

Unisex, Genderless: Let the Debate Ensue

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Abstract

Fashion communication has adopted a decidedly political language of late. This is particularly evident in the ongoing debate about gender and clothing. While clothes, per se, have no definite gender connotations, on a symbolic level clothes do actually hold specific gender connotations. In the current climate of ongoing deconstruction of old norms, the notion of *genderless* has become central to the global aesthetic and cultural debate, to much media fervor. The essay analyzes the very idea of *genderless* in comparison to the notion of *unisex* which surfaced during the 1970s, another moment of intense cultural deconstruction. By dissecting the two terms and related fashion imagery, the essay highlights the changes in the way fashion both communicates and acts, leaving the ending deliberately open.

Keywords: Unisex; Genderless; Communication; Symbolology; Theatricalization.

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Fashion has never been as blatantly political as it is today. Or better, it has never adopted a political language of campaign-like slogans and grand declarations as it is doing of late. Politics has moved to the surface, so to speak, in a shiny way. The headline is everything. Grabbing the attention of the media, and doing it sensationally, is all that counts. Fashion, nowadays, is ruled by communication, and its partner in crime: storytelling. The core of the action, thereafter, seems to have largely shifted from the way things are made to the way things are told, which basically means from design to spinning yarns. In order to get across a product that is largely banal, and make it a hit, a good communication strategy is mandatory. It happens by associating the brand with the relevant and progressive values *du moment*. Which is where the political association takes place and comes in handy, much to the detriment of authenticity. Fashion houses currently operate almost like political parties or ideological coteries held together by particular mindsets, with magazines and specialized press acting as the sound magnifying trumpet. They promote with much fervor and utter dedication inclusive and highly democratic ideals, doing away with the elitism and exclusivity that once ruled and used to be the main, and probably the strongest, magnet of the whole fashionable fascination. The fact that, by its own highly inventive nature and due to the high price tags, designer fashion is actually exclusive, in the sense that it excludes on the basis of both taste and census, is not even taken into consideration. The fundamental drive of aspiration has moved elsewhere. One wants to buy an item, or is induced to do so, not to be fashionable, but to be part of the ideologically illuminati in a fashionable way. Or so they say. Is it? Commerce is still there, front and center. Fashion can be ideological, of course, but by making money off of commerce it strives for mercantile liaisons with its designated public, which require lots of marketing and other tricks in order to produce revenues. All of this, quite simply, bastardizes ideology, even when it is genuine in its intent.

Such ecumenic fervor is particularly evident when it comes to the subject of clothing and gender, one of the hottest topics in the contemporary fashion and cultural debate. In the current climate of endless, ongoing deconstruction of the Western notions of patriarchy and white supremacy, or whatever one wants to call them, epochal changes keep being announced, even though only history will probably tell how much and how many of said changes were truly epochal and groundbreaking. However one sees the matter, overturning the oppressive logic of patriarchy, with much media-pumped fanfare, is an urgent collective interest that fashion fluidifies, amplifies and ultimately ignites. The mantra *du moment* — current as the last seven years or so, which in fashion terms is almost a geological era — is *genderless*, with the corollary of satellite concepts such as *gender fluid* and *gender neutral*, which mean more or less the same thing. The ultimate giveaway of such an overturn is the definitive acknowledgement that an item of clothing has no pre-fixed gender connotations, despite these being attached to its shape and symbolism. As a result, what is traditionally considered feminine, from a pussy bow blouse à la Gucci to the grand ball gown that British designer Edward Crutcheley has shown on both burly and lean models, can be worn by men without any fear of *ridicule*. Women, on their turn, have long adopted suits, as well as more basic items such as jeans and t-shirts.



Figure 1: The silk pussy bow blouse that opened the first show in which Alessandro Michele appeared as creative director of the house of Gucci. With its rather feminine style, this blouse became a much debated item, and still features to this day in the Gucci offer.

In fashion, communication is a verbal activity attached to image-making. Words count, and do matter. Words signal cultural shifts and a morphing of perspectives. In the case of gender and clothing, the focus on *genderless* has completely replaced a similar notion that emerged much to public success during the radical times that followed the 1968 uprisings, and lasted for most of the Seventies and up to the early Eighties: *unisex*. Unisex meant an unprecedented democratic stance that allowed men and women to look, and dress, the same. Oliviero Toscani famously photographed the *unilook* on a lean, long haired couple (man and woman) in 1971 for L'Uomo Vogue, showing egalitarianism in both tailoring and sportswear form. Genderless, on the other hand, is much trumpeted today, from the blunt abstractions of JW Anderson to Gucci's ode to fey masculinity to men casted for womenswear shows such as Marni. Everything is possible and everything is allowed: this is the message fashion houses ultimately give, as part or the particular fragmentation that is so defining of contemporary culture. In the facing-off of unisex and genderless, which coincide with an apparent theatricalization of existence, one can actually see how much communication strategies and the values which fashion promotes have changed, reflecting the peculiarities of two very different cultural milieus, and the ubiquitousness of fashion as an entertainment and communication machine in today's world.

