See-through closet

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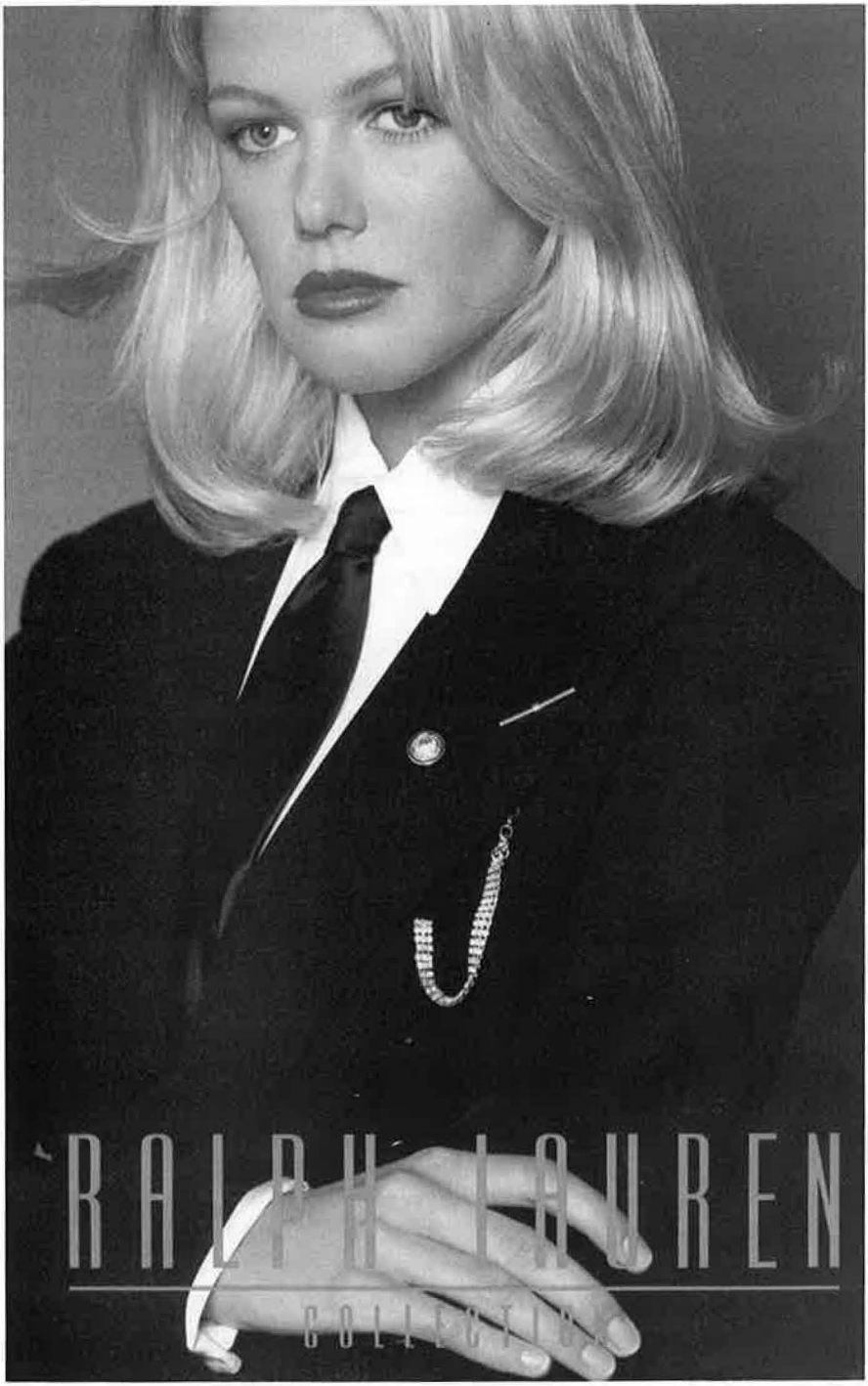
In a close-up image, against a dark background, we see a figure wearing a dark suit, white shirt and a black necktie. We see a diamond chain in the jacket sleeve, its other end disappearing in the pocket of the jacket. The figure stands with hands across the chest. Both the hands and their nails seem to be well taken care of. The model looks downwards, out of the photograph. Despite the combed hair, part of the hair tops turn up. The model's face is sharp-featured but the skin of the face is smooth. The eyebrows have been plucked thoroughly. The model seems to wear no make-up except from the full lips, which are bright red. The lip liner has been drawn over the lips, and the mouth appears to be asymmetric. At the bottom of the image reads *Ralph Lauren Collection*. (Image 1, next page.)

