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MISHA KAVKA

University of Amsterdam, the Netherlands

Skimming fashion, or how to read skin-deep

ABSTRACT

The semiotic methodology of reading fashion, however well established, has tended to maintain a gap between corporeal reality and aesthetic appearance, ensconced in the idea that fashion is a set of signifiers to be added to or removed from the body like an exo-skeleton of fabrics, accessories and cosmetics. By building on the history of semiotic spectacle through a feminist media studies sensitive to materiality, this article aims to read fashion as not being on but of the body, here understood as a set of kaleidoscopic surfaces, or skins. With a focus on skin as a mediating tissue between body and fashion that bears signification, the article advocates a methodology of reading skin-deep, which is called 'skimming' in order to draw attention to a dynamic of looking that moves across the surface, in a departure from traditional theories of the gaze. By paying attention to shapewear, second-skin looks, 'naked dressing' and tattoos, reading skin-deep takes skin literally as an element of fashion in order to illuminate the social codifications of gender, race and visibility that accompany the aesthetics of skin-as-fashion. At the heart of this analysis is Kim Kardashian, whose celebrity has become synonymous with fashionable yet controversial modes of self-exposure, especially in her annual appearances at the Met Gala.

KEYWORDS

Kim Kardashian
Met Gala
Skims
the gaze
skim-reading
second skin
naked dressing

Let us begin with a premise: while clothing has practical, social and sometimes moral functions, fashion involves aesthetic signification. In other words, fashion asks to be 'read', even – or especially – if it is polysemic, which in turn raises questions of the 'how to'. The methodology of reading fashion,

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at least from the perspective of cultural studies, owes its theoretical roots to the semiological turn in the 1950s–70s, from Roland Barthes on mythology ([1957] 1972), Daniel Boorstin on the image ([1961] 1992) and Guy Debord on the spectacle ([1967] 1995) to Stuart Hall's seminal work on representation ([1977] 1997). While Boorstin and Debord bemoaned the commodification of appearances, Barthes and Hall argued for a constructionist approach to meaning-making, insisting that sign systems construct the world (of fashion) rather than vice versa. Yet even in this semiological tradition fashion could not be more than a cover for something else that was 'really' going on, beneath the surface, whether that was the commodification of the image or the ideological work of sign systems.

What followed were certain theoretical and methodological correctives. The materialist turn of the 1980s, the queer turn of the 1990s and the affective turn of the 2000s produced a body of and for fashion – and a strutting, posing, feeling body at that. But even here a gap has remained between corporeal reality and aesthetic appearance, ensconced in the idea that fashion is something put *on* the body, an exo-skeleton of fabrics, accessories and cosmetics whose meaning-laden materiality can be added or removed at will. If we take media/tion into careful consideration, however, then we should question the separability of fashion and bodies, not only because fashion always mediates the body but also because bodies themselves are increasingly being mediated as fashion in our era of bodily modification, transformation and exposure. By extending the history of semiotic spectacle in the direction of a feminist media studies sensitive to gender, race and sexuality (see, for instance, Ahmed 2006), this article suggests a way to see fashion as not being on but *of* the body. Specifically, I propose approaching fashion as an unfolding of the body into kaleidoscopic surface(s), whereby fashion configures the body – always both a material and medial object – as a series of surfaces, or skins. Without setting out a fully fledged methodology, I will offer a pedagogy of reading 'skin-deep' in order to open up the process by which fashion turns the body into skin and skin thereby operates as a medium. To read fashion in this way means skimming the fashion image in order to be attuned to how skin takes on multiple functions: as a means of social codification, as a canvas of aesthetic mediation, and as a site of ambivalent coalescence between spectacle, eroticism and commodity in the act of 'showing skin'.

As well as the inseparability of fashion and the body, another separation refused here is that between theory and methodology. In this article, I assume that theory – that is, the work of conceptualization – offers a blueprint for how we approach objects in the (mediated) world, which is to say that the questions we ask of fashion are always both conceptually driven and methodologically oriented. In focusing on skin as a materialized medium, as a connective tissue between body and fashion that bears signification, I am thus both proposing a theory and modelling a method by providing a rationale for how to do analysis through a particular prism. I call this prism 'skimming' in order to draw attention to a dynamics of looking that moves across the surface, just as a flat stone can be skimmed across water to see how far it bounces before sinking, or – in keeping with the methodology of 'reading' the fashion image – as a reader may skim-read a tome, their eyes moving lightly but eagerly across the surface of the text. Unlike (voyeuristic) gazing or (distracted) glancing, familiar to us from film theory and television studies, respectively (Mulvey 1975; Ellis 1982), skimming a text or image glories in the medial dynamics

of the surface without attempting to grasp the text/image in depth or even assuming that there is a depth to grasp.

