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Androgynous Fashion: Reaching for the Non-Symbolic

A seemingly progressive step that blurs the lines of gender distinctions, androgyny—or gender neutrality—in fashion is a developing phenomenon in our modern times. A *New York Times* article from 2015 heralds the androgynous trend in fashion as “a boon for designers” that saves time and money while “honing an identity” that is deemed enlightened (La Ferla). However, take a look at the photos accompanying this article and you’ll see thin, angular models in the boxy, baggy, and crisp cuts of a masculine aesthetic. While the article lists a myriad of emerging brands that target an androgynous audience, one might wonder what became of them in the five years since its publication. In that time, gender-queer critics of diverse body shapes and sizes have pointed out fashion’s narrowly conceived and exclusionary view of what androgyny looks like. In a piece from 2018, writer Lindsay King-Miller relates her own struggle to express a gender-queer identity as a plus-size woman. Her experience counters what’s expressed by the fashionistas in the *New York Times* piece, as she explains that, “Androgynous clothing companies launch and flop with sad regularity; a roundup of gender-bending clothing brands from five years ago yields more defunct links than working stores” (King-Miller). She goes on to posit that the androgynous demographic for businesses isn’t a stable one, and that fashion designers simply aren’t prepared or willing to design for truly diverse bodies with diverse gender identities.

Choices are limited for those wishing to present as androgynous, despite the expressed enthusiasm in the *New York Times* article. And to complicate this limitation further, even if consumers find clothing they deem necessarily androgynous, they still may not be read in a way that matches their interior selves if they aren't tom-boyishly angular and slim. King-Miller details that "for people with bodies that curve in noticeable, traditionally 'feminine' ways, it's particularly difficult to find garments that cross the lines. Anything soft or stretchy ends up hugging our curves and encourages the tendency to read us as femme. . .". All this begs the question: is it possible to present as androgynous if you are fat, curvy, or prefer more traditionally feminine styles? What if you can't afford high fashion labels that cater to a niche market? Do these limitations make androgyny just another category that requires conformity to a particular norm in order for people to "pass" as gender ambiguous? My own contention is that androgyny in fashion paradoxically perpetuates the gender demarcations that it seeks to evade—by privileging masculine and thin aesthetics, androgyny re-centers male, thin bodies as the universal of human-kind while further marking female, curvy bodies as other and non-normative.

If we consider that clothing choices are rhetorical, then it follows that fashion is a language of its own that can be read like a text. Androgyny is understood to be a mixing of masculine and feminine styles, such that the wearer of androgynous clothing cannot be read as discretely male or female. However, a simple google image search for androgyny betrays that our cultural ideal of this style is fairly monotone in so far as we see a lot of mostly thin women with slicked back hair in men's clothing. (see figure 1). In trying to express a uni-sex gender, these representations don't merely combine the masculine and feminine, but rather reveal the

perpetual normative power of the male body in our rhetorical practices.



Figure 1, google image search result for "Androgyny" (Finch).

Karma R. Chávez identifies this tendency, contending that, “the abstract body on which rhetorical studies is based is, in reality, an actual body, that of particular white men. The white male body haunts rhetorical practice and criticism” (Chavez 244). The same could be said of the rhetoric of fashion, in that it is the male body that constitutes the base-line of human, even when supposedly stripped of gender distinctions. Feminine style and curvy bodies are still marked as other, as too divergent from the norm to be considered ambiguous or universal.

To have the normative, default body that is male is to have power, which supports why masculine aesthetics would be privileged in fashion’s construction of an identity that transcends limited gender roles. Chávez argues that our abstraction of the body—even abstraction through fashion, I would add—are based on actual bodies, and that this has significant implications for who has power and who does not. Chávez contends that, “the abstract body and actual bodies are about power: who and which bodies matter, become material (important and present). . .” (245). Hence the motivation for androgynous fashion to privilege masculine aesthetics so as to avoid being reduced to a discrete other.

As an example, let's consider how Lady Gaga made headlines late last year for wearing an over-sized suit when she spoke at an event entitled "Women in Hollywood". Her speech, combined with the effect of a striking designer suit, was generally proclaimed a powerful statement about women in the industry making their voices heard. Gaga explained that "as a woman who was conditioned at a very young age to listen to what men told me to do, I decided today I wanted to take the power back. Today I wear the pants" (Petrarca). Gaga implies that to wear pants like men do is to wear power—and this metaphor is certainly not new. "To wear the pants" is a well-known cultural idiom based on a long, patriarchal history of pants only being worn by men. All the dresses available to Gaga would've marked her as too other, too outside of power, for the point she wished to convey: that she was more than her body, she is a voice as well. The underlying logic is that in order to be heard, and in order to have power, women must draw closer to a masculine standard of dress. Lady Gaga's statement unwittingly portrays how the rhetorical male "haunts" (Chávez) our rhetoric, so that we must privilege masculine standards not only in language, but also in how we dress our bodies. Thus, it is no surprise that androgyny would eschew feminine style, such as dresses, because they seemingly reduce the wearer to their body—a body that is seen, not heard. For individuals struggling to express a gender-queer identity in a society that frequently invalidates them, being heard over the appearance of their bodies is of vital importance.

Of course we understand that there is nothing inherently powerful about pants—it is socio-cultural conventions that imbue them with symbolic power. Kenneth Burke's concept of action/motion illuminates that it is this very use of symbolism that complicates fashion's attempt to transcend oppressive and prescriptive gender distinctions. According to Burke action involves "modes of behavior made possible by acquiring of a conventional, arbitrary symbol system. . ."

(809), such as our conventional understandings of how clothing symbolizes gender. In contrast, non-symbolic motion represents what simply *is*, or rather, what would go on existing without symbolicity attached to it—thus the realm of motion is non-symbolic. Any presentation of androgyny must draw upon symbols to try and communicate the non-symbolic of gender-ambiguity. Bryan Crable explains that, “We are trying, from within symbolicity, to identify and characterize the non-symbolic, that which is outside the reach of symbols” (126). This is problematic because “symbolic structures are passed off as natural and non-symbolic, as characteristic of reality itself” (132). To get outside the symbolicity of gendered clothing, androgynous fashion attempts to present itself as non-symbolic, thus obscuring that it itself is just another configuration of symbols itself, symbols that must be enacted to communicate a notion of the non-symbolic. Crable asks, “Have we, in short, transformed our symbolic freedom into a second determinism, the determinism of inadequate ideas about the nature of motion?” (132). I would echo his question to ask, does the seemingly freeing quality of androgynous fashion similarly create another determinism because fashion can not get outside of the symbolic?

Androgynous fashion attempts to escape prescriptive gender norms by drawing upon and playing with pre-existing symbols—symbols that can never capture Burke’s non-symbolic motion. Thus, being read in a gendered way seems unescapable given that the symbology of clothing can’t compensate for the shape of our bodies, and neither can clothing shed its cultural associations. But androgyny, like most things, is a process, not an end point. Even the author of the *New York Times* piece allows that the trend of androgynous fashion may be “a passing illusion pulled from a stylist’s bag of tricks” (La Ferla). In the mean-time, accepting that we

cannot escape the symbolic may ease the anxiety over whether we are sufficiently performing or resisting our gender identity sufficiently.

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