

Contemporary Fashion Imaginary. Deconstructing Gender

Nicole Di Sandro*

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Abstract

Argued by Jacques Derrida, Deconstruction is a critical practice of reading and rewriting meanings: it aims to the decomposition of linguistic systems, by unveiling the function of oppositional categories. Integrating the Judith Butler deconstructive approach to gender identity and its performativity, the essay explores the mechanisms of social determining processes over subjects, defining to which extent fashion participates in gender intelligibility and projection of Self within the society.

Along the analysis of Zanaughtti and Knight's fashion film *Disrupt, Distort, Disguise*, the paper inquires provocative queering practices that reject any fixed, essential way of being man or woman. According to Butler's studies, it unfolds the very fallacy of 'gender' noun, its binarity and hierarchical order: gender is a continuous process of citation and alteration, and it is all about doing. As in the movie, such imitative structure is implicitly revealed by Cross-Dressing performances: a parody of heterosexual pre-existing codes, denying the idea of stable Self and its forced naturalization.

These insights are traceable in the continuous becoming and negotiation of dressing practices: embracing the fluidity of gender, fashion imaginary is blurring the line between masculine and feminine, acting a political mediation between social structural changes and the related discriminating resistance.

Keywords: Gender; Meaning; Performativity; Identity Politics; Fluidity.

* Independent scholar (Italy); ✉ nicole.disandro@studio.unibo.it

Author Note: Structuring

In order to gradually introduce the reader to the complex issue, starting point for this analysis is the movie *Disrupt, Distort, Disguise*: a brief look to its techniques and semiotics retraces the Zanaughtti intentions and preferred message. The following section of *Theoretical insights* seeks to bring the reader to perceive first problematics related to the meaning of gender, placing as example the semiotics of the skirt. What has been highlighted here is the gap between gender experience and the related inadequacy of language to represent it, since its basis on just two oppositional and hierarchical terms. Further, it rises the issue of limits of acceptability, and the role of context in processes of resignification. From semiotics then, the essay will move to the ontological inquiry of gender itself, deepening the given insights. The studies of Butler on Performativity and its interconnection with Derridean Deconstructivism and fashion practices are explained along the movie, while, simultaneously, the recorded performance is read through the theory. In conclusion, the essay will face the founding from the analysis, underlining the necessity of new models and structures ‘in becoming’.

“Is it a boy or a girl? A Drag Queen? A wash rag Queen? A junkie or just a gigolo? I bet just a whore”¹

At once, a critical deconstruction of identity politics and a deliberate provocation, the collaboration between Nick Knight and Jazzelle Zanaughtti is collocated in a wider *ShowStudio Queers*² project, meant as an umbrella-term for any expression of gender which differs from the dominant binary dictus. Recorder performance of Zanaughtti, *Disrupt, Distort, Disguise* stages her walk in the street of London in ten, eccentric looks: styled by the flamboyant model herself, the live show as well as the fashion movie are shaped up to engage people’s judgment and explore the contingency discriminations. The audience seems to hesitate in packing up an individual in a well-defined category: it suggests a gap between gender experience and the language exploited to talk about that. It is a call to overcome the dichotomy between the real presence and its representational counterpart, that fails to explain the multifaceted possibilities of being. But above all, it is symptomatic of a social asset that stereotypes the expression of any Self, in the limits of what is acceptable and what is not.

A first physical deconstruction is rendered through distorting cinematographic techniques, as the exploitation of pixeling and negatives, while a disordered dub depicts the overlap of the inner voice and the antithetical people comments. Landscapes and characters are decomposed, blurred, made uncomfortably colourful: the issue of diversity is visually provided by contrast, with what we assume as ‘realistic’ and all its linear representation.

The footage opens on the model in a dressing room: the *safe space* in which no-binary people can express their own personality, through the playful engagement with their appearance. All the movie is based on contraposition of such personal space and the social arena, portraying the gap between the truly individual expression and the social constriction into gender — and identity — stereotypes. Since the beginning, Zanaughtti face is refracted by a distortive, magnifying glass in which she must fit. Literally “That glass was representing [like] because I spent so long and so many years of my life, as so many queer people do, just acting myself and seeing why fit it on the spectrum.”³ Limiting what is acceptable and what is not, the glass explores a double-directional meaning: on one side it is an effort to “opening up that really intimate thing that we all go through”⁴ to look deeper into the self. On the other hand, it represents the panoptical lens that everyone, especially queer people, undergoes. In such view, decon-

1. Nick Knight and Jazzelle Zanaughtti, *Disrupt, Distort, Disguise* — @uglyworldwide in Nick Knight’s fashion film, June 2019, fashion movie, 5:11, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ggRrCrlNSVk>.
2. ShowStudio, *Queer project*, accessed February 2020, <https://www.showstudio.com/projects/queer>.
3. Nick Knight and Jazzelle Zanaughtti, *Jazzelle Zanaughtti on Queer Discrimination, Art and Breaking Out*, interview by Nick Knight, *ShowStudio*, 1:12–3:10, <https://www.showstudio.com/projects/uglyworldwide/queer-discrimination-art-breaking-out?autoplay=1>.
4. Knight, Zanaughtti, 1:34.

structing gender then is a due, critical analysis, to erase the social constriction of categories while freeing processes of body re-signification from a prejudging, unidirectional reading. In other words, it is a call to breakdown categories as well as the related social, taxonomical *modus operandi*.

