

Rethinking the Body: Fashion and transgender/transvestism in film

In *M. Butterfly*, *The Crying Game*, *Shinjuku Boys*, and *Paris is Burning*, clothing and dress become the way in which the body is invested with meaning. These films all focus on transgender/transvestite figures who are transgressive through their identity and fashion choices. Specifically, these characters all deal in some way with the issue of passing, appearing to be something other than their socially assigned identity. The tension between the characters' ability to transcend the identities imposed upon them through clothing and the inescapable reality of the meanings imposed upon their bodies leads to further questions about the “truth” of identity, and the power people have over the perceived truth. By examining the contradictions between agency and disempowerment embodied by fashion and dress, these films address the issues of identity construction and force viewers to question the fixity of these identities. Comparing these films provides an exploration of the ways in which clothing can be used to simultaneously destabilize and subvert categories of gender, race, and class, while also reasserting and reinscribing the subject into those essentialized categories. These films engage with fashion and identity in a way that seeks to demystify the constructed nature of bodies and compels the audience into a new understanding of identities that acknowledges the impossibility of static meaning. By examining the use of fashion as a tool for legitimation and transformation, this paper will explore the ways in which the disconnect between the body and dress bring into question the fundamental truth of the physical body.

The first two films examined here, *M. Butterfly* and *The Crying Game* deal with fictional representations of transgender/transvestite characters. *Shinjuku Boys* and *Paris is Burning*, however deal with these issues from a documentary viewpoint, interacting with people who live this lifestyle. All of these films fictional or not show the ways in which clothing plays an integral role in performing these identities. As Annette Kuhn discusses in her chapter on sexual disguise in film:

Clothing is associated with gender, serving as an outward mark of difference, of a fundamental attribute of the wearer's identity. But so to identify dress with gender identity, and gender identity with selfhood, is to step into a minefield of contradiction...Far from being a fixed signifier of a fixed gender identity, clothing has the potential to disguise, to alter, even to reconstruct, the wearer's self. Clothing can dissemble – it may be costume, mask, masquerade. Put another way, clothing can embody performance. As a means to, even the substance of, a commutable persona, clothing as performance threatens to undercut the ideological fixity of the human subject.¹

The changeable nature of clothing complicates the reading of bodies through clothing. Clothing becomes the performance and in many ways serves as a means to deny the meaning of the body underneath. These films all can be seen in some ways as dealing with and reacting to the rupture of this “ideological fixity.”

In David Cronenberg's film *M. Butterfly* clothing plays a crucial role in constructing the gendered disguise of Song Ling. From the first encounter of Song Ling and Gallimard, clothing and performance, specifically theatrical performance, are the foundation of Song Ling's feminine identity. Gallimard's lack of understanding of the cultural implications of Song Ling's role set the stage immediately for the misreading and misunderstandings facilitated by his unquestioning Western gaze. His identification of Song with the role denies the conflicts between Japan and China and allows him to see

1 Annette Kuhn, “Sexual disguise and cinema” in *The Power of the Image* (New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1985) 53.

Asian as a category which incorporates many ethnic and cultural differences. This orientaling misreading is seen again through Gallimard's viewing of a Beijing opera performance. His ignorance of the costuming and theater performance makes him unable to understand Song's true gender. He does not read the actors as male, and thus in spite of the way these clothes are read culturally, they serve to further disguise Song's gender rather than reveal it. Song is able to pass for female in these situations not only through her/his use of clothing as disguise but also through the exploitation of Gallimard's naivety. Clothing becomes a means by which to disguise the meaning of the body underneath, so much so as to deny the physical body altogether. Song's refusal to reveal the body because of her/his "shame" shows the reliance upon clothing in order to maintain the gender masquerade. Song's ability to pass convincingly as female for Gallimard, and his/her use of this position for espionage becomes dangerous on many levels. Passing in this situation then becomes especially transgressive. According to Marjorie Garber, "*Passing* is what *acting* is, and what *treason* is."² The danger in this transgression is not simply on the personal scale; passing as treason hints at the ways in which destabilizing categories of gender leads to a questioning of more than gendered binaries. As Garber elaborates, "*transvestism is a space of possibility structuring and confounding culture*: the disruptive element that intervenes, not just a category crisis of male and female, but the crisis of category itself."³ As these categories become unstable so do the boundaries that maintain identity and society. Song's ability to pass in the gendered sense is conflated with her/his ability to disguise nationalistic purposes and goals. The ability to subvert and destabilize these identity constructions is achieved

