Fashion beyond identity: The three ecologies of dress

Breuer, R.L.A.

Citation for published version (APA):
Summary

Fashion Beyond Identity: The Three Ecologies of Dress

Although fashion had been a largely underdeveloped scholarly field of research until the turn of the century, in recent years considerable attention has been devoted to studying sociological, cultural and economic aspects related to fashion. Academic research, commercial fashion communication (fashion branding and marketing) and everyday practices mainly revolve around the idea that clothing can provide you with an identity and can communicate who you are (or want to be) and what you stand for. The idea that the clothes you wear create a certain image and impression may very well be generally accepted, although presupposing that fashion and identity are intrinsically connected reveals many philosophical assumptions. To say that clothing communicates who we are or want to be implies the idea of a continuous, unified core to our being. It presumes that there is an essence, or a oneness to our existence that may be represented by the way we adorn ourselves. In addition, it presupposes that this essence, or identity can readily be represented through the apparel that signifies it.

However, if we question the idea of possessing an ongoing identity and prove it to be an assumption without sufficient ground, one may question the function of fashion. On the one hand, one may say that fashion provides us with the idea of a continuous being within a multifaceted society in which we are increasingly faced with fragmentary
performances. Through the clothing styles we adopt we may feel in charge of who we are regarded to be, and experience a freedom to play with our identity performances. On the other hand, the fashion industry thrives on frequent adjustments of these identity performances through changing trends or suggesting an update for certain personality styles in dress. The latter, however, must be associated with overconsumption and hence puts great, and eventually disastrous, strains upon our environment and results in unequal treatment of the workers that produce our clothing. Fashion and its relation with identity must hence be connected to a confinement of being upon the ego, a damaging of ecology and an exploitation of workers.

What may fashion do if a perspective is mobilised that moves beyond representation of identity? And how may such a perspective contribute to resolving the related problems of overconsumption, the destruction of the environment and the exploitation of workers? These are the questions that I endeavour to answer with this dissertation. The philosophical ontology of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari provides me with a prism through which a new light on fashion’s future functioning can be shed. By focussing on their concept of pre-personal and a-subjective connections which they situate in assemblages (agencements) wherein desire is both the alternatives for viewing fashion as an identity marker as well as raise attention for the socio-political problems involved in what we wear. Fashion, as the concept is viewed throughout this dissertation, is hence regarded for all process and forces involved in what we wear. This includes those in effect during production and those that come into effect after we discard our clothing. Rather than exclusively focussing on avant-garde fashion, I include everyday contemporary wear from jeans to trendy clothing and work-wear since these are the clothes that are worn most often, play a major part in the socio-political problems involved and are suggested to communicate our identities on a daily basis.

The first chapter of this dissertation (Fashioning Identities) commences by combining the insights of Judith Butler (1990) with those of novelist Luigi Pirandello (1926) to emphasise and illustrate the cultural constructedness and groundlessness of the concept of identity. Thereafter, existing academic theories about fashion and identity are explored, since one must know what one is attempting to move beyond
before being able to do so. In addition, research into why and how what we wear does succeed in communicating who we are or want to be, is a valuable aspect for finding the dynamics involved in our relationship with fashion. The reader is therefore provided with an overview of theories from a wide range of disciplines that all regard the signifying character clothing as the main function of fashion.

The first part of this chapter is devoted to an exploration of fashion’s systems of significance in which language-like meanings are adhered to what one wears. After examining ancient sumptuary laws which regulated social hierarchies by limiting the wearing of certain colours, materials and accessories to distinct aristocratic ranks, fashion and the concept of social imitation are researched. Thorstein Veblen’s (1899) theory of fashion as conspicuous waste and imitation of higher classes by lower ones is compared to Georg Simmel’s (1905) dynamical perspective upon fashion as revolving around imitation and differentiation. In addition, Gabriel Tarde’s (1903) more philosophical perspective upon fashion’s innovative character contrasted by more traditional manners of dress is explored to conclude that the sociological perspectives upon fashion reveal its dynamics well, but do mainly revolve around fashion as significant of the pecuniary identity of the wearer. This part ends with Roland Barthes’ (1967) hypothesis of fashion as a signifying system and his conclusion that meanings adhered to what we wear are essentially arbitrary.