Along comics balloons and subtitles that provide a reading key, Zanaughtti questions gender roles, and the related ideas of sexual harassment and sickness: the performer stages subject's alienation in *fitting the spectrum*,⁵ whether she appears in a builder-inspired look, in a traditional drag queen style, decorated with bugs or tennis balls, or in a terrifying mask of herself. In the safe space the magnifying, social glass defines the limits of such spectrum. The breaking point lies in the intimacy of a bath, in which the semiotics of glass is translated in solidified wax, literally "a landscape that is trying to remould you."⁶ In the introspective performance, the painful constrictions burn as hot wax on the skin: a step out, breaking into the glass, represents the beginning of Self, "breaking through just whatever is holding you back,"⁷ confounding any definition.

Theoretical Insights: Language, Gender, Fashion

Built over a series of conversation between Knight and Zanaughtti, the provided reading is just one of infinite interpretation to which the movie opens up. If wild resignifications are allowed for the critique sake in artistic and fashion production, the matter at stake is its perception in a broader social arena. The recontextualization of a given sign necessarily refers and differs from any absolute meaning: its acquisition depends on the reader experience, according to the development of his own particular identity, as well as, on the property of a text against which reader seeks to check authors experience, and its preferred meaning.⁸

In *Signature, Event, Context*,⁹ Derrida has shown the ambiguity of 'meaning', that is bounded to the context in which it is actualized: as the context cannot be absolutely determined, since its possibilities are unpredictable and unlimited, then any fixed meaning can be assumed. The meaning would be constantly separated from the signifier which embodies it, pursuing an ontological research behind the sign. So, if the traditional philosophical assumption of communication reduces meanings to the context, Derrida rather points to the limitless plurality of context itself, that cannot be circumscribed nor saturated.

On the wave of the Barthes semiotician contribution,¹⁰ fashion — and broadly any cultural element — can be read as a language, system of signification and context in which — and in relation to — an element acquires meanings. It goes without saying that a deconstruction of dressing practices is necessarily bounded to contingent processes of identity representation and formation. Even drawing on such premises, one should always consider the Derrida's refusal of a merely semiotic analysis of a text, since his Deconstructivism questions ontological roots of meaning.

If it is quite obvious that fashion plays a key role in representation and construction of self, then one should define the extents and limits in — and by — which fashion operates. The issues of context, meaning and politics of identity — and broadly, deconstruction — have been fully explored in Feminist Studies¹¹, while finding a great formulation in the work of the American scholar Judith Butler. In her

5. Knight, Zanaughtti, 1:25.

6. Cf. Knight, Zanaughtti, *Disrupt, Distort, Disguise*, 4:42.

7. Cf. Knight, Zanaughtti, *On Queer Discrimination, Art and Breaking Out*, 3:44.

8. Johnathan Culler, *On Deconstruction: Theory and Criticism after Structuralism* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2007), 132.

9. Jacques Derrida, "Signature Event Context," in *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 1.

10. Roland Barthes, *Systeme de la Mode*, trans. Matthew Ward, Richard Howard (California: University of California Press, 1990).

11. See Drucilla Cornell, *The Philosophy of the Limit* (London: Routledge, 1992);

Drucilla Cornell, *Behind Accommodation: Ethical Feminism, Deconstruction and the Law* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield

argumentation around *drags*,¹² the interconnection between dressing practices and gender expression conveys in an unconscious everyday performance. Deconstructing gender through fashion then, means to unveil the discriminating mechanism and way of thinking that affects subjectivity, rather than a structural inquiry of the garment itself. Despite that, the analysis of tangible garments is a useful starting point to stress the troubles in the node of fashion-gender-language and the related issues of meaning and signification.

