

Towards the Androgynous Ideal: Fashion and Sexual Identity

Rumo ao ideal andrógino: moda e identidade sexual

Frédéric Monneyron¹

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5582-4320>

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Against all odds – in any case against all we were taught –, fashion appears, as I have tried to make it clear elsewhere, as a very good tool for conducting sociological survey, as well as a faithful reflection of the relations between the Western world and the other civilizations on the one hand and of the way the Western world relates to time and death on the other hand. Fashion images are portrayal of deep societal movements, but they can also initiate social changes. They are very important, indeed, in the contemporary redefinition of the sexual identities, as well as in the new representations of sexuality. In these fields I should even say that the part they play is a fundamental one. They have both sociological and psychological dimensions, which have seldom been closely studied, if, actually, they have been studied at all.

There is no doubt that the most obvious and visible characteristics of the thirty last years in fashion is the reconsideration of what we may call the sexual dimorphism of the Western way of dressing. This way of dressing which is based on the « opened system » for women and the « closed system » for men, was born in the Middle Ages and reinforced in the nineteenth century where austerity was the rule for men, while only women had the right to wear colour and to indulge in some fantasy.

¹ Frédéric Monneyron received his Doctorat d'Etat en Science Politique from the University of Montpellier I in 1984 and his Doctorat d'Etat en Lettres et Sciences Humaines from the University of Paris IV-Sorbonne in 1986. He is a full Professor in comparative and general literature at the University of Perpignan-Via Domitia where he is also the head of the M.B.A "Fashion industries and luxury goods" in Paris. He also teaches sociology of fashion at the University of Geneva and at the University of Barcelona and he is an expert to the European Commission in Brussels. His research focuses on sexuality, gender relations, clothes and fashion on the one hand and on the idea of nation and race, the relationships between Europe and the USA on the other hand. He is the author of around thirty books translated in major languages among which: *La Frivolité essentielle. Du vêtement et de la mode* (PUF, Perspectives critiques, 2001), *La Sociologie de la mode* (PUF, 2006), *La Photographie de mode. Un art souverain* (PUF 2010) and *L'Imaginaire du luxe* (Imago, 2015). E-mail: frederickmonneyron@gmail.com.

At the end of the Sixties, the unisex fashion was definitely much more an ideal to reach than a concrete reality. And as a conclusion to a collective work, *Men and Women: Dressing the part*, Claudia Bush Kidwell, puts it quite clearly: « No real androgynous clothes have ever existed for adults, men and women » (Kidwell, 1989, p. 158). But even if that statement is true, it is also the case that the clothing of men and women clothes is much more similar today than it used to be. But even if their wardrobes resemble each other, one may say that the reason lies in the freedom of women to borrow many styles previously limited to men. Some anticipate that in a very near future, the « closed system » will dominate for both sexes, just as in Antiquity the « opened system » was the only system for men and women. But this is quite debatable. There is little doubt that it is quite difficult to find clothes once belonging to the men's wardrobe which do not belong today to the women's wardrobe (even some outwear garments once regarded as typically masculine such as the tie or the bow tie can be seen on women), but the opposite is not as rare as we may think. There have been some attempts, to be sure very few, to introduce some « open » styles in men's wardrobes: mainly some Eastern-like clothes such as djellabas in the Sixties or Jacques Esterel's masculine dresses in 1970, and, of course, more recently, the Jean-Paul Gaultier's skirt. But the « open system » is very far from having been adopted by men. On the other hand, many elements once reserved to women's clothes can be seen in men's clothing. Such elements include colors, fabrics, forms and accessories. Thus, colors limited to women's garments in the nineteenth century can be seen on men's shirts and may even extend to trousers and jackets. The latter, for example, are no longer just black, gray, or dark blue as in the bourgeois societies of the nineteenth century. The fabrics (silk or satin for instance) or the forms which were those of women's clothes have also become those of men's clothes. As for jewels, once reserved exclusively to women, they too began to be worn on men's neck and wrists with the advent of the hippy movement. We may even interpret the disappearance of the tie, man's best identification, as a step towards femininity. That may not have been obvious with the Pierre Cardin's Mao collar jacket, but in showing man's neck and torso or in playing on the sensuousness of an open collar, Gianni Versace (1997) had a model: the feminine décolleté, as he said in his book, *Men without ties*.

