

Sequins and Glitter: Fashion, Spectacular Bodies and Twentieth-Century Art

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Abstract

Sequins and glitter are employed to produce spectacular effects on the human body. Sequins, small fragments of reflective material attached through needlework to clothing, or glitter, polyester dust adhered with glue to garments or directly to the skin, are used frequently in theatrical costumes, evening wear and cosmetics. The brilliant, moving glints they produce by reflecting light off the mobile body create a sense of material wealth and visual excitement. In this paper I examine how these materials from the fashion industry have been appropriated or imitated by 20th century artists who took clothing and the body as their subject. As I will demonstrate, artists who used sequins, glitter and other reflective substances have sought to achieve two things. Early 20th century avant-garde artists, such as the futurist Gino Severini, worked to overcome the limitations of traditionally static art objects by evoking fashion's dynamic realm of body adornment. Later in the century artists such as Andy Warhol used reflective substances imitating glitter to comment on the enervating effects of commodity culture on the individual's experience of embodiment. In the post-war context artists were more circumspect about the critical potential of crossovers between art and fashion.

Introduction

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commodity culture on the individual's experience of embodiment. In the post-war context artists were more circumspect about the critical potential of crossovers between art and fashion. As I argue in this paper, the Italian futurist, Gino Severini attached sequins to his early 20th century paintings of cabaret dancers. In appropriating material from contemporary theatrical costume, Severini hoped to create a truly dynamic painting, one that literally reflected the speed and movement of modern life. Moreover, through reflection, Severini responded to Henri Bergson's ideas about the nature of perception and the human body by introducing a strong inter-relationship between the art work and the viewer's physical presence. Andy Warhol's use of glittering diamond dust in his *Diamond Dust Shoes* paintings of the 1980s, by contrast, highlighted the artifice of contemporary fashion and questioned the capacity of art to evoke a sense of physical embodiment.

Gino Severini

Gino Severini was for several years a member of the Italian futurist movement, and among the movement's most enthusiastic adherents. He fully subscribed to the doctrine promulgated by F.T. Marinetti, futurism's founder and main champion, of action and speed as first principles for art, and dedicated himself to creating an art based on dynamism. As Severini argued in a manifesto of 1913, 'One of our most systematic futurist characteristics... is that of expressing *sensations of movement*' (Severini, 1973, p. 124). Severini had first begun to experiment with representing movement in a series of paintings depicting popular dance venues, for example *The Dance of the Pan Pan at the Monico* (1911), which shows a maelstrom of dancing bodies refracted in the dazzling light of a popular Parisian theatre restaurant. This work, which combines a neo-impressionist focus on light with geometric line, records the artist's fascination with the theatre restaurant, and in particular the performers and patrons' apparel. As Severini recalled of this venue, when the can-can dancers emerged and 'raised their skirts during their dance... under bright spotlights, all you could see was a blur of contrasting blacks and whites, a splendour of greys in a whole range of purples, greens and blues' (Severini, 1995, p. 54). The challenge for the artist was to find a way of rendering homage to this erotic spectacle of rippling fabric and pulsating light in a static medium such as painting.

After experimenting for a brief period with his geometricized version of neo-impressionism, in 1912 Severini began to attach non-fine art materials to the surface of his paintings. The idea of making works out of many different kinds of materials was put forward that year within the futurist camp by Umberto Boccioni, who recommended using 'glass, strips of metal sheeting,

wire, street-lamps or house lights' in sculpture (Boccioni, 1973, p. 63). As Severini later explained, Guillaume Apollinaire had spoken to him during 1912 about the idea of adding objects to paintings, including pasted paper and precious stones, techniques that 'increased the vitality of the paintings and their dynamism as a whole' (Severini, 1995, pp. 117-8). Georges Braque and Pablo Picasso were certainly the first to experiment with collage, as Severini himself acknowledged. However, it was the Italian artist who first had the idea of drawing on the realm of contemporary fashion design, when he 'tried to glue some paillettes and multicoloured sequins onto forms of ballerinas in movement' (Severini cited in Perloff, 1986, p. 45). In so doing he realised a statement in the 'Futurist Painting: Technical Manifesto', to which the artist was a signatory, that 'The harmony of the lines and folds of modern dress works upon our sensitiveness with the same emotional and symbolical power as did the nude upon the sensitiveness of the old masters' (Boccioni, 1973, p. 29). The results are visible in a series of works of 1912 to 1914, including *Blue Dancer* 1912, *Dynamic Hieroglyph of the Bal Tabarin* 1912 (fig. 1), *Dancer* 1913, and *Dancer = Sea*, 1913-14. In each work figures swirl before the viewer, disintegrating into jagged shards of line and colour. Adding to the sense of movement created by the fragmented forms of the figures and their surroundings are the shiny sequins attached to the surface of the works.