Clothes, per se, as lifeless objects, hold no definite gender connotations. And yet, clothes do actually own gender connotations, too. Of course, such gender specificities are cultural constructs that change according to geography, historical and social climate, and yet have their roots in the unavoidable materiality of the body, the starting point of any vestimentary lucubration worth being mentioned. Whether one wants to enhance, redesign, extremize or conceal it, a woman's body is different from a man's, and that is what makes any idea of a shared wardrobe, still, so radical both ways. Despite metrosexualism and women's liberation, strengthening the woman, so to speak, and weakening the man, or better the respective images, is a bold move. Both bodies have been idealized throughout history, in order to express specific values, and that has produced highly connotated items such as the gown and the suit, utter expressions, respectively of femininity and masculinity. Thereafter, a man in a housewife dress, like Kurt Cobain photographed by David Sims on the cover of *The Face* in 1993, or a woman in a suit and tie, like Isabella Rossellini in a smattering of images shot by Steven Meisel in Madonna's *Sex*, look discom-

bobulating, even disturbing. Even more so, going back in recent history, does the deliberate macho effeminacy of The New York Dolls and Anne-Marie Schwarzenbach's suits, or Claude Cahun's shaved head and sexless wardrobe.

This story tells a lot about the representative power of clothing, on which fashion as communication, and fashion communication in general, strives. The naked body, as an ineluctable matter of fact, says in fact very little, or perhaps a bit too much. Clothing, either barely covering bodily forms or hiding everything, triggers, instead, a multiplicity of possibilities. In 1972, Ettore Sottsass expressed his opinion on the subject in a brilliant series of sarcastic vignettes entitled *Vestiti e svestiti, cioè sono tutti vestiti* which suggested exhilarating conflicts between identity and representation. Sottsass's approach was sardonic and political: a subtle satire on how, ultimately, appearances deceive, but also a keen reminder of how, starting from one single naked body, the ways to represent it by adding and mixing items of clothing, relying on the symbolism they entice, are virtually endless. Sottsass was interested in a variety of social signs. Gender, and the way it is conveyed as a shared cultural construct through silhouettes, shapes and image-making, is a particularly potent matter in this sense: one that is able to shake-up norms, subvert codes and ignite endless debates. In contemporary Western society, every time fashion rewires and rewrites anything linked to gender representations, heated discussions usually arise between the vanguard of the enlightened — those who adopt the new fashions right away — and those who stay in the darkness and the very *passé* quicksand of old ideas. It is typical of the fashion mindset to function this way, but when it comes to gender the level of fright and dissent, on the side of traditional thinkers, is decidedly high. Shaking up the collectively perceived image of the man and the woman is arresting and this is why gender blurring makes headlines — something that, communication-wise, is a success.

And yet, genderless styles are part of the collective imagination, well beyond the fashion borders. The tunics, the gowns and the habits worn as religious attire are decidedly unisex and genderless, and so is ethnic inspired form of dresses. We all see them every day, and there are designers of gothic sensibility, such as Rick Owens, who have often explored this form of unified dressing. Fashion communication, however, has polarized the gender debate related to clothing focusing on the highly codified items: the same ones that testify a norm, and if used in a different way, signal a potent break of rules. When it comes to communication, subtlety rarely works. Sensationalism is better.

This said, unisex was, and is, a potent democratic statement: the unification of the genders embodied in the *uni-* prefix. Genderless, instead, matches by subtraction, hence the *-less*: a recognition of the liquidity of contemporary existence. The transition is significant because, although they both have the same democratic inspiration that recognizes gender equality, with unisex it is basically the woman the one who conquers the man's wardrobe for herself, adopting conciseness and pragmatism, while with genderless it is the man who indulges in the softness, the frills and even the skirts usually associated with womenswear. But there is also more. Unisex was actually very linked to, or probably was a direct result of, the political activism and the fight for equality of 1968 and roundabouts, whereas genderless is mostly an aesthetic stance, which in fact has been mainly prompted by designers and stylists but is having a smaller effect on daily life at large, apart from sensational headlines and endless Instagram discussions.