Anyway, the growing similarities between men's and women's clothes are not without consequences. As the clothing of men and women becomes more similar, differences between masculine and feminine roles narrow as well. The annexation by women of men's clothes determines the annexation of roles once reserved to men. It has been said that the dress or the skirt were the outfit which define the place of women in society and which kept her away from any other activity but motherhood. Consequently, and quite logically, pants for women should free them both physically and psychologically from all of the restraints, so that they could live, to quote a well-known French sociologist, « without keeping the knees close to each other » and get involved in activities which were refused to her before: commercial activities, sport, and so on. But beyond social roles, strictly speaking, the change in clothes also modified the feminine identity in general.

If we consider that the feminine identity is a question of coherence between the way a woman sees herself (self-perception), and the way she appears to others (representation and the way others show her as a woman), we can understand the fundamental role that clothes play in this building up of an identity, for clothes stand on the borderline between interiority and exteriority (Heinich, 1996, p. 333).

Therefore, some will say that clothes are a feminine more than a masculine question, as illustrates, for instance, quite well how difficult it is for a woman to make up her mind between different clothes in any circumstance. And one will say too that this feminine dimension of clothes is the very proof of a more particular sensitivity to identity on the woman's side than on the man's side. It may be. But if the identity function of clothes is less important and dramatic for men than for women, it does not mean that this function does not exist for men as well. And there is no doubt that fashion, for at least the last thirty years, has brought about changes in masculine identity as well as in feminine identity (masculine identity which is definitely far more fluid than is commonly thought²) or at least has revealed some previously unacknowledged characteristics of masculine identity.

If clothing styles suggest a reconsideration of sexual roles such as the entry of women in what was identified as men's fields and, to an extent, the insertion in the masculine universe of feminine values, the sexual identities which are defined by clothes are nevertheless very far from aiming at androgyny. To the contrary, the situation is far more complicated than Yves Saint Laurent thought it was when, in the Seventies, he pointed out: « I am interested in ambiguity; that is life because men get dressed as women and women as men. They all have the same clothes today ».

But let us go a little bit further on.

What is revealed at first through the feminization of men's clothes is the feminine essence of a certain way of being a man, while the masculinization of women's clothes is very often but another way to be feminine.

What is revealed in the men's use of some elements from the women's clothes is the active principle of masculine seduction. As I have pointed out in one of my most well-known book (Monneyron, 1997), to seduce on a man's terms, is clearly to engage in feminine strategies; that is to say, every technique leading to a masculine seduction involves some feminine elements. In the eighteenth century, it is mainly in the tactics of seduction of such great seducers as Lovelace, Valmont or Casanova that we can read about this effemination. But, if in the nineteenth century, the dandy proved to be a seductive figure, that is because he has incorporated in his own body by the means of the clothes, or by the care he has for his own appearance, something of the feminine essence. And, again, in the Sixties and Seventies what is revealed through the feminization of man's clothes with even more dramatically and, at least, on a larger social scale is the feminine dimension that colors masculine seduction is made of. Such a dimension was well illustrated by the photograph of Jim Morrison arrayed in Gloria Stavers' furs in 1969, or by Mick Jagger in his party dress in the Hyde Park concert, in 1969, or by actors such as Terence Stamp and Helmut Berger portrayed in unisex tunics for Yves Saint Laurent. Consequently, man is more and more attracted in the field of beauty

² See Amigorena & Monneyron (1998).

and is transformed from being a subject of desire to becoming an object of desire – to the point that Jean-Paul Gaultier viewed the new millennium as the era of the male as sex-object. This effeminate man is indeed an object of the heterosexual desire as a seductive figure for women, but he is also an object of homosexual desire, for the Western representations have made of effeminization, roughly at the end of the nineteenth century, a sign of male homosexuality. Consequently, the new masculine identity which was just being created as a result of changes in menswear in the Sixties and Seventies is an identity in which bisexuality appears as a normal form of sexuality. David Bowie was quite illustrative of this development. At the beginning of the Seventies, he borrowed from women's clothes and accessories and was photographed in woman's dress for one of his records. And his next step was a declaration of his bisexuality.