A very concept of Postmodernism is the *historicality* of systems, languages and values;¹³ ergo deconstruction implies a diachrony with the historical definition of a word, and a synchronic movement across other words within the language.¹⁴ In fashion clothing, an exemplificative instance can be the *skirt*. Even if mainly assumed as gendered garment, it acquires different meanings according to its usage and contexts: as studied by the fashion curator Andrew Bolton in his *Breaveheart: Man in Skirt*,¹⁵ the sign 'skirt' is recognized as the worn piece of fabric, but its meaning is strictly bounded to the performative force of context, whereas it is used in a Scottish male tradition, in a Jean Paul Gautier 1985's collection or in everyday woman wardrobe. In Scotland, the *kilt*, even standing for gender differences, is a historical and cultural echo of virility and manliness, while the Gautier's garment called into the arena the association skirt (signifier) — woman (meaning) in an open provocation.¹⁶

Further, even in the discriminating logic of a gendered sign, the woman skirt — particularly the miniskirt — acquires different meanings in different contexts and time, even echoing the same matrix. In a trial, a lawyer wearing a mini-skirt suit is considered an independent businesswoman. If this is the trial of a rape and the victim at the time of facts was wearing a mini-skirt, a different, possible scenario could open: despite the feminists fights, sexists people would interpret it as sexual harassment and such discriminating connotation could justified the received violence.

As Chandler¹⁷ underlines, in linguistic, genres and sociolects strongly contribute to mark a term as positive or negative in a dichotomy. In the specific case, it is clear how the pairing skirt/trousers¹⁸ — as woman/man, innocent/guilty — and all their related features — can be explicitly reversed “when an interest group seeks to challenge the ideological priorities which the markedness may be taken to reflect.”¹⁹

The quoted examples can unfold some insights of Deconstructivism developed in the arena of gender inquiry:

1. There is a gap between the addressee-author intention and the received meaning, as far as there is a gap between the wearer intention and the codification — and recodification — of his style. The interplay of signification depends on intertextuality: the double act of reading-rewriting a meaning is connected to the iterability of an element, as the exploitation of the logic which links

Publishers, 1999);

Elizabeth Grosz, *Sexual Subversion: Three French Feminist* (Crows Nest: Allen & Unwin, 1989);

Elizabeth Grosz, *Time Travels: Feminism, Nature and Power* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005).

12. Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 187.

13. See Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, vol. 1: An Introduction*, trans. Hurley R. (New York: Vintage Book, 1978);

Marcia Morgado, “Coming to Terms With Postmodern: Theories and Concepts of Contemporary Culture and Their Implications for Apparel Scholars,” *Clothing and Textiles Research Journal* vol. 14 (January 1996), 41–53.

14. Janet Martin Soskice, *Metaphor and Religious Language* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1987), 80–82.

15. Andrew Bolton, *Breaveheart: Man in Skirt* (New York: Herry N. Abrams, 2003).

16. John Duka, “Skirt For Men? Yes and Not,” *The New York Times*, October 27, 1984, <https://www.nytimes.com/1984/10/27/style/skirts-for-men-yes-and-no.html>.

17. Daniel Chandler, *Semiotics: The Basics* (London: Routledge, 2007), 98.

18. Even if not mentioned, the weight of *Trousers* is perceived *In Absentia*.

19. Cf. Chandler, *Semiotics: The Basics*, 98.

repetition to alterity.²⁰ Derrida stresses the language performative dimensions of *Citationality*:²¹ a word is quote of its previous uses which can occur in unpredictable and countless situations. So, rather than a well-packed meaning, any word recalls an echo, a memory that assumes different connotations. As in the example of the skirt in the trial, even exploiting the same pattern of repetition, nothing can ensure the coincidence between received and given meaning. So, signification is a complex and potentially infinite interweaving between an element and its circulation within discourses in which it has been used. “There are only, everywhere, differences and traces of traces.”²²

2. There is no intrinsic nor natural relation between signifier and signified;²³ at the same way, its gendered claim looks purely cultural: therefore, the association woman-feminine-skirt is arbitrary. Further, as Derrida underlines, meaning cannot be absolute nor is *given a priori* outside the language: since it is given by continuous play of differing and deferring from other elements inside language itself,²⁴ any definition could never be fixed nor exhaustive. Accordingly, society should not lead back gender characteristics to standardized way of wearing, appearing or being. Stereotyping would never provide a real representation. As a matter of fact, the correlation with wearer’s sex and gendered apparel is merely cultural, naturalized by the dominant, social discourse.²⁵
3. There is a need to subvert the binary oppositions enclosed in the Western way of thinking; likewise, there is a social need to overcome the dichotomy between Man/Woman, Masculine/Feminine.

As argued by Derrida, meanings come from the *function of contrasts* with other meanings, underlining both the differences and the act of deferring from them with the word *différance*.²⁶ Western metaphysics has been always supporting a sedimented way of think that works throughout opposition of terms, setting their hierarchal relation. In a text, the deconstructive strategy should aim to corrupt such dichotomies²⁷: it involves a double gesture, from and to both terms, that would reverse the traditional order of subordination, while unfolding the whole structured system.

