

Antigender Fashion: JW Anderson and Gender-fluid Fashion

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Abstract

This article focuses on the incorporation of non-binary fashion in contemporary fashion design. Expanding on what Vicki Karaminas and Justine Taylor coined *antigender fashion*, this study investigates how contemporary fashion design can challenge and critique norms of gender identities and their representation. Taking different forms of anti-fashion — which opposes and challenges fashion — as a blueprint, the article proposes antigender fashion as an active tool in opposing, confronting and challenging gender binaries. By scrambling the symbols of masculinity and femininity, antigender fashion offers the material and visual currency to express and embody the myriad ways that masculinity and femininity can be imagined, the moments of transgression and the moments in-between. Taking on a case-study approach, the study critically analyses JW Anderson's antigender fashion in regard to its potential to trouble and proliferate gender and its visual representation through fashion. As a framework and design approach, antigender fashion contributes to the re-construction of identities and the crumbling dominance of heterosexuality and the gender binary. The study seeks to highlight the relevance of fashion in constituting and renegotiating contemporary forms of masculinities and femininities.

Keywords: Antigender Fashion; Gender Fluidity; Masculinities; JW Anderson; British Fashion.

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Introduction

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. The idiosyncratic “shape-sharing,”¹ 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. After launching JW Anderson as a menswear label in 2008, Anderson introduced his first womenswear collection in 2010, a logical consequence of its “conscious cross-pollination between menswear and womenswear elements.”²

In this chapter, I discuss Anderson’s *antigender fashion* in the context of a changing fashion industry that focused on the examination and re-examination of masculinity and femininity. As Jack Halberstam argues, the last decades saw the emergence of new categories of gender and sexualities beyond the heterosexual matrix, signalling a paradigm shift in the representation and understanding of gender.³ A paradigm shift that is also embodied in contemporary and particularly JW Anderson’s antigender fashion design.

Expanding on what Vicki Karaminas and Justine Taylor coined *antigender fashion*, I develop the concept of antigender fashion as 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 disrupt and proliferate the gender binary system. Like anti-fashion which opposes and challenges fashion, antigender fashion seeks to dismantle and confront binary gender signifiers, exposing the “instability of gender.”⁴

While there are multiple studies on the transgressive potential of fashion, the concept of antigender fashion not only offers a framework to understand the current revolutionary shift in gender discourse, but offers a tool to question and critique the construction of gendered fashion. That is why antigender fashion is positioned within the industry’s categories of menswear/womenswear, as it is precisely these constructs that antigender seeks to dismantle and destabilize. In contrast to other concepts such as “gender more”, “unisex”, or “queering” fashion,⁵ antigender fashion illustrates and highlights the juxtaposition and multiplicities of gender signifiers, while also seeking to destabilise gender itself. While it can be argued that antigender fashion is queer in the sense that it criticizes and exposes a heteronormative binary gender system, antigender fashion as a framework is not inherently queer. Rather, it speaks to the slippages and instabilities of the binary construction of gender. In this way then, antigender fashion postulates fashion as political. Indeed, 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.

1. Sarah Mower, “JW Anderson Spring 2020 Menswear,” *Vogue* (Online), June 19, 2019, <https://www.vogue.com/fashion-shows/spring-2020-menswear/j-w-anderson>.

2. “Our Story,” JW Anderson, accessed May 27, 2022, <https://www.jwanderson.com/us/about/jwanderson>.

3. Jack Halberstam, *Trans: A Quick and Quirky Account of Gender Variability* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2018), 10–11.

4. Vicki Karaminas and Justine Taylor, “Harry Styles: Fashion’s Gender Changeling,” in *Fashionable Masculinities. Queer, Pimp Daddies and Lumbersexuals*, ed. Vicki Karaminas, Adam Geczy, and Pamela Church Gibson (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2022), 9.

5. Ben Barry and Andrew Reilly, “Gender More: An Intersectional Perspective on Men’s Transgression of the Gender Dress Binary,” in *Crossing Gender Boundaries: Fashion to Create, Disrupt and Transcend*, ed. Andrew Reilly and Ben Barry (Bristol and Chicago: Intellect, 2020); Jo B. Paoletti, *Sex and Unisex: Fashion, Feminism, and the Sexual Revolution* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2015); Fenella Hitchcock and Jay McCauley Bowstead, “Queer fashion practice and the camp tactics of Charles Jeffrey LOVERBOY,” *Critical Studies in Men’s Fashion* 7, no. 1 & 2 (2020), https://doi.org/10.1386/csmf_00016_1; Nicola Brajato, “Queering Masculinities: Dress, Gender, and the Body in the Antwerp Fashion Scene” (Doctor in Social Sciences Dissertation, University of Antwerp, 2023).