2 Marjorie Garber, "Phantoms of the Opera: Actor, Diplomat, Transvestite, Spy" in *Vested Interests* (New York: Routledge, 1992) 250.

3 Marjorie Garber "Introduction" in *Vested Interests* (New York: Routledge, 1992) 17.

through the use of clothing as a projection of identity. The necessity of clothing to maintain this performance is shown as Song and Gallimard ride in the prison van. Song begins to undress for Gallimard after he/she realizes that Gallimard still believes in the gender performance of Butterfly. Song tells Gallimard he/she is doing this to help him see through the disguise. Once undressed however Song attempts to show Gallimard that underneath the clothes it was always him/her. Gallimard's response is that in revealing his/her body Song has exposed the "true" nature of the body, when what Gallimard loved was the lie. Identity here exists solely in the clothing and the performance it facilitates. Without the clothing Song is, as Gallimard tells him, "nothing." Clothing here is revealed as a means of agency and power in that the meanings one expresses through clothing become an identity which can deny the gendered "truth" of the body. Clothing also provides an embodiment of a desired image which can be taken on and off, and can invest its wearer with the desired meaning. This can be seen with the costume of the demure oriental woman, taken on through the film by Song and appropriated at the end in Gallimard's performance in prison. By dressing in the image of the exoticized Oriental, Gallimard is able to take on the role of Butterfly, and to construct the image of the submissive oriental woman so necessary to his oppositional identity, that of the powerful, cruel, white westerner. Clothing thus becomes the vehicle for configuring identity, be it racial, national or gendered. The fluidity of these categories and the ability to cross the boundaries separating them asserts the powerful part clothing plays in constructing identities and highlights its unstable nature.

While clothing can be seen as a tool for empowerment, the revelation of Song's body and the powerlessness he/she has to change the meanings inscribed upon it express

the limitations of fashion's transformative power. When Song is revealed physically and loses the costume which he/she has used to become someone else, we are left with the image of the naked body, whose meaning here is inescapable. Gallimard's disgust with the revelation of the "real" body of Song shows the reinforcement of dichotomized identities. Song's gender is brought to light unquestionably in the form of the naked body. According to Annette Kuhn "What is at stake in this expression of the dualism of appearance and essence is a fundamentalism of the body, an appeal to bodily attributes as the final arbiter of a basic truth."⁴ The reinscription of Song into this hierarchical structure of identity politics privileges the body as the ultimate truth, and denies any subjectivity or agency in defining that truth. The film, in spite of the possibilities for destabilizing these power structures, ends up reinforcing them through its assertion of the primacy of the body. The film's refusal to allow Song to maintain himself/herself as a woman, once the body is shown, takes away the power he/she has to define his/her identity.

