

Dress, Body, Deconstruction: A Philosophical Perspective. Interview with Flavia Loscialpo

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Question — First of all, I would like to start with a very general question: Why is it important to think about the theme of dress from a philosophical point of view?

Answer — Dress, or fashion, is a privileged window on our culture and society. It in fact embodies the *Zeitgeist*, the spirit of the era it is rooted in. Wearing clothes is a universal experience, with fashion being the cultural form that is closest to our bodies, defining individual and collective identities. In this sense, there is no aspect of fashion that does not follow under the aegis of philosophy.

In a very concrete way, the centrality of the theme of dress, or fashion, also to the philosophical exploration, can be observed in relation to an interesting example, that is, Karl Marx's coat. In *Capital*, Marx writes about a coat to introduce complex concepts of use value versus exchange value, and unravel his own theory of commodity fetishism.¹ Fashion, or clothing, was for Marx, the motor, product, and metaphor of the capitalist system. What is interesting is that Marx had to frequently pawn his own overcoat, due to economic struggles. Deprived of the coat, he could not present himself in a respectable way in order to gain entry to the British Museum's reading room, where he wrote *Capital*, and thus of the role of the coat in world history. An emblematic metaphor in Marx's *Capital*, the coat is also a necessary garment and social symbol in Marx's life.²

The way we dress reflects the changes informing our society, and always embodies a *Weltanschauung*, which might be informed by individual and collective beliefs, or issues, whether philosophical, political, economic, religious, ethical etc. So many examples can illustrate this. Just to mention one, we can think about the Constructivist or Futurist programmes, where clothes were part of the aspiration to a total renovation of life. As Elizabeth Wilson observes, fashion is "an aesthetic medium for the expression of

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1. Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, trans. Ben Fowkes (Middlesex UK: Penguin Books, 1976).
2. See Peter Stallybrass, "Marx's Coat", in *Border Fetishisms: Material Objects in Unstable Spaces*, ed. Patricia Spyer (New York and London: Routledge, 1998): 183–207.

ideas, desires and beliefs circulating in society.”³

In my view, there is no field of inquiry or no concept that does not fall under the remit of philosophy. Studies by philosophers such as Benjamin, Barthes, and Simmel are by now classic readings for a philosophical exploration of fashion. At the same time, within the field of fashion studies, defined by its multi-disciplinarity, several recent and not so recent contributions demonstrate the relevance of philosophical perspectives to interpret fashion.⁴ Philosophical contributions — not only within aesthetic philosophy — provide in fact interesting conceptual tools that can disclose new understandings of fashion, beyond the most established and, at times, over-used conceptual or methodological frameworks, thus inaugurating an interesting dialogue with other disciplines, and testifying to the complexity of the multiform phenomenon of fashion.

Q — From the early 20th century until today, as we know, the question of the body has been put at the centre of philosophical debates from many different philosophical perspectives and with different approaches. In your opinion, how should we conceive of the relationship between the body and the dress?

A — The relationship between the body and the dress is absolutely central for our discourse, from many different perspectives. In all its modalities of being-in-the-world, of its embodying or challenging stereotypes and mythologies, the body is the physical and cultural territory where the performance of the identity takes place.

From a fashion perspective, dresses are conceived and created with a body in mind: a body that, at times, is individual, but most of the times is an abstract, stylized body, represented by a surrogate, the mannequin. Whether in art or in fashion, the drawn body implicitly calls into question the relationship between the individual body and its idealisation, as well as conceptual pairs such as nature/culture, subject/object, inside/outside, which define our way of talking and thinking about the body.

In fashion, some designers have stimulated a fertile reflection questioning the body/dress relationship, as well as the concept of ‘body’ itself. In particular, in the late 1980s and early 1990s, the so called ‘deconstructivist’ designers, by making visible the operations that are part of the dress construction, demonstrated how the body is inhabited by its idealisation, and suggested different possibilities of giving voice to the corporeality.⁵ Interestingly, a recurring motif in ‘deconstruction fashion’ or ‘mode destroy’ is the reversal of the relation between the body and the garment. For instance, in Kawakubo’s Comme des Garçons S/S 1997 collection, called ‘Dress Becomes Body Becomes Dress’, the lumps and bumps emerging from beneath the fabrics seem to be forcing the boundaries between the body and the dress, and shape a different possibility of articulating the body. Even more eloquently, Maison Martin Margiela’s tailor’s dummy, worn as a waistcoat directly over the skin, reverses the relationship between the garment and the wearer: the body wears the tailor’s dummy, a norm for classical sizes and proportions, to which the living body has for long been made obedient.