Skimming is thus different from the established theory of the gaze, which, as Laura Mulvey posited it with reference to the heteropatriarchal matrix of classical Hollywood film, operates according to a gendered dichotomy between a male, actively gazing subject and a female, passively looked-at object. Mulvey convincingly concluded that both (scopophilic) desire and (narrative) mastery lie on the side of the male gaze, yet, despite her careful recourse to a feminist psychoanalytic framework, this theory relies on a misunderstanding of the gaze in the Lacanian sense. For Lacan, the gaze is synonymous with the ever-elusive *objet petit a*, the impossible object of desire, and hence can never be grasped or mobilized by the desiring subject (1979). On the contrary, the subject itself is prone to being caught in the gaze of the Other, as Lacan elucidates with an anecdote about himself as a young man, on a fishing expedition, being caught in the 'gaze' of a tin can floating on the water when the sun glinted off its surface (1979: 95). Although a tin can bobbing in sunlight is a rather whimsical Other, the anecdote does offer two insights: first, if '[t]hat which is light looks at me', as Lacan says, then the gaze situates and determines 'me' from outside myself rather than being in my control; second, this light, which according to the anecdote is the 'shimmering of a surface', is something that 'grasps me, solicits me at every moment' in a way that renders me captive to its shimmer (1979: 96). To shift from gazing at to skimming the image, then, not only resituates analysis at the level of the surface and what shimmers there but also disentangles a long-standing conflation of mastery and desire that, following on from Mulvey's theorization, has been tied to the voyeuristic male gaze. This is not to dethrone gender as an important analytic, as we shall see, but it does suggest a more complex distribution of agency than that involving a (male) subject who gazes and a (female) object who is gazed at. In refusing the static, gendered dichotomy of the voyeuristic gaze, the practice of skimming allows for the possible pleasures of looking at fashion skin-deep without assuming that this is synonymous with acts of epistemological and erotic possession. Indeed, as anyone who has leafed through fashion magazines or scrolled through red-carpet looks well knows, we can hardly claim to possess the fashion image; on the contrary, we are the ones who are possessed by these shimmering surfaces of 'light [that] looks at me' (Lacan 1979: 96).

In order to ensure that the methodology stays at the level of surface, my approach to reading skin-deep will be to take skin literally as a form of fashion, paying attention to shapewear, second-skin looks and even 'naked dressing' in order to focus on fashion that exposes and/or aestheticizes the skin. In recent years, naked dressing has been particularly at home on the red carpet, worn by female celebrities of a certain age and body type (Edwards et al. 2023), but no one has been more relevant to such skin shows than Kim Kardashian, whose celebrity has become synonymous with fashionable modes of self-exposure created out of latex, netting, *trompe d'oeil* corsetry and the odd champagne glass balanced on her famous posterior. Aside from knowing how to enhance her own body by showing skin, Kardashian is also the co-owner and public face of the billion-dollar shapewear company Skims, whose name directly references the notion of skimming fashion. From shapewear for the everywoman to red-carpet looks for the elite, Kardashian has used her formidable knowledge of media to sell skin-as-fashion for women, as both a concept and an aesthetic. Kardashian's videos and photo shoots for Skims not only show

how to make the body appear as a set of fashionable skins but also remind us that the way skin enwraps a body is heavily dependent on codifications of social identity. While Skims promises to (re)fashion a range of body types and skin tones in Kardashian's image, this image itself has been developing since 2013 through her appearances at the most opulent dress-up event in the fashion calendar, the Met Gala. Oscillating between wearing fabric that fits like skin and displaying skin through barely-there fabric, Kardashian's Met Gala looks have quickly become embedded in fashion history as well as cultural memory. In order to model reading fashion skin-deep, I will pay particular attention to four of these looks: her first Met Gala attendance in a tight, floral Givenchy gloved dress that covered her from neck to toe; the 2019 camp-themed gala, which she attended in the notoriously transparent 'wet dress' by Thierry Mugler; the 2021 about-face in which she appeared literally blacked out, accompanied by the shadow of Balenciaga designer Demna Gvasalia; and her 2022 controversial appearance in the 1962 dress worn by Marilyn Monroe to sing 'Happy Birthday' to John F. Kennedy. Although she is often photographed as a one-woman show, the skin in question, I will argue, is not Kim Kardashian's alone, nor is it just female, white or youthful skin that manifests as aestheticized surface. Rather, skimming Kardashian's fashion serves as a starting point to understanding skin as a medium that raises questions of gender, race and visibility, as well as what kind of aestheticized skin is available to whom.

