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The Derridean (Un)hostility of Fashion

Thinking Fashion Through Deconstruction

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Abstract

"There is, to all appearances, a philosophic hostility to fashionable dress" – writes Karen Hanson in "Dressing Down Dressing Up: The Philosophic Fear of Fashion". Hanson's study identifies several points – from the ever-changing nature of fashion to the ethicality of the fashion industry – from which philosophy has historically criticized and continues to criticize fashion as a social phenomenon, industry, and art form. In this sense, deconstruction indicates new critical design practice and (self-)critique of the fashion industry. The notion of "hostility" in the vocabulary of deconstruction and psychoanalysis is identical to the event of resistance. It is thus a genuinely defining feature. At the same time, its self-positioning consists of the creation and reception opened up by the object. Its developers (Freud, Derrida, de Man) recognized that in this "counter-feeling," or resistance, a new layer of interpretation and experience, previously only felt but not thought of, operates. Fashion's deconstructive processes exist in this resistance. There have been many attempts to link fashion research and the designers' conception of design to deconstruction. As Flavia Loscialpo already puts it this way: "Deconstruction fashion, which is always already in-deconstruction itself, involves, in fact, a thorough consideration of fashion's debt to its own history, to critical thought, to temporality and the modern condition." In my paper, I will make some arguments from the side of deconstruction concerning fashion in general, but also try to describe the nature of a postmodern "fashion process" (including the design thinking, the materiality of clothing or textiles, and even the theoretical perception of fashion). Through the writings of Derrida and Freud, I examine the critical fashion practices of Martin Margiela.

Keywords

Deconstruction, hostility, fashion theory, deconstruction fashion, Maison Martin Margiela, Derrida

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"There is, to all appearances, a philosophical hostility to fashionable dress" (Hanson 1990, 107) – writes Karen Hanson in "Dressing Down Dressing Up – The Philosophic Fear of Fashion". From the ever-changing nature of fashion to the ethicality of the fashion industry, Hanson's paper identifies several points from which philosophy has historically criticized and continues to criticize fashion as a social phenomenon, industry, and art form. In this paper, I will make arguments about fashion in general from the point of view of deconstruction and describe the nature of the radical postmodern "fashion process" (including the designer's deconstructive thinking, the deconstructive materiality of clothing or textiles, and even the theoretical perception of fashion). In this sense, deconstruction indicates the specific performative character of the fashion process, a new critical design practice, and a (self-)critique of the fashion industry. Therefore, the deconstructive direction of fashion theory and fashion design conceives of the above hostility as an integral and performative essence of the contemporary fashion process. The notion of "hostility" in the vocabulary of deconstruction and psychoanalysis is identical to the event of resistance. It is thus a truly defining feature of both ways of thinking, the recognition of the "object" and the series of events, processes, and at the same time, its self-positioning, consisting of the creation and reception opened up by the object. Its theorists (Sigmund Freud, Jacques Derrida, Paul de Man) recognized that in this "hostility", or resistance, a new layer of interpretation and experience, previously felt but not formulated, operates. The existence and deconstructive process in fashion consist of analyzing and understanding this resistance.

According to Freud's definition of resistance, it is a reaction that protects against access to, and the manifestation of, the unconscious. This is exactly what can be observed in all components of the fashion process: in the fashion object, in the activity of the fashion designer, and the reactions of the receiver/viewer. Deconstruction has shown that all these acts take place in the context of the operation of resistance, as negative actions and negative performative acts. The psychoanalyst is not primarily interested in the breaking of resistance (and the constative grasping of "truth") but in analyzing the internal nature of resistance so that the act of resistance is a valuable message, a characteristic articulation of the world of the unconscious. For meaning does not reside in the unconscious but is projected in the stories and images – essentially rhetorical in nature – built upon it and reflected back from it. Resistance is a kind of performative speculum, a reflection, and its existence cannot

be judged objectively, since resistance never defines itself as resistance but as a self-validated system of relations, as truth.

