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Opinion

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Dream Sellers: Inspirations from the Cinema of Federico Fellini in the Work of Helmut Newton

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Abstract

This article explores the influence of Italian film director Federico Fellini's cinema on the work of German fashion photographer Helmut Newton. The article is divided into three parts, each focusing on cultural phenomena or spaces that both artists explored in their work: paparazzi, the cultural image of women, and the beach and swimming pool. By analysing and interpreting selected Newton photographs, I propose that they are closely correlated with Fellini's.

Keywords: Helmut Newton; Federico Fellini; Fashion photography; Paparazzi photography; Women in photography

Summary

This article discusses the inspiration that Italian film director Federico Fellini's cinema had on the work of German fashion photographer Helmut Newton. Both artists shared a fascination with the human body and with anthropology centered on the human psyche. Through facial expressions, body positioning, and accessories such as clothing, props, and jewellery, they achieved a shared goal – to present an engaging story of a male or female character. In Newton's frames, one can find an innovative interpretation of themes addressed by the Italian director.

Dream Sellers

Newton and Fellini lived in the same era, even being born in the same year, 1920. "Nothing would be the same without Fellini," said Helmut Newton, an outstanding fashion and other photographer who, photographing women for sixty years, observed and

influenced the development of fashion photography and feminist culture. Newton often drew inspiration from film in his work. He was a master and pioneer of a phenomenon now common in photography and advertising: storytelling. One of the directors he drew inspiration from was Federico Fellini. This is especially evident in his photographs referencing paparazzi culture—a term coined in the film *La Dolce Vita* (1960). Newton loved taking photos outside the studio, in the field, for example, on the beach—he lived on the French Riviera for many years. As he recalled, the beach photos would not have been possible without the inspiration from the great director's films. Fellini also portrayed women in a unique way—like Newton, he saw extraordinary strength in them and portrayed them in an extraordinary way, for the 1960s and 1970s. Both were raised by domineering mothers, who influenced the portrayal of women in their work. They were heroines, towering women with unconventional beauty and demeanour. Looking at



them—like the figures depicted in Newton's photographs—we have the impression that time has stood still. Both artists share a fascination with the human body and an anthropology focused on the human psyche. Using facial expressions, body positioning, and accessories such as clothing, accessories, and jewellery, they achieved their intended goal: presenting a compelling story about their hero or heroine.

The Fashion Feminist

Newton was one of the most influential fashion photographers of the 20th century, and his work continues to inspire photographers, editors, and designers. He was a groundbreaking image-maker of his generation, and while his style is often imitated, it is never equalled, and his images are unmistakable. He worked for top fashion magazines – several editions of *Vogue* from various countries, including British, French, American, and Australian, *Elle*, *Harper's Bazaar*, and many others. He worked closely with designers and brands from Yves Saint Laurent to Chanel, and his images became an essential part of their legacy, as well as the history of fashion. Born into a wealthy Jewish family living in Berlin, he was interested in photography from a young age. At eighteen, he had to flee Germany due to rising anti-Jewish sentiment. Thanks to family connections, he managed to board a ship to Singapore. There, he received his first photojournalistic assignments. Then, when he had to flee the war again, he landed in Australia, where he spent the next few years. In Melbourne, he opened his first photography studio and began a relationship with his future wife, June Brown, who had a profound influence on the development of his career. It was in Australia that he began working with the world's largest fashion magazine, *Vogue*, which opened the door to international publications with greater prestige than the Australian one. As a result of these contracts, he left the Antipodes and settled in Europe – first in London, and then in Paris. From then on, he divided his year into summers spent in Paris and the French Riviera, and winters in California, USA. He died in a car accident in 2004.

Il Mago

Federico Fellini, born in Rimini and spending most of his life in Rome, is considered one of the most influential directors in the history of cinema. A leading representative of European auteur cinema, he drew inspiration from the Italian neorealism of the 1940s and 1950s. His films include *"La Strada"*, *"La Dolce Vita"*, *"Nights of Cabiria"*, *"Amarcord"*, and *"8 1/2"*, considered his magnum opus. His films have won four Oscars for Best Foreign Language Film, and in 1993 he received an honorary Oscar for lifetime achievement. Critics praised him for his creative contributions to film style and his innovative solutions, particularly in composition (free, essayistic, cantered around the motif of a journey) and his painterly use of colour.