Figure 1. Gino Severini, *Dynamic Hieroglyphic of the Bal Tabarin* (1912), Oil on canvas, with sequins, 161.6 x 156.2 cm, The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Acquired through the Lillie P. Bliss Bequest.

By drawing on the world of costume and fashion design, Severini had defeated the immobile nature of the picture by literally reflecting light off the surface in these images of 'a dancer covered in sparkling sequins in her world of light, noise and sound' (Severini, 1973, p. 124). As Christine Poggi has argued, whereas the neo-impressionist painters, including Georges Seurat, had sought to intensify their canvases by effects of colour contrast and complementary colours, Severini had 'found a way of capturing real, flickering light from the surrounding ambience and

holding it on the surface of his paintings' (Poggi, 1992, p. 172). This sense of movement, however, relies not only on the surrounding ambience, but also upon the movement of the viewer. When standing still in front of these works, there is no reason for the sequins to give the literal impression of movement. However, once the viewer moves around the work, the subtly different position of the sequins with regard to both the surface of the picture and the viewer results in an intensely responsive picture surface. This is similar to Toulouse-Lautrec's earlier use of metallic paint on his lithographs of dancers, which, as Lincoln F. Johnson has observed, 'creates the possibility of a virtual extension of the movement of the shape into time as the angle of incidence of the light is changed on the surface of the print' (Johnson, 1956, p. 21). This may be one of the reasons that Severini singled out Toulouse-Lautrec as an influence in his depiction of dancers (Severini, 1995, p. 64). As the viewer moves around before the work, he or she experiences the changes in reflection caused as the light falls upon the sequined surface from differing angles. Severini's paintings and works on paper including sequins, therefore, draw the viewer into a reciprocal, physical relationship with the work. This relationship embodies several concepts from the writings of Henri Bergson, in particular his idea of the 'living body.'

As has been well documented, the Italian futurists were deeply indebted to Bergson's writings in this period, and there is a particularly close relationship between the work of Umberto Boccioni and the French philosopher's theories (Petrie, 1974). Severini was also a reader of Bergson and cited him in written texts (Coffin Hanson, 1995, p. 36). Indeed, as Mark Antliff has pointed out, Severini's thinking about the nature of his artistic practice was closely connected to Bergson's theories, including the idea that 'to perceive is nothing more than an opportunity to remember,' a point illustrated in the artist's work *Travel Memories* of 1911 which shows a landscape overrun by diverse aspects of a remembered journey taking place at differing moments in time (Antliff, 1993, pp. 53- 4) More significant for the artist's later use of sequins, however, is another Bergsonian concept, put forward in *Matter and Memory* of 1908, that 'the living body is a kind of centre whence is reflected on the surrounding objects the action which these objects exercise upon it.' (Bergson, 1988, p. 56.) This idea, that objects in the world receive reflections of their effects on the human body, corresponds very well to the physical experience of viewing Severini's work involving sequins. The art work itself, in so far as it is perceived by a viewer, depends utterly for its effect on the movement of the spectator's living body, a movement which in turn is prompted by the physical composition of the work and its special responsivity to ambient conditions of light. It is in this sense that Severini could speak of his works of this period

as recording the artist's experience of "living the movements of a girl dancing." (Severini, 1973, p. 121)

Aside from highlighting the relationship between the work and the human body, Severini's use of sequins worked more broadly to break down the autonomy of the art object. As Hanson has argued of *Dynamic Hieroglyphic of the Bal Tabarin* (1912), such a work

challenges the very function of painting itself by confusing illusion and reality. While light breaks down the perception of solid forms, the sparkling sequins take part in the luminous atmosphere, but are at the same time real things, foreign to the painted surface, and capable of reflecting and refracting light into the viewer's own space (Coffin Hanson, 1996, p. 72).

