

Fashion Beyond Representation

Author: Peter Shand¹

Abstract

The promise of transformation is fashion's most significant gift. In ideal form, fashion is a site of profound elasticity. That ideal appears as both a reflection of constant becoming with its attendant stimulation and as a means by which we might embrace and actively reveal such a state.

As a notion, fashion offers almost pure encounter by virtue of: its existence in duration; a directionless or productively purposeless mode of proposition; its social provocation; and an intimate relationship to the body politic. Its ceaselessness and relentlessness activates imagination, memory, wonder, shock. Its proximity to lived experience actualizes degrees of phenomenological and psychological connection with a striking capacity to move us, to reflect in material form a life immanent.

As a mode of generative creative practice, fashion has a seemingly inexhaustible capacity for invention, distinction and contestation. It both reflects and anticipates existing social and cultural conditions and contributes to their overhaul. Its capacity for revolution is a condition both internal to its own logic and manifest in its realization in the world.

As a means for personal or individual expression it is a toolbox *par excellence*. Individuals are able to reflect their membership of community and to exhibit idiosyncrasies of temperament, outlook, belief or taste. Nor does fashion of itself constrain those activities – as with any good box of tools ideas and items both may be picked up, worn, discarded, modified, returned to or destroyed at the behest of the user. Fashion enables us self-actualizing exhibition whilst simultaneously pointing to the necessity of its own redundancy. Janus-faced, fashion affords a means by which we may both advance and attempt to still the ceaselessness of our becoming.

Keywords: fashion, transformation, creativity, representation, Deleuze

With respect to garments, the formal limitation of fashion grammar is a spur for continual thought. Despite the apparent simplicity of necessity, fashion as a system of supplementation enables individuals to consider and give effect to how garments might relate to the body, how they might sit, feel or look on bodies, how they might respond, affect or enable those bodies. And not only the corporeal body but the entire organism, the body that is the abode of our individual presentness in the world and the political body of the group.

And much more so as a contemporary condition: when the seat of authority has been overturned and a cacophonous proliferation of voices stake claims to be of fashion; when the epochal upheaval of communication and knowledge transference has collapsed even the assumed physical givens of space and time; and when the expansion of goods-sharing and exchange has categorically altered industrial models of manufacture and distribution, of market definition, of supply and demand.

Fashion, in this sense of a simultaneous maelstrom of causes, effects and independent events, is of life, it is immanent. The pleasure of the immanent life is not akin to that found and indulged in by pleasure seekers. It is primal, meaning that to inhabit fully that life we all must embrace its pains, our sorrows, our vulnerabilities and the fact that life will strike at us – the conditions that mark human experience good and ill. We must embrace the chaotic and fully life-affirming principle – a reflection of Friedrich Nietzsche's remark that "[the] Dionysiac, with the primal pleasure it perceives even in pain, is the common womb from which both music and tragic myth are born"² (Nietzsche, 1872, s. 24).

In relation to which a suite of irreconcilable characteristics rears up. Ideologically, fashion appears democratic whilst simultaneously asserts afresh clear indices demarcating status and power. It creates wealth at the same time as it evinces profound disparity in that wealth's generation and distribution. It affords psychological and emotional freedom and expression whilst advancing messages that exacerbate dysmorphia and seed dissatisfaction and inhibition. It is an arena of

open imagination and unfettered thought while it promulgates uniformity and external codes of adherence.

As individuals we extend our reach only to find that the means of acquisition are so proximate we need not even stretch. Upcycling Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *The Social Contract* "one is born free but everywhere one is in chain-stores." The idealized offer presented by commercial fashion's offer is compromised, its allure tainted.

The outline of this article, then, arrives a little like Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky's Carabosse in *Sleeping Beauty* with her gift to Aurora of a malignant enchanted spindle. Its central concern is the tension between the possibilities of transformation and (what is in the context of a life becoming) fashion's limiting or maleficent characteristic: representation. In consideration of this tension, it takes fashion to be a system of relations or conditions rather than objects or events though because it is in the commercial fashion sphere that this tension is arguably most evident, this is the article's primary area of address.

Rather than simply posit commerce as a "necessary evil" or tolerable core condition of fashion, the article also raises doubts as to whether uncritical claims for contemporary fashion's transformative capacities are, in fact, so secure as to enable the assumptions proceeding from this assertion to be made real in the world. Put explicitly, the article is in part motivated by a concern that in general usage transformation is used analogously to change. That conflation achieves at least two problematic outcomes.

