

TOWARDS A PRE-PERSONAL AND AFFECTIVE FASHION. LIVED EXPERIENCE AND SOFT-WEARABLE TECHNOLOGIES

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ABSTRACT

Fashion is commonly regarded for its expressive qualities that re-present the identity of the wearer. Notions, however, that there is no one stable identity to be found in or for human beings, help challenge that representation may not be the most suitable lens through which to discover fashion's full potential. Moreover, experimenting with our identities through changing fashions may be one of the causes for overconsumption and its related problems of exploitation of workers as well as of our planet. Therefore, four thinkers that offer a different take on what characterises human bodies are examined and related to fashion. It is subsequently explored what textile integrated technologies may have to offer for experiencing fashion differently and more ethically. I turn to French philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari to examine fashion's affective, rather than representational qualities. Then, a bridge is created with Robert Pepperell's concepts of interconnectedness and extension, to argue that we can no longer regard the human being as central or dominant when it comes to fashion practices. In addition, a pathway for what the role of technology may mean for future fashion experiences is rolled out. Lastly, the connection between technology and the body as Hermann Schmitz suggests is fleshed out referring to the uncommon expressive potential textile integrated technologies may have to offer to better some of the problems that must currently be related to fashion as a representant of a person's identity.

INTRODUCTION

French philosopher Gilles Lipovetsky remarked that '[no] theory or history of fashion fails to take personal appearance as its starting point and as its central object of investigation' (1994 [1987]: 16). Looking into several fashion theories, this proves to largely be true. As early as 215 BC, the Roman Lex Oppia regulated women's dress and in medieval Europe sumptuary laws remained in place, regulating dress, ornamentation, and personal appearance (Hunt, 1996: 27). Late 19th century consumption (including fashion) theorists Thornstein Bunde Veblen and Georg Simmel regarded fashion as representative of class; Roland Barthes was interested in the langue of clothing; Jean Baudrillard regarded fashion as 'enchanted simulation; and Elisabeth Wilson argued that fashion is an ambiguous game and, as such, 'unspeakably meaningful' (Breuer, 2015: 40-72). Most importantly, all aforementioned theorists regard fashion whether meaningful or not as representative for the identity of the wearer.

Even though it may be true that adorning oneself can be pleasurable, liberating, enhancing, and filled with possibilities to express an aspired identity, it is the representational aspect of fashion, that may lie at the base of the problems

that today must be associated with fashion. Unlike in history, fashion currently is widely available, relatively cheap and only a mouse click away. Identity, at least regarded from a western perspective, is no longer a stable factor determined by class, religion or birthplace. It may even be debated whether we can regard ourselves as possessing a stable and constant identity. As sociologist Zygmunt Bauman has argued, today, identity must be regarded 'a task, as an as-yet-unfulfilled, unfinished task' (Bauman, 2004: 20, emphasis in original). As such, we are always re-inventing ourselves and experimenting with who we may want to be. Fashion marketing has learnt to make clever usage of this never settled identity and 'fashion brands [...] construct brand identities that they represent and with which they encourage consumers to identify' (Breuer, 2015: 298). It, hence, does not require much effort to start experimenting with who one may want to be. If one adds the fact that new styles are currently offered as often as once a week, the expression of a never settled identity through apparel is endless and overconsumption becomes explanatory.

It is my contention that we must attempt to alter our relationship with clothing and develop a perspective that moves beyond the expression of identity, in order to draw a halt to the exploitation and pollution one must relate to fashion. Moreover, I would like to propose we endeavour to experience the wearing of clothes in a different manner to include the potential textile integrated technologies currently have to offer. In doing so, I will firstly turn to French philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari and their concept of pre-personal affects which occur in assemblages. Thereafter I will turn to Robert Pepperell's extensionist view of human existence and his idea that humans, the environment, and technology are inseparable. Lastly, I will discuss German philosopher and new phenomenologist Hermann Schmitz and his concept of the felt-body and likewise experiences. By combining these three uncommon takes on the ways in which we experience the wearing of clothes, I hope to offer new, more ethical solutions for an industry that is in need of reform.