The concepts of "modern woman" and "lesbian chic"

The model of this fashion advertisement is a woman. The image does not represent a culturally desirable form of female femininity, which fashion spreads and mass media conventionally do. The conventional form of ideal femininity includes almost non-existent clothing designed to accentuate the contours of the body, thick and long hair, neat make up, full breasts, long legs, firm buttocks, and a seductive look directed to the spectator. All these features are accentuated through camera angles, lightning, and the model's pose, gestures and expressions.

However, the model posing in the Ralph Lauren advertisement doesn't seem to represent the conventional attributes of female femininity. This model is represented wearing masculine attire. Apart from the smooth skin and the look of the model, none of the features of the model represent ideal female femininity. The clothes don't reveal the curves of the body; neither do they seem to accentuate the breasts of the model. The hair of the model seems to be uncombed, she doesn't have seeming make up, and the lip liner has been drawn over the lips. The facial expression of the model is numb. Furthermore, the image is a close-up of the upper body and thus shows no legs. There are many 'beauty flaws' in the image, which trouble the interpretation of the image as a traditional, seductive representation of female femininity. The image mixes features conceptualised as gender contradictions. It mixes the traditional features of male masculinity with the traditional features of female femininity. Together


RALPH LAUREN
COLLECTION

these features create an air of androgyny, which shows the boundaries of male masculinity and female femininity to be ambiguous and to escape strict definitions.

I will here deal with the concept of "female androgyny".[1] In my research on representations of androgyny, I have encountered the male centeredness of the concept both in research literature and in visual representations of the androgynous figure. The concept of androgyny refers to a gender, which is not female or male, neither feminine nor masculine. It is a concept, which refers to a gender *crossing* the categorical, binary boundaries. Even so, the androgynous figure is represented without exception both in the older and newer research literature as a (nude), beautiful, passive young male (See, for example Vänskä 2002a, p. 159-180). The concept of androgyny does not refer to the harmonious state of being, or utopic equality between genders. It is a masculine concept, erasing both female femininity and female androgyny. Because of this, it is crucial to re-view the concept in sexualised and gendered discourses. Doing this, I use the concept of female androgyny to problematise the conventional masculinist use of the concept of androgyny. I also problematise the masculinism of the androgynous figure by bringing forth some visual representations of female androgynes. Even though the concept has been criticised severely in feminist theory and cultural critique (See, for example Gelpi 1974 p. 151-160; Secor 1974 p. 161-169), and it has been argued that it is an expression of the homofobia of the Western culture (See, for example Harris 1974 p. 171-184; Stimpson 1974 p. 237-248) I find the concept useful in research of visual culture. One of the aims in using the concept of female androgyny is to indicate the hetero-normativity of the concepts of female femininity and male masculinity. Female androgyny is not a utopian way to a genderless world. Its conceptual *inbetweenness* could help to re-interpret and re-evaluate the concepts of masculinity and femininity as well as their visual representations. I also use the concept and visual history of female androgyny to problematise the hetero-normativity of identification and desire. Here I discuss the gender ideologies lurking behind the concept of female androgyny in the light of fashion images of the 1990s.

