ANTIGENDER FASHION: THE BOUNDLESS POSSIBILITIES OF GENDER-FLUID FASHION DESIGN

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ABSTRACT

Gender fluidity plays an increasingly important role in today's fashion industry and Western culture, calling into question the very boundaries of gendered fashion. This doctoral project focuses on the incorporation of non-binary fashion in contemporary fashion design. Expanding on what Vicki Karaminas and Justine Taylor termed *antigender fashion*, this study investigates how contemporary fashion design can challenge and critique norms of gender identities and their representation. Like anti-fashion, which opposes and challenges fashion, antigender fashion seeks to dismantle and confront binary gender signifiers. Fashion is then understood as more than a mirror of society; rather, it is a phenomenon that reflects, absorbs, and visualises broader social and cultural shifts. The focus is therefore on fashion as a system of signification, analysing contemporary fashion imagery and design via a critical visual and textual analysis. To illustrate the various ways in which antigender fashion can expand the gender binary, the thesis takes a multiple case-study approach, discussing the contemporary designers JW Anderson, Gucci under the direction of Alessandro Michele, Art School, and No Sesso, investigating the ways in which they challenge, blur, and critique traditional gender boundaries in the context of fashion and culture. This study seeks to highlight the relevance of fashion in constituting and renegotiating contemporary forms of masculinities and femininities.

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INTRODUCTION

The gender binary is set up for us to fail. For us all to fail.
Alok Vaid-Menon (2020, 27)

Fashion, gender, dress, and identity are in many ways inextricably linked. How we dress and what clothes we wear not only constitutes the way we fashion our bodies but also contributes significantly to the expression and representation of our identities. Our clothes communicate our belonging to a culture or a group, our social class, age, and – most importantly – our gender. Gender has always played an important role in the fashion industry, whether in terms of its consumption or social meaning, while fashion has always been a crucial instrument in visualising gender identities and holds a central position in its construction.

In recent years, however, there has been a discernible shift in fashion and society that disrupts rigid gender boundaries and blurs the lines between traditional masculinity and femininity. In many ways, the demarcation of gender through dress and fashion is crumbling. One might even argue that fashion is no longer 'obsessed with gender', as Elizabeth Wilson (2003a, 117) once wrote, but is instead focused on breaking gender boundaries. In accordance with shifting social norms, digitisation, and an increasingly global world, the perception of gender in society and its expression through fashion has changed remarkably.

When I first began my journey researching fashion in 2016, the words gender, fluidity, and fashion seemed to be everywhere. Numerous articles, shows, collections, and advertising campaigns were filled with gender-bending clothes and a buzzing call for a gender-fluid future of fashion. It was the time when high fashion houses announced they would showcase menswear and womenswear together, when Jaden Smith modelled Louis Vuitton's Spring/Summer 2016 womenswear collection, when 2015 was proclaimed as 'the year of trans', and gender became 'a nuanced, fluid, "non-binary" affair' (Berwick 2015). In short, anywhere and everywhere gender fluidity was on the horizon, and it seemed it would stay so for a while.

At the time I began this project, a global crisis erupted and disrupted not only the fashion industry, but cultural institutions, universities, and people's home lives. The Covid-19 pandemic changed the way people worked, communicated, and thought about reality and social

life, doing so radically and instantly. It also put a dent in the fast-moving carousel of the fashion industry: the global circus of fashion weeks was cancelled or moved online, the production and fabrication of clothes was halted, and experts and designers proclaimed the industry's death. While the end of fashion, and the fashion system as we came to know it in the twentieth century, had already begun before the pandemic (Edelkoort 2014; Geczy and Karaminas 2019), the crisis seemed to work like a magnifying glass, highlighting the unsustainable and exploitative methods of fashion, its production, and consumption. The impact of global restrictions on high-profile fashion designers and manufacturers thus triggered a questioning of the industry's mass production of clothes, the number of yearly collections and shows, and the adherence to the binary gender system. It also posed the question of how fashion is communicated and, consequently, what fashion means and looks like today and in the future – a question that also plays a crucial role in this examination of antigender fashion.

Another important question was posed by the 2019 conference 'Millennial Masculinities: Queers, Pimp Daddies, and Lumbersexuals', which was dedicated to the study of men's fashion and held at Massey University in New Zealand. The conference recognised that the role of masculinity and male subjectivity were under scrutiny, with the editors of the conference volume (see Karaminas, Geczy, and Church Gibson 2022a) stating that several social movements like #MeToo, Black Lives Matter, and Trans* liberation 'underpinned the changing cultural, social, and political formation of gender and modernity' (2022b, 1). Additionally, this gender paradigm shift, called 'gender fluidity', so the authors believe, also occurred in the creation, consumption, and communication of fashion, particularly men's fashion. They asked whether 'gender-fluid fashion was any different from androgyny or unisex fashion', and 'how, or if, the notion of gender fluidity has an impact on traditional "masculinities"' (Karaminas, Geczy, and Church Gibson 2022b, 2).

For this doctoral thesis, I want to pick up these questions and attempt to grasp the meaning of gender-fluid fashion, its ways and entanglements, its limits and possibilities. Therefore, I not only ask what, if anything, makes gender-fluid fashion different from unisex and androgynous fashions, but what impact gender fluidity and its embodiment through fashion might have on the gender binary, on masculinities *and* femininities and their being in-relation. Taking the notion of "antigender" fashion, a concept conceived and coined by Vicki Karaminas and Justine Taylor (2022), expanding it further and developing it as an analytical tool for the study of contemporary gender-fluid fashion, I hope to make sense of shifting gender norms, boundaries, and their embodiment through fashion. Like anti-fashion, which opposes and challenges fashion, antigender fashion seeks to dismantle and confront the binary gender system

by scrambling gender signifiers (Karaminas and Taylor, 2002, 9-25). Antigender fashion, then, troubles gender by breaking with traditional forms of masculinity and femininity, and offers visual expression for the plurality of gender. If gender and gendered fashion is the water we swim in, antigender fashion can help us surface.

* * *

Gender, as Sally Hines writes, 'is pervasive. It structures our lives in fundamental ways, impacting everything' (2018, 11). Hence, the increasing awareness of diverse gender identities – influenced by feminist thought and queer theory – affects many spheres of life and has led to important social and legislative changes on a global scale. As recently as 2018, the World Health Organization (2018), for instance, officially removed its classification of gender incongruence as a mental health disorder in the eleventh edition of its International Classification of Diseases. Consequently, non-binary, transgender, and other 'nonconforming' gender identities are no longer categorised as mental illnesses.

Furthermore, gender-neutral language is increasingly implemented in everyday life. For instance, Sweden included the non-gendered pronoun 'hen' in its official glossary in 2015 (Bäck, Lindquist, and Sendén 2018, 3). Germany introduced a third category of gender for official documents, ruling that binary gender designations are discriminating and a violation of personal freedom. Thus, since 2018, German citizens can choose 'diverse' as an option on their birth certificate, albeit not without a medical certification (Bundesministerium des Innern für Bau und Heimat 2018).

Changing attitudes towards gender and gender fluidity in society can also be observed in their representation in social media and in television and film. As an example of the former, the social network platform Facebook extended its gender options for users to include, besides 50+ pre-defined options, a customisable alternative. Regarding the latter, LGBTQIA+ characters and themes were increasingly finding their way onto television screens. TV series such as *Will & Grace* (1998–2006; 2017–2020) or *Queer Eye for a Straight Guy* (2003–2007) placed gay narratives at their centre, while *The L Word* (2004–2009), *Gentleman Jack* (2019–2022), and *Killing Eve* (2018-2022) broadened lesbian representation in mainstream culture (Karaminas 2013, 212–13). Streaming services and production companies such as Netflix and Amazon Prime Video also continue to expand their content on LGBTQIA+ television series and stories with, for instance, *Orange is the New Black* (2013–2019), *Queer Eye* (2018–2022),

Pose (2018–2021), and *Transparent* (2014–2019). Similarly, more and more movies that feature queer characters and narratives, including *The Danish Girl* (dir. Tom Hooper, 2015), *Carol* (dir. Todd Haynes, 2015), and *Call Me by Your Name* (dir. Luca Guadagnino, 2017), are drawing attention in popular culture and from critics alike. The 2016 coming-of-age drama *Moonlight* (dir. Barry Jenkins) made history as the first LGBTQIA+ film to win an Academy Award for Best Picture.

Additionally, African American actress Laverne Cox became the first transgender person on the cover of *TIME* Magazine in 2014, increasing the visibility of transgender in mainstream media. The openly gay rapper Lil Nas X not only celebrates success with his songs 'Old Town Road' and 'MONTERO (Call Me by Your Name)' and their accompanying music videos (the latter has garnered over 500 million views on YouTube), he regularly challenges gender norms with his red-carpet outfits. In Germany, the first lesbian dating show, *Princess Charming* (RTL+, 2021), featuring female-identifying and non-binary contestants launched in 2021, following its successful male predecessor *Prince Charming* (RTL+, 2019). In other words, the last decade has experienced a significant surge of queer representation and recognition in popular and mainstream culture.

Yet, in today's increasingly polarised society, queer representation and advances of rights and legislation in the West coincide with a return to and at times hyper-focus on traditional masculinity and femininity, as well as binary gender essentialism. Gender-reveal parties, for instance, are popular occasions for expectant parents, family, and friends, where the sex of an unborn baby – mistakenly referred to as gender – is commonly revealed through elaborate special effects based on a binary colour code, reinforcing gender stereotypes and upholding the gender binary. Furthermore, queer and gender nonconforming people are still subjected to violence, assault, and discrimination on a daily basis. Nevertheless, these social and cultural milestones are a testament to a growing understanding of gender beyond the binary system of male/masculine and female/feminine. They indicate a rising social awareness of non-normative gender and life beyond what Judith Butler (2006) calls the 'heterosexual matrix'.

This broadening understanding of queer and fluid gender is reflected in contemporary fashion design and affects high fashion, streetwear, and mainstream culture alike. Canadian fashion designer Rad Hourani, for instance, who is known for his neutral and genderless creations, debuted at the Haute Couture Fashion Week Paris with his Spring/Summer 2014 collection. Therein the models walked the runway in black tailored dresses and boxy blazers while wearing gender-concealing masks. Later, it became known as the first unisex couture collection (Geczy and Karaminas 2017, 105–20; Halliday 2020, 152).

Other fashion houses and designers followed suit, albeit with different approaches. For instance, Gucci's creative director Alessandro Michele jolted the fashion world with his surreal mixture of genders and the 2016 announcement the house would combine its menswear and womenswear fashion shows. Gucci continues to push gender boundaries, exploring the notion of gender fluidity in its collections and publications, for instance with the short film *The Future is Fluid*, which debuted at Sundance Film Festival in January 2019. Produced by Irregular Labs in collaboration with Gucci's Chime for Change and directed by Jade Jackman, it shows so-called 'Gen Z' people from around the World talking about their understanding of gender identity, hoping to redefine and represent the world 'through a prism of fluidity' (Gucci 2019). After eight years at the helm of Gucci (and since completing this doctoral thesis), Michele announced in November 2022 that he was leaving the label.

In further examples of the broadening understanding of gender fluidity in fashion, Georgian-born designer Demna Gvasalia caused a similar furore. First was the launch of the fashion collective Vetements in 2014, which regularly subverted high fashion's status quo, inter alia through the combination of its menswear and womenswear show (two months before Gucci did so) and an overall genderless aesthetic, skipping the traditional fashion show, or including models of all ages and genders in its shows and campaigns. The second occurred through his creations for the French fashion house Balenciaga. These further play with and blur the lines between masculinity and femininity (Geczy and Karaminas 2020b). Similarly, high fashion streetwear label Hood By Air (HBA), under the creative direction of Shayne Oliver, subverts traditional divisions between streetwear and high fashion, masculine and feminine, art and commerce.

Moreover, the fashion media, from cover pages to editorials and advertising campaigns, has emphasised transgender and gender fluidity. Fashion brands like Louis Vuitton, Diesel, or & Other Stories have embodied the topic in recent advertising campaigns: as mentioned above, in Louis Vuitton's Spring/Summer 2016 womenswear campaign, Jaden Smith modelled alongside other female models in the womenswear collection, while Diesel and & Other Stories included transgender models and models who identify as gender-fluid in their campaigns. Additionally, fashion publishing houses increasingly combine their print titles and publish men's and women's magazines in collaboration; for example, the May 2020 issues of *L'Uomo Vogue* and *Vogue Italia* under the title 'Gender/Together', or Dazed Media, when they announced they would combine *AnOther Magazine* and *Another Man* in a biannual title that 'addresses all gender identities' simultaneously (AnOther 2020).

Besides high fashion houses, mainstream fashion brands also include genderless and unisex concepts in their stores and collections. Spanish high-street mogul Zara, for instance, launched its first unisex collection 'Ungendered' in 2016; a year later, it used men and women to model the same clothes on their website (Petter 2017). British retailer Selfridges opened 'Agender' in 2015, a pop-up concept space that offered 'a genderless shopping experience' (Tsjeng 2015b) where gender-fluid labels like Nicopanda or Ann Demeulemeester commingle, while other labels like Acne Studios or Rag & Bone occasionally mix their menswear and womenswear. Other young US brands like 1.61, 69 Worldwide, and Telfar proclaim genderless fashion by showing identical pieces aimed at all sexes (La Ferla 2015). More recently, ASOS unveiled Collusion, a unisex brand 'designed by Gen-Z, for Gen-Z' (Maoui 2018).

This shift is reflected in the gallery world, too. For instance, the exhibition *Gender Bending Fashion* (2019) at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston looked back at a century of fashion and dress that blurred and redefined the conventions of gender and dress. Similarly, *The Male – Androgynous Mind, Eclectic Body* (2019), held at the Gucci Garden Galleria in Florence, was dedicated to the brand's history of defining and redefining men's fashion. The 2022 show *Fashioning Masculinities* (see McKever, Wilcox, and Franceschini 2022) at the Victoria & Albert Museum in London was the most recent among many fashion exhibitions addressing the concept of gender fluidity and changing notions of masculinity.

Faced with such widespread evidence of a gender-fluid 'moment', we might, however, question whether this signifies a more permanent shift or simply a short-lived fad. If fashion is understood as 'the prevailing style of dress or behaviour at any given time, with the strong implication that fashion is characterized by change' (Steele 2005, 12), one might argue that the abundance of gender-bending design is just another fashion trend that will go 'out of fashion' as quickly as it came. Admittedly, the notion of gender-bending styles in fashion has been an ongoing thread, weaving in and out of fashion's history. Already in the seventeenth century, for instance, before the French Revolution, King Louis XIV occasionally engaged in cross-dressing (Harris 2005, 58), while the blurring of masculine and feminine styles was evidenced in the extravagant and ostentatious costumes of the macaroni (McNeil 2013), the expressive elegance of the nineteenth-century dandy, or the twentieth-century *garçonne* (Steele 2013, Geczy and Karaminas, 2013). More recently, we have seen the 'peacock' and unisex revolution in the 1960s and 1970s (Hill 2018; Paoletti 2015), the unisex fashion of the 1990s (Arnold 2001), and the gender-bending character of queer fashion (Cole 2000; Kennedy and Davis 1993; Steele 2013, Geczy and Karaminas, 2013).

Despite these gender-bending styles, however, the demarcation of gender and dress has prevailed and dominated the industry. As Karaminas, Adam Geczy, and Pamela Church Gibson state, 'fashion has traditionally been a staunch supporter of gender binaries, establishing a vast industry predicated on the sale of womenswear and menswear, so effectively locking traditional notions of gender firmly within their prison' (2022b, 2). It can be argued, then, that fashion has corrupted and continues to corrupt and co-opt gender blurring styles and gender-fluid, nonconforming, and queer people and their ongoing fight for recognition and acceptance in a dominantly heteronormative culture. There are numerous examples where fashion – whether designers like Yves Saint Laurent and his iconic women's suit known as *Le Smoking*, or musicians, pop stars, or film costume designer – has incorporated or corrupted the aesthetics of social movements like feminism or the LGBTQIA+ rights movement.

Despite being a system of meaning, fashion – whether high fashion or high-street fashion – is, after all, a consumer product. It is intertwined with and complicit in the capitalist exploitation of environmental resources, women and migrant labour, and its racist and colonial trade practices. It is, as Tansy Hoskins writes, 'a commodity produced by a corporation and sold on the market for profit' (2022, 10). In this regard, then, critique that the mainstreaming and fashion(ing) of queer and trans*[1] styles appropriate and depoliticise queer culture seems valid. Furthermore, the largely gender-neutral styles of unisex or genderless fashion are considered by some to be 'nothing more than menswear rebranded', conforming to 'understated masculine aesthetics rather than embracing femininity and flamboyance, and … are only available for thin and non-disabled bodies', thereby reinforcing 'sexism, misogyny and ableism' (Reilly and Barry 2020, 9).

Yet, the reality and relationship of fashion, culture, and its resistance are complicated. Fashion is inherently contradictory. It is 'both oppressive and emancipating, glorious and terrible, revolutionary and reactionary at the same time' (Hoskins 2022, 17). Thus, while fashion's incorporation of gender-fluid styles is, on the one hand, a marketing tool for capitalist gain, it is also part of a paradigm shift. In other words, gender, culture, and fashion, or the

[1] The abbreviation and addition of the asterisk in trans* are meant to indicate that not all trans* people transition from male-to-female or female-to-male, or identify with the binary. The term trans* aims to include a range of genderqueer identities, such as transgender, trans man, trans woman, agender, genderqueer, gender-fluid, non-binary, genderfuck, genderless, third gender, two-spirit, intersex, and cross-dressed. As Avery Tompkins suggests, the asterisk expands the meaning of trans* and 'pushes it beyond the trans-prefix' by indicating 'a deeper meaning than the prefix itself might suggest… [it] may act as a footnote indicator, implying a complication or suggesting further investigation' (2014, 27). Further, Jack Halberstam emphasises the indefiniteness the asterisk provides, stating that it 'holds off the certainty of diagnosis; it keeps at bay any sense of knowing in advance what the meaning of this or that gender-variant form may be, and perhaps most importantly, it makes trans* people the authors of their own categorizations' (2018, 4). Accordingly, I use trans* with this intention – to indicate the multiplicity of gender identities and trans* people.

fashion industry and the gender binary system, are interwoven. They are so tied up with each other, in fact, that a shift in one field ultimately impacts the other. Understood as a cultural phenomenon, fashion's changing gender norms do not just happen but rather go hand in hand with, absorb, and reflect broader cultural and societal shifts. Today, there is an increasing awareness and understanding of diverse gender and sexual identities – or as Rob Cover states, a new taxonomy for emergent identities (2019). While it is easy to attribute the blurring gender lines in fashion to its cyclical character, our times are marked by changing social and cultural norms where the understanding of gender, gender roles, and their sartorial expression and representation are renegotiated.

Nevertheless, it is important to note that the understanding of gender as binary, the perceived naturalisation of two categories that are fundamentally different, is deeply ingrained in Western culture. During the European Enlightenment, when science replaced religion as the dominant framework, biological differences served as evidence of and an explanation for sex and gender difference. The assumption of two genders henceforth became the result of a presumed biological facticity. It is this facticity and its linked gender binary that Judith Butler investigates and critiques in her remarks on the social construction and performativity of gender, which will be the subject of Chapter 1. Serving as the theoretical background for the development of an antigender fashion framework, Butler's notion of gender performativity, the heterosexual matrix, and troubling gender will be considered in the context of the contemporary shift of trans* and gender variance and in its relationship to fashion.

Although this study largely follows the conceptualisation and understanding of gender in its Western binary context with antigender fashion understood as in opposition to the gender binary system and its associations, roles, and sartorial expressions viewed through a lens and history of fashion in Western cultures it is important to stress that fashion, per se, is not a solely Western notion, nor are non-binary gender identities. There are numerous examples of communities, societies, and people whose model of gender differs from a binary one; for instance, the hijra in Indian culture, two-spirit in Native American culture, or the māhū in Polynesian (Hawaiian and Tahitian) cultures. The enforcement of the gender binary system and systematic erasure of gender diverse practices and identities was a key weapon in Western colonialism and slavery. As Greg Thomas argues, gender is not just a social construct in a post-structural sense, but 'a culturally specific, Western bourgeois social construct' (2007, 49). The sex/gender binary was created against and in contrast to the 'savagery' and 'sexual ambiguity' of Black and Indigenous people. By excluding Black, Indigenous and People of Colour (BIPOC) from the gender binary, they were dehumanised and their captivity and mistreatment

justified. ‘One cannot qualify as human’, writes Thomas, ‘if one is not identified as man or woman, and vice versa since manhood, womanhood, and humanity are not apolitical notions (as if there were such a thing), but very political notions of empire’ (2007, 28). Therefore, the challenge of binary sex and gender categories and their presumed naturalness and universality starts with and requires decolonisation. Consequently, the decolonisation of fashion, besides overthrowing the systems that exploit the Global South, also needs to question, challenge, and overthrow the Western system of sex and gender binary.

As this situation suggests, gender is always contextual. How gender is understood, theorised, lived, and experienced depends on the historical, social, and cultural frameworks in which it emerges and exists. Consequently, the ways gender can and has been challenged in fashion and dress in the past differs greatly. In order to understand the contemporary occurrence of gender-fluid fashions and its differences to androgynous, unisex, and other gender-bending styles, in Chapter 2 I look at what I call *moments* of gender-blurring fashion that challenged, subverted, or blurred sartorial gender codes. Here, the term ‘moment’ has been chosen because it denotes a small quantity of something, an indefinite period of time, and (*literal* and *figurative*) significance. The notion of moments is also used as a framework to think through and analyse contemporary gender-fluid and antigender fashion design. Similar to the ways gender exists in moments of acts and performativity, antigender fashion emerges in different moments. These moments of gender-blurring fashion, then, are marked by their varied temporal occurrences, their embodiment by individuals, and their significance in challenging sartorial gender norms in their socio-cultural context.

Part of any given socio-cultural context is also the acknowledgement and importance of the theory of intersectionality. Developed by Black feminist thinkers, particularly Kimberlé Crenshaw, intersectionality seeks to analyse the ways in which different social identities overlap and create different systems of oppression. It speaks to the interconnectedness of social identities like gender, race, sexuality, age, and class, among others, and recognises that these identities influence and build on each other. The gender-bending moments of fashion traced in Chapter 2, then, will also be analysed in light of other intersecting identity categories. Because gender is inseparable from other social identities like sexuality, race, and class, the destabilisation of one category inevitably means the destabilisation of others; that is, identity categories and systems such as heteronormativity or patriarchal structures.

Furthermore, the concept of antigender fashion, a fashion design that challenges, questions, and destabilises the gender binary, postulates fashion as political. Indeed, fashion is, in a way, always political. It is a statement, a communicative medium that offers translation for

cultural, social, and personal sensitivities. Yet, as I will argue, antigender fashion is political in the sense that its purpose is essentially political: it is fashion as protest and as a means to disrupt governing social systems, such as the gender binary, and consequently, it offers a way to disrupt fashion, identity, and culture.

Accordingly, antigender fashion, increasingly blurred gender lines, and representation of gender-fluid identities in contemporary fashion are contributing to and catalysing a paradigm shift in Western society that moves away from normative gender roles towards an increasing awareness and acceptance of variant and fluid gender identities. Influenced by the philosophical and socioeconomic questioning of the late twentieth century and efforts to decolonise fashion and history, this shift in fashion and representation can be seen as a consequence of social change sparked by feminism, queer studies, and post-colonial theory. It is on this basis, then, that I will critically examine contemporary fashion and its incorporation and conceptualisation of gender-fluid or antigender fashion design.

Focusing on four case studies – JW Anderson, Gucci, Art School, and No Sesso – this study offers a theoretical enquiry into possible forms of fashion design that challenge, disrupt, and proliferate gender binaries and traditional sartorial gender norms. Drawing from Butler's theory of *gender performativity* and the notion of *troubling gender*, as well as Karaminas and Taylor's concept of the term *antigender* fashion, this study expands on and further develops the theoretical framework of antigender fashion to think through and make sense of contemporary gender-fluid fashion practices. Therefore, I will take on a critical textual analysis of fashion in the form of fashion imagery (advertising campaigns, lookbooks, etc.), runway shows, fashion films, media coverage, and social media outlets. Guiding this analysis is one central research question: How does antigender fashion disrupt, challenge, and trouble binary gender norms? This question is accompanied by two interrelated subsequent research questions: How does contemporary antigender fashion differ from and contribute to the construction and discourse of gender-fluid fashion? And how, in turn, is antigender fashion formed and informed by societal and cultural contexts and discursive shifts of gender identities?

METHODOLOGY

Fashion has many faces, as Jennifer Craik illustrates in *The Face of Fashion* (1993, 215), not just because of its everchanging and cyclical character, but because it touches upon many spheres of our life – when we wear it as clothes on our bodies, figuratively when we let our eyes wander across shop windows (whether on or offline), or when we linger over its imagery

in magazines and social media posts. Consequently, it is largely agreed that the study of fashion is by definition interdisciplinary and requires a range of methods, materials, and theories from a variety of fields. Furthermore, research methods and practices are, in part, subject to cultural, societal, and environmental circumstances. As Heike Jenss states, 'research methods are embedded in context (academically, historically, socially, culturally, personally) and the actual use of methods in the practice of research is therefore a much more dynamic or fluid undertaking' (2016, 12).

In the digital era, communication, which is an increasingly significant part of our everyday and social life, takes place online, with fashion coexisting as both material object and digital image (Rees-Roberts 2018, 2). Patrizia Calefato describes the process and production of new digital forms of fashion and textual and social connections as 'the new fluid cities of fashion' (2021, xxiii). Accordingly, the virtual spaces of fashion blogs and websites, Instagram, and YouTube, do not simply constitute electronic, digital versions of another 'real' life, they are themselves spaces that are lived and experienced in physical and communicative ways.

Within these fluid cities, the term fashionscapes describes the way visual fashion imagery flows through and impacts global cultural streams. As defined by Karaminas (2012, 177–78), fashionscapes describe fashion's form as a digital media artefact that is captured, shared, and realised via digital media technologies. Borrowing from Arjun Appadurai's work (1996) in which he discusses the new 'global cultural economy' through the lens of five dimension or 'scapes', including mediascapes, technoscapes, ethnoscapes, financescapes, and ideoscapes, the concept seeks to highlight the ways digital media technologies like Instagram and YouTube 'have become increasingly powerful and flexible formats for capturing, heightening, and transmitting the energy of collections and ideas around illusion and spectacle' (Karaminas 2012, 178). Expanding on this definition, Calefato refers to fashionscapes as 'the stratified, hybrid, multiple, and fluid disposition of imageries of the clothed body of our time' (2019, 33). Accordingly, fashion's landscapes in today's global cultural fluidity 'are marked by objects and signs, bodies and images, myths and narrations: these elements reproduce themselves and move as digital information impulses do, continuously traveling around the world' (Calefato 2019, 32). The focus on Internet-mediated research and representations of fashion through text and visual material offers the opportunity to investigate contemporary fashion as it is increasingly experienced today; that is, through stills (advertising images, social media posts) and moving images (catwalk shows, live streams, fashion films). As Nick Rees-Roberts (2018, 1–2) states, 'the internet *is* today's sidewalk, and, at times, today's catwalk too'.

In locating my research within an interdisciplinary understanding and acknowledging the concept of fashionscapes, I am also presupposing an understanding of fashion as a system of signification, following Calefato's definition, where fashion 'conveys stories, constitutes spaces, produces myths, and expresses meanings and conflicts. It is a semiotic field which belongs to the composite scenario of the contemporary world, with which the different styles of clothing enter into dialogue and to which they offer a translation' (2017, 81). The relationship of semiotics and fashion, along with its production of meaning through signs, will be further explored in Chapter 1.

In employing an interpretive lens deriving from semiotics, I am also presupposing an understanding of fashion as cultural text. 'Text' in this sense describes any cultural object that we interpret to understand its meaning. From a post-structuralist perspective, textual analysis entails focusing on 'the ways in which these forms of representation take place, the assumptions behind them and the kinds of sense-making about the world that they reveal' (McKee 2003, 17). As such, this study offers textual analysis within a post-structuralist framework.

A key benefit of this methodology is that textual analysis offers researchers a way to understand how members of a culture make sense of themselves and the world (McKee 2003, 1). In other words, it enables scholars to illuminate the underlying politics or social contexts of the text under investigation. To offer a comprehensive analysis, which takes these social contexts into account, I am using a multiple case study approach. The approach and the criteria for the case studies will be explained in the following section.

CASE STUDY APPROACH

Fashion is a wide-ranging phenomenon and emerges in tandem with complex cultural and contextual conditions. Its study requires an analysis that takes these conditions into account. It is for this reason that a case study approach has been chosen to investigate the phenomenon of antigender fashion within a contemporary context.

A case study is, according to one definition proposed by Robert K. Yin, 'an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon (the "case") in depth and within its real-world context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context may not be clearly evident' (2014, 16). Another definition, offered by Robert E. Stake, understands the case study as 'the study of particularity and complexity of a single case, coming to understand its activity within important circumstances' (1995, xi). By integrating contextual conditions as a fundamental part of case study research, this approach not only acknowledges the complexity

of the studied phenomenon and its external conditions – in this case, antigender fashion – but differentiates itself from other approaches that neglect context.

Beyond identifying these benefits, Stake (2006, 12) later outlined the potential of the multi-case study, explaining that it not only enables the examination of cases embedded in their specific contexts – such as historical, economic, political, or aesthetic backgrounds – but illuminates how the phenomenon interacts and performs in different circumstances. Additionally, as Roger Gomm, Martyn Hammersley, and Peter Foster (2000, 3) elucidate, case study research is characterised by unstructured and naturally occurring data and its qualitative analysis, meaning that the variables of the data exceed the control of the researcher. While this study illuminates the notion of gender fluidity in contemporary fashion design based on visual and written texts that already exist across a range of media, a multi-case study approach enables the systematic organisation and analysis of the multiple case studies and data while taking their specific contexts into account.

This is, of course, useful, as fashion does not exist in a vacuum: it evolves and changes in the context of broader social shifts. In particular, the concept of gender-bending fashion is intertwined with broader movements in gender discourse, as fashion, society, and identity are inextricably linked. While this study is concerned with the phenomenon of antigender fashion, the research questions address its role in the context of contemporary society. How far does fashion challenge and break gender boundaries? What does it mean that antigender fashion challenges and scrambles gender signifiers? How does antigender fashion design influence, reflect, or reject concepts of gender in contemporary society?

To answer these questions, I chose four fashion designers that address and include the notion of breaking gender boundaries in their design: JW Anderson, Gucci, Art School, and No Sesso. While there is a plethora of contemporary fashion designers and brands that include gender-fluid aspects, the chosen case studies are exemplars of antigender fashion based on its defining aspects, developed in Chapter 3. Using the language of gendered fashion is an essential part of deconstructing and reconstructing it to reveal its instabilities. In this way, then, antigender fashion subverts and proliferates traditional notions of gender.

Because antigender fashion includes the ‘flaunting’ of gender and gendered fashion through the exploitation of sartorial signifiers of masculinity and femininity, the criteria for each case study designer has been modified accordingly. The designers all: a) pursue a design approach that speaks to and challenges gender norms and boundaries by taking apart and rearranging signifiers of gender; b) follow an intersectional approach to gender, including identity categories such as race, class, age, disable/able, and thin/fat bodies; c) integrate, on the

level of construction, design specificities that include and accommodate all kinds of bodies, such as bloc patterns, stretch fabrics, zippers, strings, and cords etc.; and d) have considerable visibility in the fashion industry and media, particularly concerning gender fluidity. The main characteristics and aspects of each fashion house are listed in Table 1 below.

Table 1 Characteristics of the Chosen Case Studies

LABEL	YEAR FOUNDED	DESIGNER	DESCRIPTION
JW Anderson	2008 (menswear) 2010 (womenswear)	Jonathan W. Anderson (creative director)	London-based high fashion label
Gucci	1921	Alessandro Michele (creative director 2015-2022)	Traditional, luxury fashion house based in Italy
Art School	2017	Eden Loweth Tom Barrat (till 2020)	London-based queer design collective
No Sesso	2015	Pia Davis (co-founder and designer), Arin Hayes (co-founder), Autumn Randolph (co-designer)	Los Angeles-based, African American high fashion and streetwear brand

While numerous other fashion brands challenge contemporary gender norms, including several high-street labels, my focus was on high fashion brands as their textual and visual representations are various and multiple (multi-media advertising, runway shows, interviews etc.). Although high fashion's style authority has succumbed to the influence of street style in postmodern and post-postmodern times, where the 'trickle-down' effect is partly replaced by the 'bubble-up' effect (Polhemus 2010, 9), high fashion's quest for the new is still tangible. Furthermore, while the commercial aspect plays a crucial role in the industry as a whole, the realm of high fashion offers a platform for experimentation and frequently puts the design approach before marketability. Additionally, these four labels were chosen because they have garnered considerable success within the industry, be that in the form of media attention, prizes, or commercial success. They offer the potential to be revealing case studies that shed light on the phenomenon of antigender fashion.

The selection of the case studies is also tied to the methodology and theoretical framework of this study. While there are many justifiable definitions of fashion and the fashion system beyond its connection to Western modernity and capitalism (Jansen 2020), the conceptualisation of antigender fashion in this study is inevitably tied to the Western idea and

system of gendered fashion. First, because the development and establishment of the binary sex and gender system is closely linked to the period of (Western) Enlightenment – Butler's concept of gender performativity, that builds the starting point for my theoretical framework, is based on the Western concept of gender. Second, the emergence of gendered and binary forms of dress are understood in correlation to the Western concept of gender. What is, sartorially, considered masculine or feminine is largely influenced and informed by the Western tradition of gendered fashion. Third, my own experience and upbringing within a Western gender system is inevitably part of this study. As I perform an interpretive analysis for the four case studies – their antigender fashion design and contextual background – this is influenced and shaped by my view of the world. Additionally, the designers' own intentions were considered, adding to and highlighting the specific socio-cultural and historical context within which their work arose.

This interpretive analysis approach, then, acknowledges the possibilities of multiple interpretations of one text, each involving the understanding of the text 'within the multiple facets of the historical, cultural, and social understandings of the world at the time the text was created' (Hawkins 2017, 1756). Furthermore, situated within a poststructuralist framework and perspective, this study not only acknowledges the existence of different viewpoints and interpretations, but that the understanding of a text is relative, holding truth and validity in the differences and variations. 'The goal is not to find one correct way to interpret the text, but rather one that may be supported by information within the text itself' (Hawkins 2017, 1756).

The design of the case study approach consists of multiple holistic case studies to comprehensively fathom the phenomenon of gender fluidity in contemporary fashion design within the scope of this study. Therefore, multiple visual and written texts spanning different multi-media outlets have been collected to build each case. As Yin argues, one characteristic of the case study approach is its use of multiple sources of evidence, which in turn need to be supported by triangulation, meaning that 'the case study's unique strength is its ability to deal with a full variety of evidence – documents, artifacts, interviews, and observations' (2014, 12). While Yin refers to interviews and observations conducted directly between researcher and subject, this project is limited to already existing data (e.g., visual and written texts) and third-party records and documents, such as interviews or reports by fashion journalists. However, this range of sources enables the analysis of the surrounding discourse about gender-fluid fashion, underpinned by the contextual analysis of these writings. The analysis, then, is carried out and triangulated through various forms of data; that is, fashion imagery (advertising campaign, lookbooks, etc.), runway shows and performances, fashion films, interviews and media coverage, and postings on social media outlets. This method addresses a variety of

content in different contexts, for different audiences, and from different authors and provides the material for the textual and critical analysis carried out in this study. Each case study is underpinned by its historical and contextual background analysis through secondary sources, documents, and publications.

Certainly, this approach does not dissolve the degree of subjectivity that is inevitably a part of this project. As Helen Simons (2009, 4) points out, subjectivity plays a crucial role in the understanding of the case study: 'It is through analysis and interpretation … that many of the insights and understanding of the case are gained.' While I function as 'the main instrument in data gathering, interpretation and reporting' (Simons 2009, 4), a rigorous and continuous consideration of my influence and impact on the research process and findings is a necessary and essential part of this study. Furthermore, within the limits of this project, the steps taken to include a diverse representation of cases and multiple sources of evidence offer generalisable conclusions about the phenomenon of gender fluidity and add a certain level of rigour and validity.

MATERIALS AND DATA GATHERING

While the multiple case study approach dictates the structure and design of this research, it is the collected visual and written texts that serve as primary data and material for the qualitative analysis of texts and images. These texts and images are not only part of what fashion is today (e.g., the representation in moving and still images), but also constitute a part of contemporary media culture. The showpiece, for instance, which is often created solely for the runway and is not part of the retail collection, exists on the edge between embodied material and image; that is, while it is embodied by the model on the runway, its value as a fashion piece relies on its circulation as image. As Caroline Evans argues, 'the showpiece exemplifies the way in which much contemporary fashion enters the realm of the commodity and circulates obliquely, not always as an embodied practice but sometimes as an image, an idea or a conceptual piece' (2003, 47). Fashion in this form offers a rich and intriguing source for this investigation of gender fluidity in contemporary fashion.

The texts pertaining to the four case studies consist of: *fashion imagery* in the form of runway stills, advertising campaigns, and lookbooks; *moving images*, such as runway show recordings and fashion short films; *media coverage*, including interviews and newspaper articles; and *social media channels*. These materials were chosen because they offer a varied and multimedia representation of fashion, which is showcased in moving and still imagery and

addressed in instances edited for different contexts and intended audiences. While the garments and collections are at the centre of this investigation, advertising campaigns and fashion films play a significant role in the representation of the collections in culture/society and are therefore included in the selection of material. However, while these texts serve as a primary source for this research project, some of the images and texts are considered secondary as they are content deliberately created by a third party; for example, newspaper articles, interviews, films, and advertising campaigns. These materials will be critically examined and their possible biases and intentions on the part of journalists and content creators have been considered.

The data selection for each of the four case studies was informed by the respective circumstances and contexts. For instance, Gucci, as a long-established luxury fashion house, offers a rich historical background and a variety of materials, campaigns, and collections. In comparison, Art School and No Sesso are rather young fashion brands and their portfolio is limited. However, a driving force in the data selection was iconicity and impact, with texts selected with regard to their ground-breaking reverberation in terms of questioning gender boundaries. Furthermore, these texts, considered as significant 'moments', open up the possibility to not only analyse fashion in its multifaceted and complex existence, but as an all-encompassing entity established and perceived in a specific time, place, and zeitgeist.

INTERNET-MEDIATED RESEARCH

As mentioned above, the internet plays an important part in today's society and fashion industry, from fashion's distribution and e-commerce, to its communication and visual representation. Related to this, as Rob Cover (2019) argues, online forums are influential in the proliferation and emergence of new gender identities beyond the binary. Therefore, the internet and online media are both integral components of this study. Besides presenting a vast array of images and records of past fashion shows and collections, the internet also offers access to digital issues of fashion magazines and articles. It is, amongst others, for these reasons that Internet-Mediated Research (IMR) was chosen as a methodological approach for the collection of texts and interpretive analysis of antigender fashion.

IMR methods are defined as 'procedures for collecting primary research data' that make use of the internet and offer cost and time efficiency, as well as enabling cross-cultural and expanded geographical research (Hewson, Vogel, and Laurent 2016, 1). The latter is of particular importance for this study as fashion is a global industry and the chosen case studies represent international designers. This study, then, uses the unobtrusive method of document

analysis, which, in contrast to other methods such as observation or interviews that make use of soliciting sources, focuses on already existing and published documents (Hewson 2014). As this study is concerned with the phenomenon of gender fluidity in contemporary fashion design, the data collection of these 'naturally occurring' documents, meaning data produced without commissioning or the influence of a researcher, provide the suitable content and context for the investigation of this cultural phenomenon.

OUTLINE

The study is organised into two parts. The first, comprising Chapters 1 to 3, covers the theoretical and historical background for the development of an antigender fashion theory. The second part contains the interpretive analyses of the case studies, considering their socio-cultural contexts and antigender fashion approach.

In Chapter 1, I lay out the theoretical perspectives that frame the philosophical and theoretical strands of gender theory, which are central to the conceptual framework of this analysis. Butler's concepts of gender performativity, the heterosexual matrix, and troubling gender inform the key component of the theoretical considerations. However, other theoretical perspectives that influenced Butler's work, such as Michel Foucault's ideas on the discursiveness of sex or Simone de Beauvoir's notion of the social construction of gender, are also covered. The significance of fashion for the performativity and creation of gender will be discussed in Chapter 1, which also positions this research amidst the growing post-postmodern scholarship and consideration of fashion as a system of signification in the digital age.

Chapter 2 contextualises and highlights important moments in fashion history that challenged and blurred rigid gender boundaries. For instance, the style of the so-called *garçonne*, the gender-bending fashions of butch and femme lesbians as well as queer cultures, or the challenging of masculinities by the 'peacock' and sexual revolution. These moments of slippage will be considered in terms of their interconnection to socioeconomic and philosophical changes as well as their social realm. Chapter 2 provides an important historical background for the analysis of contemporary antigender fashion as well as the exploration of similarities and differences between it and androgynous or unisex fashion.

Chapter 3 establishes the theoretical background for the development and expansion of the concept of antigender fashion that is at the heart of this study. Taking Karaminas and Taylor's term of antigender fashion and its comparison to anti-fashion as a starting point, I trace different iterations and conceptualisations of anti-fashion to develop a blueprint and theoretical

basis for the notion of antigender fashion. Antigender fashion's political position and the aspects that distinguish it from other forms of gender-blurring fashions like unisex or androgyny will also be discussed.

Having set up these theoretical and historical backgrounds, Chapters 4 to 7 cover the four case studies, the detailed exposition of the selected materials, and its analysis regarding the incorporation and representation of gender fluidity in the work of each designer, respectively: JW Anderson, Gucci, Art School, and No Sesso. Each case study chapter follows a similar structure, beginning with an introductory outline of the history of the designer and their position in the fashion industry and broader socio-cultural context. Each then includes analysis of the selected collections and material in light of important and outstanding 'moments' in their antigender fashion approach. The case study analyses illustrate the ways the designer/brands trouble gender through their work.

The final concluding chapter discusses this study's key findings with particular attention given to the research questions and aims. It will highlight important similarities and/or differences between the ways the four case studies engage in the cultural and societal proliferation of gender identities.

1

TROUBLING GENDER: ON THE PROLIFERATION OF GENDER AND THE PERFORMATIVITY OF FASHION

The twenty-first century has been marked by shifts in understandings of gender, as well as by the technological and digital forces that shape and reshape our realities. These shifts, however, do not occur in isolation; rather, they are the belated results and consequences of the social and conceptional questioning of the latter half of the twentieth century. Building on these conceptual shifts, this project investigates how contemporary fashion design challenges and troubles normative gender identities and can thus be broadly positioned in the field of poststructuralism and queer theory.

The first of these, poststructuralism, comprises different approaches and methods that pose a critique to structuralism and the binary oppositions that constitute its meaning. Judith Butler, who draws from post-structural theory, defines it as the rejection of 'the claims of totality and universality and the presumption of binary structural oppositions that implicitly operate to quell the insistent ambiguity and openness of linguistic and cultural signification' (2006, 54). In other words, poststructuralism critically examines the totalitarian, patriarchal, discriminating, ethnocentric, and naturalising social and cultural norms and positions associated with concepts such as metaphysics, subjectivity, or rationality. In the context of this dissertation, the linguistic turn defined by poststructuralism opened new fields of enquiry for the study of fashion, where fashion is understood as a system of cultural meaning, as a tool for the construction of identities, and as a form of resistance or conformity.

The second field, queer theory, offers a framework that carries the potential to understand 'the constitution of identities' and functions 'as a method to disturb the heteronormative, taken-for-granted positions/assumptions about sex, gender and sexuality' (Watson 2005, 79). In general, 'queer' is an umbrella term used to describe people, sexualities, and genders that are not heterosexual and/or cisgender. While the term has been historically used as a slur, some have reclaimed it as an affirming identity marker. Within queer theory, and

in this research project, queer is also used in its methodological and theoretical sense of 'to queer' or 'queering' the norm or heteronormative.

In the following, I present the theoretical developments that influenced today's conception of gender and that frame the post-structural theoretical approach of this study. Beginning with an elucidation of Butler's analysis of gender, particularly the formulation of *gender performativity* and *troubling gender* in her seminal work *Gender Trouble* (1990), and its significance for the study of fashion, I then consider gender studies scholar Jack Halberstam's and social theorist Rob Cover's recent scholarship on trans* and gender diversity, showing how their work explores the social and technological developments leading to the contemporary shift in the perception and proliferation of gender. Finally, I consider fashion in its role as a system of signification, and in its relation to gender and the discursive modes of the postmodern and the post-postmodern.

SEX, GENDER, AND PERFORMATIVITY

During the 1990s, the aesthetic shift of gendered bodies was accompanied by significant developments within the discourse on gender that laid the cornerstone for the emerging scholarship known as queer theory. Largely following the work of Michel Foucault, the founders of this field of critical theory include scholars Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Teresa de Lauretis – who coined the term at a conference in 1990 at the University of California, Santa Cruz – and Butler. In 'Queer and Now', Sedgwick described 'queer' as 'the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone's gender, or anyone's sexuality aren't made (or *can't be* made) to signify monolithically' (1994, 8). In other words, queer and queerness serves as an umbrella term to encompass and present possibilities of gender and sexuality that exist beyond heterosexual and cisgender categories.

It is also important to note that the work of Black authors, such as Samuel Delany, Patrick (Pat) Califia, and Octavia Butler, has been central to the development of queer theory, as Tavia Nyong'o points out in *Afro-Fabulations: The Queer Drama of Black Life* (2018). Offering a 'dark precursor' or alternative genealogy to the predominantly white genealogy of queer theory, Nyong'o argues 'that a more expansive genealogy of queer theoretical writing can reveal the place of theorists of color, and black theorists specifically, in the intellectual and political genealogy of what we now call queer theory' (Nyong'o 2018, 153)

As noted, queer theory largely built on the work of Foucault, and in this regard, his seminal three-volume work *The History of Sexuality*, from 1978, revealed it to be a social and historical construction, while the work itself 'became the "Bible"' of queer theory, 'in part because it is here that Foucault theorizes biopolitics as a normalizing form of power, and calls for resistance to biopolitical normalization' (Taylor 2016, 176). In volume one, Foucault ([1978] 1998) conceptualises sexuality as socially constituted, as a historical system of discourse that perpetuates power relations, such as the reproduction of heteronormativity where heterosexuality is produced as the norm by positioning homosexuality as abnormal. Tracing the discourse on sex and sexuality in Western society from the seventeenth century to the 1970s and the increasing interest of Western science in the 'truth' of sex, he advocates the need for 'analytics' of power that governs sexuality.

Discussing the 'juridico-discursive' form of power that is centred on obedience based on modes of domination, submission, and subjugation, and its supposed necessity, Foucault argues for a different understanding that does not operate from a single position of dominance. Rather, he establishes a definition of power as 'the multiplicity of force relations immanent in the sphere in which they operate and which constitute their own organization' ([1978] 1998, 92). In other words, he writes, 'Power is everywhere; not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere … it is the name that one attributes to a complex strategical situation in a particular society' (93). Accordingly, power emanates from all social relations, all the time. Foucault offered gender discourse as a theoretical framework through which the gender binary, its social system of power, and the supposed 'truth' of sex could be analysed and critiqued.

Following this style of enquiry, and drawing on a Foucauldian, poststructuralist approach, Butler developed her influential work and further challenged the view that sex is a pre-discursive fact from which genders are derived products. Her concepts of *gender performativity*, the *heterosexual matrix*, and *troubling gender* are formative frameworks within the field of gender theory. They therefore constitute a significant part of the theoretical perspectives at the centre of this analysis of antigender fashion design.

Writing amid an increasingly fragmented feminist discourse, Butler's seminal work *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (2006) departs from general feminist thought that is grounded in identity politics and seeks to represent a unifying and stable category of women. Accordingly, while the subject construction of 'woman' as a stable category can help in the quest for emancipation and equality, the insistence upon its stability simultaneously counteracts feminist aims – and risks its failure. As Butler argues, 'by conforming to a

requirement of representational politics that feminism articulate a stable subject, feminism opens itself to charges of gross misrepresentation' (2006, 6–7).

Butler emphasises the problem further by stating that 'the construction of the category of women as a coherent and stable subject' inadvertently leads to 'regulation and reification of gender regulations' (2006, 7), which, she argues, is a paradox undercutting feminist goals. By defining gender as the cultural interpretation of biological sex, this strand of feminist reasoning not only acknowledges the presumed binary of sex (male and female) but simultaneously adheres to a binary system of gender (masculine and feminine). As Butler goes on to state, hegemonic feminist theory 'tends to reinforce precisely the binary, heterosexist framework that carves up genders into masculine and feminine and forecloses an adequate description of the kinds of subversive and parodic convergences that characterize gay and lesbian cultures' (90).

Before Butler, the critique of a presumed unified subject of 'woman' had previously been voiced by scholars such as bell hooks (2000) and Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) who sought to broaden the feminist discourse from a Black female perspective. Developing an understanding of the intersections of social and political identities, such as gender, race, class, and sexuality, they highlighted the individual and unique experiences of discrimination and oppression that occur simultaneously. The evolving concept of intersectionality strongly impacted the discourse on feminism and continues to be implicated in contemporary discussions. Criticising the notion of women as a unifying category that rejects the multiple ways and intersections (e.g., cultural, social, political) that constitute 'women', Butler argues for 'a radical rethinking of the ontological constructions of identity' (2006, 7).

To offer this, Butler develops the notion of gender performativity by expanding on, inter alia, Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* and its doctrine that 'one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman' (1993, 281), as well as Foucault's claim that 'the deployment of sexuality … established this notion of sex' (Butler 2006, 1). Accordingly, gender is not a fact, a static marker of identity, but a perpetually repeating activity. In other words, gender is not something one is, it is something one does; it is a *doing* rather than a *being* (Butler 2006, 34). Undertaking the phenomenological theory of 'acts' that 'seeks to explain the mundane way in which social agents constitute social reality through language, gesture, and all manner of symbolic social signs' (Butler 1988, 519), Butler concludes that gender is not a stable identity 'from which various acts follow' but 'a *stylized repetition of acts*' (2006, 191).

The performative acts that bring gender into being include, besides common speech and language, non-verbal communication and signs, such as wearing (gender-coded) clothing, the styling of one's hair in a particular gendered fashion, or body language and demeanour.

Furthermore, the continual rendering of 'feminine' and 'masculine' acts purports the illusion of a true and real gender. In other words, Butler explains:

> acts, gestures, and desire produce the effect of an internal core or substance, but produce this *on the surface* of the body, through the play of signifying absences that suggest, but never reveal, the organizing principle of identity as a cause. Such acts, gestures, enactments, generally construed, are *performative* in the sense that the essence or identity that they otherwise purport to express are *fabrications* manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means. That the gendered body is performative suggests that it has no ontological status apart from the various acts which constitute its reality. (Butler 2006, 185)

According to Butler, then, there would not be any gender at all without the discrete acts that create the idea of gender; it is 'a construction that regularly conceals its genesis' (1988, 522). As Elizabeth Wissinger points out, Butler's performativity reveals the 'ontological origins of gender itself, not just what gender means, but what gender *is*' (2016, 287). In other words, actions, behaviours, and gestures are the results of an individual's identity and simultaneously the source that constructs its formation.

Butler's understanding of performativity goes back to the notion of 'performative speech acts' as introduced by John L. Austin during a series of lectures posthumously published under the title *How to Do Things with Words* (1975, 325). Therein, Austin thoroughly outlines what he calls *performative sentences*, meaning that by uttering certain words, we are not merely saying something, but doing something; that 'the utterance is the performing of an action', accompanied by appropriate circumstances and the speaker's or another person's performance of physical or mental action (1975, 6–8). Their validity depends not on whether they are true or false, but on the surrounding conditions. Furthermore, Austin (1975, 21–22) emphasises that performative utterances 'are to be understood as issued in ordinary circumstances', and hence exclude the 'parasitic' ways in which language is used 'not seriously'; for example, when uttered by an actor on stage, in a poem, or spoken in soliloquy. However, postmodern philosopher Jacques Derrida posits that performative success is not necessarily dependent on context and convention. Rather, the general iterability – 'the determined modification of a general citationality' (Derrida 1982, 325) – enables the performative utterance to be successful. In other words, a performative statement would not succeed if 'its formulation did not repeat a "coded" or iterable statement' (Derrida 1982, 326).

Besides Butler's arguments against identity politics and for a rethinking of gender as performative, she also challenges the notion of sex as a natural and biological facticity. The

distinction between biological sex and social gender is, according to Butler, unintelligible. She argues that both, gender as well as sex, are social constructions: 'If the immutable character of sex is contested, perhaps this construct called "sex" is as culturally constructed as gender; indeed, perhaps it was always already gender, with the consequence that the distinction between sex and gender turns out to be no distinction at all' (2006, 9–10).

Two aspects of her argument are important here. First, the assertion that sex is socially constructed, and second, that sex is gender. Drawing on Foucault's theory on the social and historical constructivism of 'sex' and its 'regulatory ideal', Butler argues in *Bodies That Matter* that sex not only constitutes the norm but 'produces the bodies it governs' (2011, xi). Its materiality, then, is a productive power and 'ideal construct' that itself is 'materialized through time' (Butler 2011, xii). Sex becomes naturalised through its construction and reiteration in time. Furthermore, Butler elucidates that sex is gender in the sense that it does not exist a priori, but rather is produced within the discourse and language of gender. In other words, the binary understanding of sex stands in causal relation to gender and its implicit cultural construction.

The close relation between the sex and gender binary dates back to the eighteenth century. Sexual historian Thomas Laqueur has traced the development of sexual difference and the binary category of sex back to the Enlightenment, when the emerging science replaced religion as the authoritarian framework for the explanation of sex and gender. According to Laqueur (1992), before the eighteenth century, the common belief was that men and women represented two different forms of the same sex. In other words, the male and female genitalia were considered to be the same, whereby the vagina was understood as an inward version of the penis. In the late eighteenth century, however, a signifying shift took place: the 'one-sex' model gave way to a 'two-sex' model. Women and men began to be seen as opposites and the two sexes were invented as a new foundation for gender (Laqueur 1992, 149–50). Differences that were previously expressed in reference to gender were now expressed in reference to sex and biology[1]. The assumption of two sexes based on biological facts resulted through and with the (binary) language of gender. The demarcation between two sexes is therefore as much a cultural product as was the one-sex model (Laqueur 1992, 153).

Returning to Butler, she expands on the sex/gender distinction as formulated by de Beauvoir, further exemplifying an understanding of gender beyond the binary system. She

[1] However, we should not confuse today's understanding of gender and subsequently gender fluidity with the way it was understood in the past and within the concept of the one-sex model. As Patrick Mauriès contests: 'While mobility within the one-sexed body was a social, political and cultural phenomenon, nowadays it derives its authority primarily from psychological truth, subjective authenticity and unprecedented demands for society's acceptance ... it is relative and cultural' (2017, 17).

writes that 'if sex does not limit gender, then perhaps there are genders … that are in no way restricted by the apparent duality of sex' and that 'if gender is not tied to sex, either causally or expressively, then gender is a kind of action that can potentially proliferate beyond the binary limits imposed by the apparent binary of sex' (Butler 2006, 152). This hypothesis seemingly allows for a conception of genders that are multiple, fluid, and that break free from the restrictions of normative binary gender identities.

However, this interpretation constitutes a utopian ideal of gender, at least from a Butlerian point of view. As she later emphasises, the inflexibility of gender (and sex), its resistance to radical change and its binary and materiality is a prerequisite to the human condition. Reacting to criticism of *Gender Trouble* and the misinterpretation of the flexibility of gender – that gender is something like a mask that one can put on – Butler emphasises the predetermination of the gendered self. She states: 'gendering is, among other things, the differentiating relations by which speaking subjects come into being. Subjected to gender, but subjectivated by gender, the "I" neither precedes nor follows the process of this gendering, but emerges only within and as the matrix of gender relations themselves' (2011, xvi). In other words, while gender is performative, it is nevertheless neither voluntary nor a conscious deliberate act; rather, it is always an internalised reiteration of a norm. In this way, 'gender performativity is not a matter of choosing which gender one will be today', rather, 'performativity is a matter of reiterating or repeating the norms by which one is constituted: it is not a radical fabrication of a gendered self. It is a compulsory repetition of prior and subjectivating norms' (Butler 1993, 22).

Butler also underlines the importance of the heterosexual matrix for the construction of identity categories and their perceived naturality. As the 'grid of cultural intelligibility through which bodies, genders, and desires are naturalized', Butler characterises the heterosexual matrix as 'a hegemonic discursive/epistemic model of gender intelligibility that assumes that for bodies to cohere and make sense there must be a stable sex expressed through a stable gender … that is oppositionally and hierarchically defined through the compulsory practice of heterosexuality' (2006, 208). In other words, the heterosexual matrix operates as a governing social system that perpetually forms and reaffirms categories of identity, such as gender, sex, or sexuality, as stable and natural. It reinforces the assumptions that sex is a biological and binary facticity (male and female), that gender is the cultural expression of this facticity (male expressed through masculinity, female expressed through femininity), and that sexuality constitutes the desire and attraction for the opposite sex. Heterosexuality, then, upholds the illusion of coherent masculinity or femininity in the way that heterosexual desire retrospectively

provides proof for the binary of gender, that one is either a woman attracted to men or a man attracted to women. Homosexuality and bisexuality juxtaposed with heterosexuality as the 'norm', on the other hand, further underline the necessity for attraction to be directed at a gendered subject, that is either the same or the opposite (Cover 2019, 50).

