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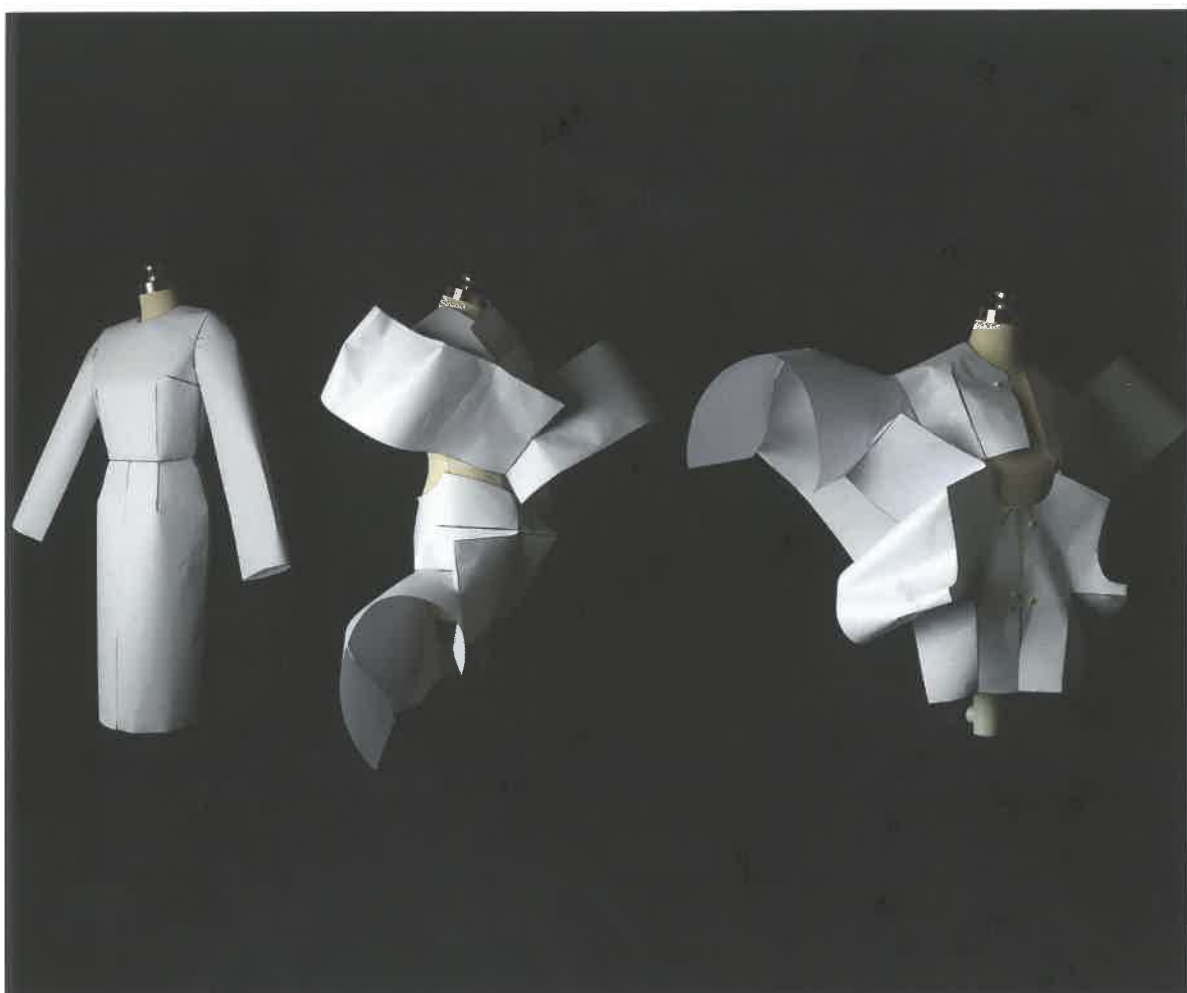# Fashion Studies

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6

A POSTHUMAN TURN IN FASHION

Anneke Smelik

Severed heads, androids, and aliens

Now that face masks have entered the reality of social life since COVID-19, they also made their debut on the catwalk. In Rick Owen's grunge and glamour collection for Spring 2021, for example, the face masks occasionally turn into threatening face coverings. In Craig Green's Spring 2021 menswear collection, the masks become part of some kind of armored exo-skeletons creating a funny but distinct posthuman look. The impossibility of featuring live fashion shows inspired Balenciaga to present the collection in a video like a first-person computer game *Afterworld*, showing how digital technology has entered the field of fashion.[1] Gucci's 2018 (S/S) show featured "posthuman" severed heads in its "wonkiest show yet."[2] Inspired by Donna Haraway's *A Cyborg Manifesto*, Gucci designer Alessandro Michele questioned the boundaries between humans, animals, and machines. This is by no means the only example of "posthuman fashion." Iris van Herpen created a fragile headgear of circular transparent folds moving in sync with the model's steps ("Syntopia" S/S 2018). The folds diffract the face of the model, and presumably, her vision on the world. It produces a dreamscape where the human face morphs into something in-between human, angel, and alien. For one of Alexander McQueen's shows (A/W 2012), models were wearing reflective silver Plexiglas visors, making them look like androids.