First, it mistakes what transformation imputes, taking away the degree of risk and challenge that underscores the transformative event. It delimits what we should expect of the transformative possibilities of any creative activity. Novelty and difference, for example, are not of themselves transformational. This is especially so in arenas where originality or differentiation may be consumed thoughtlessly and has obvious connection to diverse aspects of fashion whether as idea or as part of lived experience. Change of this order more often re-inscribes existing assumptions,

meanings or relations than shifts or challenges them. As such it cannot be transformational.

Second, the uncritical collapsing of transformation and change can contribute to a false sense of the possibilities of fashion encounters, whether theoretically, object or event-based. The blandly affirming assertion for fashion to be transformative in meagre ways diminishes or inhibits the possibility of its more radical capacity with respect to becoming. If producers and/or consumers mistake as transformative simple incidents of trend or personal adjustments geared toward representational conformity then, as a concept or proposition, transformativity in fashion at best risks being recruited into a fundamentally closed circuit of confirmation and re-affirmation and, at worst, a delusional lure that reinforces what is perhaps the most reductive and entrapping of fashion's current threats – the reduction of people to brands.

Many papers delivered at the *Shapeshifting* conference argued eloquently and persuasively for the inherent transformational potential of fashion and have explored ways in which this is made real in the world. This article shares with them an affirmation of the radical dynamism of encounters derived from the ceaseless and directionless sense of becoming consequent to fashion-related upheavals and ruptures. Such incidents and their affects force new ways of thinking about and being in the world. That reorientation is central both to what transformation effects and what is required by transformational change as opposed to its contained, limited or predictable other.

An additional component of this approach is that it is oriented toward creativity and creative endeavours generally, which can both sharpen and render problematic the discussion in relation to fashion. There are, for example, sympathies between art and fashion. There are redolent echoes in what the English Art Historian Simon O'Sullivan suggests when he describes art act as:

the name for a function, a magical and aesthetic function of transformation, less involved with making sense of the world and more involved in exploring the possibilities of being in – and becoming with – the world. Art is less involved in knowledge and

more involved in experience – in pushing forward the boundaries of what can be experienced. And finally it is less involved with shielding us from death, than in actualising the possibilities of life.

(O'Sullivan, 2006, p. 52)

Being in and becoming with the world; experience over knowledge; expanding experiential boundaries; actualizing life's possibilities; these strike me as central functions of fashion no less than any other creative activity. Functions that are essential and, as such, we cannot be complacent about what challenges they posit or what they require of us.

Change, of course, is one of the defining characteristics of fashion. At first glance, its velocity can appear to outpace other creative activities. The underlying drive of short-phased redundancy and novelty both reflects and fuels fashion's creation, realization, reception, consumption and performance. In this respect it serves as perhaps the quintessential example of late capitalism's capacity to expand markets, absorb differences and escalate demand. The plethora of new looks widely and immediately available seems to expand exponentially. But, as with the limited suite of criteria utilized in theoretical analyses such as Alfred Kroeber and Jane Richardson's (*Three Centuries of Women's Dress Fashions: A Quantitative Analysis*, 1940) or, famously, Roland Barthes' (*The Fashion System*, 1983), even a considerable array of combinations suggests a structure and method that, in the end, is stable even where the individual components are shunted about. Change is wrought like a flipbook of exquisite corpse. It stimulates or amuses only up to a point before the encounter fades – and this prior to viewing all possible combinations, partly because of the arriving awareness of and dissatisfaction with the necessary constraint of the system within which they are organized.

That restrictive circularity is a defining feature of fashion as an industry. The incessant march of cycles insists on some but not too much innovation and change season-on-season – a degree sufficiently stimulating to but remaining within tolerable parameters for designer, house, brand, market, audience or consumer. The rise and rise of the creative individual as the generative heart of the enterprise (presenting new garments, sometimes proposing new ideas) continues the trajectory

for named or signature fashion initiated in the ateliers of Charles Frederick Worth or Paul Poiret. Augmented by art direction, event choreography, media strategy and marketing campaigning, their work risks serving as representative model more than generative spur for individual followers' or consumers' independent creative thought.

