ISSUE 2

FASHION STUDIES

Alien Beauty: Posthuman Re-Imaginings

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Abstract: In the fall of 2018 WGSN (World Global Style Network) ran a report on the emerg-ing "alien beauty" trend, which they defined as "an otherworldly aesthetic inspired by extraterrestrial life forms ... signifying a new rebellious attitude towards quintessential beauty norms" (Bailey). Instagram is one of the largest platforms to represent the trend of alien beauty, presented by a thriving community of makeup artists pushing the boundaries of conventional beauty practices. These artists are developing otherworldly and exaggerated makeup looks created through the combination of makeup, fashion, technology, and social media. The following research attempts to outline elements of beauty that are engaged with through alien beauty, and through creative practice presents them on conventionally beautiful bodies to demonstrate new, challenging version of beauty. Alien beauty selfies shared via Instagram can be re-contextualized to challenge existing examples of art, nature, and beauty. Through practice-based methodology and theories of posthumanism, this piece explores the changing ideals of beauty manifested with the support of technology and social media as well as how the term "alien beauty" manifests as a current trend. Considering the re-imagined paintings created to explore alien beauty, they reveal how beauty has been traditionally constructed through a colonial, heteronormative, hegemonic gaze and how "alien" is therefore a form of escapism and rebellion.

Keywords:

Alien Beauty
Fashion and Identity
Posthumanism
Diversity
Inclusion

Figure 1: Alien Beauty Re-Imaginings Collection. Presley Mills.

Alien Beauty: Posthuman Re-Imaginings

Instagram supports a thriving community of makeup artists who share and showcase their artistry, while also providing a platform for artists to push the boundaries of conventional beauty practices (Figure 1). In the fall of 2018 WGSN (World Global Style Network) ran a report on the emerging "alien beauty" trend, which they defined as "an otherworldly aesthetic inspired by extraterrestrial life forms ... signifying a new rebellious attitude towards quintessential beauty norms" (Bailey). The emerging trend among artists to develop otherworldly and exaggerated makeup looks created through the combination of makeup, fashion, technology, and social media fits within the category of alien beauty.

This research explores how alien beauty selfies shared via Instagram can be re-contextualized to challenge existing examples of art, nature, and beauty. Alien beauty is a form of escapism and rebellion that expresses frustrations with current society and how beauty is traditionally constructed through a colonial, heteronormative, hegemonic gaze. The creative practice component of this research demonstrates how alien beauty can be a subversive artistic practice that expands diversity and inclusion in media while challenging hegemonic notions of beauty and identity. Through practice-based methodology and theories of posthumanism, this paper explores the changing ideals of beauty manifested with the support of technology and social media, as well as the term "alien beauty."

Creative Response

Instagram as a social media platform provides an endless number of images that have an impact on ideals of beauty and influence body perceptions. The artists selected to explore the trend of alien beauty have used Instagram as the primary medium to share their works. The following artists were selected to represent a spectrum of styles and techniques, including drag makeup, body modification, and post-production edits: @Matieresfecales, @Ryanburk, @Auntpetuniasfriendz, @IssheHungry, @JunoBirch, @salviia, @cremefatale, and @Aryunatardis. After selecting examples of alien beauty via Instagram, I recreated their makeup on depictions of European women in painted portraits from 1482 to 1867 where the subject of the painting was portrayed as both beautiful and fashionable. The paintings were all rendered by men, which contrasts the diverse group of identities represented in the selection of Instagram artists. As well, the portraits were primarily of prominent women or classical figures of antiquity. The paintings selected therefore in part represent the foundational colonial depictions of normative beauty. The portraits were created with intentions similar to the modern "selfie" shared today on social media — to represent the beauty, power, and fashionability of the sitter. By applying the alien beauty makeup looks to these classical portraits, their difference is exaggerated and the viewing of their beauty practice is re-contextualized.

