



## CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES

### Look Up and Smile! Seeing through Alexa's Algorithmic Gaze

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What's at stake in the introduction of algorithmic fashion assistants? In April 2017, Amazon debuted Echo Look, the latest in their cluster of products that are built on artificial intelligence called Alexa. Echo Look is a small oval device equipped with a camera, designed to be a virtual fashion assistant when you need "a second opinion on your outfit."

The video promoting Echo Look opens on a brightly lit living room where a young woman is lying on a couch. The camera pans to a close-up image of her feet—in patterned red socks—resting on the top of the couch arms. We hear her say, as if asking a real person, "Alexa, what is the weather today?" while the camera zooms in on her face. Cutting from one scene to another, we watch able-bodied mainly female actors performatively pose for the camera in modern well-fitting clothing with distinct styles. They appear racially diverse and upper-middle class: different skin colors and distinct facial features are represented, set within modern minimalist interiors and refined clothing. The ad ends with each of the women moving away from the camera's frame.

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Echo Look's short promotional video fits well into the contemporary tech ad genre. The only marked difference is that it prominently features women, a clue to the assumption it holds regarding its main users' gender—aligned with modern ads for domestic technologies such as detergents and washing machines. Echo Look promises ease and fluidity of use streamlined into the morning routine of the successful upper-middle-class woman who nonetheless needs help with her appearance. The ad's imagery reveal more of what it presupposes about its idealized user: her morning routine is clearly not about scrambling to prepare breakfast, checking in on a sick parent, or frantically finishing an overdue report for work; what she needs, rather, is an inventory of her wardrobe so she can recall the clothing she owns, panoramic videos to check for possible imperfections from every angle, and even more efficient ways to share her photos with friends. Above all, she needs a personal stylist who can tell her what not to wear on command.

Compared to those applications of artificial intelligence and big data that pose a direct threat to lives and livelihoods such as drones, self-driving cars, or smart policing (see, for example, Eubanks, 2018; JafariNaimi, 2018; Noble, 2018, Suchman, Follis, & Weber, 2017), Echo Look may seem like an innocuous gadget. Nonetheless, Echo Look is worthy of attention on multiple grounds, two of which I outline here. As with any new technology, its introduction surfaces ethical and political issues that may have been invisible otherwise, in this case no less than dominant perceptions of (women's) bodies and what fashion is and does. The specificity of the domain is also productive for seeing this category of technology anew, illuminating its taken-for-granted premises and lofty promises.

### **Seen from Every Angle: Unmasking the Algorithm's Gaze**

The idea of a disciplinary gaze (Foucault, 1977), symbolized in Jeremy Bentham's design of a circular prison where the inmates are always visible from a tower at the center—especially its features of permanent visibility

and heightened consciousness—has been a productive starting point for understanding fitness and beauty regimes in their power to render bodies the subject of an ever-present gaze.<sup>1</sup> Subjects subjugate themselves by internalizing the gaze that yields a power distributed in social relations, practices, and ideals. For example, individuals monitor their bodies, constantly comparing them to what is for most an unachievable ideal pictured in health and beauty magazines. Or extensive health and beauty regimes are sold under the guise of freedom (Duncan & Klos, 2012): you will feel and look healthy if you lose only five pounds!<sup>2</sup>



Figure 1. The actors in the ad exhibit this constricted grace as they pose for Alexa. In this screenshot set within a brightly lit bedroom, we see a presumably young Asian woman in black clothing in front of a dresser with Echo Look on top. Her hands are in her pockets, her shoulders are back and her chin is up. She appears calm and content with a subtle smile.

Echo Look's disciplining powers align with these patterns but play out in more insidious ways.<sup>3</sup> For instance, getting Alexa to take a picture requires a carefully choreographed move: standing at the right distance from the camera, ensuring adequate lighting, and making sure she can actually recognize the words spoken in the presence of other noises or an accent.

