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You have to suffer for Fashion

An Investigation into how the body has been distorted through the cut and construction of fashionable clothing

Introduction:

'You have to suffer fashion,' has been a much used phrase throughout the history of fashion. Degrees of suffering and discomfort have varied and we have probably all endured agonies, in some way, when constructing our appearance, in order to face the world. This could range from a simple cut from shaving, to the discomfort and pain of folding tender flesh into a girdle! These are only two, of numerous possible examples.

Research Background and Objective:

This paper aims to investigate how the body has been distorted, to conform to the demands of fashion, through the cut and construction of fashionable clothing. Initially it will set out to investigate some of the technical methods that have been developed to enable designers to realise fashionable silhouettes. First hand research into the costume archives of the Victoria and Albert Museum and final year 2008 fashion student's collections from the University of Huddersfield, will facilitate an examination of relevant fashion garments through observation and handling. It will also be

interesting to consider how the technology employed in the identified garments can be updated and in particular made more comfortable to wear. This would be of particular interest to fashion students and designers when developing collections. As well as enhancing technical knowledge the investigation will naturally also begin to emphasise the wider moral and health questions that arise from altering the natural shape of our bodies.

Literature Review:

The secondary sources are books, magazines and an undergraduate fashion student's dissertation. The books are either biographies of relevant designers or are sociological investigations into the history and language of dress. The Vogue magazine article (October 2008) is a contemporary investigation into shape in fashion. The student dissertation was supervised by the author and is an investigation into body distortion in fashion. All secondary sources have been quoted to enhance relevant discussion within the paper.

Research Methodology:

The primary and secondary sources give historical and contemporary insight into how fashion designers have distorted the body and the wider moral and health debate it provokes. They also emphasise traditional and new technology developed to achieve shape. The work also benefits from an interview with an experienced pattern cutter, who accompanied the author to the Victoria and Albert Museum and provided an in-depth technical and historical commentary, as quoted.

Findings and discussions:

To begin with we should consider the whole notion of clothing the body. Clothing and fashion are two entirely separate entities. An investigation into the difference between clothing and fashion is a study itself, however put simply, we clothe our bodies to protect them from the elements, or we clothe them in a uniform to communicate authority or a corporate identity. We fashion our bodies in order to decorate them to conform to a fashionable ideal. How we dress our bodies, either through clothing or fashion presents an aesthetic message to the world that tells us initially who we are. As Alison Lurie says,

‘For thousands of years human beings have communicated with one another first in the language of dress.’ (Lurie, A 1982 p3)

The examination of how our attire distorts the body falls into the two distinct areas, of clothing and fashion. Throughout history, bodies have been distorted. There are still tribes in Asia that practice neck stretching and knee stretching, which is achieved by the wearing of neck and leg rings.

‘One piece with a counterweight at the spine widens over the collarbone. The other, a separate coil, is a cylinder that encases the neck.’ (Koda, 2001, p29).

This is clothing that adheres to a tribal conformity. Fetishists cover their bodies in rubber cat suits or are restricted by corsetry. This is clothing that promotes levels of sexual desire and satisfaction. As Valerie Steele believes;

'The corset, like the shoe, was one of the first items of clothing to be treated as a fetish, and it remains one of the most important fetish fashions. But it is crucial to distinguish between ordinary fashionable corsetry, as practiced by most nineteenth century women and the very different minority practice of fetishist tight lacing.'
(Steele, 1996, p58).

In the early 1860's women wore huge crinolines, they were uncomfortable, impossible to sit down in and were lampooned by the satirists of the day, however this was fashion and it conformed to a trend. In about 1911 the hobble skirt made a short appearance, it was an ankle length, extremely tight skirt that made walking very difficult, women often tripped and suffered broken ankles, again this was fashion conforming to a fashionable trend.