As the human face is one of the most over-connoted parts of the body, severed heads, exoskeletons, alien faces and android visors challenge the question of what a human is. This is a first definition of posthuman fashion: it pushes the boundary between the human and non-human. Posthuman fashion blurs the borders between human and machine, humans and animals, and organic and artificial. Many conceptual designers can be said to create posthuman designs; Rei Kawakubo (Comme des Garçons) famously transformed the shape of the human body for the collection "Body Meets Dress – Dress Meets Body" also called the 'lumps and bumps' collection (S/S 1997)—grotesque forms that have continued appearing in today's collections. Through make-up and hairdo, Alexander McQueen created a reptilian look for models in "Plato's Atlantis" (S/S 2010). He was generally known to create all kinds of bizarre masks distorting the human face, ranging from religious icons, African masks, a chainmail warrior mask, to even face clamps. Likewise, Issey Miyake, Junya Watanabe, Martin Margiela,

Hussein Chalayan, Viktor & Rolf, and Gareth Pugh have transgressed the boundaries of the human body and face. These are all rather spectacular examples of posthuman fashion, producing strong affects—from fear or disgust to wonder and fascination. This chapter explores several dimensions of posthumanism that in each case will be related to examples taken from fashion, respectively cyborg aesthetics, queerness, and sustainability. But first, posthuman fashion will be defined by inscribing it within the critical discourse of posthumanism.

A posthuman perspective

The Latin prefix *"post"* suggests that the posthuman comes after the human, but this linear framework does not hold for posthumanism. Rather, the term *posthuman* interrogates what it means to be human. This age-old question gathers urgency in the age of the "Anthropocene," a term invented by Nobel Prize winner Paul Crutzen to indicate that the era in which we are living is dominated by the human species. *Anthrōpos*, the Greek word for "human," has a lasting and negative effect upon the planet.[3] In the Anthropocene, the human can no longer be considered in terms of superiority to its "other," the non-human world. Consequently, a posthuman perspective involves an act of decentering the human.[4]

The origins of the term *posthuman* are not entirely clear,[5] but generally a performative piece by the literary scholar Ihab Hassan is taken as the starting point of a posthumanist culture in the humanities.[6] He suggests reevaluating the relationship between humans and non-humans, especially with respect to technology and the environment. The first art exhibition entitled *Post Human* already took place in 1992, starting in Lausanne and touring to Turin, Athens, and Hamburg.[7] The notion of the posthuman gained wider currency with N. Katherine Hayles' book *How We Became Posthuman*, in which she processed the accelerated change invoked by information technologies and critically assessed the techno-optimist rhetoric of the last decades of the twentieth century.[8]

The posthuman is basically a hybrid figure; it is about thinking what the human is or rather becomes "before, beyond, or after the human."[9] Cary Wolfe emphasizes that the term *posthuman* pertains to the human being who lives in both a biological and technological world, while "posthuman*ism*" refers to the historical time in which the human is decentered by "technical, medical, informatic and economic networks."[10] Rosi Braidotti argues that "The posthuman is a work in progress. It is a working hypothesis about the kind of subjects we are becoming," in a time of unprecedented technological development, the crisis of climate change and all-pervading capitalism.[11] In the context of fashion, my provisional definition of the posthuman is a hybrid figure who decenters human subjectivity, celebrating in-between-ness, by making alliances with all kinds of non-humans.

A posthuman perspective acknowledges a nature-culture continuum that defies binary thinking, such as between the human and its many others—the non-human. The non-human can be organic or inorganic. Traditionally, the non-human pertains to nature or the organic: to trees, animals or monsters, as well as to bacteria, fungi, or spiders. Today, the non-human equally refers to the technological or inorganic world of robotics, artificial intelligence (AI), or synthetic polyester. In the case of fashion, the non-human can be made of organic materials like wool and cotton or of technological materials like polymer fibers, solar cells, or 3D printed polyamide.