(S)KIM'S NAKEDNESS

In October 2023, Kardashian's shapewear company Skims announced its new 'nipple' line in the Ultimate Bra, revealing a push-up bra 'with raised nipple detail for a perky, braless look' (SKIMS n.d.: n.pag.). Taking this as a moment ripe for cultural commentary, Zoe Williams wrote in *The Guardian* that now everything was falling into place: 'Between the butt, the shapewear empires and the new nipple-y bra, I've figured out Kim Kardashian's real purpose: to create clothes that make you look more naked than you would naked' (2023: n.pag.). Given that one of the original lines is called Skims Naked, what Skims sells is indeed the 'look' of being naked, but this is a nakedness that is both improved and hyperbolized into 'more than' nudity by the material edits of fashion. Although Skims also produces form-fitting outerwear, the core of the brand is shapewear that is meant to be worn invisibly under clothes like a better-fitting skin, offering tasteful body contouring without unsightly panty or bra lines. Paradoxically, rather than stripping clothing from the body, this nakedness relies on adding fabric while at the same time creating an intimate substratum that erases itself into a smooth surface of seeming skin, just as the nipple-on-nipple effect of the Ultimate Bra magically transforms into a 'braless look'. It is thus the interchangeability between clothing and skin that is being sold, or, to be more accurate, it is the multiple layering of the body under shapewear under outerwear, of skin-on-skin-on-skin, that promises consumers a well-fashioned nakedness. This second skin is both material and signifying, something to be worn and something to be read, conflating the body's largest organ with fabric while promising corporeal control and shapeliness. If fashion involves aesthetic signification, then Skims signifies both a naked body and the body turned into beautiful surface. But, just as Lacan's anecdote of the floating tin complicates the question of whose gaze has mastery, this is not a female body to simply be captured by the (male) gaze, for the

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voyeuristic gaze misses its mark, since it cannot see below the skins to the depth of nakedness. At the same time, it is the wearer of Skims pieces who assumes agency by soliciting the look and sending it skimming over her now-many skins. In Lacan's terms, the onlooker is captivated by the 'shimmering of a surface' (1979: 96), while the 'real' naked body is absent from the field of vision.

At the centre of the promotion of more-than nakedness is Kardashian herself, playing equal parts businesswoman and close confidante as she models the shapewear while touting the equivalence of fabric and skin. In an advert for the Skims Naked line, filmed for YouTube with the intimate tonality of a vlog (Berryman and Kavka 2017), Kardashian takes us into her gushing confidence: '[Y]ou guys, this fabric is so insane, it's like second skin. [...] You have to feel this, you guys. It literally is like so thin and it moulds to you, and then fades' (SKIMS 2020: n.pag.). The rhetoric of 'second skin' that 'moulds to you and then fades' makes an overt pitch: this material is so skin-like as to render the wearer just as naked as she would be in her own skin. At the same time, the pitch for a second skin implies that there is something inadequate or insufficient about one's primary skin, since otherwise a second skin – particularly at this expense – would be unnecessary. As consumers of beauty and fashion products know, however, there is always room for improvement when it comes to natural skin, not least because a woman's own skin is easily prone to 'rolls' which, at least from a western standpoint, have to be shaped and transformed into appropriate 'curves'. As British influencer Emily Lucy Rajch is careful to note in her 'before and after' YouTube review of Skims shapewear, 'obviously there's nothing wrong with rolls', but she nonetheless delights in showing her followers how the Skims bodysuit stops her from looking 'a bit roll-y here' and allows her to fit smoothly into otherwise tight clothing (Rajch 2022: n.pag.). Rajch, moreover, links this second-skin effect directly back to Kardashian's own smooth looks, arguing that 'now everything makes so much sense' when it comes to Kardashian's ability to 'look completely amazing in every single item of clothing she wears'. If, as Rajch argues about Skims products, this is a celebrity 'secret' that Kardashian 'has chosen to share with us', then what is on offer is not just more-than-nakedness but also more than a consumer product; this is a *better* skin out of Kardashian's wardrobe, accompanied by the fantasy that we could be like Kim, enveloped in the expanse of her own (second) skin.

Reconfiguring skin as a connective tissue between body and fashion as well as between Kardashian and consumers, Skims takes second skin as a metonym for underwear on the one hand and the now-shapely skin of all women's bodies on the other. To bring women's bodies into play, however, means facing their plurality and variability, which in turn bears the political charge of recognizing that not all (or any?) bodies equate to the utopic size-zero fashion model. As the brand self-consciously advertises, the Skims line embraces racial diversity and body positivity, selling gradations of pinks, beiges and browns to function as second skin for a range of skin tones while using models of various body shapes and sizes for the headless photos and thumbnails that advertise the products. Emphasizing the importance of colour-matching Skims to skins, the original shoot for the Skims website, which includes Kim Kardashian herself, shows a range of trim but variously proportioned women's bodies (albeit with an emphasis on Kardashian-esque curvy bums) in bras and panties of 'neutral' shades. 'Neutral' in this context means that the garments visually coincide with skin, with the five underwear

shades on display precisely matched to the models' various skin tones, from light to dark. This is undoubtedly intended to signal an aesthetics of inclusivity, but it also makes a direct appeal to skin-as-fashion for women: what you wear as skin must be able to 'fade' into your skin, which in turn positions these bodies, however different from one another, as an equivalent set of fashionable skins. Like the product thumbnails, the original photo shoot encourages us to take surfaces literally, while reminding us that skin is nonetheless never neutral with regard to how lives are being lived. Precisely because of its legible materiality, skin is also a medium of social codification: it is gendered, sexualized and racialized by the way we 'read' its colour, shape, size and signs of wear and tear. This holds true even for Kardashian, whose own skin tone is subject to manipulations through hair colour and body make-up as well as the companions chosen to share the frame.