In 1969, Yves Saint Laurent used to say: « I want to find for women an equivalent uniform to a man's suit ». We all know that this uniform has been the skirt suit, already invented by Coco Chanel but Yves Saint Laurent made it even more popular, to such a point that in the early Eighties one says a « Saint Laurent » instead of to a « skirt suit ». This woman's outfit, made out of the dry materials used for men's suits, has the same functions as the latter. But it is not a loss of femininity. It is even to most of the people, the most feminine outwear you can ever imagine, even more when it has as a complement a blouse, the Yves Saint Laurent « see-through –blouse » or any other kind of blouse. However, the skirt suit is far from defining a masculine gender or even a masculine-feminine gender between which the executive woman would hesitate, and she needs not to wear additional silk stockings to keep her femininity alive, for it is pure femininity in itself, and it may be the more perfect sign of femininity. In opposition to this skirt suit, the pantsuit or the tuxedo clearly belong to the « closed system » of the men's clothes. But worn by women such attire suggests absolute femininity. Yves Saint Laurent, who even more than the skirt suit, initiated the tux and the pants suit for women at the end of the Sixties pointed out that « pants are not a sign of equality but another charm for women; a woman in a pants suit is very far from being masculine ». With the passing of time, this super-femininity of the woman's body in masculine's clothes has become quite obvious. The femininity of Giorgio Armani's masculine-feminine suit has been praised throughout the Western world in advertisement campaigns and movies. And this suit has become the common outwear for the executive women of the Eighties and the Nineties.

As we see, what we may interpret as a trend towards androgyny could not, actually, get rid of the physical sexes. To a certain extent, we could even say that the sexes do use to their own benefit this trend towards androgyny. But the feminization of the men's clothes and the masculinization of women's clothes are not the only definitions of masculine and feminine identities.

For two decades or so, clothes have defined a new representation and, accordingly, a new social identity of male homosexuality. Homosexuality was regarded since the end of the nineteenth century as an inversion (that was even the medical term used at the time), and the physical feminization of the clothes was its main representation of it. Today this representation is still valid but another and quite opposite representation has developed. Nowadays homosexuality is also proclaimed by styles of clothing that have a very manly connotation. Leather clothes which identified some decades ago the gays from San Francisco or from any

other homosexual community in the States or in Europe and which, once reconsidered by designers such as Gianni Versace define nowadays the homosexual universe as a universe of pure manhood, with no feminine references at all. In recent years a similar fashion can be found in the Marais, the homosexual area in Paris which is fond of military clothes: battle-dress pants and accessories, revealing tee-shirts and tight sleeveless turtleneck sweater etc. If this « homosexual » fashion, once it has been reworked by designers, was quite a success among a very large range of heterosexual buyers, even more important, it has changed the image of the homosexual, no longer as an image of a third sex but as the image of the pure male.

Female identity is definitely firmer than man identity and, if some rather shallow books have tried to assert the opposite, a sociological approach of clothes makes it quite clear. Indeed, the fashion images are very often traditional images of women. They come from the old myths and are re-adapted to the conditions of our modernity or post-modernity. They define a woman identity little altered by social changes. They are always idealized or derogatory images of woman, coming from very different periods.

Let us begin with the Sixties. Except for trousers which allow women to assume the social roles of men, without, as we have seen, questioning a woman identity, the main outwear of the Sixties is the miniskirt. And no doubt that the miniskirt offers two different images of the woman: an image of purity and innocence and an image of sexuality. Indeed, the miniskirt is at first the transposition on adult women of children's clothes and, consequently, it transfers on women the characteristics of childhood: purity, innocence, and even virginity. But this angel-like vision does not last long. As the miniskirt plays with the veiled-unveiled scheme which is according to some psychoanalysts the measure of man's desire, the woman who wears it is sexually attractive and soon a temptress, the one who dominates men by the means of sexuality, and even approximates the role of a prostitute. As an outer garment, the miniskirt has indeed changed. The first miniskirts to be seen in André Courrèges' collection were actually mini-dresses (not so mini by the way) worn with socks or with small sock-like boots, and, accordingly, they resembled baby-dolls style, while, later on, miniskirts were shorter and closer to the body, far more suggestive, and once emancipated from the children's outwear they became the garments of an emancipated woman, self-assured and very conscious of her sex-appeal.