However, these seemingly rigid gender and sexuality systems might not be so rigid after all, or at least not resistant to change per se. For one, Butler herself sees an opportunity to subvert the boundaries of the binary gender system in what she calls 'troubling gender'. Concluding the first chapter of *Gender Trouble*, she proposes troubling gender as:

> the possibility of subverting and displacing those naturalized and reified notions of gender that support masculine hegemony and heterosexist power, to make gender trouble … through the mobilization, subversive confusion, and proliferation of precisely those constitutive categories that seek to keep gender in its place by posturing as the foundational illusions of identity. (Butler 2006, 46)

Butler offers drag as an example of a potentially subversive bodily act that both reveals the artificial expression and imitative character of gender, and the discursive illusion of inner true gender identity. She suggests that such acts of troubling gender will eventually subvert and undermine the rigid binary of heteronormative gender and sex.

However, Butler is also careful to point out that drag is not subverting the existing gender order per se, but that it can both denaturalise and re-idealise 'hyperbolic heterosexual gender norms' (2011, 85). She emphasises that drag is subversive in so far as it parodies the imitative character of hegemonic gender that strives to become its idealisation and inevitably fails at fulfilling its claim of intrinsic naturalness. Nevertheless, Butler recognises the potential to subvert gender boundaries in the performance of gender itself – that is, because we perform gender repeatedly, there is a chance to challenge the norm: 'The task is not whether to repeat, but how to repeat or, indeed, to repeat and, through a radical proliferation of gender, *to displace* the very gender norms that enable the repetition itself' (Butler 2006, 202–3).

The notion of gender performativity and troubling gender, therefore, offers a theoretical lens for the investigation of gender-fluid fashion design, as fashion is not only part of our day-to-day experience, but actively contributes to the visual expression of identities. Moreover, Butler's conception of gender performativity resolves the seemingly paradoxical presupposition of gender-fluid fashion within the constraints of menswear/womenswear collections. It positions the predominant demarcation of gendered fashion as the starting point for a proliferation of gender.

While the idea of the socially constructed artificiality of gender has a long history – it was already present, for instance, in Plato's works or John Stuart Mill's thoughts on *The Subjection of Women*, originally published in 1869 (Mill and Mill 2009) – Elizabeth Wissinger emphasises that Butler 'provided fashion studies a new direction' by challenging the very categories of gender and the psychological meaning fashion allegedly represents (2016, 286). Instead of focusing on the duality of men's and women's fashion as given types, 'Butler's work revealed how tenuous these distinctions can be and made it possible to look instead to clothes as deployments in the game of shifting social forces, gendered, queer or otherwise' (Wissinger 2016, 286). The performativity of gender, its cultural construction, and the potential to proliferate – to trouble – its binary, albeit in discrete ways, is a valuable tool and a potential lens for the exploration of gender-fluid fashion designs.

TRANS* AND THE PROLIFERATION OF GENDER

In light of increasing awareness of queer gender and sexual identities in North American and European contexts – think of the growing number of films and TV series on LGBTQIA+ narratives mentioned in the introduction, the multiplicity of sexualities (bi-, pan-, or asexuality for instance), and the increasing visibility of transgender in media – one might argue that the troubling of gender has already taken hold. As Halberstam argues, gender variance has always been there, it is just that it is now finding its way into the broader consciousness of society. In *Trans*: A Quick and Quirky Account of Gender Variability* (2018), Halberstam traces the recent shifts in terms of the gendered body and the history of gender variance. He eloquently explores a future of gender variant, queer, and nongendered possibilities. While Halberstam cautions against celebrating the demise of hegemonic sex and gender systems on the basis of broadening language and classification, he also acknowledges the changes in these systems as evidence of shifting notions of gender:

> This emergence of new language signals the end of a period of medical/psychiatric control of the discourse and the beginning of a new paradigm within which people collaborate to name their understandings of contrary embodiment. This new period … has produced rich and compelling narratives and accounts of the complex field of gendered and sexual expression. (Halberstam 2018, 10–11).

Halberstam's account then, influenced by Butler's work, exemplifies a post-structural textual analysis that this study also seeks to exert, albeit with fashion as a visual language of gender expression.

Moreover, as Halberstam states, the increasing awareness of diverse sexual and gender identities not only embodies a break with nineteenth- and twentieth-century customs of classification – partly influenced by binary medical terminology – it also represents a 'new mode of social control that continues the social project that classification and normative regulation began' (2018, 28). This kind of duality, where systems of meaning both destabilise and reinforce societal norms, is as Malcolm Barnard argues, also a characteristic of postmodern fashion. Drawing on Derrida's notion of intertextuality – that the meaning of an object and a sign is both produced and destroyed by its relation to other objects and signs – Barnard argues for an understanding of fashion as 'undecidable'; that is, fashion can both reproduce prevailing social identities (e.g., class and gender positions) and be critical towards them (2002, 156).

While Halberstam focuses his work on individuals and narratives that can be brought together under the umbrella term of transgender, he sees the instances of change regarding regulation and classification of transgender bodies as inextricably linked to broader 'seismic' societal shifts. In *Gaga Feminism: Sex, Gender and the End of Normal* (2012), Halberstam argues for an understanding of sex and gender as an ecological environment, an ecosystem where all organisms and structures are inextricably linked together and interact. He posits that 'we need to think about sex and gender in a more ecological kind of framework, understanding that changes in one environment inevitably impact changes in other environments', suggesting that 'gender here might be thought of more as a climate or ecosystem and less as an identity or discrete bodily location' (2012, 65–94).

On a similar note, in *Emergent Identities: New Sexualities, Genders and Relationships in a Digital Era* (2019), Cover explores the emergence of a new 'taxonomy' of gender and sexuality that proliferates identities and correlates with a broader cultural shift towards their acceptance. Accordingly, digital media fosters an environment that creates a set of interactivity, the opportunity to encounter new information and languages, online identity performativity, and the facilitation of political engagement that musters different (and in many ways marginalised) voices (Cover 2019, 64–65). Therein, the emergent taxonomy not only offers new labels, categories, and classifications of sexual and gender identities, but also provides a challenge to the dominant binary framework of identity categorisation. By providing broader and more nuanced labels and categories for subjected gender and sexual identities (such as asexual, demisexual, non-binary etc.), the new taxonomy destabilises the dichotomies of

masculine/feminine and hetero/homo as well as their alignment with other dichotomies such as normal/abnormal, superior/inferior (Cover 2019, 153).

While Cover sees digital media as an important facilitating factor in the emergence of this new taxonomy, it is certainly not the sole reason for this emergence. Rather, it is situated within a broader cultural shift that, in turn, arises 'through positionings and tensions between historical continuities and ruptures' (Cover 2019, 63). Additionally, several cultural conditions enable the development of the new taxonomy and, as cultural phenomena, create a need for new and alternative categories of gender and sexuality. Among these cultural premises are, according to Cover, the quest for *authenticity* for which even the most proliferated categories offer the most efficient means for its measurability, the *demands for inclusivity*, and the *anti-fluidity backlash* that fostered the cultural desire for increasingly nuanced and sensible categorisations (2019, 64).

In a similar vein, feminism is facing various expansions and increasingly nuanced categorisations. In the editorial letter for the Fall/Winter 2015 issue of *Purple Magazine*, queer-theorist Paul Preciado remembers his own transitioning from female to male subjectivity within and amidst a political and social network of relations. He asserts that feminism in the twenty-first century has to be considered in terms of transfeminism that considers the inevitable confrontation of binaries in late capitalism and what role we play in challenging and overcoming societal norms:

> There is a revolution taking place. Not only inside me, but all over the planet. This revolution did not happen in the glamorous and hippie 1960s. It will not take place in 1,000 years. This revolution is happening now, in front of you. You are in the middle of this revolution and, no matter if you know it or not, you are part of it. (Preciado 2015)

Like Preciado, I too believe there is a transformation happening right now; one that not only changes the way we experience and understand our genders and sexualities, but one that changes the way we live and dress them. Moreover, 'fashion, in its role as a harbinger of change, now literally embodies this quest' for gender fluidity (Mauriès 2017, 157).

Fashion therefore holds a unique position in the renegotiation of gender norms and boundaries, as it plays an important role in the performance and presentation of gender identity. As Charlotte Suthrell argued,

> clothing is unusual in artefactual terms because it allows us to play – temporarily or permanently – with identity and self-image. It can fix us into the gendered space we occupy on a daily basis

> as we get dressed or ... it can function as the means by which gender is slipped on and off' (2004, 2–3).

Butler's conceptualisation of gender as well as Halberstam's and Cover's exploration of the contemporary state of gender and society offer an important context for the investigation of contemporary antigender fashion design. Having set up this wider theoretical background to concepts of gender, the following section will turn to fashion, discussing the interpretative lens and understanding of fashion as text and as a system of signification.

THE PERFORMATIVITY OF FASHION: FASHION'S SYSTEM OF SIGNIFICATION IN POST-POSTMODERNITY

Fashion, as well as related words such as 'dress', 'clothing', and 'style', are difficult to define or to differentiate from each other as their meanings overlap and they are often used synonymously. Indeed, there is no definite, independent definition; rather, these words exist in a network of relations where each definition refers to other words within that structure and their meaning derives from their position within that network (Barnard 2002, 11). However, as I noted in the introduction, fashion can be defined as 'the prevailing style of dress or behavior at any given time, with the strong implication that fashion is characterized by change' (Steele 2005, 12). Or, as Walter Benjamin earlier wrote, 'fashion is the eternal recurrence of the new' (2003, 179). As such, scholars have sought to understand fashion's changing character as a means of demarcation and emulation – amongst its most prominent representatives are Thorstein Veblen's 1899 theory of conspicuous consumption (2004), Georg Simmel's 1904 theory of the dualism of fashion between individuality and identification (1957), and the trickle-down effect elaborated by Grant McCracken (1988).

Furthermore, some scholars argue for an understanding of fashion in connection to the zeitgeist (Vinken 2005) or the notion of (Western) modernity (Entwistle 2015; Wilson 2003a; Breward and Evans 2005). According to Joanne Entwistle, fashion 'must be historically located within western modernity' (2015, xv), referring to its origin in connection to the rise of industrial capitalism. Certainly, there are undeniable parallels between modern capitalism and fashion: both rest upon the exploitation of labour and environmental resources. However, to understand fashion solely in its connection to western modernity not only neglects fashion in other, non-Western cultures, as Jennifer Craik (2009) points out, but fails to acknowledge the pluralities of contemporary, globalised, and democratised fashion.

Finding a sufficient definition of fashion, then, is set with difficulties ranging from its inextricable relation to change and systems of meaning to its links with systems of capitalism and modernity. Underlying these understandings, however, is the shared implication that fashion is a form of clothing. In contrast, fashion can also be defined as a general social phenomenon, logic, or ideology that encompasses all social areas, of which clothing constitutes only one of many (Svendsen 2006, 12).

Taking fashion as a social and material phenomenon, we can see that there are also styles that endure beyond its continuous change by being set against the dominant *mode* of the time, thereby seemingly escaping fashion's realm. These styles and its various occurrences are commonly referred to as anti-fashion, though they are nevertheless positioned within the wider world of fashion. As art historian Anne Hollander states, fashion is a spectrum of desirable and attractive styles at any given time; this not only includes *haute couture* but 'all forms of anti-fashion and nonfashion, and the garments and accessories of people who claim no interest in fashion' (1993, 350)[2]. The notion of anti-fashion is particularly important as a blueprint for the concept of antigender fashion and its contemporary occurrence discussed in this study. The meanings, differences, and relationship of anti-fashion and fashion will be examined in more detail in Chapter 3 by examining the different interpretations and notions of anti-fashion.

The suggestion that fashion is characterised by a search for change and renewal is also a product of modernity and is therefore able to be differentiated from a postmodern understanding of fashion, which is based on concepts of bricolage and assemblage, pastiche, irony, the questioning of traditional norms, and the rejection of authority. As Mike Featherstone postulates, postmodernity is generally associated with features such as

> the effacement of the boundary between art and everyday life; the collapse of the hierarchal distinction between high and mass/popular culture; a stylistic promiscuity favouring eclecticism and the mixing of codes; parody, pastiche, irony, playfulness and the celebration of the surface 'depthlessness' of culture; the decline of the originality/genius of the artistic producer; and the assumption that art can only be repetition. (2007, 7)

The term postmodern has been discussed at length in the scholarship of fashion and dress (see, for instance, Ash and Wilson 1992; Craik 1993; Davis 1994; Polhemus 2010; Wilson 1992, 2003a), with many concluding that fashion is as much a postmodern phenomenon as it is a

[2] 'Nonfashion' here refers to all forms of dress that are positioned outside of the fashion system but are not set against or in response to it, such as folk and traditional dress, functional wear such as wetsuits or rubber and leather fetish costumes. For a similar definition of nonfashion see Fred Davis (1994, 161).

modern one, and that our identities such as class, gender, and sexuality 'are constructed, negotiated and challenged visually, in and through what we wear' (Barnard 2012, 405).

However, recent theoretical work suggests that the postmodern era has come to an end, that new cultural and societal circumstances are replacing the postmodern condition. In its wake, in the early twenty-first century, the school of thought called post-postmodernism critiqued and interpreted social and cultural changes in contemporary art, media, technology, and popular culture. Accordingly, the defining features of contemporary culture and life are increasingly fragmented, pluralistic, or intensified and include concepts such as *altermodernity*, which seeks to resist globalisation and standardisation (Bourriaud 2009); *hypermodernity*, which describes the post-postmodern condition of hyperconsumption driven by fashion-like principles of consumption, not just of consumer products, but all aspects of life including personal identity, work, etc. (Lipovetsky 2005); *automodernity* and the collusion of digital technology and human autonomy (Samuels 2008); *metamodernism*, which considers an oscillation between aspects of modernism and postmodernism (Vermeulen and van den Akker 2010); or the erasure of traditional cultural categories under the concept of *performatism* (Eshelman 2008).

It is the last of these, performatism, that is of particular importance to the concept of antigender fashion and other gender blurring styles such as androgyny. While androgyny – as will be examined in Chapter 2 – can be considered a central component of style and self-presentation within the postmodern condition (Morgado 1996), Marcia Morgado (2014) argues that androgyny has changed fundamentally in post-postmodern times. Accordingly, postmodern androgyny seeks to blend masculinity and femininity to create an ambiguously mixed gender aesthetic. In contrast, the new iteration of androgyny in post-postmodernity accentuates conventional signifiers of masculinity and femininity and juxtaposes different gender presentations (Barry and Reilly 2020, 122). Expanding on Raoul Eshelman's notion of performatism and its dissolution of distinctive cultural categories such as gender and sex, Margado identifies examples of post-postmodern androgyny in transgendered appearances that include the display and emphasis of masculine and feminine aspects. Accordingly, 'these dramatic looks are not the androgynous blending of categories identified with postmodernism; rather, the new looks combine typical masculine visual markers such as facial hair with very feminine appearance signs such as makeup, skirts, and heels' (Morgado 2014, 324).

Investigating androgynous dressing amongst male participants in a 2020 study, Ben Barry and Andrew Reilly called the form of androgyny that juxtaposes styles associated with masculinity and femininity as 'gender more', illustrating the 'complexity of gender identity and

the diversity of masculine and feminine facets' (2020, 133). The authors further emphasise that 'gender more' 'celebrates archetypal masculine and feminine signifiers' while drawing 'from the intersection between gender and the range of other social identities to express the multiplicity of meanings and manifestations of gender itself' (2020, 133). Therefore, it is also within the conditions of post-postmodernity that the notion of antigender fashion is positioned. Similar to Morgado's discussion of post-postmodern androgyny, and to Barry's and Reilly's concept of 'gender more', antigender fashion illustrates and highlights the juxtaposition and multiplicities of gender signifiers, with the important difference that antigender fashion also seeks to destabilise gender itself.

To understand how antigender fashion, and fashion in general, interrelates and subverts categories of identity, I shall focus on the notion of fashion as a system of signification. As Patrizia Calefato suggests, 'today, fashion is a system of signs that fully manifests itself as a form of mass communication, an everyday activity, a form of popular culture, of worldliness and "mass fashion"' that constantly reinvents and reproduces itself' (2017, 74). 'Codified and endowed with social meanings' (Hancock, Johnson-Woods, and Karaminas 2013, xi), fashion operates as an instrument of non-verbal communication, as a language-like institution that expresses social and gender roles, the belonging or distinction to a group, and one's identity. In other words, as visual representations of our identity, clothes are layered with meanings and facilitate the establishment of a 'code' that enables members of a group, community, or society to construct and communicate gender and other aspects of personal identity to themselves and others (Barnard 2002, 122–23).

Yet, as Davis cautions, this is more a 'quasi-code' that, while it certainly draws from conventional visual symbols of a culture, also contains allusive and ambiguous meanings continuously shifting and changing with every combination of its terms; that is, among others, the fabric, texture, cut, colour of a garment (1994, 5). However, while fashion's code is subject to change, it is also culturally specific, bound by and in time and space. As Calefato writes, 'the clothed body is always a "written" body – marked and carved. In turn, it "writes" (that is to say, it produces) society's imagery and the visual culture. The signs of the clothed body give life to the socio-semiotic system which we call fashion' (2021, x). In other words, fashion is also constitutive of our social and cultural identities. Culture, understood as 'the signifying system through which … a social order is communicated, reproduced, experienced and explored' (Williams 1981, 13), is therefore also created by fashion as a signifying practice:

> fashion, clothing and dress are the artefacts, practices and institutions that constitute a society's beliefs, values, ideas and experiences. … They are, then, the ways in which society is produced and reproduced: it is not that people are first members of groups and then communicate their membership, but that membership is negotiated and established through communication. Fashion, dress and clothing are thus constitutive of those social groups, and of the identities of individuals within those groups, rather than merely reflective of them. (Barnard 2002, 39)

In this way, then, fashion can be understood as performative in the sense that it creates or produces and reproduces its own set of references and signs that constitute meaning. To put it differently, if we consider fashion in its use as a verb '*façonner (facere)*, meaning to fashion, shape, or create', as Jay McCauley Bowstead (2018, 8) writes, we can understand it as an active tool in the process of creating or shaping identity – and in challenging rigid gender norms. Fashion, therefore, 'has been one of the spaces in which non-normative gender identities have been most accepted, and in which new ways of inhabiting and performing masculinity have been most enthusiastically explored' (McCauley Bowstead 2018, 5). This understanding of fashion, then, links back to Butler's concept of performativity, whereby fashion actively contributes to the creation and constitution of gender expression and identity.

One analytical framework used in fashion studies to interpret fashion as a signifying system – that is, as a text – and to decode the meanings of an item of clothing relies on semiotics, or semiology, the science of signs. Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure introduced his theory of semiotics in 1916 (Saussure 2011), arguing that signs are arbitrary and only gain meaning through the juxtaposition of other signs used in a system. Developing this approach further, Roland Barthes (1968) argued that not only language is a signifying system, but that any item of culture, including fashion, is part of a signifying system and can communicate meaning.

Accordingly, there are two levels, or types of meaning: denotation and connotation (Barthes 1977, 153). The former or first order of signification is factual, it is concerned with the literal meaning of a word, an image, or a garment (its material, its place of production, etc.). The latter, or second order of signification, describes the associations someone has with a word, image, or garment. It is 'the denotative sign (the unity of signifier and signified), considered as a signifier' (Barnard 2002, 85). While denotation appears to be a natural kind of meaning, connotational meaning is the result of and influenced by all aspects of the social life of a person (age, sexuality, gender, class, etc.) and is a reflection of one's ideology (Barthes 1977, 161–62). Hence, associations can vary from person to person, although within a social group or culture there seems to be a consensus of meaning.

If fashion can be understood as a cultural phenomenon that communicates and embodies culture, can it then challenge or even change cultural norms? Fashion has its own dynamic, it does not simply reflect the times or create 'a direct visual mirror of cultural facts' (Hollander 1994, 15), nor is it necessarily the cause of cultural change per se. Rather, as 'fashion is embedded within culture and cannot be isolated as an independent variable' (Entwistle 2015, 81), it is a convoluted and interrelated matter. Certainly, however, fashion – as a signifying means of culture – plays an important part. Ultimately, fashion remains 'a deeply ambiguous and unstable cultural product and a contested terrain on to which norms and deviations are constantly being negotiated' (Granata 2016, 98).

In summary, the notion of fashion as a system of signification and its study through semiotics serves as an interpretive lens for the analysis of antigender fashion design, whereby its examination relies on the consideration of the sign as much as the context; that is, cultural context, time, and space. The development and expansion of the concept of antigender fashion, as carried out in Chapter 3 of this thesis, builds upon the understanding of gender as performative and fashion's role in the visualisation and performativity of gender as outlined here. While this chapter offers the necessary theoretical background for the conceptualisation of antigender fashion, it also establishes fashion as a visual means and grounds for gender fluidity. Furthermore, as has become clear through the above analysis, gender-fluid or antigender fashion is closely linked to the theoretical considerations of queer theory and the increasing awareness of gender fluidity in mainstream culture. In other words, the development of an antigender fashion framework requires the examination and theorisation of gender to illustrate the system it opposes.

Having now outlined the key theoretical frameworks underpinning this research, it is useful to turn to concrete examples to help unpack the various historical challenges to gender conformity. The following chapter will therefore highlight important moments of gender-bending fashion in Western history. Outlining these moments and their wider historical contexts will enable me to examine the differences between these and contemporary forms of gender-fluid fashion, and, more broadly, will demonstrate the role of fashion in negotiating gender in society.

2

TRACING FLUIDITY: UNDERSTANDING MOMENTS OF GENDER-BLURRING FASHION

There are many moments in history that have challenged the binary perception of gender through sartorial codes, which are interconnected with their cultural conditions. The purpose of this chapter is to highlight historical moments of fashion that blurred rigid gender lines. By tracing key times and figures in the evolution of gender-bending fashion, this chapter offers historical background as a point of reference for the analysis of contemporary gender-fluid fashion. It thereby offers a comparison and differentiation between the contemporary occurrence of antigender fashion within a post-postmodern context and previous forms of androgynous and unisex fashions.

Rather than constructing a linear history of gender-blurring fashions, this chapter aims to create a genealogy of slippages to unveil their complexities and to take the multi-layered totality of discourse into account. However, for better understanding and readability the structure of this chapter follows a general chronology, with a brief account of the period after the French Revolution (1789–1799) as its starting point. While there is a multitude of sartorial gender slippages in non-Western cultures and societies, this chapter focuses on European and American examples, first, because the chosen case studies of antigender fashion designers exist within these contexts, and second, because the concept of gender underlying this study is tied to its Western theorisation.

The subculture of the bohemians, in particular the figures of Lord Byron and George Sand, constitutes the first moment of slippage addressed, as the challenge of gender played a key role in their quest to differentiate themselves from the bourgeoisie. This is followed by a consideration of moments of female masculinities in the 1920s and their connection to queer and lesbian style. The next important slippage covered is the subcultural and revolutionary tendencies of the 1960s and 1970s that provided an impetus for rethinking – and redressing – gender. Finally, I discuss unisex fashions and new masculinities at the turn of the millennium.

While gender is one of the main aspects of today's sartorial representation of identity, the display of gender identity through dress did not always hold such a prominent position. In court society the representation of social status was of fundamental importance while the communication of gender was subordinate (Elias 1983, 63). With the transition from a feudal society to a civil social system and the beginning of modernity came lasting changes and consequences, not least for the fashion system and the way people dressed. During the French Revolution, the class distinction within male dress blurred and the gender distinction in dress took shape. From here on out, opulence, flamboyance, and the representation of social class were, as Lynn Hunt points out, primarily reserved for women (Hunt 2009, 50). It was then that men gave up their beauty – all resemblance to female finery – and adopted a more modest and uniform-like attire.

Explanations for this sartorial shift and division of male and female dress are many and varied. The most prominent but not least contested theory is John C. Flügel's 'The Great Male Renunciation' (2004), originally published in 1930. According to Flügel, men gave up their beauty for the sake of being 'useful' and dressed correctly rather than elaborately. Considering the changing social and political climate of that time as an influential factor, Flügel argues that the reason for this renunciation lies in the newly found focus on liberty, equality, and fraternity.

However, this theoretical approach seems almost too attractive in its identification of a causal relationship between sartorial changes and the emerging political values of modern society; that is, it neglects the complicated reality and various subtle aspects that influence human life, and disregards ways of fashioning non-Western and non-white bodies. For instance, as Christine Checinska points out in her article on '(Re-)fashioning African Diasporic Masculinities' (2019), the Haitian Revolution (1791–1803) prompted a democratisation of dress in the form of the 'Great Masculine Enunciation'. Accordingly, 'the functional and anonymous (un)dress of the slaves' became 'elegant, embellished, and personalized, announcing the status of the wearer as free, equal, and part of the humanity of all men' (Checinska 2019, 82).

Furthermore, the trend towards a simple attire away from the artifice of court costumes already began to emerge in Europe before the French Revolution, in the first half of the eighteenth century after the death of Louis XIV, the flamboyant and glittering Sun King. With a less decorative version of the 'justaucorps' and simply curled wigs that were tied at the neck, the opulence of previous court dress diminished. This simplification, as Anne Hollander (1994, 85) argues, went along (or, rather, preceded) emerging ideas of nature and reason, and the revival of the styles and spirit of classic antiquity. Neoclassicism reinforced the desire for a

more natural, authentic self, represented by the reshaping and recasting of the ideal male figure with a focus on the natural form of the (male) body and rigorous use of more natural materials like wool, leather, and linen. The English tailored male also played a significant role in the shift of masculine dress in Europe. As a way of demarcation from the French court and its ostentatious style, English country clothes spread over the whole of Europe, resulting in a 'wave of anglomania' that found its peak with the French Revolution (Laver 2012, 151).

From this moment onwards, the visual distinction between men's and women's dress became more important than ever. As coded signifiers, clothes emphasised the presumed differences between the sexes. However, the transgression of these somewhat rigid definitions has a long history and plays an important role in the demarcation of subcultures and the revolt against dominant norms. While these subversions often evoked suspicions, unease, and anxiety within Western culture, their lasting effects and significance for fashion history are undeniable and will be examined below.

MOMENT I: BOHEMIANS IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

The emergence of modernity and industrialised society ushered in the birth of a new age. The German philosophers Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, who together developed what is now known as Marxism, coined this new age the epoch of the bourgeoisie. Marx and Engels developed their influential theory with regard to a 'new' industrial class conflict between the bourgeoisie, who control the means of production, and the working class, known as the proletariat, who labour to produce goods. This new societal structure caused unsettling side effects, as they suggest in this famous passage from *The Communist Manifesto* of 1848:

> Uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions, everlasting uncertainty and agitation distinguish the bourgeois epoch from all earlier ones. All fixed, fast-frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions, are swept away, all new-formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify. All that is solid melts into air. (Marx and Engels 2008, 11)

It was in this societal tumult that bohemians stepped onto the (urban) stage. As a critical answer to the crises ushered in by artists of modernity, radicals and intellectuals created an

alternative life within industrialised Western society: bohemia[1]. Bohemianism can generally be divided into the historic – that is, the subcultural bohemian whose emergence is rooted in 'the nineteenth-century Romanticism and the rise of the bourgeoisie' – and the generic, which describes 'a more open approach to self and style' (Geczy and Karaminas 2020a, 5). The former in particular contributed to the myth and stereotype of bohemia, one associated with 'transgression, excess, sexual outrage, eccentric behavior, outrageous appearance, nostalgia and poverty' (Wilson 2003b, 3).

The emergence of the bohemian as a distinct identity was possible because of the unique combination of social, economic, and geographical circumstances that created the space for this figure. The economic and social changes in the early nineteenth century led to the establishment and constitution of the arts and literature as autonomous fields with their 'own laws of functioning independent from those of politics and the economy' (Bourdieu 1993, 162). This resulted in a new role: the artist as genius, whose purpose was to produce their own creative vision. Consequently, bohemians defined themselves in opposition to the bourgeoisie, who held on to traditional norms, even though the majority of bohemians came from a bourgeois background (Wilson 2003b, 18–22). Emerging around the same time and within the same socioeconomic context, bohemianism and bourgeois life are thus deeply interwoven: 'Like positive and negative magnetic poles, bohemians and bourgeois were – and are – part of a single field: they imply, require, and attract each other' (Seigel 1986, 5).

The development of urban society and city life was also a crucial aspect of the emergence of bohemia. The expansion of modern cities provided the perfect backdrop for new, more fluid characters. In particular, the café offered an ideal place for the bohemian to flourish, perform, and live out their identity. It was at once their central arena, home refuge, substitute school, and marketplace (Wilson 2003b, 35).

The character of the bohemian arguably culminated in the person of George Gordon, Lord Byron. With the publication of the poem *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* in 1812, the English poet quickly rose to fame and became one of (perhaps even) the most famous figure of bohemia. While Byron came from an aristocratic instead of a bourgeois background, his family history, as Caroline Franklin argues, 'seemed to predestine him to become a dissolute aristocrat himself,

[1] It should be noted that while bohemians of the nineteenth century share some similarities with Romani (or Roma) – who were called 'bohemian' in France due to the belief they originated in Bohemia in central Europe – they differ in one crucial aspect: bohemians – despite their similarly transient and 'scandalous' lifestyles – could gain acceptance and even admiration from the dominant bourgeoisie, whereas the actual Romani ethnic group experienced oppression, marginalisation, and misrepresentation, and does so to this day.

and to test the boundaries of what conduct was deemed destructive of the fabric of society' (2000, 1).

Byron's influence and contribution to the bohemian myth was as remarkable as his influence on his contemporaries and those who were to follow.[2] As Elizabeth Wilson points out, 'his reputation anticipated twentieth-century forms of fame, glamour and notoriety, his personality generating a legend that became more important than his work' (2003b, 54). His persona contributed, directly and indirectly, to the making of two of the most famous and significant characters of popular culture: Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1823) and John Polidori's *The Vampyre* (1819). Especially the figure of the vampire, which is said to be partly based on a story told by Byron, cemented him and the image of the Byronic hero as a fatal and mythical man.

While Byron's life exemplifies the bohemian myth, various studies on modern masculinities also link him to the libertine and the dandy (Geczy and Karaminas 2020b, 2013; Schmid 2002). However, the pursuit of sexual freedom, in particular, distinguishes the Byronic figure from that of the dandy. Admittedly, while bohemians, libertines, and dandies share many similarities, such as the rejection of bourgeois life, the dandy was above all occupied with elegance and with cultivating 'the idea of beauty in their persons' (Baudelaire 1995, 27).

Dandyism and its cult of beauty offered a sanctuary for unconventional identities and masculinities; however, it also embodied 'masculinity as a virtuoso asceticism' (Adams 1995, 2), maintaining a sort of masculine hegemony. In the case of Byron, it was homoerotic and sexual transgression that played an important part in his life and the creation of his public persona. For all his relationships and sexual encounters with women, it was his love for boys that 'surrounded him with an aura of doom' and pointed to the 'importance of homoeroticism and bisexuality in Bohemia' (Wilson 2003b, 54). Besides this, retrospectively, queer aspect of his sexuality, his figure was fascinating for men and women alike. As Andrew Elfenbein argues, his homoeroticism was just as much a part of his successful commodification 'as an icon of desirability' as was his representation of the 'naked heart' (1995, 69–70).

Furthermore, Byron's androgynous looks and style had a distinctive impact on the Byronic image and its success: 'Especially as he was represented in the popular Harlowe engraving, Byron's appearance conformed to stereotypes of feminine beauty as much as masculine ones' (Elfenbein 1995, 65). Moreover, in terms of his clothing, he is often depicted

[2] The Villa Diodati in Cologny near Geneva, for instance, where Byron spent a considerable amount of time, became a pilgrimage for subsequent artists, writers, and bohemians in search of Byron's spirit and that of Romanticism. Honoré de Balzac was so taken by the house and its memories of Byron that he not only stayed in Geneva but eternalised his adoration in his letters and 1836 novel *Albert Savarus* (Giddey 2004, 76–77).

wearing open-collared and lace-cuffed shirts, soft velvet robes, or in gold-embroidered Greek dress, as in his portrait by Thomas Phillips (Figure 2.1). The figure of Lord Byron thus combines two central aspects of the bohemian myth that made it a transgressive counterculture: the challenge of sexual conventions and dress as outward expression of identity.

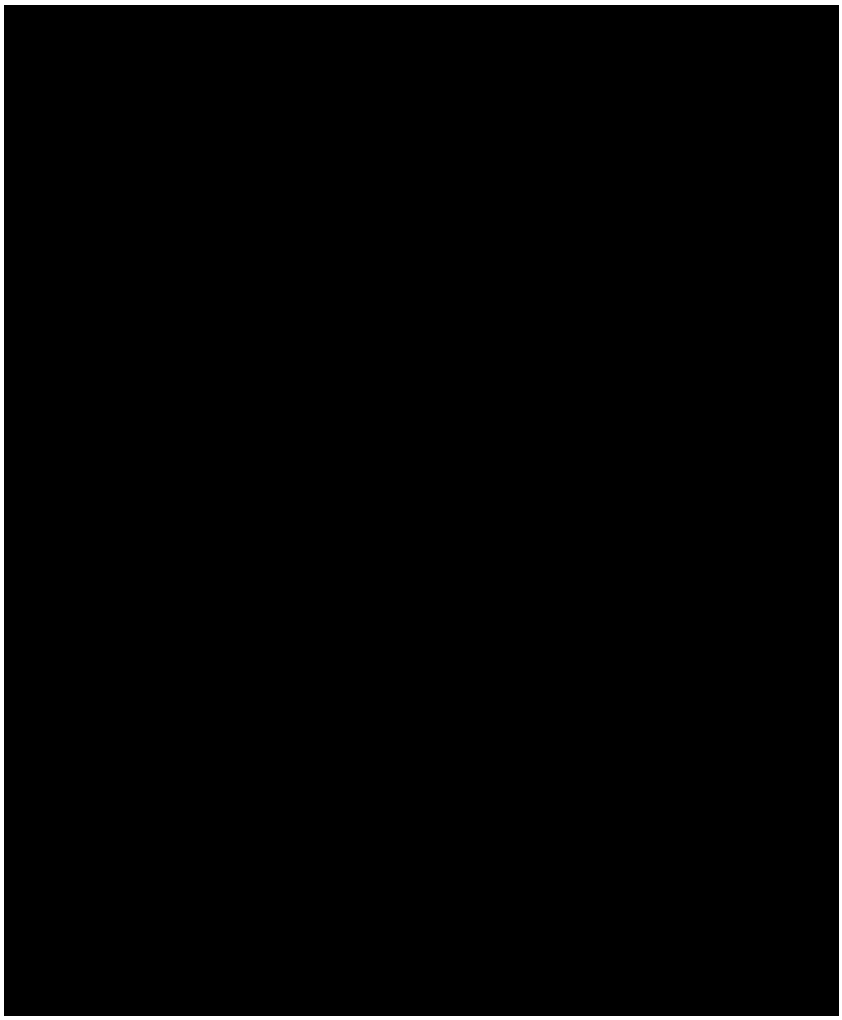

Figure 2.1 *Lord Byron*, replica by Thomas Phillips, oil on canvas, circa 1835, based on a work of 1813. NPG 142 © National Portrait Gallery, London.

As ambiguous and contradictory as bohemia was, styles of dress were diverse and manifold, ranging from the 'poor look' of paint-stained and dishevelled clothes that flaunted the wearer's artistic superiority, to the colourful and decorative romantic medievalism, and on to the immaculate Baudelairean dandy. The so-called Aesthetic dress popularised by the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood in England expressed the wish for more beautiful and rational clothing. This wish was also present in women's attire, leading to dresses with wide armholes and full sleeves that offered more movement and were worn without corsets.

However, what did unite these diverse bohemian styles in their essence was a concept of authenticity. Here, it is important to note that nineteenth-century urbanisation not only led to a surface change in cities, but also to changes in the meaning of dress, which became increasingly interlaced with a feeling of personal identity. As Richard Sennett argues, the industrial city and accompanying anonymity provoked a shift in the meaning of people's appearance, which became 'direct expressions of the "inner" self … guides to the authentic self of the wearer' (2002, 153). By resisting the norms and rules of bourgeois dress, bohemians transgressed these social norms, visually expressing a different intrinsic truth, while also adhering to the principle of *dressing as who you are*.

Following this belief, one of the defining bohemian styles was the Byronic hero, inspired by the 'suffering poet' who was consumed by his passions. The resulting appearance of pale, almost greenish skin, receding hairline, and fatal aura – expressed in his dark Romantic poetry and dramatic dress – became fashionable amongst romantics of that time. His custom of wearing open-collared, lace-cuffed shirts with billowing fronts became a visual shorthand for these beliefs.

Besides the Byronic form of dress, there were other, unconventional styles of dress, like that of Amantine Aurore Lucile Dupin de Francueil, better known as George Sand, the French novelist and writer who regularly dressed as a man, donning trousers, boots, and top hat. Sand's reasons for adopting a man's attire seem complex and exceed the ostensible reason of ideological protest, surely also including practicality as well as socioeconomic motivations. Even within the freethinking utopia of bohemia, women had more restraints than men, especially with the association of bohemian life with sexual transgression and 'free love' that promised men sexual adventures but redefined women 'in essentially traditional terms – as erotic beings … the "Other"' (Wilson 2003b, 98).

In order to be successful, Sand picked up a man's attire for economic reasons; that is, to gain access to the realm of cultural production as a writer. 'She became a female culture worker in the form of male attire', Ulrich Lehmann argues, after her separation from her husband and move to Paris in 1830 left her in a new and economically challenging situation (2019, 60–61). Accordingly, by wearing men's clothes she responded to a material need to gain access to the industry and culture she yearned to be part of, rather than expressing an ontological truth.

Sand's habit of cross-dressing was also born out of a feeling of impracticality; in other words, the need for a more protective and functional attire. Her solution was to become George Sand, dressed in the attire of a first-year student with top hat, wool tie, and boots. Even though her reasons for wearing masculine clothes did not derive from an unconventional sexual

identity, she was met with speculation. Prior to the twentieth century, women dressing or passing as men could have been interpreted from an economic or sexual standpoint, or could have been seen simply as an adventurous endeavour (Geczy and Karaminas 2013, 23). While she was admired and regarded as a great writer amongst fellow literary men and bohemians, she was also, as Ellen Moers points out, labelled a 'transvestite, man-eater, lesbian, nymphomaniac' (Moers 1979, 222).

It was not only Sand's attire that was considered masculine, her entire being and behaviour appeared manly. For instance, as Honoré de Balzac wrote after visiting her at home: 'She is boyish, an artist, she is great-hearted, generous, devout and *chaste*; she has the main characteristics of a man; *ergo*, she is not a woman' (Balzac quoted in Moers 1979, 223). Her androgyny and ambiguous gender expression – wearing trousers, smoking, using a masculine pseudonym, and referring to herself as 'he' – caused confusion on various occasions. However, at the same time, the perception of sexual and gender identity shifted in Western society and 'gave way to the in-between and hybrid sexualities such as feminists, lesbians, homosexuals, and transvestites' (Geczy and Karaminas 2020a, 90). In a letter to Sand, the writer Gustave Flaubert posed the following question: 'What kind of concept do you have of women then, you who are the third sex?' (Flaubert 1958, 52; my translation). Without receiving an answer, Flaubert recognized Sand and 'the third sex' as an important figure in the evolution of gender and sexual identity.

In fiction and in life the concept of androgyny – the blending of masculine and feminine traits and sartorial codes – became a widespread leitmotif, albeit more commonly in connection to homosexuals. At times, it was also used to negatively stigmatise women striving for emancipation, as in the case of Sand, who was occasionally referred to as 'fin-de-sex' (end of sex; Geczy and Karaminas 2020a, 90). In literature, however, the androgyne figure offered a tool to question sexual ambiguity and to challenge the bourgeois conception of the genders as polar opposites to promote capitalist progress and expansion. As Bram Dijkstra demonstrates, for the (bohemian) artists and writers the liaison of the masculine and feminine in the figure of the androgyne was not just 'a gesture of defiance toward the dominant values of their social environment', it was an ideological 'counteroffensive … against the economic motivations behind the sexual stereotypes' that had become integral pillars of bourgeois and industrialised society (1974, 62). For these artists, androgyny represented an escape and a more natural and balanced alternative to the artificial binary of male and female.

Bohemianism, then, was a counter-space and subculture set against the repressive power of bourgeois society. Modernity and industrialised society ushered in new social realms, a cult

of the individual, upward mobility, and an increasing divide between the sexes and genders. Bohemia offered an escape and alternative life to the oppressive rules of society, it was 'the "Other" of bourgeois society', expressing 'everything that the bourgeois order buried and suppressed' (Wilson 2003b, 240). Bohemia constituted a challenge to the norms of the dominant bourgeois society, and particularly in terms of gender and sexual identity, bohemians questioned the divide of masculinity and femininity and their sartorial expressions, experimenting with the norms of their respective dress. However, bohemians who expressed a challenge to normative gender identities did so within the realm of a subculture that was set against the dominant bourgeoisie. While they opposed bourgeois notions, they simultaneously adhered to the norms of a subculture, reinforcing both positions as opposites that fed off the distinction of the other.

In summary, although the bohemian artist and their ambiguously challenging status should be viewed with caution, nineteenth-century bohemians illustrate the complex ways in which changing notions of social life and consequently changing gender norms and roles can be expressed, challenged, and renegotiated on the level of dress. The bohemians' increasingly blurred gender norms can be seen as a precursor to the contemporary notion of gender-fluid fashion.

MOMENT II: FEMALE MASCULINITIES IN THE 1920s

Turning from the bohemian subculture, which was mainly located in the nineteenth century, if we move forward to consider the androgyne fashion of the 1920s, we can see that it too shares similarities with contemporary notions of gender-fluid fashion. Between the nineteenth-century bohemians and the 1920s, the devastating experiences of the First World War (1914–1918) provoked dramatic changes in all spheres of life. The 1920s, then, marked a new age for feminine beauty and fashionable ideals.

The first two decades of the twentieth century were a time of immense innovation and upheaval: from technological advancement in transport and communication, to changes in the economic and social fabric that saw women's suffrage and the widening of their economic role. For the majority of people, life took place in the city and new artistic forms and styles took shape. New developments in science and thought-provoking impulses further changed the way people perceived human behaviour and the physical world: Albert Einstein's theory of relativity and Sigmund Freud's psychoanalysis had lasting effects on the way we think about and view our surroundings.

The First World War multiplied and accelerated these developments, as the material demands of the first industrialised war and its devastation were unprecedented. As David Lloyd George, Minister of Munitions, famously proclaimed, the war was remaking the world:

> It is deluge, it is convulsion of Nature … bringing unheard-of changes in the social and industrial fabric. It is a cyclone which is tearing up by the roots the ornamental plants of modern society. … It is an earthquake which is upheaving the very rocks of European life. It is one of those seismic disturbances in which nations leap forward or fall backward generations in a single bound. (Lloyd George 1915, 3)

The changes brought about by the 'Great War' were felt by millions, with social and economic hierarchies crumbling. As Nigel Lezama argues, 'the First World War threw masculinity into crisis, and it was therefore inevitable that, in turn, femininity would come under scrutiny' (2021, 282). While the drafting of many young men resulted in an increasing number of women joining the work force – hence shifting the meaning of women's roles – many people felt a desire to return to pre-war conditions, reconfiguring life within the framework of traditional family.

In the aftermath of the war, it was not only cities that had to be rebuilt and the economy restored, but societal and cultural life had to be renegotiated too. Post-war France, for instance, was, as Amy Lyford describes it, 'rife with images promoting traditional social roles for men and women: images of robust manhood and female maternity cropped up everywhere as if they were antidotes to the terrible memories evoked by the sight of veteran's wounded bodies' (2007, 4). These images and narratives of traditional family values not only aimed at evoking a sense of stability, but also reinforced neatly defined gender roles. However, there was a palpable discordance between the government's visual agenda and the lived reality of many who encountered the injuries and devastation daily.

Similarly, albeit with some differences, Germany had to grapple with the post-war world into which it had just been born as a new and young state, the Weimar Republic. In its fifteen years of existence, the Republic went through a turbulent and paradoxical time; it was 'a democratic state, constituting the prelude to the most violent dictatorship in German history, yet at the same time a period of extraordinary cultural creativity' (Michalski 2003, 7). Its thriving years from 1924 to 1929, known as the 'Golden Twenties' were also the years in which fashion for women was dominated by the classic twenties look of the *flapper* and the *garçonne* – or, as Katie Sutton puts it, the 'masculinization of women's fashion' (2011, 25).

The backstory to the portrait of Sylvia von Harden by German painter Otto Dix, as well as the work itself (Figure 2.2), indicates the extent and impact female masculinity had at that time. Meeting the journalist on the street, Dix reportedly stated:

> 'I must paint you! I simply must!... You are representative of an entire epoch!'
> 'So, you want to paint my lacklustre eyes, my ornate ears, my long nose, my thin lips; you want to paint my long hands, my short legs, my big feet – things which can only scare people off and delight no-one?'
> 'You have brilliantly characterized yourself, and all that will lead to a portrait representative of an epoch concerned not with the outward beauty of a woman but rather with her psychological condition.' (von Harden, 1959)

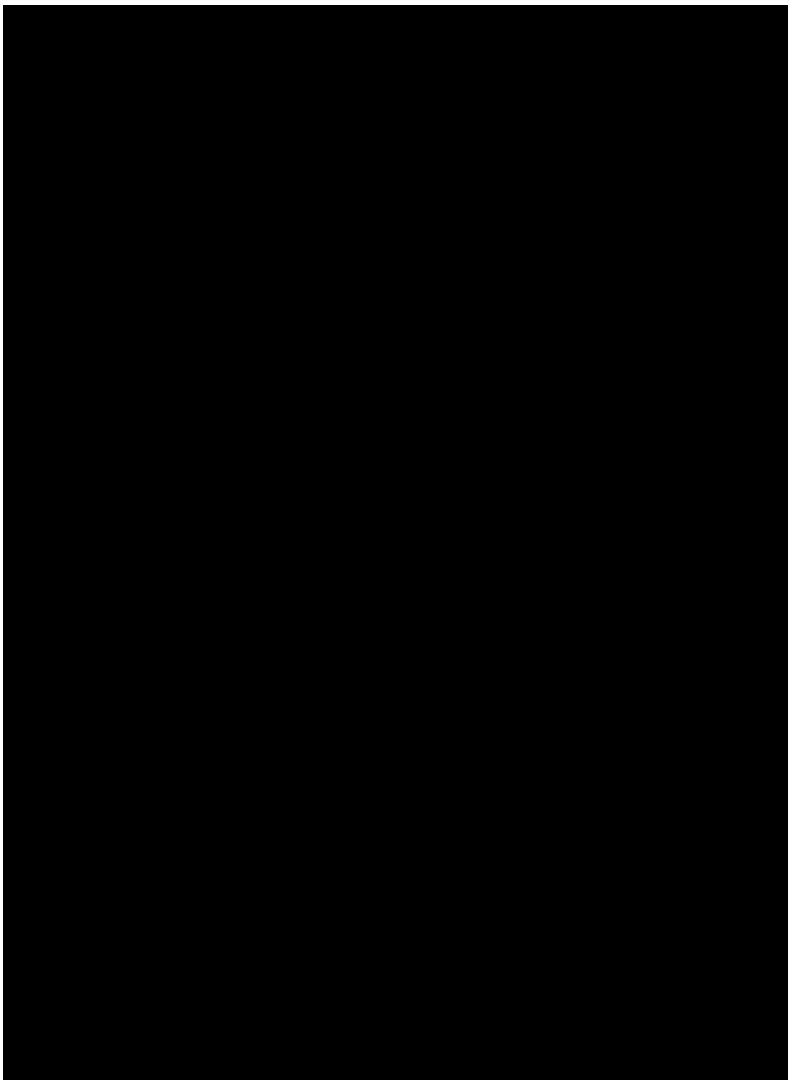

Figure 2.2 Otto Dix, Bildnis der Journalistin Sylvia von Harden, 1926. © Adagp, Paris. © Audrey Laurans - Centre Pompidou, MNAM-CCI / Dist. RMN-GP.

The 'boyish' look of the 1920s was a widespread style and the fashionable ideal women of all ages strived towards. Fashion broke with previous ideas of 'femininity' and 'beauty'. Like von Harden as painted by Dix, enveloped in a haze of immorality, masculinity, and (cigarette) smoke, the look of the twenties' woman jolted the supposedly solid pillars of masculine and feminine gender identities.

The ideal feminine beauty shifted from the corseted voluptuous female figure of the Victorian and Edwardian period in the nineteenth and early twentieth century to the slim and 'boyish' look of the 1920s. Also referred to as 'boyette, boy-girl or modern girl' (Geczy and Karaminas 2013, 28), the look was characterised by signifiers that were traditionally read as masculine: the suit, dinner, and smoking jackets; hair bobbed, shingled, or Eton-cropped; and masculine accessories such as a cigarette and monocle. The silhouette also moved from an hourglass towards the infamous 1920s flat-chested silhouette and skirts that barely covered (or, in some cases, did not cover) the knees.

Along with this boyish look, which could be found amongst different social classes, came the adoption of more 'masculine' behaviour: 'an attitude of rebelliousness and pleasure seeking – flaunted by the smoking of cigarettes – a new athleticism and an apparent sexual freedom' (Doan 1998, 672). It comes as no surprise then, that many historians interpreted women's newfound masculine behaviour and fashion as a signifier of independence, an act of emancipation as well as an outcome of a war that not only changed the role of women but caused material shortages and a decreasing interest in fashion (Steele 1985, 234).

However, with the new feminine ideal of a young, active, slim woman with small breasts, narrow hips, and short hair, there also came an increasing need to maintain and optimise that standard of beauty. Regular visits to the hairdresser, daily makeup and hair routines, and the need to diet to keep the figure slim were a consequence. As Valerie Steele points out, the change from the mature, curvy ideal body to one that was young and slim 'meant partly that the corset was internalized in the form of dieting, while the need to look young fed the growing beauty industry' (1985, 241). Femininity seemed, more than ever, to be 'a masquerade' that required a high level of grooming and performance (Wilson 2013, 175).

Charged with controversy and confusion, this masquerade and the playfulness of masculine fashion for women had a certain degree of subversive power. Cross-dressing and the adoption of masculine attire, particularly the tailored suit that was so strongly associated with upper-class men, caused gender confusion and cultural anxiety. The blurring lines between traditional masculinity and femininity left conservatives enraged by the sight of young women 'without breasts, without hips' (Roberts 1994, 20). The *femme moderne* and her radical ideal of

womanhood had moved from the outskirts of bohemia to the centre of society. As Laura Doan notes, 'gender fluidity was the name of the game, and masculine dress was one way to "usurp male privilege"' (1998, 668).

The implications of these boyish looks are linked to their origins and are culturally inscribed. In England and the United States, the word 'flapper' came to describe the young women of the 'Roaring Twenties' who dressed in boyish clothes, cropped their hair, wore make-up, danced to Jazz music, and flaunted their sexuality and gender ambiguity. In its previous use in the 1890s, 'flapper' referred to a young woman or teenage girl with a boyish figure, or a young prostitute. As Geczy and Karaminas argue, the flapper's boyishness was 'less about sexual preference' than 'a buoyant assertion of liberation from traditional constraints of gender' (2013, 28).

The French equivalent of the flapper was *la garçonne*, best described as a tomboy and to some degree entangled with sexuality. Deriving from Victor Margueritte's novel *La Garçonne* (1922), the word evokes a sexual component: the protagonist engages in promiscuous sex with numerous partners, including another woman. Furthermore, the style of the *garçonne* could be interpreted as even more radical, since it was technically illegal for women in Paris to wear a pair of trousers unless holding the handles of a bicycle or riding horseback.[3]

Despite the confusion about gender and sexuality that these masculine fashions caused, the tailored clothes and short hair was, at the end of the day, nothing more than an imitation, 'a masculine appearance without masculine power' (Doan 1998, 674). The boyish look of the flapper and the *garçonne* was more a symbol of youth, or even immaturity, than masculinity. Within the context of the post-war society and disillusionment with the older generation that had sent so many off to die, the young became the leading voice of fashionable trends. Further fuelled by the increasingly active and independent lives of young women, they took over the position of the rich middle-aged woman in the social hierarchy (Steele 1985, 239).

While mannish fashions and mannerisms for woman seemed to have challenged the norms of femininity, the fact that they were still read as feminine surpassed any questioning. Although boyishness was graciously accepted as a descriptor, as Quentin Crisp notes, 'they knew that they looked nothing like boys. They also realized that it was meant to be a compliment. Manliness was all the rage' (1983, 21). Masculine fashion and behaviour, such as

[3] The outfits of *les garçonnes* often lacked pants, consisting instead of smoking jackets, ties, and straight skirts. A potential reason might have been the 16 Brumaire IX act, passed by Napoleon on 7 November 1800, that prohibited women from wearing pants unless they possessed a *permis de travestissment*, a transvestite permit. However, the permit required a medical certificate and had to be renewed every six months. While the exception for female cyclists and equestrians was made in 1882, the act was only abolished in 2013 (Geczy and Karaminas, 2020, 94; Chaplin, 2021, 718).

smoking, might make a woman less feminine, but as Richard Klein maintains, 'she is not therefore more "masculine"' (1993, 674). Nevertheless, the open playfulness of masculine fashions offered women, primarily those of the upper and upper-middle classes, a space to explore the in-betweens of sexual and gender identities. According to Doan, the ambiguities of female masculinities 'tolerated, even encouraged, the crossing over of fixed labels and assigned categories, such as female boy, woman of fashion in the masculine mode, lesbian boy, mannish lesbian, and female cross-dresser' (1998, 670).

Moreover, for lesbians in particular, the cover of masculine fashions provided a safe space to experiment and construct a lesbian style and identity removed from the lesbian model of sexology, though that space was mostly reserved for artists and women of the upper classes (Doan 1998, 25; Wilson 2013, 175; Geczy and Karaminas 2013). Famous lesbians, such as Radclyffe Hall and Una Troubridge (Figure 2.3) or the artist known as Gluck, revelled in the dominant mode of masculinity. For Gluck in particular, her ambiguous manner and appearance – she dressed in men's clothes throughout her adult life, bought shoes at John Lobb's the Royal bootmakers, and visited Truefitt gentlemen's hairdressers – was not only a way to assert herself as an artist, but to express her sexuality (Souhami 1989, 10–11).

Figure 2.3 Marguerite Radclyffe Hall (1886–1943), the prizewinning writer whose novel *The Well of Loneliness* was originally banned in Britain for its sympathetic approach to female homosexuality. She is shown with Lady Una Troubridge (seated). (Photo: Fox Photos / Getty Images)

Similarly, actress Marlene Dietrich, who was bisexual, was known for her affinity for men's suits. She frequently wore trousers or complete male ensembles both on and off-screen (Steele 2013, 29) and blurred the lines between masculinity and femininity. In this way she influenced women's fashion profoundly. Dietrich was, some said, 'the best-dressed man in Hollywood' (Spoto 2000, 104).

However, as Doan reminds us, women of all sexual orientations indulged in the masculine mode of that time and, lesbian or not, were simply fashion-conscious. Doan argues for caution in interpreting 'masculine' dress as a sign of lesbianism at that point, with trousers, suit jackets, and shortly cropped hair simply a fashionable look. In the late 1920s, however, this changed with the publication, media coverage, and subsequent banning of Hall's 1928 book *The Well of Loneliness* – a novel about a mannish lesbian, which brought a change in the perception of masculine women as the book and its author, who in the public eye was now associated with sexual inversion, triggered a rethinking of women in masculine attire. It was from this point, then, that female masculinity was understood as a symbol of female homosexuality. The look was interpreted as a signifier of a lesbian style that was rooted in the ideas promoted by sexology, which understood sexuality not only as an inner quality but as something that could be determined from an outward appearance (Vänskä 2017, 107–30). Nevertheless, as Sutton asserts, the associations between masculine women's fashion and sexual inversion did not hinder the style's popularity in 1920s Germany, 'on the contrary, they may even have briefly contributed to their erotic and cosmopolitan appeal' (2011, 62).

The association of lesbianism and masculine attire also came to play a significant role in the arising butch and femme culture and the growth of a working-class lesbian community of the 1940s and 1950s (Kennedy and Davis 1993). As Tamara Chaplin writes, *la garçonne* was not only an object of fascination but played a central role in the development and commodification of female sexual subjectivity 'in which female homosexuality was expressed as much through *attraction to* the gendered performance of a same-sex partner, as it was through the gendered performances of subjects themselves' (2021, 743; original italics). Accordingly, the figure of the *entraîneuse*, a female staff member employed in French Sapphic cabarets and bars to cross-dress and entertain, shaped and impacted the butch/femme roles in lesbian subcultures for decades to come. Female masculinity 'testified to an unprecedented period of gender fluidity and play' and offered a visible form of expression for female same-sex desire; yet, it also widened the rift between normative and nonnormative sexuality and opened women up to the risk of stigmatisation (Chaplin 2021, 743).

Nevertheless, the Twenties look with its slim silhouette, shorter skirts, and masculine attire had a significant impact on the fashion history to come: Androgyny had entered the fashion stage and would celebrate many (re-) appearances. Dietrich's custom of wearing men's suits, for instance, would live on to inspire Yves Saint Laurent for his tuxedo suit design of *Le Smoking* in 1966, while nearly a decade later Helmut Newtown photographed his iconic image of *Le Smoking* in the twilight of a Paris city street. Saint Laurent had also been influenced by the women's liberation movement of the time. Advocating for the equality of women, the women's liberation movement identified sexism and the patriarchy as the main political issue responsible for unequal power dynamics. Introducing the first prêt-a-porter line by a couture house, YSL's tuxedo, pant suit, and safari jacket – all borrowed from male codes of dress – resonated with its younger clientele and embodied the spirit of female empowerment and freedom. The cultural rumblings and impacts of fashion in the 1960s and 1970s will be discussed in the next section.

