HOW DOES COUTURE FASHION INTERPRET FEMALE AND MALE IDENTITY?

OLIVIA MARSHALL
In this essay, I wish to explore how Couture fashion interprets “masculine” and “feminine,” and to what extent a “trend” can impact on gender. I am keen to develop the ideas of fashion evolutions, and how contemporary designers are influenced, especially what elements of their clothing define gender. For the purposes of this essay, I intend to look at the structure, texture and colour of each designer’s work, to present a clear analysis between the gender traditions, and the extent that designers have subverted gender stereotypes.
The history of division between male and female fashion has created society’s expectations of the “masculine” and “feminine”. However the image is based on predetermined ideas, not our innate human characteristics. Stereotypical attire for the female is soft and sensual, dressing to attract and entice. Valentino keeps within these predetermined paradigms. This “Red silk Crepe dress” from his earliest collection, Autumn/Winter 1965, is arguably the most iconic design, capturing romance, charm and youth. The extent of its significance is that it is now referred to as “Valentino Red”. The design is focused on the “biased cut” attempting to increase the flirtatious nature of which the dress is enhanced by the colour. Red is symbolic as it signifies pioneering qualities of leadership and evokes the contrasting natures of anger and greater sexuality’s. The emphasis of femininity is the cut “V” and the delicate folds that flow through the centre. These enhancements define the female form.
Valentino, Fall 1965. Red silk Crepe dress.
Historically, the elaboration of the female form can be traced to the end of the 17th century, as the first conical (Dior’s image reference) shapes that lifted the bust and shaped the waist. Within the 18th Century, stays were laced either at the back or the front, under or over an embroidered stomacher, which is a stiff panel that is attached to the bodice. Vivienne Westwood’s Spring/Summer 1994 corset presents the bodice with a print of the painting titled; “Daphnis and Chloe” 1743 by Francois Boueecher. The meaning of this print is the “erotic potential of classical literature.” In this garment, Westwood’s designs show maturity and harmony. The Story can also suggest the “male gaze” in which Daphnis; “began to gaze insatiably at every part of her”. Westwood has physically captured the old and new. Originally oppressive, and associated with a Females perceived inferior status. The corset, mirrors Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, the roles in association with of Male and Female within the scripture of Genesis. Eves misconduct and the fall of mankind, is a visible expression of the construction that represents freedom, dominance, femininity and power. This shows a great contrast to the perception of a passive and sensuous female. The fastening of the corset, also inhabits the movement. Metal eyelets and metal busks allows the corset to be fastened at the front, as well as laced at the back which was common throughout the 18th Century.

Westwood’s signatures of design is the zip and wide shoulder straps; this highlights the modern efficiency of dressing and comfort to women. Vivienne Westwood’s designs focuses on the female body and its shape. Westwood cuts fabrics into panel or sections to provide the wearer with multidimensional structure. Westwood uses traditional methods in her addition of padding, boning and corsetry to exaggerate the bust or hips. Westwood experiments with how fabric can move with or without the body, and mixes a historical approach with modern design.

Portrait Collection, Autumn/Winter 90-91, Vivienne Westwood

Daphnis and Chloe
Francois Boucher (1703-1770)
The Wallace Collection
Towards the end of the 18th Century, emphasis on the bust was significant. In addition the cups were built into the corset as wooden busks were applied to the garment to keep the breast apart. Jean Paul Gaultier designed the “cone bralette” for Madonna’s “Blonde Ambition” world tour in 1990 by incorporating the transcended shape, and producing the contemporary corsetry with extremely refined and inspiring features. “A woman in a corset is a lie, a falsehood, a fiction, but for us, this fiction is better than reality”. – Eugewe Chapus. (French Writer, 1800-1877)

This design was for Madonna to present herself in a performance of sexually provocative nature. The corset elaborately depicts all the infinite variations of sexuality. Gaultier fashioned the garment as a boned bustier, with exaggerated cone-shaped breasts, to portray an extreme vision of a dominant female, which took a playful view of a fetishist stereotype. The colour pink suggests the reassures of emotional energies, alleviating feelings of anger, aggression, resentment, abandonment and neglect. Studies have confirmed that exposure to large amounts of pink can have a calming effect on the nerves and create physical weakness in people. This is fundamentally putting Madonna the performer in control, in relation to the metallic fabric is considered to be a feminine energy linking to the colour silver, this fabric is illuminating when reflected against lighting, providing a higher visual impact.