From Androgyny to Antigender Fashion

There are many moments in fashion history that challenged the Western binary of gender through sartorial codes. The subculture of the bohemians in Europe and North America, for instance, was characterized by their quest to differentiate themselves from the bourgeoisie. Challenging gender norms and dress codes played a key role in that quest. 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.”⁶

Similarly, the 1920s, marked a new age for feminine beauty and fashionable ideals, culminating in the “boyish” look of the flapper and *garçonne*. Western fashion broke with previous ideas of “femininity” and “beauty.” 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’.”⁷ 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.⁸

The 1960s and 1970s, then, saw an accumulation of countercultures and subcultural styles that challenged traditional gender codes in the West. Characterized by several revolutionary movements, unisex and androgynous clothes became, once again, fashionable. 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.⁹

Yet, musicians and artists such as Mick Jagger or David Bowie regularly subverted sartorial gender codes in their performances on and off stage. Bowie in particular embodied the fluidity and ambiguity of gender and sexuality 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.

Nevertheless, “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.”¹⁰ What had happened in between was, in Halberstam’s words, a gender paradigm shift. Indeed, the 2010s saw an increasing awareness of various gender and sexual identities in North American and European contexts — think of the growing number of films and TV series on LGBTQIA+ narratives, the multiplicity of sexualities (bi-, pan-, or asexuality for instance), and the increasing visibility of transgender in media. Additionally, with the new millennium, “the nature of androgyny itself began to change, to evolve into a higher state,” escaping “from the idea of polarity altogether.”¹¹

It is this aspect that differentiates unisex and androgynous styles of the twentieth century from gender-fluid and antigender fashion today. 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

6. Elizabeth Wilson, *Bohemians: The Glamorous Outcasts* (London: Tauris Parke Paperbacks, 2003), 240.

7. Laura Doan, “Passing Fashions: Reading Female Masculinities in the 1920s,” *Feminist Studies* 24, no. 3 (1998): 668, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3178585>.

8. Doan, “Passing Fashions: Reading Female Masculinities in the 1920s,” 25; Elizabeth Wilson, “What Does a Lesbian Look Like?,” in *A Queer History of Fashion: From the Closet to the Catwalk*, ed. Valerie Steele (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), 175; Adam Geczy and Vicki Karaminas, *Queer Style* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013).

9. Jo Jenkinson, “Unisex Fashion,” ed. Joanne B. Eicher and Phyllis G. Tortora, *Berg Encyclopedia of World Dress and Fashion: Global Perspectives* (Oxford: Berg, 2010), <http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9781847888594.EDCh101312-ED>.

10. Paul Jobling, Philippa Nesbitt, and Angelene Wong, *Fashion, Identity, Image* (London and New York: Bloomsbury Visual Arts, 2022), 74.

11. Patrick Mauriès, *Androgyny: Fashion + Gender* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2017), 121.

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. In contrast, as Karaminas and Taylor suggest, antigender fashion illustrates the ways fluid fashion exposes the “instabilities of gender”:

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.¹²

The concept of anti-fashion offers a comprehensive variety of characteristics that are crucial in developing the concept of antigender fashion. Antigender fashion exposes not just the instabilities of gender and gendered dress but reveals its performativity;¹³ that is, what gender — and to a certain degree fashion — *is*. Similar to the anti-fashion of subcultures, antigender fashion interferes with the processes of naturalising gender. Accordingly, subcultures like punk express a challenge to dominant ideologies on the surface of style: “Style in subculture is, then, pregnant with significance. Its transformations go ‘against nature’, interrupting the process of ‘normalization’.”¹⁴ 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. As Elisabeth Wilson points out, “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’.”¹⁵ 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.”¹⁶

Consequently, following Stefano Marino’s positive dialectical approach to anti-fashion, it can be argued that antigender fashion and gender/gendered fashion are tied together in an infinite process of distinction and affirmation.¹⁷ 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. It also follows, that antigender fashion relies on the existence of and established gender code and particularly the binary gender system in order to oppose, critique, and challenge its norms.