MOMENT III: YOUTH AND COUNTERCULTURES OF THE 1960s AND 1970s

Several factors within recent history have contributed to the destabilisation of traditional masculinity and femininity, some of which can be traced back to the philosophical and sociological movements of the latter half of the twentieth century. As Patrick Mauriès argues, today's renewed focus on gender in contemporary fashion arose from the social shifts that characterised the late 1960s and 1970s:

> The manifestations in contemporary fashion are the most striking and evolved sign of the disruption of the supposedly natural order and opposition of the sexes, as well as of the social changes occurring in its wake. But they are also – and this point cannot be over-stressed – the belated expression, post facto, of the philosophical, psychological and sociological questioning of the 1970s. (Mauriès 2017, 155)

Furthermore, according to Jean-François Lyotard (1979), the postmodern era is defined by its scepticism towards metanarratives. With a growing disillusionment towards the grand narratives, the postmodern age gave room for smaller histories of everyday life and, consequently, for marginalised groups. In the midst of these philosophical considerations, many took their critique to the streets, as with the Black Power and anti-Vietnam war movements in the US, the student revolts in May 1968 in France, the Stonewall riots and Gay Liberation movement, and the Women's Liberation movement.

The immediate post-war years, however, saw a retreat into the household, and traditional family values were, again, inescapable. Politics and media painted a picture of 'material comfort, conservatism, and conformity' (LeGates 2012, 336), which, in turn, was wrapped in impeccable fashion. For instance, when introducing his 'Corolle' collection in 1947, Christian Dior, amongst other Parisian couturiers, defined an aesthetic of feminine dress. His (over-)use of luxurious fabrics and emphasis on the female body stood in contrast to the wartime fashions that were primarily concerned with rationing and practicality, and constituted a uniform-like, masculine attire (Palmer 2001, 40; Ewing 2005, 155–60).

Dior reintroduced an ultra-conservative version of femininity into fashion, as well as re-emphasising a class distinction and ostracising working-class women who could not afford the lavish amounts of fabric. While seen as a reaction to wartime austerity, Dior's 'New Look' also contributed to an increasingly fetishised image of femininity and the female body that characterised the 1950s and 1960s in Western societies. Drawing inspiration from the Victorian era, Dior's iconic look created an exaggerated, ultra-feminine fashion. This nostalgic look reinforced 'an essentialist gender discourse which almost habitually identifies fashion with the feminine' (Tseëlon 2001, 103–18).

Though it would be a misguided attempt to draw causal connections between the emergent feminist thought and the changing aesthetics in fashion, the way people dressed changed remarkably in the course of the 1960s and 1970s. Sartorial changes in the representation of masculinity and femininity suggest shifts in the perception of gender within the respective cultures. In Western society, the exaggerated femininity of the 1950s gradually gave way to a youthful and androgynous version of femininity. With her boyish haircut and adolescent physique, British model Lesley Hornby, better known as Twiggy, most famously embodied this new youthful look. Her iconic look was 'underscored by deeply rooted socio-sexual and economic revolutions' and rapidly became a pop-cultural phenomenon (Koda and Yohannan 2009, 66). The new slim look replaced the distinctive silhouette of the fifties and resonated with the rising youth culture. This 'Youthquake' fashion was, as Joel Lobenthal states, 'an aesthetic and sexual statement, … a rejection of the overblown ideal of hourglass femininity' (Lobenthal 2010, 746–749).

Also at this time, designers such André Courrèges and Mary Quant were credited with the invention of the miniskirt, making clothes that expressed the wearer's wish for freedom and movement. Quant later said, 'I was making easy, youthful, simple clothes, in which you could move, in which you could run and jump and we would make them the length the customer wanted' (quoted in Polan and Tredre 2020, 143). British fashion historian James Laver goes so

far as to describe the miniskirt as 'the final word in the emancipation of women – in proving her economic independence … Long, hampering skirts were fetters to keep a woman at home. The very short ones scream: "I am stepping out"' (quoted in Lobenthal 2010, 747).

As those women stepped out of the home, the street became the literal and symbolic stage for revolutionary ideas – a place both for political activism and the democratisation of fashion. Couture lost its power and streetstyle became a defining force. In other words, 'trickle-down' turned into 'bubble-up' (Polhemus 2010, 9; also see Chapter 7). As Annamari Vänskä argues, 'the street became the symbol of "anti-fashion" put forth by musical and sexual subcultures that opposed the prevailing (adult) social and gender order' (2017, 107–30).

One street in particular became the epicentre for the Swinging Sixties and cultural shift known as the 'unisex revolution': London's Carnaby Street. The rise of the mods subculture, beginning in the late 1950s, saw an increasing number of men's fashion boutiques, most famously represented by Vince's Man Shop and its largely gay clientele (Steele 2013, 41; Cole 2000, 73). Scottish-born retailer John Stephen, later known as the King of Carnaby Street, followed suit and opened several shops dedicated to men's (and women's) clothes. The androgynous paired-back aesthetic of the mods restored the notion – previously embodied by the dandy – that 'narcissistic dressing up was a male as well as a female option' (Polhemus 2010, 85).

By the end of the 1960s, the mod aesthetic of pared-back simplicity had evolved into the rampant styles of the hippies, psychedelic unisex fashion, and the so-called 'Peacock Revolution'. Moving away from the confines of traditional formal menswear, the Peacock Revolution radically changed men's fashion, shifting towards colourful, expressive, and 'feminine' silhouettes (Hill 2018, 85). With its Romantic revival of velvet jackets and flowing shirts as well as African- and Asian-inspired styles, the Peacock Revolution represented a challenge to the conformity and drabness of previous men's fashion (Paoletti 2015, 10). The style freely mixed masculine and feminine attributes and represented a somewhat more radical subversion of the concept of masculinity. It was 'the first time in modern history that both men and women were simultaneously looking at each other's wardrobes as a source of inspiration' (Jenkinson 2010).

Young designers created clothes for a new generation inspired by civil rights and sexual liberation movements, where the feminist movement for gender equality played an important part. As a reaction against social and cultural constraints, the unisex movement was 'for many an important political statement on equality', while also functioning as a way for designers to market brands to a wider audience without actually challenging the perception of gender

(Jenkinson 2010). Apart from avant-garde designers such as Rudi Gernreich, who placed unisex at the core of his futuristic design approach, most unisex fashion played it safe by simply catering towards the new masculinity/femininity while maintaining the binary.

Soon after, the psychedelics and their colour-clashing aesthetic were taken over by the hippie movement. Similar to bohemians, they were young, white, and middle class and rejected the norms and values of their parents' generation that heralded corporate power and conformity (Rorabaugh 2015, 3). The iconic style of long hair (for all sexes) and colourful, decorative clothes was the result of an amalgamation of different countercultures, including beatniks, psychedelics, surfers, and folkies. Vietnam and the anti-war sentiment unified them and tipped the scale towards love and nature away from psychedelic artificiality and culminated in the so-called 'Summer of Love' in 1967. They were anti-fashion in terms of their deliberate stance against the dominant fashions of the time, expressing an ambivalent interplay of naturalness and unnaturalness.

While the hippie movement largely followed a 'politics of no politics' (Rorabaugh 2015, 132), other human rights movements and demonstrations eventually resulted in legal and cultural change. The Stonewall Riots, for instance, that took place on 28 June 1969 after police raided a bar in New York, are considered a crucial event in the gay liberation movement. They were a reaction by bar patrons and other neighbourhood gays, lesbians, and drag queens against ongoing assaults on and hatred towards them. Amidst the contagious atmosphere of the countercultures and socio-political movements, the gay community gained momentum: The first gay pride parades took place one year later in New York, Los Angeles, and California, eventually spreading all over the world as a way to advocate for the rights of gay and lesbian people. As a result, 'variant sexualities became more accepted in the 1970s. More people lived openly gay lives, and fashion reflected this' (Steele 2013, 47).

By the end of the 1960s, the mix of androgynous unisex fashion and psychedelic flamboyant menswear was in full swing, promoted and fuelled by popular musicians such as Jimi Hendrix, David Bowie, and The Rolling Stones. This could be seen in Hendrix's mix of traditionally masculine cowboy-inspired clothes, velvet jackets and pants, and ruffled silk paisley shirts; Brian Jones' bohemian lace, velvet, pussy-bow blouses, and glittering jackets; and Mick Jagger's androgynous style portrayed in the 1968 film *Performance* or Mr Fish's 'man-dress'. Jagger's look 'was disturbing not only because of the star's careless narcissism, but the drug-induced haziness of the masculinity that he embodied' (Arnold 2001, 115).

It was Bowie, in particular, who celebrated the idea of fluid and malleable gender identity, both with his on-stage personae (such as Ziggy Stardust, the Thin White Duke, or

Major Tom) and in his personal life. Bowie's adventure into the realm of gender-bending style started around the time of his third studio album, *The Man Who Sold the World*, in 1970. Adopting a wavy, shoulder-length hairstyle and an affinity for feminine clothes, the musician caused a stir with the infamous album cover photo by Keef (Keith MacMillan) for the UK release. The cover featured Bowie wearing a shimmering blue and cream velvet maxi dress by designer Michael Fish and block-heeled leather boots while lying elegantly across a blue, silk-covered chaise longue. Subjugating himself to the gaze of the viewer while also subverting and challenging the accepted gender norms of the time, the musician attracted attention and the cover was deemed too inappropriate for the US market (Idacavage 2019).

Although his androgynous look was risky in terms of widespread commercial success, his most daring and ultimately impactful style was the look he created for his fifth studio album *The Rise and Fall of Ziggy Stardust and the Spiders from Mars* (1972). Ziggy Stardust stepped onto the stage in a blaze of vibrant red hair, shimmering make-up, and an array of glittering skin-tight clothing (Figure 2.4). While the glitter of glam rock had already made its debut with, for instance, Marc Bolan of the band T. Rex, Bowie took the idea of glam rock to the next level. For an interview with the British weekly *Melody Maker* in January 1972, the musician appeared dressed in a tight, patterned combat suit and a pair of red plastic boots with three-inch rubber soles. The look had a lasting impact on the interviewer Michael Watts:

> David's present image is to come on like a swishy queen, a gorgeously effeminate boy. He's as camp as a row of tents, with his limp hand and trolling vocabulary. 'I'm gay,' he says, 'and always have been, even when I was David Jones.' But there's a sly jollity about how he says it, a secret smile at the corners of his mouth. He knows that in these times it's permissible to act like a male tart, and that to shock and outrage, which pop has always striven to do throughout its history, is a balls-breaking process. And if he's not an outrage, he is, at the least, an amusement. The expression of his sexual ambivalence establishes a fascinating game: is he or isn't he? In a period of conflicting sexual identity he shrewdly exploits the confusion surrounding male and female roles. (Watts 1972)

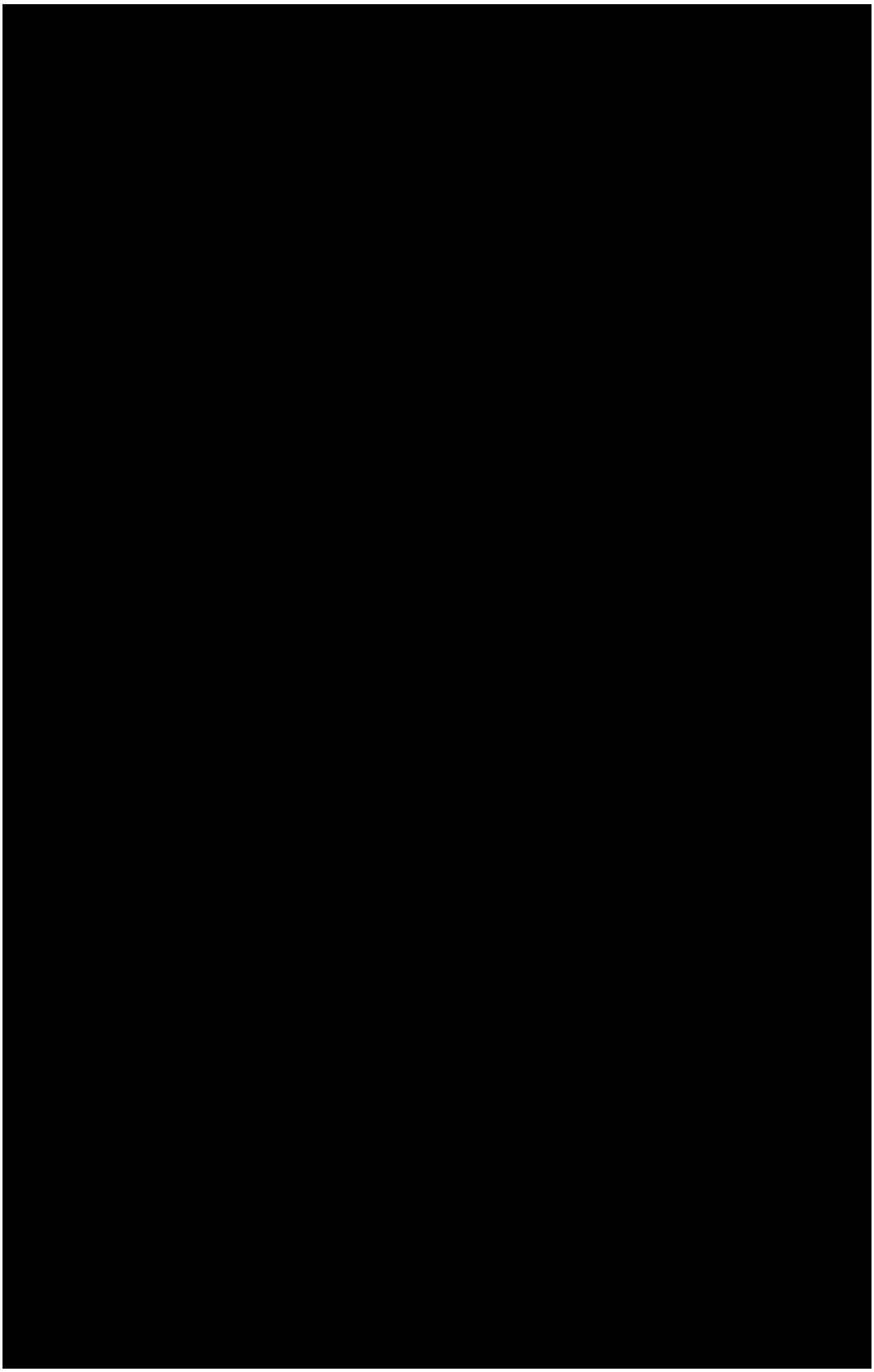

Figure 2.4 David Bowie (wearing an eyepatch) performs Rebel Rebel on the TV show *TopPop* on 7 February 1974 in Hilversum, Netherlands. (Photo: Gijsbert Hanekroot /Redferns)

With his '*otherworldliness'* (Geczy and Karaminas 2020a, 150) and androgyny, as well as his flamboyant look and vibrant make-up, Bowie epitomised glam rock and its preoccupation with gender and sexuality. As Geczy and Karaminas write, 'glam rock was concerned with the experimentation of fashion and drag more than any of its previous musical predecessors. It made sexuality ambivalent and the performance of gender-masking even more exaggerated and theatrical' (2020a, 150). Bowie embodied the fluidity and ambiguity of gender and sexuality like no other by not only blending masculine and feminine signifiers in his style but by blurring the lines between the personal, the public, and his ever-evolving on-stage personae. From his androgynous body to his scarlet-red mullet and flamboyant eye make-up, Bowie regularly pushed the boundaries of gender identity with his alter egos. His sartorial explorations not only solidified him as one of the most iconic figures in fashion history but made him a recurring source of inspiration for both menswear and womenswear.

Nevertheless, the subversion of gender norms by these rock stars and musicians should be regarded in the context of their socio-economic power and cultural capital. Indeed, there are many moments of gender-bending fashions throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries; yet, they tend to be limited to particular groups of artists, intellectuals, and musicians who could (financially and socially) afford to push gender boundaries in their self-presentation. Rather than signifying the acceptance of gender-nonconformity and the resistance of normativity by society as a whole, they celebrated the unconventional gender performances by an elite group of artists and celebrities. Arguably, 'it was not until the 2010s that the popularity of genderless or agender fashion began to blur the lines between what was male, what was female and what was truly in-between' (Jobling, Nesbitt, and Wong 2022, 74).

Furthermore, these sartorial slippages are tied to their subcultural genesis. Whether framed as counterculture or anti-fashion, they use the transgression of gender as a form of protest and demarcation from the dominant culture and its norms. Ironically, subcultural styles serve as inspiration for fashion and couture: Fashion and anti-fashion exist in an ambivalent symbiosis, they rely on and feed off each other (Davis 1994, 164; Hebdige 1979). As a result, subcultural styles are ultimately absorbed by fashion, albeit without the initial transgressive force. The subversion of gender norms by these sartorial slippages can be seen as a challenge to dominant norms while simultaneously reproducing them through its position as opposition, as Other.

MOMENT IV: CK ONE, UNISEX, AND MILLENNIAL MASCULINITIES

The street gained immense importance as a birthplace of sub- and countercultures and political movements in the 1960s and 1970s, becoming an important barometer for the fashions of the following decades. In the 1980s, a group of influential Japanese designers made the rebellion of street style and its subcultures their essence and cultivated an anti-fashion approach to dress. Rei Kawakubo from Comme des Garçons, Yohji Yamamoto, and Issey Miyake combined Eastern and Western cultures and fashion/anti-fashion on a gender-neutral surface, designing clothes that appeared largely unisex and only differed in small details in their construction. These designers ushered in a new aesthetic that replaced the eccentric and excessive styles of the 1980s.

With the beginnings of the World Wide Web, fashion took on a new unifying character, most prominently portrayed by the iconic advertisement for Calvin Klein's unisex fragrance CK One. Photographed by Steven Meisel, the advertisement features a diverse group of young people casually engaged in conversation, kissing, dancing, or smiling coyly at the camera. The perfume's slogan 'the fragrance for a man or a woman. A fragrance for everyone' is in unison with the black-and-white media campaign that portrays androgynous models clad in generic denim garments, expressing an effortlessly cool identity. The advertising campaign tapped into the zeitgeist that was searching for equality, with third-wave feminism and its intersectional approach on the rise as well as the emergence of queer theory.

While the campaign evokes memories of Patricia Faure's 1969 images of Gernreich's unisex collection, the concept for the adverts derived from the New York arts community: 'The initial vision was inspired by 1969 photography by Dick [Richard] Avedon, Andy Warhol and members of the Factory', says Calvin Klein, who also said, 'I wanted to capture a liberal and rebellious attitude, featuring unique people for our anti-perfume' (Yamaji 2017). Casting Kate Moss as the unofficial spokesperson – she lent her voice to the video campaign reading 'The sexy one, the nasty one, the wild one, the male one, the female one, CK One, a fragrance for everyone' – the leap into the youthful Gen X seemed successful. Representing the antithesis to the supermodels of the 1990s and their ultra-femininity, Moss posed alongside the androgynous model Stella Tennant and openly queer Jenny Shimizu. Shimizu was amongst the first to make gender fluidity and queerness a topic of discussion, explaining in an interview that 'I'm Japanese, 5′7″, a dyke, tattooed, have little hair, and I don't wear feminine clothes. … No one like me had paved the way' (StyleLikeU 2010, 01:34).

One can argue that Calvin Klein's unisex fragrance constitutes an essentially anti-fashion/antigender stance as it deliberately breaks with the symbolic and aesthetic divide

between male and female. With its use of iconic men's work garments such as Dr. Martens boots, denim jeans, and masculine singlets, the campaign used sartorial signifiers that had previously been adopted by punk and skinhead subcultures. In the midst of the prevailing grunge and indie cultures of the 1990s, the look resonated with male and female youth alike, providing a unisex uniform rooted in the appropriation of work into leisure wear. As Hollander then elucidated, 'dressing up is more risky than dressing down. … Things have shifted so that for many people, elegant clothing is worn for work, and laboring dress is worn for leisure' (1994, 176).

Importantly, the garments that made up this style of unisex fashion were primarily appropriated from traditionally masculine (work)wear (Figure 2.5). One of the reasons for this focus on masculine signifiers could stem from the fact that men have historically dominated the workforce. Furthermore, women's fashion has often borrowed from the realm of menswear in the past by introducing trousers, shirts, suits, and jeans into womenswear, whereas 'men for their part have flirted only sporadically … with the possibility of adopting clothing or other gender-specific items in any way suggestive of femininity' (Davis 1994, 34). The unisex aesthetic of the 1990s, with its muted colours and paired-back simplicity, resembles a feminine seizure of menswear or female masculinity more than a blending of genders. More often than not, the items that are meant to represent androgyny or unisex style originated in men's fashion and are, in terms of their associations, generally located on the masculine side of the spectrum.

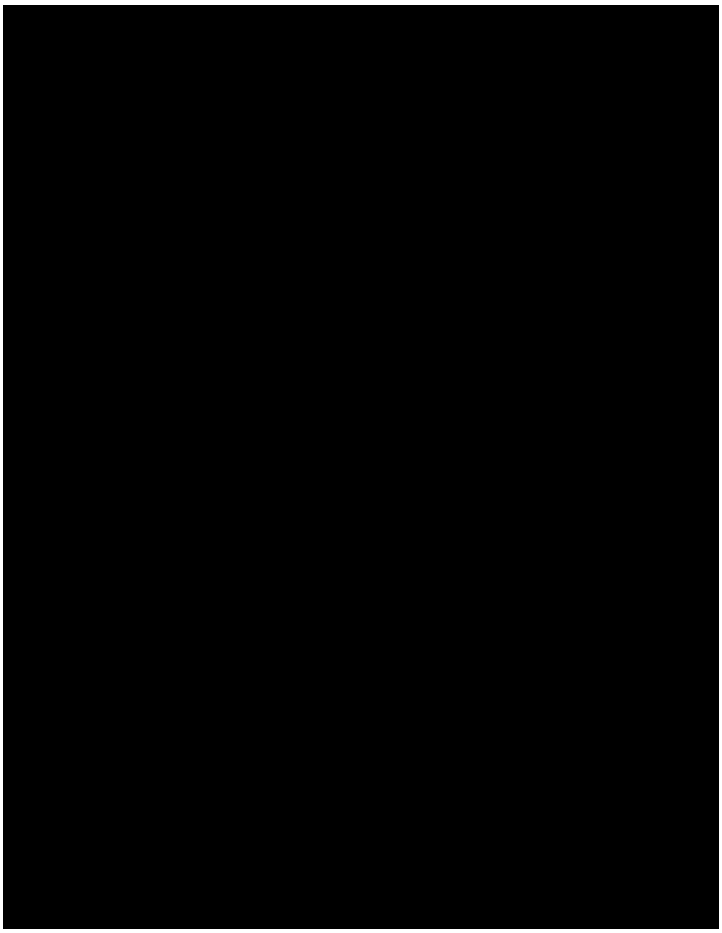

Figure 2.5 Actor Johnny Depp and model Kate Moss attend Richard Tyler's new fashion collection. (Photo: Ron Galella / Ron Galella Collection via Getty Images)

At the turn of the millennium, however, traditional masculinity was subject to new scrutiny. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, a generation of contemporary designers emerged that brought a new vision to menswear. French designer Hedi Slimane created a slim, androgynous aesthetic for Dior Homme that took inspiration from streetstyle and contemporary music scenes. Other designer such as Raf Simons and Nicolas Ghesquière challenged contemporary norms of masculinity; in particular, values of 'aggression, dominance, and invulnerability' (McCauley Bowstead 2018, 146). With influences deriving from pop and subculture, fine art, architecture, and interior and industrial design, these designers incorporated a unisex aesthetic that sought to 'transcend gender categories', resulting in a gender ambiguity that was 'channeled through the expression of male femininity' (Rees-Roberts 2015, 36). Their designs catalysed and reflected broader social shifts. Other brands such as The Kooples and A.P.C. in France, or Acne Studios in Sweden promoted a similarly genderless and democratised style. Their unisex aesthetic was rooted in the idea of identical looks for both sexes, offering the same garments with different cuts for women and men.

The unisex fashions of the 2000s were characterised by a minimalistic and 'gender-quiet' approach that became increasingly thin, pale, and simplistic. However, their notion of unisex fashion was still largely based on the binary gender system. Calvin Klein's unisex look and androgynous masculinities might pose a challenge to traditional notions of masculinity and femininity, but their influence on dissolving the binary gender system seem limited. As Patrick Mauriès states, with the new millennium, 'the nature of androgyny itself began to change, to evolve into a higher state. The contemporary androgyne claims to have escaped from the idea of polarity altogether' (2017, 121).

It is this aspect that differentiates unisex and androgynous styles of the twentieth century from gender-fluid fashion today. The sartorial slippages discussed in this chapter are characterised by their connection to subcultural and countercultural occurrences. Their gender-bending fashions exist within the realm of the subculture in position to the dominant culture and take on a transgressional function in terms of gender rather than a dissolving one. In the case of unisex fashion, the style blends gender into one 'neutral' gender to the point of neglecting the existence of multiple genders. For androgynous styles it means the combination of the masculine and the feminine, although it more often than not takes the form of traditional masculine characteristics (such as slim, flat-chested silhouettes and masculine garments like suits, shirts, and trousers).

The main difference, however, between the slippages of unisex and androgynous fashion and gender-fluid fashion is the aspect of fixity. Unisex and androgyny presume a start and endpoint on the gender spectrum that is fixed and immutable, whereas gender fluidity reveals the transience and interrelation of all genders by implying movement and fluidity between them. While unisex and androgynous styles challenge notions of femininity and masculinity by creating new forms of gendered fashion, the binary pillars of the gender system stay mostly intact.

Furthermore, the occurrence of these slippages is in many ways connected to a crisis in masculinity triggered and enhanced by the advances of feminism at the time, just as today's gender debate is highly influenced by the transgender movement. How far gender-fluid fashion challenges, subverts, and potentially dissolves the binary gender system is the main focus of this study. In the next chapter, I therefore develop the notion of antigender fashion with regards to the concept of anti-fashion, setting up a theoretical perspective for the analysis of the case studies and examples of contemporary gender-fluid fashion design in the chapters that follow.

3

ANTIGENDER FASHION; OR, WHY CAN'T GIRLS HAVE DICKS AND BOYS HAVE BOOBS?

Elliot: Who gives a shit? Everyone's a fucking nun. You're a nun.

Jules: How am I a nun?

Elliot: You're a trans girl wearing a binder asking me whether I'm straight or gay.

Jules: Well, I'm navigating a largely straight binary world.

Elliot: You sound like you're navigating a Twitter thread. I don't know what that's supposed to mean.

Jules: You know what I mean, like most people are straight.

Elliot: And most trans girls don't wear binders, right?

(*Euphoria*, HBO, Season 1, 2022)

In this scene from season two of the HBO teen-drama series *Euphoria* (created by Sam Levinson), Rue (played by Zendaya) and Jules (played by Hunter Schafer) interrogate their friend Elliot (played by Dominic Fike) about whether he wants to have sex with Rue. The conversation quickly turns towards a discussion on sexuality and genders. Asking Elliot whether he is bi, he answers that he 'does not think about it that way'. 'What do you mean? You've never like thought about your sexuality before?' asks Jules. 'Not in a particularly rigid way, no' replies Elliot (Levinson 2022). Two aspects of this scene are interesting here. First, that identity labels for these teens do not seem to matter that much, and second, that Jules is a girl with a dick. Instead of putting her trans-identity at the centre of her plotline, however, the show makes it one trait of many for her character. The series, and particularly this dialogue, suggests that there is a palpable paradigm shift in the way we talk about and understand sexuality and genders; that is, as not rigidly fixed but fluid with shades and nuances. In a similar vein, the concept of antigender fashion that I will lay out in this chapter, visualises the changing understanding of genders in contemporary society and exemplifies all the nuances and in-betweens of the gender spectrum.

Fashion exists in-relation to culture, society, and time. On the one hand, fashion absorbs and reflects current social norms and values. On the other hand, fashion can contribute to a

wider cultural discourse and unfold new possibilities. Today, with its characteristic societal shifts in terms of gender – resembling a culture war or *Kulturkampf* between secular forces and religious thought that is particularly evident in the conflicts around abortion, gay marriage, and trans* rights – fashion reflects the notion of gender fluidity and offers space and visual currency for the cultural discourse around it.[1]

Given these qualities, I here pick up the idea, introduced in Chapter 1, of troubling gender 'through the mobilization, subversive confusion, and proliferation of … those constitutive categories' (Butler 2006, 46), expanding the troubling concept by applying it to antigender fashion, the concept coined by Vicki Karaminas and Justine Taylor (2022, 9). Antigender fashion, I argue, troubles gender by breaking with traditional and rigid forms of masculinity/femininity, and, by scrambling its signifiers, illustrating and showcasing the spaces and potentialities in between these polar categories. Gender fluidity should therefore not be understood as the opposite of the binary or as outside the gender system – that is, as a means to an end – but rather as all the moments and movements in between. Antigender fashion, I argue, operates as a vehicle in proliferating gender categories and expressing forms of masculinity/femininity that must be understood as already containing multitudes and pluralities of being woman and being man. Not only are there more genders than two, but these two come in myriad forms.

Based on the principles of anti-fashion, antigender fashion generally follows the rules of oppositional and subcultural forms of anti-fashion. Positioned in opposition to fashion, anti-fashion seeks to critique, subvert, protest, or ridicule the norms and rules established by fashion. In this chapter, I will lay out the different aspects of anti-fashion and its discourse in fashion studies and philosophy to offer a foundation for the development of antigender fashion. In the first section, I will discuss Dick Hebdige's seminal work on subculture and the concept of 'confrontational dress'. In the second section, Elizabeth Wilson's notion of 'oppositional dress' offers a perspective rooted in subculture and queer/lesbian identity. This is followed by an examination of the concept of anti-fashion as discussed by Fred Davis, focusing on its particular meaning and use as protest in second-wave feminism as well as the philosophical enquiries of

[1] It is important to note that the concept of antigender fashion is in no way related to the so-called 'antigender' movement that opposes what it understands as 'gender ideology', 'gender studies', or 'genderism'. That movement stems from Catholic theology and gained increasing attention in the last decade, although, as Andrea Pető argues, 'it is a fundamentally new phenomenon' that goes beyond mere anti-feminism and 'was launched to establish a new world order' (2021, 42). Applying inconsistent and incoherent scientific-sounding arguments, 'the principal aim of the movement is to reverse progressive legislation won in the last decades by both LGBTQI and feminist movements' (Butler 2021). In its essence, the movement follows nationalist, transphobic, misogynist, and homophobic ideologies that attack human rights, liberalism, and democracy and does not reflect the gender variance and multiplicity represented in this study.

the concept of anti-fashion by Stefano Marino, focusing on his dialectical approach to fashion and anti-fashion. The guiding principles deriving from these discussions on anti-fashion will then be applied, in the final section, for the conceptualisation of antigender fashion.

While this study is concerned with the topic of gender fluidity and its incorporation in fashion, it in no way attempts to speak for or about transgender, non-binary, gender non-conforming, or gender diverse people and their lived experiences. Rather, this study focuses on the binary gender system in itself and how it can be criticised and proliferated with and through fashion to not only include and open up spaces for those that already defy its boundaries, but everyone who identifies with the masculine or the feminine ends of the spectrum. The binary gender system with its polar opposites is not only insufficient to encompass all genders, but oppresses all forms of masculinity and femininity that venture from a rigid and narrow image of it. Thereby, the binary gender system also contributes to the perpetuation of patriarchal, heteronormative, racist, ableist, and ageist structures that facilitate the hierarchising and hegemonising of particular identities over others. Understanding the binary categorisation of male/female, masculine/feminine as a source of othering, oppression, and discrimination, I argue that antigender fashion can proliferate and expand the gender system and free women, men, and gender diverse people from the oppressive and rigid boundaries of gender.

However, this is not to say that gender fluidity and antigender fashion means the end of gender or the demolishing of masculinity and femininity altogether. Rather, it means the challenging and questioning of the generality of masculinity/femininity and their understanding as singular and fixed entities. It is about the process of transition, the spaces in-between, and the moments of flux of (gender) identity. Based on the main principles of anti-fashion, antigender fashion offers a critical lens for the analysis of gender-fluid fashion and its potential to dismantle and challenge the binary gender system.

ANTI-FASHION AND SUBCULTURE: ANTI-FASHION AS 'CONFRONTATIONAL' DRESS

Anti-fashion, as an umbrella term, encompasses various styles of dress that are situated in opposition or contrast to the dominant fashions and fashion system of the time. As such, anti-fashion can express attitudes of indifference or the wish for differentiation of one group from another, or it can function as a visual marker of protest or subcultural subversion. In *Subculture – The Meaning of Style* (1979), Hebdige refers to this strand of anti-fashion as what Vivienne Westwood has described as 'confrontation dressing'. Focusing on spectacular subcultures that

are characterised by a specific and unique aesthetic, Hebdige sees the 'point' of subcultural style in the distinction-imitation dualism; that is, 'the communication of a significant *difference* … and the parallel communication of a group *identity*' (1979, 102).

In addition to differentiation, subcultures express a challenge to dominant ideologies on the surface of style. Drawing on Antonio Gramsci's theory of hegemony and Roland Barthes' *Mythologies* (2000), which seeks to unveil the ways 'mythology' naturalises and normalises socially constructed notions, Hebdige posits that subcultural style is not only charged with meaning but directed at the hegemonic power of naturalisation: 'Style in subculture is, then, pregnant with significance. Its transformations go "against nature", interrupting the process of "normalization". As such, they are gestures, movements towards a speech which offends the "silent majority", which challenges the principle of unity and cohesion, which contradicts the myth of consensus' (1979, 18). In this way, then, anti-fashion is not only a vehicle for subcultural expression of difference, but at the heart of subculture itself. In other words, a subculture's antagonistic style, which in its essence confronts the dominant fashion by repositioning and re-contextualising the meaning of commodities, goes hand in hand with the subcultural power of subverting, challenging, and opposing culture. It does so, however, within the confines and via the language of the (material) culture that is available and that also, to differing degrees, is inscribed with specific meanings that can be reconfigured. In Claude Lévi-Strauss' words, it is the *bricolage*, the re-assembling of concepts and ideas on the surface of cultural material, whether that is music, art, or style.

One style that has frequently been heralded as the quintessential subcultural anti-fashion is punk. Emerging in London and New York in the mid-1970s, punk exemplified the dualism of fashion, communicating on the one hand a significant difference, and on the other hand group identity. With its confrontational dress that was often directly offensive, the subculture aimed to disrupt and re-stitch meaning: 'Like Duchamp's "ready mades" … the most unremarkable and inappropriate items – a pin, a plastic clothes peg, a television component, a razor blade, a tampon – could be brought within the province of punk (un)fashion' (Hebdige 1979, 107; see Figure 3.1). The subterranean and anarchic style was not only meant to shock and ridicule by opposing the predominant idea of beauty, but to rethink the very notion of what fashion, and even more fundamentally, clothing, is. At a time when the love-and-peace aspirations of the 1960s did not take hold in the shipwreck of post-war and post-modern society, anything was up for grabs to be worn, destroyed, and re-assembled in punk's 'Do-It-Yourself' fashion. As Richard Hell, the American musician who is credited with inspiring Malcolm McLaren to carve the disruptive look of punk, states: 'Everything was a lie or dead. In a way it was liberating.

We had no attachments, nothing to lose. We could make ourselves up from scratch' (Hell 2013, 19).

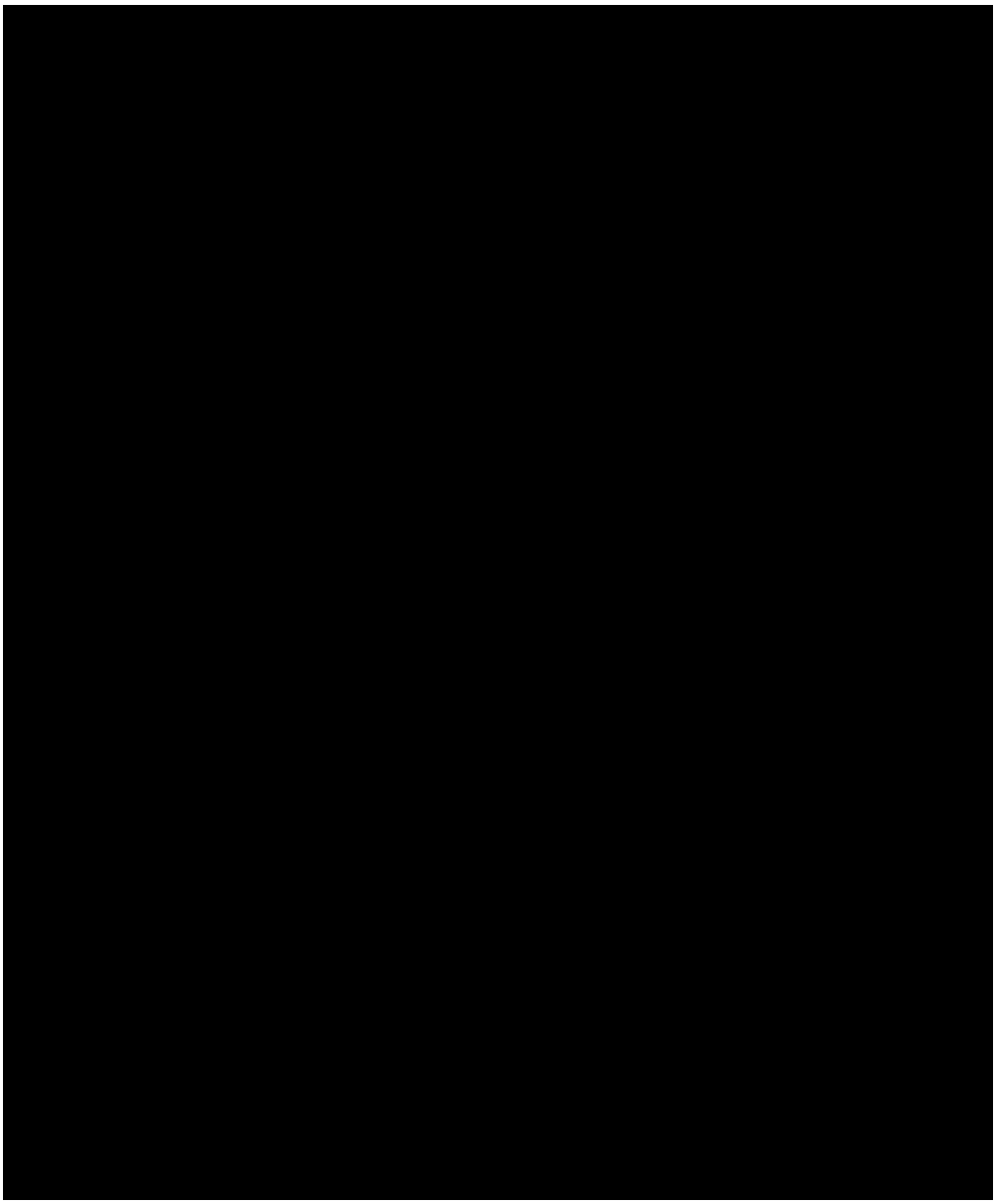

Figure 3.1 A young man with safety-pin piercings in his mouth, nose, and ears, at a concert by English punk band The Clash in Sweden, 17 June 1977. (Photo: Keystone / Hulton Archive / Getty Images)

Westwood and her then-partner McLaren were central figures and forces in crafting and commercialising the style of punk. At their shop at 430 King's Road – a conceptual space that in constant defiance of stagnation went through multiple reinventions (from the Teddy Boys beginnings of Let it Rock, through to Too Fast to Live, Too Young to Die, on to SEX, Seditionaries, and World's End) – Westwood and McLaren fuelled the disruptive style of punk. Their earliest T-shirt designs featuring graphics and slogans that called for disobedience and

rebellion against the British government and monarchy (e.g., 'Anarchy in the U.K.', 'God Save the Queen', or 'Create Hell and Get Away with It'), or that depicted provocative images such as the 'Smoking Boy' or 'Cambridge Rapist' T-shirt, provided the surface material for punk's anti-establishment attitude and contributed to the politicisation of fashion. The 'Two Naked Cowboys' T-shirt depicting two men in cowboy attire standing in front of each other with their penises touching became of political interest when Westwood and McLaren were arrested and fined for 'exposing to public view an indecent exhibition'. This was a time, as Geczy and Karaminas write, 'in which cult fashion, or anti-fashion, met with sex and politics. It was the sign of dissent and the beginning of Westwood's oeuvre as a designer that created garments to agitate and shock the traditional order' (2017, 11). In other words, the body – its adornment and modification – became the stage for punk politics, philosophy, and style by reworking and re-stitching disparate items into a punk appearance.

With fashion as a child of modernity and its systematic ideals, subcultural and particularly punk anti-fashion worked to disrupt, reject, and confront social conventions and systems of class, gender, and at times ethnicity (although, for the most part and particularly in the UK, punk was understood as a white, working-class phenomenon). 'Rooted in a desire to be ironic and anti-hegemonic' (Sklar 2013, 4), punk offered an alternative to the conformist mainstream and expressed its anti-stance and revolutionary critique of dominant ideology and capitalism through music, behaviour, and fashion. While its unconformity and doomy style has been read as a nihilistic answer to the unnerving threat of nuclear war, and post-industrial and postmodern society, punk also offered a space to explore and create one's identity within the shelter of a subculture.

Above all, however, punk style stood in contrast to mainstream fashion and challenged its very notion of naturalising the strange: 'This is the sophistication of punk, its surrealism and its modernism in the true sense: it radically questions its own terms of reference, questions what fashion *is*, what style *is*, making mincemeat of received notions of beauty and trashing the very idea of "charm" or "taste"' (Wilson 2003a, 196). In this way, punk and subcultural (confrontational) dress not only subverts dominant notions of fashion but reveals the instabilities of the signs and meanings naturalised by and ascribed to it. As Patrizia Calefato emphasises, 'decontextualizing an everyday object and transporting it to an unusual or socially unacceptable place [highlights] its status as sign' (2004, 29).

Finally, returning to Butler and post-structural theories, by using the language of fashion and de- and re-contextualising it, anti-fashion speaks to the performativity of its own creation. Laying bare the constructed nature of its supposedly natural state, anti-fashion as confrontation

dressing proliferates the meaning of fashion. It reveals what fashion is, its instability and arbitrariness as a system of signification.

ANTI-FASHION AND QUEERNESS: ANTI-FASHION AS OPPOSITIONAL DRESS

Another term for this form of anti-fashion, one that is opposed to the predominant fashion in its aesthetic and style, is 'oppositional dress', a concept explored by Wilson, who states that it aims 'to express the dissent or distinctive ideas of a group, or views hostile to the conformist majority' (2003a, 184). Applying this to the nineteenth-century dandy, Wilson notes that, accordingly, dandyism is – besides its obsession with the perfection of beauty – primarily concerned with opposing bourgeois life. This anti-bourgeois attitude is expressed through the immaculate simplicity of the dandy, which contrasts with the ostentatious aesthetic of the bourgeoisie.

In a similar vein, the bohemians, as we have seen in the previous chapter, expressed their dissent with the ruling bourgeoisie through their oppositional dress. In contrast to subcultural anti-fashions – for instance, that of the punks that tends to include a wide range of youth from working-class and minority groups and resists the dominant culture from *underneath* – bohemians represent a countercultural form of anti-fashion/oppositional dress that includes bourgeois youths who stand *against* the dominant culture, challenging their parent's positions. Bohemians are an oppositional fraction within the bourgeoisie (Kaiser and Looysen 2010).

It is important to note that Wilson differentiates between oppositional dress as a form that is aesthetically and conceptually set against the hegemonic culture, and anti-fashion as 'classic' forms of dress that stand the test of time in contrast to fashion's continual quest for change. Accordingly, anti-fashion 'is that "true chic" which used to be defined as the elegance that never draws attention to itself, the simplicity that is "understated", but which for that very reason stands out so startlingly', including the dandy's understated attire, Chanel's 'little black dress', and classic men's tailoring (Wilson 2003a, 183). This definition aligns with Ted Polhemus' conception that 'anti-fashion refers to all styles of adornment which fall outside the organized system of fashion change' (2019, 42). Here, anti-fashion is not understood in its aesthetic opposition, but in its system of time in opposition. Any and every style that lies outside the Western fashion system, including traditional and folk dress, can be encompassed by this notion of anti-fashion. However, as Fred Davis argues, this definition runs the risk of being too broad; instead, he suggests we 'restrict the term antifashion to oppositional dress', leaving 'the

remaining dress forms … that lie outside the realm of fashion' to fall under the term of nonfashion (1994, 161). I will return to Davis' concept of anti-fashion below.

Wilson's conception of oppositional dress shares many aspects of anti-fashion as confrontation dressing discussed above. She illustrates this form of anti-fashion with sub- and countercultural examples, including the nineteenth-century bohemians, the use of black in connection to the existentialist dress of post-war Left Bank Paris with its American beatniks, various British and American youth cultures of the 1950s to 1970s (e.g., mods, teds, hippies and punks), and black and minority groups that developed their own oppositional styles, such as the zoot suit, in response to mainstream and dominant culture. However, Wilson also ties the notion of oppositional style to sexuality and its expression through dress; in particular, she describes the Gay Liberation movement in the 1970s as 'the first political movement to elevate dress to the centre of its political practice' (2003a, 201). Accordingly, the gay liberationists' ideology and intention to challenge and transform fundamental concepts of society, including gender and the nuclear family, was also expressed on the surface of dress. Men wearing skirts and high heels was meant to help break down gender stereotypes and consequently larger conventions of modern life as well as the perception and meaning of homosexuality at the time.

While the cross-dressing of gay men and lesbians destabilised gender, it also contributed to an important and intrinsic part of the LGBTQIA+ community; that is, the signalling and communication of sexual desire. The codes became highly specified and for the most part only discernible by members of the group. The styles varied from the hyper-masculinised gay style of the clone to more subtle codes based on the placement of a handkerchief. The Gay Liberation Front 'created a new language, a new style, a new vocabulary for being gay. It was about being contemporary, about being incredibly, outrageously, exquisitely radical and of course – and most important of all – visible' (H. David 1997, 228).

With the androgynous and feminist style on the rise in the 1970s and its incorporation into the fashion system, for instance with Gernreich's unisex fashion or Yves Saint Laurent's iconic womenswear suit *Le Smoking*, some lesbians rediscovered the exaggerated 'butch' and 'femme' styles of the 1950s and 1960s. The butch and femme style constitutes oppositional dress insofar as it not only appears in contrast to the dominant forms of fashion but because it challenges femininity and female desire on its own terms – an important aspect of oppositional dress:

> Key to understanding oppositional dress is an understanding of the zeitgeist (the spirit of the time, at least in dominant culture) in a particular space/place. Oppositional dress need not be organized and worn by a group and may have obvious meanings or very discreet, subtle

> meanings. Key to oppositional dress, however, is the idea of articulating resistance to dominant culture, including issues of hegemonic masculinity and hegemonic femininity. (Kaiser and Looysen 2010, 160–70)

In other words, because fashion plays such a vital role in reiterating and maintaining hegemonic masculinity/femininity, anti-fashion and oppositional dress offer an important tool in destabilising and subverting these dominant ideologies, particularly because they *speak the same language*. As Wilson states, 'in this world, in which we are flooded with culture, oppositional styles continue … their attempt to subvert dominant ideologies, using the very mass consumption means that constitute or contribute to the ideologies' (2003a, 204). However, the oppositional dress of lesbian style does not just reflect resistance to one idea or ideology, but rather expresses an intersection of various resistances and factors of class, race, age, sexual desire, politics, and place. To stereotype lesbian style as essentially anti-fashion neglects the multifaceted nature of both lesbian and anti-fashion, which, for instance, takes effect in the oppositional dress of feminist protest.

ANTI-FASHION AND FEMINISM: ANTI-FASHION AS PROTEST

As already outlined above, Fred Davis' definition of anti-fashion largely follows that of oppositional dress, meaning the styles that are positioned in response or opposition to the prevailing fashions. However, his discussion focuses less on the identification/differentiation qualities of oppositional dress and more on anti-fashion's role within the fashion system at large and the driving forces behind it. Accordingly, fashion and anti-fashion share a highly ambivalent relationship. On the one hand, fashion regularly takes inspiration from anti-fashions, fuelling its own constant drive for the new. From a more pessimistic position, the fashion industry ultimately absorbs the presumably authentic anti-fashions into its system until these styles and codes are rendered meaningless, or at least have lost their punch. On the other hand, however, anti-fashion relies to a certain degree on fashion itself to contrast and oppose. In other words, without dominant or mainstream fashion there would be nothing *to oppose*. Still, as Davis illustrates, while anti-fashion seems to be a necessary impetus for fashion to move forward, occurring 'only after antifashion has displayed its wares, so to speak. The … question remains: Why these wares at this time in this place?' (1994, 165).

Davis sees potential answers to this question in societal and cultural contexts. However, throughout the European history of dress, the functions and reasons behind anti-fashion styles

have largely been the same; that is, 'to dissent, protest, ridicule, and outrage' (Davis 1994, 162). Anti-fashion sentiments as political protest seem to play an important part here: partly, because in societies that entail a certain democracy of style and taste, anti-fashion is commonly read as political protest by those in authority; and partly, because fashion, and consequently anti-fashion, are valuable and visual tools in expressing notions of protest.

An example is the anti-fashion of feminist protest in the 1960s and 1970s. Some second-wave feminists viewed women's fashion and the generally gendered clothing code of the West as a key component, symbolically as well as actually, in the systematic oppression and subordination of women within the institutions of the patriarchy. They understood the fashion system with its constant need for renewal, and its associated fields and rules of the fashion magazines and beauty industry as complicit in the perpetuation of the inequality and divide between the genders. They critiqued the fact that while men are relatively freed from the dictates of fashion change – also due to the timelessness of menswear items such as the suit – women had to succumb to the expectation and pressures of traditional femininity, which in patriarchal society mainly caters to the heterosexual male gaze and is objectifying and oppressive. Consequently, the second-wave feminist movement used dress as a stylistic device to express critique of and in opposition to mainstream bourgeois femininity.

Furthermore, similar to first-wave feminism and the dress reform that called for emancipation and freedom from the restrictions of the fashion at the time, promoting a 'rational dress' without the corset and crinoline, second-wave feminists called for freedom from the oppressive symbols of twentieth-century femininity, such as makeup, high heels, or the bra (Figure 3.2). Some feminists aimed 'to symbolically diminish the gender gap' by adapting a more masculine style (Davis 1994, 176). However, the adaption of essentially men's clothing, some believed, 'would lend tacit legitimation to the patriarchic representation of the world' and 'subscribe tacitly to the notion that men's construction of social reality, as symbolized in their dress code, is the only viable one' (Davis 1994, 176). These feminists called for a dress code for women that is resistant to the whims of fashion, and they sought to reject a traditional feminine dress code. In opposing mainstream and heteronormative femininity, feminist dress not only shares many aspects of lesbian anti-fashion, but is to some degree interwoven with it.

Figure 3.2 Women's liberation movement in Washington, DC, United States on 26 August 1970. (Photo: Don Carl STEFFEN / Gamma-Rapho via Getty Images)

However, not all feminists believed in the rejection of feminine fashion and the efficacy of anti-fashion. There has always been a multitude of perspectives and views on fashion within the feminist movement. While some believed fashion to be the visual expression of and contributor to the perpetuation of the patriarchy, others enjoyed fashion as a means of self-actualisation and 'an important form of personal expression' (Paoletti 2015, 57). Thus, it would be futile to try and identify one feminist anti-fashion, not least because feminism, like lesbianism, lies at the intersections of many identity categories, including gender, sexuality, race, and class.

Instead, more importantly and of more relevance for this discussion, we should look at the influence and relationship between mainstream fashion and feminist anti-fashion. As we have seen in the previous chapter, the late 1960s and 1970s saw an explosion of counter- and subcultural styles that not only questioned given gender roles but renegotiated them on the level of dress and appearance. The gender-bending and unisex styles of the hippie counterculture are, to some degree, inevitably connected to the rise of second-wave feminism and its open demand and questioning of gender roles; for example, what it means to be a woman. 'What was in the air', notes Jo B. Paoletti, 'was change, with no clear future direction' (2015, 50). With fashion's

tendency to pick up on and absorb what is happening in society, designers such as Yves Saint Laurent created new proliferated images of femininity that stemmed from the anti-fashions of feminism seeking to renegotiate gender categories.

The styles of feminist protest not only show the ways in which anti-fashion opposes the respective dominant fashion, but also the ways in which it can articulate and resist dominant culture and specifically hegemonic femininity/masculinity that is so prevalent in the fashion system. Feminist anti-fashion as a visual signifier of protest also shines light on the intersection of the private – for example, the way we dress – and the political. Fashion and anti-fashion are political in their ability to adhere to or protest political (as in publicly shared) norms. The dialectical relationship between fashion and anti-fashion that the example of feminist style demonstrates, will be discussed further in the following section.

PHILOSOPHICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ANTI-FASHION: A DIALECTICAL APPROACH

The prefix ‘anti’ suggests a somewhat distinctly removed and distant position towards fashion. However, the relationship between fashion and anti-fashion is much more complex and ambiguous, particularly because both are inextricably linked. For one, anti-fashion relies on the existence of fashion in order to take an oppositional stance, as discussed above in the form of punk, lesbian, and feminist styles. These styles can only gain meaning because there already is an established and dominant set of codes that supposedly dictates acceptable forms of fashion and consequently of identities. On the other side is the inescapable exploitation of anti-fashion innovation by the fashion system, which seemingly aims to co-opt and capitalise sub- and countercultural styles. However, as David Muggleton and Rupert Weinzierl suggest in *The Post-Subcultures Reader* (2003), an oversimplified dichotomy between an ‘authentic’ and ‘heroic’ subculture and a parasitic mainstream or popular culture (including fashion) bears the risk of neglecting the complexity and diversity of the plethora of (sub)cultural styles. The speed by which fashion and any form of oppositional dress, subcultural style, or anti-fashion emerges and changes has only increased in contemporary capitalism. In turn, it has become almost impossible to identify, with any certainty, distinctly oppositional styles and on the other side, a clear and universal fashion to oppose.

Stefano Marino discusses this dialectical aspect in a 2019 article in which he stresses the importance of a dialectical understanding of anti-fashion as a concept that is ‘understood as quintessential or even constitutive in its being-in-relation-to its opposite pole’ (3). In other

words, the idea and real phenomena of anti-fashion rests upon the existence of fashion as its counterpart, gaining its power and meaning in precisely the negation of or opposition to the latter. On a theoretical level, what Marino calls a 'negative model of dialectics', anti-fashion must also have the ability to resist the absorption or assimilation by fashion or the fashion system. However, when looking at real-life examples of punk style, for instance, the resistance of anti-fashion becomes more fragile and the incorporation into the fashion system – or rather the absorption by 'Fashion' as the 'entire spectrum' formed by the 'dialectical totality of mediations' (Marino 2019, 6-7) – somewhat inevitable. As Marino illustrates, it can be argued that

> despite their capacity to represent for some time a real countercultural, or sometimes even anti-cultural, alternative to the mainstream … every anti-fashion and every countercultural movement will be inevitably and hopelessly destined to finally turn into some kind of new official fashion or, more in general, official cultural development: that is, into what it was originally aimed at contradicting and being opposed to. (2019, 7)

In the end, then, fashion or Fashion absorbs and reforms anti-fashions into a new synthesis or 'new trend that can transform what once was a negation into a new factor of affirmation' (Marino 2019, 7). It is this positive reflection on fashion's appropriating power that is essential for Marino's notion of the relationship between fashion and anti-fashion.

Referring to Georg Simmel's influential theory on fashion – the inherent dualism of human experience and the dialectics of fashion fluctuating between imitation and differentiation – Marino argues for a less 'apocalyptic' and more balanced perspective of the antagonistic relationship between fashion and anti-fashion. Contrary to the rather provocative views that regard the inevitable pull of fashion as a symptom of the culture industry and its devouring of any form of counterculture projects (e.g., alternative music, art, and dress) as its fatal and ongoing destiny, Marino's dialectical approach focuses on the instances that escape the fashion system's absolute and suffocating power. Accordingly, there is the possibility for the individual to escape this pull by placing fashion 'at the very periphery of the personality, which regards itself as a *pièce de résistance*' (Simmel 1997, 198). The absorption of anti-fashions that initially challenged and contrasted the supposed superiority of fashion, is never totally complete. Rather, it is a constant back and forth between new forms of anti-fashions and new fashions that constitutes a vital part in the interplay and existence of both.

There is, as Theodor W. Adorno famously states, 'no identity without something non-identical' (2004, 120). Consequently, there is always some form of identity or anti-identity/anti-

fashion that resists and contrasts identity/fashion, leading to the infinite process of distinction and affirmation:

> It is precisely this that makes it possible to always develop new ways to defy – even for just one moment, even at a purely individual level – the all-encompassing tendencies of our time, in an ongoing and never-ending process of thesis/antithesis/synthesis/antithesis/synthesis/antithesis etc. A process that never results in an ultimate, all-subjugating or all-annihilating synthesis, but rather gives rise to always new antitheses and new oppositions. From this point of view, everything depends … on the possibility of the individual to develop a more conscious and hence more balanced, more self-controlled and eventually more relaxed relationship with the tendency of anti-fashions to turn into new fashions, and then generate new anti-fashions, and so on *ad infinitum*. (Marino 2019, 26)

Discussing Nickolas Pappas' philosophy of fashion and anti-fashion, particularly the notion of nudity as a fashion/anti-fashion practice in ancient Greek culture, Marino expresses the problem inherent to the concept of anti-fashion; that is, that anti-fashion is conceived as 'something that, quite paradoxically but also intriguingly, "is of the fashion world but not in it"' (2019, 15). In other words, though anti-fashion aims to differentiate itself from, challenge, or subvert dominant fashion, it will never fully be free of the shackles of fashion. Anti-fashion for all its oppositional potential is always part of fashion/Fashion, and fashion is always part of the narrative of anti-fashion.

FROM ANTI-FASHION TO ANTIGENDER FASHION

The different interpretations of the concept of anti-fashion offer a comprehensive variety of characteristics that are important in developing the concept of antigender fashion. First, anti-fashion always exists in opposition to or as a critique and subversion of fashion. There has to be some form of discernible fashion or a fashion system that can be opposed by anti-fashion. To some degree, then, anti-fashion is also always part of fashion: they exist in-relation. Second, anti-fashion and fashion speak the same 'language'; that is, they both occupy the same realm of signs and signifiers that make up their cultural meaning. Otherwise, anti-fashion would have no subversive potential to re-contextualise fashion. By doing so, anti-fashion also reveals what fashion is; that is, the arbitrariness and instabilities of fashion. Furthermore, anti-fashion/fashion are in a perpetual cycle of assimilation and antagonisation where both feed off

each other. Lastly, anti-fashion often carries political and progressive messages that draw attention to the grievances of social and political life.

