. Much has been written on the gaze in consumer societies, building upon theories of looking and desire (Mulvey 1989; Berger 1972). Whilst recent writing has often focused on screens and the subjectivity of desire (c.f. Rocamora, 2011, 2017, Pham, 2015) this article addresses ideas of taste and looking from a phenomenological and material culture perspective, utilizing the work of sociologist Bourdieu (1984a), and phenomenologists Schiller (1935) and Merleau-Ponty (1962, 1968) to examine the embodied and bodily experience of looking with and through things.

KEYWORDS: taste, eyewear, mirrors, looking, phenomenology, glass

Introduction

I gaze at myself in a room full of mirrors: trying to select a pair of glasses, an object which will, in turn, allow me to look more precisely – and, I hope, to look better. In a paralysis of indecision, I am yet again struck by the quandary of taste. What do I like and what do I feel I should like? How will the glasses that I select, reflect my identity out in the world and, in turn, back at me?

Processes of looking are central to ideas of luxury and "good taste": of refinement, connoisseurship and distinction. Good taste is dependent upon the capacity for clever and critical looking; of making detailed and discerning visual judgments. Luxury shopping is a process of selection and exclusion: of navigating and negotiating available brands, makers, objects and identities themselves. These processes of looking inform both the perception of the self and the way that one is perceived by others – the seeming necessity that luxury consumption be conspicuous. This article explores the material culture of taste, examining the ways that artifacts we look with (the technologies of looking) can mediate and produce our understanding of taste. Drawing on Bourdieu's formulation of "distinction," it unpacks the multiple modes of vision and roles of looking necessary to perform and maintain the capital of good taste.¹ The technologies of looking (glasses, mirrors and, lenses) are ambiguous artifacts, boundaries between the self and the world. They are containing surfaces, habitual artifacts, neither fully part of the self, nor "other" to it. This article presents taste, the capacity to know what is and isn't desirable, as a boundary between the self and the world, a filter which allows only certain artifacts to be incorporated into the body schema. Within this context, it examines a self partially constituted through processes of looking and not looking; of seeing, not as an objective or naturalized process, but as a culturally and materially mediated practice.

This article seeks to explore the ways that the objects we look with, at and through, might in their materiality be active agents in the mediation and orientation of our tastes. In doing so it positions practices of looking as a fundamental aspect of the acquisition and maintenance of a taste: the ideas of "having an eye," of "looking closely" and of "reflection"; suggesting that in order to have the status afforded by taste, one must be seen to know what to see and what to ignore. Drawing on the work of anthropologists Hoskins and Miller it examines a self that is both reflected in and constituted by material

culture.² The self is constructed through the acquisition of things – we are accumulations of stuff which reflect ourselves back at us – this process of accumulation the gathering, yearning for and disposing of objects is the expression of taste. Connoisseurship, the performative and learnt process of critical looking, delineates what is and is not admissible to the materially constructed and mediated self. It presents having “good taste” as a performative and lived practice; of which practices of looking are its primary manifestations – taste as a process, which is maintained through the multiple practices of looking. In particular it explores the ways that taste and connoisseurship, as the fundamentals of luxury shopping, are bound up with the material cultures of looking.

A Good Eye

“You have a good eye” the salesperson says – the irony of our setting and the reason for my purchase seems to momentarily elude her. I do not have good eyes: without the tools, which I am attempting to choose I cannot see well. Myopic to an extreme without glasses, the metaphorical eye she alludes to, my ability to perform good taste, would be incapacitated.

It is perhaps anomalous that the performance of taste, as a highly visual practice, draws its name from an oral rather than visual sensory experience; that it is the mouth not the eye that the word alludes to. Looking is intrinsically bound up with ideas of taste and the formulation of the dressed self. Calefato writes that:

... there is ... a play on words between the literal meanings of the verb “to look” (both “to seem” and “to look at”) and the term “look” – a sort of meta-linguistic awareness of the fact that the clothed body is simultaneously defined by being looked at and by its own way of looking at the surrounding world. In this sense, the look is a way of being in the world ...³

Etymology aside, the discourse of taste is one predicated upon seeing and looking – upon being looked at and being seen. That taste is entwined both with metaphors (“it caught one’s eye,” “to see and been seen”) and practices of looking is unsurprising, for the performance of good taste requires visibility: to be seen seeing, to be observed making the correct visual distinctions. Our tastes, as the intersections of personal and cultural preferences, are neither wholly our own nor entirely culturally proscribed. Taste is at the boundary of subjective and objective experience. Most people would say they have personal taste – the knowledge and expression of what is and is not pleasing to them: the sensory stimuli that appeal to you, alongside the dispositions you have acquired.