Other paintings by Severini from this period also ruptured the boundary separating the art work from the space which surrounds it, such as *Forms of a Dancer in the Light* (1913), in which the depicted forms intrude onto the picture frame (Clay, 1978 p. 307). Furthermore, Severini's use of collage, such as in *Portrait of Paul Fort* (1914), which includes an actual velvet collar, would prompt Giovanni Papini to comment that if this principle were pushed to its extreme 'the finest of still-lives would be a furnished room... the most profound philosophy would be that of a peasant hoeing or the blacksmith who hammers away' (Papini, 1914, p. 1). In this way Severini's painting raised the question of the distinction between art, dress and the bodily actions of life itself; a distinction that the futurists would attempt to eradicate in years to come, with their campaigns for the "Futurist Reconstruction of the Universe," and their radical ideas for fashion design, such as Giacomo Balla's "The Anti-Neutral Suit." In the 1920s, futurist ideas of dress, in particular their emphasis on dramatic shapes and colours, were taken up by Parisian fashion designers such as Madeleine Vionnet, thereby bringing ideas formulated within the realm of art into the broader social sphere (Mackrell, 2005). However, among the futurists themselves, the fascination with movement and action was largely channelled into propagandistic efforts to celebrate Italy's entry into WWI, and Severini himself was occupied with creating works such as *The Armoured Train* (1915) depicting the military actions of rifle-wielding soldiers and massive cannons. The avant-garde ambition to link the autonomous art work to lived reality, an aspiration to which Severini's use of fashion had made a significant contribution, had its apotheosis in belligerent forms of propaganda.

Andy Warhol

A completely different deployment of fashion design is apparent in the work of Andy Warhol, the most prominent American pop artist. Warhol began his career as a graphic designer and was renowned for his 1950s footwear advertisement illustrations published in magazines such as *Harper's Bazaar* (Doyle, 1996, p. 200). Although he shifted to a predominantly fine art practice in the 1960s and began exhibiting his work in galleries from that point on, throughout his career, Warhol maintained contact with the realm of fashion, and frequently created dresses based on his painting designs (Mackrell, 1996, p. 149). In his painting and sculpture he specialized in introducing commercial art practices such as fashion, advertising and comic illustrations into the realm of high art. In some respects this was a measure which debunked the high seriousness of painting, bringing it down to the level of the everyday commodity.

In a series of paintings from 1980 – 81 titled *Diamond Dust Shoes*, Warhol updated his earlier advertising illustrations of footwear (fig. 2). In an early example of his shoe drawings, such as *Anna May Wong* (1956), he sometimes added gold foil to create iridescent reflections (Ratcliff, 1983, p. 10). In *Diamond Dust Shoes* he intensified this technique with the use of the glittering surface produced by a material known as diamond dust. Actual diamond dust, a powder created in the process of manufacturing industrial diamonds, is a material used for many purposes, including the manufacture of jewellery. Although the term appears in the title to Warhol's paintings and the works are listed in catalogues as being made of that substance, they are not literally made of diamond powder. Rather the material employed is pulverised glass (Fremont, 1999, p. 7) a material sometimes used in Christmas decorations. The images show women's shoes, lined up in a relatively casual arrangements, photographed and silk-screened onto the canvas surface in bright neon or pastel colours. The dark areas of shadows behind, between and within the shoes are coated with the sparkling diamond dust.



Figure 2. Andy Warhol, *Diamond Dust Shoes*, 1980 – 1981, Synthetic polymer paint, silkscreen ink and diamond dust on canvas, (228.6 x 177.8 cm), private collection.

Frederic Jameson has singled out these works as a capital instance of what he describes as the 'deconstruction of expression'. In pointed contrast to a painting by Vincent Van Gogh of peasant shoes, which are redolent of the earthiness and labour of the rural farmer, for Jameson, Warhol's shoes are without depth and superficial and therefore exemplary works of post-modernism. Moreover, as Jameson points out, the shoes in these images are arranged indifferently, neither on display nor organized, lined up in a casual way, and he compares them to 'tokens of some incomprehensible and tragic fire in a packed dancehall.' In other words, the body is specifically removed from these works. Moreover, the painting refuses the viewer any way of accessing the work's meaning: it does not organize 'even a minimal place for the viewer,' and he or she cannot 'restore to these oddments that whole larger lived context of the dance

hall of the ball, the world of jet set fashion or of glamour magazines.’ But the visual impoverishment does not stop there. Jameson concludes that Warhol’s shoes’ ‘glaced x-ray elegance mortifies the reified eye of the viewer’ (Jameson, 1984, p 59-60). The diamond dust is conceived as an optical poison which kills off the vivacity of the viewing subject. The viewer can only statically contemplate the spectacle of these glittering empty shoes, as their very eyeballs congeal into solid, inert things. Nothing could be more opposed, one wants to argue, to Bergson’s concept of the ‘living body’ as encountered in Severini’s earlier sequin pictures.