In November 1991, Derrida presented his paper, later entitled "Resistances" (in the volume titled *Resistances of Psychoanalysis*), at a conference on *The Notion of Analysis*. In it, he is concerned not with Freud's notion of resistance, but with how Freud himself, in the *Irma dream*, operates his analytic activity as a kind of resistance. The essence of Freud's gesture is that he translates his own dream, the *Irma dream*. He states that the dream in question can be deciphered and serves to fulfill a particular desire. The deconstructive, resistance-encased processes of fashion contain a political character and its deconstruction.

1. Deconstruction as a thought experiment on fashion

There have been many attempts to link fashion research and designers' ideas about design to deconstruction as a way of thinking. As Elisabeth Wilson points out, "deconstruction fashion (or '*mode destroy*' as it was sometimes called), [is] a more intellectual approach, which literally unpicked fashion, exposing its operations, its relation to the body, and at the same time to the structures and discourses of fashion." (Wilson 1985, 250) Flavia Loscialpo concludes: "Deconstruction fashion, which is always already in-deconstruction itself, involves, in fact, a thorough consideration of fashion's debt to its own history, to critical thought, to temporality and the modern condition." (Loscialpo 2011, 17)

The role of deconstruction is to question the authoritarian foundations on which these structures are based and to open up new possibilities in signification and representation. It is not a methodology, nor a form of analysis, nor even a critique in the traditional sense:

> Deconstruction takes place, it is an event that does not await the deliberation, consciousness, or organization of a subject, or even of modernity. It deconstructs itself. It can be deconstructed. [Ça se deconstruit.] The "it" [ça] is not here an impersonal thing that is opposed to some egological subjectivity. It is in deconstruction (the Littré says, "to deconstruct itself [se deconstruire]... to lose its construction"). (Derrida 1988, 4)

Deconstruction is, therefore, rather an activity, a close reading of the text (the garment, the fashion) that shows that the text is not a single whole, and that it may always have several interpretations, which very often contradict each other.

Deconstructive reading (close reading) is manifested in the questioning and rethinking of contradictory concepts such as subject-object, nature-culture, presence-absence, and inside-outside, all of which are elements of a metaphysical hierarchy at the conceptual level.

The ideas conveyed by deconstruction have had a major impact on literature, architecture, new media, film theory, and the practical and theoretical fields of fashion design. Fashion theorist Flavia Loscialpo's "Fashion and Philosophical Deconstruction: A Fashion in-Deconstruction" also argues that Derrida's influence on the aforementioned fields and aesthetics is significant. She cites *The Truth in Painting* (1981), *Memoires of the Blind* (1990) and *La connaissance des textes* (2001) as Derrida's most significant texts in terms of fashion. Over the decades, then, a fruitful dialogue has been established between deconstruction and the many different fields of art.

2. Deconstructive fashion: reinterpreting material and structure

In *Thinking Through Fashion: A Guide to Key Theorists* (2019, edited by Agnés Rocamora and Anneke Smelik), fashion theorists explore possible interfaces between philosophy and fashion theory. Alison Gill's essay, after introducing the main terms of Jacques Derrida's *Of Grammatology* and *Positions* as an introduction, goes on to reflect on Maison Martin Margiela's creative work from the perspective of the possible tools of deconstruction, most notably authorship, textuality, signature, temporality, and the trace. She notes that although Derrida never wrote about the phenomenon of fashion in general, there is a possible link to the subject in *Positions:*

> Whether in the order of spoken or written discourse, no element can function as a sign without referring to another element which itself is not simply present. This interweaving results in each "element" – phoneme or grapheme – being constituted on the basis of the trace within it of the other elements of the chain or system. This interweaving, this textile, is the text produced only in the transformation of another text. Nothing, neither among the elements nor within the system, is anywhere ever simply present or absent. There are only, everywhere, differences and traces of traces. (Derrida 1982, 26)

Drawing on Derrida, Sawchuk starts her argument about fashion from the following:

> The fashioned body is an embodied subjectivity, constituted in the rich weave of social, historical and cultural inscriptions. At any one time, or historical

> juncture, the fashioned body is potentially located in multiple discourses on health, beauty, morality, sexuality, the nation, and the economy, to name some of the possibilities. (Sawchuk 2007, 478)

It should be noted that the ephemeral nature of fashion, which is also a cornerstone of Sawchuk's argument, was already prominent in the fashion philosophy of Barbara Vinken, who referred to fashion as "the realm of impermanence." (Vinken 2005) In Vinken's sense, fashion's time is not eternity, but the moment.