A similar moment of bodily revelation occurs in *The Crying Game*. The figure of Dil, who is gendered female throughout the film, is exposed as biologically male in a love scene with Fergus, the IRA soldier who has fallen in love with her/him. This unveiling of gender, while it does cause a break in the relationship, is not as definitive in gendering Dil as it is for Song Ling. After this moment of identity crisis for Fergus, he is unable to call Dil a girl and attempts to define her/him in ways that maintain binary gender identities. The film does not use this moment of nakedness to define or categorize subjectivity, It still leaves a certain amount of room for shaking the foundation of these categories. Dil's performances as female are not ended by the performance of masculine

4 Annette Kuhn, 54.

identity Dil must show towards the end of the film. Dil's transformation at the hands of Fergus, which turns him/her into a double of Dil's deceased soldier boyfriend Jody, does not convincingly correct Dil's performance into a "natural" gender performance. It is through this fluid changing of identities, clothing, and the ways in which they "play on a disjunction between clothes and body – [that] the socially constructed nature of sexual difference is foregrounded and even subjected to comment: what appears natural, then, reveals itself as artifice."⁵ This revelation of artifice does not occur purely on the level of an exposure of the naked sexed body, it also occurs as Dil is redressed into masculine form, the cricket uniform and short haircut. Dil's performance in this way, although his/her sex has been explicitly shown, is not convincing. By dressing Dil in a supposedly naturally gendered way, the artifice of the natural is revealed. This uncertainty of gender, in spite of the supposed fundamental certainty of the body, is thus maintained throughout the film, long after the naked form is shown. Dil's appearance at the end of the film, dressed again as a woman, shows the uncertainty of such categories, and asserts the agency of the subject over the meaning of the body. Here, unlike in *M. Butterfly*, the body, while it does maintain oppressive power structures which legislate bodily meaning, can be in some way denied or transformed by clothing. "Cross-dressing, then, may denaturalise that phenomenon held in our culture to be most evidently and preeminently natural: sexual difference."⁶ Dil's ability to continue the performance of femininity places the location of identity outside the realm of the body and allows for a creation of identity through the image projected through clothing.

5 Annette Kuhn, 49.

6 Annette Kuhn, 54.

Both of these films use fictional portrayals of transgender/transvestite characters in order to engage with issues around identity and subjectivity. The layers of performance in these films, the actors performing roles who are in turn performing roles, complicate the reading of these bodies. The true nature of these characters and even their true gender can never be known because of the fictional medium. Thus the locus of true meaning is still elusive, and whatever answers the films attempt to provide will always be complicated by the fact that within representation, there can never be a firm fixed meaning.

The two documentaries, *Shinjuku Boys* and *Paris is Burning*, in spite of their claims to reality and truth, must also deal with these issues of representation and reality. While all of these films focus on the tension between the meaning presented by the body and the one presented through clothing, only the documentaries really deal with the ways in which this tension requires redefinition of sex and biology in order to close the gap between essential meaning and image. Kuhn states that “[d]ress constantly poses the possibility of distance between body and clothing, between ‘true’ self, the fixed gender of ideology, and assumed persona.”⁷ This distance can be used to destabilize essential categories giving a certain amount of power to the subject, but this distance can also be traumatic in that the distance between desired persona and the fixed nature of the body always remains.

In *Shinjuku Boys*, the story follows three *onnabe*, essentially transgender/transvestite bar hosts/hostesses who dress as men to serve women. Throughout the film, the focuses not only on the ways in which *onnabe* play with gender, but also the ways in which their gender performance interacts with their body image and

7 Annette Kuhn, 54.

conception of self. All of the *onnabe* discuss issues with the distance between their bodies and their performance as men. Gaish, one of the *onnabe*, says that he/she has never been touched and as an *onnabe* refuses to take off his/her clothing because the body beneath the clothes does not match the image given by the clothes. The projected image of masculinity requires a denial of the body and bodily desires. Tatsu, another *onnabe*, undergoes hormone therapy and expresses similar apprehension around revealing the body. However, Tatsu, is eventually able to be naked with his partner after eight months of their relationship. This reluctance to be exposed and naked expresses the power of the body's meaning. Tatsu compares being naked to jumping off of a cliff, and the importance and fear of revealing the body's unchangeable meaning expresses further how this distance can between essence and appearance can be a dangerous and destabilizing gap both individually and societally.