These characteristics of anti-fashion serve as a blueprint for the concept of antigender fashion. As mentioned, the term antigender fashion was proposed by Karaminas and Taylor (2022), who offered the notion in their discussion on Harry Styles' and Alessandro Michele's contribution to the field of fluid and non-binary fashion. Analysing Styles' influence as 'fashion's gender changeling', they proposed the term 'antigender' to describe contemporary forms of gender-fluid or non-binary fashions. While their analysis is primarily concerned with Styles and his collaboration with Alessandro Michele and Gucci, in this thesis I expand on their proposal and develop a theoretical framework based on the principles of anti-fashion. Accordingly, antigender fashion illustrates the ways fluid fashion exposes the 'instabilities of gender':

> Much like antifashion which is oppositional to mainstream styles or trends, fluid fashion or nonbinary fashion can also be termed antigender. … By scrambling gender signifiers and citations, antigender fashion draws attention to the instability of gender, much like how antifashion, or 'confrontational' and 'oppositional' clothing is a semiotic system of resistance and dissent that is deployed against what is considered normative and dominant. (Karaminas and Taylor 2022, 9)

In other words, like anti-fashion, which uses the language of fashion but scrambles its signifiers to oppose and critique fashion and to reveal what fashion is, antigender fashion uses the language of gendered fashion to reveal its construction and subvert its signs.

Furthermore, there is an important distinction to be made between gender-blurring slippages (of the past) and fluid fashion design that exists at a time of social and cultural shifts towards gender plurality and diversity. Designing at a time when the neutralised androgyny of the 1990s and early 2000s was on the wane, Alessandro Michele's anti-fashion makes 'difference unsettling and more pronounced' (Karaminas and Taylor 2022, 17). In other words, antigender fashion flaunts gender.

Two aspects of Karaminas and Taylor's argument are important here for the concept of antigender fashion. First, the demarcation of gender-fluid fashion and androgyny (and, in a broader sense, unisex fashion) points to a significant difference between them; that is that, unisex and androgynous styles like those discussed in Chapter 2 – and that more often than not steer towards a 'neutrality' based on historically masculine pieces including trousers, shirts, and suits – imply a fixed and rather rigid vision of gender or gendered fashion in the way that

they are positioned outside or detached from the binary gender system. Unisex and androgyny may combine masculine and feminine signifiers in equal parts to the extent of neutralisation, but by doing so, they keep the pillars of the gender binary intact. By comparison, fluid fashion design or antigender fashion implies movement, fluidity, and multiplicity within the binary by offering not just a new and neutralised version of gender, but many versions of masculinity and femininity. Gendered fashion and antigender fashion, then, much like fashion/anti-fashion, exist in a perpetual push and pull whereby antigender fashion actively challenges the binary and construction of feminine and masculine fashion, and in turn, influences and shifts the boundaries of gender.

Second, by 'flaunting' gender, antigender fashion exposes not just the instabilities of gender and gendered dress but reveals its performativity; that is, what gender – and to a certain degree fashion – *is*. Similar to the anti-fashion of subcultures such as punk, which not only challenges the norms of beauty and fashion but interferes with the process of its naturalisation, antigender fashion interrupts the processes of normalising and naturalising gender. In other words, by visualising forms of gender that exploit sartorial signifiers of masculinity (e.g., simple, natural, and muted fabrics, cuts, and colours) and femininity (e.g., colourful, delicate, and ostentatious garments), that move in the spaces between these binaries, antigender fashion reveals the instabilities of gender and its performativity; that is, its construction and perpetuation through acts such as dressing. This is not to say that antigender fashion simply dissolves the gender binary; rather, it takes masculinity and femininity as it is perpetuated in society as a starting point to repeat, expand, and visualise their possibilities. Gender understood as performative and as a form of acts/action, entails the possibility to proliferate the limits of the binary system of sex and gender (Butler 2006, 152).

Yet, to move beyond the imposed binary, gender has to overcome its own inevitability and inflexibility. However, a central aspect of the performativity of gender is exactly that: that we cannot escape it. As Butler emphasises, 'performativity … is a compulsory repetition of prior and subjectivating norms' (1993, 22). The self is born – with 'gender reveal' parties even preceding birth – into and as the matrix of gender relations that depend on their binary. However, because gender is performative and gender norms 'work, animate, and constrain the gendered subject', they 'are also the resources from which resistance, subversion, displacement are to be forged' (Butler 1993, 22). In other words, while 'there can be no escaping gender because its construction is embedded in language … there are innumerable strategies for diverting conventional definitions and practices (performances) of it' (Karaminas and Taylor 2022, 9).

By using the language and signs of gender/gendered fashion and re-contextualising it, antigender fashion therefore proliferates the norms and meanings of gender. Antigender fashion *troubles gender* in the way that it subverts, displaces, and proliferates presumably natural notions of gender. Further, as Karaminas and Taylor illustrate, antigender fashion 'is not about advocating for the disappearance of gender; it is concerned with dismantling gender binaries in order to envision the multiple and myriad ways that gender can be imagined, celebrated and lived' (2022, 23). In other words, girls can have dicks, boys can have boobs, and either can wear skirts, heels, and suits.

Another characteristic of anti-fashion that can be transferred to the concept of antigender fashion is that the latter is also always part of the gender system: antigender fashion and gender exist in-relation. On the one hand, antigender fashion could not exist without gendered fashion and without the concept of gender. Antigender fashion relies on the existence of an established gender code and particularly the binary gender system in order to oppose, critique, and challenge its norms. On the other hand, gender itself is partly made up of the ways we dress and represent ourselves. Moreover, what society deems appropriate or considers masculine/feminine is connected to the zeitgeist and, consequently, the fashion of the time. It can be argued then, following Marino's positive dialectical approach to anti-fashion, that antigender fashion and gender/gendered fashion are tied together in an infinite process of distinction and affirmation (2019, 26). In this perpetual cycle of thesis/antithesis/synthesis etc., then, gender builds the thesis that is antagonised by antigender fashion which is then assimilated by the gender system, which in turn creates a new thesis to be antagonised and so forth.

What is important here, however, is the fact that the gender system and its norms are not simply challenged time and again, which has always been a central part of the societal negotiation and re-negotiation of gender norms, but that antigender fashion, by scrambling and flaunting gender signifiers, pushes the gender boundaries to the extent of proliferating it. In the way anti-fashion has pushed fashion in relation to an ever-growing plurality of contemporary fashion(s), antigender fashion pushes gender into a realm of possibilities where traditional masculinity and femininity are just two of potentially infinite genders. In other words, antigender fashion enables and facilitates myriad ways to express and live diverse forms of being woman and being man, or rather of doing woman and doing man. This highlights the ways that antigender fashion is always understood in opposition to and subversion of dominant gender norms.

While fashion and the fashion system play an important part in the construction and naturalisation of the binary of gender – most significantly with the differentiation of menswear

and womenswear collections and respective sale outlets – antigender fashion invariably works at dismantling those binary structures by scrambling its signifiers and dissolving the distinction between menswear and womenswear. This aspect is particularly important for defining the concept, with the prefix 'anti' illustrating the active role that this form of fashion design plays in proliferating the gender system. While there are many terms for fashions that challenge gender norms, such as gender-fluid fashion, androgyny, unisex, degender fashion, or Joseph Altuzarra's recently introduced line 'altu' that defines itself as 'genderful' fashion, antigender fashion differs in its antagonistic role and conception. The notion of gender-fluid, androgynous, or unisex fashion contains the establishing of forms of fashion that exist alongside the binary of gendered fashion. Besides feminine and masculine fashions that are subject to the zeitgeist and the societal renegotiation of gender norms, androgynous and unisex fashion symbolise styles that strive to blur or neutralise sartorial signifiers of gender. The supposedly natural binary of gendered fashion remains undisputed as these gender-blurring fashions are somewhat understood as outside of the system. In contrast, the term anti-fashion puts the focus on dismantling the process of naturalisation and unfolds the arbitrariness of its signs. Consequently, antigender fashion can be considered a more permanent and effective part of the fashion system than just a fashion trend that is doomed to expire. By occupying the same realm and language as gendered fashion, and by revealing the instabilities of gender, antigender fashion is anchored in the system of gender and gendered fashion and can therefore change its meaning.

* * *

The contemporary occurrence of antigender fashion is a belated result of the aims of the liberation movements in the 1960s and 1970s that sought to dismantle gender binaries to free men and women from the ideologies that oppress and marginalise different ways of being. It also results from the accumulation of the post-postmodern condition and its dissolution of distinctive cultural categories. Today's antigender fashion gives 'visual currency' to the broader socio-cultural movement of gender diversity rooted in trans* liberation, feminism, queer activism, and the continuous fight by non-binary and gender diverse people (Karaminas and Taylor 2022, 22). Susan Stryker, author of *Transgender History: The Roots of Today's Revolution* (2017), sees the emergence of queer studies and queer feminism as an impetus for the evolution and expansion of transgender issues. Accordingly, it was around 1990 when 'the

word *transgender* first started to acquire its current definition as a catchall term for all nonnormative forms of gender expression and identity' (Stryker 2017, 153–54). Butler's work in particular, along with the conception of gender performativity, played a pivotal role in the transgender movement and feminism. The understanding of genders as something that we do, rather than something that we are, circulated more widely and is now a central part of the self-understanding of many transgender (and cis-gender) people.

By declaring all forms of gender as essentially performative, as produced and implemented in the same fundamental way, the concept elevated transgender genders onto the same level as any other and helped to promote de-pathologisation. An important milestone then came with the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-V) officially dropping the category of transgender as a gender identity disorder in 2013, and the World Health Organization removing the classification in 2019. The move away from medical classifications and psychiatric terms arose at the same time that new terms and self-designations 'emerged within communities seeking for ways to name and explain their multiplicity' (Halberstam 2018, 10).

However, Jack Halberstam cautions against viewing this emergence of vernacular systems as a sign of 'the demise of hegemonic sex/gender systems' per se, as the structural binaries of race, class, gender, and sexuality remain largely unchanged (2018, 10). Still, Halberstam argues, 'one of the biggest innovations of the past two decades in relation to gendered expression has been the production, circulation, and usage of just such a vernacular language for non-normative gender and sexual expression' (2018, 10-11). The move away from medical/psychiatric classification towards collaborative self-expression has, on the one hand, fostered broader public discussions of nonnormative genders and elevated transgender towards an increasingly accepted expression of gendered embodiment. On the other hand, however, the advancement of the transgender movement and 'emphasis on *sexual and gender diversity* represents both a break with nineteenth- and twentieth-century concepts of classification, norms, and identity and a new mode of social control that continues the social project that classification and normative regulation began' (Halberstam 2018, 28). The inclusion of a third gender pronoun in countries such as Sweden and Norway or the 'diverse' gender category on official documentation in Germany, while certainly offering more freedom, also incorporates a form of social control that fixes a third gender in place and implies certain regulations and classifications. The 'Transgender Tipping Point' that *Time* magazine proclaimed in the course of a cover story featuring trans actress Laverne Cox in 2014, then, appears to be more of a pitstop (albeit important milestone) on the long and winding road towards macrosocial

acceptance (Stryker, 2017, 196). Particularly against the backdrop of Trump's presidency and its efforts to undo important rights and changes accomplished by decades of transgender activism in the US, the fight for transgender issues seems caught in the back and forth of conservative and liberal forces.

Nevertheless, advancements in one field, such as the proliferation of terminology, often entail changes in other fields. For instance, there has been an increasing number of mainstream media productions that represent and include trans* people. Jill Soloway's award-winning show *Transparent* on Amazon, which tells transgender stories on screen as well as including trans* people in the production team, Netflix's hit show *Orange Is the New Black* featuring Laverne Cox, or more recently Hunter Schafer's portrayal of transgender teenager Jules in HBO's *Euphoria* are just a few examples. Additionally, recent decades saw an increasing number of genderqueer and transgender models walking runways and appearing in magazines and advertising campaigns, including Andreja Pejic, who modelled successfully for both menswear and womenswear before transitioning in 2013, or Hari Nef, who became the 'first openly trans woman to sign an international modelling contract' in 2015 (IMG Models n.d.).

Additionally, more and more transgender and gender-nonconforming youth find places in which to voice their gender variance, and it is accepted they do so, and as a result contribute to the very real transformation of many aspects of culture, from 'a rising preference for non-gender-specific pronouns, to youth fashion trends that defy the gender binary, to the number of gender options available on Facebook profiles' (Stryker 2017, 201). These transformations in societal structures, narratives, and the visibility of transgender people can be regarded as evidence of a changing climate and paradigm shift in the way we think and embody gender. As Halberstam states, 'when logic that fixes bodily form to social practice comes undone, when narratives of sex, gender, and embodiment loosen up and become less fixed in relation to truth, authenticity, originality, and identity, then we have the space and the time to imagine bodies otherwise' (2018, xii). Antigender fashion, then, is in a unique position within that space. For one, it offers the tools and visual currency to carve out the space that allows for new ways of gendered embodiment. On the other hand, antigender fashion also *is* the space where the narratives of sex, gender, and embodiment come undone and are re-stitched.

Consequently, antigender fashion works within and at dismantling the heterosexual matrix as conceptualised by Butler. While the heterosexual matrix is the underlying governing social system that upholds and reaffirms the naturalisation of identity categories 'through the compulsory practice of heterosexuality' (Butler 2006, 208), its ubiquity is also being challenged within that paradigm shift. In the scene from the HBO television series *Euphoria* quoted at the

start of this chapter, the character Elliot (played by Dominic Fike) exemplifies this shift with his statement that he does not think about his sexuality 'in a particularly rigid way'. In the conversation with his friends, it becomes clear that a neat classification and identification with pre-defined and solid categories of sexuality (and in a wider sense, of gender), does not matter that much. One gets the impression that whether he is heterosexual, bisexual, or gay is completely irrelevant to him. Of course, this is only one example from a fictional TV-series, but its implications hint at a broader societal rethinking.

With the formal recognition of same-sex marriages in numerous Western societies in recent decades, non-heterosexuality has been raised to the same level as heterosexuality, while at the same time, succumbing to the rules of heteronormativity. Yet, it also opened a window to discuss and critique that universality. If heterosexuality, then, upholds the illusion of coherent masculinity and femininity in the way that heterosexual desire retrospectively provides proof for the binary of gender (that one is either a woman attracted to men or a man attracted to women), by implication, the dismantling and denaturalisation of binary gender identities also works to dismantle heterosexuality and its hegemonic position. Antigender fashion, which offers and visualises the multifaceted nature of femininity and masculinity, contributes to the subversion and dismantling of the hegemony of heterosexuality and the binary gender system.

Another point of alignment between theorisations of anti-fashion and antigender fashion can be seen in the fact that both carry political messages, sometimes directly printed on a shirt, sometimes in a wider sense. For antigender fashion, this particularly applies to its connection to identity politics: Because antigender fashion dismantles the gender binary, it *is* political. As Butler illustrates in the conclusion to *Gender Trouble*, 'the deconstruction of identity is not the deconstruction of politics; rather, it establishes as political the very terms through which identity is articulated' (2006, 203). Antigender fashion, then, establishes as political the terms through which gender identities and their numerous facets are and can be articulated.

Antigender fashion deconstructs gender identity by scrambling its sartorial signifiers; it imagines the myriad ways and possibilities of what genders can be – and already are. As Butler emphasises, 'the task here is not to celebrate each and every new possibility *qua* possibility, but to redescribe those possibilities that *already* exist, but which exist within cultural domains designated as culturally unintelligible and impossible' (2006, 203). In this way, then, antigender fashion makes possible the culturally unintelligible; it frees the multiplicities and possibilities already contained in masculinity and femininity from the boundaries of its binary. Therefore, it contains the very real possibility of (political) change:

> If identities were no longer fixed as the premises of a political syllogism, and politics no longer understood as a set of practices derived from the alleged interests that belong to a set of ready-made subjects, a new configuration of politics would surely emerge from the ruins of the old. Cultural configurations of sex and gender might then proliferate or, rather, their present proliferation might then become articulable within the discourses that establish intelligible cultural life, confounding the very binarism of sex, and exposing its fundamental unnaturalness. (Butler 2006)

Fashion is and has always been political. As historian Jonathan Square states in an interview with *Refinery29*, it is 'one of the most readily available political tools' (Whitfield 2019). Consequently, antigender fashion is one of the most radically political and visual tools in destabilising the social and cultural terms that uphold and naturalise the gender binary.

Antigender fashion is an active tool in opposing, confronting, and challenging gender binaries by scrambling the symbols of masculinity and femininity. By confusing, subverting, and proliferating the constitutive categories of gender it uncovers its inconsistencies; it makes gender trouble. Antigender fashion offers the material and visual currency to express and embody the myriad ways that masculinity and femininity can be imagined, of the moments of transgression and the moments in-between. Understood as something of the gender world but not in it, antigender fashion exposes the unnaturalness of gender itself while proliferating its cultural configurations. Antigender fashion, as a framework and as a design approach, contributes to the deconstruction of identities and the crumbling dominance of heterosexuality and the gender binary, so that in the end, girls can have dicks and boys can have boobs.

Having now established fashion's role in the performativity of gender and as a system of signification, and after considering key moments in the history of gender-bending styles to offer points of comparison to contemporary gender-fluid fashion, as well as having set up the theoretical background necessary for a full understanding of antigender fashion, in part 2 of this thesis, I will turn to a series of four case studies. These studies have been selected to exemplify the concept of antigender fashion in order to highlight its different design practices. Following a largely chronological order, the first of these studies is devoted to JW Anderson, the London-based fashion label that laid the foundations for fashion's increasingly dissolving gender binaries.

4

JW ANDERSON: THE ARCHITECTURE OF ANTIGENDER FASHION

I want to build the architecture of women into men and vice versa.
Jonathan Anderson (in Furniss 2011)

In an unexpected twist, JW Anderson's design for its 2020 Autumn/Winter menswear patchwork cardigan found its way into the homes of millions worldwide during the Covid-19 pandemic. Previously, Harry Styles had worn the knitted piece during a TV appearance, triggering a DIY-craze and reconsideration of masculinity and needlework (Beyer 2022). However, Jonathan Anderson, creative director and founder of the eponymous label, has a long-standing history of challenging the norms and sartorial limitations of masculinity and menswear; as *Vogue* editor Jo-Ann Furniss wrote, 'splicing and dicing the DNA of menswear and womenswear is a standing preoccupation for Jonathan Anderson' (2013). The idiosyncratic 'shape-sharing' (Mower 2019c), be it between the masculine and feminine or the animal world and the wearable (as with Loewe's infamous elephant bag), has become somewhat of a hallmark for Anderson's design.

Anderson entered the international fashion stage with his first womenswear catwalk collection at London Fashion Week in 2010. After launching JW Anderson as a menswear label in 2008, having gained a degree in menswear design from the London College of Fashion, the step towards womenswear was perceived as a logical consequence of its 'conscious cross-pollination between menswear and womenswear elements' (JW Anderson 2022). In 2015, Anderson became the first designer to be awarded both the Menswear and Womenswear Designer of the Year by the British Fashion Council – a fact that speaks to his ability to move between and beyond conceptions of menswear and womenswear.

In this chapter I discuss Anderson's design approach in the context of a changing fashion and particularly menswear industry that focused on the examination and re-examination of masculinity. Designing amidst a menswear scene spearheaded by Raf Simons' and Hedi

Slimane's collective architectural vision and focus on form and shape (Rees-Roberts 2015, 12), Anderson's 'architecture' of combined womenswear and menswear will be analysed in regard to the aesthetic and conceptual elements of antigender fashion as developed in Chapter 3. Those antigender fashion characteristics include the being in-relation and in opposition to gendered fashion, the language of gendered fashion, and the *troubling* thereof; that is, the scrambling of its signifiers.

This chapter will use fashion imagery from presentations and media campaigns as well as interviews and profiles as the primary data for this critical textual analysis. It will begin with a reflection on the changing aesthetics and conceptualisation of masculinity and menswear in the early 2000s. The influential role of designers like Slimane and Simons will be considered to offer the relevant context in which Anderson's own design work took shape. Moreover, I will draw upon the increasing scrutiny and theorisation of masculinities, starting in the latter half of the twentieth century, as well as in more recent studies and scholarship – including the work of Raewyn W. Connell, Eric Anderson, Ann-Dorte Christensen, and Sune Qvotrup Jensen – to illustrate the shift in contemporary understandings and subjectivities of masculinity. Within that context I will discuss JW Anderson's first collections and expansion into womenswear in 2010 and the beginnings of the brand's antigender fashion design.

The first 'moment' considered here relates to JW Anderson's antigender fashion that focuses on the construction and re-building of the architecture of menswear and womenswear. Concentrating on the Spring/Summer 2013 collection called 'Age of Consent' and the Autumn/Winter 2013 collection titled 'Mathematics of Love', I critically analyse JW Anderson's antigender fashion in regard to its potential to trouble and proliferate gender and its fashion-able visualisation. The second 'moment' focuses on the brand's design approach towards the body and proportion. Looking at the menswear collections from Spring/Summer and Autumn/Winter 2017, and Autumn/Winter 2019 and 2020, Anderson's antigender fashion will be analysed in terms of its envisioned and fashioned body, supported by a reading of the 'grotesque body' following Mikhail Bakhtin's theorisation. The testing of bodily borders, protrusions, and exaggerations will be considered for its potential to trouble and challenge the divide of womenswear and menswear as well as the binary of gender and gendered bodies. The third and last moment will consider JW Anderson's more recent collections, including Spring/Summer and Autumn/Winter 2021. Therein, Susan Sontag's notion of 'camp' and Bakhtin's theorisations of the carnivalesque play an important role and will be employed in my analysis. Playfulness, exaggeration, and irony in the design approach will be examined in terms of their gender-bending signs and signifiers.

MILLENNIAL MASCULINITY AND JW ANDERSON'S BEGINNINGS

When JW Anderson took the plunge and showed its first womenswear collection at London Fashion Week in 2010, the fashion crowd seemed to be on the same page, viewing it as a logical and promising step. This was not least because the attention and space menswear received at the time was small in comparison to womenswear, albeit that the first signs of a rethink were tangible. For instance, in 2003, menswear designer Kim Jones was denied a fashion week slot unless he showed womenswear. The implication, as Charlie Porter points out, was that fashion was and should remain the realm of womenswear (Porter 2022, 238). In contrast, in 2005, Fashion East staged its first MAN show at the end of London Fashion Week, with the show soon growing into a platform for new and fresh menswear designers, including JW Anderson.

Menswear in the 2000s was largely influenced and impacted by Simons' slim-lined suits and Slimane's minimalist and rockstar-fuelled masculinity at Dior Homme. By 2005, as fashion critic and journalist Cathy Horyn writes, Simons was 'probably the most influential' menswear designer who had effectively changed the shape of menswear clothing multiple times, from the skinny black suit in the mid-1990s, to the early 2000s layered and oversized 'urban guerrilla' and 'high-waisted trousers with Eisenhower jackets' (Horyn 2005). Slimane's work for Dior has been similarly impactful, with the hallmark slim, structured suit growing into a core piece for several emerging mid-range labels and contemporary menswear alike. As Nick Rees-Roberts argues, 'the Slimane effect has been felt in two ways: in the acceptance of elements of formal attire such as the structured suit jacket into everyday menswear, and in the accentuated "feminization" of men's fashion' (2013, 23). While Slimane's and Simons' design practices carry with them a queer, or rather queering, aspect, similar to that of other menswear designers such as Walter Van Beirendonck or Thom Browne (Brajato 2021; McCauley Bowstead 2018), their 'feminisation' of menswear should also be understood within a broader cultural examination of masculinity – particularly normative, orthodox masculinity.

From early theorisations of the 'New Man' (Mort 1996) or the 'metrosexual' (Simpson 1994) to recent concepts of 'caring masculinities' (Elliott 2016), men and masculinities have increasingly become a site of research and cultural consideration. A body of scholarly research published in the first two decades of the twentieth century suggests a shift in the concept and real-life practices of masculinity. For instance, Eric Anderson (2009), Christensen and Jensen (2014), and Richard O. de Visser (2009) offer insights into the subjective experiences and the changing discourse of masculinity (primarily in contemporary European and American contexts). Their work highlights the ever-growing acknowledgement and societal acceptance

of more inclusive masculinities that challenge the hegemonic position of orthodox, evolved industrial masculinities.

Industrial masculinity dominated the twentieth century, or 'male sex role' as theorised by Deborah S. David and Robert Brannon, and entails four key components: No 'Sissy Stuff', Big Wheel, Sturdy Oak, and Give 'Em Hell (David and Brannon 1976, 12). Accordingly, this masculinity directs men to avoid any and all behaviours and traits associated with women and femininity, to strive for success and status while expressing competitiveness and ambition, to be independent and inexpressive (e.g., refrain from the expression of emotions, neither happiness nor pain), and to be aggressive, determined, and daring. In Raewyn Connell's influential theory on *hegemonic masculinity* (2005), this stoic, aggressive masculinity is situated within a hierarchical structure of gender relations; that is, relations between different types of masculinity, between masculinity and femininity, and in relation to other social markers such as class and race. Occupying the hegemonic position within that structure, orthodox masculinity (with its renunciation of the feminine) subordinates other marginalised masculinities that fail to meet the hegemonic ideal, subordinates and oppresses women and femininity, and ultimately serves to uphold the patriarchy.

However, the new millennium saw a re-evaluation and offered alternative and challenging forms of masculinity. A growing scholarship also highlighted the relationship between the adherence and adoption of orthodox hyper-masculinity and negative or even dangerous consequences on men's mental and physical health (Courtenay 2000; Addis and Mahalik 2003). Furthermore, Eric Anderson's, Christensen and Jensen's, and de Visser's research suggests that the 'desirability' and supremacy of normative, hegemonic masculinity is crumbling and is increasingly being replaced by more inclusive versions. Despite the back and forth of reactionary backlash and progressive efforts, Eric Anderson argues that 'inclusive masculinities are increasingly dominating' and 'homophobia, misogyny, violence and homosocial separation associated with orthodox masculinity is increasingly unfashionable' (2009, 153). His ethnographic fieldwork amongst young men in universities and sport teams suggests sites of resistance towards hegemonic orthodox masculinity where the association with and 'expression of femininity among other men' was less concerning and the 'usefulness of categorising things as gendered' questioned (E. Anderson 2009, 128).

However, arguing for an intersectional approach and theory of hegemonic masculinity, Christensen and Jensen caution against simplifying gendered power relations and emphasise that 'contemporary masculinity positions are seldom either unambiguously equality orientated or oppressive towards women' (2014, 71). Nevertheless, this recent research indicates a

discernible shift and scrutiny of orthodox masculinity, facilitating new forms of masculinity and discursive practices of resistance in the new millennium. The scrutiny of 'toxic' traits of masculinity, which seems to have become even more prevalent in recent years amidst a resurgence of conservatism and anti-feminist movements, also rests upon the socio-cultural advancements of the 1990s. The rise and mainstreaming of identity politics and third-wave feminism that focused on intersectionality and the freedom of choice, and the increased visibility and political consideration of gay rights, marked by the world's first same-sex marriage in 2001, contributed to an examination of masculinity's status quo.

This re-examination also found expression in a new and marketable consumer identity: the 'metrosexual'. Coined by journalist Mark Simpson in his 1994 article 'Here Come the Mirror Men', Simpson used the term to describe a demographic of (heterosexual) male consumers who find pride and joy in vanity, consumerism, and their own mirror image. In other words, the metrosexual is not disinclined towards fashion, nor towards putting effort into one's appearance and embracing more feminine sides (Coad 2008).

The work of menswear designers at the turn of the millennium, including Slimane, Simons, Tom Ford, and Helmut Lang, captured the re-evaluation of masculinity and offered this new masculinity visual currency. As Jay McCauley Bowstead states, 'men's fashion has offered a set of discursive practices – ways of dressing, ways of framing the body and identity – that allow men to express alternative and inclusive masculinities and to resist and reject the narrow confines of orthodox masculinity' (2018, 145). However, just as 'inclusive' masculinities are seldom unambiguous, so is the visualisation of masculinity in culture; rather, it is characterised by ambiguity and ambivalence. As Pamela Church Gibson (2014) argues, rather than conceiving of (high) fashion as a univocal system of style, it comprises distinctly different yet complementary systems of fashion that rely on their own models and modes of discourse and style. The feminisation of masculinity was set against fixed and hyper forms of masculinity discerned in the confluence of 'pornostyle' (Church Gibson 2014), sport and celebrity culture, and the 'spornosexual'. With the term 'spornosexuals', Mark Simpson (2014) aimed to describe a new generation of metrosexuals, of men who not only follow a self-objectifying aesthetic in their clothing, but enhance and sculpt their body in the gym and through tattoos, displaying a body similar to those seen in pornography and sport.

Despite these tendencies just outlined, menswear within the realm of high fashion at the time of JW Anderson's beginnings was to a large extent characterised by a certain kind of androgyny and increasing feminisation, spearheaded by Slimane's and Simons' design work. Anderson acknowledged the influence they had on his early years as a designer, stating in an

interview with *The Business of Fashion* that 'with fashion you have to create a cult in your generational peer group. So, when I was at university Raf was the peer group, or Dior Homme was the peer group' (2014, 6:17). It is scarcely surprising, then, that JW Anderson's early menswear collections use a similar 'transversal approach to gender' (Rees-Roberts 2013, 23).

Debuting his first womenswear collection in 2010, his Spring/Summer 2011 womenswear and menswear collections seemed to borrow equally from each other. Anderson's menswear collection featured a variety of 'feminine' characteristics, such as bleached liberty and flower prints, ornate lace patches, tulle, and crystal fabrics and accents. These elements were quite literally stripped and scrambled and re-assembled in patchworked trousers, sewn-on lace doilies, and bleached-out prints.

Its basis, however, was a myriad of men's and workwear staples: T-shirts, short-sleeved shirts, hoodies and sweatshirts, chinos and cargo pants, and laced boots. The womenswear, while featuring skirts, largely consisted of the same menswear staples. It 'literally was menswear for women', as Anderson declared (The Business of Fashion 2014, 3:20). Lacking the funds to re-pattern, JW Anderson translated its menswear design into womenswear. Though one might argue that it was the external circumstances that caused this literal translation. Anderson later emphasised his approach to a holistic wardrobe regardless of gender, stating in an interview with British *Vogue*: 'I see it as one thing. Yes, there are skirts involved but it's just resizing, about borrowing clothing, cutting things off' (Bumpus 2010).

While this collection may be described as androgynous in the way that it combines signifiers that can be considered masculine and feminine, the designs do seem to challenge the norms of masculinity by expressing a form of male femininity (and to a certain degree a female masculinity) by incorporating feminine signifiers such as tulle, lace, and floral prints. In this way, then, it proliferates or troubles these gender and sartorial expressions. In comparison to previous forms of androgyny – such as the simplistic and paired-back aesthetic of Yves Saint Laurent's *Le Smoking*, or the monochrome and minimalistic Dior Homme androgyny – JW Anderson's womenswear and menswear collection offered a louder and more colourful version, though it certainly does conjure up a more 'masculine' body (e.g., flat chested, broad shouldered, etc.) than a feminine or ambiguous one.

Nevertheless, the Spring/Summer 2011 collection did show the beginnings of JW Anderson's antigender fashion, which would develop further with an increasing avant-gardist design approach. Referencing the anti-fashion of punk style in the form of studded collars, chain necklaces, and bulky laced boots, as well as using 'nonfashion' items such as hoodies, sweat- and T-shirts, and workwear items, the collection carried notions of oppositional or

confrontational anti-styles, while it drew attention to the instability of gender with its expression of male femininity. Perhaps its potential to scramble gender signifiers was most pronounced in the collection video 'The Devoured and I', directed by Sharif Hamza (2010). Collaborating with Swarovski – think glittering fabrics and crystalised toecaps – the video captured light shining and refracting through the famed crystals. Additionally, holographic and kaleidoscopic details in combination with overlapping and merging shots created an overall hallucinogenic and psychedelic effect that paired well with the collection's drug- and subculture-induced aesthetic. Quite literally, then, it blurs its menswear and womenswear and scrambles gender signifiers.

MOMENT I: (RE-)BUILDING THE ARCHITECTURE OF MAN AND WOMAN

While JW Anderson's take on menswear and womenswear and its interrelation had been the focus of multiple reviews and debates, it was the Autumn/Winter 2013 menswear collection that would stir up the fashion industry. Sending his models down the runway in high-waisted frill-hemmed shorts and shoulder-baring tops, sweaters with stapled necklines and tight-fitted knits, and ruffles on top of glossy leather riding boots and gloves, the collection caused bewilderment, shock, and outrage in mainstream media (the *Daily Mail* dubbed it 'crazy' and 'atrocious' design; Kirkova 2013). Titled 'Mathematics of Love', the show notes referred to a kind of 'bourgeois kinkiness and boudoir perversity', and probably contributed – as one might expect – to the general fuss. It was, after all, a partly radical but unapologetic ambush of the state and aesthetic of masculinity and menswear. Nevertheless, although the shock value was surely partly responsible for the wide-ranging publicity of the collection, upon closer examination and in retrospect, the designs for the Autumn/Winter 2013 menswear collection bear many elements and characteristics of antigender fashion that would anticipate various gender-fluid moments.

As mentioned earlier, JW Anderson has had a history of gender-bending fashion design, which by the time of this collection, encompassed both menswear and womenswear. One aspect that takes effect time and again in Anderson's designs is his aim to transfer and transcend masculine and feminine signifiers and sartorial codes. This aspect had appeared clearly for the first time in the Spring/Summer 2012 collections. Seeking 'to build the architecture of women into men and vice versa' (Anderson in Furniss 2011), his menswear and womenswear made use of iconic and classic gender signifiers, broken down and re-built into an architecture of scrambled gender fashion. For the collections titled 'Craft Goes Machine', Anderson cut one

of the most iconic menswear items, the striped cotton shirt, into pieces and reassembled and laced it onto a fitted women's leather jacket and slim pants. Plain shirts worn over hips became men's skirts, cardigans stretched and re-worked turned into dresses with trailing sleeves.

What had hitherto been a subtle shift in connotations and techniques, particularly in terms of garment types and materiality, became more profound in the Spring/Summer 2013 menswear collection 'Age of Consent' – another, potentially foreboding, take on perversity and provocation. The collection 'spawned from the idea of mothers sleeping with their sons', Anderson told *Vogue* (Schneier 2012). One cannot help but think of Sigmund Freud's psychoanalysis and his notion of the 'Oedipal complex'. Referring to Greek mythology and the story of Oedipus who inadvertently kills his father and marries his mother, Freud developed his theory of 'castration anxiety' that stems from young boys' fear of retaliation for jealousy and animosity towards the father and desire for their mothers. Though this perspective has been viewed critically for its emphasis on the male phallus and disregard of feminine subjectivity (Irigaray 1985a, 1985b; Silverman 1988; Braidotti 2011), it developed into Freud's work on fetishism and spawned subsequent considerations of fashion and fetishism (most notably Valerie Steele's 1996 exploration *Fetish: Fashion, Sex and Power*). JW Anderson's collection contains a charge, or fetishisation, of infantile symbolism (teddy bears and bibs) and feminine signifiers (such as lace, transparency, pink). Presumably, it was this twisted fetishism and eroticism that made onlookers and critics uncomfortable, 'with gender and social status, the dialectic of eroticism and modesty in dress strikes many different chords', as Davis (1994, 87) argued.

The collection was also a play on the previously hinted at male femininity: Typical feminine fabrics drawn from the closet of womenswear, such as organza and taffeta, were re-worked into bright T-shirts and tight flared pants, plain and sometimes sleeveless shirts, and waisted one-piece smokings. The combination of a bright colour scheme, including pink, red, lilac, and turquoise, and the muted, classically masculine palette of beige, black, and white, offered a merging and contrast of feminine and masculine signifiers. However, it was the partly suggested, partly explicit sheerness and transparency, expressed through filigree lace suits and bibs or the considered display of flesh and skin with the slanting coat revealing the naked thigh, that turned out to be the most provocative and playful take on antigender fashion (Figures 4.1–4.2). Here, the use of femininely connotated signifiers of lace, transparency, and figure-accentuating fits (as well as the delicate headscarves) culminated in an antigender fashion that at first glance may ridicule or pervert, but ultimately scrambles gender signifiers and questions its stability. It reveals the multiplicity and arbitrariness of gender signifiers by offering an idea

or vision of menswear so clearly rooted in that which is considered feminine. As Anderson told *Vogue* at the time, 'it's not about the boy, but more about the shape of the clothing' (Schneier 2012). Most of all, however, the play on masculine displays of femininity and nakedness, and the deliberate display of thighs, hips, and shoulders, conjures up the homoeroticism and appreciation of the ideal male form in pan-historic Greek sculpture, and scatters it with a coded femininity reminiscent of Laura Mulvey's 'to-be-looked-at-ness' and its centrality within the male gaze. The use of transparent fabrics only adds to that ambiguity, exaggerating the 'play of transparencies and prohibited gazing' (Calefato 2004, 63).

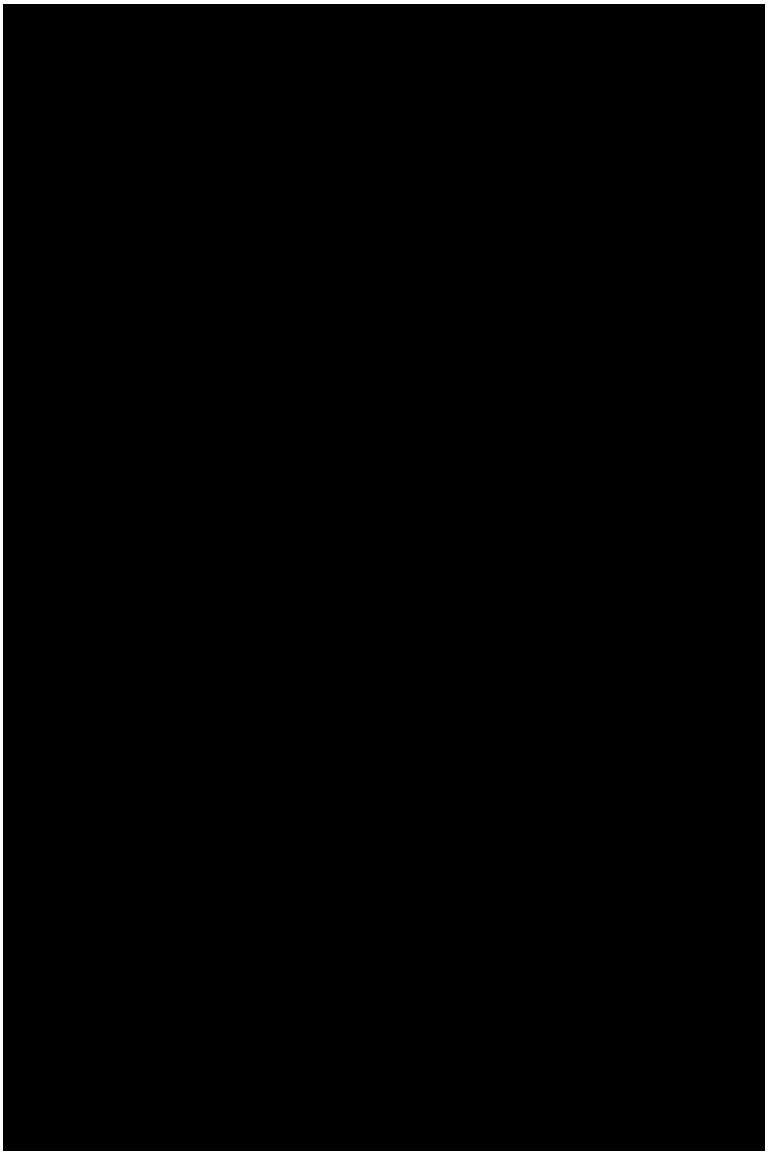

Figure 4.1 Runway look from the JW Anderson Spring/ Summer 2013 menswear show. (Photo: Giovanni Giannoni / WWD / Penske Media via Getty Images)

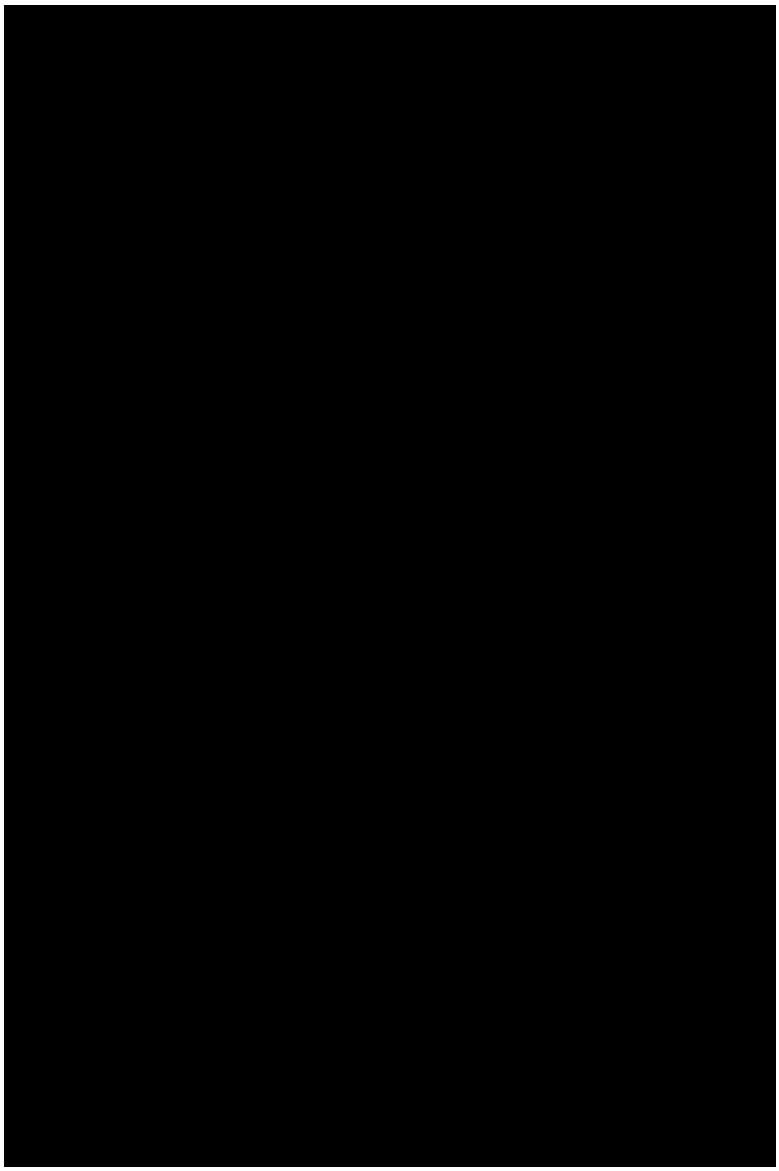

Figure 4.2 Runway look from the JW Anderson Spring/ Summer 2013 menswear show. (Photo: Giovanni Giannoni / WWD / Penske Media via Getty Images)

The aspect of flaunting flesh and the male form, particularly thighs and shoulders, and its merging with femininity loomed large over the subsequent collection. As one critic wrote, 'right from the first exit, traditional codes of gender were upturned and the body became a blank canvas on which to project desires and perversions' (Stoppard 2013). For the Autumn/Winter 2013 menswear collection, JW Anderson took up many elements of its previous Spring/Summer and Pre-Fall 2013 womenswear: the frilled hem shorts, elongated and asymmetric lapels over pants, leather shift dresses, and bustier-like tops. While the previous menswear collection (Spring/Summer 2013) used apparently 'feminine' materials and fabrics, the Autumn/Winter materials were situated within classic menswear: duffel fabric, rubberised cotton, leather, and wool dominated the collection alongside classically masculine muted

colours. The focus here was clearly on the construction and cut of the pieces rather than their ostensibly feminine appearance. Jackets were cut backwards and reversed so that the shoulders sat forward, necklines were stapled together, and knitwear was boiled in a way that it cinched at the waist.

Most remarkable, however, was Anderson's use of womenswear patterns: The shorts were made using a pattern drafted for women, resulting in the groinless fit the designer desired (Figure 4.3). Loving 'how groinless and flat-fitting it was' (Healy 2013), Anderson certainly toyed with the idea of emasculation, or castration. However, the femininity of 'castration' – which represents a key element of femininity according to Freud's anxiety and penis envy theory – and the use of womenswear patterns is here juxtaposed and proliferated with a certain fetishisation of riding boots and gloves, and the snippet-like display of (masculine) flesh. Accordingly, the fetish object is 'a way to attempt to represent or make material the lost or fantasy penis of the mother' (Miller 2016, 52). It becomes 'a token of triumph … and a protection against' the fear of castration (Freud 1961, 154). The 'bourgeois kinkiness and boudoir perversity', however, comes into effect most prominently through the black riding boots and white gloves – both items of rather traditional masculine attire. The ruffles at the top add a somewhat latex-like appearance that suggests kinky or perverse sexuality.

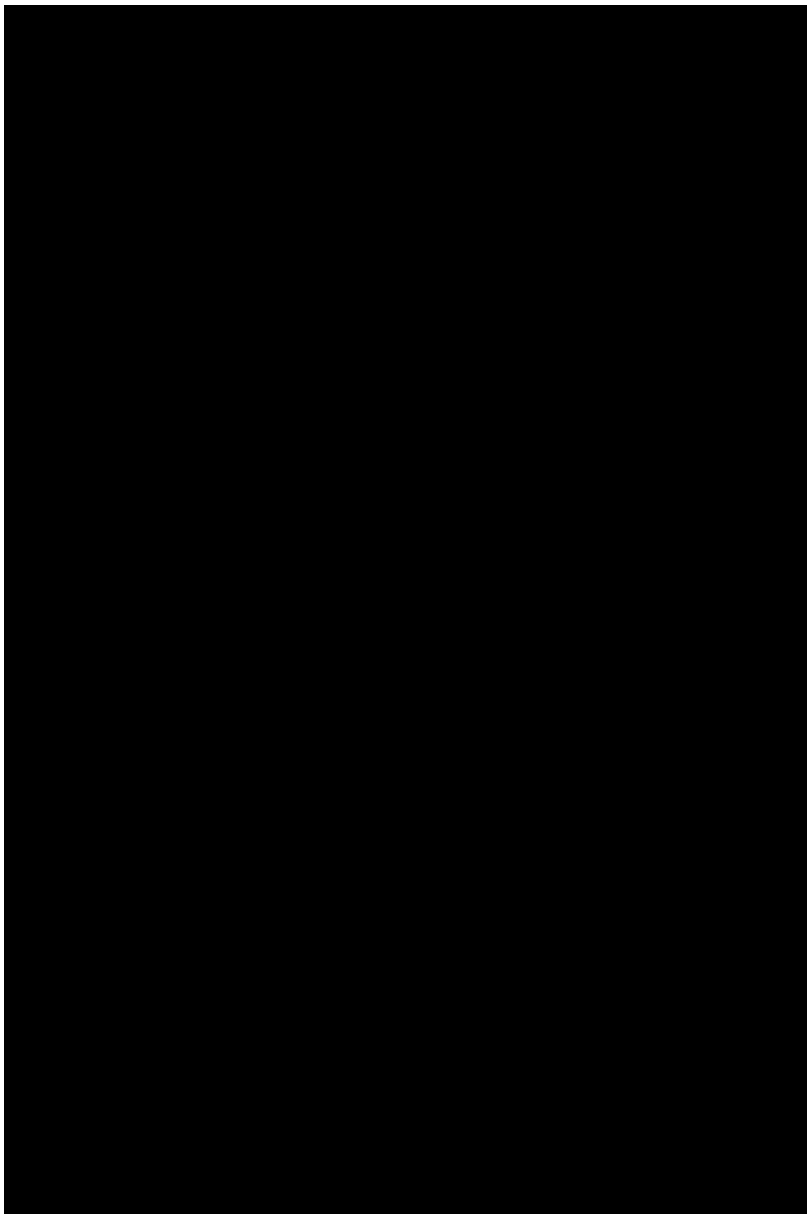

Figure 4.3 Runway look from the JW Anderson Autumn/ Winter 2013 show. (Photo: Mike Marsland / WireImage)

The combination of signifiers of chaste femininity (ruffles and 'groinlessness') and the sexual code led to some controversy. As McCauley Bowstead argued, 'there was something unnerving about an aesthetic that combined exaggerated feminine detailing with latex accessories, suggesting both domesticity and fetishism', so that his designs, 'particularly for his own label, can seem humiliating, a joke at the expense of his models, an expression of power and control' (2018, 153). While the aesthetic of fetishism and chastity (inter alia represented in the high-closing collars of the knitwear and jackets) may be unnerving, I argue that the unsettling character stems from Anderson's antigender fashion that radically scrambles and re-works connotations of the feminine and the masculine.

In this regard, it is also about revealing construction, and the question of its imperturbability. Anderson later emphasised the intention of recalibrating meanings and signifiers of clothing:

> We were looking at taking garments apart, reconstructing them. Taking things that were classic, representing them in a different way. Cutting garments in ways that they became more naïve, they became a controlled naivety that you could look at something and you could see one thing and you could see another. (SHOWstudio 2013, 14:33)

Anderson's remarks on taking garments apart and reconstructing them certainly alludes to the idea of antigender fashion based on anti-fashion's oppositional and subverting characteristics. In other words, the juxtaposition and combination of different signifiers of gender and sexuality can be interpreted as in-opposition and as critique of gendered fashion. By visualising a kind of 'naivety' in its reversal and re-construction of signs, JW Anderson's design reveals the arbitrariness and construction of gendered signifiers and simultaneously subverts and proliferates their meanings in its *Zurschaustellung* (display). It suggests that these garments, their cut and design, can also be a form of masculinity, one that is many things at once: feminine (also in its hourglass silhouette of boiled knits, cinched and high-waisted pants), broad-shouldered, fetishised, and groinless. JW Anderson offers a vision of masculinity that is free of the determination of gender based on sex signifiers and the presence or absence of a penis, a body beyond the binary.

The aspect of the body and its connection to gender also played a vital role in the antigender fashion in JW Anderson's Autumn/Winter 2013 collection 'Mathematics of Love' in the instances of naked and muscular flesh. As the designer elucidates in an interview with *SHOWstudio*, 'it's a twisted kind of humour. … The kink aspect of it is the idea of flesh. Flesh is a graphic line' (2013, 6:26). The historical connotations of the body, particularly the nude body, and the history and conception of gender are intertwined with understandings of sexuality, (homo)eroticism, and the gaze. Writing extensively on the constituents of ideal beauty, Johann Winckelmann (1717–68), a key figure for the discipline of art history, developed a notion of beauty that, based on Greek art, heralded the Greek (male) ideal as the epitome of bodily form and beauty. As Geczy and Karaminas illustrate, his version of beauty is not just 'focused on the male form' but was 'unmistakably homoerotic' (2013, 15). While rejecting any 'thought of violence or licentious love', his writing on the fragmented torso of Hercules of Belvedere seems pervaded by a homoerotic gaze:

> What a conception we gather from those thighs, whose solidity clearly shows that the hero has never flinched, and never been forced to bend! … The might of the shoulder indicates to me how strong the arms must have been that strangled the lion upon Mount Cithæron which bound and carried off Cerebrus. His thighs and the remaining knee give me an idea of the legs, which were never weary, and which pursued and caught the brazen-footed stag. (Davidson 1868, 188)

However, while Winckelmann lived at a time when homosexuality was yet to be established as a 'species', to use Michel Foucault's words here, the eroticism of the ideal muscular male form was repressed in modernist style and transformed as the ideal of 'true' heterosexual masculinity to avoid associations with homosexuality (Geczy and Karaminas 2013, 14). Although, as Nicola Brajato and Alexander Dhoerst claim, the late twentieth and early twenty-first century saw the male body become the object of the male gaze, it was an increasingly 'ambiguous gaze' that 'creates a remarkable tension between the heteronormative understanding of masculinity and the passive eroticization of the male body' (2022, 23).

In JW Anderson's Autumn/Winter 2013 collection, the graphic lines of flesh are, in a sense, subjected to an ambiguous gaze. The parts of the body left free and nude by Anderson's designs – the shoulders, knees, and thighs; all body parts that are usually not exposed by traditional suits – seem to inevitably suggest readings of homoeroticism as well as a display of normative and 'ideal' masculinity. These signs find themselves amongst a myriad of ambiguous and supposedly contradictory sartorial signifiers expressed in the groinless cut, 'feminine' ruffles, and 'masculine' materials. In other words, JW Anderson carves up and expands the male body into single pieces; he discards the groin but highlights the naked thighs, bares the shoulders and collarbones but hides the breast and torso, separates the knees and softens and hides the lower leg with ruffled boots. Gendered signifiers are broken down, scrambled, and reconfigured into an antigender fashion that evades a solely gendered, heteronormative, as well as homoerotic reading. As Anderson himself stated in *The Guardian*, 'that's what unnerved people: there was no gay fantasy there' (Healy 2013).

MOMENT II: OUT OF PROPORTION OR FASHIONING THE GROTESQUE ANTIGENDERED BODY

Abandoning an overtly transversal approach of womenswear signifiers to menswear and vice versa, JW Anderson moved on to a greater focus on transcending silhouettes and shapes in its subsequent collections. The Spring/Summer 2014 menswear collection presents arguably the most explicit transition from and combination of delicate feminine fabrics such as silk and

organza, and the testing of bodily borders and silhouettes, such as the seemingly random-cut sleeves and protrusions. These protrusions would find, however, a more unequivocal language in the (menswear) Spring/Summer and Autumn/Winter 2017 collections, and the Autumn/Winter 2019 and 2020 collections. This change in design language coincided with the decision to ignore the industry's divide between womenswear and menswear shows and instead to combine them, following in the steps of other fashion brands. While the decision was officially declared to be a strategic alignment with the retailing schedule, Anderson believes 'that garments are for garments sake. Anyone can wear them', and further, he 'never believed that there was a binary … it was just about proportion' (Anderson in O. Singer 2017). Though his obsession with proportion seemed rather quiet amidst the loud and ostentatious mix of gender signifiers in his earlier collections, it would play a more central role henceforth.

Formulations of a silhouette and shape that resists and defies the rules of traditional feminine or masculine form can be seen in the Autumn/Winter 2014 womenswear collection. Its elongated and swallowing skirts, oversized tops with curved shoulders and sleeves, diagonal crinkles over the torso, funnel necks and downward shifted corsets had the effect of distorting the traditional female form by shifting, crossing out, or sizing up its signifiers. Though this corrupted vision of the feminine did sit uneasily with some fashion critics who wished for Anderson to work '*with* the female form … rather than resisting it so much' (M. Singer 2014), Anderson clarified elsewhere that he 'wanted to explore the idea of contortion and to make the arms look withered and hunched' (Armstrong 2014).

At this point then, one has to think of Bakhtin and the grotesque body. Bakhtin's theorisation of the grotesque centres on the ideas of reversal, unsettling ruptures of (bodily) borders, and constant transgressions and offers the study of fashion an 'important tool for negotiating ideas of norms and deviations' (Granata 2016, 102). It is the interest in shapes, borders, and in-betweenness that seems most helpful in understanding JW Anderson's antigender fashion. The grotesque body, as Bakhtin writes,

> is a body in the act of becoming. It is never finished, never completed; it is continually built, created, and builds and creates another body. … This the artistic logic of the grotesque image ignores the closed, smooth, and impenetrable surface of the body and retains only its excrescences (sprouts, buds) and orifices, only, that which leads beyond the body's limited space or into the body's depths. Mountains and abysses, such is the relief of the grotesque body; or speaking in architectural terms, towers and subterranean passages. (1984, 317–18)

The body, that is, as Calefato writes, 'in the grotesque sense of "clothed body", where covering is carnivalesque protuberance, parodic second skin, openness and not delimitation or boundary' is one of the main settings for stylistic transformations (2004, 30).

These stylistic transformations on the basis of gender take place in JW Anderson's 'grotesque' fashion design, for instance in his Spring/Summer 2017 menswear collection. Here, excessively long sleeves and trouser legs trailed the floor, while dresses were stretched and the waist dropped and tied with loose sleeves (Figure 4.4). Zippers stretched along the length of trousers, around shoulders and arms and seem to just contain the fabric and body inside. Here again, Anderson played and broke with expectations of gendered fashion, mixing 'masculine' coded signifiers such as military bomber jackets with dropped shoulders and puffy sleeves, as well as lumberjack plaids covering big shirts or slim tunics with 'feminine' shrunken trench coats and glossy shoulder bags and infantilised padded bibs; a polyphony of scrambled signifiers that was only exaggerated by the grotesquely stretched and elongated shapes.