However, in the Resistance lecture, there is a line of thought by Derrida that any fashion scholar or philosopher has yet to refer to date. Derrida returns to Freud's idea of the topos of the "navel." Derrida (following Freud) understands the body as a tissue, a texture, defined primarily as a knot, a tangle:

> What forever exceeds the analysis of the dream is indeed a knot that cannot be untied, a thread that, even if it is cut, like an umbilical cord, nevertheless remains forever knotted, right on the body, at the place of the navel. (Derrida 1998, 11)

According to Derrida, the navel is also a kind of remnant (a trace, a resistance) that resists. It is resistance as such, in the body and in the person. Derrida's next (post-Freudian) step in understanding this complex of tissue, web, body is to recall that towards the end of *The Interpretation of Dreams* we encounter again the notions of the navel, the thread and the texture:

> There is often a passage in even the most thoroughly interpreted dream which has to be left obscure; this is because we become aware during the work of interpretation that at the point there is a tangle of dream-thoughts which cannot be unravelled and which moreover adds nothing to our knowledge of the content of the dream. This is the dream's navel, the spot where it reaches down into the unknown. [Cf. p. 135 n.] The dream-thoughts to which we are led by interpretation cannot, from the nature of things, have any definite endings; they are bound to branch out in every direction into the intricate network of our world of thought. It is at some point where this meshwork is particularly close that the dream-wish grows up, like a mushroom out of its mycelium. (Freud 1995, 528)

This thread, this tissue of unanalysable, unresolvable resistance, is the navel of the dream, which is not mapped by the interpretation of the dream, by the act of analysis, of reading, but is reacted to through the articulation of the dream desire as meaning.

The myriad design practices and experimental forms of deconstructive fashion can be linked to the Derridian-Freudian textual history, as when the fashion object, the garment, does not become part of the performance in its perfectly executed appearance, but on the contrary becomes a means of performative resistance against the constative presentation. Hussein Chalayan has created a dress elevated into a history of *abjection*. For the 1994 Cartesia fashion show, he made a special dress that he had previously buried and sprinkled with iron dust. After digging it up, he felt the dress took on a life of its own. It became part of the archaeology of the future. Rotting in the ground, the dress thus escapes from its own fashion-industrial truth and is placed in a performative event. The dress is no longer seen as a thing-like garment but becomes body-like; with time and age, it enters into negative performativity. It shows what people resist: it refers to death and passing. Bacteria impose organic processes on it.

3. Deconstructive fashion, post-fashion, anti-fashion

The year 1981 is considered a turning point in fashion history, as it was the year when Yamamoto and Kawakubo presented for the first time their own rather puritanical collection at Paris Fashion Week, at several points going against the fashion industry's then-classic fashion products. The designers redefined structure and the notions of quality associated with fashion products. These two collections encouraged the fashion press to reflect on the glamour surrounding fashion products. Loscialpo writes of this era:

> "Deconstructivist" designers questioned the traditional understanding of the invisible and the just unseen, thus subverting the parameters determining what is high and low in fashion. The designers seemed to make a powerful statement of resistance. At first, the austere, demure, often second hand look of their creations induced some journalists to describe it as "post-punk," or "grunge." (Loscialpo 2011, 16)

Almost a decade later, in July 1993, an article on "deconstructivist fashion" appeared in the *New York Times*, to clarify the new movement's origins and orientation. The press began to pay more attention to the work of Rei Kawakubo and Yohji Yamamoto. In an essay published in the journal *Fashion Theory* in 1998, Alison Gill argues:

> The term: "deconstruction fashion" used to describe garments on a runway that are "unfinished," "coming apart," "recycled," "transparent" or "grunge." ... As a literal *dismantling* of clothes and embodiment of aestheticized *non-functionality*, that deconstruction "in fashion" amounts to an anti-fashion statement (a wilful avant-garde desire to destroy "Fashion") or an expression of nihilism (i.e., absence of belief). It would be worthwhile to consider the parallels this style has with the influential French style of philosophical thought, deconstruction, associated with the writings of Jacques Derrida, and in doing so, to re-visit its announcement in fashion and other design fields where the term deconstruction circulates. (Gill 1998, 25-26)