Figure 1 :Glasses #1, Ellen Sampson. 2018 Polaroid Copyright Ellen Sampson

For Bourdieu⁴ taste is fundamental to the way we construct ourselves and in turn are constructed as social beings: a process through which we are defined and read as part of hierarchical social systems, our tastes are how we are located within the field. In a culture of mass consumption in which objects, and opportunities to acquire them proliferate, having good taste is not so much an act of selection (picking a dress or the perfect bottle of wine) but instead one of exclusion, of knowing what to avoid; it is what one chooses to hold in one's gaze and when one looks away. "Good taste" is analogous with discernment and selectivity, and of course "distinction," the term that Bourdieu used in his studies of capital, class and taste. Writing of this discernment, Bourdieu suggests that "Taste is first and foremost distaste ... at the taste of others,"⁵ "good taste" is the abhorrence of things that do not comply. This distinction is a particularly interesting in relation to the distinctions between good taste and vulgarity as the two extremes of luxury consumption. Vulgarity, described by psychoanalyst Adam Phillips as "the wrong people, enjoying the wrong pleasures,"⁶ is often positioned as a failure of taste, an inability to correctly filter all that is available to the eye.

In presenting material culture as an agent in the perpetuation of class and cultural hierarchies, Bourdieu positioned our taste as the meeting of "habitus" (our dispositions) and our current social position, (our social, cultural and monetary capital) within the field. Habitus is in part sensory, it is the "... system of acquired dispositions functioning on the practical level as categories of perception and assessment or as classificatory principles as well as being the organizing principles of action."⁷ It mediates and creates our taste at a sensate and bodily level; habitus is both the way we look and what we see. For Bourdieu taste is at the very heart of the creation and perpetuation of social structure. What is defined as good taste - is defined by those with an excess of cultural capital (education, accent, comportment, and, in fact, good taste itself,) so that taste becomes the primary tool in both the identification and perpetuation of a class-based social structure. So that for Bourdieu an individual's aesthetic choices not only locates them within the field but also prevents them from moving between these differing "class fractions." It is interesting to think about these ideas of distinction in regard to luxury and connoisseurship where tiny distinctions are used to ensure social reproduction of hegemonic systems. It is also interesting to think about these processes of distinction in relation to differing ideas of luxury - from those firmly located in conspicuous consumption to those which rely upon either a surfeit of skill, scarcity, and time (as highlighted by the 2015 Victoria and Albert Museum exhibition "What is Luxury"). These micro-distinctions mean that connoisseurship becomes a lens through which multiple social striations are refracted (a refraction which in turn reveals the diverse ways that luxury is acquired, maintained and produced).

The category "good taste" corresponds to both our dispositions and what is socially and culturally constructed as tasteful: to have good taste is the capacity to select objects within a specific framework of values. Enacting good taste, is the ability to pick something and know that it is "right" according to the parameters set for us. It is a nuanced process of selection. Calefato writing of luxury suggests that it is "... a relational category, a value related to the self-referential discourses that society spins, to the beliefs, sense and common sense that guide our judgments, tastes, and habits."⁸ Taste and particularly the social construction of good taste create and reproduce social structure. However these governing structures are less stable and more mutable in relation to the dressed body and fashion cultures. While our taste in clothing may be governed by our social position, the speed of proliferation of fashion images and mass-produced garments, and the capacity of garments to move from consumer items to inalienable possessions,⁹ renders these structures permeable and unstable. As Parkins writes:

... fashion is a primary field for the reproduction of social class; regimes of taste that govern fashionability function on the basis of class-based exclusions. But its temporal rhythms are, at least, suggestive of ways of organising social life that does not rely on the rigid castes that it might be seen to reinforce.¹⁰