KK @METGALA 2013 AND 2021: FABRIC AS SKIN

Under *Vogue* editors Diana Vreeland's and Anna Wintour's stewardship since the 1970s, the Met Gala (properly known as the Met Ball and Costume Institute Gala, to signify its function as a fundraising event for the MoMA Costume Institute) has become a major event at the crossroads between couture, celebrity and cutting-edge fashion. It is thus a prime site for tracking the appearance and function of skin-as-fashion, which has been on ample display there at least since 1974, when Cher appeared with designer Bob Mackie in an iconic 'naked dress' that offered little cover for her skin but sequins and feathers. Kim Kardashian, who took inspiration from Cher for her own 'nude dress' at the 2015 Met Gala, has been a regular denizen since 2013, when she first attended as Kanye West's plus-one. In her ten Met Gala appearances so far, Kardashian has run the gamut from nearly nude to fully covered, but a consistent tactic throughout has been her self-conscious (re)configuration of skin-as-fashion in two extreme forms: using fabric to replicate skin and using skin to replicate fabric. Both approaches give seemingly direct visual access to her body, while keeping the gaze firmly at the level of expansive surface.

In 2013, a heavily pregnant Kardashian attended the Met Gala on the arm of her fiancé, Kanye West, clad in a floral, high-neck, gloved gown designed by Riccardo Tisci for Givenchy. Ignoring and even contradicting the Gala theme of 'PUNK: Chaos to Couture', Kardashian came off as dowdy rather than punky, as evidenced by the 'who wore it better?' memes that immediately followed which gleefully compared her to a floral couch on the one hand and Mrs Doubtfire on the other (*Vogue* 2020). Sofa apparitions aside, what is striking in the photos of the dress is that it covers her from chin to invisible toe in depth-inducing flowers, stretching tightly over her pregnancy bump yet creating a dizzying visual effect whereby the rose-print fabric seems to take on three dimensions while the body becomes two-dimensional. Kardashian's voluminous body, in other words, is flattened by being so perfectly encased in this full, falling stretch of floral skin. The effect is underpinned (in a sense literally so) by the gloved hands, which eerily disappear into the field of fabric-skin, especially when Kardashian adopts the classic pregnancy pose with one hand under and the other hand over her rounded belly. Indeed, there is something about the hands being covered with an extension of the same dress material that makes us uncannily aware of cloth as aestheticized skin. Because our hands are usually not covered – or, if so, are covered in a suitable fabric to signal their existence as hands – they seem to occupy a different zone than the

body, one from which the skin recedes as an aesthetic into functionality. Any dress, especially if it extends to the wrist, thus appears in contrast to the hands as having been 'put on' (by the hands themselves, no less). A gloved dress like Kardashian's Givenchy gown, however, deprives the hands of their special standing by encasing them in the same 'skin' that covers the rest of the body, making them secondary to, and even lost within, the print that redimensionalized Kardashian's body at the 2013 Gala.

Eight years later, a much more confident Kardashian appeared at the Met Gala in a 'black-out' dress that can be described as an extension, both literally and figuratively, of the Givenchy floral dress. In *Vogue's* 'Kim Kardashian breaks down 21 looks' video (2020), Kardashian explains that Riccardo Tisci had originally made two versions of the Givenchy dress, one in black and one in floral print. Although a reluctant Kardashian was persuaded to wear the floral one on the 2013 red carpet, in 2021 the ghost of the all-over black dress made its Met Gala appearance with a vengeance, now designed by Demna Gvasalia for Balenciaga. In this much more radical version, Kardashian appears dressed literally from head to toe in black, with her face and head enshrouded as well as her hands and feet fully covered. Although the silhouette is familiar – with Kardashian's recognizable hourglass shape outlined by the jersey mini-dress with loose sleeves and a double train attached to the back – the effect is startling, for the simple reason that the very elements which are meant to individualize someone (the face, the hands) are skinned over in black. In a *volta face* from the 'nude' Gala looks worn by Kardashian in 2015 and 2019 (discussed below), not to mention the latex looks that Kardashian has consistently favoured (*Vogue* 2020), the black-out dress seeks to cover everything rather than expose it. As Gvasalia himself explained, however, erasing the facial identifiers provides a revelation about celebrity, since a blacked-out Kim is still recognizably Kim:

People would know instantly it was Kim because of her silhouette. [...] They wouldn't even need to see her face, you know? And I think that's the whole power of her celebrity, that people wouldn't need to see her face to know it's her.

(cited in Minton 2022: n.pag.)

While the body silhouette may be tell-tale Kardashian, however, the literal masking of her face with darkly opaque material extends the black jersey of the dress into an all-body skin that blocks the eye and refutes the gaze of the camera. In an ironic riposte to the paparazzi lens, Gvasalia – who doubled the all-black effect by appearing at Kardashian's side as her date – teases everyone who wants to get a peek at Kardashian's body by enwrapping her in an expansive surface of blackness that swallows the light and our gaze with it. For viewers, there is nothing to be done but to skim our eyes over the surface, looking in vain for a chink in the blackness while submitting to the captivation of even a fully covered Kim.