AFFECTIVE FASHION IN ASSEMBLAGE

Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari may be known for their abstract ontological philosophy that encourages thought to move beyond the principles of representation. Although it might prove a challenge to open up a contrasting perspective upon a field so occupied with representational ideas as that of fashion, it may also bring new insights and ideas that change the way we relate to our clothing and the manners in which we experience the wearing of clothing. Take the ways in which clothing affects the way we move, for instance. Wearing a pencil skirt with a narrow cut and high heels will cause one to move differently than wearing tracksuit trousers and trainers. And even though tight skirts and loose pants perhaps signify opposite meanings, these meanings are undeniably influenced by the movement they enable or disable. In addition, the materiality of clothing may be regarded as being affective. An itchy jumper or label, smooth silk worn directly on the skin, or the smell of a loved one still present in a T-shirt, for instance, do affect one and another, yet are not often widely discussed nor recognised. I propose looking into Deleuze and Guattari's concepts of affect and assemblage to come to understand fashion through a different lens. Rather than looking for meaning, Deleuze and Guattari invite their readers to open an eye for the pre-personal processes and forces that can be detected, and that move beyond representation. Representation, according to Deleuze, 'has only a single centre, a unique and residing perspective, and in consequence a false depth. It mediates everything, but mobilises and moves nothing' (Deleuze, (2004 [1968]: 67). Deleuze and Guattari, thus, want to move beyond the signifying practices of representation and are interested in intensive qualities that precede representation and being. These processual forces can best be described as 'relations of movement and rest, speed and slowness' (Deleuze & Guattari: 2004 [1980]: 136). This entails that they do not intend to think about (representational) being, but rather in affective becomings. This view upon affective becomings, in the case of fashion, brings other qualities than brands, signification, status or knowing what is in or out of fashion to the fore. They, however, do not only think about how clothing influences movement, or how its materiality connects to our skin, but also about how these sensations are the result of connections between the body and cloth that precede meaning and representation.

Affective becomings, such as those mentioned above, do not come about in a vacuum. They typically happen through encounters between different forces, of which skin and cloth is only one example. These encounters, according to Deleuze and Guattari, can be regarded as taking place in dynamical assemblages in which connections are made

and undone and which are regarded for how they function, and which affects they bring about. Or as Deleuze and Guattari write:

As an assemblage, a book has only itself, in connection with other assemblages and in relation to other bodies without organs. We will never ask what a book means, as signified or signifier; we will not look for anything to understand in it. We will ask what it functions with, in connection with what other things it does or does not transmit intensities, in which other multiplicities its own are inserted and metamorphosed, and with what bodies without organs it makes its own converge (Deleuze and Guattari, 2004 [1980]: 4).

If, in the quotation above the word 'book' is replaced by 'pair of jeans', for instance, an understanding of the ontological and heterogeneous take Deleuze and Guattari bring to fashion may come about. In their view, a particular pair of jeans is not regarded for what it means or signifies. It is regarded for with which other things it brings about affects and new becomings, new ideas, new events, and new perspectives.

Continuing the example of the pair of jeans, in a Deleuzeoguattarian perspective it would not be important to which brand they belong. Rather, how a pair of jeans may change through pre-personal forces that bring about wear and tear, for instance, may come to the fore in their focus on intensities and affects. The fading of the pair of jeans typically occurs through the connections being made between the denim and a watch, a chair, a leg, a knee, a mobile phone, a set of keys, and so on. On Instagram, for instance, proud owners share photographs of their worn and torn jeans, which they wash as little as possible and wear down to the last thread. This way of consuming and preserving items of clothing reduces resources, pollution, and waste and can be said to be preferred above a fast fashion mentality. And even though it must be admitted that there is still some representation present in the faded jeans, perhaps one can foster these different perspectives on a larger and wider scale aided by the concept of affective becomings in assemblage, rather than the superficial representations jeans brands propagate.