The central body/dress relationship can also be addressed from a slightly different perspective, that is, the curatorial one. It is in fact emblematic that, within fashion curation, crucial debates have concentrated on a critical question, that is, how can we represent fashion’s dynamism and presence in the museum, when the body is absent? Over the years, academic and curatorial contributions have indeed highlighted the static nature of (some) fashion exhibitions, which struggle to represent fashion “as a living phenomenon.”⁶

3. Elizabeth Wilson, *Adorned in Dreams* (London-New York: I. B. Tauris, 1985): 9.

4. See Agnès Rocamora and Anneke Smelik, *Thinking Through Fashion. A Guide to Key Theorists* (London-New York: I.B.Tauris, 2016); Stefano Marino and Giovanni Matteucci, *Philosophical Perspectives on Fashion* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017); Malcolm Barnard, *Fashion Theory: A Reader*, (Abingdon: Routledge, 2007); Gilles Lipovetsky, *The Empire of Fashion: Dressing Modern Democracy* (Princeton-Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2002); Joanne Entwistle, *The Fashioned Body: fashion, dress, and modern social theory* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000).

5. See Flavia Loscialpo, “Fashion and Philosophical Deconstruction: A Fashion in-Deconstruction”, in *Fashion Forward*, ed. by Alissa de Witt-Paul and Mira Crouch (Oxford: Inter-Disciplinary Press, 2011): 13–29.

6. Valerie Steele, “A museum of fashion is more than a clothes-bag”, in *Fashion Theory* 2, no. 4 (1998): 334. See also Joanne Entwistle and Elizabeth Wilson, “The body clothed”, in *Addressing the Century: 100 Years of Art and Fashion*, ed. F. Bradley

In my view, even through its absence, the body is always present, as we can see also in relation to the work of several contemporary artists, such as Joseph Beuys, Lesley Dill, Gotscho, Beverly Semmes etc., whose practice includes clothing or representations of clothing, and where the absence of the body can be compared to Barthes's authorless text. In the artistic practice, the absence of the body demands in fact that viewers "read between the lines, examining the meaning of what is not presented", as curator Nina Felshin remarks.⁷

From a philosophical perspective, the relationship between the body and the dress is absolutely essential to the exploration of fashion. However, as we know, not many philosophers have investigated fashion as a subject of inquiry and, even among those that have done it, only very few have elaborated on the body/dress relationship. My view is that there is no non-fashioned body, as the body proper is itself always already the product of something that is added, as claimed by Nancy or Derrida, who challenge essentialists notions of the body, and address the fact that we can understand the body only within its environment.

Q — We can say that, of course, in the world of fashion being creative or innovative is something like "a must". However, it is also possible to identify many elements of repetition in contemporary fashion: I refer, for example, to the comeback of old styles or the serial production — and hence repetition — of new styles. What kind of relationship do you see between difference and repetition, traditionalism and innovation, with regard to the question of dress?

A — You address a crucial question, as contemporary fashion is characterized by what theorist Iain Chambers calls a "semiotic blur,"⁸ that is, a stream of incessant mutations taking place in such a way that can hardly be interpreted or fixed in the collective consciousness. The spiral of consumerism is encouraged and enhanced by these fast and endless substitutions of imagery. Especially now that fashion seasons have reached a very unsustainable rhythm, with too many collections created each year, a lot needs to be reconsidered in relation to pressing issues of environmental sustainability and global emergencies. To answer your question, we might need to reflect on what being innovative means nowadays. When looking at contemporary fashion, a peculiarity in fact clearly emerges. It is a landscape defined by an endless interweaving of references within other references, where past and present promiscuously fuse. I would like to recall an interesting observation by Hussein Chalayan, who stated during a lecture given at the Wexner Center for the Arts, Ohio (2002):

the garment is a ghost of all the multiple lives it may have had. Nothing is shiny and new; everything has a history [...] The design is a wish or a curse that casts the garment and its wearer into a time warp through historical periods, like a sudden tumble through the sediment of an archeological dig.⁹

This consideration alludes to fashion's impossibility, against its own rhetoric, to be completely innovative, and demonstrates its inevitable dependence from the history of fashion.