This may seem surprising, given the broadly accepted notion of an unparalleled level of polyvocality in contemporary commercial fashion and a relationship to the social that would appear to be demonstrably democratic. Many orders of clothing and event have been dismantled (gender, generation, ethnicity, cultural affiliation; professional, formal, casual, domestic). Many designers (and many more consumers) have contributed actively to this dismantling. Contemporary commercial fashion is highly responsive to market. Trends are less unitary. Diverse approaches to notions of dress are accommodated. Like other social networks, fashion is increasingly self-moderating rather than the consequence of external application of rule. The tolerance for diverse codes of dress as one element of a fashion system is, at a general level at least, significantly greater than at any time in modern history. In some instances, the resulting bricollage indicates a flexibility and adaptability that is an affirming component of the *Zeitgeist*.

These latter day shifts make more plausible the claim long made for fashion that, as a supplementary condition, it has the capacity to evince personal expression. With what is quite plainly the transformation of manufacturing and distribution networks, individual consumers are perhaps most advantageously positioned than at any time in the past. Coupled with what looks like increased social acceptance, scales of access and affordability result in a period of unprecedented individuality of modes of dress and performance within those modes. Fashion retains a critical role in a self-actualizing, reflexive schema of how anyone may express identity – actions and conditions that are not singular in register.

Even so, in distinct opposition to transformation, the clarity by which systemic, industrial, social or individual fashion reveals underlying systems of fixed points of relation inveighs the epithet “plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose”. For fashion consumers, it appears as though there is an unprecedented array of fashion objects

made available through an unbounded range of mechanisms and that, once acquired, are constrained only by the level of willingness to re-interpret or imagine. “The consumer as producer” as Michel de Certeau suggests. We may choose from available designs and designers, may adopt or adapt as and when we like. The challenge would seem to be the extent to which we freely enjoy or exercise that capacity. Indeed, the exigencies of market analysis hasn’t necessarily partnered with a greater array of *substantively* different things. Diverse outlets (physical or online) offer uniformity. Consumer-producers flounder in a multiplicity of sameness. Irrespective of individualized expressions, consumers dress the same or at least dress to the same purpose.

Of course, as with the inventive potential of designers and makers, consumers have the capacity to resist this state. A fundamental precept of fashion affords this, reflected in the central tension of individuality and belonging. In the century or more since Georg Simmel advanced this notion in his *Philosophy of Fashion* (1905), little and much has changed. What has stayed the same is that the aspiration to be “in fashion” necessitates a simultaneous adaptation to a social group and individual elevation from it. It remains a central tension for the contemporary aspirant.

One of the persistent barriers to the realization of fashion’s transformative potential is representation. Representation is fundamentally antithetical to transformation because it is a condition of confirmation. While confirmation may comfort and stabilize individuals and may allow for commercial adaptation viably maintained, it is predicated on fixing and delimiting creative potentiality – the inverse of the inherent promise of shapeshifting.

The desire for belonging makes representation necessary. In the dynamic of inclusion one must conform to certain codes of membership that are, by agreement, shared. Revealed in shared habits of dress, fashion serves as a means of representing belonging. Representation communicates to the self and to the group. Its communication is predicated on recognition (they are one of us), which in turn confirms acceptance (you are one of us) and subsequently constructs or augments the *esprit de corps* (we are us). Fashion’s representationally declarative function in

relation to belonging is to fix the identity of both group and individual relative to one another and as against others. Fixed here does not mean absolute stasis as any group will have levels of tolerable variance that become increasingly normative. It is perhaps more useful as a term in the sense of repair or adhesion (both valuable to the maintenance of group identity).

Representation necessitates a withdrawal from an openly creative encounter. No longer driven formally by its own domain, nor generatively by the purposeless extension of thought, fashion is recruited here towards designated meaning; it presents back a recognizable identity externally constructed. More importantly, the twinned possibility of representation and recognition arise from the articulation through garment and behaviour known indices of declaration and confirmation. Knowledge here signals certainty as opposed to the uncertainty of encounter; and confirmation rather obviously forestalls the possibility of rupture or dislocation that force us outside of our habitual understanding and into becoming. Any opportunity for transformation is sublimated to a supervening desire to belong. Fashion's offer of individual expression is declined.