KK @METGALA 2019 AND 2022: SKIN AS FABRIC

In contrast to fabric that encases her body as a second skin, Kardashian has also memorably gone the other way at the Met Gala by wearing dresses which, in effect, allow her to go naked, or at least to project herself as such. Her first nude look appeared in 2015, when Kardashian wore a dress, designed by Peter

Dundas for Roberto Cavalli, that layered an intricate pearl-and-crystal pattern over her visibly naked skin before dissolving into a pool of feathers at her feet. In response to that year's theme, 'China: Through the Looking Glass', the crystal arrangement recalled a geometric Chinese pattern, but the actual inspiration, as Kardashian made clear, was Cher's appearance three decades previously in a naked dress that used strings of sequins and feathers to eye-catchingly reveal her body. In Kardashian's case, from the front she looked more dressed on the red carpet than Cher had, partly due to the richly beaded epaulettes and sleeves of the dress, but photos taken from behind as she swept up the MoMA stairs revealed the swathes of skin visible at her hips and bottom, exposing the fact that she was *sans* underwear and alluringly more-than-naked.

Kardashian returned to this concept with full force in 2019, when she attended the Met Gala wearing a 'wet dress' designed by Thierry Mugler. The look, for which Mugler envisioned Kardashian as 'this California girl stepping out of the ocean, wet, dripping' (De Klerk 2019: n.pag.), placed her body in a tightly corseted, centre-ruched dress made of nude-toned latex, with myriad hanging crystals evoking water drops. Carefully paired with gelled hair, oiled skin and body make-up to tan her skin tone and highlight her breasts, the wet look also paid homage – as Kardashian announced on Instagram – to Sophia Loren in peasant décolleté emerging from the water onto a fishing boat in the 1957 film *Boy on a Dolphin* (De Klerk 2019: n.pag.). Perhaps as part of the Loren homage, of all the dresses that Kardashian has worn on the red carpet, the 'wet dress' is the one that most strikingly outlines her curvaceous figure, with her symmetrically rounded breasts, hips and famous posterior (the dress was also ruched in the back) highlighting and, being highlighted by, her impossibly cinched waist. This is Kardashian's body both *au naturel* and utterly moulded, setting up a visual paradox whereby the seemingly transparent material both liberates her nakedness and constricts her into an exaggerated hourglass shape. On the one hand, the latex is nothing but a transparent layer of skin-on-skin, revealing Kardashian in her seeming naturalness, while on the other hand the 'not there' dress shapes the body in a way that only corsetry can achieve. As Alexandra Sastre has noted, moreover, Kardashian's hourglass figure draws on expectations for white as well as black women's bodies, thereby signalling a double racial coding. Her fulsome breasts recall those traditionally romanticized as belonging to a white female body, as evident in the breast-centric poses of Kardashian's own 2007 *Playboy* spread (Sastre 2014: 129), while the large, rounded posterior has historically been associated by Anglo-Europeans with black women, as Sastre discusses in relation to the 'Hottentot Venus' (2014: 131). This racial codification continues today, not least, as Racquel Gates points out with due irony, in 'the Black "video vixens" made famous in music videos starring rappers like Kardashian's ex-husband, Kanye West' (Gates 2022: n.pag.). Like the hyper-naked effect of the Skims lines, the 'wet dress' reminds us that showing skin engages with a two-fold trajectory: skin is a medium of erotic frisson as well as of social codification, functioning in both instances as a shaping mechanism that draws the eye to a (naked) body but also pins it within the social field.

Although visually striking, the 'wet dress' was not Kardashian's most controversial skin show at the Met Gala; this distinction goes to her 2022 appearance in the very dress worn by Marilyn Monroe in May 1962 at John F. Kennedy's birthday gala in Madison Square Garden. Explaining her decision in a *Vogue* interview to wear the garment in honour of the Gala theme

'In America: An Anthology of Fashion', Kardashian herself called it 'the original naked dress', worn during the 'most memorable Marilyn Monroe moment' when she sang 'Happy Birthday' onstage to Kennedy (Nnadi 2022: n.pag.). Indeed, the contemporary impact of the 'original naked dress' can be heard on the archival recording when the crowd collectively gasps as Monroe, standing at the microphone, removes her white stole and reveals the dress delicately clinging to her visible breasts (Marilyn Monroe Video Archive 2014). Created by Hollywood costumier Jean Louis and based on a design by his then-assistant Bob Mackie, the dress seemed to strip Monroe's body of fabric while both attracting and reflecting back the gaze through its 6000 glittering crystals. On Kardashian the dress is more shapely, no doubt because of the shapewear worn underneath, producing a skimming effect of skin-on-skin-on-skin.