Makeup has become ubiquitous for women in Western society, but there has always been an emphasis on appearing "natural" (Hernandez). The historical paintings selected demonstrate some of the makeup trends throughout the past 400 years, but the common style displayed is "natural" looking soft features, pale skin, and rosy cheeks. Alien beauty critiques this concept as it not only challenges the idea of "natural" beauty, but the idea of beauty itself. Alien beauty pushes the definition of natural and beautiful as subjective.

Upon first viewing the alien/paintings, there is a sense of unease or tension. I applied the makeup looks to the paintings in a way that matched the style of the original artworks. This helped to re-contextualize and integrate the makeup into the historical period. The women depicted in the paintings were rendered through a colonial, heteronormative, hegemonic gaze, and the addition of the alien makeup subverts these expectations of beauty dramatically. Even if the viewer is unfamiliar with the original artwork, it is clearly evident that their appearance is out of the ordinary. Makeup has been used throughout history to attain a specific ideal of beauty. The reimagined paintings challenge this concept of classic beauty as they juxtapose old and new directions of makeup application. They also invite the viewer to consider defining "beauty." The alien makeup may appear unpleasant, ugly, or unrealistic to the unfamiliar eye because it boldly rebels against expectations of an ideal woman. Spending time with the images encourages a dialogue between ugly and beautiful and reveals how they can coexist.

The makeup artists referenced fall across a spectrum of genders, races, and sexualities, but their makeup has been applied to exclusively heteronormative depictions of white women. Viewing the makeup on "non-othered" bodies helps visualize how alien beauty has the ability to transcend normative concepts and colonial depictions of race and gender. Viewing the makeup on classical images of women positions them as images the viewer should consider beautiful and should consider art. The images I have created are shared on my personal Instagram, @presley-mills, to resemble the format of a digital zine. Presenting them via Instagram allows viewers to interact with the image, gain knowledge on the topic of alien beauty, and continue the relationship with the artists through the tagged link to their Instagram account.

Defining "Alien"

In the book *Science Fiction, Alien Encounters, and the Ethics of Posthumanism*, Elena Gomel explains how the term "alien" evokes images of strange creatures from science fiction stories. The construction of the alien concept took place in science fictions novels, tales of conspiracy subcultures and abductees, and Hollywood blockbusters such as *Alien, Star Trek*, and *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (Gomel). In the current digital age there are countless tales of alien encounters and media depictions of intelligent or animalistic creatures from the far reaches of the galaxy. The definition of an extraterrestrial "alien" can also metaphorically represent the definition of alien as "belonging to a foreign nation" or "unfamiliar and disturbing" ("Alien"). When considering the term "alien beauty," makeup and self-portraiture is a medium for expressing the sense of being alien through imagined personas or new definitions of beauty. Though this idea of alien beauty has existed for decades, seen for example through the "green-skinned beauties"found in *Star Trek: The Original Series* (Thompson), according to the October 2018 report by WGSN alien beauty is a growing trend emerging from social media to rebel against the standardization of the beauty industry. No longer conforming to the normative notions of beauty, this subculture has emerged from communities who feel alienated or othered by society, such as women, the trans and queer community, and/or people of colour (Maddox). Though not aligned with specific musical or political movements typical of other subversive subcultures, for example punk, the otherworldly aesthetic is bending concepts of "beautiful versus ugly" while pulling from other contemporary trends such as gender-neutral makeup and drag queen makeup (Bailey). Examining the makeup practice from a cultural posthumanist lens, the bodily practice of alien beauty questions the notion of human and human nature, and asserts these terms as subjective and constantly evolving (Justice).