Westwood and Gaultier both incorporate the traditional construction of garments. Both designers demonstrate how the evolution of the garment, is aesthetically and symbolically adapting to society. The construction based upon harmonious lines and contour which enhances the beauty of the female form. The Corset ultimately idealises the female form.
HOW DOES COUTURE FASHION INTERPRET FEMALE AND MALE IDENTITY?

CHAPTER 1: HISTORICAL FEMININITY

Madonna, Blonde ambition tour 1990. Designed by Jean-Paul Gaultier

Portrait Collection, Autumn/Winter 90-91, Vivienne Westwood.
Chanel analysed gender stereotypes, highlighting divides of expression and repression. Chanel was a designer who challenged the limitations imposed on women at this time. Through the “little black dress” Coco Chanel played with the idea of gender expectations. The deconstruction of gender roles is advancing the variety of expression through colour, form, length and body. The little black dress is distinguishable by the ribbon located around the neck, the solid black body, white cuffs, and elegant straight silhouette. The purpose of this garment was focused on speed and efficiency, meaning that the activity of dressing would be shortened. The Second World War in 1915, witnessed women’s increased war efforts. This period of time was highly influential for women within industry as trousers became the norm. This primarily advanced women for the future of an equal gender function. Chanel’s intervention of dress code was creating the “subversion of identity becomes possible”. The corset has completed its journey from the original constrictive garment, which Coco Chanel detested as it was “humiliate women”. The classification of fabric help to determine identity coupled with heavyweight fabrics which asserts authority, as lightweight fabric could be seen as frivolous. In my opinion the little black dress was historically the first to demolish binary oppositions between female and male, and subsequently freeing women to evolve their own gender identity.
CHAPTER 2: The Subversion Of Femininity. How Does Couture Fashion Interpret Female And Male Identity?

Vogue 1926, Model T Dress, Coco Chanel.
Alexander McQueen’s Antler dress from the Autumn/Winter Collection 2006, “Widows of Culloden”, embraces the female form. The “Male Gaze” refers to the way visual arts are structured around a masculine viewer. It describes the tendency in visual culture to depict the world of women from a masculine point of view. McQueen defeats this objectifying concept. This is because of the overall projection of the design, McQueen allows the woman to be in charge, allowing the female to no longer be the object of desire. Kant Wittgenstein, on sexuality and objectification wrote “objectification, involves the lowering of a person, a being with humanity, to the status of an object”. In doing this, McQueen utilises a woman’s silhouette to exaggerate her form, focusing on the waist. This opportunity for women, was developed by McQueen to embrace their femininity by exposing and overemphasising the idealisation of the body, thus signified the underlying strength of women, and their implication of sensuality as a form of defence. “Widows of Culloden” embraces the female form. The similarity between Alexander McQueen and Coco Chanel was to take feminine clothing and to enhance it with masculinity, making female and male equal. The ruffles located at the bottom hem of the dress, in tulle, give a significant depth and volume, to the dress, projecting a sense of movement when on the runway; again enhancing the female form. The transparency of the fabric reveals the body beneath, creating a mystery and sensuality of the female figure.

The revelation of the female form has sexual connotations compounded by the antlers, representing the idea that antlers are only grown by the male species of deer. Masculinity is piercing through the silk tulle veil. Placed upon a woman, it signifies strength and equality, whilst highlighting a woman’s biological traits of fertility, for growth and rebirth. These ideas are not a weakness in society, but a factor of supremacy, as the antlers are projecting dominance. This garment significantly represents the breakdown of gender stereotypes, helping to liberate and strengthen woman from their sexuality by transforming them into a genderless hybrid, a creature with strong feminine and masculine powers.
Autumn/Winter Collection 2006, Alexander McQueen, “Widows of Culloden”.

Autumn/Winter Collection 2006, Alexander McQueen, “Widows of Culloden”.