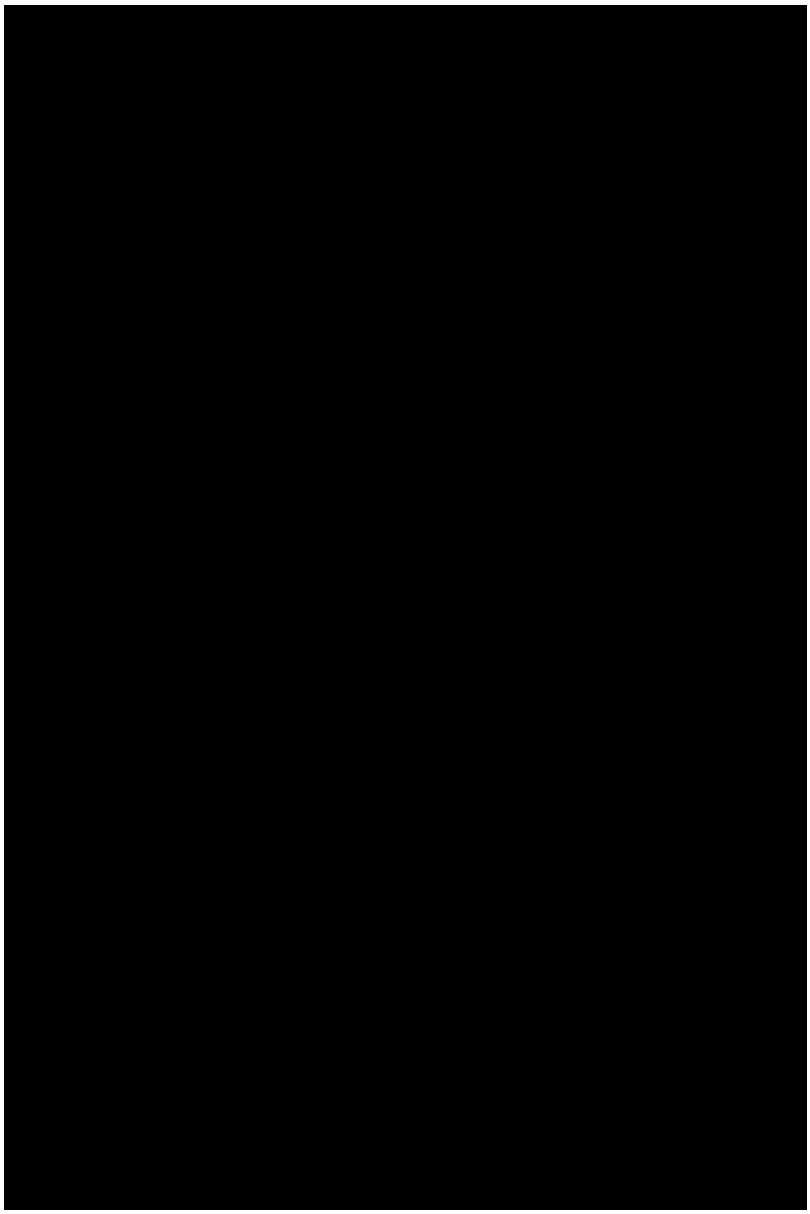

Figure 4.4 Runway look from the JW Anderson Spring/ Summer 2017 fashion show. (Photo: Catwalking / Getty Images)

This theme can also be found in JW Anderson's Autumn/Winter 2017 menswear collection with its surplus and exuberant knitwear slouching over arms, wrists, and shoulders and trailing-the-floor, wide-leg, and flared pants, crochet patches 'bleeding' over shoes and floors, and layers upon layers that hide or rather neglect the idea of a classical body beneath. The mix of scrambled gender signifiers and slouching knitwear is also entailed in the Spring/Summer 2020 menswear collection whose show featured the womenswear Resort line. The 'shape-shifting' from previous womenswear and menswear collections can be found here in the silhouettes and construction of its design. Cutting away the sleeves of trench coats and tailored jackets created geometric wings protruding from the shoulders, leaving a drape in the back. Deconstructing the concept of the tuxedo, a historically masculine but long-term partner of womenswear, further developed into lapel scarves and dress shirts with bibs. As one onlooker described it, the tuxedo was

> ripped apart and magnified. He turned the stripe at the side of trousers into a fat, drooping ribbon that looked as if it were melting off the side of the leg, and stretched the jacket lapel into a long, fringed, flesh-flashing scarf that won't be keeping any drafts at bay. (Conti 2019)

The slicing and reconfiguring of garments (and signs) also pervaded the knitwear, creating billowing patchwork trousers and shorts as well as slashed up pullovers and cardigans that hung loose and exposed the skin or layers underneath (Figure 4.5). Dresses on men and women were composed diagonally in two-tone skinny knits with tassels along the front and back. 'There's no gendered distinction here. "All sizes can wear that"' Anderson said to *Vogue* (Mower 2019c).

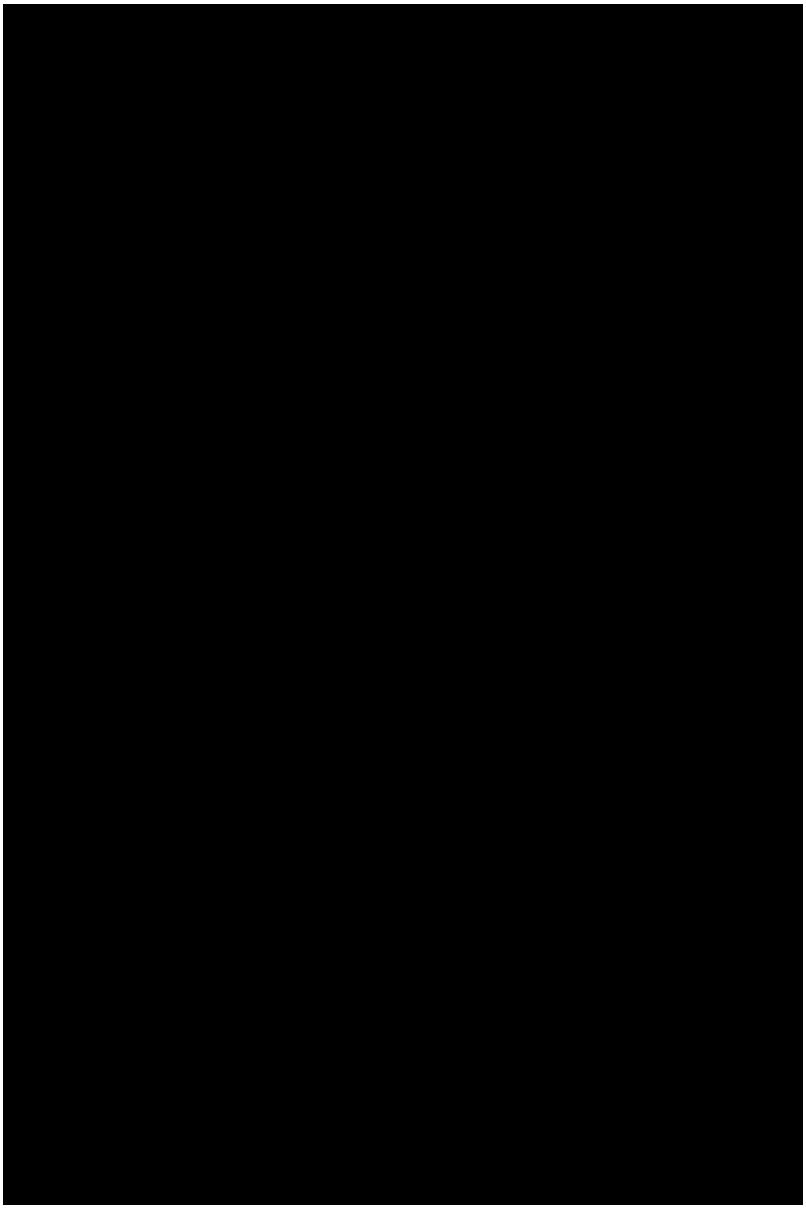

Figure 4.5 Runway look from the JW Anderson Spring/ Summer 2020 menswear show as part of Paris Fashion Week. (Photo: Peter White / Getty Images)

The antigender fashion design shown in these collections, which use gendered fashion language and scramble and reconfigure it, creates garments that resist and challenge the gender binary through the use of grotesque and exaggerated forms and shapes. Or, as Calefato states, the grotesque creates and transforms its pluri-stylistic meaning, while 'its characteristics of exaggeration, hyperbole, boundlessness, superabundance, semantic inversion, glorification of baseness, bodily openings and protuberances allow an exemplary analysis of the body's pluri-stylistic transformations, the perceptual decentering of objects and exacerbation of received meaning' (2004, 29).

While JW Anderson has often been more explorative and daring with his menswear collections, particularly in his transferal of womenswear silhouettes and shapes into menswear, the 2019 and 2020 Autumn/Winter womenswear designs are not far behind in their creation of a boundless and exaggerated grotesque 'clothed' body and of troubling the gendered fashion divide. For Autumn/Winter 2019, JW Anderson offered classically tailored silhouettes of suit pants and jackets in exaggerated width and volume, creating the impression of a body almost swallowed by these components (Figure 4.6). The only support was given by large waist belts that seem to hold the folds and layers of oversized coats and knitwear in place and on the body. The menswear staple of the blue shirt was here re-worked into a silky flowing dress, and the tailored jacket became a patchwork of check and wool fringes.

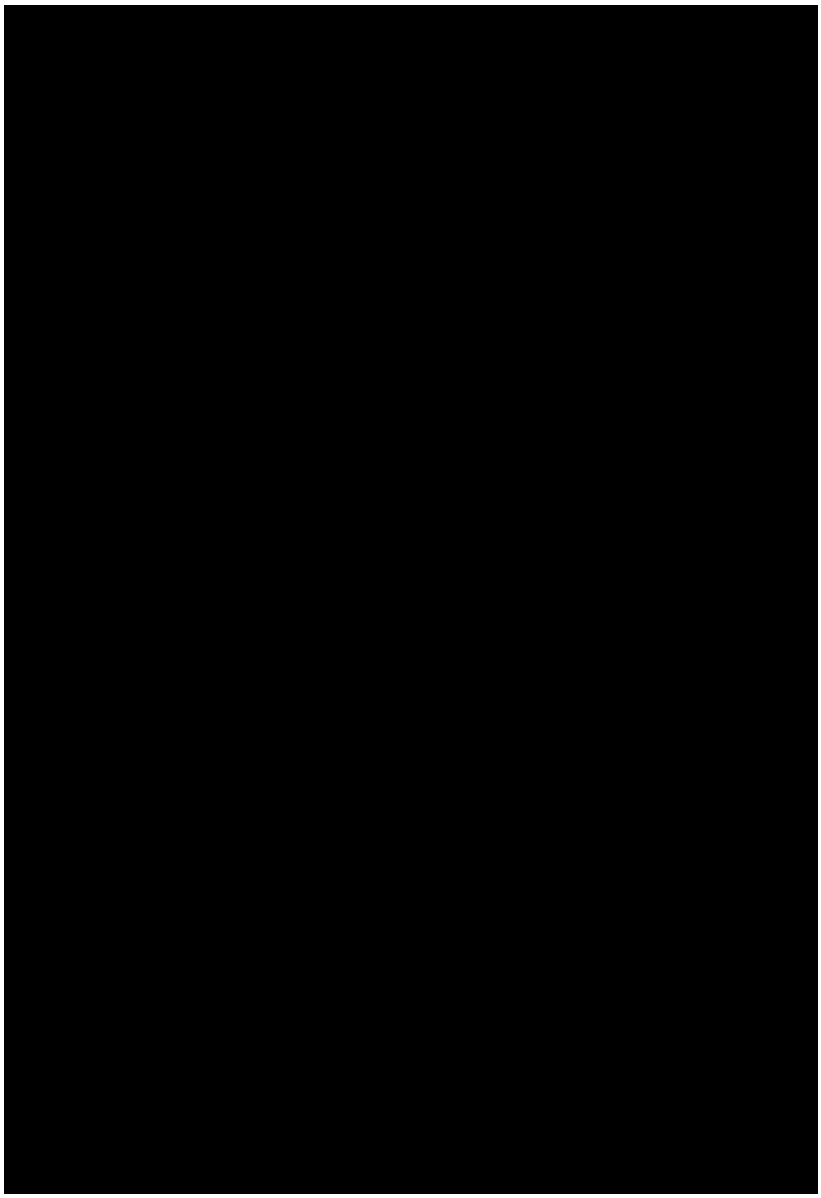

Figure 4.6 Runway look from the JW Anderson Autumn/ Winter 2019 fashion show. (Photo: Victor VIRGILE / Gamma-Rapho via Getty Images)

Similarly, albeit more drastically voluminous, was the Autumn/Winter 2020 collection, featuring an array of geometric and angular coats and ballooning dresses. Thinking about 'volume and movement' as the show notes claimed, and what it takes to compete with 'a space of strangers' (Moss 2020b), the collection certainly toyed with the idea of taking up space. Three iterations of trapeze-shaped coats in tweed, camel hair, and black wool with wide leather shawl collars filled the room, as did bulbous and layered gowns in a fuzzy knit, sometimes engulfing the arms at the wrist, sometimes leaving them free (or lost in its vastness of folds). As Caroline Evans concludes in her seminal work *Fashion at the Edge* (2003, 297), 'all fashion … turns out to be shot through with alienation and melancholy, which are always threatening to erupt and disturb the smoothness of its surface'. These pieces, then, with all the space they filled up, also disrupted and alienated fashion's smooth surface, envisioning bodies beyond a binary, grotesquely protruding out in angular or ballooning shapes.

MOMENT III: THE CAMP, THE CARNIVAL, THE SURREAL OF ANTIGENDER FASHION

There is a lot to say about the Covid-19 pandemic and its impact and influence on the fashion industry. For one, it disrupted the regular scheduling of fashion shows and collections that has been under scrutiny for its immense acceleration for a long time. It changed the ways fashion is and was communicated and presented, and it certainly broadened fashion's preoccupation with the hand-made and craft, a theme that has been part of Anderson's designs for both Loewe and his eponymous label. However, I would argue that the pandemic has also been a catalyst for Anderson's more surreal, carnivalesque, and camp design approach. The Spring/Summer 2021 menswear and resort collection, for instance, which had been launched during the height of national lockdowns, was delivered in a box. Besides images of the garments and swatches of fabric, the box contained additional elements that spoke to the need to slow down raised by the pandemic, such as pressed flowers and small cards with different messages. Furthermore, some elements were outright theatrical and ironic; for instance, the design of the collection itself with its discharge printed knits, patchworked lace and denim coats, and the hypnotising circles, or the presentation with the enclosed paper masks designed by artist Pol Anglada. These flat paper masks could be crafted into facemasks and decorated the mannequins presenting the garments (Figure 4.7). The irony of a global shortage of masks and politicisation of the dispute over their effectiveness seems rather prevalent.

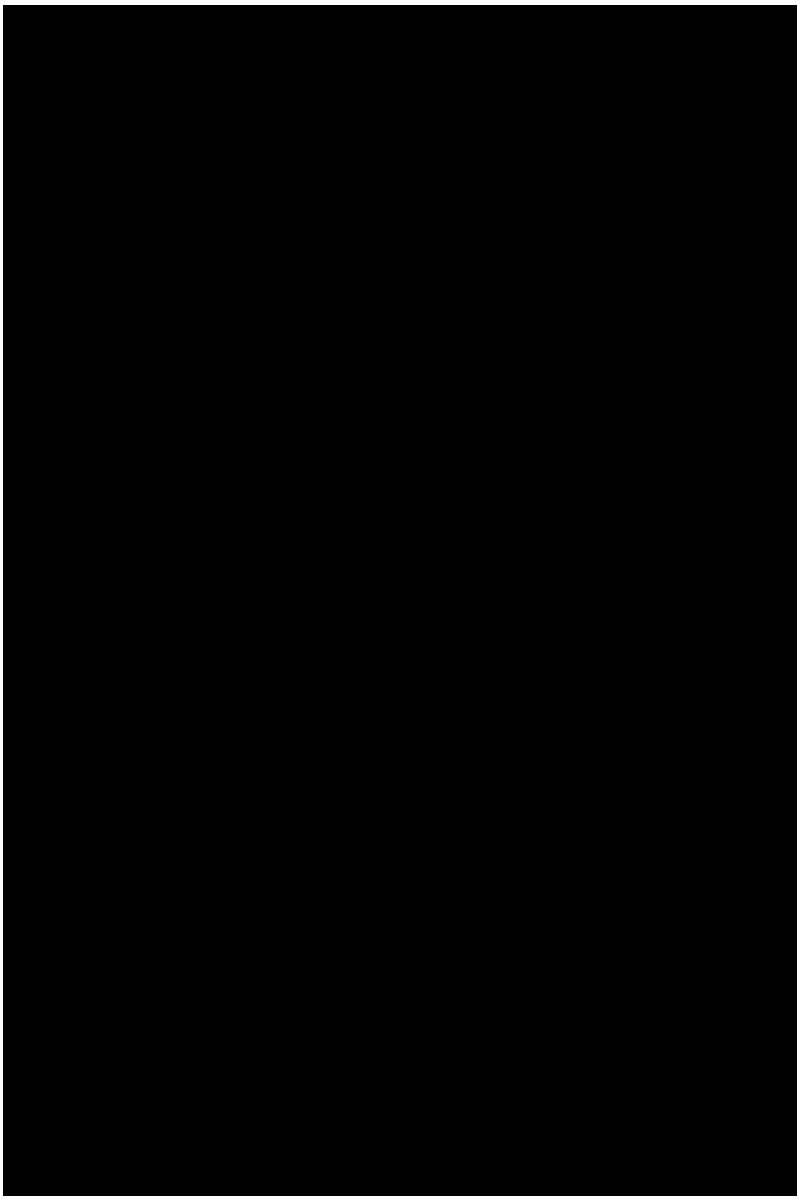

Figure 4.7 JW Anderson Spring/Summer 2021 menswear.
(Photo: Courtesy of JW Anderson)

Nevertheless, it does also lend the presentation of the collection a certain theatricality, an aspect that could be considered camp under Sontag's definition of a sensibility that loves the unnatural and revels in artifice, stylisation, theatricalisation, irony, naivety, playfulness, exaggeration, and extravagance (2018, 1–33). Playfulness also assumed a role in this JW Anderson collection and its realisation; as he states, 'The portable format [of the collection] makes it playful, engaging and, well, connective' (JW Anderson 2020). On the level of design, then, playfulness was expressed in the joyful and mischievous way signs and signifiers were rendered: the hypnotising circles on masks and pullovers whose sleeves stretched to and over the floor, the cheerful pompoms around the hems of T-shirts, or the colourful mix of textures, fabrics, and cuts. Here, again, it is JW Anderson's subtle shift of shapes and cuts that transcends

classical menswear or womenswear: the exaggerated curvy line reminiscent of Dior's New Look or the babydoll shape in the menswear collection, and the de- and re-constructed forms of classic tailored suits in the womenswear. Oversized knitwear and cuts that deflect from gendered signifiers of the body further contributed to this antigender fashion approach. As Anderson explained, it was 'going back to the idea of the shared wardrobe where pieces are not really tied to any gender. It's whatever you want it to be' (in JW Anderson 2020, 5:35).

In the Autumn/Winter 2021 menswear and Pre-Fall 2021 womenswear collection, it was the idea of the carnivalesque and humorous that took centre stage. A series of posters photographed by Juergen Teller featured actress Sophie Okonedo and played on the absurd, the real, and the surreal. As critic Sarah Mower (2021) argued, 'now that reality's gone mad, the hilarious antics going on in Anderson's new set of posters are a reasonable enough response to the zeitgeist'. The response involved a collection of humorous and silly proportions, iconography, graphics, and accessories that took on the 'carnivalesque techniques of inversion, travesty and upset proportions which were central to carnival humour' (Granata 2016, 107). The collection was much like Bakhtin's discussion on the carnivalesque celebration of 'the new world – the new year, the new spring, the new kingdom' which 'is why in carnivalesque imagery there is so much turnabout, so many opposite faces and intentionally upset proportions' (Bakhtin 1984, 410). Simply put, Anderson wanted to create a collection 'that really reflects the kind of beginnings of the new year' (JW Anderson 2021, 0:45). The result was a series of images that played with oddly placed fruits and vegetables, such as still life peaches or hand-crocheted radishes on sweaters, pumpkins and cabbages as hand-held accessories, or flowers as antenna. There is also the element of inversion in the handwritten captions that seem to be mixed up or made nonsensical. Additionally, the garments explored clownish proportions and antigender signs and aesthetics that went against Western ideals of beauty and gender: long shapeless mohair sweaters with nylon belts at the waist, jersey and poplin dresses with exaggerated and gathered sleeves, fussy sleeveless tops or deconstructed and 'chopped up' tailoring (Figure 4.8).

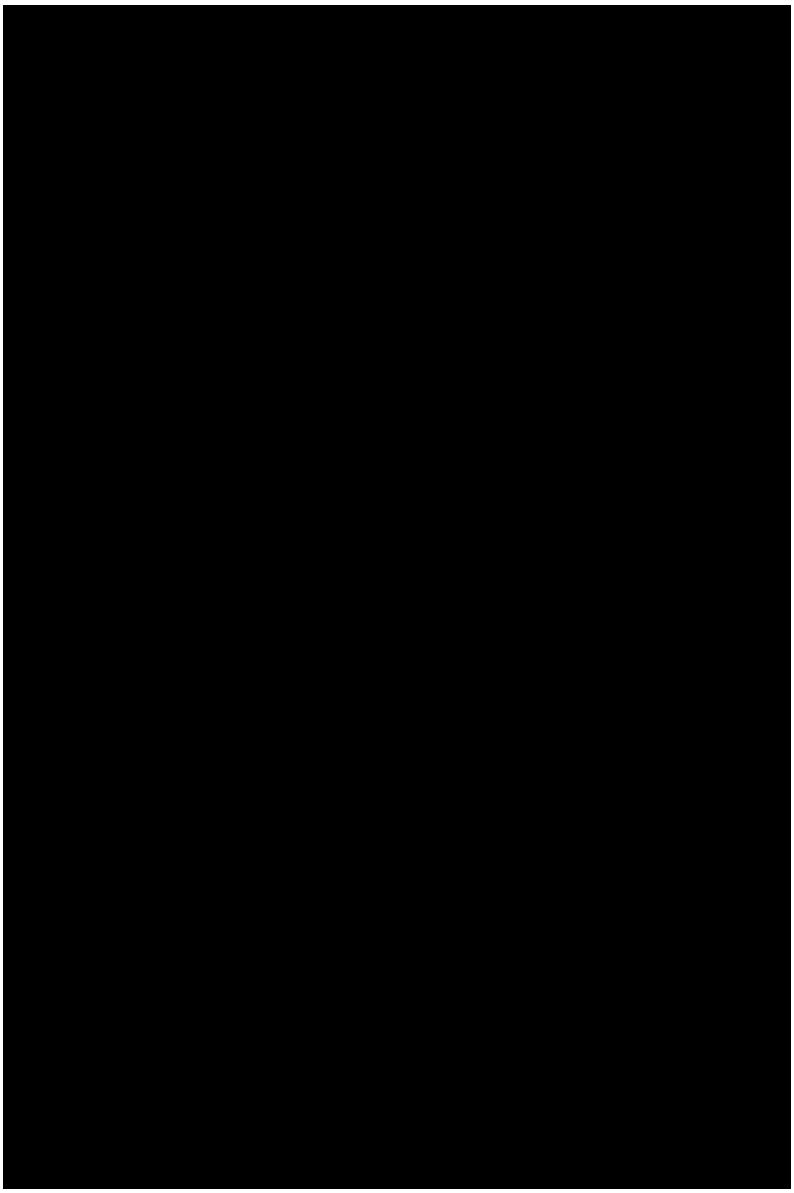

Figure 4.8 JW Anderson Autumn/Winter 2021 menswear.
(Photo: Courtesy of JW Anderson)

Standing out – quite literally – were trousers and their upended isosceles triangular shape in checkerboard print that evoke the photographs of gender non-conforming Surrealist artist Claude Cahun. Anderson's long-standing occupation with shapes and silhouettes finds another realisation in these clownish, or in the designer's words 'jester' pants (Anderson in Mower 2021). These inverted, upended, and exaggerated designs, which are so central to the expression of the comic, 'could be understood as practices of cultural negation. In their denial of systems and orders and their play with and disruption of category and classificatory systems, they can be read as a critique of closed symbolic systems and fixed categories' (Granata 2016, 108). This disruption of classificatory systems, in this case that of gender, can be seen in JW

Anderson's naïve and silly take on gender signifiers made clownish and absurd. As Anderson said in the accompanying video to the collection:

> The collection … is really going back to what JW Anderson was at the very beginning. This idea of primitive play with materials, looking at trying to scope out new ideas within gender …. Looking at different ways to let go of conceived ideas of how fashion should be constructed, how gender should be. (JW Anderson 2021, 0:15)

A similar carnivalesque logic could be found in the Autumn/Winter 2022 menswear collection, particularly in its use of 'carnival objects' that are 'turned inside out, utilized in the wrong way, contrary to their common use' (Bakhtin 1984, 411). Here the models held pigeons and stuffed elephants while wearing cropped tops peppered with rubber bands and sweaters with tubular protrusions, some of which ran through the wearer's legs creating sound through movement. Most significant in terms of antigender fashion was, however, the re-examination of the polo shirt and Anderson's engagement with 'the limits of hyper-masculinity' (Leitch 2022). This entailed disrupting the 'quintessential' masculine sign of the polo shirt through stretching and lengthening it into dresses with tube-hems, reimagining it in 'feminine' micro-sequins or as a short playsuit. It is here that JW Anderson gets to the heart of antigender fashion: taking gendered signifiers and reconfiguring them in a way that reveals its (gender) construction: it is partly playful, partly surreal, partly radical.

* * *

JW Anderson has a long history and preoccupation with the constraints and limitations of masculinity and femininity, as we have seen with the collections discussed above that challenge and subvert the norms of menswear and womenswear. However, the designer himself has been reluctant to name his gender-blurring fashion anything in particular, clarifying that 'when it comes to [his] relationship with gender and fashion, as much as it keeps coming up as a bloody trend, it's really not a trend' (Anderson in O. Singer 2017), further stressing that 'it's about wearing clothes that tell a story and an emotion, it's not so much about gender' (Anderson in Woo 2010). Indeed, Anderson's fashion practice gives the impression that his fashion design does not show any consideration of gender and particularly its prim and neatly defined boundaries. Rather, it takes gendered signifiers as a suggestion, a starting point for subversion and proliferation towards an antigender fashion that opposes and critiques the gendered binary

of fashion. His at times deliberate use of the provocative, the fetishised, and the perverse, and his at times naïve and playful approach towards garments and bodies creates an antigender fashion that speaks to the fluidity of gender and the innumerable possibilities of its fashioned embodiment.

5

ALESSANDRO MICHELE AND GUCCI: THE BRICOLAGE OF ANTIGENDER FASHION

They call me the ruler of gender fluidity, but to me, I was just pulling out beauty.
Alessandro Michele (in Hirschberg 2020)

Any discussion on the concept of gender in contemporary fashion seems inevitably incomplete without discussing Gucci, particularly Gucci under the creative direction of Alessandro Michele. Ever since his appointment in 2015 till his resignation in 2022, the house has been heralded as 'a lynchpin brand in the gender-free movement' (Maoui 2018) and as a brand that 'jump-started a revolution' and 'helped usher gender fluidity into fashion' (Hirschberg 2020). Michele's design work broke with the jet set aesthetic associated with the Italian luxury brand and its 1990s Tom Ford era of sex-induced hedonism (Karaminas and Taylor 2022), leaving that style of sleek sophistication behind. Instead, the designer introduced an eccentric, romantic, and maximalist approach that plays with the boundaries of gender, time, and bodies.

Before taking the helm at Gucci, Michele had worked at the fashion house for twelve years as the label's accessories and jewellery designer. After the joint exit of executive Patrizio Di Marco and creative director Frida Giannini, the new chief executive officer and president Marco Bizzarri, named Michele, who hitherto had been relatively unknown in the fashion world, as the new creative lead to reinvent the brand. This reinvention, as it turns out, paid off: Kering, the luxury company that has owned the Gucci Group since 1999, recorded rising sales. Part of its commercial success was due to the adaption of a fluid and antigender fashion aesthetic that resonated with millennials and broader social shifts at the time (Mau 2019; Henig 2017, 59).

This chapter will discuss Michele's design approach amidst the context of an arising transgender movement and visibility in mainstream culture. Using fashion imagery from runway shows, advertising, and media campaigns as well as interviews and designer profiles as the primary data, in this chapter I will critically analyse the key moments and themes of

Michele's design work that challenge and transcend gender boundaries, exemplifying an antigender fashion design. This will be considered within the context of the increasing visibility of transgender rights movements in Western society, where an increasing awareness of gender diversity and trans* identities has not only influenced the way we think about gender, but had also taken place on the runways and in fashion spreads beginning in the 2010s with JW Anderson's collections. I will analyse the antigender fashion approach of Michele's first collections, particularly in contrast and dialogue with the house's previous design language.

Moment I addresses the role and importance of the men's floral suit in Gucci's reinvention as a gender-fluid fashion brand. The suit, as the epitome of masculinity and masculine attire, holds a pivotal position in Michele's approach to masculinity and menswear and its renegotiation towards a more inclusive and 'feminine' masculinity. Michele's conceptualisation and scrutiny of masculinity in the Fall/Winter 2020 menswear collection titled 'Masculine, Plural' will be analysed in terms of its antigender approach and understanding of the plurality of gender. Moment II tackles the issue of time and memory in Michele's fashion design. Looking at the Spring/Summer 2016, Spring/Summer 2018, and Fall/Winter 2019 prêt-á-porter collections, I will analyse Michele's antigender fashion and its potential to transcend and leap through time, here linking with Walter Benjamin's *Tigersprung*. Taking and re-making its context, Gucci's antigender fashion design will be considered for its potential to re-contextualise and proliferate gendered signifiers of dress and fashion.

In addition to Michele's transcending of time, Moment III considers his design in terms of its reorganisation of cultural meanings. Working as a *bricoleur*, I will analyse Gucci's Fall/Winter 2017 and 2020 collections' potential to scramble gender and cultural signifiers. Finally, I will analyse Michele's approach to and vision of post-humans in the Cyborg collection (Fall/Winter 2018), considering its ability to transgress borders of the body, gender, and the human.

GENDER FLUIDITY GOES MAINSTREAM: THE MAKING AND BREAKING OF GUCCI

While it seems that Gucci has become one of the most successful and well-known fashion houses of recent years – on the one hand for its revitalised fashion, on the other for its involvement in (pop-)culture – it had been relatively quiet around the Italian fashion house before Michele took the creative helm. The increasing popular interest in Gucci was noticeable, however, when Michele co-chaired the New York Met Gala Ball in homage to Susan Sontag,

'Camp: Notes on Fashion' in 2019, and can be traced in the firm's sponsorship of the Victoria and Albert (V&A) exhibition *Fashioning Masculinities* (2022) in London. It also extended to the biopic *House of Gucci*, a film adaption of Sara Gay Forden's novel *The House of Gucci: A Sensational Story of Murder, Madness, Glamour, and Greed* (2001). Released in 2021, the film follows the murder of Maurizio Gucci (played by Adam Driver) by his wife Patrizia Regianni (played by Lady Gaga) and featured a stellar cast of actors including Al Pacino as Aldo Gucci and Gucci Ambassador Jared Leto as Paolo Gucci.

Founded by Guccio Gucci and his wife Aida Calvelli in 1921 as a leather goods store, the brand was known for its fine luggage and handbags and elegant craftsmanship. In the 1950s and 1960s, Gucci became closely associated with the jet set and high society, promoted by Jackie Kennedy and Hollywood stars such as Grace Kelly. Following the appointment of Dawn Mello as the first creative director, the brand introduced a clothing line with Tom Ford as creative director. In 1995, one year after Ford's appointment, Gucci was once again confronted with scandalous and negative attention when Maurizio Gucci was murdered.

Twenty years later, in 2015, after Giannini left the company, Michele was appointed creative director, introducing a new and ultimately queer design approach that resonated with its younger millennial clientele. Breaking with the previous image associated with a jet set lifestyle and the Hollywood of the 1950s and 1960s, the brand now dresses contemporary style icons like Rihanna, Jared Leto, or Harry Styles, who became the 'unofficial poster child of Gucci's floral and printed suits', wearing several flamboyant examples during his first solo world tour (Fisher 2018). As Vicki Karaminas and Justine Taylor (2022, 16) state, 'Gucci became synonymous with the unconventional: the ugly became beautiful, imperfection became perfection, and the undesirable became desirable'. The dream team 'spearheading the brand's resurgence' and credited with its recent success (Danziger 2017), does not shy away from tinkering with the brand's image; for instance, with graffiti artist Trevor Andrew, also known as GucciGhost, reinventing and emphasising its iconic GG logo. In other words, Gucci under Michele has 'become a pioneer of idiosyncratic, eclectic and queer forms of dressing' (Jobling, Nesbitt, and Wong 2022, 115).

As we now know after decades of scholarship, fashion *acts* and *reacts* to broader socio-cultural currents and shifts. Michele's vision of Gucci needs to be positioned within the context of the transgender movement, which had entered mainstream consciousness in 2015. The ongoing activism by transgender people as well as the increasing proliferation of identity labels off- and especially online, ensured that the rigid binary of gender lost its generality in the twenty-first century. As author Patrick Mauriès states:

> Agender, genderless, cisgender, transgender, intersex, non-binary, gender fluid, genderqueer, third gender, transmasculine, transfeminine – the idea of gender, and even more the idea of an identity that is stable, fixed and unchanging, has dissolved in a fluid tide of acronyms and individualities. … The opposition between biological sex and social gender, the subject of so much controversy over the last thirty years or so, has gradually entered the mainstream. (2017, 155)

Furthermore, as journalist Brendon Griggs (2015) postulates, '2015 may be remembered as the year the term "transgender" fully entered mainstream consciousness', the same year that Michele introduced his geeky gender fluidity to Gucci in Milan.

While androgyny and unisex fashions had been a key component in the mainstream fashion scene around the turn of the millennium, the early 2000s saw a resurgence or rather refocusing on hyper-forms of gender and sex. In other words, everything was 'hyped' up: hyper-femininity, hyper-masculinity, and hyper-sexuality was the mode of the time; merging, for instance, in the 'spornosexual' (Simpson 2014), and the increasingly visible superhero-physique of Marvel-actors or James Bond (Goldsmith 2022; Church Gibson 2022).

However, with the beginning of the 2010s, there came a more positive and widespread representation of gender diversity as well as transgender and gender non-conforming models on the runway and in fashion spreads. In a 2010 advertising campaign for Givenchy, Ricardo Tisci cast his friend Lea T, who also worked as his personal assistant. Citing the struggles and challenges she was facing with her home life as a reason for casting her – she was considering sex work after the rejection of her gender identity by her family (Tsjeng 2015a) – the campaign constitutes an important milestone in the visibility and acceptance of transgender models. In 2011, before her transition, Andreja Pejic modelled womenswear on the cover of *Vogue* and closed the Jean Paul Gaultier haute couture show in a sheer wedding gown. In contrast to previous transgender models, particularly those in the twentieth century, their careers did not stagnate after their transgender identity became public, 'signalling a possible shift in the reception of non-binary identities in fashion and, perhaps also, in society at large, as their images became commonplace in fashion media' (Jobling, Nesbitt, and Wong 2022, 78).

However, while more transgender and gender non-conforming models are signed and cast, there is still a long way to go to reach a complete societal and political acceptance of gender non-conforming people. Even within an increasingly diverse fashion industry, their representation falls, more often than not, into traditional standards of beauty, so that 'transgender models who are plus-size, disabled or non-white still remain underrepresented …,

reproducing the pre-existing power structures within a new category of intelligibility' (Jobling, Nesbitt, and Wong 2022, 92). As a result, while the norms of gender identity are being challenged by transgender models, many standards of what is acceptable and beautiful remain unchallenged. Although, as Paul Preciado (2015) emphasises, it is less about gendered subjectivities *per se* and more about the way they work: 'The question is not: What am I? What gender or what sexuality? But rather: How does it work? How can we interfere in its functioning? And, more importantly: How could it work in another way?'

With his first collection for Gucci, which was put together in less than a week while replacing every detail his predecessor Giannini had conceived of, Michele demonstrated how things can work in another way. An amalgamation of fabrics, colours, and cuts that escape any clear delineation of time or gender, Gucci's Fall/Winter 2015 menswear collection not only represents a break with the previous sleek version of Gucci, but a break with what was considered beautiful. As fashion journalist Yari Fiocca writes,

> Since Alessandro Michele has called the shots at Gucci, the sexy panache man's body was imbued with is no longer a big deal. Michele keeps through the thrills of bending sexes, creating a more flamboyant halo with a 70s style throwback. His off-gender brave new world confuses, winks. Male or female is just a hangover of the past. The machismo show-off era draws to an end and – as it turns out – a subtle eroticism gets into higher gear. (Fiocca quoted in Mauriès 2017, 154)

For the collection, the models wore a motley assortment of classic tailoring that was just a little bit too short at the sleeves (resembling pieces found in a vintage shop), chiffon blouses with *lavallière* (also known as pussycat bows), fitted knitwear, and sheer lace tops. Some wore large horn-rimmed glasses, others wore berets and bobble hats. However, it was Michele's interpretation of the classic loafer, with the Gucci horse-bit ornament and leather in the front and open back lined with long kangaroo fur spilling out in all directions, that prompted his team to acknowledge he adored 'things that are ugly or strange' (Michele in Hirschberg 2020). Yet what was the most radical or different about Michele's first collections (menswear and womenswear Fall/Winter 2015) was that the clothes whose domicile was traditionally womenswear, such as the pussy-bow blouses, ruffled turtlenecks, chiffon fabrics, and sheer lace tops, 'were all worn by men', and that 'the models shared the same chiffon dresses, pleated skirts, and sheer lace tops, irrespective of gender' (Karaminas and Taylor 2022, 16). The smorgasbord and fluidity of aesthetics and gender signifiers was the first precursor for Michele's eccentric, maximalist, and at times eerie vision and antigender fashion at Gucci.

It was not only the men in pussy-bow blouses that struck a chord at the time and illustrated the bubbling questioning of the gender binary in fashion and society, it was also the ambiguity of what the show notes coined 'visceral storytelling through fashion' and described as 'nonconformist, romantic, intellectual' (Blanks 2015a). Indeed, nonconformity, romanticism, and intellectualism seem to be the cornerstones for Michele's antigender fashion that comes together in the excess of materials, cuts, and codes and the subliminal dissonance of gender signifiers. Quoting the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben and his musings on contemporariness for the 2015 Fall/Winter womenswear collection, Michele's conceptual approach of challenging gendered fashion of the time becomes clearer: 'Those who are truly contemporary are those who neither perfectly coincide with their time nor adapt to its demands. … Contemporariness, then, is that relationship with time that adheres to it through a disconnection' (Phelps 2015).

A lot has been said about Michele's unconventional approach to gendered fashion – in 2016 Gucci announced it would join its menswear and womenswear shows in contrast to the tradition of split shows – and flamboyant men in pussy-bow blouses. However, in his own words, the inclination for breaking sartorial gender signifiers stems from a sense of not belonging:

> I was an outsider, and I still am an outsider. … They call me the ruler of gender fluidity, but to me, I was just pulling out beauty. Conventionally beautiful people have always confused me. The more you are a hybrid – young but old; male but female; female but male – the more you look interesting. (Michele in Hirschberg 2020)

This hybridity of gender signifiers and romantic disconnections was evident in Michele's Fall/Winter 2015 collection with the abovementioned large accessories, like chunky rimmed glasses, heirloom rings, bobble hats, and fur-lined loafers; colourful coats with occasional fur cuffs and military double-button rows; flowing dresses and tailored suits with botanic floral prints; and, chiffon blouses with *lavallière* bows worn by all genders. Here, then, it is the taking and breaking of traditional gender signifiers that most clearly constitutes Gucci's beginnings of antigender fashion design.

MOMENT I: GUCCI'S NEW MAN – ANTIGENDER FASHION AND THE FLORAL SUIT

There are many aspects that led to Gucci's cultural success and positioning in the gender-free fashion movement. For one thing, the fact that Michele was relatively unknown to the majority of the fashion crowd – one might even call it his 'outsider' status – surely contributed to the unencumbered curiosity on the part of critics and a freedom of movement on the part of the designer. The radical break from Gucci's image of sleek and sexy sophistication to geeky and unflattering met with open minds. For another, Michele used the simple design of the classic menswear suit to revamp Gucci's reputation as a gender-fluid fashion brand. In an interview with Frederico Sarica, the designer voiced his fascination with the classic menswear staple:

> I really love men's suits. They are perhaps one of the things I like most. I love the shoulders, the buttons. The jacket is an amazing item – one that cuts across sexes and identities. It places everyone, whatever their differences, under the same umbrella. Everyone is captivated by this strange uniform of jacket and trousers. I like it and I also like playing with it, breaking it, and using its codes but then also upending them. (Sarica 2022)

The form and function of the modern suit, besides its function to clothe the body, has not changed dramatically since its origin almost four hundred years ago. The later seventeenth century saw the emergence of a loose-fitting buttoned coat in combination with a buttoned waistcoat and some sort of cravat that would, as Anne Hollander (1994, 63) argues, represent the birth of the three-piece suit. Influenced by the neo-classical focus on nature, the suit became the epitome of masculine sobriety and simplicity, whose traces can still be found today: heads of states wear suits at summit meetings, job applicants wear them to interviews, and Wall Street brokers wear them as an everyday uniform. Even the female business outfit takes on the suit's characteristics.

However, while its form has stayed largely the same, the suit's social and cultural connotations have shifted over time. As Hollander emphasises, 'tailored suits have proved themselves infinitely dynamic, possessed of their own fashionable energy' by 'not vanishing, but instead shifting ground and visual emphasis, and also shifting their social and sexual meaning' (1994, 4). Christopher Breward (2016), tracing the suit's origin, form, and function, concludes that today's suit and especially high fashion suits have another cultural meaning. While high fashion once functioned as a vehicle 'to foment social and aesthetic change from a position of influence', the self-defined role of radical fashion now 'seems to be to present a

very specialized commentary on the vicissitudes of contemporary existence' (Breward 2016, 199). This sentiment seems to resonate with Michele's own design practice.

Since the 'Great Male Renunciation' (see Chapter 2), masculine fashion was primarily based on the premise of simplicity and an aversion to all forms of ostentatious embellishment. In contrast, Michele's design of the suit gained a somewhat cult-status and helped usher in a renaissance of flowers and embellishment in masculine style. The first occurrence of the floral printed suits was in Michele's second collection for Gucci Fall/Winter 2015 womenswear in the form of a bright red suit with shrunken sleeves and painted flowers (Figure 5.1), and a cream-coloured suit with painted proteas.

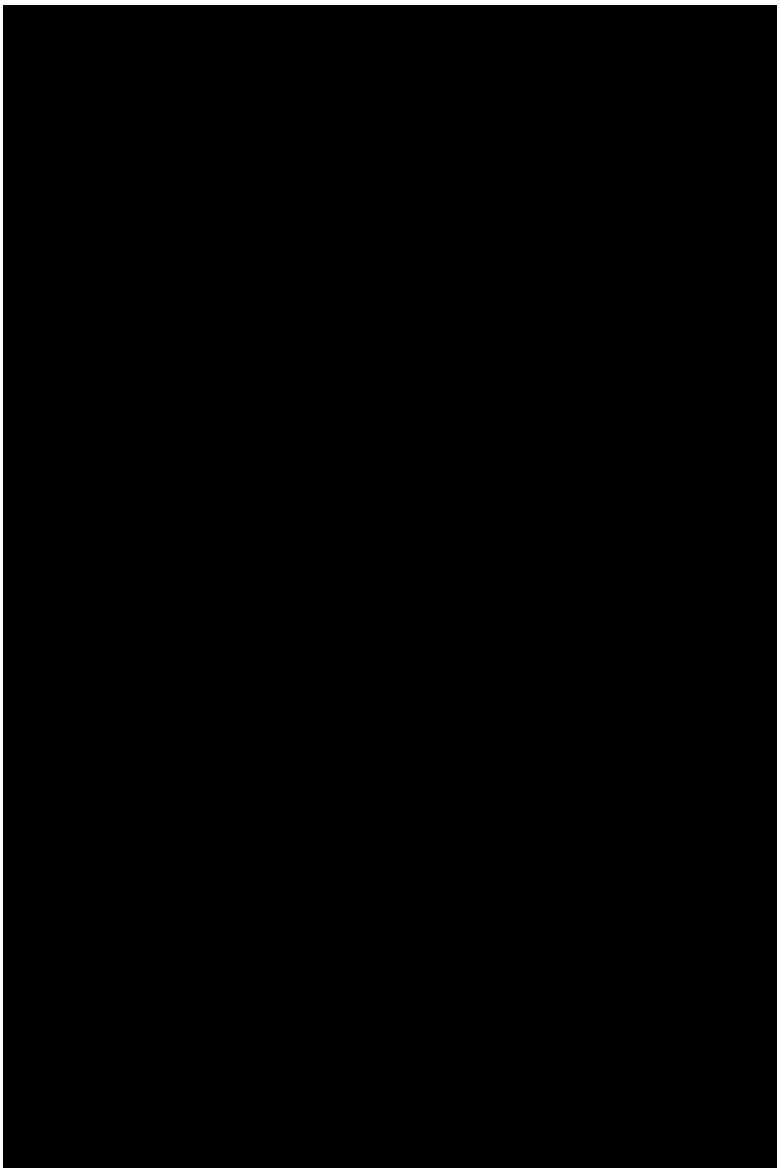

Figure 5.1 Runway look from the Gucci Fall/Winter 2015 fashion show. (Photo: Pietro D'Aprano / Getty Images)

After that first outing, variations of the floral suit continued to appear; for instance, in the Spring/Summer 2016 menswear collection with a cream-coloured version with an all-over botanical print and bell bottoms, and a turquoise cotton suit with the so-called 'Tian' print inspired by eighteenth-century Chinese tapestry. Leather jackets, silk kimonos, and bomber jackets were also embroidered with floral and botanical patterns (Spring/Summer 2016 and Fall/Winter 2016 menswear), as were dresses, trench coats, and accessories, including shoes and bags (Spring/Summer 2016 womenswear). The use of floral prints, particularly in the menswear collections, are characterised by the juxtaposition of feminine and masculine signifiers; for instance, with the 'masculine' biker jacket embellished with flowers and metal studs, or the bright pink bomber jacket.

Another important part of the success of Gucci's floral suit is Harry Styles and his creative partnership with Michele. As Karaminas and Taylor illustrate, the embellished Gucci suit from the Spring/Summer 2016 menswear collection was a key piece in the reinvention of Styles from teen idol to 'gender outlaw' (2022, 12). Vice versa, Styles became a symbol for the gender-fluid and floral-printed tailoring of Gucci, appearing in various versions of the floral suit on and off-stage, or starring in Gucci's tailoring campaigns in 2018 and 2019 photographed by Glen Luchford. The campaigns feature Styles in traditional masculine pinstripe and wool suits, sometimes with glittering embellishments; sometimes with pink socks and white leather loafers, as for Fall/Winter 2018; or sometimes with checked or floral-printed suits with pussy-bow blouses and baby farm animals, as for the men's tailoring cruise 2019 collection. Here, again it is the combination and scrambling of gendered signifiers that creates and illustrates antigender fashion.

Furthermore, the images portray Styles with a soft and 'feminine' masculinity, on the one hand through clothes combining different gender elements, on the other through the nurturing impression achieved by the baby pigs, sheep, and goats. The images represent a cultural examination of 'toxic' or rigid masculinity and the challenge thereof. In other words, as Rebecca Arnold points out, because 'masculinity is held up as a signal of the "norm" in Western culture … to question masculinity within a strictly patriarchal society threatens the existing balance of power' (Arnold 2001, 111). Styles and Gucci's floral suits represent a form of 'feminised' and 'soft' masculinity, a form of androgyny, or as I argue, an antigender fashion that creates and builds on the dissolution of gender boundaries which 'threatens' or troubles the gender binary. As Michele states in *GQ*,

> When you try to manipulate the codes of a man's wardrobe, you can do something really new. … I started thinking about an idea of beauty that, for me, it doesn't belong to men or women. It's almost the same; that's why I put a few men's looks on women and the reverse. You can be more masculine showing your femininity. (Yotka 2020)

For Michele, then, the suit and particularly the suit jacket holds an important position in the renegotiation of femininity and masculinity. 'The power that it holds', said Michele, 'is now available to everyone: to women, to men, to those in between. I try to manipulate it, empty it, lengthen it, shorten it, move the buttons around. The effect is always quite out of tune, loud, beautiful' (Michele in Sarica 2022).

The renegotiation and cultural commentary on the state of masculinity also played an important conceptual role in Gucci's Fall/Winter 2020 menswear collection. The show notes were titled 'Masculine, Plural', and referenced the implications of toxic masculinity in contemporary society:

> In a patriarchal society, masculine gender identity is often moulded by violently toxic stereotypes. A dominant, winning, oppressive masculinity model is imposed on babies at birth. … Any possible reference to femininity is aggressively banned, as it is considered a threat against the complete affirmation of a masculine prototype that allows no divergencies. There is nothing natural in this drift. The model is socially and culturally built to reject anything that doesn't comply with it. (Gucci 2020c, slide 1)

Here, Michele seems to refer to the concept of gender as a social construction. Without directly quoting Butler, the notes suggest the constructiveness of gender performativity and the institutions and mechanisms that regulate or punish gender expressions, such as the heterosexual matrix. The show notes continue, imagining another version, or rather proliferated version of masculinity, 'a desertion, away from patriarchal plans and uniforms':

> Deconstructing the idea of masculinity as it has been historically established. … It's time to celebrate a man who is free to practice self-determination, without social constraints, without authoritarian sanctions, without suffocating stereotypes. A man who is able to reconnect with his core of fragility, with his trembling and his tenderness. … A man full of kindness and care. … A man who is also sister, mother, bride. … It's not about suggesting a new normative model, rather to release what was constrained. Breaking a symbolic order, which is nowadays useless. Nourishing a space of possibility where masculine can shake its toxicity off, to freely regain

> what was taken away. And, in doing this, turning back time, learning to unlearn. (Gucci 2020c, slide 3–4)

This breaking of the traditional restrictions of masculinity, then, translates into an antigender fashion that scrambles gender signifiers by mixing feminine and masculine garments.

The Fall/Winter 2020 menswear collection travelled back in time to preadolescence, offering an allegorical journey back to childhood before the rules and restrictions of gender mattered. The collection consisted of a variety of knickerbockers, leather strap shoes, knee-high socks, fluffy sweaters, and vests in baby-blue and pink (some featuring story book motifs), A-line dresses and coats with Peter-Pan collars, and a mix of gingham, checked, and floral patterns. While JW Anderson's collections have referenced childhood with a somewhat sexual or fetishising charge, here Michele's design represents a certain innocence and naivety – some of the jeans even featured green stains reminiscent of the unmistakable marks of playing in the grass (Figure 5.2).

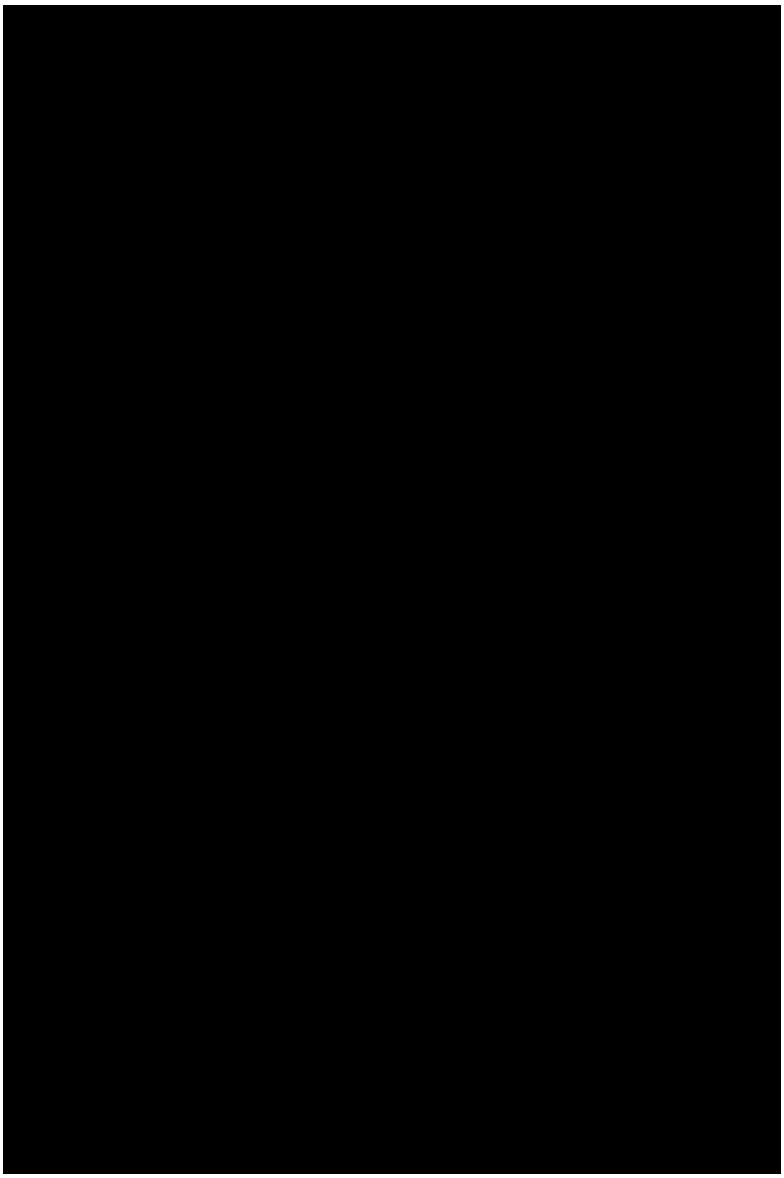

Figure 5.2 Runway look from the Gucci Fall/Winter 2020 menswear fashion show. (Photo: Daniele Venturelli / Daniele Venturelli / Getty Images for Gucci)

Similar to Michele's first collection that imagined a soft and pussy-bow masculinity (the open-back loafer made a comeback in this collection, albeit without the fur), the Fall/Winter 2020 menswear collection was scattered with a feminine 'softness', seen in the colours, patterns, cuts, and materials. Elaborating on the idea of plurality and the potential boundarylessness of masculinity, Michele explained that he wanted to 'talk about how complex it is to be a man. And this means growing up maybe in a different way because the world of men is very diverse and full of different elements like the feminine world' (Leitch 2020). The deconstruction and reconstruction of masculinity takes shape in the silhouettes that are borrowed from traditionally feminine or infantile clothes: A-lines, babydoll tops, or the accentuated waist via high-waisted pants and cropped tops.

The collection further plays with contemporary notions of gendered colours, particularly the concept of pink for 'girls' and 'blue' as a symbol for boys – a distinction echoed in the various forms of 'gender reveals' that chiefly use these two colours to symbolise an unborn baby's sex. The common association of pink as feminine and blue as masculine is itself a social and historical construction, and a rather recent albeit always ambiguous one at that. As Marjorie Garber writes, 'in the early years of the twentieth century, before World War I, boys wore pink, "a stronger, more decided color", according to the promotional literature at the time, while girls wore blue, understood to be "delicate" and "dainty"' (Garber 2011, 1; see also Paoletti 2012, 85; Steele 2018). Here, Michele's use of soft pink, red, and orange in combination with the baby blue in otherwise feminine garments subverts the rigid norms of masculinity as simple and toned-down. In this way then, by opposing and challenging the gendered colourways of soft pink and blue, Gucci's collections become antigender.

MOMENT II: TIME LEAPS, DÉTOURNEMENT, AND MEMORY

Time and time travelling are recurring themes in Michele's collections. In a quite literal reference to the passing of time, the installation for Gucci's Fall/Winter 2020 menswear collection resembled a huge pendulum, first ticking back and forth, drawing lines into the sand underneath, then swinging from different angles while the models circled around it. While Michele refrains from calling it 'nostalgia' – 'I haven't got any nostalgia', he said to *Vogue*. 'I don't cling to the past. … I use the past because the past is a very interesting place' (Leitch 2020) – his designs regularly reference moments of days gone by. His 2020 menswear collection featured metallic flares reminiscent of David Bowie's alter ego Ziggy Stardust, along with denim and oversized knitwear evoking rock star Kurt Cobain and the grunge era of the 1990s. However, the era Michele returns to the most is the 1960s and 1970s and its associations with social justice movements, the Counter Cultural Revolution, and its hippy and unisex fashions. 'The '70s is the most powerful image, for me, for the brand', said Michele, further noting that 'the brand has a soul – and its soul is really that kind of '70s moment' (Michele in Fury 2016a).

The Spring/Summer 2016 menswear and womenswear collection entailed an accumulation of garments, cuts, and colours that could have been plucked from a 1970s archive, or rather the memory thereof (Barthes 2000, 117). Slim-cut trench coats with shrunken sleeves, high-waisted belts and various materials (leather, suede, gabardine, bleached denim, with geometric or floral prints), long slim 'Biba' scarves (Figure 5.3), tight flared pants, flowing

skirts and dresses, oversized horn-rimmed glasses, and a mix of prints and colours that recalls the spirit of the Counter Cultural Revolution and designers like Mr Fish. In line with the period's Romantic revival as well as African- and Asian-inspired styles, the collections entail cross-cultural signifiers; for example, Kimono-like coats or the Chinese-inspired Tian print. Here these signs are mixed with bright brocades and *lavallières*.