This capacity of garments and accessories to transcend their status as a marker of consumption, cultural knowledge or class, is central to our relationships with them. The objects we wear do far more than mark us as parts of a certain category of social being: they constitute and produce us in the material world. We know others and ourselves through their relationships to material things: they reflect ourselves back to us, not only defining us to others but allowing us to see and adjust ourselves. Anthropologist Daniel Miller¹¹ foregrounds the capacity of things to function as a "material mirror": our collated material identities situate us within broader historical and cultural identities. "We cannot know who we are, or

become what we are, except by looking in a material mirror, which is the historical world created by those who lived before us. This world confronts us as material culture and continues to evolve through us.”¹² In the acquisition of goods, we are able to both present our self to the world, and practice a level of self-regard. Our possessions (and desired possessions) reflect back who we are, so that the capacity to make sound taste judgments is not merely a way of conforming to social norms or conspicuously consuming, but of interpreting and formulating a self. No place is this more apparent than in the selection of the things we wear; our taste in garments is a process of constituting and reformatting the self.

Anthropologist Woodward¹³ highlights how during object based interviews, in which her participants assessed the appropriateness of garments for certain situations, they would often stand looking at the mirror and ask “is this me?”¹⁴ or equally in rejecting a garment state, “ ... is not me”¹⁵: the technologies of looking (the mirror) as integral to the formulation of the dressed self.

Hoskins develops the idea of material culture as mirror, examining, “the biographical dimensions of objects, their ties to particular lives, but also how our biographies can be enhanced by technology, how we can construct a public image and share it across space and time, and so realize new goals.”¹⁶ In doing so, she emphasizes the way that certain technologies reflect our newly constituted self back at us; a reciprocal cycle in which we are making and remaking ourselves through images, reflections and screens. Hoskins highlights how the materiality of the objects we select impacts upon the modes through which we understand and reproduce ourselves. Writing of the manner in which our selection of material culture becomes an iterative cycle of self-production and evaluation she states “ ... that we construct ourselves through objects, through our most treasured possessions, but also every- day clothing, furniture, entertainment choices and eating options. Each object that we use both absorbs the impact of the choices that we make and pushes back, in a certain sense, because the object is not identical to the self but detachable from it.”¹⁷ This understanding of our possessions as detachable parts of the self is resonant of anthropologist Annette Weiner’s¹⁸ formulation of “inalienable possessions,” but also of phenomenologist Merleau- Ponty’s¹⁹ work on the “body schema.” Might a phenomenological approach to good taste suggest that in selecting objects, we are selecting things which will constitute aspects of the self rather than becoming reflections or representations of it. That in practicing taste (in selecting artifacts, identities and locations), one is testing and reformulating the boundaries of the self: taste acts as a filter, which is both maintained and mediated by the technologies of looking.

Technologies of Looking – Lenses, Connoisseurship and Scopophilia

In the opticians, I pull out a phone to photograph my potential glasses, a layering of technologies of looking, which seems uniquely 21st-century.

The technologies of looking are deeply entwined with social and personal constructions of taste. Seeing, being seen and, in turn, being seen to be seeing, are the ways in which good taste is made apparent and reified. Taste is both bound to looking as a performative practice (of seeing and being seen) but also to the material culture of looking: the lenses and screens we peer at and through in order to confirm our own taste and to assess the taste of others. Taste is made materially manifest through the collation of things, as Hoskins and Miller observe but also through its representation and observation in and through things; through the utilization of technologies of looking. The relationship between taste and looking is often examined in relation to pictorial or material representations of the self (selfies, Veblen goods – purchased not primarily for their function (use value) but instead for their capacity to signify wealth,²⁰ forms of social media such as Instagram). However looking is not only the critical and objectifying gaze, it is



Figure 2 Glasses #2, Ellen Sampson. 2018 Polaroid Copyright Ellen Sampson

also a sensory and embodied experience enmeshed with and mediated by things. Evans discussing Lurie's theory of "Prosthetic Culture" articulates the role of these technologies of looking particularly clearly:

The self is both the body self and the objects and images which help to reproduce and situate it in our image-centric world, so that "seeing and knowing are meshed in specific formations in what Lurie dubbed 'prosthetic culture'. Pictures are no longer 'out there' as distinct entities, representations that mirror our images back to ourselves; rather, the photographic screen or image becomes a prosthetic extension of the self, allowing the individual to reconfigure his/her identity experimentally."²¹ Though there are multiple technologies of looking, and increasingly those which we think of in relation to the dressed body are digital (mobile phone cameras, VR glasses and laptop screens) here I address the technologies of looking which might be described as analogue: mirrors, windows and glasses – the glass surfaces on and through which we perform taste. Glasses are perhaps our most habitual technology of looking: bodily and familiar items of material culture. They are both fashion items, subject to the shifting whims of style and advancements in materials technology, and medical-prosthetic devices, capable of mediating and enhancing our sensory experience of the world. As Grimstad-Klepp and Rysst, write:

They are all carried on the body and are involved in everyday life and routines; still, they are understood as very different. Glasses ...are good illustrations of objects that have passed from being a pure medical device to an object with both aesthetic and practical functions.²²

To take a more phenomenological approach, they are both part of the self (a prosthetic lens or cornea) and "other" to it, a fragile consumer item that may be lost, damaged or discarded. Of all the technologies of looking, glasses, which immediately correct or alter our vision, are most frequently linked to representations of knowledge and, through that education and taste. Glasses are seen to not only make one look "clever," but through their ability to focus the unfocused eye, to facilitate looking cleverly.

Looking is so entwined with conceptualizations of knowledge that there is a " ... pervasiveness of sight metaphors about knowledge: seeing is believing, I see what you mean, as far as I can see, and so on."²³ The lens, as the central technology of looking, is both a tool for the production of knowledge and a component in the ways that knowledge is acquired and performed. The technologies of looking, and in particular the technologies of looking closely, are bound up with the post-enlightenment conceptualization of truth. Since the enlightenment, looking through glass (the circle of a microscope viewfinder, the square of a camera or the ovoid frames of our glasses) has been one of the primary means of enquiry in the Western world, both within science, and in the arts: the lens as a tool for framing and interrogating the world.

As such the technologies of looking have become entangled with ideas of clarity, accuracy and truth: of focusing on something and of framing it. As Lurie writes “vision and self-knowledge have become inextricably and productively intertwined in modern Euro- American societies.”²⁴ Vincent writing of the eighteenth-century fashion for wearing and demonstratively using eyeglasses outlines the links between the scientific processes through which new knowledges about the world were acquired and practices of decorative dressing.²⁵ She goes on to suggest that the eyeglass (the quizzer as they were known) itself:

... provides the performative space for this scrutiny, enacting visual criticality. It sets the wearer a little apart – at an “objective” distance – the small piece of glass both arming the viewer and providing him with the means to deflect the critical gaze of others. It is hard to imagine a better way of delivering a cut than through a quizzer’s cold, “unseeing” stare.²⁶

If taste is the accrual of knowledge, the marker of a particular kind of cultural capital, then often to look tastefully (to know what to see and what to ignore) requires looking closely: to have an eye for detail. The idea that attention to detail is crucial to the formation and maintenance of “good taste,” suggests that tasteful looking requires the viewer to interrogate and differentiate between things which are similar; that taste is about the nuanced assessment of that material world, a critical and analytical form of looking: “the capacity to know what they are, to tell the difference between luxuries and necessities.”²⁷ In the context of luxury, looking closely and interrogating the detail of the world, is often presented not as a chore but instead as a pleasure, so that cultivating good taste is cultivating pleasurable looking: connoisseurship as scopophilia.²⁸ For Featherstone connoisseurship relies on two intersecting knowledges: “knowledge-about” which places the object within the hierarchies of social and culture capital and “knowledge-with,” sensory engagement of that object which he refers to as an “an intense affective experience through the opening up to the object, the promise of a full engagement with the senses.”²⁹ In looking closely, the connoisseur is allowing the object to affect them: allowing it to cross the boundaries from external to internal experience. The connoisseur both knows what to incorporate and what to exclude from their sensory realm (their body schema). To return to Featherstone’s analysis of the connoisseur:

These processes are central to connoisseurship, which involves both training the senses and the accumulation of knowledge. Entailing not just knowledge of systems and histories, but more direct affect-based tacit knowledge grounded in the senses: the judgment of the eye, the hand, the ear, the tongue and the nose -and the gut (proprioceptive sense). All these judgments involve an elaborate process of training and education of the senses.³⁰

Thus the performance of good taste is the convergence of knowing how to look and of desire: of the pleasure of looking and the acquisitory urge. Much of this knowledge is produced, and reproduced through technologies of looking, so that the things we look with (glasses, magnifying glasses, camera lenses) and the things we look at (screens and images) are themselves agents in the production of taste. Our taste is not only our own but inhabits and is mediated by material things.

