

Book Reviews

ADORNING BODIES: MEANING, EVOLUTION, AND BEAUTY IN HUMANS AND ANIMALS. By Marilyn Johnson. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2022. 224 pp.

When discussing fashion, clothing, or adornment more broadly, conversations in philosophy shift almost inevitably to aesthetics. The obvious aspect about someone's adornment is how it appears to others, but something beyond appearance is also integral. In *Adorning Bodies: Meaning, Evolution, and Beauty in Humans and Animals*, Marilyn Johnson launches her analysis from the philosophy of language in order to delve into the meaning of human adornment. She weaves the discussion around ideas from three key thinkers: Roland Barthes, H. P. Grice, and Charles Darwin. Because appearance remains an important aspect of adornment, Richard Prum and his notion of "biotic aesthetics" serves to connect the discussions about meaning with aesthetics.

To clarify the subject of this book, Johnson explains that it is not limited to fashion or clothing. This book is about "bodily adornment," which includes fashion as well as hats, jewelry, piercings, hairstyles, tattoos, and other accessories. She emphasizes that, for it to be meaningful, adornment needs to be understood as adornment of a body. Adornment carries meaning for a particular body, which can differ on another body. Part of her reason for approaching the topic from philosophy of language can be summarized by her own words. Johnson writes, "I am not making the claim that communication is the *only* thing we do with clothing, but one of the important things, and one that has been neglected." (16) As a legal example further motivating the connection with language, Johnson cites *Tinker v. Des Moines School District* from 1969. In this case, the Supreme Court ruled that three students wearing black arm bands to protest the Vietnam War "were protected by the Free Speech Clause of the First Amendment." (21) If it had been a mere accessory, then no one would have objected, even if they thought it was a bad fashion statement. But it was presented to the public as bearing a particular meaning.

From *The Fashion System* by Roland Barthes, Johnson finds her starting point that humans communicate through their clothing about themselves. Adornment communicates that someone is married, serving in the military, going hunting, going to the beach, and much more. The fact that clothing communicates, as these examples show, becomes "the explananda that a theory of communication by bodily adornment ought to account for." (20) Statements of dress can also reveal other information and have different references, such as time (past, present, future), people (oneself, others, groups), spatial (here or there), and implicit references (I am the Queen [of a particular place]).

Barthes, one of the few philosophers to address fashion, realized that his project failed, which Johnson takes to highlight some issues with structuralism more generally. Barthes focused on identifying the fixed meaning of clothing by examining the pages of two fashion magazines—*Elle* and *Jardin des Modes*—from a one-year period, June 1958 to June 1959. He sought to identify the link between the clothing (the signifier) and the meaning (the signified). Years after publishing this work, he abandoned this theory of fashion and structuralism, and he published his famous article, "The Death of the Author." Clothing cannot be reduced to mere input and output notions of communication because it is more nuanced and intentional than that model allows. Like language, Johnson points out, the meaning of adornment is not fixed. People embed subjective meaning in their clothing in addition to more recognized symbolic meaning.

Johnson draws on H. P. Grice's distinction between natural and non-natural meaning to advance her own view about the meanings of adornment. Natural meaning, for example, could include this statement: The man's white hair means that he is older than thirty. Natural meaning occurs when something happens without someone's deliberate action, like the regular course of time that turns hair white. And an example of non-natural meaning could include seeing someone in a firefighter's uniform, which means that person is a firefighter. A salient difference between these two types of meaning rests on non-natural meaning being intentional. One would not accidentally wear a firefighter's uniform; someone puts on that uniform to indicate their profession or possibly as a costume. But it is deliberate. Upon seeing someone dressed a particular way, we wouldn't look for a code to decipher the meaning like an answer key. We would seek to understand (or hypothesize) why that person chose to adorn themselves that way, even if we make the wrong conclusions. This strategy of using intentionality to ground meaning offers a more promising approach to understanding bodily adornment. Since even Barthes admitted that his project failed, this book lays out a newer and needed way to approach this topic.

Non-natural meaning includes things that a group or country decided upon, such as particular uniforms or symbols of protest. But it also includes personal meanings, such as wearing a flannel shirt to remember one's deceased uncle. A recurring question addresses whether animals can create non-natural meaning. Do animals really *intend* to adorn themselves to communicate meaning? In a sense, they do because animals act in ways that imitate natural meaning. Sometimes, however, their choices took years of evolution to become more common for their species. For example, animals emulate the patterning of plants to offer a layer of camouflage to be less noticeable to predators, so the animals that had better camouflage presumably survived longer. The most frequent aspect of choosing for animals revolves around the need and desire for reproduction.

While *The Origins of Species* remains Charles Darwin's most famous and popular book, focusing on natural selection, his other book, *The Descent of Man*, charts out his ideas about sexual selection. One example that puzzled him, in terms of natural selection, was the peacock. The elaborate tail feathers drained more resources for survival and hindered a quick escape from approaching predators. Darwin concluded that the peahen favored the long, colorful feathers. So, one of Darwin's more interesting claims was that he believed the way men developed is the result of women's desire. Some of these adaptations evolve through natural processes, but people also use adornment to directly highlight (or diminish) different aspects of their bodies and to communicate meaning.

The final chapter discusses how aesthetic decisions also guide bodily adornment. Johnson presents Richard Prum's notion of the process of co-evolution—two groups are needed for sexual reproduction, such as “males and females of the same species, or flowers and pollinators of different species.” (164) Prum maintains that sexual selection has led to traits in animals that people find beautiful, but Johnson warns that this fact doesn't illustrate that animals also judge these traits as beautiful. To bring it all together again, she summarizes that language and adornment are both the products of co-evolution, and that co-evolution guides non-natural meaning only. “Those features that are the result of sexual selection are the result of a choice.” (181)

Philosophers have generally ignored clothing, fashion, and adornment, especially as the subject of philosophical analysis. The ghost of dualism—that the body is not so important—might continue to haunt philosophers unbeknownst to them. Or possibly, the continuous shifting of styles and trends makes the moving target of fashion and adornment more difficult to pin down and examine. Whether either of these hold merit, it remains that philosophers have not written much about adornment. Since these discussions are so lacking in philosophy, this book provides a much-needed contribution to the field. But since this book has the added benefit of being highly engaging and insightful, it comes as a very welcome entryway into discussions in the present and also leading philosophers into future avenues of research. Johnson presents astute analysis, while demonstrating each move of the argument with examples from history, popular culture, and science. Taking cues from theories of

culture, biology, and psychology, this book maintains its core presence as philosophy, while exemplifying the kind of interdisciplinary research that should guide more academics.

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