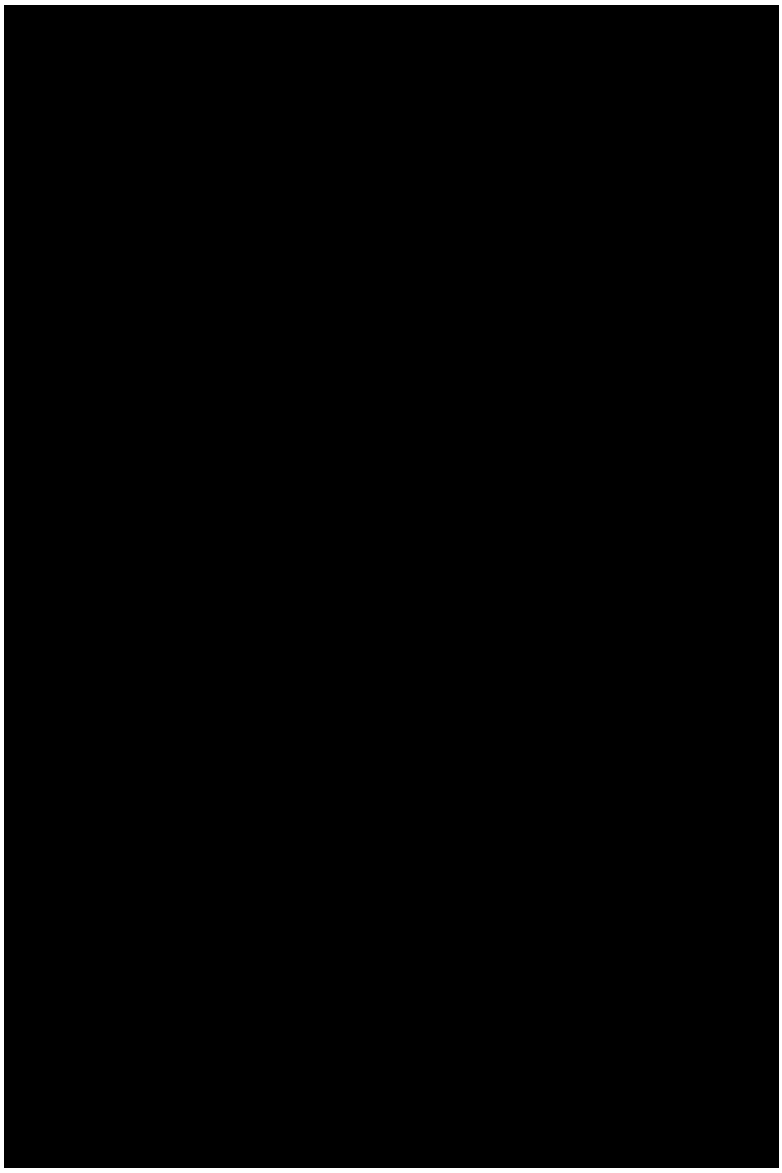

Figure 5.3 Runway look from the Gucci Spring/Summer 2016 fashion show. (Photo: Pietro D'Aprano / Getty Images)

In a similar vein, the Fall/Winter 2016 menswear collection envisions a colourful mix-and-match aesthetic gathered from distant memories and places: embroidered silk bomber jackets and coats, granny prints and checkers, Lurex knitwear cardigans with patch-motifs and Snoopy prints, and heels embedded with pearls. Titled 'Rhizomatic Scores', the show notes refer to Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's concept of the rhizome, stating that Michele's clothes 'become an assemblage of fragments emerging from a temporal elsewhere: resurfacing epiphanies, entangled and unexpected' (Mead 2016). Like Deleuze and Guattari's rhizome, that 'has no beginning or end; it is always in the middle, between things, interbeing, *intermezzo*' (Deleuze and Guattari 2004, 27), Michele's fashion design is non-linear, plucking signs and signifiers from history and culture. In other words, Michele's idea of fashion is a 'non-linear, non-narrative approach that scrambles notions of chronology and causality' (Fury 2016b).

Michele's early collections make use of the archive, or as the designer states, 'the "idea" that I have of the archive' (Michele in Fury 2016a). His designs seem to conjure up an idea, a memory of the youth- and countercultures of the 1960s and 1970s and their myth of rebellion, a 'magpie sensibility', as Tim Blanks writes, 'scouring time, place, and gender for scraps' (Blanks 2015b). Still, Michele's idiosyncratic scrambling of time was not always met with excitement – as fashion journalist Alexander Fury (2016a) writes, 'Michele is offering not invention but reinvention, revival, and rehash'. However, it is precisely the revival of styles that is so essential for Gucci's antigender fashion design and reinvention of itself. As Patrizia Calefato states, 'revival is actually a strategy that has always occurred in the revolving of fashion, but that currently manifests itself in the fragmented, syncopated decontextualisation of signs of the past, quoted and so living again in the present' (2017, 95).

As it happens, the Gucci Spring/Summer 2016 menswear collection was entitled 'détournement' (French for diversion, hijacking), as 'a renewal of possibility' seemingly inspired by the Situationists (Blanks 2015b). For the Situationists, *détournement* is a 'reuse of pre-existing artistic elements in a new ensemble', a 'deviation of meaning, that is, re-signification' (Zacarias 2020, 214–18). *Détournement* is closely linked to memory; as Guy Debord and Gil J. Wolman write, 'the main impact of a détournement is directly related to the conscious or semiconscious recollection of the original contexts of the elements', or the memory recalling it (2006, 17). As Gabriel Zacarias elaborates:

> The aim of détournement is not to erase the original. The element which is détourné acquires new meaning once it is inserted into a new semantic context. Nevertheless, the original meaning is still there, latent. Détournement is an operation of pluri-signification; it contains different layers of meaning. Moreover, it attains its maximum effect when the reader or spectator is able

> to grasp the whole sense of the operation, by recognising the original element and consequently the détournement of meaning which is introduced. (2020, 218)

In this sense, then, Gucci employs détournement to hijack the signs and signifiers of memory and gender. Like the subculture of punk, that itself was influenced by the Situationists and constituted an anti-fashion approach, Michele decontextualises sartorial signifiers of gender and recontextualises, or rather inserts their meanings into a new semantic context, by mixing and proliferating their masculine or feminine codes (e.g., all clothes worn by all genders). Michele relies on the memories and coded signifiers that are embedded and established in the past and re-ascribed into a genderless, or antigender meaning, by their use in the present. As the designer states in *Vogue Australia*, 'I like history because it's like a vault. You can pick up things and put them in the present' (Birrell 2022, 183).

Hijacking the past and making it contemporary is a recurring element in Michele's design for Gucci and was prevalent in the Spring/Summer 2018 and Fall/Winter 2019 prêt-á-porter collections – particularly their advertising campaigns. The latter collection saw both 1940s tailoring reminiscent of an older generation with garments worn by men and women (sharp shoulders, cinched waists, and wide trouser legs bound around the ankles with cord) including old-fashioned house coats and checked knitwear, and 1970s and 1980s glam rock romanticism (ruffled Pierrot collars, cravats, and sleeves, with some models sporting bright orange mullets like Bowie) and oversized hip-hop leather jackets, shorts, and short-sleeved shirts (Figures 5.4–5.5). Many garments were unfinished, with raw edges and visible basting stitches. Here again the clothes were presented regardless of, or rather in opposition to, gender, mixing and scrambling gendered signifiers throughout.

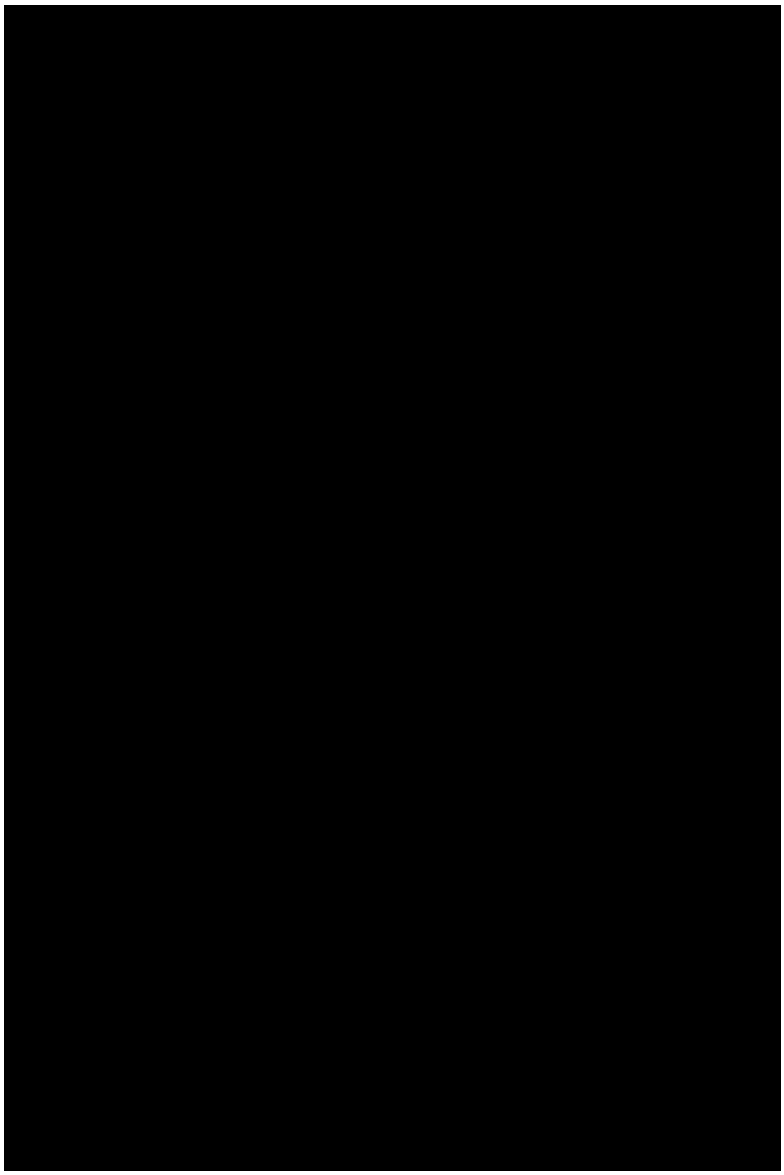

Figure 5.4 Runway look from the Gucci Fall/Winter 2019 fashion show. (Photo: Getty Images)

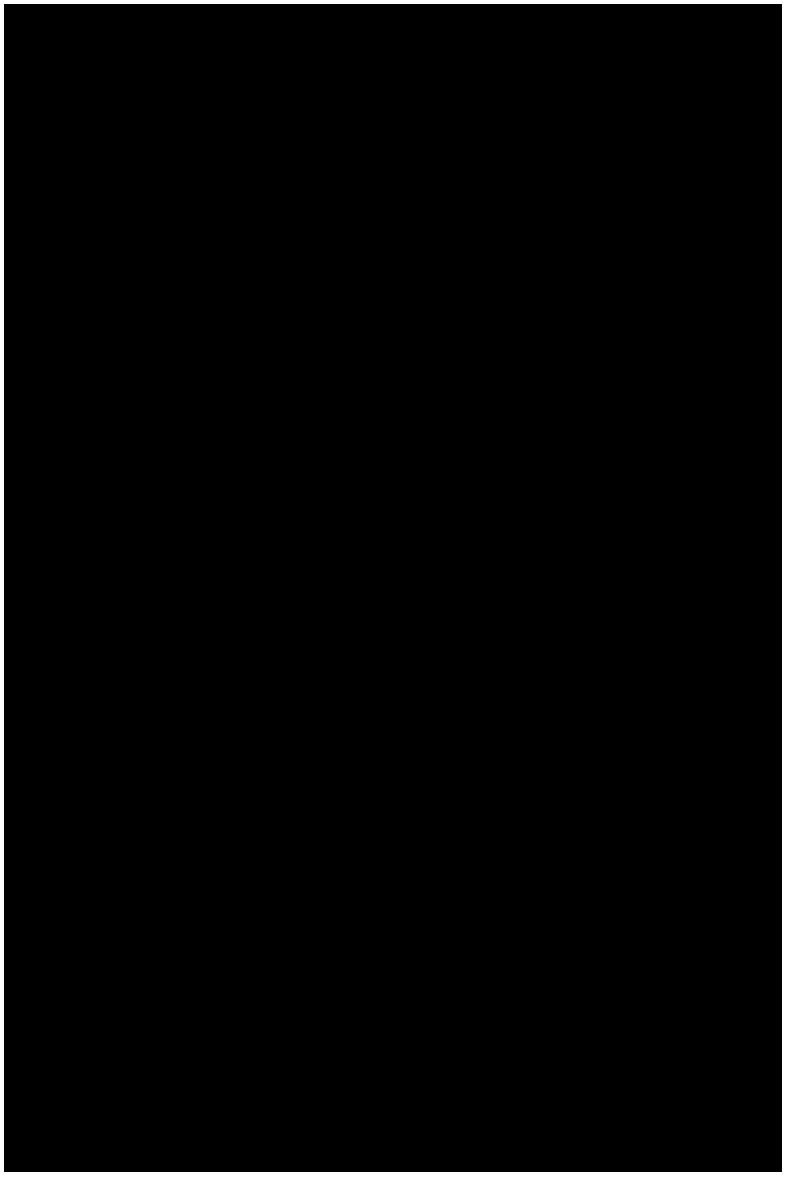

Figure 5.5 Runway look from the Gucci Fall/Winter 2019 fashion show. (Photo: Getty Images)

The accompanying advertising campaign, consisting of images and a short film, picks up on the collection's transcending of time (and genders). Art directed by Christopher Simmonds and photographed by Luchford, 'the campaign documents a journey through the seasonal fashion wheel. … Like the symbol of the Ouroboros, a circular snake eating its own tail … fashion is seen to continually create and consume itself in an eternal cycle' (Gucci 2020d). Employing a documentary style reminiscent of the mid-twentieth century (including the hairstyles, dress, and cars), the film shows the makings of a fashion show, or in this case a *défilé*. It makes visible, then, what Walter Benjamin called the *Tigersprung*, the tiger's leap, of fashion. That is, the reviving of the past in the present. 'Fashion has a nose for the topical', he writes, 'no matter where it stirs in the thickets of long ago; it is the tiger's leap into the past' (Benjamin 2003, 395). This 'leap in the open air of history is the dialectical leap Marx understood as revolution' (Benjamin 2003, 395), or as Adam Geczy and Karaminas elaborate, 'it is precisely this historical relay … that renders fashion a dialectical process shifting between the present and the past, for it challenges the linearity of history and becomes a symbol of modernity's potential for change' (2016, 88). The revolutionary or changing character in the Fall/Winter 2019 collection is the tiger's leap injected with a re-evaluation and antithesis of gender of the moment, *Jetztzeit*.

The Spring/Summer 2018 collection worked in a similar way, leaping into the past both in its fashion design and advertising campaign. Created after a visit to Elton John's archive of 1970s glam rock looks, the collection contrives a rundown of 1980s shoulder pads, glitter costumes, track suits, English tweed, and Disney imagery. Some outfits (the fur coat, Americana track suit, pink suit) seem to have escaped Wes Anderson's *The Royal Tenenbaums* (2001). Additionally, the show took place in a space filled with antique structures, Greek and Roman statues, effigies of Egyptian gods, and fragments of Aztec temples. As fashion critic Sarah Mower wrote (2017b), Michele channelled a 'sensibility that everything, past and present, is going on at the same time'.

The advertising campaign also represents a sensibility that spans beyond time and (art) history. Titled 'Gucci Hallucination', the Spring/Summer 2018 campaign featured a series of illustrations by Spanish artist Ignasi Monreal inspired by classic artworks (Monreal 2022). A green sequin dress finds itself inserted into John Everett Millais' *Ophelia* (1852), while Hieronymus Bosch's *The Garden of Earthly Delights* (1490–1500) blends with *The Arnolfini Portrait* (1434) by Jan van Eyck and Gucci's designs. In another image, the models, clad in Gucci dresses, turn into mermaids dozing at the shore, or Disney's first animated feature film *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* from 1937 is reimagined. The latter in particular represents

Gucci's blurring of gender and it's leaping through history. The image depicts Snow White's slumber after she bit the poisoned apple, moments before the prince kisses her awake. Here, however, the 'princess' appears to be a prince dressed in blue denim jeans and a pullover embellished with rhinestones in the image of the Disney Princess Snow White. The character's delicate features and gestures further subvert the traditional gender performativity of masculinity. The illustration, and the collection at large, plays with the reader's expectations of gender, pop culture, and history.

By creating a representation of identity that breaks with rigid gender boundaries and that depicts an interplay between ascribed aspects of traditional femininity and masculinity, the campaign illustrates Gucci's re-contextualising and proliferation of gender. In other words, it is an antigender design that *détours* and leaps through sartorial gender signifiers, illustrating that in fashion not only past and present are fluid and exist at the same time, but that the feminine and the masculine do too. Michele envisions a multitude of masculinities and femininities that exist in tandem and in fusion with each other.

MOMENT III: THE BRICOLAGE, THE CYBORG, AND THE POST-HUMAN OF ANTIGENDER

One theme that has been ubiquitous in Michele's collections for Gucci is that of maximalism and the clash of different time periods, aesthetics, and cultural signifiers. Michele's tendency for cross-cultural referencing, or, as some might say the co-opting of cultural artefacts, has led to criticism and allegations of cultural appropriation. Such was the case with the highly debated Cyborg collection from Fall/Winter 2018 and its Sikh-like turbans and woollen balaclava, or the Spring/Summer 2020 show and its array of white straitjackets. While these collections are sites of debate and discussion regarding the distribution of power and the structural discriminations in an increasingly diverse and globalised world,[1] they also allude to Michele's approach as a *bricoleur* who brings together existing codes and signifiers, (art) historical references, and (pop) cultural allusions and turns them into multi-layered and pluralistic clusters of visual significations. As Alexander Fury (2016a) writes, 'these collections are designed to be pulled apart by consumers, fashion shows as an engaging proposition of pieces rather than dictatorial, identikit aesthetic'. The concept of *bricolage* is not only essential in the construction

[1] For a more detailed discussion on the implications of colonialism and cultural appropriation in fashion and the Cyborg collection see Jobling, Nesbitt, and Wong (2022) and Kawamura and De Jong (2022).

of subcultural styles like the anti-fashion of Punk, but central to Michele's antigender fashion that works as an active tool in confronting and challenging gender binaries in fashion.

In French, the word bricolage describes the activity of constructing, repairing, or creating an artwork by using materials that are at hand. In dialogue with the collection of materials, the bricoleur chooses from and combines the materials to form a new set of meanings. As Claude Lévi-Strauss wrote:

> He [the bricoleur] interrogates all the heterogeneous objects of which his treasury is composed to discover what each of them could 'signify' and so contribute to the definition of a set which has yet to materialize, but which will ultimately differ from the instrumental set only in the internal disposition of its parts. (1972, 18)

In fashion, bricolage plays an important role in theories of post-modern consumption and the idea that 'personal' style is created through collecting and combining different symbols and signs from different sources, creating a plethora of appearances and ambiguities. In a way, it is fashion's own rehashing and re-writing of signs that creates endless opportunities for new meaning. According to John Clarke,

> Together, object and meaning constitute a sign, and, within any one culture, such signs are assembled, repeatedly, into characteristic forms of discourse. However, when the bricoleur re-locates the significant object in a different position within that discourse, using the same overall repertoire of signs, or when that object is placed within a different total ensemble, a new discourse is constituted, a different message conveyed. (2006, 149)

For Dick Hebdige, it is through bricolage, through 'repositioning and recontextualizing commodities, by subverting their conventional use and inventing new ones', that the subcultural stylist 'opens up the world of objects to new and covertly oppositional readings' (1979, 102).

The subversion of gender norms and restructuring into oppositional, antigender readings can be seen in the eclectic style of Michele's fashion design, particularly in the Fall/Winter 2017 and 2020 collections. The former was the first amalgamated show of menswear and womenswear and spanned roughly 120 looks worn by a similar number of misfits, geeky and unconventional boys and girls. Its bricolage of materials included coats and dresses with curved edges, three-dimensional embroidery, and crystals, along with ruffled gowns with floral prints. Hand-scrawled words by the artist Coco Capitán were written on T-shirts and parasols, pumps were topped with pearls or dragon embroidery, and bags were embellished with hardware of

insects and beasts. Plaid or watercolour floral suits were trimmed with crystals and three-dimensional beaded flower lapels (Figure 5.6), and athletic inspired tracksuits and ski-pants were mixed with braided knitted hats. From shiny leather contrasted with plaid wool, silk, and chiffon, to fine lace and brocades, it was a motley collection of materials and cultural signifiers, a representation of 'the contemporary multilayered cultural consciousness of it all' (Mower 2017a). Scottish plaids and kilts were mixed with Japanese-inspired paper parasols, while long flowing 1970s-gowns mixed with chinoiserie prints and sweat bands.

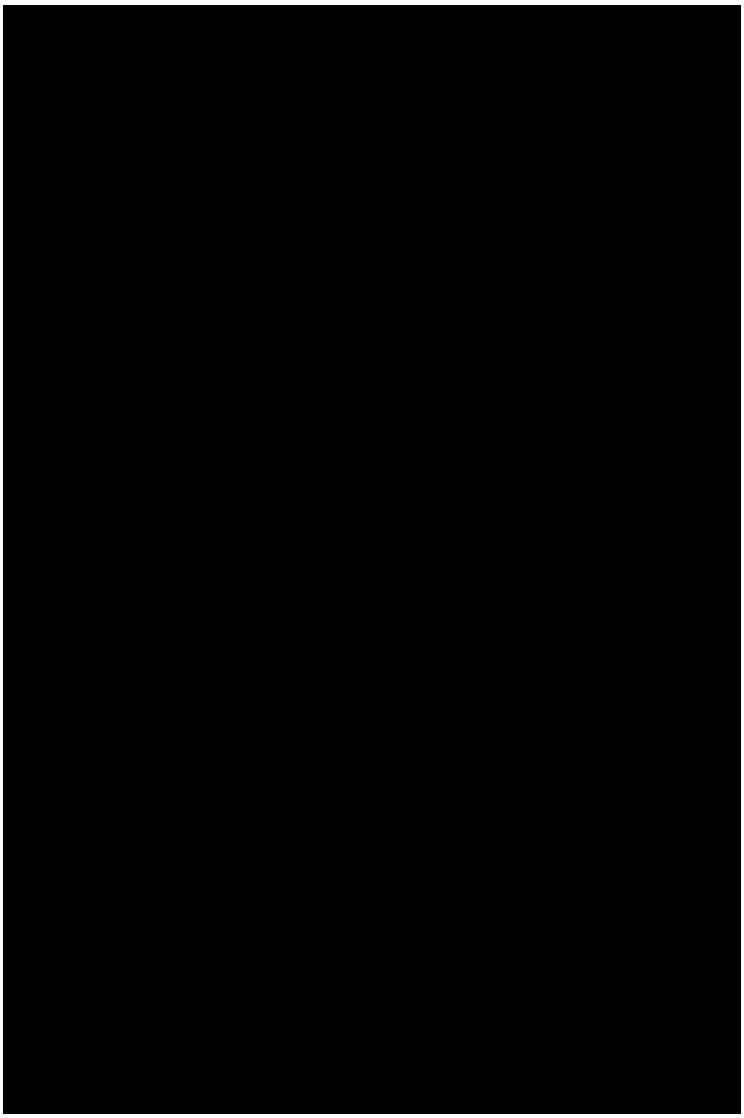

Figure 5.6 Runway look from the Gucci Fall/Winter 2017 fashion show. (Photo: Estrop / Getty Images)

In the show notes, Michele described his role as that of an alchemist: 'I can pick up different things and make them talk' and 'it expresses all the ideas of me, all of my obsessions' (Gucci 2017a, 2017b). It is Michele's ability to move between and beyond borders of the natural and the artificial, between high and low culture, and between masculine and feminine that creates the bricolage of antigender. Whether scrambling gendered signifiers within one outfit (e.g., classic tailoring and floral prints, plaid shirts, and crystal embellishments) or scattered over the whole of the collection – Michele's antigender fashion design takes gendered signifiers and disrupts and reorganises their meanings in an explosive junction that reveals the inconsistencies of gender.

The reorganising of meaning was also a common thread in the Fall/Winter 2020 collection, which was a bricolage of cultural and historical signifiers. Like the menswear collection, the womenswear collection included an array of childhood details: Peter Pan and embroidered collars, Disney-inspired pins, lace trimmings, destressed jeans, knee-high white socks, and Mary Janes mixed with suiting in check wool and with flared pants, billowing lace gowns, pinafore dresses, and Liberty-print headbands. Michele leaps through time by referencing hippie culture, grunge style, and turn-of-the-century dress.

However, this time, Michele placed emphasis on the kinky and fetishised: a patent leather harness and collar decorated every other look, as well as a big silver cross. In combination with the partly high-necked, partly low-cut and see-through dresses, the collection makes an eerie impression, speaking to the sacredness and depravity of Catholic symbolism. It seems only fitting, then, that Michele described the collection as a ritual, albeit alluding to the fashion show and its circus.

What illustrates the bricolage of antigender fashion the most, however, might be the accompanying campaign film that was produced during the height of lockdowns. In the film, a cast of models wear the clothes while cleaning their homes, riding bikes, hanging out. They become their own bricoleur, not just of the collection, but of their gender identity, assembled from the vast material of masculine and feminine signs. As Michele states, 'I asked them to represent the idea they have of themselves, to go public with it, shaping the poetry that accompanies them. I encouraged them to play, improvising with their life' (Gucci 2020b). The result is a colourful mélange of masculine and feminine gender signifiers and performances that speak to the plurality and multitude of gendered subjectivities.

For the Fall/Winter 2018 Cyborg collection and the Fall/Winter 2019 collection, Michele took the question of what makes us masculine/feminine or even human further, alluding to theories of post-humanism, the cyborg, and the grotesque. For the former, Michele

referred to Michel Foucault's considerations on power and the creation and regulation of the body, as well as Donna Haraway's 'A Cyborg Manifesto' (2016). Accordingly, as the show notes claimed, the cyborg

> is a paradoxical creature keeping together nature and culture, masculine and feminine, normal and alien, psyche and matter. Conflicting with any category grid, the Cyborg is the expression that blends different evolving identities. Hybrid and shifting identities, built on multiple belongings, that transgress the normative discipline. (Gucci 2018)

The collection transgresses multiple borders and categories, representing a hybrid design that takes cues from other times and *Other* cultures, collecting and connecting them, 'borrowed, appropriated and placed into a different context' (Geczy and Karaminas 2021, 63).

Accordingly, chequered woollen suits, flower-print silk shirts, and ruffled chiffon and lamé dresses were juxtaposed with velvet gowns and snake-skin jackets. Cultural motifs and garments like a Muslim khimar or niqab, Chinese pagoda hats, Japanese kabuki knitwear, Sikh turbans, Russian babushka scarves, and Inuit and Sami-style coats clashed with commodified branding like the Paramount Films logo printed on sweaters, the 1965 movie poster print *Faster Pussycat, Kill, Kill, Kill* (dir. Russ Meyer), or the New York Yankees' logo embroidered on houndstooth coats, cardigans, and woollen hats. The Cyborg collection was an assemblage of the multitudes of identities and cultures, of human subjectivity. It moved beyond the confines of gender classification, offering a plural and diverse range of gendered signifiers, gathered and re-stitched from the wide-ranging field of gender codes. Or, as Eric David wrote, it 'is a sensational parable of hybrid designs, cross-cultural references, clashing aesthetics and brazen symbols that speaks of the possibility of being liberated from the confines of the natural condition we are born into' (E. David 2018).

Comparing his work and method to that of a surgeon, Michele speaks of the fragments of signs, that were eerily and at times upsettingly stitched together in this collection: 'We are the Dr Frankenstein of our lives', he said in an interview with *Vogue*. 'There's a clinical clarity about what I am doing. I was thinking of a space that represents the creative act. I wanted to represent the lab I have in my head. It's physical work, like a surgeon's' (Mower 2018). Fittingly, then, the show took place in an imagined operating theatre with clinical cleanliness, bright lights, and operation tables the models passed by. As a fashion chamber, as Geczy and Karaminas argue, the theatre was emblematic 'for the posthuman condition, where people construct their identities and undergo regeneration through technology' (2021, 63). The collection envisioned subjectivities beyond the human condition, beyond the confines of

gender, the body, and species. Models carried replicas of their own heads iguanas, coral snakes, or baby dragons (Figure 5.7). Others had extra eyes placed on their heads or hands, and yet others had grown horns. It is here, in Gucci's pluriverse, that Michele's cyborg emerges and breathes. 'In this regard', the show notes claim, 'what can seem atypical, anomalous, flawed to a normalizing eye, acquires a new legitimacy. A new breath' (Gucci 2018). Like Haraway's cyborg that appears 'where the boundary between human and animal is transgressed', signalling 'disturbingly and pleasurably tight coupling. Bestiality has a new status in this cycle of marriage exchange' (Haraway 2016, 11). Transgressing boundaries, moving between and beyond the binaries of male/female, human/animal, and organism/machine, the collection embodied new modes of being that are moulded, stitched, and reshaped time and again:

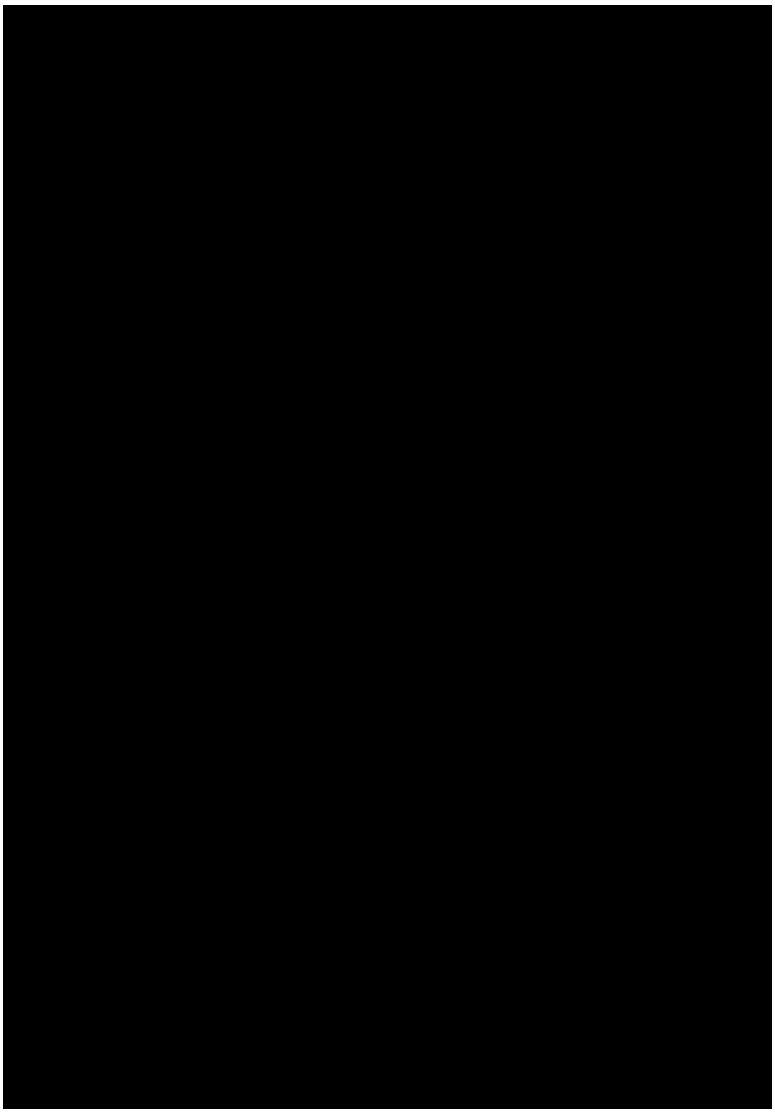

Figure 5.7 Runway look from the Gucci Fall/Winter 2019 show. The model is carrying a replica of their own head. (Photo: Estrop / Getty Images)

> Gucci Cyborg is post-human: it has eyes on its hands, faun horns, dragon's puppies and doubling heads. It's a biologically indefinite and culturally aware creature. The last and extreme sign of a mongrel identity under constant transformation. The symbol of an emancipatory possibility through which we can decide to become what we are. (Gucci 2018)

The sentiment of 'becoming who we are' also played a role in the Fall/Winter 2019 collection, and particularly its accessorising. While the Gucci 'Cyborg' had a sterile, medical impression that laid open and examined the possibilities under the harsh operating light, the 2019 collection moved in a more enigmatic world, 'between the visible and the invisible' (Gucci 2020a). While not made for sale, many looks were worn with masks, leather belts, and collars with long spikes, transparent teardrops, and metal ear coverings inspired by the 24-carat gold work *Fashion Fiction I* (1966) by Eduardo Costa published in the February 1968 issue of American *Vogue* (Gucci 2020a). Some masks resembled the goalkeeper mask seen in *Friday the 13th Part III* (1982), others had elongated spikes, another was a brass eagle whose talons clutched the jawline. In a way, then, the mask's ability to hide and disguise was extended towards showing and imagining what could be: boundless and borderless possibilities. In other words, Michele's design played with the boundaries of the human and the body, adding masks, metal ears, dragon babies, or artificial eyes, extending the anthropocentric human condition.

* * *

Michele's Gucci exemplifies fashion not simply as a commercial-creative spectacle or a mirror of culture, but as a phenomenon that reflects, absorbs, and visualises broader social and cultural shifts; that is, in this case, the ongoing and particular challenges of masculine and feminine identity in contemporary times of change. He presents fashion as a means of renegotiation, a vehicle and catalyst for a new order of being. His designs are sprinkled with countless signs of the ambiguities of gender and the concept of the human itself, crafting a plurality and vision of gender that is not just fluid, but that crosses genders, cultures, and time. By scrambling genders and species, time and history, Michele offers us a vision of subjectivities that lay beyond the demarcations of organism and machine, human and animal, male and female.

6

ART SCHOOL: DRESSING THE QUEER AND ANTIGENDERED BODY

If Art School is here for five years or 50 years, at least we wanted to have made an impact on the way that fashion is seen.

Eden Loweth (2019)

For Autumn/Winter 2017, Art School presented their collection in a two-hour durational performance. Inspired by the Ballets Russes and the Bauhaus, friends of the brand and performance artists from the Theo Adams Company presented the clothes in a whirlwind of improv, dance, and sound-fuelled performances at Fashion East's emerging designer showcase. Velvet cowl-neck dresses, thin-strap tops, Swarovski-encrusted jackets, and flared pants clad the non-binary and trans* bodies. Indeed, ever since their first inaugural collection, Art School had the queer and trans* bodies at its heart. Founded by cultural criticism graduate Tom Barrett and fashion graduate Eden Loweth, Art School swiftly became known for its genderqueer and trans-centred approach and developed into an inclusive and diverse fashion brand.

It almost seems paradoxical that Art School emerged through Fashion East and Topman's MAN platform at London Fashion Week, not just because the designers identify as non-binary, but because their clothes are meant to dress all kinds of genders and all kinds of bodies. They are defying the fashion system's traditional parameters of separating menswear and womenswear by designing for bodies in transition – between genders and between ages. Their practice is informed by their non-binary friends and the queer community, aiming to redefine the limitations of gendered fashion and 'to celebrate idiosyncratic individuality of queer style' (SHOWstudio 2022). In line with their community-based approach to design and identity – regardless of gender, sexuality, age, or race – Art School reflects its diversity in their casting of 'non-conventional' models. Far more than tokenistic, the 'models' presenting the designs are primarily collaborators, friends, and creatives from the duo's own community.

In this chapter I will first discuss Art School's antigender design as centred in and within the queer and trans* community. Their approach as a non-binary design collective, as well as their positioning within London's queer community, will be taken into consideration. The first moment in this analysis deals with the aspect of performance. With a background in performance studies and as a performance artist, Barratt and Loweth's collection presentations regularly use performative aspects to further illustrate their message of inclusivity and diversity. Art School's aim of including a diverse and intersectional cast and representatives in their shows and work will be the topic of the second moment of analysis, where the intersections of trans, fat, aging, and disabled people and bodies play a central role in Art School's antigender approach. Lastly, Art School's incorporation of gothic elements represents an important moment in their antigender fashion. Drawing parallels between the traumatic experiences of queer people today and the essential queerness of the gothic and its uncanny horror plays an important role in the later collections of Art School and its antigender fashion.

DESIGNING WITH AND WITHIN LONDON'S QUEER/TRANS* COMMUNITY

Art School emerged at a time of increasing awareness and sensibility towards social issues within the fashion industry and Western culture. Fuelled and formed by social media, many social movements took shape during the 2010s, such as the Black Lives Matter protests initiated by Alicia Garza, Opal Tometi, and Patrisse Cullors in 2013, the #MeToo movement that gained global recognition in 2017, or the climate protests Fridays for Future and Extinction Rebellion that began in 2018 and 2019 respectively. Additionally, transgender visibility and rights gained increasing momentum in the second decade of the twenty-first century with more openly transgender models on runways and in advertising campaigns. Consequently, many fashion labels proclaimed they would rethink and challenge the industry's disruptive and excluding parameters that relied on separate gendered collections and its commercialisation into divided runway shows, editorials, advertising campaigns, and retail spaces. Younger brands like Vetements, Telfar, Off-White, or Eckhaus Latta work beyond the traditional trappings of the designer brand and practice a collaborative and collective design approach that transcends borders of art, design, and fashion (Gerrie 2023).

In a similar way then, Art School represents a design collective and community-centred brand that takes 'luxury fashion as their communicative tool to explore contemporary queerness' (SHOWstudio 2022). While many designers start with a mood or concept that then

gets developed and redefined into a cohesive idea, created and presented in a runway show with booked models, Art School begins with the people wearing the clothes. As Loweth explains:

> The way in which we work is that we work backwards. So, we start with all the casting and then make a mood for the season. We then create the looks based around them and their personalities. Each season they evolve, as we evolve with our friends who wear the clothes. (SHOWstudio 2018, 1:01)

These *icons*, as Art School calls them, not only inform the cut and sizing of the collection, but the aesthetic and style that is primarily rooted in the queer and trans* community. In other words, gender fluidity or non-binary identities are an essential part of Art School's design approach. Loweth and Barratt, who identify as non-binary themselves, occupy and create a space of ambiguity, of antigender fashion, both in the collections and on the runway. As Barratt explains to *Dazed* magazine:

> It's not menswear, it's not being a man, not being a woman – it's like anything in-between that you can express. That's the next step, because we have the whole Caitlyn Jenner thing now. The transgender narrative is that you were a man and now you're a woman, whereas (the reality is) much more complicated than that, especially for our generation of people. (Brinkhurst-Cuff 2017)

As a design duo, Loweth and Barratt exemplify what Vanessa Gerrie (2023) calls a 'borderless fashion' practice, which centres on collaboration and creative interaction. While 'the fantasy of the designer in an ivory tower, dreaming up wonderful ideas in isolation, has never been accurate', as writer Lou Stoppard clarifies (2018, 13), the narrative of the fashion designer as sole creative genius pervades the twentieth century, from Paul Poiret to Alexander McQueen and John Galliano. While the reality of creating fashion has always rested upon collaboration and a team of pattern makers and cutters, seamstresses and tailors, stylists and production managers, designers today are increasingly challenging the myth of the genius fashion designer. Accordingly, Art School positioned itself as more than a designer brand; rather, it is a movement that seeks to amplify and visualise queer voices and collaborators:

> all of us exist in the everyday. All of our models are friends or people that we know who have other jobs and from all kinds of life. And more and more, as we've developed the label, we're trying to include all sides of – not just our community, but outside of the community as well,

> because I think it's really important that this queer movement doesn't just stay within this idea of queer people wearing it. It's also open to anyone to interpret it in their own way. (SHOWstudio 2018)

Furthermore, Barratt and Loweth occupy a space beyond the formal fashion design trajectory. While Loweth graduated from the Bachelor of Arts Fashion programme at Ravensbourne University London, Barratt studied Criticism, Communication, and Curation at Central Saint Martins. The latter is an interdisciplinary programme focused on cultural history and critical theory, and spans the fields of art, design, architecture, fashion, media, literature, and performance. It is particularly the latter that plays an essential part in Art School's antigender fashion design. Barratt is a practicing video artist and performer with a focus on feminist film aesthetics and the communication of queer and counter-cultural style.

Despite Art School's early critical success – the brand received a nomination for the Best Emerging Menswear Designer of the Year in 2018 and was declared as being 'on the cusp of a creative revolution' (Hunger 2017) – the label underwent extensive changes and turbulent times. Accordingly, in August 2020 the duo split, with Loweth acting henceforth as the sole creative director for Art School following Barratt's departure. Loweth recounts that 'the [Spring/Summer 2021] season was a bit of a blur because Tom was there right at the very beginning and then he wasn't, so it was a big transitional period' (Loweth in Conroy 2021).

Additionally, in 2021, Art School and Loweth faced backlash after allegations of exploitation and misconduct emerged on social media. The claims of unpaid labour were raised by former models and employees. Lucia Blayke, trans-rights activist and casting director for Art School's Autumn/Winter 2021 show, claimed that 'neither she nor the majority of models' including trans* people of colour that face larger societal issues 'had been compensated for their work' (Rodgers 2021). In a statement published by *Dazed* magazine, Loweth took responsibility for 'the unacceptable delays in payment to suppliers, contractors, and members of the community', further claiming that Art School was 'working tirelessly to resolve these issues as quickly as possible', pointing to the financial difficulties faced by young brands (Rodgers 2021). Since the allegations became public in June 2021, Loweth's and the brand's public website and Instagram platforms have been deleted. At the time of writing, the Autumn/Winter 2021 collection was Art School's last collection to date.

The issue of unpaid labour within the fashion industry is not an isolated one, however. Anthropologist Giulia Mensitieri (2020) identified exploitation and precariousness as an integral part of the fashion and particularly the luxury fashion industry. Emblematic of contemporary capitalism and the neoliberal project, Mensitieri argues that the system of fashion

relies on the exchange of monetary compensation with significant symbolic capital, creating ‘a considerable gap between the fantasies of the dream, of luxury and of glamour that fashion disseminates and sells through its products, and the often precarious and unpaid work that produces it’ (2020, 251).

The gap between the glamourous image and devastating realities of fashion also pervade other social issues, from sustainability to representation and diversity. Commenting on the increasingly antagonistic paradox of the fashion industry, writer Connie Wang states that fashion ‘likes to see itself as eternally woke, but it’s also an establishment that is undeniably elitist. In other words, fashion is a bastion for tolerance, and fashion is also exclusionary’ (2021, 219–20). Additionally, while representation is important to foster social change, Wang argues that fashion seems ‘to stop just short of real reckoning beyond simple representation’ (2021, 220). For these reasons, it then seems all the more important to analyse the ways in which Art School practices and represents antigender fashion as a label that has set itself the task of representing and celebrating contemporary queer style.

For its debut collection, Autumn/Winter 2017, Art School aimed to position itself as a genderqueer fashion collective, illustrating their own gender-fluid realities and those of their friends and queer community. ‘We're not just trying to jump on a queer bandwagon’, said Loweth, ‘this is how we live and see the world’ (Loweth in Stansfield 2017). Consequently, the presentation featured an array of friends and non-models reinterpreting everyday-wardrobe pieces into a cohesive collection. Gingham tops and skirts were combined with fishnet tights and satin pants, tube dresses worn over turtleneck sweaters, a velvet cowl-neck dress contrasted with a transparent chiffon dress, and Swarovski crystals and rhinestones decorated flared pants, jewellery, and colourfully painted faces (Figure 6.1).

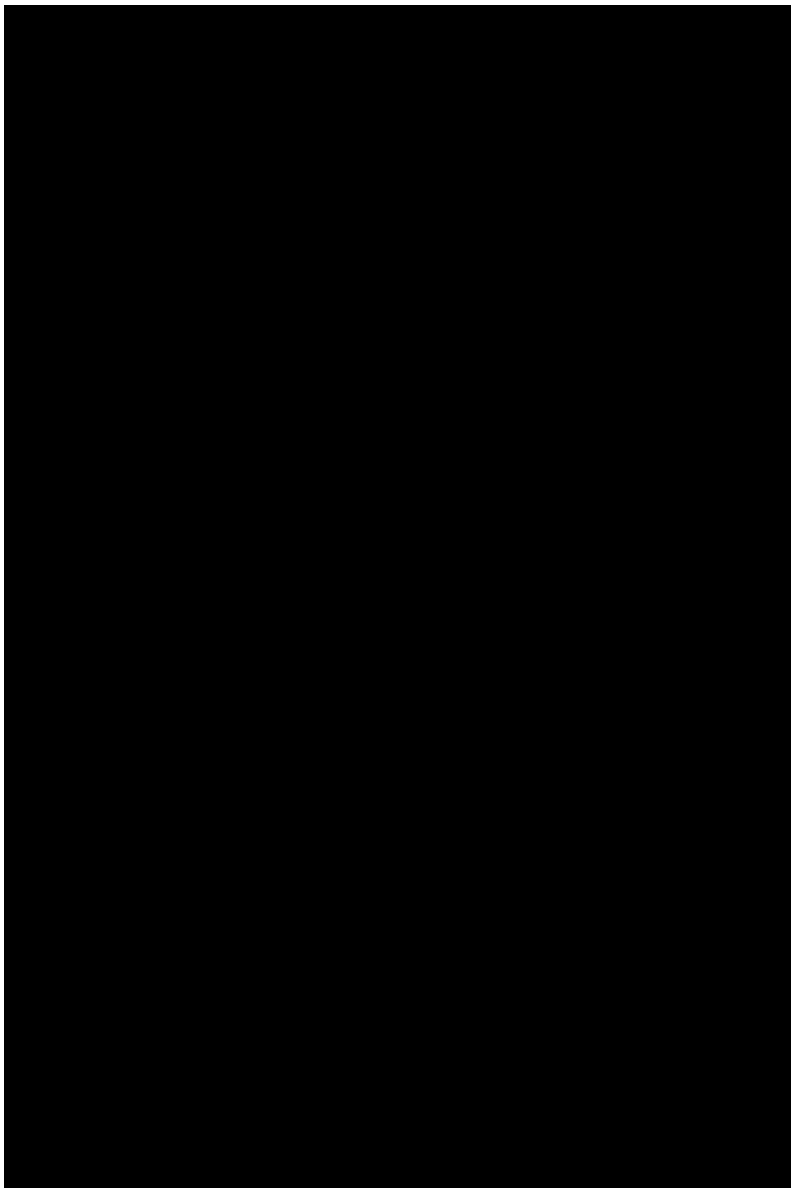

Figure 6.1 Art School Autumn/Winter 2017. (Photo: Ella Dror PR)

The Ballets Russes, Bauhaus, and Derek Jarman's explorative writing on colour informed the collection, though the main inspiration was the queer and non-binary people involved. As Loweth states, 'Art School is a celebration of the non-binary body. A big part of the story of Art School is the people around us in our everyday lives, because no one is represented the way that we want to be represented' (Loweth in Stansfield 2017). As Barratt emphasises, 'it's not about being gender neutral, it's about expressing gender, any form of gender' (Barratt in Stansfield 2017).

The antigender fashion approach was not only evident in the way the garments combined masculine and feminine signifiers in the form of colours and cuts, but in the way the garments were embodied by all kinds of bodies and all kinds of genders. As Luke Leitch (2017)

wrote, ‘this was bespoke otherness … unfettered, liberated from libido, and pure’. Gay, lesbian, queer, and transgender bodies presented the designs, danced, and performed. The presentation of the collection transcended the traditional runway show and cemented the performative aspect of Art School’s antigender fashion, which will be examined in the following section.

MOMENT I: PERFORMING FASHION, PERFORMING QUEERNESS – STAGING ANTIGENDER FASHION

For their fashion week debut at Fashion East’s emerging designer showcase, Art School delivered a two-hour performance that played out like a rehearsal. The space was filled with theatre props: chairs, ladders, and stage parts. The ‘models’, consisting of friends of the label, including designer Barratt, and performers from the Theo Adams Company, moved through the space, beginning with a warm-up, stretches, and group choreographies. Some read and flipped through a script, others ‘rehearsed’ the text while walking around (Figure 6.2). The performance then became more energetic and turned into a mix of dance choreographies, singing, emotional outbursts, and intimate scenes between couples. Directed by Theo Adams, the presentation resembled a piece of performance art rather than a traditional fashion show, with Adams explaining that the performance was inspired by a rehearsal, as ‘it’s more interesting than people just standing still for two hours’ (Adams in Stansfield 2017).

Figure 6.2 Art School Autumn/Winter 2017. (Photo: Ella Dror PR)

The performance of the collection presents an interesting case in terms of antigender fashion and the intricacies of gender and performance/performativity. For one, the performance of a 'rehearsal' draws a parallel between performance/non-performance and gender/antigender. Accordingly, the people performing are simultaneously on stage and not on stage, as they perform scenes that are usually hidden or take place behind the scenes, backstage. They are performing a non-performance, revealing the ambiguity and in-betweenness of performance – and identity. In this way, the performance speaks to the performativity of gender and the revealing characteristic of antigender fashion that both acts and relies on the signs/performance of gender and, at the same time, reveals its construction. As Barratt stated, 'it felt more like performance than fashion' (Barratt in Stansfield 2017).

The performance of a rehearsal speaks to Erving Goffman's influential work in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959). Developing the analogy of social life as theatre, with the front stage as the performance of identity, and the backstage for preparations of the performance, Goffman 'articulated a performative perspective by providing a dynamic definition of identity not as a *state of being* but as *acts of doing*' (Tseëlon 2016, 154; original italics). While Butler theorised gender as performative, Goffman's concept of the presentation of self emphasises the ongoing 'performance' of identity, including but not limited to gender.

Accordingly, Art School's performance of the 'rehearsal' put on stage what is usually hidden behind it. It mixed and scrambled front-stage mannerism with backstage preparations of identity construction. In this way then, the performance of the rehearsal was antigender fashion in the way that it revealed the construction of identity 'on stage' while also scrambling sartorial gender signifiers. Centring around queer, trans, and non-binary individuals and bodies, the performance incorporated the vast and intricate history of queer performance and performativity. Some aspects of the performance were particularly reminiscent of ballroom vogueing and drag theatricality that, in many ways, are important components of queer style and culture (Jones 2020; Geczy and Karaminas 2013).

The ambiguity and antigender design was enhanced by the performance that embodied the designer's queer background – or, as Leitch (2017) described it, 'a free-form safe-space forum for aesthetically pure queerness that explicitly revelled in the difference of non-binary gender infini-lectics'. As RoseLee Goldberg has claimed, 'historically, performance art has been a medium that challenged and violates borders between disciplines and genders, between private and public, between everyday lives and art, and that follows no rules' (1998, 30). In other words, performance art such as Art School's inaugural 'rehearsal' show, or more

explicitly drag performances, draws particular attention to the performativity of gender. As Geczy and Karaminas illustrate, this type

> also foregrounds the performance of gender by dint of the very excess of materiality that performance art commands. In the body attempting to become pure object, pure matter, it exposes the qualities of gender (and race, personality, identity and so on) as mobile and contingent elements. *It is when such elements are destabilized that they become visible*. (2017, 135)

It is this paradox and element of disruption or destabilisation that Art School's antigender fashion approach benefits from in their catwalk shows for East Fashion and Topman's MAN.

For the Spring/Summer 2018 collection 'Queer Couture', trans* and non-binary friends and collaborators walked the runway in voluminous gowns – most remarkably the first look, a printed tulle dress with cording, presented by multimedia artist and first Art School icon, Josephine Jones – pleated skirts, slip dresses, shirts, and tailored pieces like suits, jackets, and coats. Many pieces were fastened and made adjustable through strings or cords, others through rows of buttons (Figure 6.3). The show notes stated: 'Rooted in a cast who are emblems of trans defiance. The catwalk is reconstructed into their safe space. A space of theatre, friendship, rebellion, expression and fantasy' (Dscene 2017). In this space, then, the Spring/Summer 2018 show was a performance of queerness, drag, and vogueing. Structured in five sequences, the models danced or ran down the catwalk, interrupted by Barratt's performance in a red satin dress and closed by a collective pose and walk of all models and designers. The show again emphasised Art School's focus and integration of queerness and queer culture, both in the colourful and bold garments that clothed the trans* and non-binary bodies, and in the theatricalisation of queer and trans* performances.

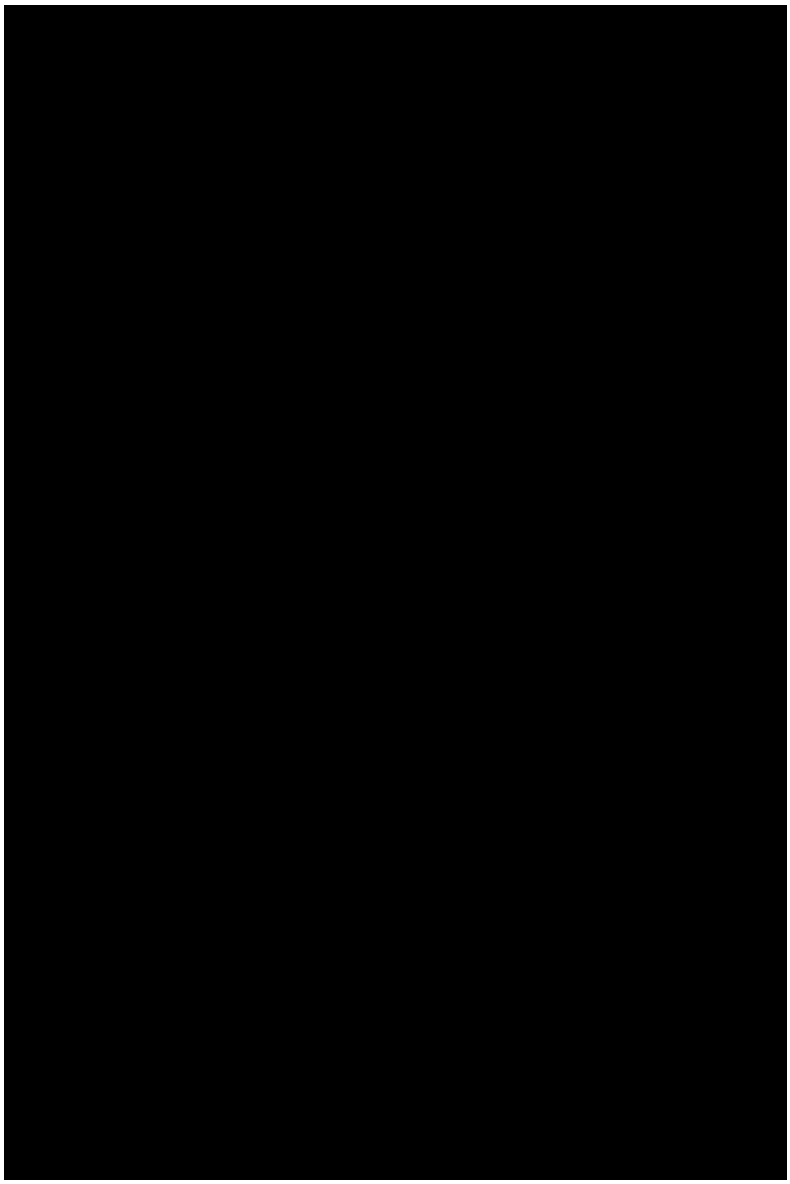

Figure 6.3 Art School Spring/Summer 2018. (Photo: The Lobby)

The runway show, performance art, and theatricality are in many ways inextricably linked. As Nancy Troy argues in *Couture Cultures*, both require 'an audience, a discourse, a profile in the public sphere', further noting that

> In the modern period the connections between fashion and theatre are multiple, encompassing not only the design of costumes for the stage, or the dramatic potential of fashion shows, or even the performative aspect of wearing clothes, but also the exploitation of the 'star' system for the commercial purpose of launching new clothes. (Troy 2002, 81)

The 1990s, in particular, represent a watershed moment in the interrelation of (performance) art and fashion. Designers like McQueen, Galliano, or in a more avant-gardist approach Martin

Margiela, held spectacular shows that blurred the borders between art, performance, and fashion and created a hybrid of performance art and fashion in the form of the runway show. As Ginger Gregg Duggan writes, these fashion designers have 'earned reputations for fashion shows that read like sequences of dream images or fantastical visions … [creating] elaborately orchestrated events that rival theatrical productions' (2001, 244).

Tracing the development of the fashion/performance hybrid, Duggan established a list of categories to describe their occurrences and connection to specific manifestations of performance art: spectacle, substance, science, structure, and statement (2001, 244). Accordingly, designers like McQueen or Galliano who fall under the category of spectacle, created runway shows that go beyond the presentation of clothing. Connected to the performing arts of theatre and opera, as well as feature films and music videos, they often contain elaborate plots, interesting locations, recognisable themes, and culminate in a grand finale. In contrast, the second category includes substance designers like Viktor & Rolf or Hussein Chalayan, who emphasise process over product. For them, the concept behind the clothes takes centre stage and is often realised in a more abstract way. The runway shows of fashion designers that fall under Duggan's third category of science are primarily influenced by fabric creation and construction. Known for their attention to the technology of fabric, the runway shows of Junya Watanabe or Issey Miyake, for instance, often feature transformative aspects to highlight the garments' material and construction. Fourth, structure designers' focus lies on the form of clothing. Like Margiela or Rei Kawakubo of Comme des Garçons, structure designers are primarily concerned with form over function, resulting in quite physical rather than abstract manifestations of concepts, like Margiela's *flat* or *oversized* collections.

It is the last category, that of statement, however, that best describes Art School's approach. According to Duggan, 'statement designers create environments and presentations that reflect confrontational ideas and messages' (2001, 263), and are charged with social commentary. Art School's Autumn/Winter 2017, Spring/Summer 2018, and their last show with Fashion East, Spring/Summer 2019, contained both an emphasis and a statement on the realities and lives of queer and trans* people. The latter, with its sequined sheath dresses, fluidly tailored pieces, miniskirts, slashed T-shirts, feathered stilettos, and brightly coloured palette, was again presented by an array of friends of the label, trans, non-binary, and genderqueer people, as well as people of different ages and ethnicities (Figure 6.4).