Framing: Looking and the Boundaries of the Self (Body Schema)

Back in the shop, I pick up frames filled with clear glass and think about, the edges of the self.

If the eye is an orifice, an opening through which stimuli enter; then “looking” is opening the body to the world. Chong Kwan discussing the work of Merleau-Ponty on the embodied experience of looking summarizes this openness thus:



Glasses #3, Ellen Sampson. 2018 Polaroid Copyright Ellen Sampson

[Merleau-Ponty] describes how “vision is caught by or comes to be in things” and simultaneously things are caught by vision, and as a result brought into the body. Vision is embodied and made visceral. Through vision, the body “opens up” to the world, moves towards it and through their visuality things appeal to the body and move into it through vision. In this way, he argues for “the undividedness of the sensing and the sensed”.³¹ Glasses, eye coverings, serve as boundaries between ourselves and the world. They mediate what Merleau-Ponty refers to, as the way that “things pass into us, as well as we into the things.”³² All dress is a frontier between the self and the not-self: a layer between the personal/bodily and the social world. As Wilson describes:

If the body with its open orifices is itself dangerously ambiguous, then dress, which is an extension of the body yet not quite part of it, not only links that body to the social world but also more clearly separates the two.³³

Wilson's articulation of the worn object as “the frontier between the self and the not-self” recalls the work of phenomenologist Schilder who interpreted these objects not as boundaries but instead as aspects of the self. Schilder³⁴ presented a process of the production of the self where the body was not bounded by the skin but incorporated other objects into the bodily schema:

The bodily schema does not end with the human skin as a limiting boundary. It extends far beyond it and, from the point of view of motility, perception and emotions, includes all the objects we use and to which we are geared.³⁵

Merleau-Ponty in his development of the idea of the body schema expresses this idea particularly well; “To get used to a hat, a car or a stick is to be transplanted into them or conversely to incorporate them into the bulk of our own body.”³⁶ Glasses are artifacts which sit within the body schema, simultaneously boundaries and incorporated aspects of the self. As such they mediate the social and the psychic allowing us to select objects that will be part of our “material mirror” but also aspects of the self. Does taste then function as a filter of external and internal experience, a boundary that is made and remade through the selection of things? Taste as a means of protecting or maintaining the integrity of our interior selves: to exclude what is not “us.”

The filtering of our vision, the production of corrected looking, takes two forms. Firstly our glasses focus the eye, making vision more precise. Spectacles, allow us to see more clearly and in more detail. Secondly glasses orientate the body towards certain kinds of looking. It is our frames, the bounded edges of the lens that determine what we see clearly and what is excluded from view. Glasses discipline the body: for one's vision to be focused and framed one must look ahead, away from the peripheries: those spaces not shielded by glass remain a blur. This forward- looking, the orientation of the body and our vision by its technologies recalls Ahmed's writing on the orientation of the self. Ahmed writes of how objects (and spaces) orientate our experiences, of how they position us in and towards the world: "I have suggested that the orientation of objects is shaped by what objects allow me to do. In this way, an object is what action is directed toward."³⁷ In this manner our vision is orientated by our glasses, they compel us to look ahead. Glasses (and their frames) keep eyes centered, to avoid the peripheries and edges where our surroundings become a blur. Our line of vision is directed by our glasses much in the way that Ahmed writes about paths, so that in looking our body is orientated forwards and away from the self:

... lines are both created by being followed and are followed by being created. The lines that direct us, as lines of thought as well as lines of motion, are in this way performative: they depend on the repetition of norms and conventions, of routes and paths taken, but they are also created as an effect of this repetition.³⁸

The embodied practice of looking, an act through which we perform taste, is mediated orientated and produced through the technologies of looking.

Window Shopping: Looking Through and Looking at the World

Stepping outside the shop, I am assailed by the theatre of the shopping mall: numerous shimmering surfaces competing to draw my eye. In each surface I am reflected, so that I already inhabit spaces I have yet to enter; spaces which call to me by showing me I am already there.

