

BOOK REVIEW

Adorning Bodies: Meaning, Evolution, and Beauty in Humans and Animals

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Human beings are meaning makers and beauty lovers; both facts about us are showcased in our adorning practices. In *Adorning Bodies*, Marilyn Johnson reminds us of the importance of adornment by asking: what do our bodies and the things that we adorn them with *mean*? Johnson draws from Grice to answer this central question, while taking an interdisciplinary approach to the topic overall. *Adorning Bodies* raises questions for those interested in the philosophy of language, the philosophy of art, the self and identity, the philosophy of race, the philosophy of biology, archaeology, and sociology (this list is not exhaustive). Johnson is a lovely writer; she is accessible, overtly feminist, and at times quite funny (see her takedown of the beard theory, p. 92–93).

Adorning Bodies proceeds in roughly four parts. In Chapters 1–2, Johnson motivates the claim that our bodies and the things that we adorn them with have meaning while showing us why getting at this meaning is difficult. In 2–4 she develops a Gricean framework for understanding the meaning of bodily adornment. Like language, bodies and their adornments have natural and non-natural meaning. In 5–8, she provides a historically and biologically informed analysis of natural meaning in bodies and the connection between bodies and adorning practices. Johnson concludes in Chapter 9 by considering whether and when adornment is art.

Johnson opens her investigation by motivating the claim that our bodies and the way that we adorn them *have meaning*. Adornment is usually taken to refer to *anything* that aesthetically modifies or improves something else (Davies, 2020; Minarik, 2021), including interior design, cake decorating, street art, and so on. Interestingly, however, Johnson intends her account to apply only to *bodily* adornment:

Bodies have features that lead us to be categorized into genders and races that are not present in other things we decorate. Bodies also have phenomenology. Because of the important unique traits of *bodily* adornment, I carve a metaphysical space between bodily adornment and/or ‘self-decoration’ and decoration of other things like our homes.

(p. 19)

That said, I wonder whether Johnson’s reasons for restricting her account are well-founded. Our spaces are often treated as extensions of our bodies. Although our homes do not have genders or races, they are still gendered and raced based on their associations with their inhabitants and their adornments: historically in Western interior design, we see men’s smoking rooms and women’s boudoirs (Moreira and Farias 2022; Subramanian 2022). Décor and interior design are often so gendered that we can read it off the walls of a room (see r/malelivingspaces on Reddit). Rooms also have a phenomenology to them: the light that feeds into a room, the way the seating is arranged, how a place smells, how temperate it is, and similar, all contribute to the way that a space feels. Although the thing adorned does not itself feel phenomenally, it has features that coalesce into a phenomenological

feel for its inhabitants; attention to this phenomenology factors into how we adorn spaces and how we evaluate them (at least insofar as one has autonomy over their decoration). Of course, this is not an objection to Johnson's account of bodily adornment, it is merely an objection to her reasons for restricting it. If anything, I am suggesting an optimistic extension of the primary account of meaning she has put forward. I would love to see this further explored.

Johnson develops the core of her argument in the second section (Chapters 2–4). Here, she shows that Grice's account of natural and non-natural meaning applies to bodily adornment. There is natural meaning to be found in the chalk on my pants that indicates I have just taught a class; I can imitate natural meaning by wearing a suit to make it look like I have broad shoulders; and I intentionally communicate non-naturally by wearing my black armband to signal my disagreement with the war in Vietnam (p. 68). I find this Gricean solution quite compelling. Johnson deftly deals with the social signalling that accompanies uniforms, the implicature found in thrifting, and the ability to lie with our clothing like the con artist does. Personally, I am most intrigued by her discussions on silence (p. 53), and on whether we are 'slaves to fashion' (p. 49). I will take each briefly in turn.

Johnson asks whether we can 'say nothing' with our clothing, citing objectors who claim that they do not think about what they wear (so how could they be communicating?) She takes advantage of the counterfactual case: if you were offered a hat from an unjust political party, you probably would not wear it. In other words, by having clothing in our closets or being willing to put it on at all, we are complicit in what it says about us, in the same way we are complicit in the use of language when we do not speak out about it. I am largely satisfied with Johnson's response, although interested to see how one might push the comparison; how does one's socio-economic status, gender status, racial status, and so on affect what their silences mean, how much they are allowed to speak out with their clothing, or whether they are forced to stay silent? For example, one might draw

a comparison between linguistic cases of testimonial smothering (Dotson 2011: 244) where a speaker is silenced by the audience's perceived unwillingness or inability to take up their testimony, and cases of silencing in gendered and cultural dress, where speakers are prevented from dressing the way they would like to because of a perceived unwillingness or inability of social uptake. Public transphobia arguably leads to the forced silencing (testimonial smothering) of trans persons by preventing them from being able to adorn themselves as they please without public rejection (Cray 2021).