The emerged issues are inquired in the convergence of Deconstructivism and Queer studies. Derrida has dismantled the western *Metaphysic of Presence*, according which the idea of a *Truth* existing *a priori* outside the language is based on a sedimented, logocentric prejudice.²⁸ Deepened in the next paragraph, such view has been acquired by Judith Butler: underlying the problematics between gender, politics and language,²⁹ the scholar has rejected any pre-existing definition of gender that reduces the concept of being to an ideal identity.

In the Zanaughtti fashion movie, those three main points have been staged through deconstructive strategy: the necessity to overcome the arbitrary opposition masculinity/femininity with all the related behavioural and apparel assets, acting within the social landscape; the impossibility to perfectly conform to one of these absolute terms; the diverging — given and perceived — meaning of such act and its systemic resistance. The stunned, entertained, or disgusted reactions to her confusing looks well explain how the process of reading-rewriting depends on the previous use of a term and the contexts in which it has been

20. Cf. Derrida, *Signature, Event, Context*, 7–8.

21. Derrida, 10–12.

22. Jacques Derrida, *Positions*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 26.

23. Cf. Chandler, *Semiotics: The Basics*, 28.

24. Jacques Derrida, “Différance,” in *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 10–12.

25. Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender* (New York, London: Routledge, 2004), 40–56.

26. Cf. Derrida, *Différance*, 1–27.

27. Cf. Derrida, *Positions*, 41.

28. Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, [1967], trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: JHU Press, 2016).

29. Cf. Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 33–44.

exploited, which can be never absolute³⁰: in such *Citationality* of a language lies the creative potential to rewrite meanings and to engender new context.³¹ Here, Deconstruction is shown in its double action of Erasing and Generating³²: according to the critic Barbara Johnson, the dominant way of signifying over another is unveiled by analysing the specificity of a text's critical differences from itself.³³

'Disrupt, Distort, Disguise' Gender Identity

In assonance with the Butler's studies, the fashion movie *Disrupt, Distort, Disguise* is a critique to the very binary distinction of gender; a challenge to the traditional feminist claim of a specific women identity which is one of the *troubles* at the core of gender issue.³⁴ Assuming her argumentation, gender and its fashions follow a citational logic: down to the streets, Zanaughtti has brought her style into new contexts, challenging their meanings by drawing new possibilities of use. While Derrida stresses the discursivity of norms that create the contexts in which the utterance acquires meanings, Butler emphasises the discursive nature of subjects³⁵ that moulds such norms: it is a philosophical inquiry regarding body and identity, and how they are stylized into existence within the boundaries of the dominant discourse.³⁶

To define to which extent dressing practices that participates in subject formation are conscious acts, one should then mark the fundamental differences between performance and performativity. In doing that, it is useful a look to the John L. Austin speech act theory,³⁷ at the stake of the whole Derridean *Signature, Event, Context*, and its implication in Queer Studies. Drawing on Austin, Butler asserts that a performative statement "enacts or produces that which it names."³⁸ Further, assuming the Derrida critique to Austin, the performative utterance can succeed just in the game of citation and repetition,³⁹ by referring to other iterable utterances, inscribed in established conventions. Butler's contribution consists in understanding performativity not only in relation to speech acts, but also to bodily acts.⁴⁰ She points at gender as a *Stylized repetition of acts*⁴¹: differing from the mere semiotics, performativity is an inquiry about the ontological roots of gender itself that explains what it is, rather than what does it mean. Gender is not a natural condition: we are not born male or female, but rather we *become* it. That means that gender comes into being within practices of gendering, rather than refer to a noun that exists outside such practices. It is *all about doing*,⁴² while sexing the very body calls into play language and discourses⁴³ that naturalize sexed and gendered features in the society.

30. Cf. Derrida, *Signature, Event, Context*, 18.

31. Derrida, 12.

32. Alison Gill, "Jacques Derrida. Fashion Under Erasure," in *Thinking Through Fashion*, ed. Agnes Rocamora, Anneke Smelik (London: I.B. Tauris, 2015), 251–260.

33. Barbara Johnson, *The Critical Difference: Essays in the Contemporary Rhetoric of Reading* (Baltimore: JHU Press, 1985), 5.

34. Cf. Butler, *Gender Trouble*, xxix.

35. Julian Humphrey, "Three Conception of Performativity," in *Dancing About Architecture in a Performative Space* (PhD Diss., University of Toronto, 2010), 18, https://tspace.library.utoronto.ca/bitstream/1807/24769/3/Humphreys_Julian_P_201006_PhD_thesis.pdf.

36. Elisabeth Wissinger, "Judith Butler. Fashion and Performativity," in *Thinking Through Fashion*, ed. A. Rocamora, A. Smelik (London: I.B. Taurus, 2015), 286.