A world without men

Fashion magazines are typical products of the 20th century, which intermingle looking, beauty, and desirable or ideal female femininity (Wilson 1985 p. 157). For example: the ideology of the *Vogue* – which is the oldest (founded in 1892) and the most canonical of the fashion magazines – has always been to produce and re-produce the concept and appearance of the idealised, aesthetic norm of female femininity (Jobling 1999 p. 19). Thus, the *Vogue* is part of the cultural

production, where the priority is on the working up of the female femininity both visually and textually. The contributory factors in the visual rhetoric of representations of gender in fashion photography and fashion advertisements are lightning, image angles, setting, or other environment, and the facial expressions, and the bodily gestures of the model, as well as his/her walking-, sitting-, and standing styles. They also include clothes and bodily details from hair to face to nails to legs, and to breasts.[2] Unlike haute couture clothing, fashion magazines are within the reach of every woman. The consumption of fashion images by leafing through the magazines is an important feature of female bonding as it is an important ritual for young girls in their process of becoming culturally acceptable women.

The feminist critique of fashion is full of contradictions. For example, Susan Bordo has argued that fashion, which creates life styles, is an obstacle to the construction of individual subjectivity. According to Bordo, the "tyranny of fashion" – i.e. the constant, continuous, and unattainable pedagogy of the lack and insufficiency of the female body – is a powerful disciplinary order, which insists the normalisation of *all* women in our culture (Bordo 1993 p. 254). Susan Bordo (1993), Janet Wolf (1990), Susan Brownmiller (1984) and several other feminist theorists argue that fashion subordinates women by promoting the norm of ideal female femininity. These critics see fashion as a social 'corset', which constrains women and combines womanliness with consumption. In this interpretation fashion is conceptualised as a form of consumer culture, which compels women to pursue the idealised, homogenised body ideal. It conceptualises women as the passive victims of fashion industry, and claims that fashion creates the fear of differences.

"The ambivalence of fashion fascinates like the smile of Mona Lisa"

Some feminists, however, argue that the consumption of fashion through glamorous fashion images is full of contradictions and doesn't position women straightforwardly as the victims of fashion industry. For example Elisabeth Wilson (1985) was one of the first feminists to claim that fashion is a social technology, which produces gendered positions, that is, represents the self and the body as culturally produced concepts, and allows the resistance of imperative gender positions through the creation of resisting discourses. Wilson's aim is not to find the 'real' or 'authentic' woman behind the ideal representations created by fashion images. On the contrary, she argues that the spectacle of fashion is a kind of 'performance art', which reflects the ambivalence of modern culture (Wilson 1985 p. 246). This means, according to Wilson, that the way fashion magazines ask their readers to experiment with their own bodies and identities is in contradiction with those cultural arguments, according to which the self

and the identity are received at birth, and are unchangeable. This is precisely what interests the consumers: "The ambivalence of fashion fascinates like the smile of Mona Lisa", she writes (Ibid. p. 247).

Wilson crystallises one important feature of fashion: it is much more than an economical act. The leafing of fashion images connects importantly to fantasies and dreams, and it is constructed in the multiplicity of fragmentary and contradictory discourses. Fashion can also be conceptualised as a method, which produces and consumes gendered and sexualised meanings through fashion images. The consumption of fashion images is also means to express hopes and wishes that are yet to be achieved. The makers and the readers of the fashion magazines produce the meanings of hopes and desires together.

Although feminists have started to write about fashion in more positive ways, many theoreticians still take up a critical attitude towards the ambivalent and manifold meanings of fashion. One example might be Rebecca Arnold, according to whom the ambivalence of fashion doesn't merely liberate or emancipate women. Arnold claims (2000 p. 212-213) that in the 1980s and in the 1990s the fashion designers tried to apply different kinds of feminist methods in their work so that it would be possible to discuss how the visual and real consumption of fashion gives pleasure, and how it represents women. According to Arnold, the ambivalence of fashion has a high market value. In other words, the fashion designers are aware of the feminist critiques, and this has led several designers to claim that they are 'feminists', and or to claim that they 'use post-modern irony' as the means of estrangement in their work (Arnold 2000 p. 213). It is difficult to say, however, how profoundly feminist thinking has changed the ways of representing women in fashion, even though discussions for example on how clothes can produce different cultural meanings in different cultural contexts are run on the pages of fashion magazines.

