

Fashion and Digital Culture

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Abstract

How fashion has been working and announcing the paradigmes of the digital culture?

Among many elements, we may stress a few ones which determine digital culture such as: fluidity, hybrid body and its manipulation, internationalization of diferences in real time, datas in digital formate making sampling a common dinamic, frontiers surpassed in cases of gender, culture and social relation, constant negotiation (in-betweeness), biotechnology, and genetic manipulation.

Digital technologies have been playing an important role in silhouette when proposes overcoming the idea of rigid frontiers. In this sense, we can understand the importance os belgians and japanese fashion designers since the 1980's. These designers have broken strict beliefes of gender, binomy beauty-uglyness, original-copy and, human being-being in determinist culture.

As Derrick de Kerckhove says, once we have everything in digital datas, all of it can be sampled, breaking the idea of begging-middleend. The fashion designers, Rei Kawakubo, Yohji Yamamoto, Issey Miyake, Hussein Chalayan, Sarah Pacini, Sandra Backlund, Martin Margiela and Walter van Beirendonck, have been announcing dinamics and silhouttes in this sense.

They have subverted the logic of structure (patterns), as well as gender of biologic bodies. Which one is original, which one is copy? (if there is a determinist answer). And also, they have been proposing hybrid figures which remind us the idea of the hybrid being which overcome the idea of the human figure, as some of his creation were manipulated in labs.

The main subjects here about fashion will discuss new ways of understanding world wide relations which are no longer rigid 'laws' because of the volatile dinamics of market and socio-cultural shifts, but a constant negotiation. The hybrid body integrates the organic and the inorganic by means of biotechnological processes, redesigning our bodies, fashion designer and cientists getting closer, turning the limits between man and machine imprecise.

1. INTRODUCTION

How fashion has been working and announcing the paradigms of the digital era?

One important point is that technologies can help designers and companies to differentiate their product in the global competition.

We must understand that digital technologies have been playing an important role in silhouette when propose overcoming the idea of rigid frontiers. In this sense, we can understand the importance of belgians and japanese fashion designers since the 1980's. These designers have broken strict beliefs of gender, binomies such as beauty-uglyness, original-copy and human being-being.

As Derrick de Kerckhove says, once we have everything in digital datas, all of it can be sampled, breaking the idea of begging-middle-end. Yohji Yamamoto and Walter van Beirendonck, fashion designers, have been showing dynamics and silhouettes in this sense: both of them have subverted the logic of structure (patterns). Yamamoto put one of his creation in a website (Showstudio) with explanation of how to build that piece of clothe. Anyone who downloads this explanations, may build the piece with the fabrics they wish and wear them in her/his particular way. Which one is the original, which one is a copy? (if there is a determinist answer in it).

Beirendonck has been showing his collections in the internet and have been proposing hybrid figures which remind us the idea of the hybrid being which overcome the idea of the human figure, as some of his creation were manipulated in labs.

The main subjects here about fashion will discuss new ways of understanding world wide relations which are no longer rigid 'laws' because of the volatile dynamics of market and socio-cultural shifts, but a constant negotiation.

2. DIGITAL CULTURE: BRIEF PARADIGMES

As technology, mainly the digital one, permeates fashion, the body is becoming a project of design^[1] lending up as the form of a cyborg. In fashion, technology appears as a differential factor in the globalized competition.

Etymologically, the word 'fashion' may mean «something that becomes part of the daily routine of a determined culture». According to Abbagnano (Philosophy Dictionary), fashion is able to renew paradigms which are previously solidified by the rigidity of tradition.

Nowadays, the recent paradigms are related to the liquid modernity (a term used by Zigmunt Bauman^[2]), due to digital technology that is performed in real time. Consequently, the paradigms appear as fluid and ephemeral dynamics, such as when we observe the relational behavior in contemporary societies.

[1] Goodall, J. (2000): «An order of pure decision: un-natural selection in the work of Stelarc and Orlan». In: Featherstone, M. (ed.). *Body modification*. London: Sage Publ., p.149.

[2] Bauman, Zigmunt (2001): *Modernidade líquida*. Rio de Janeiro: Jorge Zahar Editor.

Thus, our relational patterns are reflected in the skin of culture, as seen in Derrick de Kerckhove's book *La piel de la cultura*.^[3] The skin of the culture is the design that changes the functional benefits into sensorial and cognitive forms. For the author, each technology generates harmony of various natures according to each period, stating that «Just the omnipresence of the microchips in everyday applications can have inspired our desires for high-tech styles and fashion».^[4]

This skin is considered by him as the design. Such design is a silent language that works as a cultural mediator. This is because we seem to live an eternal present, thus everything that was used as an identifying code between individuals of a given society (such as rituals, national hymns, folk tales, traditional clothing — which are ways to go back to past and that require time so they can accomplish their function), somehow is lost in the past, and does not work as an integrating mode anymore. In order to overcome space and time, we pursue immediate ways so we can feel we belong to something, and sometimes the act of consuming brings us the sense of accomplishment. According to Renato Ortiz and Jean Baudrillard, consumption establishes hierarchy through its symbology, which can be seen in the discourses presented in the objects. These are real cultural communicators.