Nevertheless, several commentators have recently questioned this account of Warhol’s work, and there are many reasons to doubt Jameson’s easy absorption of the pop artist’s work into a monolithic idea of postmodernism (Miller, 1999). The first reason to doubt this interpretation is found in Jameson’s own text. Before moving on to discuss what he calls the ‘waning of affect’ in post-modern culture he concedes this: ‘There is a return of the repressed in *Diamond Dust Shoes*, a strange compensatory decorative exhilaration... The glitter of gold dust, the spangling of gilt sand, which seals the surface of the painting and yet continues to glint at us’ (Jameson, 1984, p. 61). But what is the nature of this exhilaration? There is a distant reference to some of the same concerns that moved Severini to use sequins. After all, shoes are what house feet, the main means of human locomotion. When combined with the glittering effect of the diamond dust, this work can bring to mind physical movement. Thomas Dumm goes so far as to argue that the ‘diamond dust allegorically brings these individuated shoes to life, reanimating them’ (Dumm, 2002, n.p.). The sparkling effect of the diamond dust surface, like Severini’s sequins, does change marginally in response to the viewer’s movement, creating what Carter Ratcliff has described as a ‘rough, glowing texture’ (Ratcliff, 1983, 94).

However, this effect is much less marked than in Severini’s sequined surfaces and the subject, empty shoes, is understood to be at rest rather than at play. Indeed, there is what we might describe as an attenuation of physicality in Warhol’s work. This attenuation was already visible in an earlier work by Warhol, *Dance Diagram* (1962), which incorporates the outlines of shoes in imitation of a dancing school instructional device. Benjamin Buchloh has argued that *Dance Diagram*, rather than urging the viewer to engage in a physical activity, and thereby rupture the static, one-on-one aesthetic of traditional painting, invites the viewer to ‘participate in a trivial ritual of mass culture’ (Buchloh, 1989, pp. 44-46). In this way, Buchloh argues, it is a deliberate travesty of the participatory aesthetic which was a goal of the avant-garde beginning with futurism and continuing into the 1950s. Even if we disagree with Buchloh’s mordant reading of

Warhol's work, any exhilaration produced by *Diamond Dust Shoes* comes with a good dose of disenchantment, an element that emerges when we begin to examine the historical character of Warhol's painting.

Mandy Merck, for example, has connected the *Diamond Dust Shoes* series to history in several ways. As she notes, Warhol commented in 1980 that: 'I am doing shoes because I'm going back to my roots' (Warhol, cited in Merck, 1996, p. 230). They are contemporaneous with other series of works known as *Reversals* and *Retrospectives* in which the artist reprised a number of his earlier subjects (Ratcliff, 1983, p. 91). Another significant issue is the way these works refer to the artist's earlier career as a graphic designer, when the shoe was his signature tune. As Merck suggests, this work refers back to a self-promotional, illustrated book, *à la Recherche du Shoe Perdu*, which Warhol created in the 1950s. Warhol's joking reference to Antonin Proust's monumental stream-of-consciousness novel about his early life, *Remembrance of Things Past*, justifies interpreting *Diamond Dust Shoes* through the lens of 'Proustian remembrance' (Merck, 1996, p. 231). Merck also compares these shoes to "a sidewalk display in the garment district, where outsized remnants of some previous year's fashion stand racked for wholesale," linking the shoes not to the immediate present but to seasons past (Merck, 1996, p. 231). I would like to add another dimension of remembrance to these works. It is no coincidence that 'dust' is the term used to describe the material of which the work is made as well as the work itself. Although the term 'diamond dust' suggests something ethereal and glassy, the same term is used in English to denote that airborne flotsam that rains down on our material possessions and ages them, as it were, atmospherically.

Walter Benjamin, in his early text "Dreamkitsch", argued that in our dreams we go back to our childhood, to a realm populated by obsolete, kitsch things which have worn out, grown old and are covered in dust:

The dream has grown gray. The gray coating of dust on things is its best part. Dreams are now a shortcut to banality. Technology consigns the outer image of things to a long farewell, like banknotes that are bound to lose their value. It is then that the hand retrieves this outer cast in dreams and, even as they are slipping away, makes contact with familiar contours. It catches hold of objects at their most threadbare and timeworn point... The side which things turn toward the dream is kitsch (Benjamin, 1999, p. 3).