Posthumanism is a theoretical concept in which the boundaries between human, nature, and machine are blurred, allowing humans to transcend the basics of biology (Tirosh-Samuelson). The makeup exploring alien beauty intersects with technology, colonialism, evolution, sexuality, and the material world. This excerpt from "Decolonizing Feminism: Challenging Connections between Settler Colonialism and Heteropatriarchy" by Arvin et al. demonstrates how posthumanism intersects with sexuality, gender, and race to challenge the stereotypes rooted in society:

> While both gender and women's studies and ethnic studies unmask gender and race as social constructions, with often devastating material effects for women and nonwhite people, respectively, these fields also expose various mythologies about gender and race, including the myth of misogyny and racism as to-be-expected characteristics of human nature. (9)

Artists creating alien beauty looks are making complex statements about their individual experience related to race, gender, and society while challenging the human relationship with technology, colonialism, evolution, sexuality, and the material world. For example, @Aryunatardis demonstrates how alien beauty was an outlet when she felt isolated being the only person of Asian descent living in the dominantly European part of Russia (Figure 2). She never saw examples of someone like her, and as a result experimented with makeup and body modification as a way to express her emotions, fears, and exaggerate her insecurities (Weinstock).

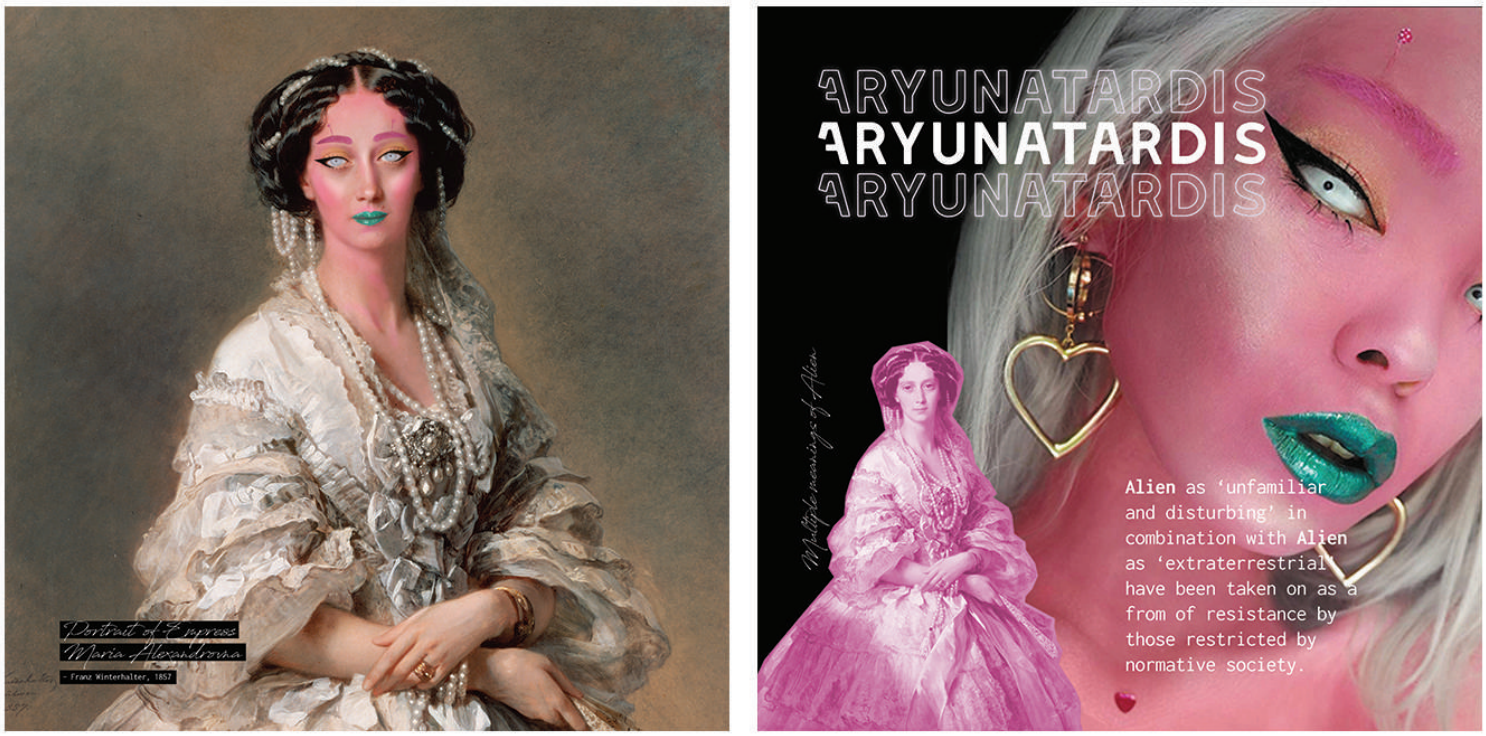

Figure 2: @aryunatardis as Empress Maria Alexandrovna with zine slide. Presley Mills, @presleymills, 30 December 2018, Instagram, www.instagram.com/p/B-sCHfWVB7GK/.

Defining Beauty

Patzer claims "beauty has a strong, pervasive impact on people's lives," impacting their power, social influence, and perceived intelligence. There has been a socially constructed beauty myth that presents itself in the form of white skin, blue eyes, young, and thin as the ideal required to be beautiful and successful (Mills). This is a colonial and heteronormative beauty construct reflected in the media of Western society and history. Alien beauty challenges these established constructs as well as the design of an ideal human form. To identify artists challenging the "human" face and existing beauty constructs, I outlined the following criteria when selecting artists to reference for the creative component.

Categories:

Skin: "Skin is connected to our bodies yet also alien, marking the exterior, the end of ourselves" (Lupton 239), meaning skin is the largest organ on the human body and the protective barrier between the self and the outside world. Skin can denote race and origins and is a universally shared feature, yet alien beauty often challenges what are conventionally considered natural skin colours (Figure 3). Reminiscent of the grey skin of creatures depicted in flying saucers, cute neon-green cartoons, or the bright blue scales from superhero films, there have been depictions of aliens in media with an endless variety of skin tones and textures. Modifying the skin tone with makeup is one of the easiest ways to explore alien beauty and challenge connotations of race.

Figure 3: @ryburk as Comtesse D'Houssouville. Presley Mills, @presleymills, 28 December 2018, Instagram, https://www.instagram.com/p/Br9P0ijByGS/.

Facial Features: Makeup artists have the skill and ability to create dramatic illusions with their makeup. Whether that is through something as common as narrowing the nose or something as dramatic as fully restructuring their face to eliminate entire features, the modification of normal human facial structure can be considered alien beauty. The selected examples distort facial features such as eyes, nose, mouth, and ears to challenge the notion of what human features are. Looking at eyes as an example, artist may multiply the number of eyes beyond two, or they may use makeup to abstract the conventional shape of the eye beyond recognition (Figure 4).

Figure 4: @isshehungry as Mary Heberden. Presley Mills, @presleymills, 22 December 2018, Instagram, https://www.instagram.com/p/Brs8468Bv_f/.

Cyborgs: According to Haraway, any addition to the body can turn the individual into a cyborg. This could theoretically include the makeup used, and the smartphone used to photograph and share the images of the artist. Beyond makeup and smartphones, cyborg additions can be made up of contact lenses, piercings, wigs, body modifications, or jewels, crafts, paper, etc. These elements are sometimes decorative, but they may also act as extensions to the body that change the normative body (Figure 5).

Figure 5: @salvjiia as Olympia. Presley Mills, @presleymills, 21 December 2018, Instagram, https://www.instagram.com/p/Brp_wu5BLuQ/.

Post-production: Editing one's selfies has been critiqued because it can reinforce unrealistic beauty expectations and contribute body dissatisfaction (Lonergan et al.), but editing selfies can also be, as with makeup, clothing or a haircut, an equivalent tool for self-presentation. This is particularly true when editing is expanded beyond beautification and can become a form of performance art (Kasriel-Alexander). Post-production is flipped when it is applied to alien beauty, as the look is unrealistic to begin with. Examples of post-production include extending or enlarging body parts, multiplying elements, or smoothing and blending lines and textures (Figure 6). This styling can be viewed as a form of digital second skin as it also provides a boundary between the self and the outside world.