The controversial nature of the dress, however, has less to do with the exposure of Kardashian's body (which, while striking, is hardly shocking) than with the exposure of the dress *to* Kardashian's body, which opponents claim stretched and damaged the vintage garment in the few minutes that she had it on before changing into a replica. Kardashian has made no secret of the work that went into moulding herself into the dress, from having to lose eighteen pounds in three weeks to spending an entire day dying her hair platinum and having to sacrifice her usual body make-up. In the debates about the ethics of wearing the original dress, Kardashian as well as her proponents stressed the labour – as in, the work on *herself* – that she had to undergo in order to discipline her body to fit into the dress, thus implicitly 'earning' the right to wear it. What was at stake, however, was not just a dress (or even *the* dress), but the dress as Monroe's own skin. As Racquel Gates observes, Kardashian aimed to become Monroe by stepping into her skin, in a move which fuelled criticism about her commodity tactics of appropriation:

Kardashian's desire to essentially wear Monroe's identity *like a second skin* fits into a larger charge about the former (and some of her sisters): that they are shameless appropriators of culture and style as part of their personal and professional branding.

(2022: n.pag., emphasis added)

For Gates, the controversy echoes earlier criticism of Kardashian's (and her sisters') appropriation of black culture through both fashion and bodily signifiers, which 'informs the perception that Kardashian was consciously attempting to poach Monroe's stardom – and Whiteness – when she donned her famous dress' (2022: n.pag.). In this light, the gesture of appropriating the blonde bombshell's skin comes weighted with the uncomfortable sense that the blackness Kardashian had earlier toyed with 'was a temporary stop' on the way to the pinnacle of celebrity whiteness (Gates 2022: n.pag.).

To read the 'original naked dress' through the methodology of skimming fashion, however, means paying attention to its layers, specifically to the layers of media history that are re-enacted, covered over and reiterated through the borrowing of someone's skin. Indeed, if we think of fashion less as a set of citations than as a palimpsestic layering of (celebrity) skins, then we might notice that there is another star, another bombshell dress hidden in the historical tangle between Monroe and Kardashian. I am referring here to Madonna, who borrowed heavily from Monroe's iconicity from the mid-1980s (e.g. the video for 'Material Girl' [1984]) to her platinum look of the

1990s, perhaps nowhere more memorably than when she performed the *Dick Tracy* theme song at the 1991 Oscars in a slinkily seductive homage to Monroe while wearing a bejewelled, white column dress designed by Bob Mackie. The palimpsestic layer provided by Madonna extends to a self-consciously ironic reiteration of Kardashian's own Monroe homage in *American Horror Story: Delicate* (Season 12, 2023, FX), which cast Kardashian as a ruthlessly successful publicist who procures the 'exact dress' worn by Madonna in 1991 for her awards-bound celebrity client, while warning her awed client 'just do *not* rip it' ('Rockabye' 2023, emphasis added). The reference to Kardashian's own experience with, and heavy criticism for, wearing Monroe's dress is unmistakable. What the Madonna reference in *AHS: Delicate* reveals, however, is that at the 2022 Met Gala Kardashian was stepping into the skin of a previous blonde-bombshell star who had stepped into the skin of Monroe – who, after all, had transformed herself in the late 1940s from Norma Jean into Marilyn by donning the signifiers of a well-established Hollywood bombshell prototype (see her brief appearance in a white column dress in *All About Eve* [Mankiewicz 1950]). Indeed, the white stole that has traditionally accompanied the blonde-bombshell look, from Monroe in *All About Eve* to Madonna on the Oscars stage and even to *AHS: Delicate*, reminds us that, until recently, wearing a literal (albeit non-human) skin was part of the performance that fashioned femininity as something to be stripped down under the spotlight.

Reading fashion as skin thus points us to a palimpsest of surface adornments, like crystals and sequins and feathers, that allow the skin-on-skin-on-skin relation to shine through. This may also help to explain Kardashian's 2023 Met Gala dress, a Schiaparelli outfit made entirely of strands of pearls draped in heavy loops from her neck over her breasts and from her hips over her legs, all worn over a blush-toned corset that left the breasts exposed. As some onlookers noted (Southwick 2023), the material strongly suggests a flashback to the pearl garlands semi-covering Kardashian's naked body in her 2007 *Playboy* shoot (Littal 2022), which Alexandra Sastre has argued were used as a way to add romanticized class to her nudity (Sastre 2014). The skin as palimpsest works to unearth the individual's celebrity and media history behind the pearls, as well as a cultural history of skin-sharing.

That Kim Kardashian is never just one skin also explains the fixation of paparazzi as well as fashion followers with the entire Kardashian family being on display. This certainly holds true for the 2019 Met Gala, which for the first time included invitations for Kris, Kendall and Kylie Jenner. A photo of the family group on the Met staircase shows Kylie in lavender hair and mesh-dress, on the stair above Kendall in orange sequins and feathers, who is poised next to Kim in the Mugler 'wet dress', who stands on the stair above Kris in a navy pant suit and grey tulle overcoat to go with her platinum bob. This widely circulated image may connote little more than Kardashian-ness, but the coordinated accessories and props of the *mise en scène* also create a continuous skin out of the bodies in the frame: the purple feathers of Kylie's drop sleeves and mesh skirt extend into the orange feathers flaring behind Kendall's head and falling from her thighs, while the glitter of Kylie's dress catches the same light reflected in Kendall's sequins, which echo the droplets of light/water in Kim's crystals, which in turn extend to the glittering star brooch at Kris's cleavage. Unsurprisingly, the rounded shape of all four women's breasts create a visual echo, despite different degrees of bustiness, in part because of the similar cupping and body make-up techniques used