In the popular imagination, the most egregious example of a mistaken triangulation of individual, fashion and transformation is the makeover. In broadcast media this phenomenon reached its nadir in *The Swan*, developed from shows that had originally developed under the premise of assisting people to overcome disfigurement or body dysmorphia. Episodes resulted in an alarming blandness and uniformity of surgically modified and brand-dressed participants. Across a range of incidents (including less physically invasive ones such as chat show wardrobe makeovers or fashion advice shows), the significant majority of such programmes perniciously advance reductive notions of individuality by *re-presenting* participants within a bounded suite of conservative, standardized, consumption-oriented types or looks. They achieve what they seek: they no longer look out-of-place, except perhaps in the "reveal" to family and friends where they appear to belong more to the arena of television's representation of likeness than any world they actually inhabit.

Individual participant's metamorphoses may be transformational but becoming they are not. Becoming is necessarily radically purposeless, an unceasing experience of constant, multivalent change without goal or objective, which is why it is so challenging, traumatic even. As O'Sullivan remarks:

We are, if you like, representational creatures with representational habits of thought. We inhabit an internal and an external world. We separate ourselves as subjects from the object world. Indeed, this alienated state is the very precondition of self-consciousness. (O'Sullivan, 2006, p. 16)

But it is also why the thoughtless adoption of representation suggests a disenchantment like to Max Weber's *Entzauberung der Welt* – the expunging to us of the world's strangeness, its wonder, its inexplicableness or incommensurability. A disenchantment, moreover, rendered all the more cruel if lost from an arena that seemed so likely a plausible, hopeful and enabling space of its realization. Fashion, like any creative endeavour, cracks open the separated domains of individual and world. It refutes, or at least has the capacity to refute, representation's seemingly reassuring image of our subjectivity and in that rupture grants us the opportunity to encounter ourselves afresh, at one in and with the world.

By tethering ourselves to representation in order to obtain the rewards attendant to our subjective confirmation, we back away from a truly open encounter. We opt, instead, to align with known and knowable indices of imitation and recognition. At a system level we endorse the trebly removed rationalism of Barthes' representation (not object but text; creative materiality over-written by semiotics; a declaration of meaning over encounter). At an industry level we surrender to the market (we monetize everything, value little). Creatively we anoint others as the seats of origination (valorising and fixing singular versions of creation). Individually we deny our own capacities to intervene or to influence outside of market selection (we render ourselves passive). All of which amounts to a refusal of immanence, of a life becoming in favour of shoring-up an image, a label, a representation of self and identity. So keen are we to assert identity that we miss the point that, like fashion as ideal, identity is never fixed.

The refusal or inability to embrace transformation and becoming is, classically, nihilistic because it turns us away from life. Of greater concern, though, is whether we can evade the seeming inevitability of our representation or give away or opt out of elements that lead us to representation.

Which prompts the question, is there anything beyond representation? As Nietzsche remarks,

[that] striving towards infinity, that wing-beat of longing even as we feel supreme delight in a clearly perceived reality, these things indicate that in both these states of mind we are to recognize a Dionysiac phenomenon, one which reveals to us the playful construction and demolition of the world of individuality as an outpouring of primal pleasure and delight. (Nietzsche, 1872, s. 24)

The language here echoes the material and emotional intensities of fashion practice. Further, it suggests a porousness of the fashion object. Of course there is a constructed work, a constructed world. But that world is not whole or complete unto itself. Rather, it is an environment of excess or overflow; it proposes an encounter that is constantly becoming, rather than a replete thing of fixed meaning.

Fashion of this order actualizes the non-representable and responds to that process viscerally in its material and emotional pitch. It is an essential part of a consumer's engagement that we are, in common parlance, moved. To be moved is explicitly transformative; to be moved propels us on the path of our own becoming. In this act we necessarily unmake, destroy or undo a part of who we are or how we might see ourselves or how we might be in the world. We change our own "individual world" both in the sense that we unmake who we are but also and more significantly we destroy our belief of an isolated self. This simultaneous, double undoing is, as Nietzsche argues, precisely the domain of art and I would add fashion. In saying "yes" to the act of encounter, the action of being moved, we engage in a Deleuzian affirmation of immanence, a radical commitment to life.

Giorgio Agamben describes fashion's temporal form as "an ungraspable threshold between a 'not yet' and a 'no more'" (Agamben, 2009, p. 48). There's a distinct echo here of the shimmering opening phrases of Madame de Ponty's assessment of

jewellery in the late summer of 1874 in Stéphane Mallarmé's *La Dernière Mode*; "Too late to speak of summer fashions and too soon to speak of winter ones (or even autumn ones)" (Mallarmé, 2004, p. 21). In Auckland's unexpectedly lingering summer of 2014 there is, perhaps, a like hovering between an immediate no longer and a proximate not yet. An evasiveness of contemporaneity that wrong-foots us or necessitates the attempted or partial reconciliation or accommodation of quite contradictory thoughts and encounters.

