

Undressing Dresses

by Roselle Pineda

“Undressing Dresses” is about decoding the various encodings in fashion, the various ways in which we transgress and even subvert the very language of fashion imprisoning us as women in various cages of beauty myths and social constructions of womanhood. Undressing is the process of exposing the language of fashion (dresses). By such undressing, we will, hopefully, better know our place as women consumers of fashion in this battlefield of images, and consequently create disturbing spaces within this language that could shatter that force that impinges on women’s subjectivity and creates manipulative, oppressive images.

According to Angela McRobbie, a British pop culture and fashion analyst, women dominate participation in the fashion industry—from designing, packaging and modelling, to producing, writing about and consuming clothes. There are an overwhelming number of women who are a part of the workforce, sewing and cutting patterns for mass-produced merchandise. Thus, she says, fashion is a feminist issue.¹

Throughout the history of fashion, the main object has been mostly women. As early as the medieval period, so-called sumptuary laws² were imposed on women to indicate class and gender. Clothes did not only serve as protection from the elements and as compliance with Christian rules on modesty but also as an apparatus of caste. Women of the elite class were dressed differently from the working class, with specific styles and types of garment indicating the differences. Other forms of body modifications such as foot-binding and corseting, or even the modern high heels, were used to control women’s movements to maintain a certain daintiness and gracefulness, all in the name of beauty, femininity and chastity.³

Women’s apparel was also seen as symbols of the aspirations of an era. During the Dark Ages, women’s clothes were literally cushioned with pillows around the stomach to produce the effect of a pregnant woman. The bubonic plague had depopulated Europe, and fertility, as represented by women’s clothes, was the social goal.⁴ Along with the imposition of institutionalised ideals through women’s clothing, various prescriptions on women’s body types were imposed as well. After the Dark Ages, Reubenesque bodies characterised by lush and voluptuous curves became the ideal body type. Corseting was imposed during 16th and 17th centuries. In the 1920s, the boyish look was in; in the 1960s, the phrase “thin is in” became the norm; in the 1980s, the muscular athletic look became the vogue, and now it seems “thin is in” again. Thus, standards of femininity and beauty were directly proportional to the changes in apparel styles.

In psychology, clothing is viewed as the second skin. Clothes are used to highlight body image. Whether these are tight-fitting to call attention to certain parts of the body, or loose to hide a weak body image, clothing has become an extension and affirmation of bodily identities.⁵ If this is true, then the intimate relationship between body and apparel is also an inseparable one.

The body has always been one of the most exploited terrains in general, but it is also one of the most eluded



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topics in various fields—sociology, humanities, anthropology, and philosophy. In philosophy and religion, there was a denial of the body in favour of ontology. The body has been constructed as a passive container for the soul, a site of sin, the object of desire, and as many more concepts that do not discuss the reality of its corporeality. The body has life; blood flows through it. We see through the body, we comprehend the world around us through the body, we feel through the body, sense through the body, and we know through the body and yet, we elude from its materiality and the way knowledge on it is written.

Judith Butler's influential book on the performativity of the body tells us of the idea that the body is not an essence like identity is not an essence. The reality of the body is only real through numerous discourses and it doesn't necessarily or only necessarily bears inscriptions of history.⁶ The materiality of the body is therefore, not the essence of truth about the body but only an aspect and at the same time a discourse, from which we perform other discourses. Our gestures, and the way we eat, walk, stand, blink our eyes, smile, pucker our lips, manipulate, cover or uncover our bodies—are all performative aspects of discourses only comprehensible through corporeal machinations. Some of these performances are conscious and some, unconscious. In this sense, the body is freed from the character of passivity to activity—the body is not therefore the prison of the soul, but the soul is the prison of the body.⁷

In psychology, this unconscious performance of the body is said to be compounds of the various accumulations of feedback and self-image reflected back by society. The phenomenal self (body) and how we manage this is most of the time dependent upon the bodily image (mental picture of ourselves) motivated and prescribed by the society.⁸ Fashion (including other forms of body modifications such as tattooing, scarification, adornment, etc.) is one of the most common, imposed, accessible and value-laden forms of body performativity. In his study of dress and adornment, Erving Goffman calls his theory, dramaturgy. He used the metaphor of the stage to represent society, and the actor as the people who present and dress as spectacle in everyday life.⁹

Fashion is the greatest performance and spectacle. It is not only lush with garb and decorations, colours and pastiche images, but it's also where performative gestures such as walking, turning and other bodily performances are

trained. William Shakespeare foresaw the idea that “all the world's a stage” and we are but mere actors in it, but the extent of this idea and its implications on how we conduct our everyday lives in this consumer-oriented society was not covered by Shakespearian genius. Given the relationship of clothes, body and performance is such an intimate *ménage à trois*, we are hard placed to separate one component from the other and analyse each one.