CHAPTER 2: The Subversion Of Femininity

HOW DOES COUTURE FASHION INTERPRET FEMALE AND MALE IDENTITY?
The exploration of lace is presented between the two garments as the relationship with one’s own predetermined gender identity. Both garments commonly signify a resistance to conformity between social legitimacy, and gender stereotypes. Textures of fabrics underlies the transformation of identity. Lace is a fragile fabric synonymous femininity, and this conveys a woman’s physical vulnerability. Burberry, spring 2016 collection, displayed lace shirts with contrasting masculine fabrics and forms. This includes the legged trouser suit, made up of cotton suiting fabric. Lace is complex due to its pattern, placement and colour. This concept is to imply more about the wearer than any other fabric available. The controversial effect of lace styled on a male, is that lace itself is a subtle pattern and delicate embroidery, which is alluring. This effectively presents a contrast from originally the male gaze, to the female gaze. Both terms are categorised as an intense admiration of the physique. The subversion of feminine physics and fabrics projected onto the male form and identity is continually evolving, within the fashion industry. J.W Anderson is a designer highly regarded for imaginative interventions. Andersons Menswear Autumn/Winter collection 2013, portrays physical differences between the male and female form. Anderson removes the structured tailoring within his pieces, and presents a divergent display by placing the shoulders of the suit onto the hips, exposing the male’s upper body. The concept of this design is to contribute both male and female symbols, both sexes are physically defined by. A nude sleeved top clinging to the male form exposes an outline of his chest. The stitch within the centre of the form, presents an interpretation of a female’s chest. It is clearly defining a male aesthetic, as there are no breasts. This is similar to Valentino’s Red Crepe dress, “V” cut is to tantalize the female chest. Anderson, expresses a mutual idea, both devise attention to the chest. Valentino’s cut within the structure is to emphasises women’s femininity, in contrast Anderson idolises a males aesthetic within a masculine attire. This gender ideological view, of which Anderson is culturing biological differences to allow men to be non-conformist, by removing the tailoring of a jacket that forms a suit. The feminine signifier is expressed on the hips. Anderson has transformed the jacket, a male signifier, by widening the hips as biologically, females have wider hips which denotes fertility. The insertion of a pocket onto the male’s chest compromises the masculine form, the location of the models hands highlight no breasts. The pockets being relocated from either side of the groin reduces the attraction of the female gaze to the male’s erogenous zone. However, the colour black, represents masculine authority. The insertion of gathered fabric in the lining of the bottom off the skirt, conveys frivolity and adds an elegant rhythm to the movement of the design, which could be interpreted as a feminine quality. Anderson has successfully combined physical traits of both men and women, providing status of equality. Anderson’s collection Chanel’s “little black dress” as demolition of binary opposing gender signifiers by interpreting his own modern identity of masculine attributes, and to extend the characteristics of a female garment to physically fit a masculine physique. The amalgamations of female and male attributes result in an androgynous ideal.
CHAPTER 3: The Subversion Of Masculinity

HOW DOES COUTURE FASHION INTERPRET FEMALE AND MALE IDENTITIES?

Burberry, Spring, 2013

J.W Anderson Autumn/Winter 2013

J.W Anderson Autumn/Winter 2013
The traditions of women’s fashion was divided when this image of “Le Smoking” was proposed to evolve what one often associates with how a woman in society is commonly presented. “Le Smoking”, was the first tuxedo for women. It consisted of a classic dinner jacket in black grain “de poudre” wool or satin; trousers with a satin side strip with a ruffled white shirt; black bow tie; and white cummerbund satin.

“For a woman, Le smoking is an indispensable garment with which she finds herself continually in fashion, because it is about style, not fashion. Fashion comes and goes, but style is forever”- Yeves Saint Laurent. This presents style as the relationship to the internal, the perception of who someone is, an identity, to match a sense of self. This portrait captures a fierce “branding” style for women to aspire to. The setting against a lonesome street, a single woman participates in a stereotypical male activity of smoking a cigarette. Also, this is an empowering image for women. Being alone in a dark street, with potential dangerous outcome, being unescorted they are ultimately seen as vulnerable, the model being the defiant of danger. It promotes women as dominating, the oversized blazer is not fitted, and the shoulders are broad, just like a males figure. This provides a sense of strength and equality, male and female alike. Through Yeves Saint Laurent establishing a new definition of the question to “what extent is masculinity?” and the explanation that it should not be reduced to the male body, and to what extent masculinity is recognised. The evolution of “male dressing”, can be recognised today, for example Ralph Laurens, “Resort” collection 2015 highlights female masculinity; “female masculinities are framed as the rejection scraps of dominant masculinity in order that male masculinity may appear to be a real thing”. Lauren, uses the codes of femininity like the polka dots and the split at the side of the skirt. What is evidently highlighted in Laurens design is the archetype of practical and instrumental crossed with emotional and expressiveness, to have the outcome of a dominant female supremacy.