When information comes in digital data, negotiation is an order. This negotiation happens immediately, in real time, with and because all these apparatus provided by such digital technology. This constant negotiation, can be analogous to the idea of augmented reality, when we think about nanotechnology which brings us closer to an infinite world of possibilities. This means to say that with digital tools we bring ourselves closer to a brand new knowledge, making our reality more complex.

The idea of *In-betweenness* from Jens Hauser,^[5] that speaks about a constant negotiation, is an interesting idea which explains our dynamics nowadays. Our body, as the potentialization of power, made through digital technologies and genetic manipulation, is condemned to be constantly re-modeled and re-designed.

Kerckhove says that when our own body is connected with the web, as well as with everywhere and everything that is happening, we can expose it publicly, and we ourselves are able to contemplate it objectively.^[6] Obviously, the body has also to be considered as an object of consumption here, however, such discussion will not be done in this article.

Thus, our body (and our conscience) is susceptible of observation and projections are made possible by digital technologies. It can be manipulated and desired as promptly as technology allows us to, which means to say, in real time. Technology is so specific that, not only it is part of our daily routine, according to McLuhan^[7] and his followers, but also works

[3] Kerckhove, Derrick de (1999): *La piel de la cultura*. Barcelona: Gedisa editorial, p.182.

[4] «Solamente la omnipresencia de los microchips em las aplicaciones más cotidianas pudo haber inspirado nuestras ansias por los estilos y modas high-tech», p. 183.

[5] Hauser, Jens (ed) (2008): *Sk-interfaces*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press.

[6] Kerckhove, Derrick (1999): *La piel de la cultura*. Barcelona: Gedisa editorial, p. 33.

[7] McLuhan, M. (1964): *Os meios de comunicação como extensões do homem [Understanding media]*. São Paulo: Cultrix.

as prostheses.^[8] So, it composes the human body operation, intensifying the discussion on the subject cyborg. The body becomes an object not only of the design but also of the engineering.^[9]

3. FASHION «IN-BETWEEN»

To talk about that in fashion, I would like to mention Kathia Castilho's words, when she states that fashion is a way to update our cultural writings on the body^[10] (2002). Today, the design of the body, and we can include fashion (but not exclusively), is one of these ways of updating. It is worth saying that updating is a way of communicating with one another. In Elizabeth Wilson's words,^[11] «fashion is our social being» or, as Flügel^[12] says, «to relate with the other's dressed body». As science is present in our daily routine, this speech also needs to be updated. According to Suzanne Lee,^[13] today a designer can be much closer to a scientist, which I have been calling as a technological designer. Obviously, this does not annul the importance of the fashion makers who are more involved with the area in which the concept of the collection appears exacerbate in fashion shows. Anyway, when talking about the way of thinking of the fashion creators, who tend to be closer to science, it is important to mention the examples presented in the *Techno Textiles 2* (Braddock Clarke and O'Mahoney, 2007), and in Suzanne Lee's book «Fashioning the future».

Therefore, going back to the initial subject by Kerckhove, which stated that the design is a cognitive form and sensorial perception. As seen in fashion, this universe of science remolds our bodies or, in other words, provides the idea of a cyborg.

In order to talk about this question, we should remember that the body in this context is fluid and mutant, just as the way we relate through the culture of consumerism and the web. They are codes that change constantly in real time. We may also remember the «Cyborg manifesto» by Donna Haraway,^[14] which says that this cyber organism is generated from manipulations in laboratories and that it has no parents, thus it disrupts with traditional notions of family and with established dichotomies:

...the border between the physical and non-physical structure is very imprecise for us. The dichotomies between mind and body, animal and human, organism and machine, public and

[8] Stelarc (2000): «Parasite visions: alternate, intimate and involuntary experiences». In: Featherstone, M. (ed.). *Body modification*. London: Sage Publ., p.117-27.

[9] Goodall, J. (2000): «An order of pure decision: un-natural selection in the work of Stelarc and Orlan». In: Featherstone, M. (ed.). *Body modification*. London: Sage Publ., p.149.

[10] Castilho, Kathia (2002): «Do corpo à moda: exercícios de uma prática estética». In: Castilho, Kathia and Diana Galvão: *A moda do corpo o corpo da moda*. São Paulo: Esfera.