In this process female androgyny has also a central position: the growing number of women in the masculine field of fashion designers since the mid-1980s has made female androgyny more visible in fashion design. Some designers – such as Donna Karan, or Miuccia Prada – draw gendered signs from men's clothing and try to reinterpret those signs by creating identities, which accentuate the independence, the power, and control of women, through practical designs. The growing number of female fashion photographers has also brought more androgynous models among feminine 'supermodels'. For example one of the hottest female models of the 1990s was Kate Moss, whose childlike, androgynous style was found or produced by fashion photographer Ellen von Umwerth, and whose style was then taken and made world famous by the designer Calvin Klein. Calvin Klein has also used another androgynous model in CK advertising. She is the American Asian, an openly lesbian model

Jenny Schimizu. Compared to Moss' androgynous waif-look, Schimizu represents a more masculine androgyny with her tattoos, crew cut hair, and more muscular body.

The ambivalence of fashion

The ambivalence of fashion and its critiques indicate that fashion and fashion images are especially fruitful material for a visual culture researcher. First of all, fashion and fashion images produce concepts of ideal female femininity and normative gender order. Secondly, they aim to vary normative and ideal conceptions. This is inbuilt in the fashion magazines: they represent an illusion of a world, where women are positioned in central roles. Men either have a walk-on part, or they lurk 'behind the scenes' as designers or fashion photographers.[3] Illusion of a world without men begs the interpretation of the world of fashion as a space, where lesbianism should be especially easy to explore and express.[4] Thirdly, fashion magazines seem to believe in the power of fashion images. This means that they invest in the belief that images can convey meanings through casual gazing. One of the main projects of fashion research is to problematise the ideology of gazing.

A female dandy

I will examine this by analysing a Chanel advertisement from 1998. (Image 2) The advertisement is a typical 1990s advertisement, where a female model is represented cross-dressed. In the Chanel advertisement, the representation of gender has been constructed by drawing from the style of the aristocracy and dandies of the turn of the 20th century. In the nostalgic, toned black-and-white photograph we see a model dressed in a masculinely tailored, loosely fitting suit. The model also wears a white shirt and white lace-up shoes and seems to walk towards the spectator with her hands in her pockets, her beret astray. The figure is like the 19th century dandy described by Thomas Carlyle: "A clothes-wearing man; a man, whose career, trait, and all of his existence is based on dressing." (Ref. in Ratcliff 2001 p. 101). The Carlylian / Baudelairean dandy was an idle man produced by the new urban world. He was a man, who created a spectacle out of his body through clothes, gestures, and other personal qualities. The difference here is, of course, that the Chanel-dandy is a woman.

The ideology lurking behind Carlyle's statement tells us about the social codes concerning clothing. Before the 20th century, clothing was regulated according to for example class, gender, and context. Since the middle ages and the early modernity, clothing codes were used to prevent crossings of the categorical boundaries and situate individuals in certain economical, class-bound and


CHANEL
26 OLD BOND STREET · LONDON W1
31 SLOANE STREET · LONDON SW1
HARRODS · INTERNATIONAL DESIGNER ROOM

gendered categories (See for example Garber 1993). The Carlyle-quotation indicates how the 19th century dandies violated existing order with their clothing and behaviour.

At the beginning of the 20th century, however, male dandies lost their cultural position as *the* representation of the modern, masculine man. Mass culture and the newly born fashion photography sucked up the individual style of the dandies and recreated it into a feminised, buyable consumer product (Garelick 2001 p. 37). The Chanel advertisement's nostalgia draws historical meanings from the changes in women's social position at the turn of the century. It indicates, how the modern, new women drew from masculine symbols of the dandies, and used cross-dressing to turn the masculine world of dandies upside-down and resisted discourses of femininity and masculinity.