The both of these garments have in common is the ideal of a “natural” desire for the greater freedoms expressed within a male culture. The designs share a projection of independence and self-motivation.
CHAPTER 4: The Subversion Of Masculinity

HOW DOES COUTURE FASHION INTERPRET FEMALE AND MALE IDENTITY?


Yves Saint Laurent- “Le Smoking” by Helmut Newton, shot for French Vogue in 1975.
Most recently Kayne West’s Yeezy Collection, 2015 explored genderless ambition. West’s highly representational idea of muddying gender through colour pallet, silhouette, texture and physical form of the models, is successful. The collection is categorised by colour; light, medium and dark. The colours are matched to the appropriate skin colour, which in contrast is not specific to a particular gender. The colour scheme is made up of Khaki, clay, nude and earthy hues. Kayne explained; “It’s just a painting, just clothing as a canvas of proportion and colour”. The organic shades almost resemble a status of equality, mirroring a non-conformist gender. The silhouette removes any female or male attributes. By utilising layering. The placement of heavily washed fabrics, which cumbersomely drape over the form, do not cling.
Yeezy Collection 2, 
Kanye West 2015 
Light, Medium and Dark.
In conclusion, I believe that the expression of gender is expressed through signs and symbols that change with the evolution of fashion design. What I have found in my research to be significant, is that couture designs have essentially advanced through the re-invention of original fabrics. For example Denim has been upcycled through new technology, and in coherence to this, the growth for experimentation to re-design the structure of the fabric placed upon the wearer. It was said by Yves Saint Laurent, “I wish I had invented blue jeans. They have expression, modesty, sex appeal, simplicity- all I hope for my clothes”. This quote is why I believe the physical form of genderless fashion has historically always been Denim, which was founded on 20th May 1873, by merchants Levi Strauss and tailor Jacob W. Davis. Iconically this hardwearing material was worn by actor James Dean in “Rebel without a cause” 1956. The colouring of the jeans were achieved by overdyeing, to allow the denim to appear more vibrantly blue, as using technicolour would have made it appear a muddy green on the screen. When this film was made in 1956, they subverted away from the muddy green, but today Kayne West’s “Yeezy” collection, exploits this colour. West continues with a traditional fabric, and adapts this to create a futuristic appeal by renovating the old to construct the new. It is consistent that both heavy fabrics epitomise authenticity and body consciousness. Gender identity is imposed through society’s influence and an individual’s sense of self.

“Gender is an impersonation. Becoming gendered involves impersonating an ideal that nobody actually inhabits”-Judith Butler. This highlights repetitive social acts that create gender distinction, and make them the normality until they are challenged. Therefore, fashion can promote gender binary upon humans, when fashion designs decides whether human is masculine, feminine or genderless.

I am to develop my research further through a related study, by producing a piece based around structure, with clear links to texture, form and colour. With the correct use of visual materials I am to manipulate the viewer’s interpretation by utilising their preconceived ideas of societal understandings and to de-code by presenting a quality of evolution and controversy.
James Dean - “Rebell without a cause” 1956
Bibliography


Design Museum (2009) Fifty Dresses that changed the world. 1st Octopus Group LTD.


K. Karbo (2009) the gospel according to Coco Chanel: Life lessons from the world’s most elegant woman. 1rst the Globe Pequot Press International.


Thames and Hudson (2010) Fashion Box: The immortal Icon of styles. 1rst Thames and Hudson.


https://books.google.co.uk/books?id=VT_r8GgEkKkC&pg=PA203&lpg=PA203&dq=subversion+of+the+male+gaze+in+fashion&source=bl&ots=f8-7s0kaqB&sig=NURDjWWSLCcenKKxX1CSSoxbONc&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwj4me20kafKAhVL1RoKHdGeCnEQ6AEIzAA#v=onepage&q=subversion%20of%20the%20male%20gaze%20in%20fashion&f=false

https://books.google.co.uk/books?id=BbGC0FxRqowC&pg=PA105&lpg=PA105&dq=subversion+of+the+male+gaze+in+fashion&source=bl&ots=HWGfk6bEC1&sig=AYDjh_PaUgeY1DwfsWI4hBsFUBA&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwj4me20kafKAhVL1RoKHdGeCnEQ6AEIzAA#v=onepage&q=subversion%20of%20the%20male%20gaze%20in%20fashion&f=false

https://books.google.co.uk/books?id=ADkFYX2CtjIC&pg=PA203&lpg=PA203&dq=subversion+of+the+male+gaze+in+fashion&source=bl&ots=M349fr4Yxu&sig=nCPYgNyeLhLgVKeQKpOvaJ59E&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwj4me20kafKAhVL1RoKHdGeCnEQ6AEIzAI#v=onepage&q=subversion%20of%20the%20male%20gaze%20in%20fashion&f=false

http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/feminism-objectification/