The question arises as to why fashion is often dissatisfied with the natural shape of the human body. This again is a large area for research. Throughout periods of fashion history the natural body has been celebrated and revered. In other periods it has been reduced (through dieting), padded and corseted, to conform to the fashionable ideal. Social and moral questions obviously arise, particularly when the consumer resorts to extreme measures in order to achieve a silhouette. This has often resulted in bruising, anorexia, bulimia, drug addiction and depression.

To focus on fashion and in particular fashion in the twentieth century, an in depth investigation of its sequential changes produces many fascinating examples of body distortion. Many distortions of the body's natural shape have concentrated on exaggerating specific parts, in particular, the waist, the shoulders and the bottom. Some fashion designers such as Comme Des Garçon's, have chosen to build shape

and distortion on less familiar areas of the body, in order to subvert our more conventional ideas about body shape and what is flattering. Challenging our pre conceived ideas about body shape, helps to establish new design ideas in consumer consciousness, which in turn can move the fashion industry forward with fresh products.

The following discussion is an examination of fashion garments produced by final year fashion design undergraduates in 2008 at University of Huddersfield . The garments selected focus upon varying degrees of exaggeration and distortion of the natural body shape. These garments are compared with an examination of similar historical fashion garments in the Victoria and Albert Museum archives. The discussion emphasises the design, cut and manufacture of the garments and the degrees of suffering and discomfort, that need to be endured when they are worn. The historical comparison provides a measure to discuss the students understanding of the professional manufacture techniques that need to be understood and mastered. It also justifies the design resonance for the distortion of the body shape and in so doing exemplifies why in some ways, we are prepared to suffer discomfort for fashion.

The first example is Jessica Lord's recreation of the bell shaped jacket that was introduced in Christian Dior's New Look collection in 1947 (pics 1,2). The Victoria and Albert Museum jacket is in grey wool and from the New Look collection. Jessica's jacket is made from green cotton velvet. The pattern has shaped the jacket in at the waist, and then curved the shape out, to create the exaggerated silhouette over the hips. The silhouette is designed to flatter the natural curves of a woman's

body, but it is difficult to sit down in and feel comfortable. The jacket appears clumsy. The bell shape is sustained by ridgeline (a plastic strip that mimics traditional whale bone used in corsetry) channelled in to the lining; unfortunately the ridgeline is too flexible and collapses, unable to sustain the desired shape. A close examination of the Dior at the Victoria and Albert Museum (pics 3) reveals that his bell shaped jacket was tailored in a way that produced a more refined shape. The bell shape was achieved with a clever combination of canvassing and use of the steam iron.

‘At the waist point the tailor did a lot with the iron, shrinking and stretching over the hip pad to give the fabric shape.’ (Leslie Poole, 2008)

The Dior jacket is also cut in a way that emphasises curvature. The bust looks very rounded because the bust dart has been positioned into the pocket, the jacket is also fitted with a narrow Almond sleeve, with a rounded shoulder. Both jackets obviously require heavy handed manufacture techniques which make them weighty and cumbersome garments to wear.

Corsets are a classic garment in the fashion industry. Traditionally an underwear garment designed to constrict the waist and flatten or uplift the breasts, it has more recently been popularised as a glamorous outerwear garment in particular by designers such as John Paul Gaultier and Vivienne Westwood. The example in the Victoria and Albert Museum is a Westwood corset from 1996, (pics 4,5). Made from heavy cotton, it has a stretch power net, side panel for greater elasticity. As Leslie Poole described;

‘All shaping in the bust is suppressed. Its very 1740 in derivation as the boning going across the breast keeps it flat and pushes it up.’ (Leslie Poole, 2008).

The corset distorts the body into a curvaceous and breast enhancing shape through tight lacing and boning. The boning is necessary because the corset is strapless and needs this support to hold the garment up. The discomfort of the wearer can be controlled from minimum to extreme. Corsets can be laced up to a certain pain threshold. Once the muscles have relaxed they can then be tightened again, until the desired waist line is achieved. This level of body modification has been the subject of much health related debate for several centuries. Eline Canter Cremers-Van der Does explains;

'Tight lacing offered another hazard if carried to extremes; the corset and especially the tapes could, if pulled tight, make a deep ridge, which might ultimately damage the liver.' (Van der Does, 1980, p115).

