

## Annamari Vänskä, *Fashionable Childhood: Children in Advertising*, Bloomsbury, 2017

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Since the twentieth century individuals have become more self-conscious, more concerned about their health and looks, inevitably transferring such attitudes onto their children. Children grow up in an age that is thoroughly permeated and seduced by the media, and visual material is a crucial tool to foster customers' loyalty and build consumers' identity. Its function is also to mould our concept of an ideal childhood. Images have the ability to bypass linguistic and cultural barriers and through media and advertising they encourage children's body-consciousness as well as the idea that their body can be altered and that it is possible to build identities or reshape personalities. As early as at the age of preteens and teens they become accustomed to the idea that their bodies can be modified not only with clothes, accessories and make-up, but even with plastic surgery.

In her book Annamari Vänskä analyses representations of childhood in high fashion advertisements, that is, fashion as idealized imagery: "it shows how childhood should be, rather than what it is. Fashion images are interesting to study because they both express and challenge the prevailing conception of the ideal childhood."<sup>1</sup> Through the innovative focus on the so-called symbolic childhood we get the idea of values, ideals and perceptions of our entire society. Very little research has been conducted on the construction of childhood in advertising and no research at all on the role of children as models, whereas much has been studied on the aspect of children as consumers. *Fashionable Childhood* is a pioneering, much needed contribution to the field of fashion studies, it provides well researched theoretical and historical analysis of contemporary issues on childhood, such as innocence, sexuality, race, gender and consumerism. Its constructionist approach, strongly linked to the historical and social context, stresses how clothing and visual representations contribute to shaping childhood.

This book offers an enlightening analysis of innocence as a social construct, spanning from the role of colours in constructing gender-specific social codes to colour as a marker of ethnicity and "otherness." Of particular interest is Ralph Lauren's advertisement of 2010 (fig. 4.8) showing two black children, a girl and a boy, wearing elegant clothes. From this ad one receives the message that things have changed. Fashion images are no longer dominated by white children, they reflect American multicultural-

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1. Annamari Vänskä, *Fashionable Childhood Children in Advertising* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), 10.

alism, moreover consumers of expensive clothing can now be black and wealthy. The Ralph Lauren ad is also interesting because it breaks down racial stereotypes thus offering the opportunity of discussing racism. Innocence and race are emphasized by the pet animals that both children have with them, however, it is remarkable that, as in this case, African Americans tend to be shown with lighter skin colour in fashion advertising, thus reinforcing the fact that the racist discourse is still ongoing and present.

The above connects us to one of the most interesting parts of the book which relates to post-colonial critique of fashion and its advertising. “The aim of this stand is to analyze ‘optical colonialism’ and to decolonize: to change the ways in which the dominant Western culture represents other cultures and peoples.”<sup>2</sup>

Its convincing and compelling analysis of fashion and childhood makes this book highly recommended for students and scholars of fashion studies and all those interested in theory and research on the deconstruction of the myth of innocence and the critique of Westernization of the fashion system.

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2. Vänskä, *Fashionable Childhood Children in Advertising*, 101-2.