Gill therefore emphasises that the fashion press reduces deconstructive fashion and interprets it solely in the context of the material. It ignores the criticism of the fashion industry that lies behind it and is inherently ever-present. In a sense, however, deconstructive fashion is often associated with the term "anti-fashion". In 1993, even the curatorial duo Harold Koda and Richard Martin described deconstructive fashion as "the new trend of the 1990s." (Koda – Martin 1993)

Most fashion history writings consider Rei Kawakubo's 1978 collection for *Commes des Garçons* as an essential reference point in the context and perspective of deconstructive fashion. Her clothes were simple (monochrome), timeless, and flawed looking. The knitted dresses were perforated, the fabric distorted and ragged, the shapes non-conformist and they were a complete counterpoint to the trendy, glittery and sexually radiant dresses of the 1980s. Martin Margiela also rebelled against the creativity of the fashion industry, reworking old clothes and their most varied fabrics for his 1989 Paris fashion show. It was not only the clothes that were "unconventional" in the traditional sense, but also the mannequins and the catwalk space. The faces of her models were deliberately pale.

The terms "anti-fashion," "post-fashion," or "postmodern fashion" are often applied to deconstructivist fashion in fashion history writings. Deconstructive design is frequently associated with the "death of fashion," and the term "la mode Destroy" is also used. Barbara Vinken dates the emergence of post-fashion to the 1980s: "Fashion gains a new lease of life. This is what I would like to refer to as postfashion." (Vinken 2005, 5) She continues:

> The Paris show of Comme des Garçons, in 1981, spectacularly marked the end of one era ... it deconstructs modernity and, in the end, leaves it behind. If, for a hundred years, fashion has invented and reinvented "woman," postfashion

> has begun to deconstruct this "woman." Where fashion used to disguise its art, it now exhibits its artificiality. In the sign of the old, the used, it prescribes itself an aesthetic of poverty and ugliness, of sentimentality and out-modedness, of kitsch and bad taste, in which elements of the petit bourgeois enter into competition with the outsiders of society. (Vinken 2005, 35-36)

4. Deconstructive fashion as a self-critique of the fashion industry

In her comprehensive study, Alison Gill notes that, apart from Olivier Zahm's responses, many scholars have assumed that deconstructive fashion as a movement is nothing more than another example of avant-gardism and the avant-garde's desire to destroy. (Gill 1998, 32) To support Zahm's argument that the linking of dressing and deconstruction is about more than a desire to destroy functionality, Gill develops four possible interpretations of deconstructive fashion from the concepts of "Anti-Fashion," "Recession Zeitgeist," "Eco-Fashion," and "Theoretical Dress." Gill also suggests that even deconstructive fashion could easily find a place in the discourse of Anti-Fashion, since, like the history of Anti-Fashion, deconstructive fashion is characterised by a rejection of high fashion by designers who expect couture to have no connection with "street wear" or "night club style." (Gill 1998, 32) Anti-fashion/anti-design (such as Westwood, Gaultier, etc.) is also closely linked to political resistance, which is not characteristic of deconstructive fashion to this extent. In Gill's interpretation, the question of whether or not deconstructive fashion is "Anti-Fashion" is closely related to whether or not the "fashion created by the designer takes up the oppositional terms of a negative critique, as the term anti-fashion clearly signifies, with the additional tones of playfulness, provocation, and parody frequently used." (Gill 1998, 33) Fashion and literary theorist Jolán Orbán also points out that "Anti-Fashion is a performative self-contradiction, as Rei Kawakubo or Martin Margiela question fashion through the means of fashion, creating a fashion that is fashionable." (Orbán 2020) Flavia Loscialpo makes the same argument:

> When, in the early 1980s, a new generation of independent thinking designers made its appearance on the fashion scenario, it seemed to incarnate a sort of "distress" in comparison to the fashion of the times. Influenced by the minimalism of their own art and culture, designers Rei Kawakubo, Yohji Yamamoto, Issey Miyake and, later in the decade, the Belgian Martin Margiela