In "Theses on the philosophy of history", Benjamin brilliantly captures the nature of fashion, when he writes "fashion has the flair for the topical, wherever it stirs in the thickets of long ago, it is the tiger's leap into the past."¹⁰ The metaphors of history as a labyrinth and the *Tigersprung*, introduced by Benjamin, are now staples within contemporary fashion theory, and have also been explored from a cura-

(London: Hayward Gallery Publishing, 1998) 107–111; Flavia Loscialpo, "From the Physical to the Digital and Back: Fashion Exhibitions in the Digital Age" in *International Journal of Fashion Studies* 3, no. 2 (2016): 225–248.

7. Nina Felshin, *Empty Dress: Clothing as Surrogate in Recent Art* (New York: Independent Curators Incorporated, 1993): 13.
8. Iain Chambers, "Maps for the Metropolis: A Possible Guide to the Present", *Cultural Studies* 1, no. 1 (January 1987): 2.
9. Caroline Evans, *Fashion at the Edge: Spectacle, Modernity, and Deathliness* (New Haven-London: Yale University Press, 2003), 57.
10. Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the philosophy of history", in *Illuminations*, ed. by Hannah Arendt, translated by Harry Zohn, 245–255. London: Fontana/Collins, 1968), 253.

torial perspective.¹¹ The quotation is the defining characteristic of fashion, but its sartorial borrowing is promiscuous, for it does not follow any continuity or linearity. As a tiger's leap, a *Tigersprung*, into the past, fashion is independent and irreverent towards any fixed and recognizable contents. As Ulrich Lehmann and Caroline Evans¹² both discuss, following from Benjamin, this is precisely what expands the spectrum of its creative possibilities.

To say it in different words, fashion is repetition with a difference; it always contains the past in some form, even in its technological development. In respect to production, reproduction and repetitions, interesting is the example of Maison Martin Margiela's *Replica* series, which includes accurate reproductions of second-hand clothes from different periods, with labels providing information about each garment's style, provenance and date. These replicas are a posthumous tribute to the often-unknown makers of those garments, drawing our attention to traditional craftsmanship, and its labour intensive character, which is fading within the dominion of mass reproduction. Margiela's replicas represent a rather unique operation in fashion, hinting at an uneasy question, that is, what is the creative process behind the making of a copy? And what about the making of a copy of a copy? This question has become even more relevant nowadays that styles are replicated, and circulated very quickly, for instance by fast fashion retailers, thus addressing issues related to authorship, uniqueness and originality.

Q — Establishing now a connection between philosophical concepts and fashion trends, I would like to ask you how do you conceive of the relation between deconstruction and destruction, and between deconstruction and anti-fashion, and how do you think that such labels as 'deconstructionist' or 'deconstructivist' or 'mode destroy' should be properly and adequately used in the field of fashion.

A — To start with the first point, deconstruction, as thought by Derrida, is rooted in another disrupting philosophical project, the phenomenological destruction. The Heideggerian destruction (*Destruktion*) and Derrida's deconstruction converge in the same intention of mining the petrified layers of metaphysics that have for centuries dominated philosophy. Nevertheless, the deconstructive activity never finds an end, and is rather an open and complex way of proceeding, a double movement of both affirmation and undoing. In any context in which it is at work, the a-systematic character of the deconstructive reading emerges in its putting into question and undoing a series of conceptual oppositions, which are staples of the metaphysical hierarchy.

Just as in the philosophical or architectural practice, the deconstruction exemplified by fashion designers can generate new construction and signification possibilities. At first, in the late 1980s and early 1990s, the austere and demure look proposed by 'deconstructionist' or 'deconstructivist' designers induced journalists to describe it as post-punk, grunge, or post-nuclear survivalism. Nevertheless, the disruptive force of their works resided not only in their undoing the structure of a specific garment, in renouncing to finish, but, above all, in rethinking the function and the meaning of the dress itself. Very often the labels 'deconstructionist', 'deconstructivist' or 'mode destroy' have been used to describe a style, whilst deconstruction is actually an activity, a way of undoing certain oppositions. As Elizabeth Wilson writes, deconstruction in fashion is definitely an "intellectual approach, which literally unpicked fashion, exposing its operations, its relations to the body and at the same time to the structures and discourses of fashion."¹³

Deconstruction in fashion goes beyond certain stylistic tropes or clichés, being above all a dialectical device, which ultimately results in disinterring the mechanisms of fascinations that haunt fashion. For instance, deconstruction can be 'at work' in the creations of a designer that, on the surface, might not look particularly 'deconstructivist' or 'deconstructionist', just as in the case of Hussein Chalayan.