A modern woman

The concept of the "modern, new woman" was launched in the aftermath of the World War I in Europe. The concept was one of the most discussed and debated gender concepts during that time. Women were guaranteed the right to vote, and a possibility to work outside home. The new woman was able to define herself socially, economically, politically, and sexually. Many feminists, for example Maud Lavin (1990/1995 p. 151) have argued that the new rights of the new women were often only a myth. Even so, the ambivalence of the concept exemplifies the changes and ruptures in the gender system. Many women artists of that time, for example, can be defined as "new women". They pursued their own careers, often they didn't marry, and they moved about in the art circles in the new, urban metropolis. Clothing was closely connected to their careers and lives: many women artists used cross-dressing and androgynous style as the means to problematise the dominant concept of artistic creativity as a masculine project. It was also a means to negotiate more space and visibility at the masculine arena of art. The androgynous dandy-look represented also the art ideology of the time. It was the sign used to question the gender of the artist, and to express artistic radicalism.

The identity of the modern woman, whether she was an artist or not, was bound by her appearance and how she moved in the public space. Fashion was crucial in creating her representation (Fillin-Yeh 2001 p. 134). Whereas women in the 19th century wore corsets and large hoopskirts, and looked like unmoveable art objects, the modern woman dressed herself in loosely fitting clothes, which enabled her to move freely. These changes were considered to be radical, and not all were happy about them. One critic, for example wrote that "these creatures, who smoke, work, and fight like boys, and who drink and drown themselves in cocktails during the night, and look for juicy and acrobatic

pleasures at the back seat of a five horse-power engined Citroën: these are not young women!" (Ref. in Lucchesi 2001 p. 170)

Coco Chanel

In the context of fashion, the most famous designer to re-interpret dandyism was Gabrielle "Coco" Chanel (1883-1971). According to the art historian Rhonda K. Garelic (2001 p. 41-43), Chanel wanted to change the dominant paradigm of female femininity. Chanel rejected the idea that women should look like sandglasses in their corsets, and marketed the new look, the "Chanel-look" instead. It was a representation of a tomboyish, small-breasted woman, who had a natural – that is non-corseted – waistline. Chanel believed that women were able to change their lives through clothing. Feminist fashion historian, Anne Hollander, disagrees with Chanel. According to Hollander, the concept of the modern woman – promoted also by the ideology of the androgynous style – was produced within the categorical boundaries of the heterosexual, bourgeois norm. According to Hollander (1994 p. 124), the modern woman's resistance of the gender norms was safe. It only stretched the boundaries of female femininity.

Lesbian chic

The Chanel advertisement can also be interpreted as a representation of modern lesbianism. At the turn of the century, sexologists Richard von Krafft-Ebing (1886) and Havelock Ellis (1895/1900) popularised the idea that a person's sexual identity was not only an inner quality but could be discerned from appearance. Both Ellis and Krafft-Ebing argued that if a woman dressed in elegant, masculinely tailored suits and tuxedos, it was evidence of her homosexuality, of her "inner pathology".[5]

At the beginning of the 20th century, some women used cross-dressing as a way to enlarge their social life sphere. Some women, on the other hand, used it as an erotic code, as an expression of a woman's active sexual desire to other women. For some women artists at the beginning of the 20th century, cross-dressing and/or masculine behaviour was manifestation of their lesbian identity. For example the French artist Claude Cahun used androgyny to visualise her own lesbian identity. She and other lesbian identified artists explored the possibilities and restrictions of visible lesbianism through their work. This theme is still present in many contemporary artists' work, for example in the works of Del Lagrace Volcano, Catherine Opie and the Finnish artist Aurora Reinhard.