Figure 6: @auntpetuniasfriendz as Madame Bergeret. Presley Mills, @presleymills, 30 December 2018, Instagram, https://www.instagram.com/p/BsBhHtSBTPU/

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Instagram and the Digital Self

According to MacCallum and Widdows (2018) no image is passive, as it is interpreted, critiqued, rejected, and negotiated by individual viewers. Increasingly globalized and homogenized beauty ideals have emerged in the last few decades, which has correlated with increased rates of both men and woman feeling unhappy with their appearance (MacCallum and Widdows). Observing media historically, there has been a dominant beauty trend for women to be thin and white (Mills). With the growth of social media, Instagram has created space for an online community to share new and diverse images of beauty and makeup. Instagram is an accessible platform to share creative work as it does not cost money to post and anyone with a smartphone can create an account. Instagram has provided a platform for non-conforming individuals, allowing for self-expression that would otherwise be limited by physical risk to self (Proulx). According to Proulx:

> [T]he Internet was claimed as a space of disembodiment. Theorists of the digital in the 1980s and 1990s projected a networked future not only devoid of the body but also freed from its corporeal limits. This would be a free space, we were told: free from hateful bigotries and corporeal violence, free from geographical and political hindrances, free from market restrictions for professional exchanges, and free from the dangers of "risky" gay sex (Wakeford 1997). (114)

Though this theory has proved to not be entirely accurate, as the digital environment is not free of discrimination, bigotries, or restrictions, it is still a space of disembodiment. This allows for hyper-visibility of gender non-conforming performance and dramatic reinterpretations of normative notions of beauty without putting individuals at physical risk of violence. Individuals sharing images over Instagram can be connected and can contribute to the media presenting beauty ideals, increasing the diversity of standards presented.

Selfies are defined as "self-portraits uploaded and shared in social media" (Halpern et al. 99). Maddox explains how selfies have been critiqued in popular culture as narcissistic and a juvenile "epidemic," but the root of this criticism is centred on individuals who fall outside the dominant heteropatriarchal standard having control of their own self-image (26-7, 31). Self-portraits shared on Instagram are less likely to be socially policed by normative standards which allows the "Othered" individual (women, racial minorities, queer, transgender, individuals with disabilities, etc.) to turn photography into acknowledgements of their lived experience (Maddox 38-9). Instagram has allowed makeup artists to create transgressive images to expand the concept of beauty beyond what is normative by creating a digital realm of disembodiment and allowing for hyper-visible forms of performance (Plewka). The digital self is constructed through the development of a persona, username, and photography. As many of the alien beauty looks are too complex or not functional for everyday wear, their online platform is crucial for their continued existence. Of the artists selected to be included in this research, many develop a performative version of themselves that can only exist fully through images. For example, @JunoBirch creates alien beauty makeup looks on herself, but this also extends to her illustration work and a community of social media followers who recreate her art on their own body (Figure 7). Her alien persona is extended beyond herself.

Figure 7: @junobirch as Venus with zine slide. Presley Mills, @presleymills, 20 December 2018, Instagram, https://www.instagram.com/p/BroRbyJB0pq/.

The Future of Alien Beauty

According to WGSN, aspects of the alien style may be adopted in popular culture in the form of darker lipsticks and eyeshadows, or in extremely metallic or holographic shades, but the true form of alien beauty currently relies on the relationship between the human body and the digital screen (Bailey). These styles will not be possible until further advancement in technology exists to further integrate the physical and the digital realm. The most common representations of alien beauty will remain fixtures in science fiction films, television, and now the makeup industry.

Though alien beauty is extreme for daily life, selfies are still a common element of social media and alien beauty can be considered a new form of dandyism for the digital age (Plewka). Similar to Club Kids or Punk of the seventies and eighties, alien beauty possesses the same anti-establishment vigour that pushes the boundaries of beauty (Bailey). As the relationship with social media becomes more and more rooted in daily life, there is an opportunity for extreme makeup looks to become a regular part of social performance online.

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