Often called anti-fashion, or the death of fashion, deconstruction in fashion definitely incarnated a sort of distress in respect to the mainstream fashion of the late 1980s and early 1990s. In not being dictated by any particular trend, deconstruction in fashion seems to address a provocation to consumer culture, in which the process of production is separated from consumption. Eloquent, in this respect, is Margiela's

11. In this respect, pioneering is *Malign Muses/Spectres: When Fashion Turns Back*, ModeMuseum of Antwerp, 2004, and Victoria and Albert Museum, London, 2005, curated by Judith Clark.

12. Ulrich Lehmann, *Tigersprung: Fashion in Modernity* (Cambridge MA and London: MIT Press, 2000) and Caroline Evans, *Fashion at the Edge: Spectacle, Modernity, and Deathliness* (New Haven-London: Yale University Press, 2003).

13. Elizabeth Wilson, *Adorned in Dreams* (London: I. B. Tauris & Co. Ltd, 1985), 250.

Artisanal Collection, declaring human labour as the real source of the value of a garment, and addressing that alienation that for Marx defines the relationship between the consumer and the product. Operations such as this have sparked debate and comparisons amongst critics and journalists. For instance, theorist Herbert Blau suggested that the practice of deconstruction, as it was in the early nineties, can be considered as an anti-aesthetic manifestation of a left-oriented, or socialist style.¹⁴ While devising a manifest political intention in the works of designers practicing deconstruction might be a too strong claim, their impact on fashion and culture cannot be underestimated for its disruptive, refreshing and thought-provoking contribution.

Q — Finally — and that is because I think that there is no “neutral” and “pure” conceptual tool or method in philosophy — I would like to ask you which is, in your opinion, the most interesting and useful approach in order to understand the question of dress from a philosophical point of view.

A — As we know, fashion can be interpreted through multiple perspectives and disciplines, such as philosophy, sociology, anthropology, cultural studies, history etc. You rightly mention in your question that there is no neutral conceptual framework in philosophy, to which I would add that there is no approach — in any discipline, I believe — able to analyse and exhaustively explain the nature of fashion, which is a multiform phenomenon. The postmodern condition, as Lyotard defines it, is an “incredulity toward metanarratives,”¹⁵ which means that we can rely on a variety of equally relevant philosophical approaches to understand and question our experiences. The interesting and yet challenging task for us, researchers and students, is to find our own hermeneutic approach, which might be inspired by one or more philosophical contributions, or even traverse disciplinary boundaries.

Overall, I believe, an interpretation of dress or fashion from a philosophical perspective asks for a direct dialogue with the original philosophical texts, and to resist over-simplifications. To me, deconstruction remains one of the most interesting approaches for interpreting fashion and, in particular, some intriguing operations enacted by contemporary designers. It is important though not to reduce philosophical deconstruction to a mere style in fashion, thus collapsing philosophical concepts and stylistic tropes.

In my experience, some philosophical contributions are particularly relevant to the exploration of fashion, for instance, Benjamin’s is illuminating for a reflection on fashion’s relationship to its own history, as well as for debating technological issues, or addressing the figure of the flâneur also from a methodological perspective. Instead, in my study of the curatorial practice in fashion, as well as for my own curatorial standpoint, Foucault’s discussion of heterotopias has opened to me a new way of considering the exhibition space, and hence of responding to issues at the centre of the curatorial debate.

More recently, I have explored the figure of the immigrant in fashion from a theoretical perspective, and my contribution has embraced some philosophical works that are not very common within fashion studies, such as those by Balibar, Agamben, Gilroy, and Di Cesare, who has been my mentor and former PhD supervisor. Even if recently philosophical perspectives have become more relevant to the study of fashion, I think that fashion studies can engage even further with philosophical approaches, opening up to a variety of contributions, which can offer the opportunity to interpret dress or fashion in interesting and innovative ways.

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14. Herbert Blau, *Nothing in Itself* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1999).

15. Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition* (Minneapolis MN: Minnesota University Press, 1984), xxiv.

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