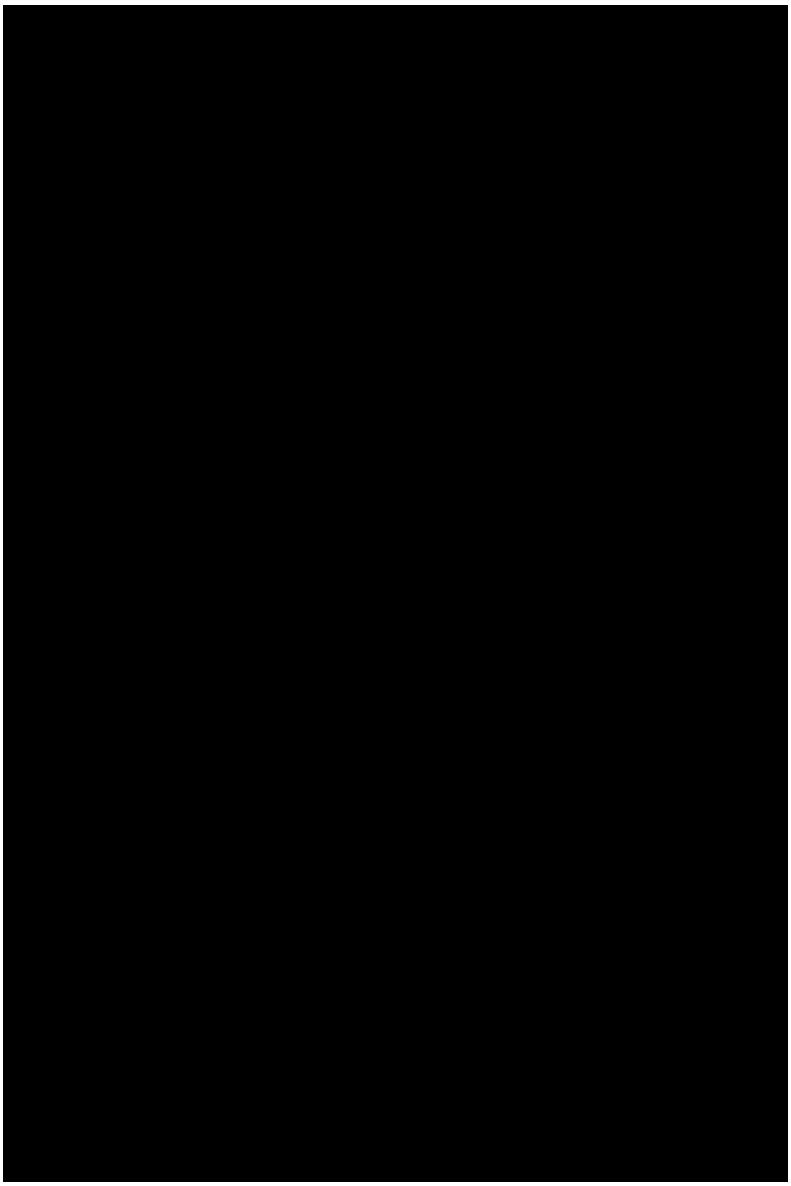

Figure 6.4 Art School Spring/Summer 2019. (Photo: Jeff Spicer / BFC / Getty Images)

While the show itself mostly followed the trajectory of a traditional fashion runway show, the presentation was interrupted by expressions of exhaustion, anxiety, and awkwardness. Accompanied by Handel's aria 'Lascia ch'io pianga', at different times, some models fell on the floor, while others seemed disoriented, even confused. Stressing the importance of the role of LGBTQIA+ people in and around the fashion industry, Art School put the representation of queer identity and the social anxiety surrounding it at the heart of their shows. 'The physical act of stepping onto a catwalk and being seen alongside people as a queer person' said the designer, 'is really powerful. It raises these individuals up' (Loweth in Conroy 2021). By casting primarily people who identify with the feminine end of the gender spectrum under a show called MAN, Art School presented a strong statement on gender and fashion. Furthermore, as Loweth stated: 'It's about the celebration of the queer form … [which] is not

something that is often explored or represented … but we are talking about it because we are those people. We are trying to do what we want to say as a young generation' (Loweth in Leitch 2017).

Although Art School centres on queerness, their understanding of it builds on the preceding advances of previous generations, both academically and socially. Elaborating on their perception of queer, Loweth states that for them it 'means everyone, all elements of the gender spectrum, all age groups, nationality, race, everything. I think it should be this melting pot of amazing individuals, and for us, that's what we enjoy doing – uplifting these individuals from all sides of this queer community and from all aspects of life' (SHOWstudio 2018). Loweth's understanding of queerness fits within the digital spaces, the emerging taxonomy of sexuality and gender identities, and broader socio-cultural shifts and visibility of trans* identities that impact and alter the conceptualisation and representations of gender. As Patrizia Calefato writes

> new communication techniques are altering the very definitions of corporeality in the social context, and there is a new theoretical awareness of what it means to read clothing as a 'disguise' which allows people to abandon social or sexual stereotypes, break the rules with deliberate ambiguity, and produce performances that give pleasure. (2017, 82)

Art School uses the art of performance to enhance, emphasise, and support their message and visibility of queer and trans* bodies. Their antigender fashion, then, is both a part and result of queering, of *troubling*, the runway.

MOMENT II: ANTIGENDER BODIES IN-BETWEEN – DRESSING INTERSECTIONALITIES OR THE TRANS*, AGEING, FAT, AND DISABLED BODY

The genderqueer and trans* body play a central role in Art School's antigender fashion. However, it is not just the presentation and performance that is built around the representation of queer identities, but the very construction and design of the garments that is informed by bodies in transition, by bodies in between genders, ages, sizes, and abilities. Art School's antigender fashion approach thus highlights the intersections of different and multiple identity experiences.

Originating in Black feminist thought, intersectionality offers a way of thinking through and understanding the complex and multiple dimensions (or intersections) of social identities like gender, sexuality, age, race, class, among others, and the ways in which they constitute and

build on each other, forming intersectional experiences of privilege and marginalisation (Collins and Bilge 2016, 1–3). As Susan B. Kaiser and Denise N. Green assert, fashion occupies an important space in the production of intersectionalities, as 'fashion highlights the multiple intersections and entanglements among gender, race, ethnicity, national identity, religion, social class, sexuality, body size, dis/ability, and other facets of our identities. Even more forcefully, it plays an active role in producing intersectionalities and entanglements: visibly, materially, conceptually' (2022, 34).

From their very beginnings, Art School emphasised wearability and comfort for trans, genderqueer, and aging bodies, integrating this into their fashion conception and construction. As Loweth explains, 'we do a lot with the construction, particularly with the suiting, to make sure it's comfortable for trans bodies' (SHOWstudio 2018). For instance, Art School uses the bias-cut on a variety of their garments. Championed by Madeleine Vionnet in the 1920s, the term bias-cut describes a process of cutting the fabric 'on the grain', meaning that rather than placing the pattern along the line of the weave, it is placed diagonally on the woven textile. In this way the crossing warp and weft threads create a natural stretch. The created elasticity allows the garment to fit against the body without the use of traditional pattern-making techniques, and the stretch accommodates the movements of the wearer. In the 1990s, Galliano made the bias-cut one of his signature styles. Inspired by Vionnet's ingenious approach, Galliano propelled the bias-cut slip dress to the forefront of fashion and 1990s evening wear, offering an antidote to the grungy and deconstructed aesthetic of the time. While Galliano has been an ongoing source of inspiration for Barratt and Loweth, for Art School, the bias-cut also offers the elasticity to accommodate all kinds of bodies, whether trans, female, fat, or aging. 'When we started doing [the bias-cut] with suiting as well as with the silk slips', explains Loweth, 'it really clicked because it works with so many different women's bodies and it just felt like it was the right kind of statement' (SHOWstudio 2018). The bias-cut became an integral part of Art School's garment construction and accompanied the design collective's aim to foster an inclusive and intersectional approach to fashion.

Related to this inclusive and intersectional approach, the press release for the Autumn/Winter 2019 collection stated they were 'envisioning their models *en route* to the opera', 'depict[ing] a world of inclusivity with garments that open doors' (SHOWstudio 2019, 0:57). Accordingly, while running under the label of menswear, Art School's first stand-alone show consisted of asymmetrical slip dresses cut on the bias, tailored jackets, and pants presented by an array of queer, trans, feminine, aging, and fat bodies. The combination of classically 'masculine' tailored pieces like suit jackets – worn with textured leather corsets –

pants, and coats with ‘feminine’ aspects like iridescent pink and fitted and flowing dresses and skirts, for one, speaks to the antigender fashion approach and its use and reinterpretation of gendered sartorial signs.

While the bias-cut covertly enables the garment to fit different body types and genders, Art School also quite literally scrambled and sliced gender signifiers of fashion in this collection. Termed ‘glad rags’ by fashion critic Sarah Mower (2019a), the collection was a mix of asymmetrical bias-cut dagger dresses, skirts with large, gold disc-like sequins, a gold-leather-belted safari suit, big-skirted cotton gowns, and ‘ragged’ pieces like fragmentary pink velvet dresses and cutaway T-shirts and hoodies with jagged holes (Figure 6.5). Some looks were also adorned with headpieces by Shiori Takahashi, constructed from old shoes and other ‘found objects … created from disregarded, repurposed lost property from queer spaces across London’ (Mower 2019a).

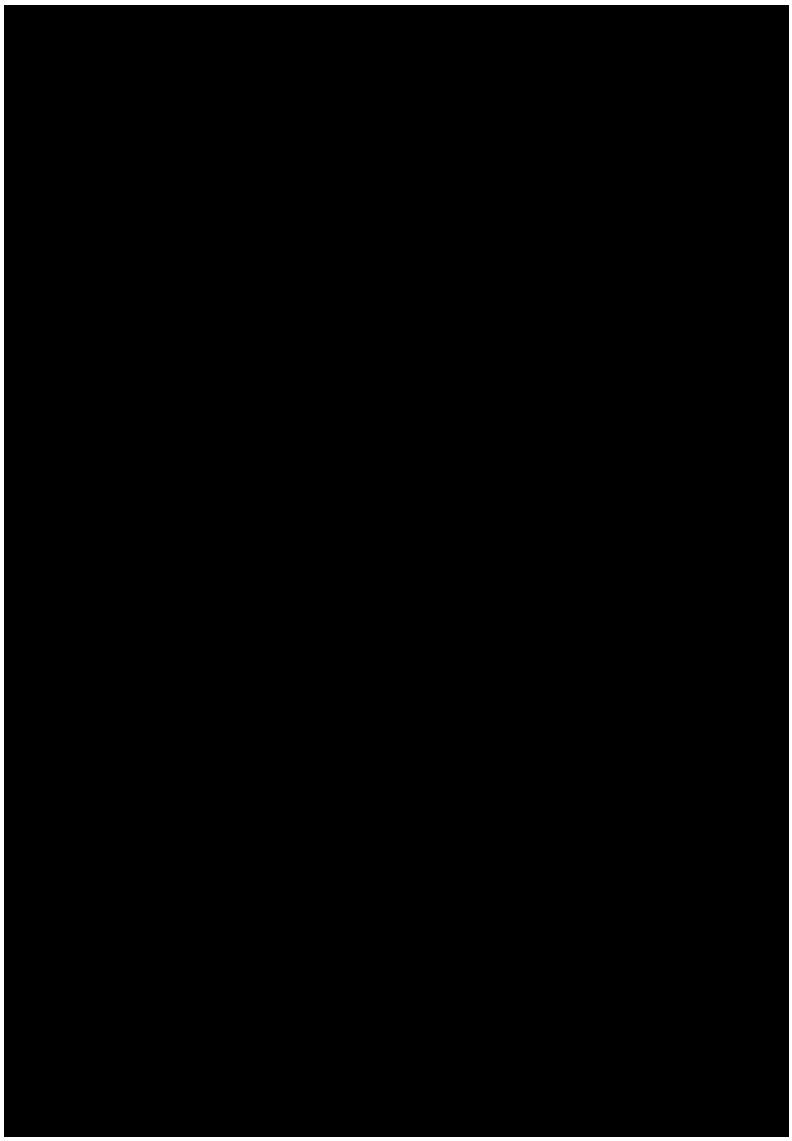

Figure 6.5 Art School Autumn/Winter 2019. (Photo: Estrop / Getty Images)

While the clothes were antigender in the way they combined, scrambled, and revealed masculine and feminine signifiers, Art School's message of intersectional inclusivity spoke even louder through the people walking the runway. The finale was a performance of friends and allies hugging, holding hands, and caressing each other's hair while one person, dressed in the final look of tailored jacket, blond wig with a bow, and stilettos that seemed to reference Lady Gaga's early aesthetic, was picked up and carried down the runway. 'There is at least one more welcoming place, now', wrote Mower, 'catwalk fashion, an arena in which Art School has brought the terms *gender nonbinary* and *trans* into mainstream discussion' (2019a).

However, Art School's antigender fashion does not only embody trans* and non-binary gender identities, but also speaks to the embodiment of age. Since the 1950s with its youth quake and increasing impact of teenage culture, as well as the introduction of prêt-a-porter, fashion has been obsessed with the idea of youth. As Julia Twigg contends:

> Fashion and age sit uncomfortably together. Fashion inhabits a world of youthful beauty, of fantasy, imagination, allure. Its discourses are frenetic and frothy; its images glamorous and – above all – youthful. Age by contrast is perceived as a time of greyness, marked by retirement from display or engagement with the erotic and style conscious. It is associated with a toned-down, self-effacing presentation. (2013, 1)

Fashion had and still has a somewhat awkward relationship with the concept of age, with teenage girls modelling designs for women, or the consistent removal of signs of age such as wrinkles and grey hair. Yet, as Twigg emphasises, 'age is surely one of the key or "master" identities, along with gender, class, "race" and other contenders. We should not, therefore, be surprised to find it reflected in ideas about clothing' (2012, 1032).

In *Fashion and Age: Dress, Body and the Later Life* (2013), Twigg explored the ways in which age and fashion intersect and discussed the concept of 'age ordering'. Accordingly, 'the tradition of age ordering in dress' regulates the cultural conceptions of acceptable, hierarchical, and conventional ways of dressing that are deemed appropriate for the respective stages of life (Twigg 2013, 3). While all genders suffer from the dictates of age-appropriate clothing styles, it is particularly normative femininity that is equated to youthfulness. Deviating from a youthful femininity, for instance by aging, can result in 'cultural exile from femininity itself' (Twigg 2013, 5). In this way, then, Art School's inclusion of ageing bodies in its runway fashion both challenges and deconstructs the concept of age ordering. Rather than adhering to the age ordering of dress that dictates toned-down, self-effacing styles, Art School dressed their models aged fifty and above in striking, flashy, and skin-revealing clothes. Art School thus

functions as a cultural intermediary that makes older subjectivities visible while, alongside intersectional identities of gender, sexuality, race, and so on, envisioning new and different ways of embodying age (and antigender).

That intersectionality is a central aspect of Art School's antigender approach was even more evident in the Spring/Summer 2021 ready-to-wear collection and runway show. Taking place on 24 August 2020, amidst the ongoing challenges and restrictions posed by the Covid-19 pandemic, the show was held outside in the gardens of Waterlow Park in London and later published as a filmed catwalk show accompanied by Celeste's 'Little Runaway' and 'I Can See the Change' (Art School 2020). The collection was both an answer to and result of the turbulent times the designer and the world went through that year. Parting ways with partner and co-designer Barratt, Loweth went through a 'traumatic' period that resulted in fifty-four looks made by hand in the designer's apartment, an experience he described as cathartic: 'I think in a way that's how I was able to get clarity over it, but also why it ended up being such a huge collection', he said. 'I needed to get out everything I wanted to say that rounded up the last four years of Art School, and then be able to move on from it' (Loweth in Moss 2020a).

As an apt metaphor, the collection was titled 'Therapy' and featured, in comparison to its previously brightly coloured collections, a darker outlook in the form of a set of three colour tones: navy, army green, and black. Each was dedicated to a different section of the Art School community: the first (blue) was a 'real dissection of what queer culture is. … These trans women are my rocks' (Loweth in Newbold 2020); the second (green) paid tribute to the craftspeople and members of the Art School studio; while the third (black) honoured the people they met in London's night life and queer community. The focus of the collection, as Loweth explained, was on the idea of reflections as well as to integrate 'more clothes that had a menswear reference to them, something that felt strong in the silhouette' (SHOWstudio 2020, 01:35). The result was an array of classically tailored pieces like overcoats and trench coats, tailored jackets, leather and safari jackets, and high-waisted trousers in combination with typical Art School (and traditionally feminine connoted) pieces, including corseted bustier dresses, bias-cut slip dresses, and A-line gowns (Figure 6.6). However, 'the much bigger question that Loweth took on – and answered – during his time of introspection', writes Mower, 'is who does fashion *see* wearing such clothes?' (2020). Art School – like the seasons before – hired a group of trans* and non-binary people to embody the garments on the runway. This time, however, the cast was extended to include models of wide-ranging ages, sizes, ethnicities, genders, sexualities, and abilities. Alongside Art School regulars – including a group of women who buy the clothes and mentor him, such as former *SHOWstudio* editor Mimma Viglezio or

Cozette McCreery of Sibling – were seven models from Zebedee, such as Damian Harper, an amputee, and Kofi Holland, a model with Down syndrome. Zebedee is a talent agency devoted to people with disabilities as well as trans/non-binary people that Loweth encountered during his contribution to a paper on diversity and inclusion by Fashion Roundtable.

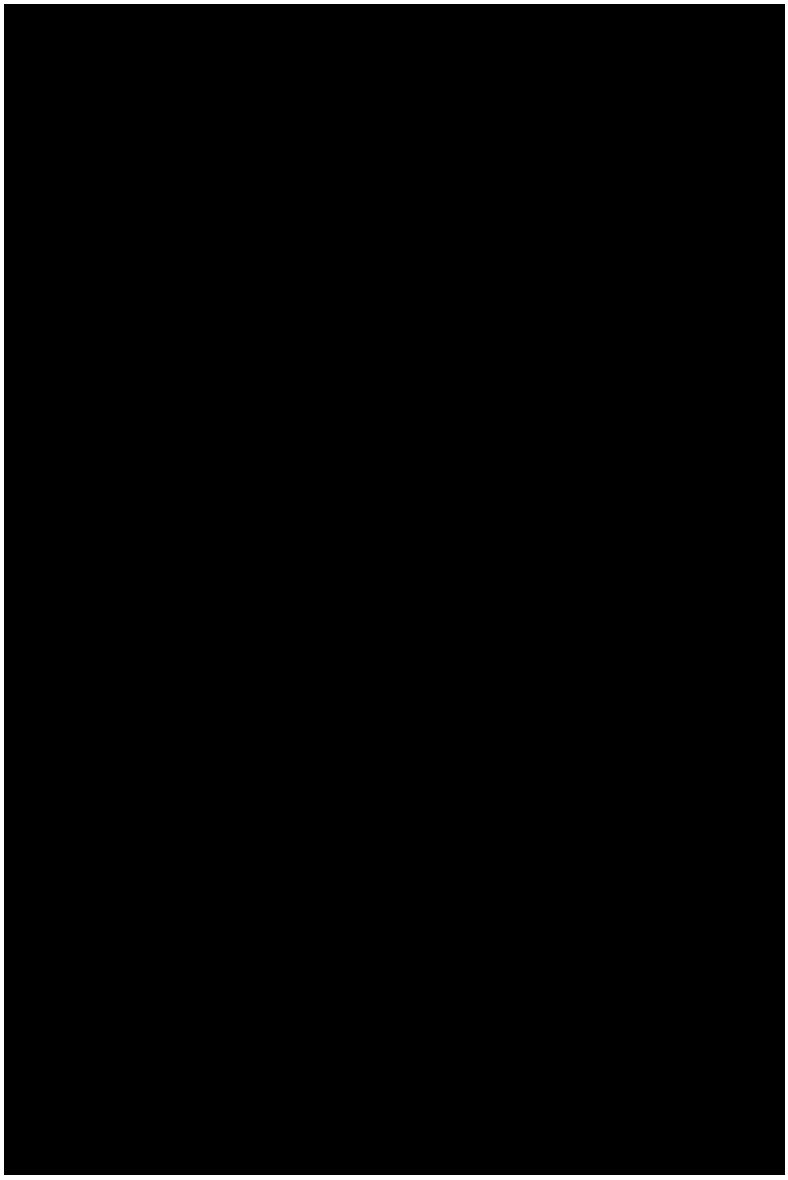

Figure 6.6 Art School Spring/Summer 2021. (Photo: Art School)

Art School's antigender approach and inclusion of diverse people and bodies was also reflected in the construction and conception of the garments: Many pieces were cut on the bias, made adjustable through cords or metallic chain belts, or (re)movable buttons. Discussing look 13 (Figure 6.7) from the collection, Loweth explains:

> It goes back to the beginning … where we looked at the idea of interchangeable clothing. The coat is cut on the bias. This means it can be worn in different ways. It can be worn single or double breasted, it can be belted, and it has a general tolerance in the way that it is worn. … We also cut the split very high, which means that it is a very easy wear. Whether you are someone like Damien who has a prosthetic leg, or you are someone like one of our Matches customers for example, who may be a larger lady who wants to wear something that feels easy but also can fit really well. It is these small details that really helped to make something tolerant in the way that a garment can be worn. (SHOWstudio 2020, 02:17)

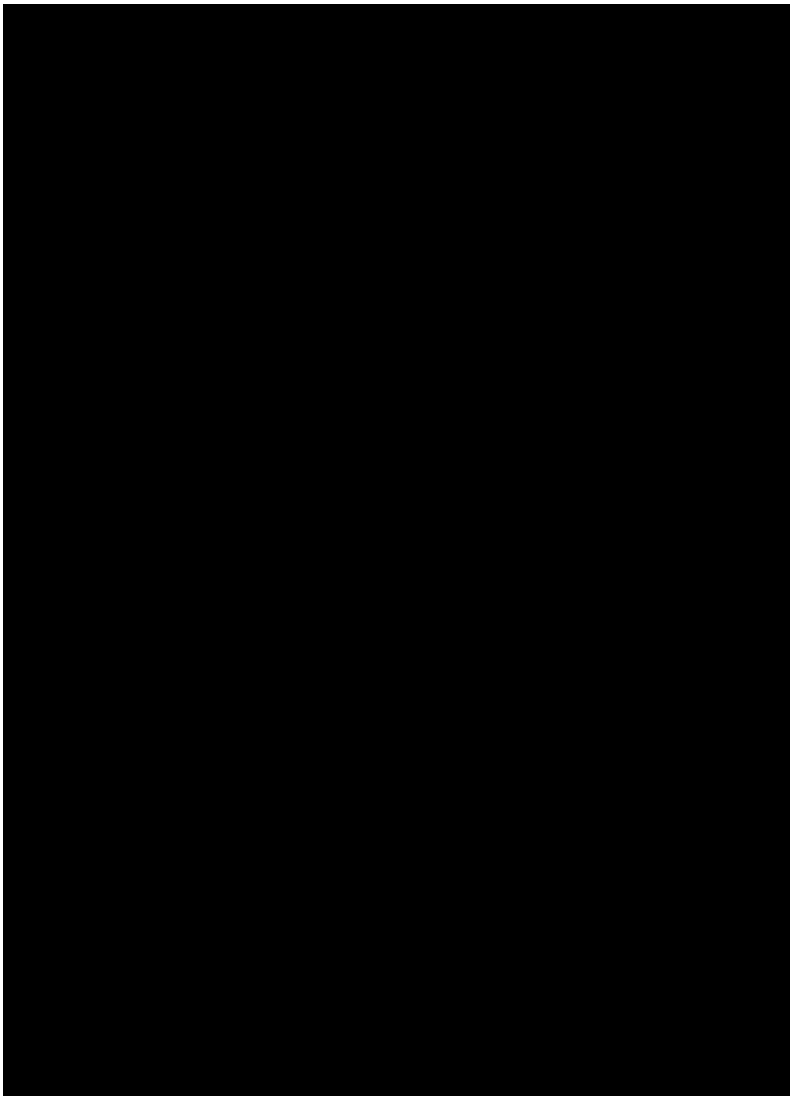

Figure 6.7 Art School Spring/Summer 2021. (Photo: Art School)

Further, the same approach adopted to the construction of a pair of trousers creates ‘a fluidness to the way it hangs across the body’ says the designer (Loweth in Hyland 2020). In this way, then, Art School’s Spring/Summer 2021 collection creates fashion that is antigender in its destabilising aspect (e.g., scrambling gender signifiers), but also envisioned clothes not just for bodies in transition or transitioning, but bodies in-between – genders, sizes, ages, and abilities.

This approach speaks to some of the strategies employed by students with visible physical disabilities presented in a study by Susan Kaiser, Carla Freeman, and Stacy Wingate (1990). Accordingly, the students modified and made their clothes to adapt to their needs and pleasures, either through DIY or ‘hacking’ (Busch 2009). Moreover, the design of adjustable and adaptable clothing embodies the strategy of ‘social inclusion’, which describes the call for or wish to generally include more functional features in fashion design and the garment industry. While the concept of social inclusion from the perspective of disabled students might seem reversed in terms of today’s understanding that seeks to ‘encompass individuals who have been marginalized by the fashion industry, … the net overall effect or result could be the same’ (Kaiser and Green 2022, 290). In the context of queer studies, Eve Sedgewick (2008) identifies this contradiction in the difference between a ‘minoritising view’ and a ‘universalising view’ of social difference, in this case of sexual identity. Still, as Kaiser and Green illustrate, the minoritising versus universalising view also applies to the embodiment of fashion by disabled people, as the students ‘are asserting that rather than an exceptional minority experience, theirs might actually be the exemplary case of a general relation of compromise and innovation between specific embodiment and standardized clothing’ (2022, 291). Art School’s antigender fashion can be considered a universalising approach, and one that is political, in the sense that their antigender fashion is not ‘just’ meant for trans, non-binary, or gender-fluid people, but everyone with a gender identity and other intersecting identities.

Furthermore, in recent studies focusing on the embodiment of fashion and the intersections of masculinity, queerness, disability, and fatness, fashion studies scholar Ben Barry (2019, 2022) explores the ways in which individuals embody, assemble, and challenge dominant notions of fashionable masculinities. While men who are disabled and/or fat ‘are the most distanced from fashion’s male body ideals’, they employ strategies that ‘make fashion and fashion culture work for their bodies’ (Barry 2019, 275–76). Using the concept of ‘fashionable masculinities’, Barry reveals how men inhabiting non-normative bodies expand the meaning of masculinity and masculine embodiment through their styling and wearing of clothes. Drawing on crip theory, he further explores the ways in which disabled men and masculine non-binary people *crip* normative masculinity (Barry 2022). Accordingly, crip theory exposes the

construction of nondisabled bodies or compulsory able-bodiedness as the unmarked norm and, in turn, the construction of disabled people as abject subjects that deviate from it (Kafer 2013, 17). To crip, then, 'is to open up with desire for what disability brings into the world by disrupting nondisabled normativity' (Barry 2022, 161). By using self-fashioning as a tool, 'disabled fashionable masculinities crip not only dominant narratives of masculinity and disability but fashion itself' (Barry 2022, 174).

In a way, Art School's Spring/Summer 2021 addresses the ostracisation and pathologising of disabled and fat bodies, particularly in the way the simplicity and cut of the garments allude to the clothes worn by nurses and medical professionals in the twentieth century. The discrimination and ostracisation of disabled and fat bodies are fuelled by medical discourses that have, and still do, pathologise these bodies. By naming the collection 'Therapy', Art School's Spring/Summer 2021 collection can be understood as a commentary on this medicalisation of bodies, but also as an antidote or, indeed, therapy in the form of inclusive and universalising fashion that embodies different genders, ages, sizes, and abilities. Furthermore, by envisioning and embodying various forms of masculinity and femininity (fat, disabled, old), Art School *crips* normative fashion and offers an inclusive antigender fashion approach.

MOMENT III: ON GOTHIC QUEER CULTURES – THE UNCANNY HORROR IN ART SCHOOL'S ANTIGENDER FASHION

While Art School's early collections have focused and established a celebratory and, in many ways, pop cultural aesthetic of queer and trans* culture, the later collections succumbed to a darker and ultimately gothic approach, particularly the Spring/Summer 2020 and the Autumn/Winter 2020 and 2021 collections. The latter, titled 'Ascension', constitutes the first collection where Loweth worked as sole creative director from start to finish. Hence, their move away from the glitz and glamour of previous creations: 'It's my view on the world of Art School, rather than a joint view', Loweth explains to *SHOWstudio*, further clarifying that 'I am quite a goth and my favourite colour is black, so naturally it has more of a gothic mentality than in the past' (Loweth in Conroy 2021).

Accordingly, the collection was split into three colour tones: black, which constituted the largest share, red, and white. Presented as a recording of a runway show at London's Truman Brewery (Art School 2021), the cast consisted of previous Art School models and new queer and trans* icons including transgender model Finn Buchanan, and Bimini Bon-Boulash and Aurora Sexton, who both appeared in *RuPaul's Drag Race* UK. To the sound of dramatic

string music, the models walked out of the darkness into a smoke-filled space, illuminated by two lateral spotlights – a production that sat well with Loweth's overall aim: '*Ascension* is designed to act as more than a collection of clothes. It is a message of hope. No matter how hard the challenges our community may face, we will emerge from the darkness' (Loweth in Conroy 2021).

The clothes picked up the theme of hardship and hope: torn and slashed silk dresses, trousers, and jackets cut on the bias were paired with tailored leather jackets and coats; voluminous, floor-length A-line dresses were juxtaposed with coats and jackets cinched at the waist and body-fitting miniskirts and corseted tops; chunky combat boots, military hats, and structured uniform jackets met with embellished and glittering evening gowns – an interplay between vulnerability and strength, subjection and protection (Figure 6.8). This aspect was also evident in the chunky and embellished wheat chains that coiled around necks and wrist, were slung over bared torsos, or 'snaked through hats by Noel Stewart like exoskeletons' (Conroy 2021). The chains as well as the thick leather belts teeter on the brink of sexual innuendo and sadomasochism, with symbolism evoking shackles and the freedom of the gothic monster.

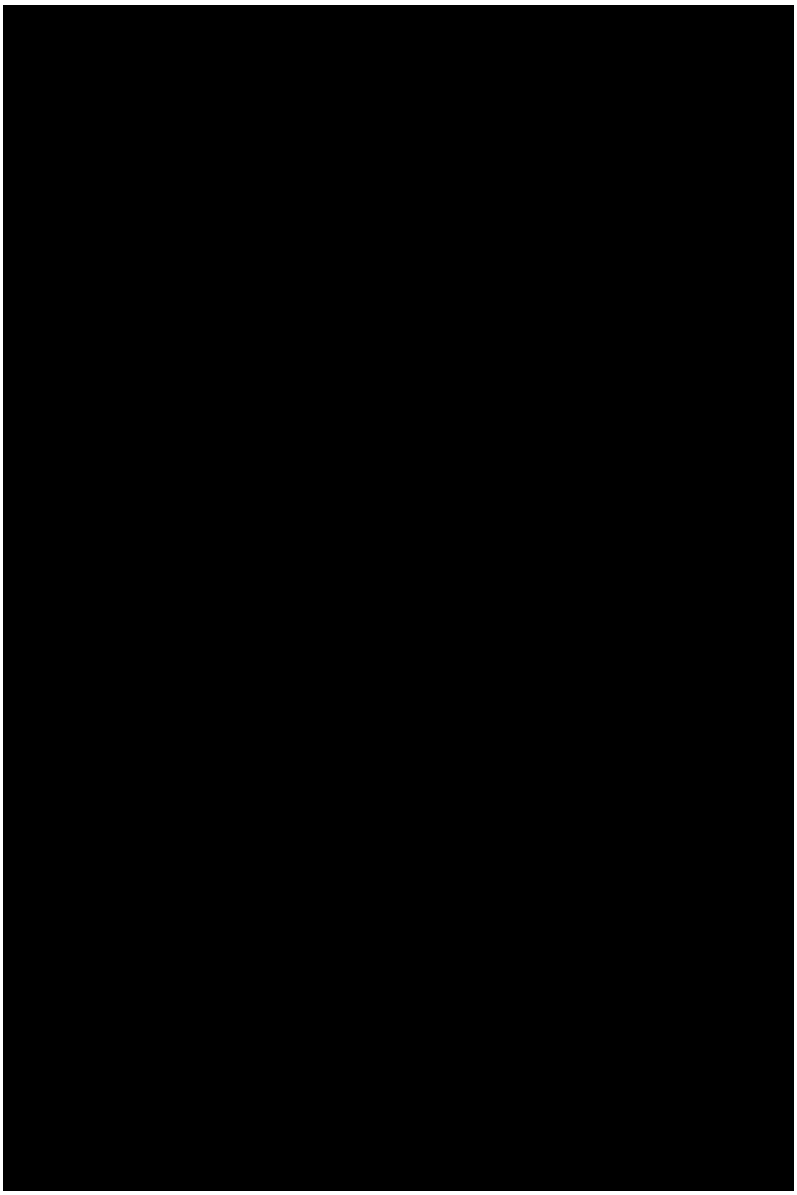

Figure 6.8 Art School Autumn/Winter 2021. (Photo: Art School)

It was these elements in particular that evoke the concept of the gothic. As Laura Westengard (2019) argues, gothic and queer culture – particularly the queer experience of insidious trauma – are deeply interwoven. Accordingly, as a literary genre 'obsessed with themes such as paranoia and doubling, terror, incarceration and live entombment, sexualized power dynamics and torture …, monstrosity, ghostliness and haunting (especially in dark, mysterious castles), the grotesque, and the uncanny' (Westengard 2019, 8), the gothic offers an aesthetic expression of the horrors and violence endured by the queer community, as well as reflecting antinormative queerness. As Westengard states,

> The excesses of the Gothic – its ability to place readers in an unsettled affective space, its indulgence in those thoughts and behaviors considered lurid and perverse, its tendency to

> dismember cultural norms and reform them in visibly parodic ways – offer queer ways of being that resonate with those who find themselves outside of the mainstream and those driven to resist normativity and to embrace the fluidity of movement that this resistance allows. (2019, 14)

Many critics have drawn parallels between the emergence of the gothic genre in Victorian Britain with its rigid societal structure, and its preoccupation with – conscious or unconscious – human fears and desires. In particular, the figure of the vampire represents an ample example of same-sex desires and homoeroticism, although, as Eszter Muskovits (2010, 33) argues in her discussion on Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, 'the character of the vampire represents more than simple homosexual tendencies, namely the fluidity of gender identity in a seemingly rigid gender structure of the Victorian society'. Against this backdrop, one cannot help but draw parallels between Art School's 'Ascension' collection and *Bram Stoker's Dracula*, the 1992 screen adaption by Francis Ford Coppola, be that through the blood-red colour theme or the torn and slashed garments.

Besides the association of the vampire, it is in the ambiguity of masculine and feminine sartorial signifiers, of non-binary and trans* people who have or are transitioning, and of different levels of scars and body modifications (visible top-surgery scars, burn scars, or spike piercings on the torso) that the fashion design is most monstrous and gothic, and ultimately antigender. As Westengard asserts, 'the Gothic is queer, trauma is gothic, and queer cultural production is both queer and gothic' (2019, 30). This queer and gothic cultural production is also symbolised in the show's title 'Ascension' and the (conceptual and literal) coming out of the darkness. It speaks to the trauma that the queer community endured, particularly through Covid-19 restrictions and the closing of (queer) nightlife spaces. In other words, Art School's 'Ascension' collection uses gothic elements to highlight the hardship and insidious trauma endured by the queer and trans* community. As Loweth illustrates, 'I think we often are attracted to things that people would ordinarily take as being [uglier] than they are beautiful. That's inherent to our work because queer people grow up with that instilled in their brain from a young age' (SHOWstudio 2018).

Art School's inclination to the gothic was also evident in its two preceding collections. For the Spring/Summer 2020 menswear collection titled 'Modern Nature', after Derek Jarman's journals, Loweth and Barratt imagined their models as otherworldly creatures – 'the idea', said Loweth, 'was that they were queer deities, archangels, witches', further clarifying that 'we always want to present our models as if they are Naomi Campbell, but this season we wanted to echelon them even higher. This season we cast more transpeople than ever before, and we

wanted to show each one, give them a voice' (Loweth in Mower 2019b). The show was a slow procession of zombies and witches walking, stumbling, or limping down the runway. To the ethereal music of Anna Calvi, who stood in a ritualistic circle of salt (was it to keep her in or the others out?), the models slowly made their way down the runway, with milky-white or black eyes, some barefoot, some in kitten heals. The effect was a spectral, uncanny show that one critic described as 'otherworldly with a touch of horror' (Peters 2019). While the creepy atmosphere might have already caused unease in the audience, the deliberately slow pace also ensured that the audience's gaze had to linger and take in every model and their look – from the silver coin-paillette and feather gowns, the button-through nurse dresses, and the corseted and hand-painted leopard-print mini dresses to the tailored vests and jackets slashed in the back, the black, glittered fringe gowns, and corseted tops (Figure 6.9).

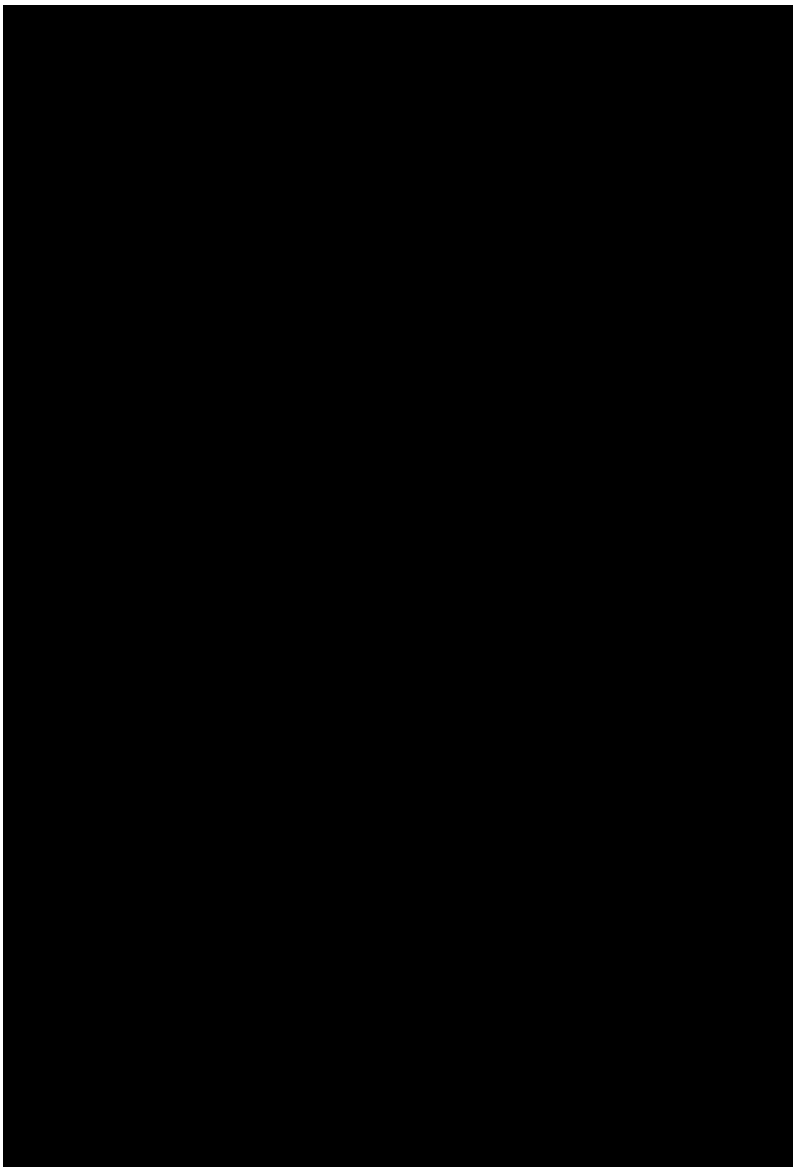

Figure 6.9 Art School Spring/Summer 2020 Menswear.
(Photo: Jeff Spicer / BFC / Getty Images for BFC)

In this way, Art School created what Geczy and Karaminas elsewhere described as a 'fashion chamber of horrors' (2021, 61). Simultaneously containing connotations of death (forbidden chambers, or chambers of torture) as well as pleasure (the boudoir), chambers are sites free from societal observation and judgement and allow the living out of one's forbidden desires and fantasies. In other words,

> The chamber is unrestricted by the inhibitions that come from being observed and judged. This means that the spectators of the fashion chamber all enjoy the pleasure of suspecting they are voyeurs. They are presented with something that has been hidden, even forbidden. The spectacle of the fashion chamber turns this relationship into something of a double helix, wherein of course the event is designed and staged to be seen, yet the audience are made to feel that they have stumbled on something completely foreign, unfamiliar and unhomely – uncanny (*unheimlich*). (Geczy and Karaminas 2021, 61)

Art School's fashion chamber of slowly stumbling zombies and witches not only created a space and collection of gender slippages that defied earthly (and Western) conceptions of gender, but a fashion chamber that acted as a site for cultish rituals conjuring up trans-humans, deities, and witches. Barratt drew parallels to the 2000s PlayStation game 'Silent Hill', whose first iteration revolves around a cult reviving a deity it worships: 'I think Silent Hill speaks a lot to the world today', said Barratt. 'For queer people it can often be a battle and scary, mentally intense and almost dystopian' (Barratt in Mower 2019b).

In the Autumn/Winter 2020 collection 'Fearless Love', the design duo continued its gothic, uncanny approach, albeit with a wider focus on artist collaboration and genderless workwear. Inspired by the artist's smock, the cast of trans* and diverse models presented an array of button-through smock-dresses (whose white iteration, in combination with head pieces resembling surgical hats, evoked images of nurses and medical professionals), tailored jackets and shirts cut on the bias in black and mud tones, transparent and glittering dresses and skirts, high-waisted pants, and flowing silk dresses. British artist Maggi Hambling collaborated on several pieces using layers of black fabric recycled from previous seasons, creating erupting 3-D structures. Artist Richard Porter's sculptures constructed from rocks, driftwood, and clay and ceramic hung around necks and off roughly braided ropes used as belts. What was most uncanny though, were the model's eyes, which ranged from big black pupils, to milky-white and bright red, and their hair that was either hidden underneath tied caps, adorned with clay, or dripping wet (Figure 6.10). The models walked at a deliberately slow pace, accompanied by their bare feet and pieces of chalk that they spread around with their footprints.

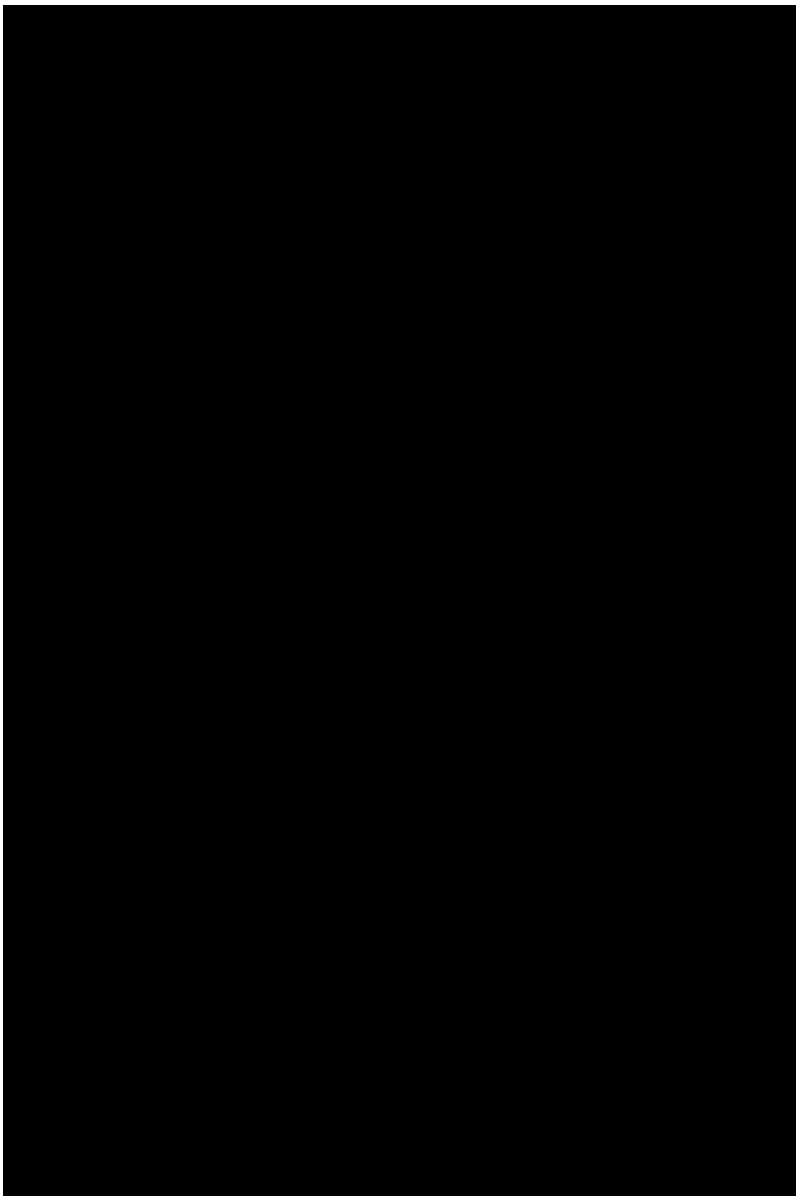

Figure 6.10 Art School Autumn/Winter 2020. (Photo: Estrop / Getty Images)

* * *

Art School's inclusive tailoring, which incorporates all kinds of body sizes, ages, and abilities through the use of the bias-cut, adjustable and removable buttons, or cord string fastenings, offers a fluid antigender fashion that adapts to the multi-layered and complex realities of genders and bodies. Their playful and essentially queer element of performance in the presentations of their antigender designs also speaks to the performativity and constructedness of gender and fashion, and consequently reveals its instabilities. While the garments scramble

and re-stitch gender signifiers to fit all kinds of genders and bodies, the appearance of the models as otherworldly beings exemplify Art School's approach of transcending gender boundaries most clearly. By envisioning their models as gothic trans-humans – beyond gender, beyond the human condition – Art School presents an antigender approach that encompasses a dark, yet inclusive aesthetic that lays bare the realities and consequences of gendered fashion, while also opening up its possibilities and pluralities.

7

NO SESSO: STYLING THE BLACK, ANTIGENDERED, AND AFROFUTURIST BODY

No Sesso is somewhat a queer brand, but that's not all we are. Most of all, it's about us doing what we want to do and creating looks for everyone. It's about wanting to exist in a world where everyone can just dress and look how they please without being judged.

Pia Davis (2022)

In February 2019, Pia Davis, creative director and designer of No Sesso, made history as the first trans woman designer at New York Fashion Week to be included in the official calendar of the Council of Fashion Designers of America. Together with Autumn Rudolph and Arin Hayes, No Sesso – which translates from Italian as 'no sex / no gender' – showed a collection that celebrated Black, People of Colour, and queer identities in a multitude of aesthetic and cultural references, including sportswear elements, celebrity style, and bohemianism. Launched in 2015, the brand has since built a reputation that centres around Black and non-white people, a genderless or, as I argue, an antigender approach, and in many ways, an anti-fashion mentality that works apart from the seasonal fashion calendar and its continuous striving for the new by upcycling and using recycled materials.

Defying the fashion system with its traditional parameters of gendered fashion, runway shows, and dedicated sale channels has become somewhat of a hallmark for the brand that started as an art project. Deliberately out of step with high fashion's pace – 'I really don't care about the fashion cycle', says Davis in *The New York Times Style Magazine* (Hambleton 2018) – No Sesso creates clothes that challenge and subvert traditional notions of gender and dress, of who can wear a garment and how it is worn. In other words, clothes that are antigender: 'Some of the pieces are almost like Transformers, or convertible cars', says Davis. 'Everyone has different shaped bodies, so it makes the garments a bit more accessible' (Davis in Hambleton 2018). The results are pieces in movement, that constantly change and shift: knitted, tied, or knotted, stitched and embroidered, seams are turned outwards or become undone,

colours combine or clash, loose knits morph into sleek nylon, denim patchwork pieces are layered and worn as jackets, sportswear tricots are turned into dresses. As the Council of Fashion Designers of America (CFDA) writes, 'No Sesso challenges convention within the luxury fashion industry with a collection of bold, deconstructed silhouettes that blur the gender lines' (Campbell 2019).

The brand's design philosophy and politics are rooted in representation and visibility, particularly of Black, Brown, and transgender people who have historically been ostracised and underrepresented in the fashion industry. The brand envisions a world beyond gender, a world of antigender fashion that is full of joy and optimism. As Pia Davis states, it is about 'a peaceful protest and making things that embody all of that' (Davis in Vice 2020, 02:42).

In this chapter, I articulate No Sesso's design practice in the context of the brand's and the designer's own intersectional identities and interdisciplinary positioning. As a fashion brand that works between and beyond the borders of art and fashion, as well as masculine and feminine sartorial boundaries, No Sesso occupies a unique position within the fashion system. Its antigender design approach will be analysed in relation to the aesthetic and conceptual elements of antigender fashion theorised in Chapter 3. Recorded interviews and fashion presentations, exhibitions, and media campaigns will be the primary data sources for this critical textual analysis.

This chapter first establishes No Sesso's development and positioning as a Black-owned, trans, and anti-(gender) fashion brand. Presenting its collections in art spaces as well as occasionally at New York Fashion Week, working within and outside of the fashion industry's schedule, using recycled and upcycled materials, and working from a marginalised position within the industry as a queer Black fashion brand, No Sesso challenges conventions on multiple levels. Using what José Esteban Muñoz identifies as 'disidentification', No Sesso negotiates mainstream culture and its dominant conventions and narratives to re-configure and create spaces for 'queers of colour'.

The first moment addresses one of the narratives or themes in No Sesso's design practice: streetwear. Born from sportswear, workwear, and combat wear, streetwear is closely linked to subcultural style. Indeed, many strategies of streetwear run parallel to subcultural antifashion and its re-configuring of styles and sartorial signs. No Sesso uses elements of streetwear, its mixing and scrambling of signs, its logic of collaboration, and limited drops, to create and foster an antigender fashion practice. The second moment and central element in No Sesso's antigender fashion design is the use and reuse of recycled, upcycled, and vintage garments and materials. In contrast to the industry's standard of offering a continuous stream

of new collections and materials, No Sesso focuses on a more cyclical and sustainable design practice, using and reusing styles and fabrics from previous collections or sourcing materials from archives and thrift stores. Drawing from Benjamin's theories on the relationship of time and fashion, I analyse No Sesso's antigender fashion design in terms of its literal and conceptual reuse – and consequently re-configuring – of time and sartorial signs. Lastly, as moment III, I discuss No Sesso's work through the concept and cultural aesthetic of Afrofuturism and its self-fashioned, utopian universe of alternative histories and identities. As a queer, trans, and African-American brand, No Sesso uses elements of Afrofuturism to imagine a future, and present, apart from the Western concepts of gender and race, and creates a world of antigender or gender inclusive realities.

ON DISIDENTIFICATION AND DESIGNING FOR AN INCLUSIVE FUTURE

Founded in 2015 by Pia Davis and Arin Hayes, who oversees the marketing and casting of the brand, No Sesso has since welcomed Autumn Randolph, who has a background in styling for magazine editorials and music videos, as co-designer. While the brand uses conventional codes of dressing as a starting point, the design collective follows an unconventional route as a fashion brand in a number of ways: It regularly blurs the lines between art and fashion, puts craftsmanship and needlework over mass-production and consumption, fosters collaborations with local artists and designers, and presents its collections off the beaten track of America's fashion calendar and New York Fashion Week.

This unconventionality is also reflected in their design approach, as Isabel Flower (2018) of *Cultured* magazine writes: 'No Sesso is difficult to summarise. Its enchantingly peculiar clothes are unisex, unsized and tough to place within conventional garment classifications. The items resist the idea that there's a right way or person to wear them'. Such ambiguity, however, is not a happenstance, but a deliberate choice and focus of the designers that stems from the fashion industry's restrictive and exclusive principles. As Davis explains in an interview with *POCC* magazine,

> We don't want to be labelled, or put into boxes for people to make sense of their own reality. We are designers with many layers to who we are as people. With that being said we have created our own lane in fashion because we didn't have access to any of the lanes that were existing already, in the fashion world. (Fenwick 2021)

Hence the somewhat unconventional route to the brand's establishment and continuous blurring of lines: Though Davis enrolled as a fashion student at the Art Institute of Seattle (dropping out after two years), her early designs of leather patchwork jackets were treated like sculptures and exhibited in galleries and art spaces in Seattle and Los Angeles. Davis' inclination is to see her fashion design as 'art objects that might someday be in a museum' (Davis in Flower 2018), while No Sesso regularly creates one-of-a-kind, artisanal pieces and time-intensive needlework; for instance, a jacket from the Spring/Summer 2017 collection embroidered with depictions of Black women's hairstyles took six months to make. As Flower (2018) states, 'They are redefining the terms of and the relationship between fashion, art and popular consumption. They are pushing and pulling at these precarious boundaries, exposing the fundamental instability of hierarchies of culture – of art/fashion and niche/mass'. No Sesso seems to walk the line between high fashion and slow fashion regularly, offering their collections via made to order, through their website, or peer-to-peer e-commerce companies like Depop.

Additionally, while No Sesso participates in New York Fashion Week, the brand widely resists the industry's fast seasonal cycle and only presents their collection when they are ready – a sentiment other and bigger fashion designers like Alessandro Michele or Balenciaga have shared after the pandemic disrupted the traditional fashion schedule. Furthermore, No Sesso, in contrast to many other US brands, is based in Los Angeles rather than New York City, challenging the city's sole position as that country's fashion capital. As Hayes explained in an interview about the brand's fashion week debut, the inclusion in the official schedule was an important milestone, while not forgetting their Los Angeles roots:

> LA really isn't taken seriously with fashion but we've been making our own noise and making our own rules. … So I think it was important for us to really sort of make our fashion debut in a way that says we are from LA, we have fun but we do take what we are doing seriously and we also take fashion seriously. (Street 2019)

In contrast to the industry's exclusive, closed shows and selective seating charts with celebrities and high-profile fashion folk in the front rows, No Sesso aims for a more inclusive approach. For instance, their shows are often open to the public. This inclusive and community-driven mentality is not just visible off the runway but is reflected in the brand's frequent collaborations and representations on the runway. Like Art School, their community and its representation are at the heart of No Sesso's philosophy. As Davis explains, 'It's important to take up space. And in the spaces that we get, it's important to us that our friends and our

collaborators are there to take up space with us and contribute. It's about community and highlighting the people you don't normally see in fashion' (Street 2019).

Accordingly, No Sesso's design presentation is driven by the individuals and models involved in the shows and shoots. The brand's Instagram page, which is one of their main communication channels, regularly highlights the people depicted and involved in each project. Rather than describing the fashion design or the garments, No Sesso prominently features the model's names at the beginning of the posts.

The community and collaborators also play an important part in the design process of No Sesso, not just between Davis and Rudolph, but other artists and community members joining them at their live-in studio. 'There's a community of us always hanging out, always vibing', as Davis explained to Emily Manning (2017). 'Whenever we're thinking about things that are happening in the world, we talk them through together'. In this way, then, No Sesso's design philosophy not only includes the aspect of fashion as personal expression, as creative outlet, but as an essentially political device: 'I see my practice as a form of resistance, and try to use it as a peaceful protest' (Davis in Manning 2017) – a protest against fashion's standardisation of bodies as white, slim, and gendered.

Furthermore, No Sesso occupies a space at the intersections of Black and queer identity. Though the design trio refrains from labelling their brand as such, their fashion design is rooted in the aesthetics of a queer sensibility, of what Mariia Spirina (2021) identifies as non-demographic fashion. By subverting and challenging traditional norms of the fashion industry and highlighting Black and POC individuals and voices (No Sesso's models are almost exclusively BIPOC), as well as designing clothes for everybody regardless of gender, race, class, and age, No Sesso's fashion practice speaks to the broader socio-cultural shift towards a more inclusive and diverse (Western) society. As a form of 'peaceful protest', the brand and its designer Davis, as a Black trans woman, actively participates in the trans* liberation and anti-racist movements, challenging not only the industry's parameters of gendered fashion, but its Eurocentric and tokenistic approach to representation.

In *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (1999), Muñoz discusses such strategies of resistance and identity-making as an important process in negotiating mainstream culture for 'queers of colour' who are gender, sexual, and racial minorities. Accordingly, 'disidentification' describes the process of re-configuring and transforming dominant conventions and narratives for their own purposes, in contrast to aligning or opposing the majority culture:

> Disidentification is the … mode of dealing with dominant ideology, one that neither opts to assimilate within such a structure nor strictly opposes it; rather, disidentification is a strategy that works on and against dominant ideology. Instead of buckling under the pressures of dominant ideology (identification, assimilation) or attempting to break free of its inescapable sphere (counteridentification, utopianism), this 'working on and against' is a strategy that tries to transform a cultural logic from within, always laboring to enact permanent structural change while at the same time valuing the importance of local or everyday struggles of resistance. (Muñoz 1999, 11–12)

Disidentification is a central tenet in No Sesso's antigender fashion approach, using established sartorial gender codes and scrambling or destabilising its signs into a new proliferated code. Its design practice is part of the designer's self-creation. The brand was born out of a personal need for self-expression that grew into what Davis describes as 'a platform for other like-minded artists who just want to be seen or represented' (Davis in Hambleton 2018). Davis emphasised further in an interview with *WWD*'s Bridget Foley,

> It doesn't matter what you identify as. I feel like clothes should be worn by whoever wants to wear them. I wanted to create a brand for all identities, shapes and colors, that breaks away from traditional silhouettes and ideas of garment identity and politics. A brand speaking not only to my community but to everyone. (Foley 2020)

By using elements and aesthetics of streetwear, celebrity culture, and people of colour and Black aesthetics, as well as upcycled, reused, and patched materials, No Sesso exemplifies a contemporary antigender, anti-fashion, and anti-racist brand that breaks with the traditional norms and tactics of the fashion industry.

MOMENT I: ANTIGENDER STREETWEAR

One of the defining elements and influences that can be found in No Sesso's antigender design approach is streetwear. While it is a slippery slope to begin to define streetwear, as it is somehow everything and everywhere, it is undeniable that streetwear has something to do with the (urban) street and style, while, as Steven Vogel contends, 'streetwear is at the core of an intensely independent urban subculture' (2007, 7). Coined by the gay African American designer Willi Donnell Smith to describe his 'oversized casual silhouettes' introduced in the

1970s, which would become central to the hip hop aesthetic (Romero 2012, 42), streetwear is now one of the most influential and important subgenres of the fashion industry.

While subcultural street style in the postmodern condition, as Ted Polhemus (2010) theorises, has turned fashion's motor on its head by creating a 'bubble-up' rather than a 'trickle-down' effect, in the post-postmodern times of the twenty-first century and the reign of the Internet, streetwear's cultural aesthetics now 'trickle-across' and transcend the multiple cultural fields of street and high fashion. Even further, the (high) fashion industry has widely adopted the streetwear toolkit, including limited edition releases, product drops, and collaborations – think, for instance, of Gucci teaming up with Adidas and The North Face, Yeezy Gap Engineered by Balenciaga, or Louis Vuitton's collaborations with streetwear giant Supreme. As Alec Leach states, 'you can find streetwear's fingerprints all over the contemporary fashion industry' (2021, 47).