37. John L. Austin, *How to do Things With Words* (Cambridge: Harvard Press University, 1975).

38. Butler, *Bodies That Matter. On the Discursive Limits of 'sex'* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 23.

39. Cf. Derrida, *Signature, Event, Context*, 15–16.

40. Cf. Butler, *Undoing Gender*, 198.

41. Cf. Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 140.

42. Butler, 25.

43. We assume the Foucault's notion of 'Discourse' in his *History of Sexuality*, as a culturally constructed representation of reality, whose meanings are given by the norms and rules that govern it.

The body itself is a result of linguistic and social interactions that bring it into being.⁴⁴ Identity formation occurs through repetitions, and its meaning is based on arbitrary, oppositional categories that *create* — rather than describe — it. Arguing the performative dimension of subjectivity as for the language, Butler unveils the very fallacy of a gender taxonomy, whose terms are perceived as ‘natural’, rather than contingent, unfairly limiting the concept of ‘human’ to two, specific kind of being. In this sense, the fashioned body is an utterance of pre-existing power relations.⁴⁵

Bodies, caught up in games of significations, become intelligible throughout imaginary, cultural schemas, acquired via interaction and imposed by self-disciplines.⁴⁶ In this sense, trying to fit into such schema, subject is nothing than a repetition of iterations that follows psychic projections of how he/she should be. But there is an incoherence between the ideal projection and the very subject: the body always exceeds the limits in which it is given.⁴⁷ Here, Butler identifies a temporary gap in which the body is exposed to re-signification, carrying an unconscious difference in its repetitions, “a variety of incoherent configurations that in their multiplicity exceed and defy the injunction by which they are generated.”⁴⁸ Performativity cannot be equated to performance, since it refers to processes of iterability, a *constrained repetition of norms*⁴⁹: repetition enables the subject itself and provides its temporary condition.⁵⁰ While in a continuous state of becoming, once the body is limited, it embraces a sedimented history of norms among which morphological sex and gender.⁵¹ Further, by highlighting the inherent incoherence of the subject, Butler argues the limits of personal responsibility, since upsetting social categories necessarily involves the dissolution of the very subject.⁵²

Brought as example by Butler herself, the status of drag performers,⁵³ in their imitation of gender features, unveils the “imitative structure of gender itself — as well as its contingency.”⁵⁴ To avoid misunderstandings, it must be underlined that, while drag practices can explain the very notion of gender, there is any necessary relation between drags and subversion. A wide range of scholars has attributed a subversive power to their imitation, confounding the line between performance and performativity. Among them, Garber⁵⁵ has argued that “one of the most important aspect of cross-dressing is the way it offers an easy notion of binarity, putting into question the category of female and male, weather they are considered essential or constructed, biological or cultural,”⁵⁶ by connoting a different range of gender possibilities. Another example could be the Rick Owen analysis pursued by Gezcy and Karaminas⁵⁷ in 2017: referring to performativity to explain fashion performances, they blurry the line between representation and construction of gender.⁵⁸ Both these theses presumes the subject as aware agent, implicitly

44. Cf. Butler, *Undoing Gender*, 20–29.

45. Cf. Wissinger, *Judith Butler*, 286.

46. Cf. Butler, *Undoing Gender*, 17–39.

47. Butler, 199.

48. Cf. Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 145.

49. Cf. Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, 95.

50. Butler, 95.

51. Cf. Wissinger, *Judith Butler*, 288.

52. Cf. Humphreys, *Three Conception of Performativity*, 28.

53. As Butler, I will use the terms *Drag* and *Crossing-dressing* interchangeably.

54. Cf. Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 187.

55. Marjorie Garber, *Vested Interest: Cross-Dressing and Cultural Anxiety* (London: Routledge, 2008).

56. Garber, 10.

57. Adam Gezcy and Vicki Karaminas, *Critical Fashion Practices: From Westwood to Van Berendonck* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2017) 133–138.

58. What is at the stake of my critique is the concept of drag performance implicitly considered as a performative act in their argumentation. Rather, the drag performance on stage is not a performative act, but a performance that consciously imitate (or talks about) the imitative nature of gender. It would not be probably what they meant, but the chapter results quite ambiguous. Further, despites the authors consider the effort to represent the body as an object — so denying its agency — in the performances on stage, my wonder is that, those bodies on stage belongs to lively models and actors, that consciously

assuming a relation between drags and resistance, which is not necessary nor universal: what emerge is a focus on a supposed Cross-dressing performativity, that diverges from the Butler theorization so far. Moreover, by imitating signs of difference, drags stylization always refers to the main binary discourse: if on one side, it seems to mirror a rebellious act, on the other it could reinforce the dialectic of real and fake way to be masculine or feminine, which is anything but subversive. Rather, matter of drags is their tendency to stage the mechanic fabrication of identity and categories, through the hyperbolic parody of the heterosexual pre-existing codes, echoing the negation of a stable self.