[11] Wilson, E. (1985): *Enfeitada de sonhos – moda e modernidade*. Lisboa: Ed. 70.

[12] Flügel, J. C. (1966): *A psicologia das roupas*. São Paulo: Mestre Jou.

[13] Lee, Suzanne (2005): *Fashioning the future*. London: Thames&Hudson.

[14] Haraway, D. (2000): «Manifesto ciborgue: ciência, tecnologia e feminismo-socialista no final do século XX». In: Haraway, D.; Kunzru, H.; Silva, T. T. da. (Org.) *Antropologia do ciborgue*. Belo Horizonte: Autêntica, p.37-129. P.47.

private, nature and culture, men and women, primitive and civilized are all ideologically in question (...); (p.69)

The technology of communications and the bio-technology are crucial tools in the process of remolding our bodies (p.70).

For Kerckhove, crossbreeding can happen with the language and with the migrating movements, as well as in the transposition of the objects to the digital format. In this case, the invention is seen as a digital bricolage, originated from mixing and samplings, cultivated by softwares: we live by paradox, because we indefinitely wait for solutions for such antinomies, which are intensified by globalization. Contradiction between one being and the other, between nationalism and globalization, democracy and the state of control are some of the present questions in our daily routine. They live with intense crossbreeding caused by digital technology which produces objects, beings, bodies, and cultures difficultly defined inside this binary situation.^[15]

Such crossbreeding is constantly done through the infinite possibilities in digital format. Therefore, what seems to be a problem for our global society appears from this intense hybridization — our reality is, in a way, the difficulty to classify one from another. We are fated to live with the ‘strange’, with that ones which scape from this polarity that we are used to deal with. The ‘strange’ is indeterminated. It is placed between or, better, beyond ‘friend’ and ‘enemy’. As Bauman says, the indefinables are all those understood as nor something neither something else. Their indetermination is their strength: because they can be everthing. They put an end on the organizational power of opposition; the oppositions make possible knowledge and action while the indefinables, paralised them. The indefinables expose the artifices, fragilities in a brutal way from the most vital separation. They put what is given as external inside, poison the confort of the order with the suspicion of caos.^[16]

This is the main point in some relevant fashion designers: the production of non-classifiable aesthetics which have been working as a subversion in our every day life and our comfortable classification which is now, condemned.

In sampling, the scanners of the body that we may see in fashion production, can be understood as machines that enables the transformation of the body into digital data, and then producing clothing from this digitalized body. We are able to act together with reality, as we build it — real time. That is the same to say that electronic impulses are changed into organic forms, into solid information. This is our comfort in relating with and through the computer.

[15] Catalog of the event Hybrid – living in paradox (2005). Ars Electronica, Linz, Austria.

[16] Bauman, Z. (1999): *Modernidade e ambivalência*. Rio de Janeiro: Jorge Zahar. P. 65. «Os indefiníveis são todos nem uma coisa nem outra, o que equivale a dizer que eles militam contra uma coisa e outra. Sua subdeterminação é sua força: porque nada são, podem ser tudo. Eles põem fim ao poder ordenador da oposição e, assim, ao poder ordenador dos narradores da oposição. As oposições possibilitam o conhecimento e a ação: as indefinições os paralisam. Os indefiníveis expõem brutalmente o artifício, a fragilidade, a impostura da separação mais vital. Eles colocam o exterior dentro e envenenam o conforto da ordem com a suspeita do caos».

This technology favors the example of annulling barriers is the seamless technique, which eliminates the marks of the production, as well as the nonwoven fabric and what the Spanish Manuel Torres creates with his sprayed surface (*Fabrican*).

Another interference in ways of production can be fabrics which are designed due to manipulating the needles on an electronic loom. It can also be understood as some interference with which, once was considered correct, uniform, and now, given as differentiation of product. What was previously considered an error, nowadays this is almost the unique way to create fabric.

Moreover, the information about discoveries and the experiences carried out in laboratories, such as biotechnology, genetic manipulation and regeneration medicine, are constantly around us and we feel close to this potency announced by biotechnology. The possibilities of manipulating our body seem to be present — seem to be feasible. Our imagination gets involved with this potency and we end up desiring it. Thus, the objects that are part of the culture, communicate this potency: the design is a way to present such desire. Kerckhove calls it the techno-fetishism (p.30): «cada tecnología extiende una de nuestras facultades y trasciende nuestras limitaciones físicas, [así] tendemos a adquirir las mejores extensiones de nuestro propio cuerpo»

The less technology gets apparent, the more efficient we think it is (because it surpasses barriers, which were once considered obstacles).