The technologies of looking sit in a complex position, functioning simultaneously as extensions of the self (aspects of the body schema), filters between the self and the world (intermediaries of the body), and a surface through and in which we may see ourselves reflected. The things we collect are material and malleable constructions of the self. These objects serve not only as markers of identity but as agents in the construction of taste – they direct our vision, orientate our bodies, present us with fleeting glimpses of what others might see. The material culture of the dressed body which forms a boundary of the self, of what may and may not enter the body schema and our interior worlds, also allows us to mediate a different binary, that of public and private spaces. If the frame and lens orientate our vision by focusing and directing the eye forward, then glass surfaces and mirrors orientate our bodies by drawing our vision toward them, compelling us to look not "through," but "at" them. Mirrored and glass surfaces are central to



Figure 4

Glasses #4, Ellen Sampson. 2018 Polaroid Copyright Ellen Sampson

the material culture of good taste; for the judgment of an artifact, is, in turn, a judgment of its capacity to be part of the self. However taste and particularly taste for expensive or high-status objects, tends to exist in relation to public spaces display. Beyond the bodily sphere, taste is always relational, both the comparison of our own taste versus the taste of others and in the necessity to be observed enacting good taste. Shopping (as the performance of good taste rather than the acquisition of essentials) is an activity that must be performed in public (though increasingly it is the public sphere of the internet within which these activities are performed). The performance of shopping is “the practices of visibly expending time and consuming objects in a particular manner as a means of signaling one’s position in the social order.”³⁹

Shopping for Fashion⁴⁰ in particular, is predominately a gaze-based medium; it is a practice of looking and of being seen. It is a process of looking (at other wearers or fashion media), and then mirroring and adapting what one has seen, finally presenting oneself for the gaze of others. It is akin to Berger’s formulation of the male gaze⁴¹: However, unlike Berger’s description, fashion’s viewer and viewed are interchangeable, locked in a perpetual cycle of mirroring and modification. So that one is not just looking publicly but performing looking publically. This performative looking is the process of seeing and being seen; an iterative process of mirroring and repetition.

The sites in which we perform taste are inhabited by multiple technologies of looking. Reflective surfaces in particular play an important part in the material culture of shopping; cameras, screens, glass and mirrors litter the spaces in which we shop (and in the context of online shopping are the spaces on/in which we shop), creating an almost panopticon like cycle of observing and being observed. Luxury shopping spaces in particular are reliant on the “glamor” of glass and reflection – materials which both convey wealth in the labor required to maintain them and which facilitate shopping within the public gaze. Though these glass surfaces are no doubt part of the “surface splendor” of the modernist project, described by Kracauer and Scheerbart,⁴² they also allow the consumer to visually situate themselves within the material culture available to them: mirrors locate us amongst and with things. In his paper on the aesthetics of glamor Thrift⁴³ examines the ways that glamor is produced through the artful manipulation of surfaces and it is clear that, shiny shimmering and reflective surfaces are often the visual currency of Luxury (and conversely when deployed differently of vulgarity too). The fetishization of glass surfaces, of the smooth and shimmering things, which Kracauer writes about, is perhaps taken to its logical conclusion in the late 20th where the shiny surface (Apple products, etc.) and the digitally reflective have come to dominate public and commercial spaces, creating a world in which we are accompanied not by one reflection but a multiplicity of them. The artifacts we see in shops are captured in these reflective surfaces; our image reflected back alongside them so that they and we are already entwined. In these reflections, we are “along with” the goods which “call to us”: looking and incorporation combined.

Self-Regard: Looking with Things to See the Self

So, to return to the glasses shop where I stand paralysed with uncertainty, as to what constitutes me and not me. Uncertain in my taste: I am caught in the cycle of self-regard.

In the shiny mirror surface of the shop window, there is always another voyeur, not an external observer but one’s own reflection staring back at us. Reflective surfaces draw the eye; they compel



Figure 5 Glasses #5, Ellen Sampson. 2018 Polaroid Copyright Ellen Sampson

us to look. To return to Ahmed's⁴⁴ orientations of the body, mirrors like glasses orientate our vision; they are a "path" which we follow. We observe and are observed by others only to return our gaze to the mirror: to the self. In the mirror surface, the self is both visible and malleable: as we adjust our postures and surroundings our reflection changes. Looking in these reflective surfaces is a repetitive negotiation of the boundaries of the self, of the things that might become aspects of the body schema; the mirror allows observation and adjustment of our possible incorporated selves. In glass surfaces, the social self is reflected back at you, shimmering and immaterial, an apparition not quite there. The relational nature of taste is both embodied in the experience of seeing and being seen but equally in the relationality of looking at an ever-changing image of the self. Merleau-Ponty observed that "... since [the] seer is caught up in what he sees, it is still himself he sees: there is a fundamental narcissism of all vision."⁴⁵