In this sense, one should read the whole Zanaughtti performance in *Disrupt, distort, disguise*: rather than a subversive act, it is a conscious critique to pre-established labels, staging the citational fabrication of identity. Particularly interesting is her “*Pure Drag*⁵⁹ look⁶⁰”, that questions the traditional association between Cross-Dressing practices and men, acknowledging discriminations even between different kind of queers. Traditionally, drag has entered in the collective imaginary as a fictitious, exaggerated female character, staged by men. Jazzelle, “*a woman being a man being a woman*”, dismantles such unnecessary association, highlighting how drag is “*Its own thing*”⁶¹: a reference of feminine attributions, between the radical sexualization and the parody. Despite the voiceover’s look description as a “*Morose coloured version of the truth*,”⁶² the hyperbolic representation reinforces the idea of a fake way of behave. No one dresses like that in everyday life, neither man nor women: drags can underline the difference between genders through exaggeration, rather than blurring their very distinction. “*Drag is subversive to the extent that it reflects on the imitative structure by which hegemonic gender is itself produced.*”⁶³ Acknowledging the imitative dimension of gender, Cross-dressing unveils the cultural basis of such practices, by imitating this imitation.

A stressed issue in all Zanaughtti looks is the forced, naturalized contingency between sex and gender, fundamentals of Butler’s critique to feminism. “*Is that a man or a woman?*” is an effort to identify the biological sex of an individual looking at his gendered features, as the two terms would be consequential. Several Feminist theories diverge in the definition of those terms: traditional biological models support the idea that while gender is a cultural construction, sex refers to the related ‘natural’, material genitalia, marking a distinction between the historical category of the former, versus the latter’s biological one.⁶⁴ Zanaughtti makes clear how gender affects the perception of bodily sexual differences, by imitating male sexual harassment, matching oppositional feature or erasing any of them: in some looks, the identification of her specific sex can be problematic. If sex acquires meaning through gendering, then sex itself is socially constructed. Quoting Butler, sex is “*a process whereby regulatory norms materialize sex and achieve this materialization through a forcible reiteration of those norms;*”⁶⁵ therefore is impossible to think at sex outside dominant linguistic norms that continuously re-determinate boundaries in which it comes into being. On this wave, Zanaughtti performance shows that, even between sex and gender expression there is any causal relation, but both cannot exist outside the dominant, binary discourse that generates and designates them — literally “*the materialistic fabric of life that encloses you*”⁶⁶: sexing the body then is meaningful only due the frame of gendered social organization, whose categorization is just approximate and never exhaustive for a representation of variations.

What is outside the binary distinction is still relegated to the zone of abjection, with specific regard to sexuality: knowledge and science — both depending on language oppositional structure — have reduced

undergoes in such representation.

59. Nick Knight and Jazzelle Zanaughtti, “*Drag, Breast Reduction and Trolls*,” interview by Nick Knight, *ShowStudio*, 1:03, <https://www.showstudio.com/projects/uglyworldwide/drag-breast-reduction-trolls?tag=Queer%20Culture>.

60. Cf. Knight, Zanaughtti, *Disrupt, distort, disguise*, 5:18.

61. Cf. Knight, Zanaughtti, *Drag, Breast Reduction and Trolls*, 1:42–2:32.

62. Cf. Knight, Zanaughtti, *Disrupt, distort, disguise*, 5:13.

63. Cf. Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, 125.

64. Cf. Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 9.

65. Butler, 1–2.

66. Cf. Knight, Zanaughtti, *Disrupt, distort, disguise*, 4:56.

the categories of sex to the mere productive function, imposing heterosexual condition as natural and segregating the deviation to illness. It is exactly such heterosexual matrix that imposes a linear connection between sex and sexuality, and — consequentially — gender⁶⁷: it is expected from a baby born with penis to identify himself and behave as a man in his lifelong time and being sexually attracted by woman. Such configuration is needed just to make a body intelligible within the heteronormative, but it is not exhaustive for a real depiction.

What needs to be emphasised is the role played by fashion in such classificatory processes, that seems to leave rooms for a third kind of gender, well represented by Jazzelle in her everyday life: the androgynous. Even if already present in all the history of costume, just in the Twentieth Century, a consistent exchange between male and female wardrobe, as well as a hybridization of their gendered features, occurred. As theorized by Morgado, Androgyny is shaped up to be the in antithesis with the conventional masculine strong physicality as well as the sexualized feminine body, placing itself in an ambiguous average and supporting a gender-blender aesthetic. But if in postmodern era androgyny was meant as a style of self-representation, with the post-postmodernism a difference occurs, since the individual effort to erase cultural categories.⁶⁸ If the shift lies in the active negation of gendered elements, then Androgyny itself is just another fixed term, in contrast to any gendered body: therefore, it shows its fallacy in the moment in which the instability of gender is advocated.