“Look up and smile” is what appears on the screen before the picture is taken. The phrase evokes experiences of street harassment, fitting squarely within a culture where being ladylike still often carries expectations of smiling with the chin up, sitting with ankles crossed, and taking up as little space as possible with dainty movements that are nonthreatening and docile. The limitations and choreographed poses (both required and suggested) extend disciplinary practices where “feminine movement, gesture, and posture must exhibit not only constriction, but grace and a certain eroticism restrained by modern society: all three” (Bartky, 1988, p. 30) (Figure 1).<sup>4</sup>

The app is designed to collect, archive, and support sharing of these poses well-aligned with practices of self-presentation on social media and the associated thirst for a steady stream of images to maintain meticulously crafted personas, ready for instantaneous albeit fleeting consumption. In this manner, Echo Look serves as another tool for the selfie genre, “quantifying the self and regulating the value of affective labor” (Losh, 2015). The vulnerability that comes with the exposure of 360-degree views of the body reinforces the perpetual need for fashion assistance in a world that judges individuals, especially women, on their ability to effectively manage and present their bodies. As such, Echo Look emerges as the perfect tool for self-discipline through 360-degree views that render a *view from nowhere*—another example of *unregulated gluttony* of technological vision (Haraway, 1988, p. 581). In doing so, it carries forward the history in which women are framed to be just a sight (Rocamora, 2011) assisted by the omnipresence of tools both low- and high-tech: mirrors, cameras, screens, and now this!

### Authorizing Cloud: Ceding Authority to Data

The disciplining power in the relentless monitoring of poses and gestures is coupled with that of Echo Look’s *normalizing judgment*.<sup>5</sup> Like a nagging whisper, Alexa emerges with mysteriously sourced yet authoritative

decrees. Trying out Echo Look in my design studio, it was striking to observe how even my students and colleagues who are most knowledgeable about fashion, those with a distinct style and high confidence, doubted their choices when faced with Alexa's ratings—and tried hard to figure out the logic behind the percentages: Is it that it does not like the combination of patterns or is this jacket too boxy? And, potentially, this process can continue indefinitely as the comparative results are generated in percentages with no stopping point, as a perfect score appears unattainable.

Still, ceding judgment to its code is not where Alexa's demands end. As the promotional video comes to an end, we hear, "Plus, Alexa is built in the cloud and always getting smarter—and so will Echo Look." In this way, the normative judgment of Alexa substantiates the pitfalls of a code that is simultaneously absolutist and relativistic. It is absolutist in the sense of assuming that a universal set of principles could provide the basis for fashion choices, therefore undermining individual and cultural diversities in fashion expression as well as the deeply social and situated nature of fashion for dominant Western, heteronormative notions of style and beauty. It is relativistic in the sense that it looks to majority opinion to identify and fix this universal code, elevating already powerful voices.

Moreover, Amazon is selling Echo Look while in beta, "laden with the promise of what it might become" (Stilgoe, 2018, p. 26). This promise is similar to that of other products dependent on machine learning, enlisting users to submit their most intimate data for realizing the products' full potential while the terms of accountability and ownership remain ambiguous. What is clear, however, is that the dynamics and ideals of the sharing economy and connectivity are similarly mobilized, carrying over the legacies of gendered and racialized labor, not unlike what we have seen in other crowdsourced platforms such as Google Image Labeler and Mechanical Turk (Atanasoski & Vora, 2015; Irani, 2015; JafariNaimi, 2012). And, of course, the kinds of information that Amazon can potentially mine from these images is mind-boggling. They include not only the details of

what I wear, what size I am, or my favorite colors. They also contain information about the rhythms of my life—when I get dressed daily for work or the gym for ever more precise targeted ads—as well as information about my surroundings—what furniture I own, what books are on my nightstand, or what brand of vitamins I take.<sup>6</sup>

### **What Algorithms Cannot Do: I Need Something That Looks Like I'm Destroying the Patriarchy**

What this algorithmic gaze fails to see, however, is where I am going, both literally and figuratively. The former, that is whether I am dressing to go to a club or a funeral, is potentially an option that can be added in future updates to the app. The latter, however, is telling of that aspect of fashion that is beyond the domain of algorithmic analysis.

In a recent *New York Times* commentary, Eva Hagberg Fisher (2018) documents what it was like to think through her choices of outfits as she appeared in court and on TV, for testimonies, speeches, photo shoots, and interviews, after she found herself in the very particular situation of defending her sexual harassment case. Her account, titled “How I Learned to Look Believable,” brings to the fore a nuanced understanding of fashion that can be characterized as a mode of inquiry into the social world. This understanding emerges from the inherently problematic nature of situations that call for an attentiveness to what is worn, as expressed in one of the principles that Hagberg Fisher shares: “You always want to stay ‘just plausibly sexy enough to look like you could have been harassed but 100 percent weren’t asking for it.’”