It is, however, not only of interest what happens when wearing a pair of jeans that enters into and out of connection with different things. The idea of regarding elements for where, how, and with which other elements or entities they connect and enter and break off is an open-ended, unlimited, and ever-extending process. Therefore, also a perspective for which, at times molecular, processes take place before an item of clothing is bought and worn and those thereafter come to the fore. Think about the assemblages a pair of jeans has been through before coming into being, for instance. The soil in which the cotton plant grew, the water, pesticides, hands, machines, water, dyes, threads, studs, and so on, are all included in a Deleuzeoguattarian perspective upon assemblages. Such a perspectives demands attention for the processes we do not see and often disregard when buying and wearing clothing. Yet, taking these into account before 'shopping for subjectivity', may help to change our mindsets and reduce environmental issues and create awareness for the exploitation of workers, for these have also been a connection in the assemblage and therefore cannot be disregarded.

POSTHUMAN FASHION

Robert Pepperell's thinking has many similarities to that of Deleuze and Guattari. He also argues that there are 'profound interconnections between all things in nature' much like Deleuze and Guattari's concept of (machinic) assemblages (2003: iii). Pepperell, as such, has an extensionist view upon existence. He is convinced that 'we can no longer think about being human in the same way we used to' and he debates the humanist perspective in which the human species surpasses nature and technology (Ibid.). Deleuze and Guattari's concept of assemblage also does not leave any space for hierarchical thinking in which human beings are placed before affective becomings. In their account, the pesticide needed to grow a cotton plant is just as important as the pair of jeans worn on a body. One cannot exist without the other. In his 2003 book *The Posthuman Condition* Pepperell, however, also treads a different path and focuses specifically upon the role technology has in contemporary society. I therefore suggest to first look into his ideas about the merging of technology with biology. And thereafter, examine his ideas about aesthetic experiences, which can be related to the wearing of clothing.

In his [N]ote on the term 'posthuman' Pepperell describes three aspects he relates to the word posthuman. Apart from indicating that it marks the end of humanism, and we need to re-think what it entails to be human, 'the term refers to the general converge of biology and technology to the point where they increasingly become indistinguishable' (2003: iv). This entails that Pepperell no longer separates a living, natural realm from a technological one, which is commonly considered lifeless. Moreover, he also argues that 'the apparent separation between the human and the environment is invalid in the posthuman era and, therefore, in need of revision' (2003: 30). Pepperell thus contends that a perspective upon interconnectedness rather than representation is currently important to reflect upon a changed society. This, on the one hand, reinforces the idea that the clothing we wear cannot and must not be seen as separated from all forces and connections that are being made when it is created nor those that are in place after we discard them. As said, such a perspective demands equal attention for fashion's exploitative and polluting qualities, which cannot be seen as separated from the pleasures we may draw from expressing ourselves.

In addition, Pepperell offers some ideas as to how to distinguish good art from bad art, which may be useful to decide which paths fashion may want to prefer in the future. For Pepperell, '[g]ood art always has an element of (disorder) discontinuity, bad art simply reinforces a pre-existing order' (2003: 185). 'Posthuman art' furthermore 'uses technology to promote discontinuity' (Ibid.). This entails that one could argue that good fashion, being part of the realm of the arts, in a posthuman manner is also indicated by discontinuity and the use of technology. Good fashion is then, to speak with Pepperell, not found in designers that simply reinforce existing styles, ideas, and shapes, but offers a viewpoint in which a human cannot be separated from nature nor technology. Inspired by Montreal based fashion designer and professor at the university of Quebec, Ying Gao, I would like to draw attention for the ways in which she combines fashion, technology, the body, and the environment to come to her expressive designs. In her 2013 designs (NO)WHERE, (NOW)HERE, for instance, she uses photoluminescent thread and eye-tracking technology to connect the wearer and garment to the gaze of a spectator. The dresses consequently luminate when a gaze is captured. Albeit differently than the jeans assemblage example, Gao also demands attention for fashion's alternative potential, moving away from traditional and as such continuous practices in fashion.