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. By using the language and signs of gender/gendered fashion and re-contextualising it, antigender fashion therefore proliferates the norms and meanings of gender; it *troubles gender* in the way that it subverts, displaces, and proliferates presumably natural notions of gender.¹⁸ 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.”¹⁹

12. Karaminas and Taylor, “Harry Styles: Fashion’s Gender Changeling,” 9.

13. Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 2006).

14. Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (London and New York: Routledge, 1979), 18.

15. Elisabeth Wilson, *Adorned in Dreams: Fashion and Modernity* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2003), 196.

16. Patrizia Calefato, *The Clothed Body*, trans. Lisa Adams, *Dress, Body, Culture*, (Oxford: Berg, 2004), 29.

17. Stefano Marino, “Fashion and Anti-Fashion: A Dialectical Approach,” in *The Culture, Fashion, and Society Notebook 2018*, ed. Francesco Crepaldi and Maria Diletta Strumolo (Milan–Turin: Pearson Italia, 2019), 26.

18. Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*.

19. Karaminas and Taylor, “Harry Styles: Fashion’s Gender Changeling,” 23.

JW Anderson's Antigender Fashion

Menswear in the 2000s was largely influenced and impacted by Raf Simons' slim-lined suits and Hedi Slimane's minimalist and rockstar-fuelled masculinity at Dior Homme. By 2005, as fashion critic Cathy Horyn writes, Simons was "probably the most influential" menswear designer who had effectively changed the shape of menswear clothing multiple times.²⁰ Slimane's work for Dior has been similarly impactful. 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."²¹

The new millennium, then, saw a re-evaluation and offered alternative and challenging forms of masculinity, and the work of menswear designers at the time, including Slimane, Simons, Tom Ford, and Helmut Lang, captured the re-evaluation of masculinity and offered this new masculinity visual currency.²² Indeed, 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.²³ The research highlights the ever-growing acknowledgement and societal acceptance of more inclusive masculinities that challenge the hegemonic position of orthodox, traditional masculinities. Anderson's early design practice, therefore, also questioned traditional forms of masculine fashion.

Moment I: (Re-)building Male Femininity

While JW Anderson has attracted attention from the beginning, it was the Spring/Summer and Autumn/Winter 2013 menswear collections, that would stir up London's Fashion Week remarkably. It was, after all, a partly radical but unapologetic ambush of the state and aesthetic of masculinity and menswear. Upon closer examination and in retrospect, the collections bear many elements and characteristics of antigender fashion that would anticipate various gender-fluid moments.

The Spring/Summer 2013 menswear collection "Age of Consent" was a, potentially foreboding, take on perversity and provocation. The collection "spawned from the idea of mothers sleeping with their sons," Anderson told *Vogue*.²⁴ 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,²⁵ it developed into Freud's work on fetishism and spawned

20. Cathy Horyn, "Raf," *The New York Times Magazine*, September 18, 2005, <https://www.nytimes.com/2005/09/18/style/tmagazine/raf.html>.

21. Nick Rees-Roberts, "Boys Keep Swinging: The Fashion Iconography of Hedi Slimane," *Fashion Theory* 17, no. 1 (2013): 23, <https://doi.org/10.2752/175174113X13502904240659>.

22. Jay McCauley Bowstead, *Menswear Revolution: The Transformation of Contemporary Men's Fashion* (London: Bloomsbury Visual Arts, 2018); Nicola Brajato, "Masculinity, Identity and Body Politics in the Interzone: A Queer Perspective on Raf Simons's Critical Fashion Practices (1995–2005)," *Fashion Theory* (2021), <https://doi.org/10.1080/1362704X.2021.1982191>.

23. Eric Anderson, *Inclusive Masculinity: The Changing Nature of Masculinities* (New York: Routledge, 2009); Ann-Dorte Christensen and Sune Qvortrup Jensen, "Combining hegemonic masculinity and intersectionality," *NORMA: International Journal for Masculinity Studies* 9, no. 1 (2014); Richard O. de Visser, "'I'm Not a Very Manly Man': Qualitative Insights into Young Men's Masculine Subjectivity," *Men and Masculinities* 11, no. 3 (2009), <https://doi.org/10.1177/1097184X07313357>.

24. Matthew Schneier, "J.W. Anderson Spring 2013 Menswear," *Vogue* (Online), June 16, 2012, <https://www.vogue.com/fashion-shows/spring-2013-menswear/j-w-anderson>.