Paparazzo

One of the main themes explored in Newton's photographs was the culture of paparazzi. The term "paparazzi," which refers to photographers who buzz like mosquitoes around a famous person, was inspired by a character from *"La Dolce Vita"*, and after watching the film, the photographer began using real paparazzi in his fashion shoots. This term was used to describe the protagonist in Fellini's film, whose character was based on the real-life photographer Tazio Secchiaroli, who worked as a photographer on the director's film sets. At the same time, he and several other photographers supplemented their income by taking photos of celebrities strolling along Rome's Via Veneto. As Wiesław Godzic writes about the film: "The paparazzo, the most important figure in this arrangement, occupies the screen almost constantly. He sits at tables, runs up to people talking, passes through cordons, lies to bouncers. What's the point of all this? – To get the desired photo. We still – like a child – ask: why? What is this figure who is everywhere and takes up no space anywhere? Without paparazzi, celebrities don't shine with a strong light, after all, both the warrior and the exhibitionist must function simultaneously!"².

¹ Newton 2007.

² Godzic 2022, p. 331.

Paparazzi photography is both an industry and a cultural practice, which is why it is such an interesting subject of research. Paparazzi photography is an aggressive form of photojournalism, especially today, when famous names in showbiz are pursued and forced into dangerous situations to obtain the most compelling image possible. In the 1960s and 1970s, during the “classic” era of paparazzi, the combination of voyeurism and exhibitionism, in which photographers waited for celebrities to appear in public, was less violent. Creativity, speed, and persistence, combined with a touch of brazenness, were usually enough to guarantee good results. Newton argued that a good fashion photo shouldn’t look like a fashion photo, but like a still from a film or a paparazzi snapshot. Before planning his photography, he cut out images from the daily press for inspiration. He was fascinated by the everyday world captured in photographs and the work of the paparazzi, who spy on others to show them to the world. The popularity of paparazzi began in the 1970s in Rome and continues to this day. Unfortunately, the profession has a rather negative connotation these days, as they no longer work as they once did. He was so fascinated by these types of photographers that he decided to immortalize them in his own shoot. In 1970, he travelled to Rome to work with “real” paparazzi. As part of an assignment for the fashion magazine “Linea Italiana,” Newton hired several of them to pose with his models. Newton’s unconventional approach involved asking the photographers to treat the model as if they were a celebrity. An interesting aspect of Newton’s photo is the combination of many real-life elements, such as the model, fashion, and paparazzi on the one hand, and the staged nature of the photograph on the other. The photo shows a model playing the role of a celebrity, surrounded by a crowd of paparazzi trying to take her picture. In his photo, Newton demonstrates the paparazzi’s workflow and photographs the photographers, lending the images a unique atmosphere. Is being surrounded by so many photographers supposed to make a model feel fragile or strong?

In addition to exploiting the paparazzi motif in his scheduled shoots, Newton also took photographs on the streets, at banquets, in luxury hotels, and at important, snobbish events. He photographed public figures and celebrities, even when they didn’t want him there. He believed that every photographer was a voyeur, and photography was a form of obsessive and predatory surveillance of the private lives of others. He often used the metaphor of looking through a camera’s viewfinder as if through a keyhole. Taking photographs is tantamount to observing or invading the privacy of someone who doesn’t know, or pretends not to know, that they are being observed. In this context, it’s worth recalling Susan Sontag’s term “heroism of vision,” which denotes a dedication to photographic vision. Photographers often have to stand in one place for hours,

crawl through bushes, or hang on a rope to capture that one perfect shot: “Alfred Stieglitz proudly announced that he stood for three hours in a snowstorm on February 22, 1893, waiting for the right moment to take his famous photograph, ‘Fifth Avenue, Winter.’ The right moment comes when you can see the world (especially what everyone has already seen) in a new, original way. This pursuit became the photographer’s trademark in the minds of most people. In the 1920s, the photographer became a modern hero, like the pilot and the anthropologist—without having to leave home”³.

Newton, too, often had to wait for the right light in varying weather conditions, as he mostly photographed on the street. As social photography researcher Nathan Jurgenson writes: “A street photographer is a camera in a human body. A hunter, invariably treating the world as something to be discovered, recorded, sorted, and exploited. A street photographer with the mentality of a hunter, a master of a given territory, traces the current, seeking moments of stillness to transform them into shareable stories that encourage us to see beauty in the mundane, the banal in the extraordinary, the meaning in the usually overlooked.”⁴.

Paparazzi were accustomed to the harsh working conditions. They shot from a safe distance, and the photographer often went unnoticed. Nevertheless, every now and then, a fight would break out between hunter and prey when the photographer got too close or was discovered in his hiding place. Ron Galella, for example, lost several teeth when he was struck by a well-aimed punch from Marlon Brando. After that, he often wore a football helmet whenever he expected to run into Brando at a public event. In 2008, the Helmut Newton Foundation, a foundation and photography gallery founded by Newton in Berlin, hosted the first exhibition in Germany dedicated to paparazzi photography, featuring photographs by Newton and other photographers such as Salomon, Weegee, Galella, Quinn, Angeli, Secchiaroli, and Pigozzi.