Gender bending, effeminacy and men in make-up have long been part of pop culture, mainly prompted by authorized outsiders such as singers, actors and artists. The advent of genderless-ness is a result of this long process, but it has also an official birth certificate: January 19, 2015. On this date, Alessandro Michele presented his first collection for Gucci. The opening look, a red silk blouse with a pussy bow, immediately signaled the shift. That very item worked like a Trojan horse on preconceived ideas of masculinity, and ignited a massive commercial phenomenon. The blouse still hangs on the Gucci racks in Gucci boutiques, a bulwark of a costume phenomenon that has translated into stellar turnovers and pop accolades, generating acolytes and accomplices within the star system. But that is a matter of show business and showmanship: lots of appearance, a lot less substance. Unisex, meanwhile, still looms large, in real life: it's the t-shirts and jeans worn by everybody, but also the suit worn by women. It is Armani's vernacular as well as streetwear. It's the jeans and wife beater with which Matthieu Blazy opened his first Bottega Veneta show in February 2022.



Figure 2: A white ribbed tank top and stone washed jeans, all done in leather, by Matthieu Blazy for Bottega Veneta. Not intended as a unisex statement on the side of the designer, this look is a testament to the enduring power of unisex styles.

With the advent of the media-grabbing, sensational visual appeal of the genderless — which, truth be told, has created quite some stir in the visual display of progressive stores, too — unisex seems to have faded in the background as a term worth using in fashion communication. And yet, to the eyes of this writer, unisex is still a much more potent statement and concept. One that resonates. It is, quite simply, because it deeply impacts daily life, whereas genderless fits within the virtuality and theatricality of life as we live it today, mainly broadcasting it through social media channels and making it, essentially, an act of communication.

As I draw towards the conclusion, I'd like to leave the ending open, and the debate alive. This is why my exit strategy to this essay happens in the form of a dialogue between opposite opinions. On the one hand, the ongoing *genderless* liberation feels exciting, on the other all this glittery flickering seems to be yet another pantomime, rather conventional and quite normative, too. Unable to find the key, here I am serving the divisive dilemma hoping for the reader to untangle it, and possibly carry it on.

–Let's say it once and for all, removing all that glittery dust from the eyes: genderless is absolute bullshit. A good foundling *pour épater les bourgeois* with flames that attract easy attention and stir a storm in a teacup all around designers who pose as prophets just to sell branded stuff.

–Shut up: clothes have no gender, and finally everyone knows it.

–Of course, but what we are witnessing right now feels like a conformist glorification of unimaginative transvestism. An affair, moreover, that belongs to the catwalks, rather than the sidewalks. It's fiction, not reality.

–And if so, what's the harm? Today the theater of permanent fiction is pervasive. It has reached the

everyday and the banal. Also, there is something divine about a man who reconciles with his feminine side and dresses like a woman. Just think of the *femminielli*, hermaphrodites and so on. But think also of supermachos on stiletto heels, from New York Dolls to Kiss.

–See, you’re on my side too.

–I do not understand.

–Tell me about dolls, and add Bowie and Lou Reed: all masters in aesthetic self-determination, not puppets dressed in the most outrageous runway look by attention-seeking designers or stylists. This does make a difference, don’t you think so?

–You are right, but sometimes even the runway look, as it is, helps detonate the bomb in the theater.

–But it’s a bomb without explosive charge, so to speak. When it comes to *tempora and mores*, the real bomb was *unisex*. The outrage of the woman dressed as a man, absolutely identical to him, was explosive, so much so that it has not stopped deflagrating from the Seventies to this day, reaching the streets and coming back from the streets as the utopia of egalitarianism realized.

–I can’t blame you. Genderless, in comparison, is a no brainer. But aren’t they more or less the same thing?

–No. It is a question of pragmatism. Gabrielle Chanel showed guts by cutting women’s clothing in men’s underwear jersey. And Giorgio Armani was smart in looking at her when he devised the suit-centric wardrobe of the modern woman. Look around you: you see the effects everywhere. It is not theater, it is life.

–I also see quite a few boys with lacquered nails and scarves.

–Well they come. But, apart from exhibitionists, influencers and runway show-goers, how many men cross your path decked from head to toe in such runway looks? Few, I tell you. Actors and cosplayers, mostly.

–Does unisex still seem disruptive to you?

–It does. It destabilizes and disturbs. It is everywhere.

–I stick with my idea: genderless is the new enlightenment.

–The *Roi Soleil* sparkled boldly, hoisted on high heels, yet his looks were absolutely normal back then.

–Really?

–Really!

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