In sum, a posthuman perspective proposes a non-anthropocentric view by taking the human subject away from the center of attention. It permits an understanding of fashion as materially co-produced in a complex network of interconnected human and non-human actors. As such,

the term *posthuman* refers to the insight recognizing the human as being always already interconnected with the wider material world.[12]

A posthuman aesthetic

What does a decentering of the human mean for the field of fashion that is conventionally focused on the human body? A first and perhaps obvious answer lies in a posthuman *aesthetic* or *imaginary*, like the severed heads of Gucci, the android faces of McQueen, Iris van Herpen's fractal folds, or Comme des Garçons' grotesque lumps and bumps. Or perhaps even the face masks we now wear on a daily basis.

Posthuman fashion can be seen as an immediate successor of postmodern fashion, with its flair for spectacle, extravagance, and pastiche.[13] A posthuman aesthetic may share an inclination for the dramatic and the bizarre, but it engages more ethically with the contemporary world than in the ironical times of postmodernism. Such a critical engagement happens in many ways, but I will only touch upon three instances in this chapter: the relation to technology, the shifting boundaries between femininity and masculinity, and the turn towards slow or sustainable fashion.

As we have seen hybridity is key to the figure of the posthuman. The cyborg, as a hybrid of human/machine, has become one the most prevalent images of the posthuman in contemporary culture. The term *cyborg*, a *cyb*ernetic *org*anism, originates in space studies, indicating a feedback system between human and machine as an updated version of the mechanical robot.[14] The notion was introduced in feminist scholarship by Donna Haraway (1985) as a posthumanist concept for "fractured" identity in her agenda-setting "Cyborg Manifesto" (the essay that inspired Gucci's designer Michele in 2018). The entanglement of the biological and the technological, of "man and machine," is in itself not new, but the sheer expansion and all-pervasiveness of that entanglement and the ever-accelerating speed at which the two have been merging in the past decades is quite staggering.[15]

The cyborg has been hailed as a posthumanist configuration in its hybridity between human flesh and metal or digital material, and in its wavering between mind and matter.[16] In popular culture, the cyborg has become a friendly figure, after the more evil robots or disturbing androids of earlier science fiction stories. This is in tune with our times where we have come to love the technology that surrounds us: from the hot shower and strong espresso in the morning, to the metallic sheen of our car, or the smooth surface of our mobile phones. We stroke our technological gadgets—in fact, we need to stroke them in order to make them work. Technology is no longer the scary "other," but our friend, and in some sci-fi stories even our lover.[17] Contemporary fashion reflects this friendly relationship, for example in the metallic fashion that became *en vogue* in 2017. Metallic is both cool and sexy while not necessarily smooth because Comme des Garçons still created its lumps and bumps, but now in shimmering silver (A/W 2017). Metallic fashion is hardly a new trend, harking back to the cool "space race" of the 1960s, as can be seen in Paco Rabanne's collection of A/W 2018 in which designer Julien Dossena revisited the brand's iconic chainmail dresses of the 60's.

Technology not only inspires a certain aesthetic, but is also intricately bound up in the designing and making of fashion. Old and new technologies play a pivotal role: from age-old techniques like spinning and weaving; to factories on an industrial scale for cut, make, trim (CMT); to the role of computers today, for computer-aided design (CAD), 3D printers, and wearables; to virtual fitting and shopping in the near future.

As one of the pioneers of 3D printing, the Dutch designer Iris van Herpen is an example of the indispensable role that technology plays in contemporary fashion.[18] Her technologically

informed fashion designs feature fractal folds and striking shapes, 3D printed in parametric patterns on extremely thin acrylic tulle or organza that is computationally distorted, foam-lifted, laser-cut, and heat-bonded. Yet, she always combines the latest technologies with manual craftsmanship. Her designs often find inspiration in a natural phenomenon, using cutting-edge technologies to catch immaterial processes like dreams, sound waves or magnetic fields, or organic forms like waves of water, wisps of smoke, a spider web, or butterfly wing, in the smart materials of 3D-printed dresses. Morphing art, fashion, and technology Iris van Herpen has developed a posthuman style of in-between-ness, creating encounters between craftsmanship and technology, between the organic and inorganic, and between materiality and immateriality.

A posthuman critique

One of the dangers of a posthuman, or cyborg, imaginary has been the privileging of the digital over the material. The techno-optimism of cyberculture and of certain roboticists and futurologists embraced the AI promise of downloading the human mind into a computer (e.g. Hans Moravec, Marvin Minsky, or Raymond Kurzweil).[19] This fantasy led to a celebration of disembodiment and immateriality that resulted in a veritable "flight from the flesh."[20] Such fabricated claims point to disdain and denial of the human body and subjectivity, which is problematic in itself but also quite unproductive for the field of fashion. Moreover, as Hayles reminds us, the glib analogy between the structure of the brain and the computer is fundamentally metaphorical, sustaining a false binary opposition between mind and body.[21] Clarke and Rossini argue that such "vestiges of heroic aspirations ... preserve rather than challenge the Cartesian mind-body split."[22] On the contrary, a critical posthumanism undoes and complexifies the mind-body relationship.