It must be acknowledged that it is not likely that dresses such as the ones Gao creates will any time soon be worn by the masses. Moreover, textile integrated technologies inevitably come with their own specific problems, which may also be exploitation of workers or polluting the planet in different ways. I have, however, wanted to present an alternative way of relating to fashion as well as uncovering its potential beyond the representation of identity for which fashion is so renowned. In the next section I will attempt a more accessible manner of combining fashion and technology by tying widely available technologies to our everyday experience of the wearing of clothes. Yet, before doing so, I would like to refer to Pepperell's contention that the post-human condition is manifest. He argues that 'movements that resist the worst aspects of humanist behaviour: feminism - the movement against exploitation of women, animal rights - the movement against human exploitation of animals, environmentalism - the movement against human exploitation of the earth's resources, and anti-slavery - the movement against human exploitation of other humans' are indicative of the end of humanism (2003: 171-172). Based on this characterisation, one could very well contend that we are indeed in need of a posthuman fashion.

FASHION, TECHNOLOGY, THE FELT-BOY, AND LIVED-EXPERIENCES

In his *Kurze Einführung in die Neue Phänomenologie* (Brief Introduction to New-Phenomenology), German new-phenomenologist Hermann Schmitz emphasises that contrary to other philosophical currents, new phenomenology concentrates mainly upon potential new experiences and their applicability for opening up new perspectives (2009: 17). For this research paper, Schmitz contention of the body in relation to experience is particularly interesting. Schmitz points out that in Ancient Greece, at around 500 BC the distinction between the material body and the immaterial soul was introduced (2001: 244). This split, according to Schmitz, 'still profoundly distorts our experience of ourselves and the world' (Ibid.). While the soul was split from the body it was also designated to an inner world which proved closed and unreachable. 'In this way, the perceptible felt body [Leib] and corporeal [leiblich] communication, the emotions as atmospheres [...] are displaced from one's attention; what remains are inner worlds for self-control and an external world for mastery of the world' (Schmitz 2016: 2). Schmitz consequently claims that we typically use

our mind to control our emotions and have largely lost a perspective upon felt bodily experiences.

These felt bodily experiences for which Schmitz demands our attention, may be regarded affective in the sense of Deleuze and Guattari's concept of affect. What is more, these experiences are pre-intellectual and even though they are embodied, they do not halt at the outside of our skin. They, furthermore, appear spontaneously and in affective involvement, which is immediate, pre-reflective and in a 'not yet articulated self-consciousness' (Schmitz et al. 2022: 248). Felt body experiences, as such, characterise what Schmitz names 'life in the primitive present' (Ibid. 249). When you climb a set of stairs, for instance, and you have reached the top but are mistaken and ready to take another step up. This moment, which is experienced bodily and happens without conscious awareness, has a certain immediateness to it that prevents one from being able to distinguish it from a mental evaluation. Schmitz argues that such 'involuntary felt body experience (unwillkürliche Lebenserfahrung)' is foundational for all experiences (Schmitz 2009: 13). That is to say that these experiences have not yet been intellectualised by mental reflection. These are experiences that cannot be controlled and happen randomly.

How can fashion, being closely related to the body, in combination with technology that can discontinue current practices become the bearer of such profound embodied experiences? For a previous research project, I tested a detachable posture corrector, which I wore for two weeks on end. The small device, which was placed just under my left collar bone, was to be calibrated when in an upright position, and would give off a light vibrating sensation when I was not standing or sitting straight up. Not intending to use the device to better my posture, I used it to test the experience of wearing technology directly on the body. Since actual textile integrated technologies are fragile and mostly merely available as prototypes, the detachable posture corrector proved a sound alternative to test how one may experience future features of fashion. Because I was not in control when the device would vibrate, and it once actually went out of control continuously giving off vibrations, the experience was resemblant of Schmitz description of involuntary felt body experience. It, furthermore, was difficult to describe the sensation, since it was one I had not experienced before.