She goes on to say that;

'The corset pushed the liver partly upward, partly downward; upward it pressed into the lungs, impeding breathing; downwards it pressed in to the abdomen making breathing practically impossible.' (Van der Does, 1980, p116).

A final year student, Jamie Glover did her own personal investigation into the discomfort involved in corsetry for her final year dissertation. Whilst on work placement at a bridal company she had a corset toile made up to fit her personal measurements exactly. The corset reduced her waist by around two inches and she identified her physical suffering in the following;

'I did begin to feel uncomfortable, being pulled in only that small amount and had to sit down a couple of times, as wearing the corset began to take an effect. My natural body shape was exaggerated but also when wearing the corset, breathing normally becomes increasingly difficult, as you feel restricted as to how much you can breathe

in or out. The posture of the body completely changes and makes you stand perfectly straight. While you are wearing a corset, normal every day movements like sitting down or bending over become difficult due to the metal busks that are down the centre front.' (J Glover, Dissertation, 2008).

Sarah Broadbent's copper corset (pics 6, 7) is a pure fashion statement piece. It is obviously not a practical fashion garment. It is also extremely uncomfortable and cumbersome to wear. The metal is cold and harsh against the skin and there is also the physiological fear that the metal could wound or tear. Sarah had considered this in manufacture, as the inside seams were heat soldered and therefore smooth. It's an excellent example of a fashion garment made from a non conventional material and is in the spirit of iconic fashion garments such as Issey Miyake's plastic corset (pic 8). A calico toile was made and fitted initially. The metal pieces were cut from the finished pattern and heat soldered together. The inside of the garment is unlined or padded, making it more uncomfortable when worn next to naked flesh. Statement pieces such as these are produced by designers and shown on the catwalk. These are pieces that won't necessarily sell, but are designed to attract press and media attention for the collection. A deconstruction of the work of more theatrical designers such as Jean Paul Gaultier or Alexander Mc Queen reveals this philosophy. Whilst not a corset, the Jean Paul Gaultier, Cyba Punk jacket from 1994 (pics 9), is an interesting example from the Victoria and Albert archives. The jacket, like the corset defines the breasts and waist line. The base fabric is from cotton canvas but the design incorporates wire, metal and plastic. The breast area is cut out and filled with the metal cup. Again this is an attention grabbing catwalk piece but is difficult and cumbersome to wear.

Melanie Suffill's Bump Dress (pics 10), in grey felt exaggerates the contours of the female body in order to accentuate its womanliness and curves. It makes a particular statement about curvaceousness, but emphasises womanliness rather than the erotic. Again, this type of dress is designed to make a statement when worn and is very much akin to the work of designers such as Georgina Godley and Rei Kawakubo of Comme Des Garçons. In 1997 Rei Kawakubo produced a controversial collection that placed shaped pads or bumps on unexpected areas of the body (pic 11). It presented a new and thought provoking silhouette that was light and relatively easy to wear. It was manufactured from polyester and nylon knit with a light polyester fill. The collection was used by a dance troop where; 'The somewhat unnerving 'bumps' that would appear to inhibit the body's movement instead introduce an upholstered security to the dancers propulsive turns.' Koda, 2003, p113).

Melanie's dress by contrast appears heavy and rather unwieldy. She experimented with various fabrics and methods of manufacture. She initially made the garment in neoprene but settled on felt, as it was light and the fibres are felted together, making it pliable enough to hold its shape. The padded shapes are very heavy and need to be applied to the body first, before wearing the dress. It makes the process of dressing for the wearer time consuming and burdensome. The Comme Des Garçons clothes are more thought through and have utilised high tech fabrics and experimented with pad techniques that are applied to the dress as a whole.