Women are the greatest performers in this field dominated by images. Efrat Tseelon, in “The Masque of Femininity,” submits that women were made to embody the essence of fashion and that the qualities of fashion have become one with her flesh.¹⁰ Moreover, women were made to expend themselves—effort, money, and everything in

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between—into achieving the ideal beauty. Hooked up with images, women are the greatest consumers of fashion products from make-up, lotion, accessories, apparel. In fact, during the early 20th century, there was a psychological disorder called “dressing disorder” applied to female adolescents who spend inordinate amounts of time, money, and energy on clothing and exhibit an inflexible insistence on being dressed identically with peers, or in what is believed to be the contemporary mode, no matter how uncomfortable, expensive, or aesthetically distasteful the fashion. This disorder is supposedly chronic and cureless, and is exacerbated by living in a consumer-oriented society, according to the manual of mental disorders.¹¹

However, women could also use this fashion prison into languages of transgression and subversion. The intimate threesome between body, fashion and performance is not as inseparable as it may seem, and women could actually deconstruct each one to see the radical potential of each el-



ement, and then piece them together again in an ensemble that could work for them instead of imprisoning them. The effect, the body, could have an active say in how to shape clothes that could complement and politicise the same deemed passive body.

Wearing my Body, Wearing my Clothes

If the body is performative in itself and fashion is another level and probably the most common and celebrated performance outside the formalities of the stage, then we actually wear our clothes over our worn bodies. In the theory dramaturgy, we take on roles in the society as beings and clothes are symbolic characteristics of these roles. Once in a while, however, we cross characters, or we subvert the language of our traditional roles by parodying these roles (double negations), intentionally miss-matching apparels or bringing some visual conflict within a fashion ensemble to create a momentary chaos, a fragment of disruption within a seemingly monolithic surface of the stage.

My own fashion sense is almost indefinite. Most of the time the term “fashion statement” is accorded to how I dress. But if “statement” means a declaration, then every form of fashion is a fashion statement because every form of fashion is some kind of declaration, whether this purports conformity or non-conformity. I don’t even have a conscious statement on how I dress. As with the other arts, the medium (fashion) may have some significance, but in the aesthetics of clothing, it is in the composition of the various elements where fashion genius truly lies. The transgressions that occur whenever I put on an ensemble are brought about by an “inherent” attraction to colour, textures, play, display and asymmetry. As far as I can remember, I never really

put an ensemble that was predictable. I hate predictability. I hate boxing and stereotyping, and so, I try to illustrate/present fluidity in the images that I put on my body, the way my identity is characterised by flexibility and poly-vocality. Yes, fashion could be the extension of one’s identity or an illustration of an aspect of that identity, but just like fashion, which is bound to change, identities can also accommodate large numbers of languages and images.

I must be doing something different in the way I look because people started noticing my clothes and how I wore them, some of them even praising me for the guts to be outrageous, crazy and experimental. I change hairstyles maybe as often as I change my shampoo—from being shaved, permed, bleached, short, long—name it, I probably have done it with my hair. I change fashion style almost everyday that it is hard to keep up, and it is hard to capture my so-called fashion identity. Then, I came to realise that I represent a certain image of women—the phantasmic image of the strong/outrageous/crazy woman without boundaries and almost unaffected by beauty myths (that’s what they think). And then again, by my fashion sense, I could also be suggesting that the materialisation of the wild woman is true.