Johnson also cites an interesting argument from Lauren Ashwell and Rae Langton, who claim that because we are subject to certain 'aesthetic restrictions' on what clothing we can wear, we are 'slaves to fashion'. Johnson rightly points out that in order to have a functioning language, we need regularity: as Humpty Dumpty teaches us, we cannot change the meanings of our words willy nilly. Although the general claim is correct, Langton and Ashwell are concerned primarily with the *aesthetic* restrictions we experience when clothing ourselves. Although Johnson aptly shows that adornment is like language in this sense, one might also take this opportunity to show how language is like adornment.

Johnson's discussion brings to mind the infamous scene in *The Devil Wears Prada* where Andy Sachs (Anne Hathaway) is seen wearing a cerulean top, and Miranda Priestly (Meryl Streep) goes on a brief monologue that ends with the claim 'it's sort of comical that you think you've made a choice that exempts you from the fashion industry when in fact, you're wearing a sweater that was selected for you by the people in this room' (Frankel 2006). Perhaps this says something about clothing in particular, but it also makes me think about language in general: how does our understanding of what is 'in vogue' change what we choose to say? There are aesthetic restrictions on verbal and written language too. Think about the stylistic choices you make when writing professionally, or when talking with your friends. Factors like race, gender, power, and sexual orientation radically affect what words we can say and how we can acceptably say them. We use

more deferential, less risky language when talking to a superior than we do when speaking with a friend. Similarly, we wear a suit to work and pyjamas at home. Furthermore, we might ask about, given the above example, how what we say or can say are dictated by those in power. In the linguistic case, the formal restrictions on philosophical writing come to mind.

In Chapters 5–8, Johnson uses the work of Charles Darwin and Richard Prum on natural and sexual selection to remind us that we are animals that display regularities. As we just saw above, if we want to find meaning in clothing, there needs to be some regularity in our meaning assignments. That our clothing has enough regularity to facilitate something like meaning or communion through non-linguistic means is awesome and unsettling. For me at least, it made me face my own computability: I am merely one of many philosophers who dress in black most of the time. There is a bit of a tension here that I wish Johnson had brought out more: this regularity is necessary for meaning, but clothing is also the place where we try so hard to individuate ourselves. In a paradoxical manner, we must have regularity in order for this individuation to work: in order to sort oneself into a category, that category must exist. In her work on fashion, Di Summa notices this need for both repetition and novelty in clothing in order to communicate features of our identity, pointing out the subtle ways people add individual flairs to uniforms (Di Summa 2022: 35–36).

Part of what Johnson so nicely brings out in her discussion of biology is how meaning in adornment (and language!) is linked to our bodies and identities. Much of our clothing was designed to mimic natural meaning in *bodies*: suits were made to make men look broader-shouldered; heels to add height. Adornment is an extension of meaning that our bodies already have. This provides an interesting explanation for why clothing is so responsive to bodily context. Who the clothing is on causes it to differ in its meaning. Think of the famous introduction to George Eliot's *Middlemarch*:

Miss Brooke had that kind of beauty which seems to be thrown into relief by poor dress. Her hand

and wrist were so finely formed that she could wear sleeves not less bare of style than those in which the Blessed Virgin appeared to Italian painters; and her profile as well as her stature and bearing seemed to gain the more dignity from her plain garments.

(Eliot, 1994: 5)

Here of course, it is Miss Brooke's beauty that changes the meaning of the dress she is wearing. Who one is changes the meaning of their clothing—think about cases of cultural appropriation. Again, looking at meaning in adornment reveals neglected aspects of our linguistic communication.

In Johnson's final section, she discusses whether adornment can be art. She rightly notices that bodies themselves are not classified as artworks. Although they are aesthetically pleasing, judgements of bodies are not disinterested in the way that judgements of art typically are—bodies evolved and evolution 'cannot trade on disinterestedness' (p. 169). For this reason, aestheticians typically distinguish judgements of sexual attraction from judgements of beauty. If adornment is intimately connected to, and receives meaning from, the body it adorns, does it then not count as art? She concludes that not all adornment is art, but some is, although she does not tell us how to draw the line.

I agree with Johnson that some adornment is art. Furthermore, I think drawing this line is important (although I agree she should not have to do it here). A better understanding of what adornments are promises to tell us something about a very large class of aesthetic objects. The omission of adornments from our aesthetic discourse not only prevents us from attending to a large variety of artforms, but it has also culturally impoverished our contemporary ontology of art. For example, many traditional Indigenous artforms such as beadwork, textiles, and tattoos fall under the umbrella of artistic adornments (Leuthold 1995; Hessel 1998; Cordova 2004; Adrienne L. Kaeppler 2008; McCleary 2016; Johnston 2017), and have been ignored by Western analytic aestheticians as a result. A better

understanding of artistic adornment is arguably essential for Western analytic aesthetics to develop cross-culturally and combat further cultural erasure—as Leuthold notes, ‘the problem of finding art in indigenous aesthetics arises not from the absence of art in indigenous cultures, but from the narrowness of contemporary Western definitions of art’ (Leuthold, 1995: 322).

Overall, Johnson’s book is a treat to read, and covers an astonishing amount of ground. I eagerly await the research it is sure to inspire.

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