In the second part, Jean Baudrillard’s (1976) perspective upon fashion as an enchanted play devoid of meaning is contrasted with Elizabeth Wilson’s (1985) persuasion that fashion is ‘unspeakably meaningful’ and as such conveys meanings one may adhere to dress that are paradoxical and ambiguous, never settled and communicated silently rather than significantly. Although the latter is not contested, Llewellyn Negrin’s (2005) critique of the reduction of identity to appearance and the manner in which this encourages consumers to behave the way the advertising industry wants them to, is included. Furthermore, Negrin’s perspective reveals that apart from playing with our identities according to the rules by the fashion industry, we have in recent years adopted increasingly homogeneous looks. Hence the chapter concludes that although fashion may be regarded ‘unspeakably meaningful’ in essence, its predominant focus upon representation and performance of identity has lead to over-consumption and as such to pollution and exploitation.
The second chapter (*Undressing Plato*) reveals that a focus upon identity, of the self as well as that of items of clothing that may signify certain traits, is essentially related to a Platonic thinking in oneness, absolutes and unchanging ideals. Since fashion revolves around change and is essentially ambiguous, three philosophical theories that provide us with alternative perspectives for Plato’s theory are examined and combined to overcome a static view upon who we are and its relation with what we wear. David Hume’s (1739) empiricist exploration of the sensory forces one may relate to the wearing of clothes – such as comfort or discomfort of materials worn close to the skin, smell and the effect of colour – are extended by Friedrich Nietzsche’s philosophy of art (1888). With Nietzsche and Hume a static view upon identity is replaced by a thinking in multiplicities in which the bodily and creative forces one may relate to fashion are foregrounded. This leads to an exploration of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s (1980) conceptual pair of ‘the smooth and the striated’ as open, extendable and endless forces (smooth) existing in a complex mix with those forces that delineate, fix and enclose (striated), which are suggested as an alternative prism for studying fashion and what it may do rather than what it may signify.

Furthermore, this second chapter reveals that a perspective upon fashion as significant for our identities is such a persistent one due to human habitual tendencies. Thinking of ourselves as the bearers of an ongoing and unchanging identity provides us with a sense of security and ability to make sense of the world surrounding us by reflecting upon it from the constructed unity we call ‘self’. With Deleuze, the chapter concludes that a perspective upon being is not only constructed and groundless, it also repudiates a perspective upon the more creative and constantly transforming forces that one may also relate to fashion. Since it is a major aim to provide an analysis that emphasises what fashion may do rather than what it may represent, Deleuze’s rhizomatic philosophy, which focuses on processes and connections, is adopted to create an alternative perspective upon fashion in the remainder of the dissertation.

However, before researching how Deleuze’s concepts may aid in revealing potential forces in fashion that are habitually overlooked, the power Llewellyn Negrin assigned to the fashion industry and its branding and marketing mechanism is explored. In the third chapter (*A Delineated Fashion*), the communication practices the mainstream fashion industry
deployed are therefore submitted to a critical examination. In the first part the conclusion is drawn that fashion brands, their constructed brand identities and brand extensions through lifestyle branding, fashion magazines and online fora designed to construct a fashion personality type, all revolve around the representativeness of typical consumer profiles. These identity profiles are offered to consumers, who are in turn invited to identify themselves with the representations on offer. It is argued that the identity profiles are the result of inductive and algorithmic measuring of preferences and ideas of a majority of people. On the one hand, the usage of identity profiles and representations thereof may explain the increasing homogeneity of appearances. On the other, they limit incidents and adventures to occur since only that which can be measured in relation to what we wear is taken into account and emphasised.

In the second part of this chapter, I therefore name this way of approaching fashion ‘A Delineated Fashion’, which is a concept that limits ideas of identity and representation, and focuses on measurables for monetising purposes. By studying Deleuze’s alternative to representation in the form of his concept of difference in itself, which entails a positive difference that is multiple and transformative and cannot be captured by representations, one is introduced to an analysis of fashion practices through Deleuze’s idea that society consists of several ‘lines’ that can be followed and studied separately, but nevertheless appear intertwined. The three types of lines Deleuze distinguishes are those of rigid segmentarity, lines of supple segmentarity and lines of flight (lignes de fuite). Whereas the latter function on the basis of creativity, adventure and transformation, and may be called incidental, Deleuze regards these lines of flight as prerequisites for society in which segmentarity, be it rigid or more supple, prevails. The fashion industry, with its focus upon types, identities and representatives, typically encourages us to relate to segmented categories. In addition, the industry is determined to translate creativity, such as newly emerging subcultures, into definable and representable segments that can be sold to a larger public.

The conclusion of this third chapter recaptures the fashion industry’s mechanism as revolving around the representation of identities in four ways. Firstly, our habitual thinking of others and ourselves as unified, continuous beings is emphasised. Secondly, fashion brands themselves construct brand identities that they represent and with which they
encourage consumers to identify. Thirdly, fashion magazines, trend
watchers, bloggers and personal style advisors reinforce a thinking in
identity categories through which they offer their readers and customers
advice and inspiration. And lastly, the accumulation of what is named
‘Big Data’ revolves around identifying what digital information repres-

ents which kind of specific users. The latter is a practice that will in-
creasingly play its part in a society that emphasises identity performances
and representation thereof through the goods and clothing we consume.
With Deleuze, I conclude that these practices create false depths, which
are based on calculable, categorical and identifying characteristics, while
omitting a perspective upon what fashion may do and say beyond repre-

sentation.