There was one more characteristic the posture corrector brought about which can be better understood by Schmitz's concept of the lived body. Whereas the general concept of the human body is material, Schmitz's lived body is area-less and consists of several singular area's which extend beyond the skin (Schmitz 2016: 3). Schmitz names such a surface-less areas body islands (Ibid.). Apart from finding it difficult to describe the sensation, I started noticing an area the size of a breakfast plate that recollects the presence of the posture corrector even when not wearing it recently. What is more, this sensation extends about 5 centimetres beyond the boundary of my body and makes me relate to my body and the way it can be affected in new and unexpected manners. Through Schmitz philosophical concepts one can begin to experience the body differently. Not as distinguished from the mind, that is so often deployed to discipline the body through exercise or dieting, for instance. But as an extended felt body that does not stop at the boundary of the skin and cannot be separated from the mind, for it precedes the mind to make sense of felt body experiences. What textile integrated technologies can mean for future experiences one can relate to fashion than becomes an endless field of potential experiences.

CONCLUSION

In search for an alternative way of relating to fashion, both as a practice as well as an academic field of study, I have examined three different philosophical perspectives to help me think differently. In addition, I have set to move beyond common principles of regarding fashion for its representational qualities, since it is my contention that the focus upon and encouragement of regarding fashion's main quality the expression of identity is the cause of the problems of exploitation of workers and pollution of the planet. Setting out to open up a perspective for qualities that are less acknowledged, I firstly emphasised that fashion's affective qualities are often overlooked. These are, according to Deleuze and Guattari, to be regarded for what they bring about when a body finds itself in connection with other bodies, entities and ideas. These dynamical assemblages are endless, and its parts continuously break off to join other assemblages. In such a perspective one can no longer relate to fashion merely for its aesthetics or meaning added by logos and brand names. One then must also bring all processes and forces that are present dur-

ing the producing, wearing and after discarding items of clothing to the fore. Realising which impact our practices have, may mean a first step in bettering our behaviour.

An examination of Pepperell's posthumanism reinforced the idea of bodies being extensive and interconnected with all things in nature. In addition, human beings can, in such a view, no longer be regarded as unique entities that get to determine what is good or bad. Pepperell furthermore emphasised that there is no separation between humans and nature, and he foresees a merging of biology and technology, creating a perspective in which human bodies, the environment, and technology are indistinguishable. Within fashion one can regard the artist avant-garde as breaking with traditional notions of dress and combining textile, technologies, and surroundings to create interactive garments which alter the way we relate to ourselves, others, and the environment. As said, it cannot be excluded that textile integrated technologies do not create their specific environmental or exploitative qualities. They do however open up a whole range of unprecedented potential and modes of expression that common garments do not.

Lastly, I turned to Schmitz's philosophical conception of the felt body [Leib] that does not differentiate between the body and the mind (or soul) and is extensive beyond the limits of the skin. His concept of felt body islands, furthermore, helped me to make some sense of the uncommon experience I underwent when wearing a buzzing device directly on the body. This experience is, obviously, only one example of how textile integrated technologies may bring about novel experiences that take fashion away from the representation of identity towards more experiential manners of relating to the clothes we wear. Imagine a jumper that provides you with pressure on your shoulder blade, much like an encouraging pat on the back a friend may give when needed. Would not this be more enticing experience than wearing the North Face logo on the same spot? Or what to think about the life-like qualities textile integrated technologies may bring about by purring, trembling, moving? So called 'imaginary friends' may then very well become real and consoling, for instance.

I can only begin to think about a number of examples, yet the possibilities seem endless. Compare the evolution of the telephone between the mid 1990s and now with what could happen in fashion in a few decades. The majority of people in a 1998 documentary by Dutch film maker Frans Bromet answered that they did not think they would need nor want a mobile phone in the future (be it far or near). Such an answer seems unimaginable today. Yet, something is telling me that the fashion industry as we know it, does not want to endeavour new paths easily, is comfortable with the current situation, and remarkably conservative. One thing to remember if and when the industry does change, and the body, textiles, and technologies become increasingly intertwined, is to protect the data big tech firms will want to collect. But this is for later worry and research and extends the scope of this particular examination of fashion's underexposed potential.

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