This is why I propose to firmly place posthumanism within the theoretical framework of new materialism. New materialism abides by the notion that things, objects, art, fashion, and people are made of matter, that is to say they are all mixtures of mineral, vegetable, and synthetic materials.[23] The posthuman subject cannot be deprived of her flesh, but needs to be grounded in materiality: s/he is an "embodied and embedded posthuman subject in process."[24] "Embodied" because humans have bodies—and any fashion scholar would add, a "dressed body";[25] "embedded" because we live located in space and time; "in process" because the posthuman subject is in the process of becoming, always within an entanglement of things both human and non-human.

What posthumanism and new materialism share is their endeavor to rethink and undo dualisms.[26] A dualistic or binary mode of thinking is a way of dealing with difference by creating an opposition or dualism out of it, for instance between the human and the non-human, nature and culture, the material and the immaterial, or men and women. Poststructuralist critique showed that such binary oppositions are not neutral but hierarchical: one pole of the binary (e.g. man) is considered superior to the other (e.g. woman). Reversing the order won't change anything, because the underlying binary structure remains intact. Deconstruction meant instead to "destruct, destabilize, displace an opposition" and construct a new meaning while relocating power.[27]

The deconstruction of binary oppositions gets "intensified" in new materialism.[28] Posthuman thought takes it further by arguing that the two terms, such as nature and culture, are always and already mutually involved and messily entangled.[29] In other words, nature-culture is a continuum rather than an absolute opposition, which means that the human–non-human can also be positioned on a continuum. Because the term *nature-culture* is heavily

sexualized, genderized, and racialized, displacement entails the undoing of a number of established binary oppositions.

Gender is particularly meaningful for fashion, as styles of clothing and dressing are historically, perhaps even universally, different for men and women. It is, therefore, no coincidence that with the advent of the second women's movement and the gay liberation movement in the 1960s, the differences between men's and women's clothing started to minimize, undoing the traditional gender binary. The hippie movement endorsed "unisex" clothing in the 1960s; career women adopted a masculine look in the 1980s; and "gender benders" abounded in pop culture in the 1980s and 1990s: from Grace Jones, Annie Lennox, or Madonna to David Bowie, Boy George, Prince, or Michael Jackson. The play with androgyny was on. Gender bending was a product of the fundamentally ambiguous culture of postmodernism that played with the fixed meanings of gender and sexuality. Judith Butler's seminal work on gender performativity (1990) laid the conceptual groundwork to question the very categories of gender and denaturalize the discourse of the human body.[30]

While gender ambiguity is then not a new phenomenon in itself, gender fluidity has become much more normalized in fashion today. Take for example Saskia de Brauw modeling for Yves Saint Laurent's men's campaign in 2012. Or look at Gigi Hadid and Zayn Malik dressed in the same brown suit for the cover photo of *Vogue* (August 2017). While women have adopted elements of male clothing in their daily wear, most notably pants, still very few men have incorporated skirts or dresses in their wardrobes despite the exceptional designs by Jean-Paul Gaultier, Marc Jacobs, or J.W. Anderson. Gender fluidity has also become more visible with the breakthrough of transgender models like Andreja Pejić, Valentina Sampaio, or Anjali Lama to name just a few.

Posthuman fashion can be said to push the boundaries further in blurring not only gender categories, but also transversally mixing them up with categories of the non-human like the animal or the machine. The eccentric designs by Belgian designer Walter van Beirendonck or German designer Bernhard Willhelm (together with Jutta Kraus), for example, have transformed bodily shapes and transgressed codes of decency. Van Beirendonck is known for his explicit sexuality, donning his male models with dangling penises on clothes or with a penis hat. His fascination for non-humans, from animals to extra-terrestrials, led to outrageous designs with masks, plastic prosthetics, or inflatable clothing.[31] Bernhard Willhelm's designs are equally crazy, colorful, and hilarious. This is posthuman fashion because both designers not only challenge gender roles, but also queer the human form, sometimes beyond recognition. In their radical take on body politics, and their fatigue with the "body beautiful" of the fashion world, their anti-fashion questions the power differences based on gender, sexuality, race, and ablebodiedness.[32]

Van Beirendonck's and Willhelm's designs point to the transformative process of becoming enabled by posthuman fashion. By reshaping the human body beyond its finite contours, these designs offer an encounter with otherness, opening up to the alien world of insects, birds, or cyborgs, and multiple sexes and genders. Such encounters suggest "that all bodies possess an inherent capacity for transformation," as Stephen Seely puts it.[33] As such, fashion designs provoke a dynamic process of posthuman becomings.