The fourth chapter (Clothed Connections) reminds the reader of the
ethical and environmental problems that must be related to the prac-
tices and commodities of fast fashion brands and the ephemeral exten-
sions of luxury brands, which are ubiquitous, relatively cheap and easily
discarded. Deleuze’s concept of desire is introduced and contrasted with
fashionable desires for frequently updating one’s wardrobe through the
purchasing of cheap fast fashion items, and the idea of buying into luxury
brand names by means of cheap accessories that feature the brand’s
name. Whereas a common idea of desire is related to experiencing a lack
that must be filled, Deleuze’s concept of desire does not revolve around
objects and an experienced lack thereof, but around the intensive connec-
tions that are productive of what he names the complete aggregate. The
concept of desire for Deleuze lacks a subject and is regarded only for the
productive and transformative processes that are enabled when elements,
such as a body, a sound, a touch, a ray of sunlight, et cetera are in con-
nection with each other momentarily.

In order to clarify the complex concepts put forth by Deleuze, denim,
the material that jeans are primarily made of, functions as an exemplify-
ing tool to reach an understanding of his concept of productive assem-
blages in which denim and skin, denim and body movements, and fabric
and flesh meet and functions are altered. By carefully distinguishing this
concept of assemblages from more common contexts and connections, a
thorough understanding is developed pertaining to the transformations
that occur through the processes that are initiated when connections
are being created. Once such an understanding has been established,
Machinic assemblages of desire are examined in relation to the production of jeans. By following the molecular connections between water, soil, workers, chemicals, wastewaters, insects, fish, wildlife and the food chain that come into effect during production, the full scope of environmental damage and unethical practice is revealed. It is established therefore that not-for-profit organisations monitoring the fashion industry’s practices lack power and are too fragmented to inform consumers about the ethical and environmental impact the garments they purchase have. Hence, it is ultimately concluded that the fashion industry can be held responsible for, and is most equipped to convey this information.

The second part of this chapter explores potential (future) alternatives along a thinking in assemblages. Rather than developing new technologies, such as nanoparticles incorporated in fibres, that focus on solving problems, without thinking about the implications these particles may have when in assemblage with wastewaters, animal life and the food chain, a perspective upon experimental potential is advocated. Fashion designer and founder of BioCouture, Susanne Lee and her biodegradable garments grown from microbes are presented as exemplary for thinking about alternative assemblages through which fashion’s future material may come about.

In the concluding chapter (*The Three Ecologies*) Félix Guattari’s text with the same title is used to interconnect the mental, social, and environmental issues related to fashion in what Guattari names an ‘Ecosophy’ (1989). It is demonstrated that due to their homogeneous character, neither politics nor society will be able to change the current focus upon fashion independently. Adopting a heterogeneous perspective upon fashion and its interrelated problems, reveals that our mental attitude towards fashion as representation of identity is inextricably tied to ethical and environmental issues. It is argued that rather than thinking of representing our being, regarding ourselves as interconnected with, and transforming through, exterior forces, may set the wheels in motion for social and environmental change also. The designs by Canadian designer and scholar Ying Gao, which change shape when in contact with light, wind or gazes, are introduced to clarify how fashion’s material and immaterial assets may reshape our relation with these exterior forces.

Reshaping the social relation to fashion furthermore requires dissident voices and groups of people working together for other than purely
monetising goals. Here, *Grannies Finest* serves as an example in which young designers and photographers team up with a group of elderly to create hand-knitted products, which are sold to the public. Whereas the elderly enjoy the company, the young designers find a platform for their work. Lastly, it is suggested by Dutch designer Christien Meindertsma that awareness for the materiality and origin of clothing is raised. Her *One Sheep Sweater* project (2011) revolves around the creation of sweaters on the basis of the wool of one sheep, rather than pre-setting the desired design and size.

By presenting current examples of a different image of thought in relation to fashion, I, however, do not implicate that habits nor corporate powers will change overnight. It has been my modest goal to initiate a thinking that moves beyond identity, a technology that moves beyond problem solving, a fashion that moves beyond its industries and media, and lastly, an experimentation that moves beyond signification, identities and codes by focusing upon affects, intensities and potentials that may be seen as early indications of what fashion may do in times to come. As such, I mobilise a perspective that foregrounds fashion’s open-ended, limitless, and dynamic potential, which may serve as an antidote to the focus upon functionalism, representation of identity and overconsumption palpable in fashion today.