Gender construction, regulated by social, medical and biological discourses, inevitably intersects further discriminating categories. In the movie, whether Jazzelle is covered of melted ice cream, walks in a man suit with tights on her face and a ruffled wig, or wearing the Fecal Matter oversize 'I'm sick' jumper, she also questions the parameters in which the gendered subject has been layered by moral meanings that relegates 'unhealthy' and 'insane' to the domain of abjection. Compelled by the medical apparatus and supported by social sanction, she has been defined 'prostitute', disgusting 'poo', or considered pathologic. According to Foucault, the medical discourse rises social and self-coercions, which consequentially delimitates "a domain of unthinkable, abject, unliveable bodies."⁶⁹ This zone of abjection, as constant reference, define the limits of the subject itself. Literally, the "identification against which — and by virtue of which — the domain of the subject will circumscribe its own claim to autonomy and life."⁷⁰ Body intelligibility does not depend from any body as real, but refers to a instituted fantasy,⁷¹ in which "physical facts serve as causes, and desires reflect the inexorable effects of that physicality."⁷²

Health and hygienic regimes are utterances in language and social perception, that result in phycological treatments, exercise, surgery modification and medical history, leaving very little rooms for those who exceed the limits. Meaningful is the melted ice cream look: it recalls a certain exchange of bodily liquids at the basis of many Eighties visual metaphors⁷³ related to increasing of collective anxieties and fears around AIDS epidemic,⁷⁴ suggesting the immunological aberration and dirtiness, since it refers to primordial, bestial practices such sex, eating and drinking while producing degrading, visceral wastes.⁷⁵

Other signifiers of decay are the insects sticking on Zanaughtti face: supporting an ideal aberration of

67. The tactical production of the discrete and binary categorization of sex c'onceals the strategic aims of that very apparatus of production by postulating "sex" as "a cause" of sexual experience, behaviour, and desire. Foucault's genealogical inquiry exposes this ostensible "cause" as "an effect," the production of a given regime of sexuality that seeks to regulate sexual experience by instating the discrete categories of sex as foundational and causal functions within any discursive account of sexuality', in Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 31.

68. Marcia Morgado, "Fashion Phenomena And The Post-Postmodern Condition: Enquiry And Speculation," *Fashion, Style & Popular Culture* 1, no. 3 (2014), 313–339.

69. Cf. Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, xi.

70. Butler, 3.

71. Or schema, as already argued.

72. Cf. Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 90.

73. An example is the 1983 Joel Peter Witkin *Sanitarium*, that lately inspired the Alexander McQueen *Voss* fashion show.

74. Rebecca Arnold, *Fashion, Desire and Anxiety: Image and Morality in the Twentieth Century* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2001).

75. Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World*, [1965] (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1984).

beauty, they were already used in by Alexander McQueen in the *Voss* fashion show. But, matching the insects and the 'I'm Sick' oversized jumper with playful movements, the parody stages mental illness, rather than the body decomposition as for McQueen. Instead, death and mummification are somehow quoted in the mask look,⁷⁶ suggesting the very decay of subject, lead to the consumerism: apparently, walking in the night around the Victoria Station is a classy lady; but a closer gaze reveals a terrifying mask, modelled on the Zanaughtti face, that distorts her features and blinds her. While teasing the relation between gender, health and class, the model performs a grotesque realism on her own body: if behind the claustrophobic cover she felt powerful, being completely in her own head, on the other hand the pejorative utterance of her look critiques classic, wealth women standards.

Conclusions: Fashion And The Body

Disrupt, Distort, Disguise, by staging cross-dressing performances of Zanaughtti, it unveils the imitative structure of any notion of gender. It allows a double movement, providing a functional contrast between normalized identities of the audience and the model's abject one, that defining the limits of subject agency. Reading at the film in the framework of Derrida and Butler theories, clarifies that there are only performed identities, in as much as, rather than *being* a fixed gender identities, subjects *do* their gender through continuous, constituting repetition of acts that *bring into being* a compelling projection, *an object of belief*.⁷⁷

How do the fashion practices participate in such *belief*?

Fashion mediates between subjects and environment, according to shifting commercial and cultural forces and social prescriptive norms. It works as individual and collective agent, layering the body with codified values while making rooms for variations. Dressing practices can be meant as *situated bodily practices*⁷⁸: its mainstream dimension supports the dominant, hierarchical gaze around sex, gender, health, and morality, since its "collective, systematized and prescriptive"⁷⁹ nature. Differing and referring to the normative structure, fashion imposes self-discipline, in the aim to achieve an ideal projection of Self: so, *la Mode*, is matrix of body intelligibility.