Beaches and Pools

Beaches and pools are other motifs that inspired both artists. For many years, Newton owned a house near Saint Tropez, which inspired his photography. Not a single scene was shot in Fellini’s hometown, Rimini, his greatest inspiration and often the setting for his best productions. Nevertheless, the beach was a frequent backdrop for his films, from “The Loonies” (1953), through “8 1/2” (1953), to “Amarcord.” Beach scenes also serve as a unifying element in the film “La Strada.” It is in this film that we meet the carefree Gelsomina, still unaware of her fate. It is also there that we bid farewell to Zampano, grief-stricken after learning of Gelsomina’s death and realizing how much she meant to him.

³ Sontag 1986, p. 83.

⁴ Jurgenson 2021, p. 133.

The beach was a frequent backdrop for the German photographer's photographs. Newton eagerly photographed Thierry Mugler's designs, and the photo on the beach in Saint Tropez is one of their first collaborations. It was published in the German avant-garde magazine "Stern" in 1978. Both artists were considered controversial and innovative for their time, which is why they understood each other well. Both were also accused of sexism and misogyny. The designer, like Newton, wanted to portray exceptional, strong women in his campaign photos, superwomen. Taller and larger than the average woman. He also strove for an athletic figure, and his studio featured exercise machines. Mugler's avant-garde fashion looked stunning in Newton's photographs. The photographer shot the designer primarily on the French Riviera, where he had lived since the 1960s, using locations such as the beach, swimming pool, and construction sites as backdrops. The aim of the photos was to portray an unexpected and surprising situation, somewhat shocking, like Mugler's fashion itself.

The photo, taken for "Stern" magazine, shows a woman wearing an elegant evening gown and high-heeled shoes, the entire outfit painted in black. If the model were cut out of the photo, there would be nothing surprising about her outfit and posture, but the fact that she has been integrated into an environment she doesn't fit into is somewhat unsettling. The model stands on a beach, surrounded by ordinary, half-naked sunbathers. The women in the photo are sunbathing topless, a common occurrence on the beaches of the French Riviera in the 1970s. Their nudity, juxtaposed with the model's almost-up-to-the-chin black dress, creates an interesting contrast, enhanced by the fact that the entire scene takes place in daylight, under the harsh midday sun. An interesting supporting character is an older man, who, despite his age, has a fit body and also poses for the photo. Newton loved capturing ordinary people in his photographs, as they provided a diverse, intriguing, and energizing backdrop. It's a scene that feels both natural, due to the presence of natural, naked bodies, and utterly surreal, due to the composition being broken by the appearance of a model in a black outfit. The woman in the photo is metaphorically, as is typical with Newton, and this time also literally, elevated onto a pedestal, as she stands on a bench. She's confident because she doesn't care what others think – she's wearing an outfit inappropriate for the circumstances and surroundings, yet she exudes a power unheard of on the beach. People who take on the role of beachgoers typically feel insecure. They worry about whether they look good and whether they will be negatively judged by others, whom they themselves observe out of the corner of their eye. The beach is one of the few places where the average person can legally appear almost naked in public. This triggers two contradictory emotions within them – a sense of shame and a deeply hidden exhibitionism. The model exerts control over the entire environment – this is indicated by her body posture, which is straight, tense, legs apart, hands resting authoritatively on her hips, elevated above the crowd, eyes directed somewhere into the distance.

The pool, like the beach, had always been Newton's focus. From a young age, he frequented Berlin swimming pools, where he and his friends spent summer afternoons. This ritual was

brutally interrupted when, during one visit, he saw a sign at the entrance: "Jews and dogs not allowed." His love for swimming, however, persisted, and pools became a frequent location for photo shoots—both fashion and art. The photo below is titled "Arena" and was published in the New York Times in 1978. The photo shows a pool in Miami. For his unconventional scenarios, the artist transformed ordinary spaces into starkly contrasting theatrical stages. This is no different, as the pool transforms from an ordinary place into an extraordinary one. The pool, like a hotel room or villa, becomes a symbol of the privileged wealthy and an extraordinary world where anything is possible. The photo depicts a scene where each model seems to be in their own world. The woman in the foreground, dressed in a white swimsuit, with her posture and hairstyle, is reminiscent of models photographed by Leni Riefenstahl. Her receding shoulders and straight back convey confidence and strength. Around her are three men, though none are directly depicted. One shows only his head, another his body turned away as he jumps into the pool, and the third stands on a diving board, only his legs visible. The white of the model's body and swimsuit contrasts both with the darker bodies of the men and the blue surroundings of the water and sky.