Sometimes, I consciously compose an ensemble that would represent an ideology that I want to pursue, whether I’m off to a symposium where I am presenting a paper, or a political rally or parade. I consider these conscious compositions as conscious performances in which I know I present myself as a spectacle and at the same time, as bearer of ideological symptoms. When I march in a rally against imperialism, for example, I wear iconic signage like a Rastafarian bonnet, a Che Guevarra bag, or a Mao Zhe Dong t-shirt. On the one hand, I am aware that I am falling into the consumerist trap that capitalists produce by turning these precise images of revolution into pop and decontextualises them from their ideological roots to achieve an appeal to the masses (in which they were rooted) and to the bourgeois consumerist crowd that these capitalists target. On the other, I consciously use these images in contexts that may be considered as step to advance the ideologies that these people and symbols stand for.

I enjoy cross-dressing and drag. The politics of drag lies in the idea that drag doesn’t over simplistically imitate the traditional gender roles (as in the case of transvestism), but it subverts these traditional roles by parodying them. It creates a whole new language by firstly, exaggerating and carnivalising these roles/rules, and secondly, by presenting

a visibility to absence. As Marjorie Garber put it, "Drag is the theoretical and deconstructive social practice that analyzes these structures from within, by putting in question the naturalness of gender roles through the discourse of clothing and body part."¹² Dragging is an act of destabilising and disturbing monolithic structures and gazes, and inserts images and effects that will make us think twice, shock us even. Drag is a powerful political tool that subverts the language of the ruling ideology.

Maybe I am meant to disturb some sort of social order. Sometimes, I consciously disturb the social order. I look at various clothes and images and I think of conflict. Conflict is probably the best compositional guideline I have ever found useful in creating a fashion ensemble. Images are images, and you have to make these work for you. Make the clothes fit you, not you fitting in your clothes. Clothes should be seen as signs inscribed with ideologies and social constructs that may well be instruments to maintain oppression, on the one hand. But on the other, fashion is also a sign of contention, a site of conflict in which one could inflict disruption, disturbance and subversion.

Epilogue: Women and Fashion

For the many, many reasons, women are always the ones most affected by fashion—because of the social construction of women's identities; because of the social construction of the beauty myth through prescriptions of fashion, body, and skin types (corsets, thin is in, block and white); because of the participation of men designers in the fashion world that defines what is "women's beauty" from the male gaze following the idea that it is men who know exactly how women should act and appear. As John Berger would say, men gaze and women appear.¹³ It is also for this reason that women should take charge in this business called image making. We should take charge of our bodies and assert what and how we want to look like. Beauty (or non-beauty) is our business as much as construction of it should be ours too. And if we think it is still not ours, then we should make it ours. As Ani Difrancò would sing, "Some guy designed these shoes I use to walk around, some big man's business turns profit every time I lay my money down, some guys designed this room I'm standing in, another built it with his own tools, who says I like right angles, these are not my laws, these are not my rules..."¹⁴

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Footnotes:

- ¹ Angela McRobbie, *In The Culture Society: Art, Fashion and Popular Music* (New York and London: Routledge), p. 41.
- ² The idea of a "sumptuary law" was to regulate men and women through the imposition of dress codes. These laws were promulgated in cities, towns, and nation states attempting, with apparently indifferent success, to regulate who wore what, and on what occasion. Sumptuary laws, moreover, were related to consumption. Marjorie Garber, *Vested Interests: Cross-dressing and Cultural Anxiety* (New York and London: Routledge, 1992), p. 21.
- ³ Susan Kaiser, *The Social Psychology of Clothing* (New York and London: Macmillan Publishing Company), p. 9.
- ⁴ *Ibid*, p. 67.
- ⁵ *Ibid*, p. 62.
- ⁶ Quoted by Judith Butler, in *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York and London: Routledge, 1990), p. 129.
- ⁷ *Ibid*, p. 135.
- ⁸ Susan Kaiser, p. 62.
- ⁹ *Ibid*, p. 137.
- ¹⁰ Efrat Tseelon, *The Masque of Femininity: The Presentation of Woman in Everyday Life* (London, Thousand Oaks and New Delhi: Sage Publications), p. 15.
- ¹¹ *Ibid*, p. 17.
- ¹² Marjorie Garber, p. 151.
- ¹³ John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: Penguin Books, 1979), p. 89.
- ¹⁴ Ani Difrancò, "I'm No Heroine," from album entitled "Imperfectly" (United States: Righteous Babes Records, 1992).