The experience of looking at the self, so often presented as narcissism, is equally a process of examining and negotiation of what constitutes the self. Evans observes that "the scopic regime of the mirror becomes the place in which the script of the self is written."⁴⁶ Hoskins describes this process of self-reflection and self-adjustment thus:

I have been looking in mirrors for years, and so I have a gut sense that my mirror image (which is always inverted) is the "real me", while the various photographs of my own face that I have seen somehow fail to capture the person that I really am. I think that all of us are to some extent like Narcissus, in that we have fallen for a reflection rather than the "real thing", which we cannot access through direct sensory experience. We need technology to tell us what we look like, and that technology will always be imperfect in some way.⁴⁷

Of all images of the self, the reflection is the most malleable, the one most easily changed: we may reformulate the reflected self instantaneously and repeatedly, through gesture, movement and dress⁴⁸. It is this idea of ego formed through illusory reflected images that I want to draw upon. The self is reflected back at us in multiple material ways both in the glass surfaces of mirrors, windows and phones but also through the material culture that we own and acquire. We are revealed to ourselves in this interplay of looking with and at things. It follows that the technologies of looking, the material culture we look with and at, are agents in the formation of the self. That as we utilize these objects to look with we are making, framing and adjusting the boundaries of what constitutes "me." Taste thus becomes one of the parameters, the framework, through which the self is made: self-construction and self-editing through the selection and rejection of material things. These processes of selection are informed by our

dispositions and the particular cultural contexts in which we are currently located, but they are also informed by the material culture with which we interact. No place is this more apparent than in the materiality of looking, which molds and mediates our tastes in multiple ways. The things we look with, through and at are agents in the construction of taste.

Looking is the principal sensory mode⁴⁹ in the production and expression of taste, although we may employ other senses, touch in particular, we arbitrate much of the material world with our eyes. Looking is a process of filtering the material world; our taste is a way of negotiating what may or may not be incorporated into the self. In looking we select the objects which will reside within the body schema, in looking, we are incorporated into and entangled with things: “there is overlapping or encroachment, so that we may say that the things pass into us, as well as we into the things.”⁵⁰ Taste is mediated and constructed through vision, but it is also mediated through friable consumer items such as glasses. These items both act as filters, mediating what is and isn’t seen and simultaneously orientate the body in certain ways, directing our vision and gaze. In combination with the reflective surfaces of the sites and spaces in which we perform good taste (shops, screens) we are caught in a cycle, not just of seeing and being seen, of selection and reflection, but of constructing the self. This triangulation, the orientation and disciplining of the body through the technologies of looking and the reflection of this body-self back at us in those same surfaces is the performance and maintenance of taste.

These reflective surfaces, the shiny and smooth objects we have come to associate with luxury consumer goods are active agents in the construction and maintenance of taste. The surface and technological qualities of these things, their capacity materially and metaphorically reflect ourselves, so that in looking we see ourselves located within them, gives them a particular allure. Writing of this allure Featherstone suggests that:

... luxury hovers over the surface of consumer culture goods, sites and people. In this it works well with another aspect of consumer culture: glamour, which refers to the capacity to transform surfaces, to delude through illusion. Glamour operates as a force which can make things seem more alluring and splendid, better than they really are.⁵¹

It is surface qualities, not as metaphors for artifice or vanity but as material agents which this text seeks to highlight and explore. That understanding of taste, not only as a social construct, but as a materially mediated and sensory process might help us to think about how luxury goods call to us as consumers. This article has used three technologies of looking, the lens, the frame and the mirror to examine the embodied and bodily experience looking at and selecting things – the ways that taste is manifested, mediated and performed with and through these items. It presents good taste as a complex interplay of clever looking (knowing what to look at), orientated looking (being directed to where to look), and self-regard (the assessment of one’s reflection) – a cycle of filtering, mediating and reflecting upon the artifacts, which we may permit to enter our body schemas. It suggests that taste is, in part, interplay between the technologies of looking and the self – a self which is produced mediated and maintained by these artifacts. To return to Featherstone on connoisseurship these processes of looking and selection afford us “the pleasures of playing with classifications,”⁵² the pleasure of deciding what is “me or not me.”