> pioneered what can legitimately be considered a fashion revolution. By the practicing of deconstructions, such designers have disinterred the mechanics of the dress structure and, with them, the mechanisms of fascinations that haunt fashion. The disruptive force of their works resided not only in their undoing the structure of a specific garment, in renouncing to finish, in working through subtractions or displacements, but also, and above all, in rethinking the function and the meaning of the garment itself. With this, they inaugurated a fertile reflection questioning the relationship between the body and the garment, as well as the concept of "body" itself. (Loscialpo 2011, 13)

5. Presence and absence: the fashion-trace

The trace follows from the Derridean term *différance*, which proclaims the "happening" of the text and the hidden, writing-level distributive production of differences in meaning. For Derrida, the trace is the difference, the disappeared origin of the *différance*. Alison Gill embeds the Derridean notion of trace in the discourse of sewing and tailoring in the practice of fashion design. In this sense, a trace would be what the designer's hand applies to the textile with the dressmaker's pencil, which refers directly to the working process and to traditional dressmaking techniques. Gill also notes that in the case of postmodern fashion, these traces are "on the outside of deconstructed garments: one can make out lining, seams, darts, shoulder pads, white basting thread, patterns. These traces of the labour would normally be effaced or magically concealed in a finished product, until exposed seams, amongst other elements, changed the game." (Gill 2016, 258)

As Derrida puts it: the trace is the effaced origin of difference, "the opening of ... the enigmatic relationship of the living to its other and of an inside to an outside." (Derrida 1976, 70) Alison Gill argues through Derrida's text:

> The related notion of the "seam" in garment construction is highly suggestive as a productive third term, an undecidable, that has the potential to give further insight. In simple terms, the seam is a trace of garment production that cannot be fully concealed: more interestingly, it functions as a hinge, interface, and borderline between two pieces. It is both essential to structure and overall garment shape, and it resides on the surface and below. The seam is an interface holding the inside and the outside, depth and surface together, that can take us to both sides when "double-thought." (Gill 2016, 258)

Gill's examples are Rei Kawakubo and Yohji Yamamoto. Taking Derrida's quote above as a starting point, the trace also refers to historical antecedence, acting as a palimpsest. It is that the trace triggers "interplay between presence and absence, including elements of fashion history and the signature motifs of past designers, that are neither fully absent nor present ... which operate as palimpsest entails an effacement of the trace of fashion history." (Gill 2016, 259) The fashion experiment can find a way to make traces of the past transparently visible. Alison Gill seeks to illustrate this through the work of Martin Margiela, who in the 1990s was already rejecting the tabula rasa nature of the fashion product and attempting an "analysis of the construction" (Gill 2016, 264).

6. Fashion as Zeitgeist

Fashion, art, and consumer culture are all concepts that deconstructive fashion designers have critiqued, questioning their relation to time. As Barbara Vinken argues, fashion is nothing more than the *Zeitgeist*, an expression of the cultural reflection of the times. At the same time, the fashion industry is permeated by a specific *Zeitgeist*, which is nothing other than cyclicality: it must constantly change and reinvent itself from season to season. Deconstructive designers are questioning the need for this, and its direction. This constant dialogue with the past allows Yamamoto, Kawakubo, Margiela, and others to ensure that deconstructive fashion is not dictated by any particular fashion trend provoked by consumer culture and capitalism. Deconstructive fashion "does not simply aim at replacing the old fashion parameters it tries to dismantle with new ones. What it does, in fact, is working for disclosing and showing 'other' possibilities." (Loscialpo 2011, 20)

In this sense, deconstructive fashion can be understood as a critique of formalism, a response to its crisis. However, in Alison Gill's interpretation, deconstructive fashion is also linked to the phenomenon of "eco-fashion." While the spirit of the times in which Margiela created the collections mentioned above was not particularly affected by the issue of sustainability (although the potential problem of sustainability was already a theme in some professional circles), Margiela was already concerned with these issues, which in turn are now also defining the spirit of our times. Margiela seems to have "predicted" what the cloak of the *Zeitgeist* of the next age might conceal. "Deconstruction fashion seems then to dwell in a place that is neither inside nor outside the fashion scenario, but stands always already on edge or, in Derridean words, '*au bord*.'" (Loscialpo 2011, 22)

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