across the frame. The entire Kardashian palette, on the brown-orange-blue scale of the rainbow (including Kris's partner Corey's blue satin pussy bow), is one continuous surface and hence a single stretch of *medial skin*. What is yet to be mentioned, however, is that there is also actual skin in the frame, made visually striking by the contrast between the Kardashian women's whiteness and the black skin of their companions, with Travis Scott standing head-down behind Kylie, Kanye West placed protectively behind Kim and Corey Gamble standing next to Kris (the only one, interestingly, to be positioned slightly in front of his woman). In the context of critical interest in the Kardashians' racial allegiances, symbolizations and appropriations (Sastre 2014; Gates 2022), it is noteworthy that the men – whose dark suits and skins make them less visible than the gleaming women – function here as props, as materially embodied accessories whose black skin is, or at least was then, a necessary part of the Kardashians' collective 'look'. Taken together, the dresses, sequins, feathers, hair products, body make-up and white as well as black skins create a kaleidoscopic surface of modulated visibility on which couture, celebrity and self-branding coalesce into fashion.

GENDERED SKIN

Although Kardashian is a fierce proponent of skin-as-fashion, she is by far not the only one to engage in naked dressing, nor is naked dressing restricted to a woman's body, despite the feminine focus of glamour magazines. Cis-male bodies can also wear skin-as-fashion, whether as a mark of awareness about how fashioning the skin can create gender variability or, on the contrary, as an insistence that skin is the guarantor of the 'natural' masculine body. Both approaches have their own long histories, with queer drag in the first case and tattoo cultures in the second immediately coming to mind. As with the second-skin effect examined above in relation to Skims and Kardashian's Met Gala looks, the skins of the cis-male body may similarly engage with modes of aesthetic (re)signification through fabric, cosmetics or ink applied to its surfaces. However, while second skins on feminine bodies are meant to disappear from view, enhancing the effect of nakedness, on masculine bodies the aestheticized skin is to be seen as primary, however spectacularized. Either way, skin on cis-male bodies can serve as a surface for negotiating gendered spectacle amidst its ongoing reconfiguration.

This can be no better exemplified than in the programme that has single-handedly popularized the spectacle of queer drag, *RuPaul's Drag Race* (2009–present, LogoTV/VH1/MTV). While numerous 'lewks' across the seasons have shown plenty of skin, RuPaul and the panel of judges remain committed to the art of drag by insisting that the contestants use the full range of make-up and accessories to create an 'illusion'. This has traditionally been the illusion of femininity layered onto cis-male bodies through cosmetics, gowns, wigs, etc., but is now extending into transgender and even post-human layerings. Across the gender spectrum displayed on the drag runway, however, what remains consistent is the surface tension between revealing and reshaping the body, between stripping off and covering up, as was highlighted during the final challenge of the Season 7 pilot episode (2015), when contestants were asked to come up with a 'resort-wear tearaway to create a nude illusion'. For this challenge, each queen came down the catwalk in some version of summer elegance before tearing away the dress to reveal her 'naked' skin underneath. In most cases, this involved a sheer or skin-tone bodysuit made

up to look like a nude female body, with some queens (e.g. Mrs Kasha Davis and Ginger Minj) air-brushing realistic breasts, navel and vulva onto the second skin of the bodysuit. Only a few queens opted to go (nearly) nude in their own skin, prompting one of the panellists, Michelle Visage, to criticize Violet Chachki, who wore little in the way of fabric or body make-up, for giving 'too much boy' and thus too little illusion. The aesthetic commitment to illusion, moreover, was borne out technologically, for when the episode aired on LogoTV the queens' private parts – that is, the nipples, pubic hair and bum crack that cis women must cover in public and on-screen – were pixelated, despite the fact that wearing a 'naked' second skin does not technically break with broadcasting standards. The challenge, then, turned out not to be about simply using sheer fabrics or cosmetics to create a feminine illusion, but rather about adding the technical skins of fashion and media – fabric, paint, pixellation – in order to strip down the body to its seemingly naked surface. This in turn produced a panoply of ambiguous surfaces that captivated viewers, as evidenced by fan discussions on Reddit about who was wearing how much under which pixels. By dressing up on the runway as naked, then, the contestants were not preening for a voyeuristic gaze, but rather inviting viewers to skim over the surfaces of the (cis-male) body in order to enjoy its reconfiguration as (feminized) skin.