The fashion of the Seventies also proposes these two images of women, not in a succession this time but rather in a juxtaposition. In the early Seventies, a longer skirt comes back, and with it may be not the image of an asexual or virginal woman but at least an image of a more respectable woman. Actually it could be as well a provocative image, when the long skirt is opened up high on the thighs – or even to the waist as in an evening dress by Yves Saint Laurent in 1970. The same thing is true with respect to the ethnic style of the early Seventies initiated by Kenzo which soon appeared in public. While proposing a very natural and candid image of woman, the Indian ponchos, the Afghan jackets, the Romanian blouses, later on the « retro » skirts and blouses propose also the image of a seductive woman, for all these clothes suggested a total freedom, a freedom in the dress as well as in one's body. Yves Saint Laurent, thinking of the Seventies, said in 1986: « Women, at this time, had a

very special seduction (...) They had never been, in the movies, in the photographs, so attractive. Because they looked free and happy. Maybe because they were waiting for marvellous things to come and there were lights in their eyes. All that made them clack their high heels on the sidewalks and, joyfully, they rediscovered silk, colors, the pleasure to get dressed, the pleasure of seduction. They did not care of fashion. Nor did I ».

The fashion of the Eighties built up still another image of woman, a woman who is an incarnation of sexuality and who is quite conscious how attractive she is to men. This image was in process at the end of the Seventies in Yves Saint Laurent Russian and Chinese collections in which women are cruel goddesses, femmes fatales, or girls from the harem, while stockings and high heels may be seen in the streets again. Thierry Mugler, drawing inspiration from comic-strips, science-fiction, Hollywood movies of the Forties and Fifties played an important part in this building up of this image of woman. His fashion portrays a dominant and dangerous female, and we may consider that, thus, he expresses some masculine fears in regards of the even more visible position women enjoy in social and economic life. If the skirt suit, blending feminine seduction with masculine functionality is somewhat ambiguous, Thierry Mugler intensified it. He proposes, indeed, with his skirt suits, most particularly his « tailleurs trotteurs », very structured, with wide padded shoulders and narrow skirts the image of a woman who is both very attractive and very sure of herself. As a commentator pointed out: « Spacegirl or rodeogirl, kolkogirl or Vampirella, Blue Angel, Lady Mugler is always a kind of Gradiva who reads Freud, comic-strips and *Dangerous Liaisons* ».

These femme fatale images will still be present in the fashion of the early nineties, as in collections by Alaïa and Versace and even in some Christian Lacroix's collections. But in this last decade the feminine identity has become very elusive; there is no dominant woman's images. *Vogue*, at least in the French edition, has renounced any kind of quintessence and just enumerates the different options: mini, long, masculine-feminine, leather, large, colored, black etc. It is a very good indication that there is no dominant feminine image which the women could identify with. At best, some traditional or new woman roles, and the identities that come from them, are put side by side such as in *Vogue*, September 1998. In this issue you can find the traditional « femme-maîtresse (woman as mistress) », very sexy, in leather, short skirt, high heels to whom are opposed two women far less sexy, almost asexual: the « maîtresse-femme (woman as master) » who is « triumphant in the men's world thanks to her mind and intelligence » and who wears clothes such as « a coat-dress in gabardine but doubled with chiffon, or « la femme égale de l'homme (the equal-to-man woman) » who hesitates between skirt suit and pants suit, between seduction with lace and silk or business with classical shirt.

Fashion images are quite essential in the expression of feminine and masculine identities but also in the building up and in the definition and redefinition of these identities. However, that is not their only function. They also give us a very good picture of the relation to sexuality at one historical period and, consequently, they may help to understand this period. We can read in clothes our aspirations as well as our fears related to sexuality. Clothes express, says Jean-Paul Gaultier and he is right in saying it, « the importance of sexuality in our life ». Therefore, the history of fashion is the history of our relation to sexuality.

Even if, as I pointed it out in my book on seduction, seduction and sexuality are two different worlds which are governed by different laws, it is true at least that the sexual experience is linked to the ability to seduce. And in our desires to seduce, there is little doubt that clothes play a very important part, for they appear as being a help to seduction. Consequently, clothes are very reliable means to know how one sees and lives one's sexuality.