In the conservative system of contemporary fashion advertisements, representations of passing women are non-existent and representations of stereotypical masculine lesbianism are rare. Crossdressed models are recognisable

as women – often as supermodels with a Name. For example the model posing in the Chanel advertisement is the English model Kristen McMnenamy. She, among other famous models, has an iconic status as the desirable (hetero)sexual woman in contemporary culture. Nonetheless, this and other representations of androgynous, crossdressed women refer exactly to the most stereotypical form of masculine lesbianism, namely to butch-lesbianism. This phenomenon has even a name: *Lesbian Chic*.

Lesbian chic is a style, where the cultural visibility and conventional visual codes of masculine lesbianism have been softened by female androgyny. It is a style used to fit the possible assertiveness of women and lesbians to heterosexuality. In lesbian chic, female androgyny and the discourse of the modern woman function as a form of idealisation. They are means to cover those sexual tensions, which are inherent in the concept of the modern woman. Some women may interpret the representation of female androgyny in the Chanel advertisement as a code of lesbian desire, whereas some women may not. In the context of haute couture fashion images, the visual accentuation of economical wealth and high social status may thus obscure the relationship between female androgyny and lesbianism.

Lesbian chic in the 1990s fashion advertisements is an ambiguous phenomenon. On the other hand, it is part of the inner movements of fashion industry, where different kinds of "novelties" and "trends" fuel consumption. Female androgyny is thus a way to neutralise and take into possession the assertiveness of masculine women. Female androgyny is an attempt to restore female masculinity back in the heteronormative order. It is an attempt to make the androgynous woman into the culturally approved object of male desire. The cultural angst lesbians still seem to cause in social communities is directed into female androgyny.

In the Ralph Lauren advertisement combining masculine clothing with the conventional attributes of female femininity does the neutralisation. The model is dressed in a suit connoting virility, activity, and assertiveness. All the little beauty flaws I mentioned at the beginning of this paper encourage the interpretation of the image as a representation of non-conventional female femininity. At the same time, some details work to accentuate the femininity of the model, if we look at the image carefully enough. It is possible to see, for examples that the hands of the model crossed across the chest are actually posited under her breasts. The hands as well as the diamond chain work actually to accentuate the three-dimensionality of the model's bust. They round the area, which should definitely be flat, if this was a representation of a masculine butch.

In the Chanel advertisement the neutralisation is done by the visual rhetorics of modern woman and with the allusion to the person of Chanel through the

name of the fashion house. The androgynous woman walking idly in the mansion like environment seems to have acquired that economical status, which her sisters a hundred years ago fought for. There are many elements, in the advertisement, however, which disturb the reading of the image as a politically correct representation of a modern woman. The lifestyle represented in the advertisement is not to be acquired by any woman. This interpretation is enhanced by the representation of the environment: there are no clues of that urban environment, where modern women hundred years ago or now move around. The environment of the advertisement seems to communicate that this kind of female androgyny is available only for *some* women – for those, who can *afford* to wear Chanel.

In the Chanel advertisements the masculine suit doesn't associate to the power suit connoting assertiveness, activity, and virility, to the uniform of contemporary, (post)modern corporate women. Rather, the meanings of the advertisement connote to Carlylian or Buadelairean dandyism, which accentuate the idleness of the rich and educated dandy. The aestheticised female androgyny of the Chanel advertisement is conservative: it reproduces the conventional idea of female femininity as appearance, which has to be taken care of through following the latest fashion trends.

Notes

[1] I have applied Judith Halberstam's (1998) concept of "female masculinity" in my terminology.

[2] On the connection between visual representations and production of genders, see de Lauretis 1987.

[3] Of course this doesn't mean that they would actually be behind the scenes or in any way passive agents.

[4] Caroline Evans and Minna Thornton have argued that fashion images are especially designed for breaking the boundaries, especially in relation to female sexuality (Evans and Thornton 1982, p. 82).

[5] It is debatable, did the psychological and sexological definitions of lesbianism produce lesbianism as it appeared or did the already-existing forms of lesbianism feed theory-formation. Many lesbian historians have indicated that masculine lesbians existed long before Ellis' and Krafft-Ebings theories on sexual inversion. See, for example Halberstam 1998, Donoghue 1993.

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