In this passage Benjamin notes that although technology renders cultural forms obsolete, they linger on in dreams. In dreams we are immersed in the kitsch of yesteryear, the styles of our parent's generation. As Celeste Olalquiaga argues in her discussion of Benjamin's essay, 'Dust makes palpable the elusive passing of time... [and] propels a vague state of retrospection' (Olalquiaga, 1998, p. 95). It is only under the spell of time's passing, Benjamin suggests, that we are able to draw the dusty, obsolete and banal thing near to us and "take hold of the good along with it," that is to say, grasp an earlier, historical promise embodied in that thing of a world better and different to the one presently existing (Benjamin, 1999, p. 3). Warhol's *Diamond Dust Shoes*, which are about a certain dream of the past, are a series of works redolent of what, in history, is made to disappear.

Reflective materials such as sequins, glitter and diamond dust have a history, which we can understand through what Rosalind H. Williams has described as the 'democratisation of luxury' (Williams, 1982, pp 94-106). 19th century decorative arts reformers aimed, through industrialization, to offer the pleasures once reserved for the wealthy to the average person. However, in the hands of many early 20th century designers, this ideal was reduced to an insistence upon elaborate decoration and the use of imitation precious metal in, for example, Art Deco. In spite of its patent falsity this fantasy of democratic luxury persists, for example, in the repeated use of sequins in Hollywood costumes, because of their capacity to 'satisfy those not admitted to the banquet table with manifest and unattainable images of well-being and happiness' (Bossaglia, 1975, p. 23). The dreams of personal satisfaction embodied in reflective materials such as sequins, in other words, are a myth designed to keep the existing class system in place. Nevertheless, reflective fabrics, whether covered in sequins, glitter, or diamond dust, have retained their power to signify material abundance and contentment.

The valueless, artificial lustre of pulverised glass visible in Warhol's *Diamond Dust Shoes* reeks of falsity. Nevertheless, it refers to a historical fantasy that the commodity, no matter how ersatz, might provide access to a dream of well-being and happiness such as that promised by the sequin. As Theodor Adorno once commented, 'impostors have always incarnated utopia: even false jewelry gleams with a helpless childhood dream' (Adorno, p. 211). In the avant-garde tradition, in Severini's work for example, introducing reflective material to painting was the means for an enhanced somatic relationship to the artwork, of a rapprochement between the art work and the world through fashion and what Henri Bergson referred to as the 'living body.'

Although Thomas Crow has argued that in Warhol's work "the mass produced image as the bearer of desires was exposed in its inadequacy by the reality of suffering and death" (Crow, 1996, p. 51), what is also at stake in these images is the continually renewed promise that the fashion commodity might provide a means to overcome precisely such human limitations.

In the period during which these works were made, Warhol made a revealing statement about his childhood relationship to shoes and their associations with glamour: 'I always wanted to be a tap dancer, just like Betty Ford and Barbara Walters. When I was a kid not growing up in Pittsburgh, I saved my pennies, wolfed down my salt and pepper soup, and ran downtown to see every Judy Garland movie' (Warhol cited in Ratcliff, 1983, p. 108). Shoes were a central part not only of Warhol's early career, what the artist describe as his 'roots,' but also his childhood fantasies of escape into stardom, epitomized by the ruby red, glittering slippers worn by Garland's character Dorothy in *The Wizard of Oz* (1939). If that dream of the commodity seems to have been rendered lifeless or static in *Diamond Dust Shoes*, if it is expressed in an ambivalent fashion, at once spectacular but morbid, glimmering but dusty, this does not mean that they are completely depthless and enforce a rigid immobility on the viewer. If the Bergsonian vitality of the 'living body' encountered in Severini's painting is absent from Warhol's work, what remain are signs that the fantasy of making the body present have aged, a recognition that the fulfilment through art once promised has been unrealised, and yet that the promise itself is still valid.

Conclusion

In this essay I have traced two moments in the history of art's appropriation of reflective materials from fashion design. For Severini the sequin was a material borrowed from the realm of fashion to add a visceral energy to the art work, and to break down the boundaries between art, design and life itself. In Warhol's late work, the use of diamond dust, a reflective material similar to that employed in fashion and cosmetics, was more a memorial to, than an embodiment of, the past fantasies of ecstatic, physical fulfilment in the sparkling world of the entertainment industry. The historical distance between 1912 and 1980 is apparent in these two artists' very different approaches to the use of such materials. However, what both artists shared was a belief that, by employing materials drawn from fashion and costume design, they could draw attention to the exhilarating visual effects of an aesthetic realm traditionally considered beyond the boundaries of the traditional art object, and thereby seriously question the legitimacy of those boundaries themselves.

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