Unfortunately there were no significant examples of a bump dress in the Victoria and Albert Museum archives. The Georgina Godley dress from 1987 (pic 12), was the only example from a designer with a similar approach. The hem of her silk jersey

dress is boned with ridgeline and is vaguely disturbing as it seems to constantly move and is asymmetric. By contrast the Hobble style dress from 1912 (pics 13, 14), was very interesting. The top is interfaced with heavier cotton sateen in ruffles which even though irritating to wear creates the pigeon chest silhouette, fashionable in that period, which is essentially a large curved chest.

Putting volume into the silhouette of a garment can radically alter the size and shape of the body. This can look effective but requires great poise in order to carry it off.

There were some amazing examples of volume in the Victoria and Albert Museum archives, particularly in the work of Balenciaga who was renowned for;

‘His immaculate technique and restrained purity of form.’ (Jouve, M,A,1997 p9).

It is particularly noteworthy that Balenciaga created shape and volume by exploring the inherent possibilities of the fabric as opposed to stiffening it or constructing shape beneath it. This is evident in his amazing evening cape from 1963 (pics 15,16). The garment reveals some of the couturiers particular dressmaking methods.

It is made from a double layer of silk gazaar to give it body. The designer used very large seams of approximately 8cms at the waist. The seam was then turned down in order to kick out the gathers and exaggerate the volume. Equally the 8cm hem is substantial enough to hold out and emphasise the volume of the garment. The large

seams cannot be viewed as waste of fabric but demonstrate the possibilities of the fabric, as opposed to experimenting with other construction methods, that would

need to have been applied to the garment. Also noteworthy is the fact that much of the garment is put together by hand, employing skilled couture dressmaking

techniques. This technique was again evident in the black wool sack back dress from 1959 (pics 17,18). The large 6cms seam was pressed downwards to kick out the

pleat and the large pocket bags also give volume. The extra thick seam down the front of the dress is also very large and helps the dress to hang. It is difficult to encourage students to really exaggerate volume and over sizing in garments. Victoria Tynan's collection of Empire line dresses (pics 19), would have benefited from a study of these particular techniques. Her garments attempt to introduce a large volume of fabric by gathering the skirt into the Empire waist line. The finished garments although strong in their use of textile embellishment suggest meanness in their volume, almost as if the student was afraid to slash huge swathes of fabric into the skirt. The use of larger seams would also have helped to really kick the skirt out at the waist.

The recent exhibition 'The Golden Age of Couture' at the Victoria and Albert Museum highlighted fashion in London and Paris between the years 1947 to 1957. This was the period of the New Look introduced by Christian Dior in 1947. This collection was significant because it radically altered the fashionable female silhouette. The shape promoted was rounded and curvaceous with sloping un-padded shoulders, tiny waists and curved hips. As Christian Dior said;

'I designed clothes for flower – like women, with rounded shoulders, full feminine busts, and hand – span waists above enormous spreading skirts. (Wilcox 2007, p,39).

The silhouette was achieved with artifice and patience. A video at the exhibition, demonstrated a woman in her underwear putting on padding to wear beneath her garments. She wore an elasticised 'waspie' to reduce her waist, then applied padding to her hips by attaching shaped pieces of material that had been heavily padded, to sit under her garments.

The girdle became a popular form of body modification in the 1950's but was abandoned in the late 1960's as fashion promoted a more natural body shape. In recent decades control pants and body stockings have become popular, worn under garments to tame the body into a desired shape.

'Control pants are obviously the modern version of distorting the body' (F.Thompson Bridal Wear, 2007). (J. Glover, Dissertation, 2008)

When worn they change the shape of your body to fit certain garments or to look a certain way when wearing a garment. They are less dangerous to health than corsets which broke ribs and pushed organs about however they can lead to varicose veins.

Conclusions and Implications:

An article in British Vogue, October 2008 entitled 'Beyond Flattering', discussed the Autumn/Winter season's trends for outsized proportions. The article analyses the role of the fashion designer in inventing new shape in garments.