Moreover, the majority of contemporary fashion design is based on and around essential streetwear items, including T-shirts, bomber jackets, hoodies, denim, tennis- or polo shirts, sneakers, and combat boots. These styles initially developed from sports-, work-, and combat-wear. In the latter half of the twentieth century on the streets of cities like New York, Los Angeles, or London, subcultures like hip hop, skate, and surfboarding, along with punk, rave, and club cultures appropriated and re-contextualised these styles of clothing and 'freed the garments from their original intended use' (King ADZ and Stone 2018, 23). While these garments originally belonged to the realm of menswear, in the course of their subcultural appropriation, these garments also lost their connection to masculinity and became largely considered unisex or genderless, albeit with a supposed neutrality based in masculine simplicity. Nevertheless, streetwear is well-versed in combining, remixing, and re-configuring styles and sartorial elements into new forms of dressing inscribed with new meanings.

Born out of what King ADZ and Wilma Stone call 'a human reaction to the wounds of growing up in the sub/urban environment' – the feelings of powerlessness and alienation brought about by racist, sexist, classist, and other oppressive and discriminatory structures – streetwear emerged as the 'physical manifestations of imagination and creativity – a form of post-traumatic response' (King ADZ and Stone 2018, 24). It is a response that connects and transcends:

> Street culture is all about communal solidarities connecting across lines that normally polarize, separate and divide. The phenomenon of streetwear is an active performance – through dress – of a multi-layered consciousness and culture. It embodies a lifestyle formed by a cross-influence

> of races, interwoven to create multiple threads of stylistic recycling and production. (King ADZ and Stone 2018, 29)

In other words, streetwear is a complex system and phenomenon that exists in-between and beyond the borders of fashion, street style, and (sub)culture.

Today, a number of contemporary designers master the balancing act of occupying a position between streetwear and high fashion, including Shane Oliver of Hood By Air, or Telfar Clemens of Telfar, and the late Virgil Abloh with his label Off-White™ as well as in his role as artistic director of Louis Vuitton Men's – although their success partly derives from the fact that they are not just appropriating aspects of a subculture, but are, in differing degrees, part of it. This is an important aspect of streetwear, as Vogel asserts, because, 'in order to be successfully involved in the streetwear industry, many would argue, including myself, that it is essential to have been a part of the subculture in the first place' (2007, 8).

For No Sesso, then, streetwear and subculture play an important part in their fashion and antigender fashion design. As Hayes explains to Michael Slenske,

> it's a matter of us doing what we're doing, but building the capital and the social power to do it in a way that is resourceful and can reach and impact a lot of people. We want to be the high fashion version of Supreme, and do literally anything and everything' (2020).

Accordingly, No Sesso regularly borrows aesthetic signifiers and codes from streetwear and subcultural style while re-working the elements and meanings into a new form. For instance, the 'NS 2018' collection, featured on No Sesso's Instagram profile, showcases a dress made from silver metallic denim baggy pants, gingham pattern pieces, and a reworked windbreaker jacket with elastic cord details and Vans sneakers. The look combines a myriad of subcultural signifiers (skater shoes, hip hop baggy pants, sportswear/preppy utility jacket) into a multilayered dress – in this case, floor-length A-line (Figure 7.1). Additionally, the look breaks with the expected gender code: the baggy pants and hooded jacket are primarily worn and associated with masculine wearers, oftentimes in a way that reveals the wearer's underwear. By reworking this recognisable hip hop garment into a dress, No Sesso's design reveals and destabilises the gender code. The antigender style is further extended through the element of adjustability in the form of the elastic bands, so that the pieces can accommodate varying bodies and sizes.

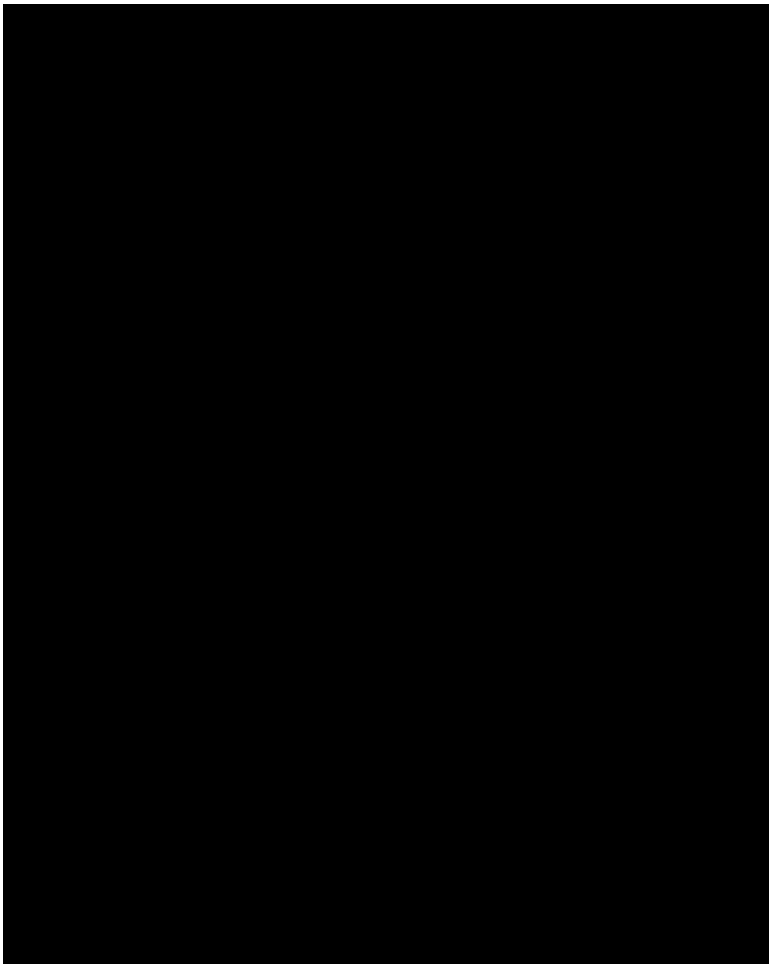

Figure 7.1 No Sesso NS 2018. 'Melanie wearing our NS 2018 Collection'. (Photo: Brooke Ashley Barone, via Instagram,https://www.instagram.com/p/Bsbg5ACFZzO/?hl=de)

The rest of the collection features a similar reconstructed gender and streetwear aesthetic. Metallic overalls that evoke a Dickies workwear suit, wide oversized T-shirts with an airbrushed print that reads 'Bossy Deal with It' in bubble letters (a classic graffiti technique), all-over logos, and sportswear staples meet with asymmetrical tailoring. Knitted pieces are made from athletic fabrics, denim, or clubwear materials. Additionally, the accompanying lookbook features models wearing Nike Monarchs and VaporMax sneakers – Nike is one of the brand's supporters.

A similar aesthetic reference can be found in the Spring/Summer 2020 collection 'I'd Rather Rescue Myself'. Showcased at the New York Fashion Week in September 2019, the collection features an array of airbrushed T-shirts, colourfully dyed dresses and shirts, and striped knitwear. While the collection offered a greater sense of wearability and scalability compared to previous No Sesso collections and their focus on unique handmade pieces, the Spring/Summer 2020 collection still promoted the idea of the hand made. This is an aspect that

is also closely linked to streetwear and subcultural style; as Vogel states, 'the early days of streetwear were marked by a do-it-yourself attitude … it is the dual ideals of independence and a DIY ethic that have been carried forward from the early days of hip hop, skateboarding and punk to contemporary streetwear as we know it today' (Vogel 2007, 8). No Sesso's 2020 collection consisted of hand-dyed fabrics, hand-drawn details, and hand-embroidered pieces combined with logo-heavy tops and shorts that resemble Supreme's iconic graphic logo.

Additionally, classic streetwear items were taken apart and re-constructed: the classic white T-shirt became a backless dress, the velvet tracksuit became an ultra-short jumpsuit, the hooded sweater was made into a backless and waterfall top, the polo-shirt became an ultra-cropped top, and track pants were sliced and reassembled with zippers and cords (Figure 7.2). Like streetwear once did, No Sesso appropriates and reappropriates these styles into a new form of dress that scrambles and destabilises gender signifiers, so that once-masculine workwear pieces are now simply part of a genderless or antigender outfit. In a similar vein, the collection's foundational print – a superhero flying over a city carrying girls on her back, all of whom are black women – is taken and modified from a T-shirt Davis saw while in Tokyo. While that version originally showed a white man as the superhero, the designer altered the print to fit and reflect her worldview– one that certainly fits better with the brand's ethos of uplifting and representing the black and fem(inine) community.

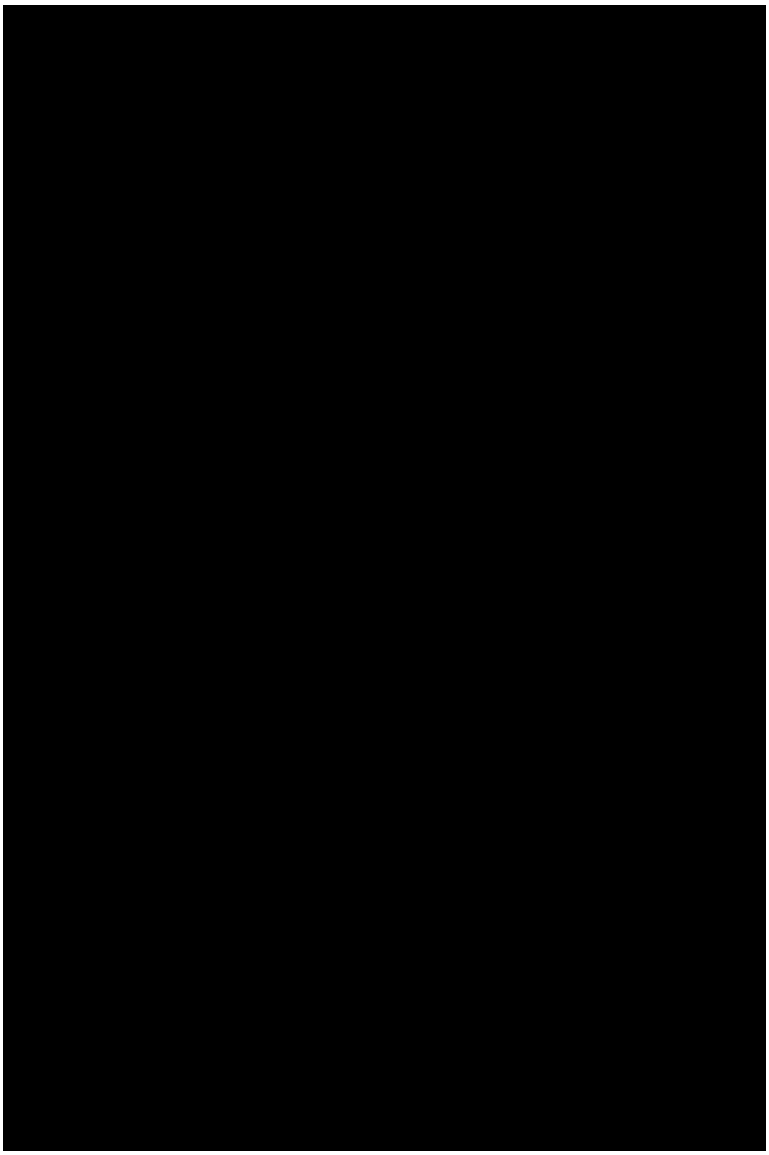

Figure 7.2 No Sesso Spring/Summer 2020. (Photo: Noam Galai / Getty Images for NYFW: The Shows)

The taking apart and reworking of recognisable elements of streetwear was also evident in No Sesso's 'Getty 2K19 Capsule' collection. Showcased at the Getty Center in Los Angeles in August 2018 and accompanied by musician Kelsey Lu live-scoring the event, the collection featured a group of Black models and dancers in corseted rococo style dresses and skirts made from custom basketball jerseys or patchwork denim. Inspired by the Greek and Roman statues flanking the halls of the museum, the reworked jerseys were draped like chitons or togas. No Sesso logos and Los Angeles lettering were printed prominently on the chest, or were found upside down and sliced into a patchwork skirt; armholes decorated with elastic bands were reworked as cut-outs revealing the skin or another jersey-layer underneath. One look consisted of multiple jerseys stitched together into an asymmetrical skirt topped with a grey hooded sweater, while another was a floor-length skirt made from two-toned denim jackets creating an

asymmetrical hem. Other looks saw ballgowns made from layered tulle and satin corsets, worn with cropped hoodies or metal gladiator helmets (Figure 7.3). Here, again, it was the appropriation and reworking of cultural codes and signifiers that characterise No Sesso's antigender fashion design.

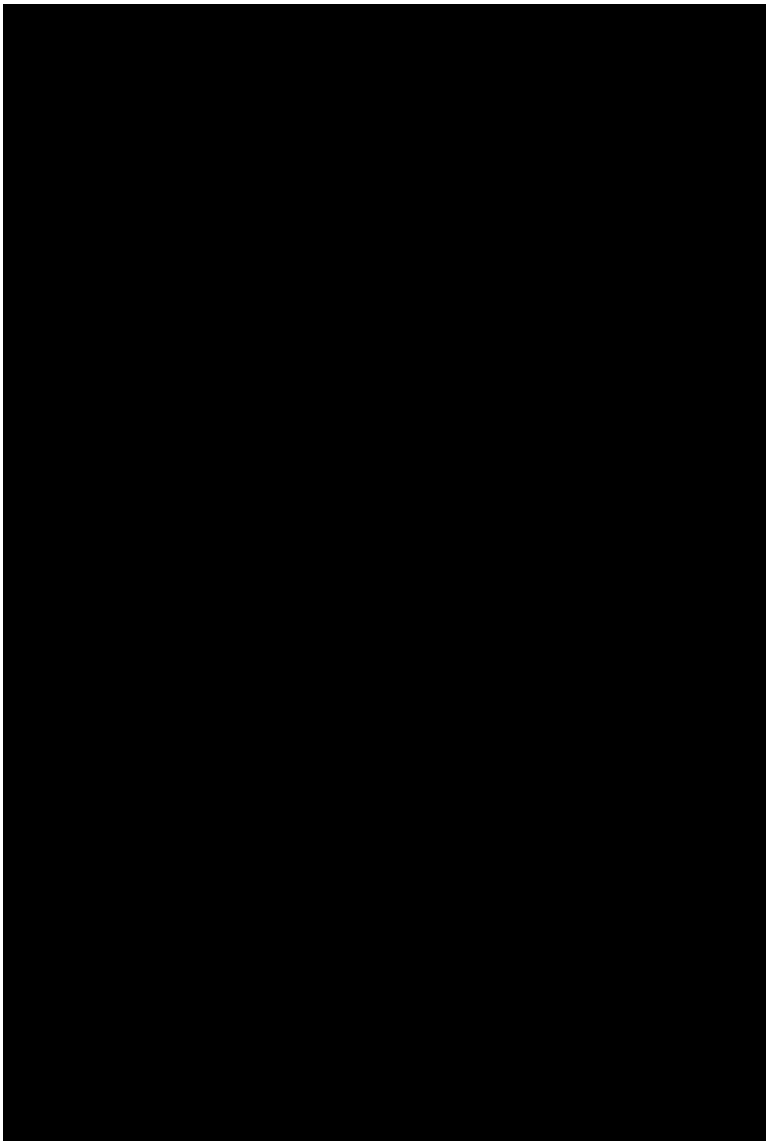

Figure 7.3 No Sesso Spring/Summer 2020. (Photo: Noam Galai / Getty Images for NYFW: The Shows)

Like the musicians and rappers close to the brand – such as Lizzo or Kelela – No Sesso synthetises and samples elements of culture, Greek and Roman antiquity, and modern-day street and sportwear culture into an essentially antigender and anti-racist collection. As Davis clarifies, the collection was an attempt to 'dismantle all of the whiteness that was in the Getty and make a space for black creatives to see themselves' (Davis in Slenske 2020). While the scrambled signifiers seemed to create a dissonance – a crack in the smooth surface of the marble

statues –the collection deliberately played with the expectations and embedded codes, freeing the garments (or rather garment pieces) from their intended use and meaning, creating a disidentification with the dominant cultural rules. As Davis explains to Foley,

> I love bringing our No Sesso world to other worlds. When we design, we keep all of sports in mind, we keep couture in mind, we keep all of these aesthetics in mind. Because the person who wears No Sesso, they have all these moods. Like, you want to dress sporty one day, or you want to wear a really nice one-of-a-kind gown – we have all of that. (2020)

The bringing together of different worlds is also part of No Sesso mentality in terms of collaborations, another streetwear logic the brand follows regularly; for instance, with their collaboration with avant-garde streetwear label Come Tees. Founded by artist and painter Sonya Sombreuil in 2010, the brand is also based in Los Angeles. Together, No Sesso and Come Tees created 'Comesesso' in 2018, a line that mixed and reinterpreted both their signature styles as well as luxury fashion and streetwear branding. The result was an array of gender-inclusive pieces like hand-screen-printed dresses, wide-leg jeans reminiscent of JNCO-style jeans, two-piece sets, and accessories including bucket hats, earrings, and backpacks.

Noticeably, the line used another common streetwear and particularly hip-hop element; that is, hijacking luxury fashion house's logos and styles, such as Gucci's GG diamond stitch or Versace's iconic banded stripes and block capitals. Furthermore, the collaboration combined Gucci-like red and green with a chocolate or Louis Vuitton leather brown, creating a rich intertextuality of streetwear, luxury fashion, and sports apparel that transcended and scrambled signifiers of gender into an antigender fashion design. Moreover, the collection was presented in a warehouse in downtown Los Angeles and was open to the public, a rare occurrence in the fashion industry, which oftentimes still relies on and adheres to the idea of exclusivity and a front row made up of celebrities. In the end, two thousand people came to see No Sesso's and Come Tees collaboration.

Another collaboration that exemplifies No Sesso's antigender fashion design and that drew considerable attention was the collaboration with American denim brand Levi's. As part of their Fall/Winter 2022 collection 'The Girls with Dolphin Earrings' – a symbol for the collection's homage to Black womanhood – No Sesso presented a range of dark denim pieces with lace-up and zippered details that transform into a myriad of silhouettes, offering multiple ways to be worn. The 'Corset Zipper Trucker Jacket', a variation of Levi's classic trucker jacket with the two breast pockets and signature v-stitching, was modified with chain stitch embroidery details and corset ties on the front and back, a removable zippered bottom, and

adjustable ties on the arms. The ‘Zipper Trucker’ and ‘Zip Flare Jean’ came with vertical zippered darts that transformed the pieces into flared styles when unzipped, while the ‘Zip Baggy Jean’ could be turned into shorts. The runway show featured the pieces in various configurations on all kinds of bodies, worn as a classic jacket, as a shoulder-revealing top, or a dress, as full denim looks or basic denim jeans (Figure 7.4). The collaboration showcases No Sesso’s cornerstones of antigender fashion design: adjustability to encompass and embody diverse bodies and sizes, and the mix and combination of different gendered signifiers (e.g., the masculine-connotated trucker jacket and feminine-connotated lace details).

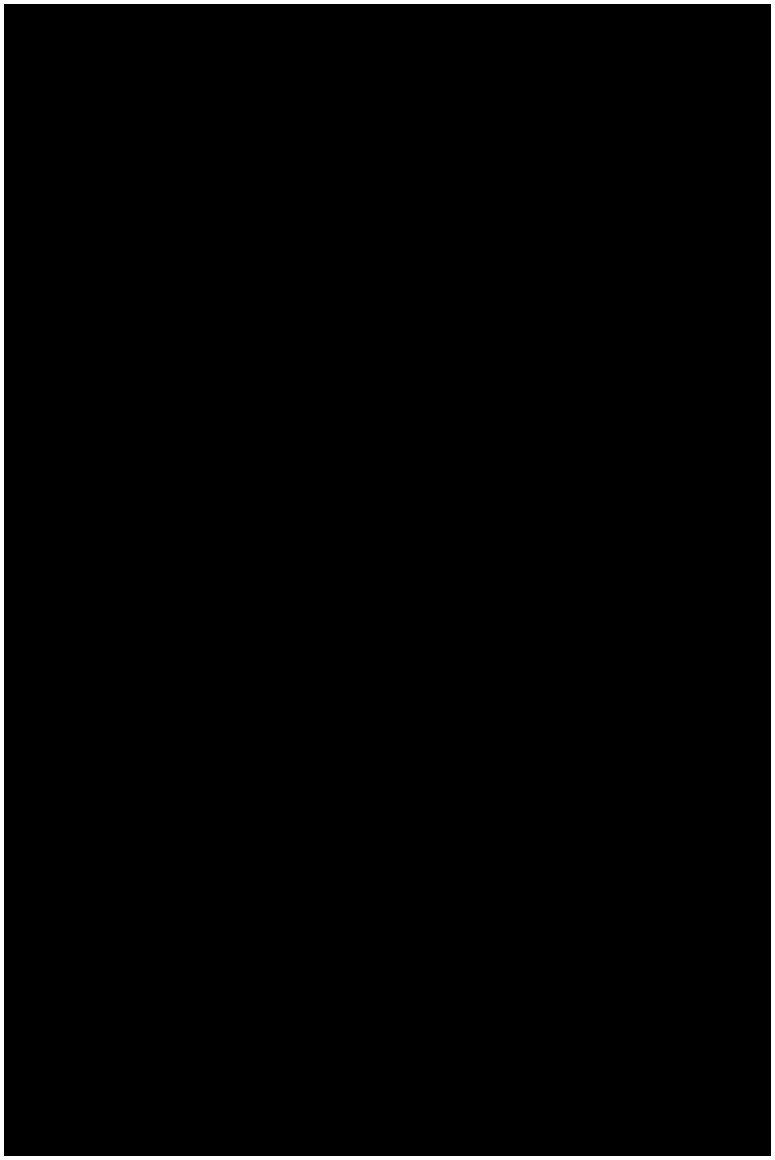

Figure 7.4 No Sesso Autumn/Winter 2022. (Photo: Filippo Fior / Gorunway.com)

The rest of the collection contained a similar aesthetic and conception, combining classically masculine signifiers such as bulky and boxy silhouettes with flowing knitwear and silk dresses, brown houndstooth wool and red nylon, silky olive chiffon and crisp cotton shirting. One recurring motif was a one-shoulder silhouette equipped with cargo pockets and a cut-out at the hip, revealing, in stages through the adjustable cording, various amounts of skin. Revealing skin was an important theme for the designer duo. As Randolph explains in an interview with Devine Blacksher (2022) from *The Cut*, 'We love skin. We appreciate being covered up as well. But it's just something about … accentuating it and seeing it in this light that is not sexual but appreciated for what it is before being a spectacle. It isn't to be just sexy or absurd but to be relaxed, fun, creative, and confident in exposing certain body parts without shame'. The collection exposed body parts and skin in a way that might have been read as sexy and sensual – as Steff Yotka (2022a) writes, that 'is the territory where No Sesso thrives' – but that steered away from a sexualisation and eroticism of the body. Rather, the exposed torsos, chests, shoulders, legs, and hips seemed to be more of a styling device that pervades all bodies and genders. Or, as Davis states, it is 'an important conversation in this collection, [to] wear whatever you want and show skin. It's powerful when you have control of that' (Davis in Lau 2022).

MOMENT II: REUSING, RECYCLING, AND REMEMBERING

The Fall/Winter 2022 collection also contained another central element of No Sesso's antigender design approach; that is, patchwork and the use of upcycled or 'found' materials. Vintage varsity jackets were turned into sweaters, skirts, or a striped oversized jacket with a padded collar and shawl, a short-hooded zip-front dress, or a patchworked dress with lateral cut-outs and a long train. Other discarded fashion items like ties became a corset top, while old puffer jackets were fused with a pinstripe blazer and turned into a long winter coat, and various leather patches were re-worked into a floor-length cloak. The collection, then, told a coming-of-age story through its themes of childhood innocence and adult maturity, deconstructing and reconstructing suiting and school uniform details into new forms of dress that escape the fashion system's binary gender categories.

Patchwork, and particularly denim patchwork, has become somewhat of a hallmark for No Sesso. The Fall/Winter 2017 collection, for instance, was an array of geometrical patchwork denim in the form of dresses, pants, tops, and jackets, in addition to the colourful knitwear and printed sweatshirts they developed in collaboration with artists Elvira Graham and Janiva Ellis.

No Sesso's collections exemplify the scrambling and mixing of gender signifiers not just through the combination of signs, but through the mixing and reworking of different feminine and masculine garments. The use of a patchwork technique and aesthetic, then, contributes to their disruptive and subversive fashion. The multiform logics of patchwork, as Patrizia Calefato states, 'spread the idea of personal inventiveness and creativity' (2021, 8). Or, as the *New York Times*' Coco Romack wrote (2020), the 'raw hems and exposed seams are a testament to reinvention itself, just as patchwork – a recurring motif throughout Davis' collections – might be a metaphor for the fact that we are all complex beings composed of myriad experiences and desires'.

Furthermore, the reuse of materials and garments obtains another layer of meaning when the patchwork consists of reused and recycled material – an aspect that No Sesso regularly takes on. In December 2020, for instance, No Sesso released a knitwear collection that was made from recycled fabrics or repurposed textiles sourced from previous collections as well as Davis' and Hayes' own wardrobes. Recycled T-shirts and sports jerseys were reworked into dresses and oversized sweatshirts; plaid shirts were cut up and patchworked into pants or skirts with ruffles at the side. Many of the pieces, all produced in Los Angeles, were embellished with hand-embroidery or the brand's smiley-face logo or No Sesso lettering. Once again, the collection paid no attention to the industry's gender norms and offered clothes for any and every gender that took cues from both masculine and feminine signifiers (fitted dresses made from sports sweaters, cut-outs and shorts, and full-coverage sweaters and skirts). Rather than worrying about 'the limited notion that a certain piece of clothing is meant for a certain body' (Romack 2020), No Sesso's fashion is concerned with taking things apart, deconstructing and reconstructing pieces found in thrift stores, their own wardrobes, or the brand's archive. In this way, then, No Sesso' writes and rewrites a garment's history, topicality, and timeliness.

In light of the contemporary simultaneity of crises, reusing, recycling, and repurposing materials and clothes have become increasingly important practices within the fashion system and other creative sectors. To use something that already exists, an object or a garment, and to repurpose it, to re-make it into something new, carries with it the idea of a cyclical and sustainable practice, and the opportunity to resist and oppose the ubiquitous charm of consumption. While Martin Margiela's work in the 1990s already addressed the idea of reusing garments and upcycling materials – for instance, with the infamous sock-sweater, dresses made from silk scarves, the broken plate top, or his use of vintage jackets that questioned the garment's and fashion's obsolescence – the reuse and upcycling of material today seems even more important, or rather inevitable. As Calefato (2021, 5) writes, 'in the 2020s, reusing

acquires an ethical and political meaning' when faced with an excessive fashion industry that contributes significantly to the exploitation of labour and the planet's resources. 'Reusing and recycling are practices that remove objects from the sphere of meagre, technical and immediately consumable usage and restore the aura of time' (Calefato 2021, 5). In contrast to the Western and capitalist cultures of accelerated consumption and growth, reusing and recycling can be considered an antithesis that can make garments 'the quintessence of time, the elixir of the present' (Calefato 2021, 10), and it can function as an aesthetic strategy that reuses and juxtaposes different materials, creating something new out of an ordinary old thing.

No Sesso's return to Los Angeles in the beginning of 2020, having showed their previous two collections in New York City, was filled with references and garments that connected the designers to their adopted home. The title, 'A Vignette of the Renaissance on 24th Street', was inspired by co-designer Rudolph's home on 24th Street in West Adams, Los Angeles, where the conception and creation took place. The collection was presented at the Geffen Contemporary at MOCA, the venue where Davis and Hayes first met in 2015. As a mixture of runway show and performance piece, choreographed by Chris Emile and musically supported by Cody Perkins, the theme of home and community pervaded the show, which was open to the public.

Speaking about the show, Davis explained that 'we are a community-based brand' and 'wanted our community to be able to attend the show and to see themselves' (Davis in Marlowe 2020). With this in mind, No Sesso incorporated a number of collaborations, including illustrations by artists Sensational Bobbi and B. Anele of 8 Palms, that could be found on leather corsets, screen-printed T-shirts, and denim, as well as silk dresses and skirts made from salvaged material found in LA's fashion district; or the airbrush art by Jasmine Monsegue that adorned the dyed and bleached denim pieces. The collection's focus lay in the label's artisanal roots and handcrafted pieces, 'It's couture done the No Sesso way', as Davis stated (Marlowe 2020). The design-duo also turned to their archive of clothing and fabrics found in thrift stores and flea markets. Oversized sweaters were made from deconstructed knitwear and patchworked with plaid shirts, men's suit jackets were taken apart and sewn back together into skirts, dresses were crafted from an array of shirts, and a quilted nylon puffer coat was made from multiple puffer jackets deconstructed and sewn back together (Figure 7.5).

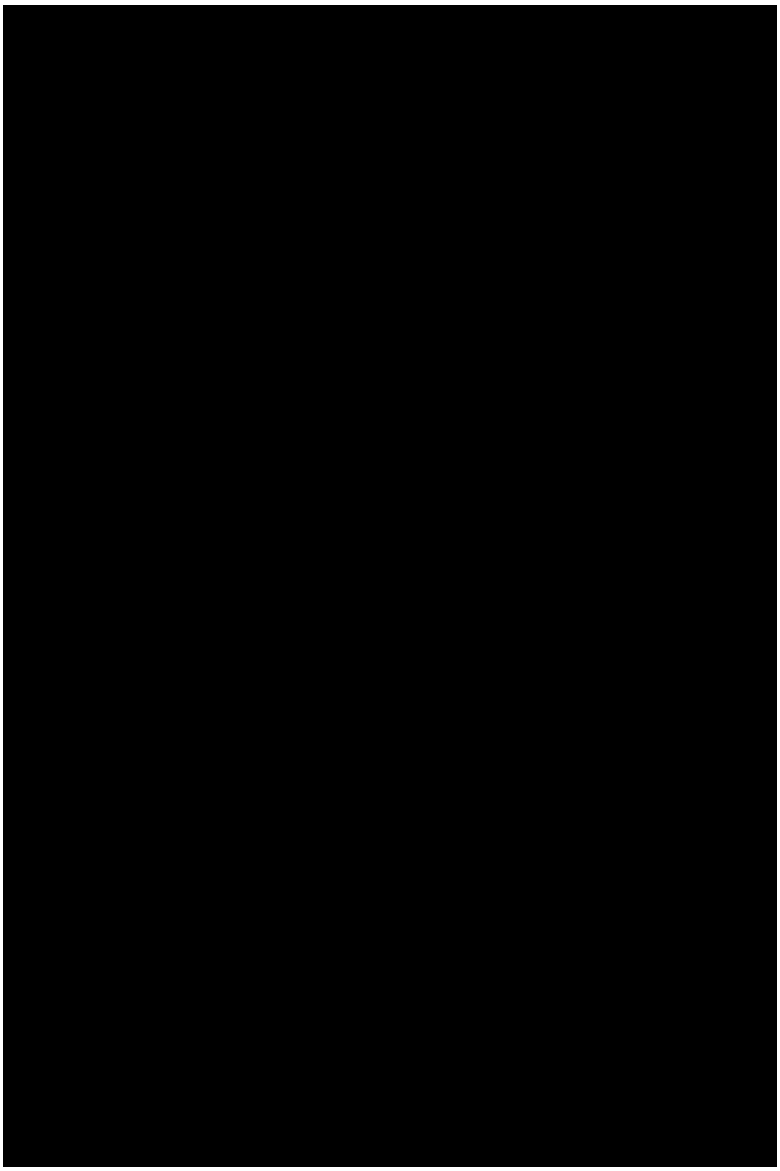

Figure 7.5 No Sesso Fall/Winter 2020. (Photo: Sam Trotter / No Sesso)

Shortly after the show, No Sesso revealed the accompanying campaign shot by Clifford Prince King in Rudolph's home on 24th Street. Inspired by the Harlem Renaissance in the early twentieth century and the cultural revival of African American artists, writers, and intellectuals, the campaign seemed to speak to the timeliness and reconstruction of history entailed in the upcycling and reusing of material. Indeed, the collection did not follow a linear narrative of time, nor did it give information on the garment's age/life; rather, it skipped and jumped, contrasting and combining elements and references of signs, styles, and fashions.

In this way, then, the collection and campaign were, what Benjamin described as the authentic figure of fashion in his *Passagenwerk* (The Arcades Project originally published 1982):

> one could speak of the increasing concentration (integration) of reality, such that everything past (in its time) can acquire a higher grade of actuality than it had in the moment of its existing. How it marks itself as higher actuality is determined by the image as which and in which it is comprehended. And this dialectical penetration and actualization of former contexts puts the truth of all present action to the test. Or rather, it serves to ignite the explosive materials that are latent in what has been (the authentic figure of which is fashion). (2002, 392)

Fashion represents this process, 'because it is the constant "incandescent" *presentification* of motifs from the past, of which fashion becomes its messenger and medium' (Calefato 2021, 2; italics added). In light of the ongoing discrimination and brutality faced by people of colour and African Americans in the United States and elsewhere, the highlighting, elevation, and embrace of Black people and culture gains more importance (*Aktualität*) in the moment, the *Jetztzeit* as Benjamin calls it. In other words, it is 'being current' as 'being awake' in the 'condition of dilated attention into which we can understand again what is "past" and invest in it even more relevance as it had in the moment (*Jetztzeit*) in which that past occurred' (Calefato 2017, 93).

This aspect can also be seen in No Sesso's Fall/Winter 2019 collection and its references to the 1960s working girl, 2000s celebrity and club culture style, and bohemianism. Inspired by 'Glamazons' (the title of one of drag queen RuPaul's albums), the collection was Davis' take on the business uniform of suits, blouses, and shirts. Sean John velour track suits (popular in the 2000s) were reworked into tailored suits with broad shoulders and rhinestones spelling out 'No Sesso' on the back, a voluminous puffer jacket was made from traditional suit fabric and equipped with an oversized lapel, a classic suit jacket was cut in half and completed with a pearl-string silk dress, and a pussy bow blouse was crafted from loose knits. Meanwhile, classically tailored pieces became more fluid and were made from hand-dyed silk. Some became wide-leg patchwork pants with club-style tassels or were turned into pleated skirts and paired with shirts with voluminous sleeves. Here, again, it was No Sesso's playful take on time and memory of eras gone by, as well as the deconstruction and breaking up of gendered signifiers, of masculine and feminine garments and styles, that makes up this antigender fashion design. It offers a transparency, literally and conceptually, of revealing the breaking and re-writing of signs and gender signifiers, of the material of clothes and the language of signs.

MOMENT III: ANTIGENDER AND AFROFUTURISM

Time also plays a crucial and important part in another theme present in No Sesso's collections: Afrofuturism. Indeed, Afrofuturism and fashion seem to share some similarities in their relationship with time and its supposed linearity. For one, 'Fashion does not relate to linear time, to "progress", to what is current in a uniform path' (Calefato 2017, 93). On the other hand, 'Time, for an Afrofuturist', as Laura Havlin (2015) notes in her online article on 'A History of Female Afrofuturist Fashion', 'is a fluid concept, and the terms past, present and future aren't necessarily linear'. Afrofuturism, like fashion, takes note of the past and creates an aesthetic strategy that instils it with importance, *Aktualität* in Benjamin's words, in the current moment. As Havlin also writes, 'some of the historical moments at the roots of Afrofuturism have cycled back into relevance with heightened urgency today' (2015). Coined by Mark Dery (1994) in the essay 'Black to the Future' to describe the dystopian fiction (and realities) of being African-American, 'the radical politics of remembering a dismembered past, and of writing yourself into the future' (Dery 2015), Afrofuturism today, as Reynaldo Anderson and John Jennings write, encompasses the aesthetic and intellectual perspectives of 'the so-called post-human/post-racial future' that is 'connected to an African, humanistic past' (2014, 35).

No Sesso's Pre-Fall 2022 collection titled 'Ghetto Gold' was inspired by Afrofuturism and Black royalty, as the co-designers state. Presented at Jeffrey Dietch's *Shattered Glass* exhibition at Art Basel Miami Beach in December 2021, and subsequently as the 'Ghetto Gold, No Money Old Money New Money' Couture Collection 2021–2022 on their Instagram profile in a multimedia presentation, the collection was heralded as 'one of the brand's best so far because it prizes the wearer over any ideas of trend' (Yotka 2022b). The collection centred on themes of glamour, embellishment, and individuality, with pieces handmade in their LA atelier and only available to purchase as one-offs.

Like previous collections, 'Ghetto Gold' highlighted and played with revealing and covering (Black) skin, with the collection's varying shades of black and brown. Many pieces dripped off the body like liquid, such as the brand's signature 'One Titty Dress' crafted in silk charmeuse with a matching hooded bomber coat and handsewn crystal beads (Figure 7.6), the ostrich patchwork leather corset that also zips into a bag, or the ostrich feather boa gown. In line with No Sesso's affinity to deconstruct garments, the collection combines aesthetics and cuts from the masculine and feminine, from classic tailoring and lingerie, creating looks like the pimp-stripe lingerie suit with garter pants and cut-out sleeves, a three-piece gator-tail suit, or a suit with exaggerated shoulders and ostrich feather cuffs. The pieces 'were next level', as Booth Moore (2021) wrote, with 'a layer of raw, "Mad Max" style decadence'.

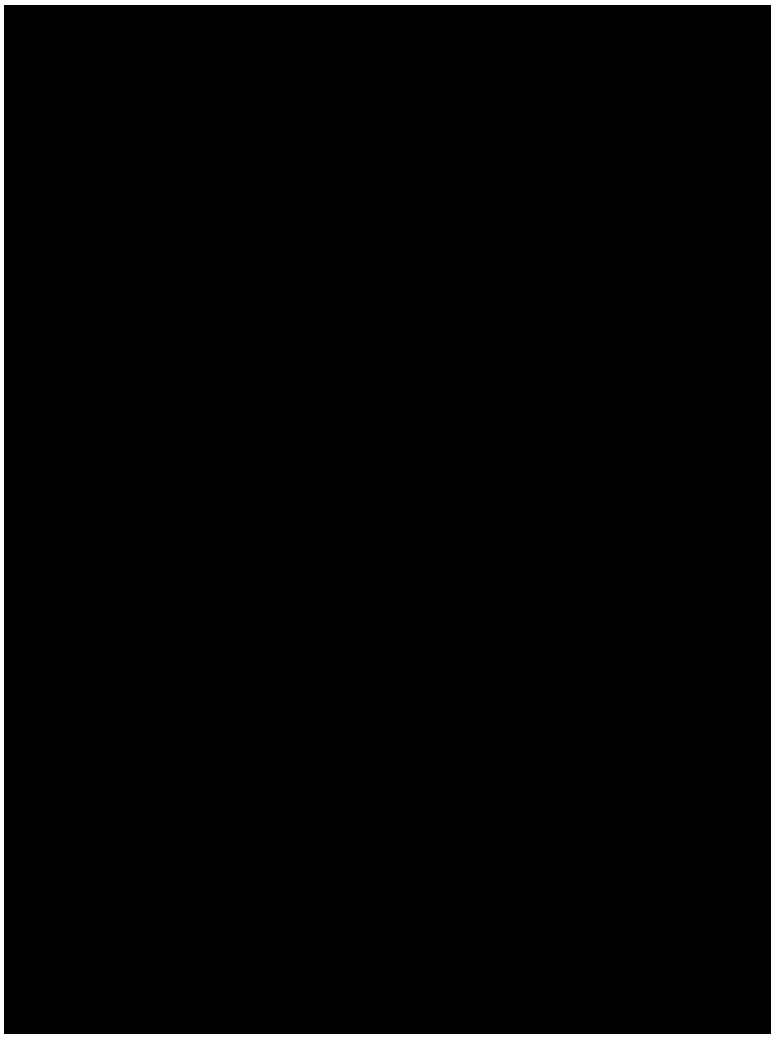

Figure 7.6 No Sesso 'Ghetto Gold, No Money Old Money New Money' Couture Collection 2021–2022. (Photo: Kennedi Carter, via Instagram, https://www.instagram.com/p/CYVgCcLrV_1/?hl=de)

In a similar vein, the image campaign and short film conjured up a celestial or transcendental setting that drew from sci-fi and Afrofuturist aesthetics. Set against a pitch-black background, a non-place or space, the models lounge on what looks like floating stones overgrown with moss, anchored only by their water-like reflections. Their skin, with its gleaming makeup, appears almost metallic, emphasised by the reflecting light that illuminates them. Additionally, the short film enhances this effect further by portraying the models in blinding light, with colourful auras, glowing animations, and futuristic hairstyles (No Sesso 2022). To the sound of Perkins' hip-hop track, the models' eyes change colour and glow in bright blues and golds (Figure 7.7). 'You're in our world now, and you get to see all of it', Rudolph said of their collection and multimedia presentation (Rudolph in Yotka 2022b).

Figure 7.7 Screenshot of No Sesso 'No Money, Old Money, New Money' short film. (Image via Instagram: https://www.instagram.com/p/CZuoUFdlhVJ/?hl=de)

This world, then, imagines a past, present, and future beyond gender boundaries, that scrambles gender (masculine suits and feminine lingerie), cultural signifiers (hip-hop, African American), and celebrates the Black body. In other words, the collection imagines a postcolonial time free of the colonised and Western concept of the gender binary. This reflects Sonja Eismann's observation that 'one strategy to deal productively with the contingencies of postcolonial time(s) is found in the concept of Afrofuturism' (2019, 67). Its 'self-fashioned universe of alternative histories, geographies, and identities' calls upon the African diaspora to 'imagine themselves as utopian space travelers with roots in Egyptian mythology as well as in space-age mysticism, unbound by the chains of slavery and racism' (Eismann 2019, 67–68).

For the Fall/Winter 2017/2018 collection No Sesso took direct inspiration from sci-fi narratives and storytelling. The collection featured an array of ornate knitwear, patchwork denim, and a bright, surreal colour palette – 'uniforms updated for a new planet', as Sanam Sindhi (2017) in *Office* magazine. Inspired by the science fiction series *Star Trek*, the collection envisioned a different kind of present, a different kind of future. As Davis explained in an interview with Sindhi:

> While I sewed the last few months, there was always *Star Trek* playing in the background and I was inspired by their costumes, the textures of the clothing and skin. A lot of TV shows and movies that take place in the future don't have black people in them so I wanted to explore it through my own vision. It's a conceptual representation of how I see my future. (2017)

Following the aesthetic strategies of Afrofuturism, which, as Dery writes, ‘must be sought in unlikely places, constellated from far-flung points’ (1994, 182), No Sesso’s Fall/Winter 2017 collection combined and re-mixed signs from traditional African dress, sci-fi costumes, and patchworking techniques, creating an antigender and Afrofuturist fashion design with one foot in the past, and one in the future: geometrical denim patchwork jackets and pants with zip details and pockets, gold metallic shirts and jackets, a denim-patchwork wrap coat with voluminous frills, a striped one-shoulder knitted dress and one-leg pants, a patchwork fur wrap top and skirt, and Zulu-inspired *isicholo* hats with the ‘No Sesso’ logo or in a geometric patchwork pattern. Furthermore, the collection combined and mixed gender signifiers in the form of materials (e.g., durable denim, soft and loose knits), colours (bright blues in combination with red, pink, yellow, etc.), and cuts (boxy jackets and wide-leg pants combined with frills, puffy-sleeved tops, and cut-outs at the shoulder, hips, and torso) while making the pieces adjustable to adapt to different kinds of bodies and sizes; for instance, with zips, cords, or wrap fastenings (Figure 7.8).

Figure 7.8 No Sesso Fall/Winter 2017/2018 Campaign. (Photo: Dicko Chan)

That Davis imagines a (sartorial) future through the prism of science fiction and Afrofuturism is no coincidence. Sci-fi offers Black and marginalised people an outlook into the future, where 'the vertigo of everyday life' and the 'chasm, for black Americans, between technological progress and social justice' (Dery 2015) can be resolved. As Samuel R. Delany wrote in his 1978 essay 'The Necessity of Tomorrow(s)':

> We need images of tomorrow; and our people need them more than most.Without an image of tomorrow, one is trapped by blind history, economics, and politics beyond our control. One is tied up in a web, in a net, with no way to struggle free. Only by having clear and vital images of the *many* alternatives, good and bad, of where one *can* go, will we have any control over the way we may actually get there in a reality tomorrow will bring all too quickly. And nothing gives such a profusion and richness of images of our tomorrows – however much they may need to be revised – as science fiction. (Delany 2012, 14)

* * *

No Sesso's fashion design and practice exemplifies an antigender fashion steeped in the traditions of streetwear, sustainability, and Afrofuturism. The design collective spearheaded by Pia Davis lives, like streetwear, on the logic of collaboration and the scrambling of signifiers. As a queer Black fashion brand, No Sesso not only negotiates mainstream culture as an 'outsider' from within the fashion industry, but also negotiates its in-betweenness of streetwear and couture, art and fashion, and menswear and womenswear. No Sesso's fashion design, then, offers on the one hand an antigender fashion that incorporates all kinds of bodies and sizes, and on the other, an antigender fashion that envisions a (fashionable) future for Black and marginalised identities beyond the Western binary system of gender.

CONCLUSION

In this thesis, I expanded and articulated the concept of gender-fluid fashion and applied it to the critical analysis of contemporary fashion design. What emerged was the development of antigender fashion, a theoretical framework rooted in the principles of anti-fashion that helps us to analyse, describe, and think through the current moment of gender-fluid fashion and its potential to challenge and proliferate the gender binary system. The central question guiding this research asked what, if anything, makes the contemporary occurrence of gender-fluid fashion different from other gender-bending styles called androgyny or unisex fashion, and further, what impact the design of gender-fluid fashion might have on the construction and conceptualisation of masculinities and femininities. The research also suggested ways antigender fashion disrupts, challenges, and troubles the gender binary system and mapped out its position in the societal and cultural context, and discursive shift of gender identities.

I expanded on the notion of antigender fashion as conceived by Vicki Karaminas and Justine Taylor (2022), and developed it into a framework for the analysis of contemporary gender-fluid fashion design. Based on the principles of anti-fashion, Karaminas and Taylor argue that antigender fashion exposes the instabilities of gender by scrambling its signifiers. Understanding fashion as a cultural and semiotic phenomenon that absorbs, reacts to, and reflects broader societal shifts, I further developed the principles of antigender fashion, which seek to dismantle and reveal the constructedness of gendered fashion and the binary gender system by mixing and proliferating gender signifiers.

Taking this concept further, I argued that the occurrence of contemporary antigender fashion correlates with the current paradigm shift in Western society in the understanding and acceptance of gender diversity beyond the binary system. In other words, fashion is a seismograph for social and cultural shifts and changes in the perception and understanding of gender. Within that context, antigender fashion emerges as a political means to disrupt the governing social system of the gender binary and it contributes to and acts as a catalyst in shifting gender paradigms.

In this thesis I have argued for the relevance of fashion in constituting and renegotiating contemporary forms of masculinities and femininities. As a system of signification, fashion plays an important role in the construction and performativity of gender. As I argued, antigender fashion embodies the potentialities of confronting and expanding gender categories. Through the critical textual analysis of contemporary fashion imagery and the multiple-case-study approach, this study illustrated the various ways antigender fashion design can challenge, blur, and critique gender boundaries and proliferate gender signifiers.

The first part of the thesis, mapped and contextualised the interrelation of gender and fashion, and the theoretical components for the development of an antigender fashion framework. Part two applied the theoretical considerations by critically examining the four case studies: JW Anderson, Gucci by Alessandro Michele, Art School, and No Sesso. Based on the visual and written texts that served as the primary data for this research, the materials encompassed varied and multimedia representations of fashion, as well as interviews, designer profiles, and journalistic articles to offer a comprehensive basis for the critical textual analysis.

Chapter 1 focused on the theoretical perspectives underlying the field of fashion and gender studies. Judith Butler's contributions to queer theory and the concept of gender performativity have been discussed regarding contemporary understandings of gender and fashion, including the concepts of gender trouble and the heterosexual matrix. A theoretical framework was established in which gender is understood as performative, as a social construction naturalised through the stylised repetition of acts and stabilised through the adherence to the supposedly natural model of heterosexuality. Further, Jack Halberstam's and Rob Cover's recent scholarship on the proliferation and increasing awareness of gender variance was discussed. Accordingly, digital media (Cover 2019) and the emergence of new labels and language for contrary embodiment (Halberstam 2018) fosters an environment of collaboration and a paradigm shift in which people get to name and live their experience beyond the dominant binary framework.

Chapter 1 also positioned this research within the strand of poststructuralism and a post-postmodern paradigm that seeks to critique binary oppositions as well as acknowledge the defining features of present culture and life as an increasingly fragmented and pluralistic culture. Within that framework, I argued that fashion is established as a system of signification and as a visual component of gender representation. Contrary to gender-bending styles in postmodernity, such as androgyny, post-postmodern examples of androgyny emphasise and highlight the display of masculine and feminine signs. Antigender fashion, then, is positioned

within a post-postmodern paradigm, that seeks to illustrate and juxtapose the multiplicities of gender signifiers and as a result destabilises the gender binary system, making gender trouble.

The following chapter traced moments of gender-bending fashion in Western history and highlighted important slippages of fashion that blurred rigid gender boundaries. This chapter served as the historical background and point of reference for the case studies in part two of this thesis. Respective cultural and societal contexts played an important part in the analysis, as well as illustrating the differences between these historical moments of sartorial slippage and the contemporary gender-fluid and antigender fashion phenomenon. Nineteenth-century bohemians, female masculinities in the 1920s, the unisex and flamboyant styles of the 1960s and 1970s, and the unisex fashion and new masculinities at the turn of the millennium were examined in relation to their potential to challenge gender norms and signifiers. What emerged was, in part, an answer to the question of what makes contemporary gender-fluid fashion different from androgyny and unisex fashions; that is, that these earlier gender-bending moments are closely linked to their subcultural or countercultural roots. In other words, their gender-bending styles are primarily understood as a demarcation from the dominant culture and norms; for example, the bourgeoisie, heterosexuality, and traditional femininity and masculinity. In contrast, antigender fashion entails a revelation of the gender binary as a governing social system and opposes and critiques gendered fashion.

The conceptualisation of antigender fashion was carried out in Chapter 3, where I mapped the different roles, positions, and understandings of anti-fashion, and established its defining traits as a blueprint for the concept of antigender fashion. The concept of confrontational dressing as theorised by Dick Hebdige, Elizabeth Wilson's notion of oppositional dress, Fred Davis' concept of anti-fashion in connection to feminist protest, and Stefano Marino's dialectical understanding of fashion/anti-fashion established the driving principles of anti-fashion from which the principles of antigender fashion followed. Antigender fashion, like anti-fashion, seeks to critique, subvert protest, or highlight the norms of gendered fashion. In doing so, antigender fashion operates as a visual currency and vehicle in proliferating gender categories, revealing the multitudes, pluralities, and nuances in-between masculinities and femininities. Using the same 'language' of gendered fashion, antigender fashion flaunts gender and exposes its instabilities, arbitrariness, and performativity.

Part Two offered case study analyses using antigender fashion 'moments' that set out to challenge and scramble gender signifiers. In contrast to other gender-bending fashion moments that offer an androgynous or unisex alternative to the binary, antigender fashion designers flaunt the gendered fashion system and its obsession with the binary system. The case-study analyses

revealed several different ways in which fashion design can challenge and expose gender signifiers.

In the first study, I showed that Jonathan Anderson, influenced by his emergence as a designer within the menswear realm, adopts a constructivist and architectural approach to antigender fashion. In other words, JW Anderson's antigender fashion is characterised by its focus on materials and overall shape: Feminine-connoted signs, as well as fabrics and colours like lace and pink, are juxtaposed with traditionally masculine cuts; and vice versa, traditionally masculine fabrics like wool and leather are reimagined in traditionally feminine silhouettes. Furthermore, JW Anderson flaunts gender and fashion signifiers by exaggerating cuts and silhouettes to a grotesque and carnivalesque level, elongating sleeves and inflating dresses. The brand's envisioned and fashioned body, then, challenges conventions of gendered fashion and bodies through the testing of bodily borders, exaggerated protrusions, and camp irony and playfulness.

In contrast, Alessandro Michele's antigender fashion for Italian fashion house Gucci centres on an eccentrically romantic and maximalist design that challenges and transcends the boundaries of gender, bodies, and time. Stepping into the role as creative director at a time of an increasingly dissolving gender binary, Michele's fashion design not only exemplifies a break with Gucci's previous image of sleek sophistication, but ushered in a re-examination of masculinity and re-imagining of a soft, inclusive, and generally more 'feminine' masculinity. There I showed that Michele's key design piece, the floral suit, holds a pivotal role in his antigender fashion approach and visualisation of the plurality of gender. It was further shown that time plays a central role in Michele's antigender fashion. Decontextualising, re-contextualising, and leaping through fashion history are recurring motives in his design, exemplifying fashion's ability to scramble, proliferate, and expand gender signifiers. In addition, the research established Michele's position as a *bricoleur* with an ability to reorganise cultural meanings. Michele's antigender is characterised by its transcending of time and cultural and gender signifiers, and the transgression of bodily and human borders.

The fashion practice of the London-based brand Art School centred in and within the queer and trans* community was discussed in Chapter 6. Aiming to include a diverse and intersectional cast of models and representatives, the label's antigender fashion encompasses all kinds of bodies, sizes, ages, and abilities. In this way, it regularly applies parameters and design specificities of antigender fashion that enable the garments to be adjustable, such as the bias-cut, movable buttons, or cord fastenings, employing them in combination or juxtaposition with masculine and feminine signifiers. Art School further emphasises and flaunts the

performativity and consequently the instabilities of gender through the use of performance and performative elements in their fashion shows/presentations. Like drag, which parodies the supposed naturalness of gender, Art School's fashion performances reveal the very constructedness of gender. Additionally, Art School incorporates gothic elements in its antigender design, illustrating and highlighting the essential queerness as well as uncanny horror of the gothic in connection to the trauma often experienced by queer people today in a dominant heteronormative culture.

In the last case-study chapter, I articulated No Sesso's antigender fashion practice in the context of the designers' own intersectional identities and interdisciplinary positions. No Sesso's fashion practice is, in many ways, positioned in-between: between art and fashion, between menswear and womenswear, and between ready-to-wear and couture. Furthermore, as a queer Black fashion brand, No Sesso works from a marginalised position within the industry, as they negotiate mainstream culture through what José Esteban Muñoz termed 'disidentification', re-configuring and creating space for 'queers of colour'. I also addressed the fact that a central element in No Sesso's antigender design is streetwear. Closely linked to subcultural style and its logic of collaboration and limitation, as well as the juxtaposing and scrambling of cultural signifiers, No Sesso uses these streetwear elements to foster and create an antigender fashion design. In addition, No Sesso challenges and scrambles gender through the use of reused, upcycled, and vintage textiles that not only carry gendered signifiers, but were sold, worn, and discarded within a gendered system. Its re-configuration in an antigender fashion design, then, endows the garments with new layers of meaning. Finally, I discussed No Sesso's antigender fashion in terms of the cultural aesthetic and concept of Afrofuturism. As a self-fashioned, utopian universe that offers alternative histories and identities, No Sesso uses Afrofuturist elements to negotiate its own position as a queer, trans*, and Black fashion brand and to imagine an antigender fashion beyond and freed from the Western concepts of gender and race.

* * *

Through the analysis offered in these chapters, this study extends the existing literature and contributes to gaps in knowledge in several ways. First and foremost, this research has conceptualised a framework of antigender fashion to analyse, think through, and understand contemporary fashion design, particularly gender-fluid fashion design, in the context of the

current gender paradigm shift spearheaded by the trans* rights movement. Second, through the comparison and analysis of previous occurrences of gender-bending fashions – often termed androgynous or unisex fashion – this thesis has identified important differences in terms of antigender fashion's potential to challenge gender norms and its impact as a politically and culturally significant disruption of the gender binary. In offering this analysis, this study adds to an existing body of knowledge about the interconnection of fashion and gender, and the role of fashion as a cultural phenomenon that reacts to and interacts with the socio-cultural context, with its shifts and waves. Furthermore, the thesis adds to the expanding scholarship on fashion and masculinity; more specifically, the scholarship on fashion as a contributor to and visual signifier in the contemporary renegotiation of masculinities.

While this research project primarily focuses on Western examples of gender-fluid and antigender fashion, it also contributes to a growing awareness and acknowledgement of the need for the decolonisation of the fashion industry and the study of fashion in academia. As a deeply rooted concept in Western culture, the gender binary has been crucial in the oppression and colonisation of non-Western peoples. A post-colonial or decolonised theory of fashion also entails an examination of the binary concept of gender. For this reason, I plan on developing a postdoctoral project that takes on antigender fashion as a theoretical concept to analyse the ways non-Western and postcolonial fashion designers challenge and confront the gender binary and influences of colonisation through their design.

Contributing to the interdisciplinary field of fashion studies, this thesis explored fashion as a system of signification, and within that, the changing codes and norms of gendered fashion. Though it would be a futile effort to draw conclusions about the future of gender and fashion as a global industry, these case studies and the theoretical framework of antigender fashion offer a glimpse into the multiple ways fashion can be a playground for shaping, moulding, and expanding gender categories that exist in-between and beyond the gender binary. This thesis conceptualises fashion as a destabilising factor that works to broaden and proliferate the understanding of gender and gendered fashion, identifying ways in which the notion of gender can be renegotiated through fashion. Like the new taxonomy of gender identities that emerged in digital spaces influenced by the discourse in forums and social media platforms, antigender fashion offers a new visual taxonomy for the expression and performativity of gender. Antigender fashion allows us to imagine a future that is fluid, where gender is not limited to binary categories but envisioned as multiple, plural, and boundless possibilities.

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