Of course these destabilize us. Of course that upset is ongoing; we do not right ourselves but continue to say "yes" to other encounters. Like Penelope at her loom, we make and unmake and make and unmake. This, in essence, is to embrace the most radical of fashion's propositions; that it is out of order. As individuals in fashion we are never secure, never fully fashionable but always in a state of movement, always in a state of becoming. This as opposed to fixedness which, as I have suggested, is core to representation, anathema to transformation.

Turning in conclusion explicitly to Gilles Deleuze, we may add the fixing of identity to that antithesis. His important book *Difference and Repetition* is a critique of identity, most particularly identity that is imitative and geared to securing stability. For Deleuze, this runs counter to an affirmation of life. In a moment of particular if casual significance to a conference in New Zealand, he deploys the idea of *erewhon*, derived from Samuel Butler's satiric novel of the same name: *Erewhon or Over the Range* (1872). What Deleuze recognized and named was the bi-fold aspect of Butler's title. Not only "no-where" reversed, it is simultaneously "now-here." In the context of Deleuze, this expands to "the originary 'nowhere' and the displaced, disguised, modified and always re-created 'here-and-now'" (Deleuze, 1994, p. xxi). In the conclusion to his book, he recasts particular types of works of art (not fashion, however) as "erewhons". Such works he describes as "objects of an essential encounter rather than of recognition" and, building on Immanuel Kant, describes the ideas actualized in the art work as "participating in a phantasmagoria of the imagination, irreducible both to the universality of the concept and to the particularity of the now here" (Deleuze, 1994, p. 285).

What might we take from this? The relationship with the irreducible now-here; the power of imaginative participation; essential encounter over recognition; the maelstrom and partiality of the here-and-now; and four actions: displacing, disguising, modifying, always re-creating (which, in this context, might productively be expressed by synonyms such as re-fashioning or fashioning anew). These are perhaps the principal demands made by and promises to be had from transformative fashion for generative, creative producers and consumers.

Imaginative participation is perhaps the key to any mode of creative endeavour. What it offers us is that central, human capacity to speculate beyond the immediate limitations of language or experience, to envisage what might be possible beyond the horizon of representational expectation or assumption. That activity of imaginative thought is essential to who we are in the world and how it is we encounter that world. It makes us human.

Nevertheless, the phantasmagoria, as Deleuze puts it, is inherently, indeed, fundamentally destabilizing. To participate fully necessitates not only an embrace of its potentialities but, consequentially, a refusal of the security of known or favoured conditions. This, in part, is why both creative thought and action are important and also why they can seem so daunting. For fashion or, more importantly, for people “in fashion” to inhabit its transformational possibility, amounts to a proposal to think and act ourselves differently. This entails recognition of inherent instability. We, like fashion, are “not yet” and “no more”; “no-where” and “now-here”; and these at once. To embrace instability is requisite to transformation; to radicalize it is the promise of fashion.

It is in this sense that fashion may yet claim to be transformative insofar as its ceaseless and undetermined character explicitly reflects and helps propel and shape our becoming. Truly transformative fashion impels us to consider how we appear to the world and how the world appears to us – to shapeshift.

Lying within this idea, however, is the threat to such a claim for fashion as a system of relations or conditions. It is this: the fashion system and our participation in it

(particularly with respect to commercial fashion and our use of it as a tool of representation) actualizes a *determined* and *determinative* series of conditions of thought, action and object. The chain store, the makeover, the designer as celebrity brand, the anaesthetizing effects of cycle, sign and meaning; these are harboured in the maleficent spindle. As mechanisms of representation they, along with our desire to conform, to belong, are soporifics to becoming – they enchant and remove us from the world, from life.

The last words, in equal measure hopeful and vigilant, are Deleuze's:

Something in the world forces us to think. This something is an object not of recognition but of a fundamental *encounter*.

(Deleuze, 1994, p. 139)

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² In the context of this article it is perhaps worth noting that Oscar Levy in the 1909-11 *Complete Works* translates this sentence: "[the] Dionysian, with its primitive joy *experienced* in pain itself, is the common source of music and tragic myth" (emphasis added).