A posthuman take on sustainability

So far I have shown how a posthuman aesthetic decenters the human by hybridization: blending human-animal and human-machine while queering gender and sexuality. Such a respect for diversity is in effect a political process, as Annamari Vänskä argues: "Posthumanist

critique of fashion is therefore essentially an ethical and a political project: it aims to do justice to the complexity of humanity by decentering the human".[34]

Where posthuman critique and new materialism converge, is in their critical engagement with the contemporary world. There is a strong ethical concern for real-life conditions and the need for creative responses to the current challenges.[35] This ethical passion and political critique makes sense because posthumanism claims that we are entangled with the world. That also makes us, humans, "completely responsible to and for the world and all our relations of becoming with it. We cannot ignore matter (e.g., our planet) as if it is inert, passive, and dead. It is completely alive, becoming with us, whether we destroy or protect it".[36] Donna Haraway, too, pleads in *Staying with the Trouble* for "cultivating response-ability" for a damaged earth.[37] She convincingly argues that deep interconnectedness is the only way to defy human exceptionalism, calling for a "practice of becoming-with others for a habitable, flourishing world".[38] For Haraway, the other always includes non-humans, or what she refers to as "companion species" like dogs or monkeys, but we can also think of bacteria, viruses, spiders, synthetic hormones or polymer fibers.

This kind of posthumanist critique is highly welcome and most necessary considering the urgent issue of sustainability. It is by now well documented that the fashion industry excels in textile waste, pollution, and exploitation of human labor and natural resources, due to over-production and over-consumption.[39] The fashion system is caught in a spin of acceleration, characterized by rapid changes in style, ever-faster cycles of global production and consumption, and ever cheaper products.[40] Scholars in fashion studies have highlighted the urgent need to engage systematically with the social and environmental consequences of the globalized fast-fashion system.[41]

The problems are huge and many solutions are being developed in many different countries in the direction of a circular economy. Solutions range widely in a fast-growing field: from developing alternative yarns and fabrics, for example out of hemp, orange peel, or pineapple skin; to different ways of recycling textiles and clothes; to technological innovations like smart fabrics or solar dresses; to creating new business models towards circularity. Yet, compared to other fields (such as the slow food movement), the development of sustainable fashion has been lagging behind or remains stuck in local, isolated, fragmented, or partial solutions for fashion design and production.

A posthuman perspective may help advance the field of fashion because it takes critically the entanglement of the human and non-human. Sustainable fashion not only pertains to the material production of sustainable fibers, textiles and clothes and the disposal of waste, but also to a capitalist industry grounded in social-economic realities in a global context. As consumerism is at the heart of the fast-fashion system, matters of identity play an important part. The desire for constant change and renewal[42] keeps production and consumption of fashion in an iron grip. Posthumanism brings into focus those several levels within the field of fashion, as a material, but also as a social and cultural practice. The field of fashion thus does not only involve complicated chains of material production and consumption, but also pertains to immaterial issues of body images, subjective identity, social interaction, and cultural values.[43]

Neither the practice of, nor the scholarship on, sustainable fashion has seriously considered the interaction between the human and non-human factors of the fashion system. The close connection between fashion and identity is responsible for over-consumption, which in turn is crucial to the wasteful economy. Recognizing the embedded and embodied dimension of fashion may help acknowledge the agency of consumers, doing justice to their active role of engagement. A posthumanist perspective can bring these practices – materials, objects, bodies and identities, and labor – together, because it departs from a dynamic notion of life in which

human bodies, fibers, fabrics, garments, and technologies are inextricably entangled. Such a perspective helps understand fashion as materially co-produced in an intricate network of interconnected human and non-human actors.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have shown how posthuman fashion highlights new processes of human becoming by stressing the dynamic interaction between human and non-human actors. By proposing a non-anthropocentric view to the field, posthuman theory will help to understand fashion as made up of complex and intensive assemblages where humans, animals and cyborgs interrelate. It is a grounded theory that takes the embodiment and embeddedness of dressed bodies into account. Posthumanism is in a strong position to bridge practice and theory, because it takes personal issues of identity together with wider matters of social relations and ecological sustainability. By revealing the deep interconnectedness of those aspects, a posthumanist perspective may give direction to the desired change and transformation towards sustainable fashion.

Notes

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