In a similar mode but preaching a different gender ideology is the culture of tattoos, which at base are a permanent form of body make-up that (re)fashions the skin. While the popularization of tattoos for feminine as well as masculine bodies has considerably broadened the set of significations attached to body ink (Botz-Bornstein 2013), there is still a strong association between tattoos and virility, especially for older generations. One prominent example of tattoos as skin-on-skin fashion appears in British *GQ* magazine's interview with rock icon Iggy Pop and the celebrity chef Anthony Bourdain (Dil 2018). The interview, dated 18 June 2018 but originally released in November 2017, was re-published by *GQ* in tribute to Bourdain on the day of his death, by suicide at age 61. Despite the themes of ageing and dying discussed in the interview by the two friends and starkly reiterated by the subsequent death of Bourdain, what is most striking about the *GQ* piece is the accompanying photo, which spectacularizes skin and tattoos as a counterweight to any suggestion of Bourdain's or Pop's mortality. Rather, the fashion shoot – since *GQ* is, after all, a fashion magazine – celebrates their hypermasculinity in a cool, casual defiance of ageing. Both men are stripped to the waist, with tanned skin and muscles on display, in a stance that welcomes (from Bourdain) as well as challenges (from Pop) the gaze of the camera. Bourdain, the taller of the two and slightly in the foreground, adds eye-catching tattoos, sculpted abs and carved pecs to the skin show, while Pop balances a painted skull (complete with sunglasses) on Bourdain's left shoulder in an aesthetic match to the skull tattooed on the latter's right shoulder. The men are further accessorized by sunglasses, acid-washed jeans (Bourdain) and grey-patterned board shorts (Pop), as they pose in front of a monumental black Rolls Royce convertible, whose casually opened door props up Pop's outstretched arm. Funnily enough, the sweeping sleek car is rendered nearly invisible by the expanse of toned male skin, which absorbs the (dare I say it, phallic) power of the car and mixes it with the markers of male celebrity well-lived, in an appeal that radiates from the surface of the photo. In place of fabric, Bourdain and Pop wear their masculinity on and as their own skin, which – marked by the wear and tear of hard living and accessorized by muscles and tats – signifies

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robustness, virility and an unquestionable aesthetic of cool. There is a joke in the centre of the frame for those who insist on looking deep – a shiny skull that aesthetically binds their two heads and syncs the metaphysics of ageing to the themes of the interview – but the fashion is on the surface and, crucially, on the skin.

These are admittedly only two examples from a wide range that could be brought to bear on the larger question of cis-male skins. For the purposes of my interest in skimming the mediated surfaces of fashion, however, there is at least one observation on the gendering of skins that can be made on the basis of these contrasting examples. While femininity, both as embodiment and performance, dons a second skin which is meant to recede from view in the production of more-than-nakedness, masculine virility parades in its original skin as natural, no matter how stylized. Both skins, of course, conceal as much as they reveal. Whether this be the 'rolls' of women smoothed into curves or the Rolls that props up Pop's and Bourdain's poses, our eyes are guided – or, as Lacan says, grasped and solicited – in very particular ways by the surfaces on display.

CONCLUSION: SKIN SHOWS

It is worth stressing an obvious but easily overlooked point: given that I have never been on the Met Gala guest list or invited to the *Drag Race* studio, all of the looks discussed here are not only highly aestheticized but fully mediated, whether through online magazines, shopping websites, social media or television footage. This is, of course, the way that nearly all of us access fashion at the nexus of couture, celebrity and commodification. Thus, while reading skin-deep means understanding skin to be fashioned as both an aesthetic surface and a materialized medium, we should also be aware that these skins, and the bodies they outline, arrive already mediated; indeed, their very presence is predicated on the process of mediation. Because the skin in question is never just a single person's, not even the ubiquitous Kim Kardashian's, reading skin-deep stretches to more than the question of how skin is fashioned to encase individuals. As a methodology, it also reflects on the way that skin stretches across the media frame: historically, as a palimpsest, as well as associatively in the visual field, conjoining all bodies, objects and elements into a single fashionable surface. To situate skin within this broader context of mediation, then, suggests that the 'skin' of fashion encompasses not only fabric becoming skin and vice versa but also the glossy pages, screens and projections that allow us to see how skin becomes fashion in the first place.

I would thus argue that reading skin-deep, as both theory and method, involves giving up on an independent body while taking into account the many operations of skin as a human, synthetic as well as medial membrane. After all, it is through the mediation of skin that we, as consumers of fashion, experience the 'shimmering of a surface' that sends us skimming from facet to facet and image to image. The skin of fashion, in this light, is not just a fabric to drape, mould or display the body; rather, to update Lacan's claim, the glinting light that 'looks at me' is the light of media, the photographic flash that makes visible the surface to which our eyes adhere. If fashion mediates the body through the materiality of skin, then this implies the inseparability of body and fashion, while also offering a critical entry point to reading the fashion image that stays on, and with, the surface. Luckily, that is also where the shimmer is, all 6000 crystals' worth.

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CONTRIBUTOR DETAILS

Misha Kavka is a professor of cross-media culture at the University of Amsterdam and co-founder of the research group Queer Analysis at the Amsterdam School for Cultural Analysis. She has published widely on gender, sexuality, celebrity and affect in relation to television, film and media technologies. She is the author of *Reality Television, Affect and Intimacy* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2008) and *Reality TV* (Edinburgh University Press, 2012), and the co-editor of volumes and special issues on reality television, gothic culture and feminist theory.

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Contact: Department of Media Studies, University of Amsterdam,
Turfdragsterpad 9, 1012 XT Amsterdam, the Netherlands.
E-mail: m.kavka@uva.nl

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0546-4421>

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