'Indisputably, it is a designer's job to move proportion and silhouette forward with the times, but its true also that radical changes are not always being met with widespread appreciation.' (Frankel 2008, p 104)

The article seems to confirm the necessity for fashion to continually evolve in terms of volume and silhouette and to quote Alexander McQueen,

'What is considered flattering and indeed beautiful in the eyes of one generation will almost necessarily be rejected by the next. (Frankel 2008, p104)

The article concludes with the idea that what appears new in terms of silhouette, however radical, does eventually become the norm. This norm can also apply to changing attitudes towards the wider moral and health issues in altering the natural shape of our bodies. It can also reflect social change. The phenomenal success of Christian Dior's New Look in 1947 was due in part to the designer's recognition that women, who were starved of fashion and femininity in World War Two, were ready to embrace a fashion that encased them in padding and restrictive corsetry. By the mid 1960's designers like Mary Quant discarded any restrictive underpinnings and designed clothes such as flat chested mini dresses making women look like little girls. This reflected a newly affluent youth culture. It also emphasised shifting moral attitudes as to what was acceptable in fashionable dress.

The paper has discussed how both student and professional fashion designers have distorted the natural shape of the body and has discussed this in relation to health and cultural change. Garment technology has continuously evolved in order to realise distortion of body shape in fashion and this emphasises that designers need to experiment with both traditional and evolving technology in order to realise their visions in three dimensions. Distorting the shape of the body for the purpose of fashion today includes not only the wearing of garments that alter silhouette, but also an ever increasing use of diets and cosmetic surgery. This paper doesn't really attempt to examine surgical enhancement and distortion of the body but in order to consider the degrees of suffering followers of fashion are prepared to endure, in the future, it needs to be emphasised. Today we live in an unashamed culture that avidly

promotes size zero as the beautiful ideal. In the way that nineteenth century women wore corsets and bustles, modern followers of fashion are starving themselves yet are damaging their bodies in a similar way. Fashion is never satisfied with the natural silhouette and perhaps in their search for new shape, designers will be testing their customer's endurance of pain and discomfort by promoting surgically implanted padding into the human body. This could be moved around each season in order to conform to the prevailing modes. It is an extreme assumption but not entirely impossible.

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Personal interview with Leslie Poole MDes (RCA), Pattern Cutter

Victoria and Albert Museum Archives, garments viewed:

3.) Christian Dior Jacket 1947 – T.109-1982

4 and 5) Vivienne Westwood Corset 1996 – T.14-2002

9) Jean Paul Gaultier Cyba Punk Jacket 1994

10) Georgina Godley Dress 1987 T7.1988

13) Hobble Style Dress 1912 – T.314.1996

14) Hobble Style Dress 1912 – T.314.1996

15) Balenciaga Evening Cape 1963

16) Balenciaga Evening Cape 1963

17) Balenciaga Sack Back Dress 1959 – T.124-1970

18) Balenciaga Sack Back Dress 1959 – T.124-1970

University of Huddersfield 2008, garments viewed:

1) Jessica Lord Jacket 2008

2) Jessica Lord Jacket 2008

6) Sarah Broadbent Corset 2008

7) Sarah Broadbent Corset 2008

10) Melanie Suffil Dress 2008

19) Victoria Tynan Empire Dress 2008

Images from:

Koda, H. (2001) Extreme Beauty: The Metropolitan Museum

8) Issey Miyake Plastic Corset

11) Comme Des Garcons Bump Dress

With thanks to Victoria and Albert Museum Costume Curators:

Louisa Collins

Antonia Brodie

Kate Hay



Image 1



Image 2



Image 3



Image 4



Image 5



Image 6



Image 7

Image 8 - is withheld - please refer to reference: Koda, H (2001) Extreme Beauty:
The Metropolitan Museum, page 85



Image 9



Image 10

Image 11 – is withheld - please refer to reference: Koda, H (2001) Extreme Beauty:
The Metropolitan Museum, page 112



Image 12



Image 13



Image 14



Image 15



Image 16



Image 17



Image 18



Image 19