If it can explain the role of fashion in the creation and circulation of fixed identities, nonetheless what must be brought into enquiry is the fashion recursive engagement with trends, defined as an "anomaly, [...] deviation from the norm,"⁸⁰ that if acquired over a certain lapse of time, it turns into norm itself. In this sense, fashion can act out instability within social system. Looks like it allows representation of sexual and gender types that have been pointed as pathological, as homosexuals and queers. Despite that, it follows different logics of inclusion-exclusion, since, as observed by Zanaughtti, just few forms of queering are recognized.⁸¹ So, can fashion be defined 'subversive'? Does it really erase the gender oppositional hierarchy?

As for Drags, subversion cannot depend on the mere denaturalization of gender through conscious acquisition of dressing codes and behaviours. Rather, according to Derrida, any deconstructive act should lead to "the irruptive emergence of a new 'concept', a concept that cannot longer be, and never could be, included in the previous regime."⁸²

76. Cf. Knight, Zanaughtti, *Disrupt, Distort, Disguise*, 3:53.

77. Judith Butler, "Performative Act and Gender constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory," *Theatre Journal* Vol. 40, (December 1988): 520, https://www.amherst.edu/system/files/media/1650/butler_performative_acts.pdf.

78. Joanne Entwistle, *The Fashioned body: Fashion, Dress and Modern Social Theory* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000).

79. Joanne Finkelstein, *The Art of Self-invention: Image and Identity in Popular and Visual Culture* (London; New York: I. B. Tauris, 2007), 211.

80. Martin Raymond, *The Trend Forecaster's Handbook* (London: Laurence King Pub, 2010), 14.

81. Cf. Knight, Zanaughtti, *On Queer Discrimination, Art and Breaking Out*, 2:05.

82. Cf. Derrida, *Position*, 42.

There seems to be some chance to lead such ‘concept’ to the idea of *Fluidity*, to the extent which it constantly moves between female/male characteristics, denying the idea of a stable gender. This is the case of Zanaughtti herself or icons like Jake and Joseph Dupont or Mateusz Maga. While gender-bending fashion is as old as the history of gender norms, nowadays it seems that a different politicization is rising. There is more at the stake of fluidity than a mere trend, but it is still labelled as an avant-garde statement, rather than everyday issue. It is a subtle call for inclusiveness, that embraces the idea of a continuous becoming of the Self, and it involves a whole spectrum between and outside the two static definitions of male/female.

If, as argued by Derrida, the western thought is based on hierarchical opposition of terms, then it is the whole system that needs to be rethought, by increasing subjects’ consciousness and agency. In this sense, fashion is a privileged place of action: while a rethought of verbal, sedimented languages results problematic, fashion exploits images that brings into being what still cannot be said through words, rapidly engaging with changes and alterations. Due this symbiosis with transformation, fashion promotes Selves in becoming, hybridized with other cultural insights, above all technology.⁸³ A critique to normative structures so far, is bringing new meanings for gender, sex or identity categories, but also it questions the whole concept of Humanity and its ‘natural’ abilities. Nonetheless, a radical revolution seems still far: it should involve the whole schemas through which identities come into being, that may embrace a certain dynamism in languages and continuously changing models of representation, discarding any stable definition. Rather, deconstructing gender through fashion practices aims to raise awareness and increase subject agency withing processes of cultural inscription, acknowledging the very source of discriminatory dictus. “Because it feels better to hold on and make yourself to believe you can depend on it⁸⁴ [...] hiding behind the chaos without choice. So, try hard along the influences of the truth.”⁸⁵

83. Among others, Donna Haraway, advocates the rise of subject awareness toward determinism, suggesting its subversion through forms of hybridization unthinkable in the dominant asset. What she has kept in consideration is the contemporary irruption of technology in every aspect of life, as breaking point with traditional structures: the continuous interactions between subject and devices is opening up to resignification of body by technological means as never before. See Haraway, *A Cyborg Manifesto*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).

84. Cf. Knight, Zanaughtti, *Disrupt, distort, disguise*, 0:30.

85. Cf. Knight, Zanaughtti, *Disrupt, distort, disguise*, 6:03–6:31.

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Nicole Di Sandro: Independent scholar (Italy)

✉ nicole.disandro@studio.unibo.it

She is a Master in Fashion Culture and Management. Her current research topics are Critical Queer and Crip Studies in the field of Fashion, newest Technologies and their influences over the fashioned body. In her study residency at the National College of Art and Design in Dublin, she approached practices and critique of contemporary art, co-curating the exhibition 'Make Haste, Slowly' at the Goethe Institut. Previously, she obtained the BA in Humanistic Science for the Communication at the University of Florence. In the same city, she also studied as Fashion Designer at the Polimoda Academy.