25. Luce Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1985); Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1985); Kaja Silverman, *The Acoustic Mirror: The Female Voice in Psychoanalysis and Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988); Rosi Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory*, 2nd ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011).

subsequent considerations of fashion and fetishism.²⁶ 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 argued.²⁷

The collection was also a play on 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. 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. 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."²⁸ For the Autumn/Winter 2013 menswear collection titled "Mathematics of Love," 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. Most remarkable, however, was Anderson's use of womenswear pattern: The shorts were made using a pattern drafted for women, resulting in the groinless fit the designer desired.

Loving "how groinless and flat-fitting it was,"²⁹ 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."³⁰ It becomes "a token of triumph ... and a protection against" the fear of castration.³¹ 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.

26. Valerie Steele, *Fashion and Eroticism: Ideals of Feminine Beauty from the Victorian Era to the Jazz Age* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985).

27. Fred Davis, *Fashion, Culture, and Identity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 87.

28. Lou Stoppard, "Show Report: JW Anderson A/W 13 Menswear," *SHOWstudio* (Online), January 10, 2013, https://www.showstudio.com/collections/autumn-winter-2013/jw_anderson_aw_13_menswear/show-report.

29. Murray Healy, "The radical unisex designs of JW Anderson," *The Guardian* (Online), June 1, 2013, <https://www.theguardian.com/fashion/2013/jun/01/radical-unisex-designs-jw-anderson>.

30. Janice Miller, "Sigmund Freud: More than a Fetish: Fashion and Psychoanalysis," in *Thinking Through Fashion: A Guide to Key Theorists*, ed. Agn s Rocamora and Anneke Smelik (London: I.B.Tauris, 2016), 52.

31. Sigmund Freud, "Fetishism," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. J. Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1961), 154.



Figure 1: Runway look from the JW Anderson Spring/Summer 2013 menswear show.
(Photo: CatwalkFashion / Alamy Stock Photo)



Figure 2: Runway look from the JW Anderson Autumn/Winter 2013 show.
(Photo: Penske Media. WWD / Getty Images)

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.”³² 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.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. 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.

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.”³⁴ 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. In JW Anderson’s Autumn/Winter 2013 collection, the graphic lines of flesh are, in a sense, subjected to an “ambiguous gaze.”³⁵ 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.”³⁶

32. Jay McCauley Bowstead, *Menswear Revolution: The Transformation of Contemporary Men’s Fashion* (London: Bloomsbury Visual Arts, 2018), 153.

33. SHOWstudio, “SHOWstudio: J.W. Anderson A/W 13 Exclusive Re-see,” February 5, 2013, video, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JwMx4xRbOYQ>, 14:33.

34. SHOWstudio, “SHOWstudio: J.W. Anderson A/W 13 Exclusive Re-see,” 6:26.

35. Nicola Brajato and Alexander Dhoest, “Ambiguous gaze: masculinity and the male body in Dirk Bikkembergs’ fashion and photographic production,” *NORMA: International Journal for Masculinity Studies* (2022): 23, <https://doi.org/10.1080/18902138.2022.2091919>.

36. Healy, “The radical unisex designs of JW Anderson.”

Moment II: Out of Proportion

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 Autumn/Winter 2017, 2019 and Spring/Summer 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."³⁷

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,"³⁸ Anderson clarified elsewhere that he "wanted to explore the idea of contortion and to make the arms look withered and hunched."³⁹

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."⁴⁰ 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.⁴¹

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.⁴²

These stylistic transformations on the basis of gender take place in JW Anderson's "grotesque" fashion design, for instance in the 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

37. Olivia Singer, "JW Anderson Subverts Gender Binaries Once More By Going Co-Ed With His Shows," *Vogue UK* (Online), December 14, 2017, <https://www.vogue.co.uk/article/jonathan-anderson-goes-co-ed>.

38. Maya Singer, "J.W. Anderson Fall 2014 Ready-to-Wear," *Vogue* (Online), February 14, 2014, <https://www.vogue.com/fashion-shows/fall-2014-ready-to-wear/j-w-anderson>.

39. Lisa Armstrong, "J.W. Anderson autumn/winter 2014 at London Fashion Week," *Telegraph* (Online), February 16, 2014, <http://fashion.telegraph.co.uk/news-features/TMG10641718/J.W.-Anderson-autumnwinter-2014-at-London-Fashion-Week.html>.

40. Francesca Granata, "Mikhail Bakhtin: Fashioning the Grotesque Body," in *Thinking Through Fashion: A Guide to Key Theorists*, ed. Agnès Rocamora and Anneke Smelik (London: I.B.Tauris, 2016), 102.

41. Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Helene Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 317–18.

42. Calefato, *The Clothed Body*, 30.

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.⁴³

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. 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*.⁴⁴

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 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.

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. As Caroline Evans concludes in her seminal work *Fashion at the Edge*, “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.”⁴⁵ 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 and oversized shapes.

43. Samantha Conti, “JW Anderson Men’s Spring 2020,” *Women’s Wear Daily* (Online), June 19, 2019, <https://wwd.com/runway/mens-spring-collections-2020/paris/jw-anderson/review/>.

44. Mower, “JW Anderson Spring 2020 Menswear.”

45. Caroline Evans, *Fashion at the Edge: Spectacle, Modernity and Deathliness* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2003), 297.



Figure 3: Runway look from the JW Anderson Autumn/Winter 2019 fashion show.
(Photo: Gamma-Rapho. Victor VIRGILE / Getty Images)

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. Some elements within it 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. The irony of a global shortage of masks and politicisation of the dispute over their effectiveness seems rather prevalent.

Nevertheless, it does also lend the presentation of the collection a certain theatricality, an aspect that could be considered camp under Susan Sontag's definition of a sensibility that loves the unnatural and revels in artifice, stylisation, theatricalisation, irony, naivety, playfulness, exaggeration, and extravagance.⁴⁶ 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."⁴⁷ 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."⁴⁸

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 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."⁴⁹ 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."⁵⁰ 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."⁵¹ Simply put, Anderson wanted to create a collection "that really reflects the kind of beginnings of the new year."⁵² The result was a series of images that played with oddly placed fruits and vegetables, such as still life peaches or

46. Susan Sontag, *Notes on 'Camp'* (UK: Penguin Books, 2018).

47. JW Anderson, "JW Anderson | Men's SS21 & Women's RS21 Collection Reveal With Jonathan Anderson," July 2, 2020, video, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2x7iQ-IByY8>.

48. JW Anderson, "JW Anderson | Men's SS21 & Women's RS21 Collection Reveal With Jonathan Anderson," 5:35.

49. Sarah Mower, "JW Anderson Fall 2021 Menswear," *Vogue* (Online), January 21 2021, <https://www.vogue.com/fashion-shows/fall-2021-menswear/j-w-anderson>.

50. Granata, "Mikhail Bakhtin: Fashioning the Grotesque Body," 107.

51. Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 410.

52. JW Anderson, "JW Anderson | Men's Autumn Winter 21 and Women's Pre Fall 21 Collection Reveal," January 20, 2021,

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.

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.⁵³ 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.”⁵⁴ 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.⁵⁵

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.”⁵⁶ 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.”⁵⁷ 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.

Conclusion

JW Anderson has a long history and preoccupation with the constraints and limitations of masculinity and femininity. 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,”⁵⁸ further stressing that “it’s about wearing clothes that tell a story and an emotion, it’s not so much about gender.”⁵⁹ Indeed, Anderson’s fashion practice gives the impression that his fashion design does not show any consideration of gender

video, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fuZH3RSpmy8>, 0:45.

53. Mower, “JW Anderson Fall 2021 Menswear.”

54. Granata, “Mikhail Bakhtin: Fashioning the Grotesque Body,” 108.

55. JW Anderson, “JW Anderson | Men’s Autumn Winter 21 and Women’s Pre Fall 21 Collection Reveal,” 0:15.

56. Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 411.

57. Luke Leitch, “JW Anderson Fall 2022 Menswear,” *Vogue* (Online), January 16, 2022, <https://www.vogue.com/fashion-shows/fall-2022-menswear/j-w-anderson>.

58. Singer, “JW Anderson Subverts Gender Binaries Once More By Going Co-Ed With His Shows.”

59. Kin Woo, “J.W. Anderson Video,” *Dazed* (Online), September 18, 2010, <https://www.dazeddigital.com/fashion/article/8398/1/j-w-anderson-video>.

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.

In this study, I showed that Jonathan Anderson, influenced by his emergence as a designer within the menswear realm, adopts a constructivist 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.

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.

As I have argued, JW Anderson's fashion design exemplifies the concept of antigender fashion. It scrambles the sartorial symbols of masculinity and femininity, such as suits and dresses, boxy or flowing silhouettes. Consequently, it opposes and confronts gendered fashion and its binary. Like anti-fashion, JW Anderson's antigender fashion challenges the constitutive categories of gender and uncovers its inconsistencies.

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