A swimming pool is a common backdrop in fashion photography. It possesses a certain glamorous atmosphere, making it suitable for this type of shoot. Entering the pool transports us to a different world, one where unusual attire and rules of behaviour apply. The outdoor pool provides ideal daylight, even reflected off the water, making it a ready-made, colourful, and original setting for photographers. Photographers often perceive pools as erotic, and fashion photography has much in common with eroticism.

The photos Newton took at the beach or pool are colourful, unlike most of his other photographs. Perhaps he wanted to emphasize the summer atmosphere, colours, and sunlight. The subjects he photographed at pools have athletic builds, are usually dressed in swimsuits, and the photo captures the moment just before diving into the water or while sunbathing.

Women

The portrayal of women in fashion photography has been a topic that has riveted the fashion and photography industries for decades. Discussion on this topic is particularly relevant today, when the fashion industry is constantly changing its approach to the image of women in media and advertising, and feminism, despite having achieved much, still has much to do in many areas.

Fellini's films feature physically large women, with large breasts, some almost caricatured, but incredibly beautiful. He saw in them everything he desired in a woman: sensuality, motherhood, protection. His women were never conventional. They were beautiful because of all the things he allowed the viewer to see. Watching his films, viewers want to continue gazing at their faces. They have a magnetic power.

Newton also favoured strong women (mentally and physically), the Amazon type, because he felt safe around them. He considered himself weak and frail, which is why women's strength impressed

him. In his photographs, he showed their strength in a non-obvious way. Such strong women in his life were both his mother and his wife. The women he photographed became alpha females in his pictures. Models eagerly stood in front of his lens, where, as they themselves admitted, they could express themselves through his vision, feel their strength, and show it to the world. The power that emanates from his photographs is truly metaphysical, a fusion of energy flowing from the body and spirit.

He never portrayed women in a mocking or offensive manner. On the contrary, he idealized both them and the reality surrounding them. In his imagination, women were equal to men and could even exercise a certain power over them. Newton's works aimed to reverse gender roles, granting women agency in every situation, and demonstrating the possibility of female domination in a world that was (and still is) dominated by men. At the time of his work, this was a highly innovative approach to feminism.

For Newton, the body is an object of control over which its possessor wields power—and thus also exerts power over the viewer. Through the pose her body adopts, she demonstrates who is in charge. The term “social control” was introduced by sociologist Edward Ross in 1901. According to his concept, society dominates individuals through social influence and social control. The phenomenon of social control is linked to the existence of social norms. Its origins can be found in primitive societies. Bronisław Malinowski, describing tribal societies, pointed to the existence of taboos, which served as the basis for social control. Taboos comprised a series of traditional customs and prohibitions, the noncompliance of which resulted in negative reactions from those around them. Emil Durkheim notes that to maintain balance and function properly, society must develop certain mechanisms that, on the one hand, limit the selfish pursuits of individuals and, on the other, reinforce the natural inclinations toward harmonious group coexistence. These mechanisms constitute a system of formal and informal social control, the exercise of which depends on the degree of social integration⁵. The human body and sexuality are also subject to social regulation and control.

Through the body, a metaphysical force is expressed, unfettered, finding its outlet in the photograph. Through the representation of the body, Newton visualizes his vision of beauty and women's empowerment. Newton's work was a prime example of breaking down barriers and fusing art with the culture industry. Newton's superwomen are dressed in sensual furs and provocative sheers, wearing androgynous tuxedos and elegant, tailored suits, high heels, and provocative garters, transforming themselves into unattainable objects of desire.

Conclusion

As the above analysis has shown, Newton's photographs were often inspired by Fellini's films. In the former's frames, one can find an innovative interpretation of the themes explored by the Italian director. Each of them had their own vision of themes that electrified audiences. These visions, though somewhat different, nevertheless had much in common, as becomes clear after examining their work. Newton's work defined a new framework for photography, and Fellini's for film. Both were icons of their times: Newton of 20th-century fashion photography, and Fellini of the tenth muse. Their images are characterized by extraordinary power of suggestion, elegance, and mounting tension. To paraphrase Oscar Wilde's words that before William Turner, there was no fog in London, one could say that before Helmut Newton, there was no fashion photography, and before Federico Fellini, there was no auteur cinema. As Theodor Adorno wrote, art should “be the resultant of centrifugal and centripetal forces, drawing from the world and opposing it at the same time”⁶. And although neither Newton nor Fellini described themselves as artists, the above words can undoubtedly be applied to their work.

Acknowledgment

None.

Conflict of Interest

No conflict of interest.

⁵ Kupiec 2007, p. 16.

⁶ Adorno 1984, p. 481.

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