The question “what should I wear” surfaces because Hagberg Fisher is in a particularly delicate situation. It is a situation that is difficult to pin down, one that calls for pause and reflection on what outfit might best serve it. The uncertainty of the situation manifests in the difficulty of characterizing it as she approaches different salespersons for help. “I need something that looks like I’m destroying the patriarchy,” is among the questions she attempts, hardly resulting in any helpful suggestions. What is certain,

however, is that Hagberg Fisher's concern is not about how well the clothes sit on the body or whether the colors and patterns match. Nor is her question about crafting an expressive or performative personal style. Rather, her uncertainty about what to wear is a reflection of the uncertainty of the situation. Her journey develops as a way of questioning the social world and the relational qualities that shape and reshape it. Each outfit serves as a probe into this world that is at once pushing back at the situation, collecting evidence about how it reacts, while upholding an ideal: "I wish that we lived in a world where I could both wear high-heeled gold-detailed boots and be utterly reliable and credible, but the patriarchy is still too strong."

Paradoxically for Hagberg Fisher, the fact that her situation demands her to pay meticulous attention to her clothes is a direct product of the same patriarchy that she is attempting to destroy. And indeed, it is striking to see how an understanding of what this precarious situation is exactly develops as she composes one outfit after another, rendering the collection of outfits as a trace of what she learns in the process. Fashion and style emerge, in this manner, as ways of engaging, challenging, and inquiring about the world. This is perhaps true for both individual styles and collective developments in fashion sensibility. As an example of the latter, consider the adoption of shoulder pads as women worked to find a place at the table by conveying power through a silhouette that resembled that of their male counterparts—and how its going out of fashion reflects a new collective understanding of values and issues at stake for women working alongside men. In short, what Hagberg Fisher's poignant piece of commentary captures is the inherently situational and social nature of fashion that is irreducible to algorithmic logic.

Echo Look's promotional video alludes to empowerment through imagery of women who appear confident about their looks, veiling the high price of its promise: being tethered to a device that reveals very little while demanding a whole lot. Well-aligned with the dominant understanding of fashion as frivolous, Echo Look reduces it to a matter of fit, color, and pattern combinations; following trends; and keeping an inventory of what

you own. What's more, Echo Look remains of no use at all for situations such as that of Hagberg Fisher's, when the question of what to wear is very real and of consequence. It is my hope, however, that Echo Look's introduction occasions the opportunity to see fashion for its substance as we interrogate algorithms' claim to reason: surfacing both their inadequacy and oppressive potency.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> It is important to note that Foucault does not directly engage disciplinary practices that influence female bodies, as highlighted by Sandra Bartky (1998). For an overview of Foucault's theory in relationship Western bodily practices inclusive of its criticisms, see Pylypa (1998).

<sup>2</sup> This is not to overlook the active engagement of individuals and groups with such norms and practices in spite of challenges such as those noted by Diane Ponterotto (2016). Indeed fashion itself, as I will also discuss later, is recognized a site of creativity, resistance, and individual and social action. Fashion is, arguably, marked by a central tension that is being liberatory and disciplinary at the same time. Tarrant and Jolles's (2012) edited collection *Fashion Talks: Undressing the Power of Style* takes up this tension through a series of articles engaging fashion from feminist perspectives. For an informative series of articles, commentary, and creative work that capture current debates and scholarship on different facets of fashion, see also the Spring/Summer issues of *WSQ: Women's Studies Quarterly*, inclusive of Natalie Havlin and Jillian M. Báez's (2018) essay charting recent debates in this area as well as noteworthy examples such as Michele White's (2018) discussion of feminist makeup tutorials and

masquerades on YouTube, or the ten principles of disability justice captured by Patricia Berne and collaborators (2018) on behalf of the Sin Invalid performance project on disability and sexuality.

<sup>3</sup> While the concept of the gaze is a productive point of entry into critique of Echo Look, it is by no means to be where we stop and certainly not a wholesale endorsement of Foucault—which is certainly unwise, as articulated by Linda Alcoff (1990).

<sup>4</sup> For dramatic examples of such poses, see the promotional video at <https://www.amazon.com/Amazon-Echo-Look-Camera-Style-Assistant/dp/B0186JAEWK>.

<sup>5</sup> Foucault identified three disciplinary powers: hierarchical observation, normalizing judgment, and examination. For a concise summary, see Gutting (2014).

<sup>6</sup> The kinds of collective insights that such a big data set might yield are unclear yet open to speculation. Could they be used by Amazon to sell its overstocked plaid skirts? Could the combination of my daily facial expressions together with my weight changes be revealing of my mood and lifestyle and thus of value to insurance companies? For recent precedents, consider Roomba's collection of home maps or the exposure of military bases through the fitness app Strava's maps of running and walking routes.

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## Bio

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