The construction of identity through clothing is seen in some ways here, as in the other films, as a means of creating a desired identity, but the inadequacy of fashion to truly change and destabilize meaning is expressed over and over in the discussions of bodily disconnect. Clothes and fashion, while allowing for some power to change the body does not really interfere with the systems which inscribe meaning onto the physical body. This limitation comes from the ways in which gender and sex are constructed and how the physicality of the body is socially marked. According to Judith Butler,

what constitutes the fixity of the body, its contours, its movements, will be fully material, but materiality will be rethought as the effect of power, as power's most productive effect... "Sex" is, thus, not simply what one has, or a static description of what one actually is: it will be one of the norms by which the "one" becomes viable at all, that which qualifies a body for life within the domain of cultural intelligibility.⁸

8 Judith Butler, "Introduction" to *Bodies That Matter* (New York: Routledge, 1993) 2.

This understanding of biological sex exposes the constructed nature of the body. In order for a body to exist it must first and foremost be defined in terms of sexual difference. Sex becomes as much a normative construct as gender and in fact cannot be separated from it. The body must be rethought of as a form which does not hold a fundamental truth, but rather as another space where cultural and social norms are enacted and articulated. The absolute meaning of the body is reinforced by the denial of sex through clothing.

Clothing the body and attempting to change the meaning of it through external fluid means denies the very fluidity of the body and supports the primacy of the biological sex construct. The agency exerted through clothing can in this way be a reaffirmation of powerlessness over the body.

Paris is Burning also explores this powerlessness of the body and the contradictions inherent in using fashion and dress as a means of redefining the body. In this exploration of ball culture and gay culture, the film deals with the issue of “realness.” Within the realm of these balls, realness refers to the ability to blend in or pass in straight society. The costume and dress of a particular identity becomes a way to become that identity, and passing makes the illusion real. The ability to pass is empowering in many ways. They discuss the competition category of executive realness, or the ability to dress and pass as a business executive, and how looking the part of an identity in some ways proves your ability to take on that identity. Clothing becomes a way to assert desired identities, whether it be a new race, class, gender or culture. Passing makes these transformations attainable, but that freedom and power is complicated by the nature of the identities being taken on. One of the comments about realness in the film is that it is like “going back into the closet.” The portrayal of another identity through clothing and

the desire to pass as something you are not denies what you are. This denial further supports these oppressive identity structures because it goes along with the idea that one must be disguised or different in order to attain a desired identity. The nature of the body is held up as the ultimate truth and thus it must be disguised, and changed whether it be through clothing alone or operations and other bodily modification. The performance of these identity stereotypes also emphasizes the tension between agency and disempowerment in these gender performances. Performing such gendered, raced, or classed stereotypes furthers and perpetuates these ideas and only makes them more unattainable to the performer. Thus the problematic nature of clothing and fashion is revealed as the desire to transcend bounded identities and dichotomies through dress becomes a way of reinforcing the very system one is trying to escape. Though these identities are in some ways destabilized, the subject is reinscribed into a position of inferiority because of the disconnect between the body and the image.

This tension between image and essence is fundamental to the idea of fashion. In exploring the ways in which clothing can transcend the boundaries of categorized subjectivity, one must always examine the ways in which fashion cannot move beyond the limitations of societal ideas of the body and meaning. These films attempt to deal with these issues and tensions and explore the ways in which dressing and undressing the body becomes a practice invested with cultural, gendered and classed meanings. Butler's ideas on the constructed nature of materiality push this discourse onto a level which forces the questioning of the body as a site of originary meaning. The revelation and disguise of the body all point to the desire to see into an essential truth that clothing seems to hide. The films allow us to explore, however, the falseness of that promised

truth, and instead we are left only with the disguise. The body's meaning as expressed through these films is in many ways equally changeable and it is this realization of the inability to fix meaning that allows for an understanding of the ways in which fashion can move beyond the perpetuation of oppressive power structures, and can instead become a realm which demystifies and debunks the myth of the body's inherent meaning.

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