Notes

1. Bourdieu, *Distinction*.
2. Hoskins, “The Mirror of the Material.”
3. Calefato, *Fashion and Worldliness*, p.76.
4. Bourdieu, *Distinction*.
5. « Le goût est presque toujours le dégoût du goût des autres »; Bourdieu, *Questions de sociologie*, p.215.
6. Philips, “The Vulgar,” p.11.
7. Bourdieu, 1990, pp.12–13.
8. Calefato, *Fashion and Worldliness*, p.79.
9. c.f. Weiner, *Inalienable Possessions*; Hoskins, “The Mirror of the Material.”

10. Parkins, "Building a Feminist Theory of Fashion," p.105.
11. Miller, Materiality.
12. Ibid., p.8.
13. Woodward, Why Women Wear What They Wear.
14. Ibid., p.83.
15. Ibid., p.40.
16. Hoskins, "The Mirror of the Material," p.2.
17. Ibid.
18. Weiner, Inalienable Possessions.
19. Merleau-Ponty, The Phenomenology of Perception.
20. Veblen goods were often considered to be at the heart of contemporary luxury consumption: things that make the buyer look rich". However as the late twentieth and early twenty-first century fixation with authenticity heightened in the context of the simulacra of the internet conspicuous consumption has become increasingly linked to a capacity to acquire "authentic" experiences and goods.
21. Evans, "This Vertigo of Time Defeated," p.32.
22. Grimstad Klepp and Rysst, "Deviant Bodies and Suitable Clothes," p.85.
23. Dyer, White, p.103.
24. Lury, 1997, p.3.
25. Vincent, "Ogling, Quizzing, Spying," pp.1–40.
26. Ibid., p.31.
27. Featherstone, "Luxury, Consumer Culture and Sumptuary Dynamics," p.48.
28. The pleasure in looking closely is akin to what Freud ("Three Essays on Sexuality") termed scopophilia: a form of object identification in which looking both cultivates and satisfies desire. In his work on scopophilia, Fenichel writes that "A child who is looking for libidinous purposes ... wants to look at an object in order to feel along with ... [it]" (1987, p.71) Looking closely at something, attending to it, is a form of incorporation, of negotiating the boundaries of the self.
29. Featherstone, "Luxury, Consumer Culture and Sumptuary Dynamics," p.54.
30. Ibid.
31. Merleau-Ponty et al., The Visible and the Invisible, p.125; Chong Kwan, "Making Sense of Everyday Dress," p.112.
32. Merleau-Ponty et al., The Visible and the Invisible, p.123.
33. Wilson, Adorned in Dreams, p.3.
34. Schilder, The Image and Appearance of the Human Body.
35. Ibid.
36. Merleau-Ponty, The Phenomenology of Perception, p.166.
37. Ahmed, Queer Phenomenology, p.27.

38. Ibid., xix–xx.
39. Mooney Nickel, "Haute Philanthropy," p.1.
40. As opposed to everyday dress which might be formulated as more directly engaging all the senses.
41. According to usage and conventions which are at last being questioned but have by no means been overcome: men act, and women appear. Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at; Berger, Ways of Seeing, pp.45–46.
42. Kracauer, "Cult of Distraction," pp.323–328; Scheerbart, "Glass Architecture," pp.41–74.
43. Thrift, 2008.
44. Ahmed, Queer Phenomenology.
45. Merleau-Ponty et al., The Visible and the Invisible.
46. Evans, "Masks, Mirrors and Mannequins," p.19.
47. Hoskins, "The Mirror of the Material," p.53.
48. In particular, this process of looking at the reflected self both in the looking glass and in our material culture is resonant with Lacan's (1977) Mirror Stage. The Mirror Stage was for Lacan a process of ego formation through identification with one's own reflection – one's mirror image. The infant from six months begins to identify its reflection both in the mirror and in the behaviors of those around it. In that way a fantasy self, complete, unified and whole, is presented to and understood by the child: that the sense of self is not inherent but a construction, and that this construction is in turn based upon an illusory reflected image rather than the internal, and more fragmented, reality of the infant's experiences.

49. See Chong Kwan ("Making Sense of Everyday Dress") for an enlightening discussion of the senses in everyday dress.
50. Merleau-Ponty et al., *The Visible and the Invisible*, p.123.
51. Featherstone, "Luxury, Consumer Culture and Sumptuary Dynamics," p.52.
52. *Ibid.*, p.54.

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