« The word seduction is taking over on the word elegance. That is a way of living rather than a way of getting dressed », Yves Saint Laurent said in the late Sixties. This shift from a codified elegance with its rules and social restraints to a freer seduction which only obeys to the mysterious laws of desire is quite significant. As the British fashion journalist Catherine Storr puts it, this shift anticipated women liberation at the clothing level and, accordingly, helped them to have a freer sexuality. Indeed, the Sixties fashion and the Seventies fashion as well determined a way of living and at first a freer and more spontaneous way of living one's sexuality. The fashion of these two decades have multiplied, mainly for women, the possibilities of choice between different kind of clothes, and this is already an affirmation of freedom and, symbolically, to be opened to all experiences. But, most of all, they are the ultimate step of a very important change which began fifty years ago.

During the nineteenth century, the woman body was hidden under layers of dresses, and from the twenties began an important change that showed more and more nudity and the natural forms of the body, so that feminine attractiveness was no more linked to modesty. No doubt that this change was accelerated in the Sixties. Some very important inventions such as the miniskirt and the see-through-clothes on the one hand and the jeans on the other hand were a great revolution. And this revolution in clothes means also a revolution in ethics. No doubt that a body which exhibited itself after having been hidden develops a new relation to sexuality, a relation to a sexuality which is seen now as an affirmation of life. You know that these inventions proved to be scandalous to some people and that for other, on the contrary, they were seen as the true symbols of revolt: for instance, the Yves Saint Laurent see-through-blouses were scandalous to America, while some designers stressed on the erotic side of the miniskirt or of jeans. These opposed positions clearly show that the revolution in clothes was also a revolution in ethics.

This sexual liberation is to be seen again in the Seventies fashion, with some differences. Nudity and close-to-the body clothes are still important in the fashion of this new decade, but some other elements belonging to the past are there again. Thus, at the end of the Seventies, while see-through-clothes and close-to-the body clothes are on any woman, high heels, for instance, can be seen again. They had not completely disappeared but belonged to a special world – the world of prostitution. Anyway, to wear high heels changes the way a woman walks and her general appearance. A lot of the natural movements of the body are amplified and the sex-appeal of the person, consequently, is possibly increased. Most generally in making the figure longer, it gives some elegance too. To many people, men or women, high heels are a symbol of femininity and as they give to women elegance, they are also the sign of a refined sexuality which hesitates between domination and subjection. In adding this traditional element of seduction and some others to a nudity regarded as naturally attractive, the Eighties fashion still suggests a free sexuality but with a touch of perversity, perversions as sadism and masochism being then just the ultimate transgression, as in Helmut Newton's photographs.

Fashion, from the Nineties on, expresses quite a different relation to sexuality. Some sexual perversions are still expressed by it, but the general trend has nothing to see with sexual freedom. Indeed, the fashion of the nineties is the very best expression of a new social imaginary entirely reconsidered by the AIDS epidemic and the general atmosphere is anti-seduction and anti-sexuality.

This evolution can be seen firstly in the economic evolution. The desire to seduce is a desire to consume as well. It drives to buy what can be a tool for seduction, in particular to buy clothes which may enhance one's attractiveness or hide some disadvantage. And in the Western world during the last decades, fashion industries were rather in financial straits. In France, there were 8% decline in clothing expenses. And that just means that we do not want to seduce anymore. But fashion itself shows that no one wants to consume. If the very essence of fashion is to never last, in order to always be new, the fashion of the Nineties and Two thousand was a non-fashion: both a refusal to seduce and to consume as the Grunge is a good example, the Grunge which hides the body, uses old clothes and refuses the very idea of elegance and seduction.

Some clothes of contemporary designers are very illustrative of this trend. Vivienne Westwood's creations could be very good examples, but I shall stress on some other ones as the black coat dresses by Rei Kawakubo which entirely hide the body and that monk-inspired style that we find as well in the clothes of the Japanese designers as in those of the European designers. The ultimate step is doubtlessly the attempt by the Belgian designer Martin Margiela to deconstruct fashion by exposing all the inside construction of his creations. Such an attempt means a deconstruction of what clothes signify: seduction and sexuality.

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