So, the corporal models are reflected in the changes of the weft and warp threads of the fabric (if it is still possible to talk about only weft and warp once we have the three dimensional textiles such as from the ScotWeave company) in their functions and in their image (from subversions in the modeling, which have created silhouette that change the biological forms of the body) — this is where the cyborg signals appear: Rei Kawakubo, Martin Margiela, Walter van Beirendonck.

In this sense, the artists Orlan and Stelarc are very critical regarding our biological body, proposing new experiences and understandings. While Orlan claims her work is blasphemous, once it breaks the classical ideas of beauty and a christian culture, Stelarc claims that our body is obsolete and we may deal with it together with new technologies which potentialize our body for this brave digital world.

Viktor and Rolf, in the collection of Spring 2006 have shown the subversion of the current logic in their fashion show where everything was backwards and up-side-down. Yet, in the collection of Fall 2002, they create a performance that the prints are images project on the clothes and sometimes you can't tell which one is really on the fabric and which one is not. This collection also reminds the idea of been in the digital net but you choose if you want to be seen or not. Bodies with volumes that simulate other parts that we can see in Comme des Garçons collections since the eightie`s.

In Walter van Beirendonck fashion shows we find new beings presented on the catwalk proposing hybrid beings and beyond the gender determinism or more than that: some new created being. He works as a genetic manipulator when presents these non-humans creatures, as they have been hybridized in labs with many other kinds of creature: beyond gender and human kind — non-classifiable beings. He also was inspired by the works of Orlan which questions the ideal of beauty in a provocative way, working as superhuman giants who challenged the gods in greek mythology. They could have parts of their bodies in some different dimensions and numbers and yet, steal some special powers from the gods such as fire.

In the same sense, Martin Margiela has working in fashion. This designer, just as Orlan has worked, samples old icons but with clothes, creating new ones with new forms and volumes. He is also developing strategies of subverting the fashion system such as using labels without his brand or signature, or, as more recently, entered to the haute couture to challenge the luxury market in its own heart.

The creative process of Yamamoto many times started by the fabric, the new ways of constructing shapes which subvert the traditional way of cutting and sewing. He doesn't always follows the logic of the patterns which are front and back. His work posted in the website of Showstudio (http://www.showstudio.com/projects/ddl_yamamoto/download.html) is a real challenge for those who still think about original and copy bynomy. He creates a garment which exists only in digital form. Anyone can download the «pattern recipe» and make that piece in the fabrics he/she wishes and wear according to his/hers will. Then, the person sends a picture of the garment to the website and and we have a whole collection of one piece.

The Italian fashion designer Sarah Pacini is a peculiar designer when we speak about knitting. Her patterns also subvert the logic of body which is construct almost in a continuum. You may wear her clothes in many ways with only one piece giving to the wearer a constant chance of re-build her body. Just as Yamamoto, Pacini doesn't necessarily follows the logic of patterns.

In the sense of knitting, Sandra Backlund, a Swedish designer, uses traditional handcraft techniques to build something like an exoskeleton. Her creations reminds us a vision of the interior of human body made possible by high introject digital cameras or micropictures from our inner body.

Hussein Chalayan with his wearable computers has establish a great turn in the fashion shows arena. Once he brings clothes design together with eletronic devices, he brings other materials to the traditional idea of creation in fashion. Not only they work as a computer but the concept of timeless is represented as our own garments. He is a designer who has been working since science labs to the final product, planning a new cyborg body turning our potentialities into real potent devices in every day life.

The idea of working with digital technology and scientists was the goal of Brazilian fashion designer Jefferson Kulig in his collection of Fall-Winter 2004. He developed eletronic devices that were attached to the models's body. These devices captured the inner sound of their bodies and projected to the audience turning this private space in public event, surpassing the stablished frontiers of public-private. This is a common dynamic experienced by everyone who navigates in tne internet, for example, in a net games or in chat rooms: the space of your home can be a public one once you have a webcam attached.

Fashion can bring all these new ways of living to a every day life: that is the main point of fashion. As it was discussed here, the hybrid body integrates the organic and the inorganic by means of bio-technological processes, redesigning our bodies, turning the limits between man and machine imprecise. As Priscila Arantes^[17] states, it is not a matter of searching for

[17] Arantes, Priscila and Avelar, Suzana (2004): «O corpo globalizado». in *Fashion Theory*, Vol. 3 No 4, December, 2004.

such limits in a world of prostheses and artificial lives. Arantes states that it is hard to tell a human from a non-human. It is not a matter of visualizing an ontological abyss between the natural and the artificial, a fissure between the organic and the non-organic. It is not defining them by their heterogenic parts, but by the way these parts become inseparable, as in a ribbon of Moebius, which folds itself on its parts.