The design and manufacture of fashionable clothes to a client’s specific requirements and measurements.

Undermine the power and authority of (an established system or institution).

Having qualities or an appearance traditionally associated with women, especially delicacy and prettiness.

A general direction in which something is developing or changing.

The process by which different kinds of living organism are believed to have developed from earlier forms during the history of the earth.

Living or occurring at the same time.

Undermine the power and authority of (an established system or institution).

A widely held but fixed and oversimplified image or idea of a particular type of person or thing.

having qualities or appearance traditionally associated with men.

having qualities or an appearance traditionally associated with women, especially delicacy and prettiness.

Fashion Designer

Italian fashion designer and founder of the Valentino Spa brand and company.

His main lines include Valentino, Valentino Garavani, Valentino Roma, and R.E.D. Valentino.

Born: May 11, 1932 (age 83), Voghera, Italy

Full name: Valentino Clemente Ludovico Garavani

"cut on the bias" when the fabric's warp and weft threads are at 45 degrees to its major seam lines.

A cone is a three-dimensional geometric shape

Founder: Christian Dior

Founded: December 16, 1946, Avenue Montaigne, Paris, France

A hook, that is used to lace up the garment

a V-shaped piece of decorative cloth, worn over the chest and stomach by men and women in the 16th century, later only by women.

Male gaze is a concept coined by feminist film critic Laura Mulvey. It refers to the way visual arts are structured around a masculine viewer.

Inflicting harsh and authoritarian treatment.

a metal ring for lining a small hole;

Fashion Designer

British fashion designer and businesswoman, largely responsible for bringing modern punk and new wave fashions into the mainstream.

Born: April 8, 1941

Full name: Vivienne Isabel Swire

Fashion Designer

Jean Paul Gaultier is a French haute couture and prêt-à-porter fashion designer. Wikipedia

Born: April 24, 1952 (age 63), Arcueil, France
Lee Alexander McQueen, CBE was a British fashion designer and couturier. He is known for having worked as chief designer at Givenchy from 1996 to 2001 and for founding his own Alexander McQueen label.

Born: March 17, 1969, Lewisham, London

1. Degrade to the status of a mere object.
2. The state or condition of being superior to all others in authority, power, or status.
3. A thing made by combining two different elements

Fashion company

Burberry Group Inc. is a British luxury fashion house, headquartered in London, England.

Its main fashion house focuses on and distributes ready-to-wear outerwear, fashion accessories, fragrances, sunglasses, and cosmetics. Thomas Burberry

a sash worn around the waist, especially as part of a man's formal evening suit

Fashion company

Yves Saint Laurent YSL is a luxury fashion house founded by Yves Saint Laurent and his partner, Pierre Bergé.

July 1961, Paris, France

The promotion of a particular product or company by means of advertising and distinctive design.

Fashion Designer

Ralph Lauren (born Ralph Lifshitz; October 14, 1939)

American fashion designer, philanthropist, and business executive, best known for the Ralph Lauren Corporation clothing company.

Kanye Omari West is an American hip hop recording artist, songwriter, record producer, former singer, fashion designer, and entrepreneur.

Denim is a sturdy cotton warp-faced twill textile in which the weft passes under two or more warp threads. This twill weaving produces the familiar diagonal ribbing of the denim that distinguishes it from cotton duck (a linen canvas).

A process of colour cinematography using synchronized monochrome films, each of a different colour, to produce a colour print.

Gabrielle Bonheur “Coco” Chanel was a French fashion designer of women's clothes and founder of the Chanel brand.

Born: August 19, 1883, Saumur, France
Died: January 10, 1971, Paris, France

Labels: Chanel
HOW DOES COUTURE FASHION INTERPRET FEMALE AND MALE IDENTITY?
OLIVIA MARSHALL