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Body Meets Dress, Dress Meets Body: An Analysis of *Comme des Garçons* Spring/Summer 1997 Collection Unknown Quantities Journal, Issue Two

It is said that god created man in his own image. Yet, when comparing one's own reflection to the angelic figures of runway catwalks and movie posters, you can't help but draw the conclusion that god is either very cruel or rather ugly. This is the dead space between "should look like" and "actually looks like", which can be identified in the profound sense of loss that undercuts the act of getting dressed. It is the gap between the item we want (the designer dress) and the item we can afford (the high street knock off), the physical body (how we are perceived) and the dream body (how we wish we were perceived), the clothes on the hanger and the clothes on the 'ordinary' person, the clothes on the 'ordinary' person and the clothes on the model.

A particularly powerful case study for understanding these tensions between ideal self and actual self, beauty and 'deformity', liberating high school movie make over versus horror film mutilative revenge, can be found in *Comme des Garçons* Spring/Summer 1997 collection, *Body Meets Dress, Dress Meets Body*. One of the most commercially unsuccessful offerings from the label, colloquially known as the "Lumps and Bumps" range for the tumour-like padded growths and built in hunch backs that warp the 'ideal' forms of the young, white, female models on the runway.¹ In distorting the traditional boundaries of the female form, by blurring the safe space of the untouchable, eternal, beauty of runway collections, questions are raised of the pre-existing ideals of the

¹ B. Hammarlund, 'String Theory', *l'etoile*, October 12th 2012

Available at: <http://www.lettoilemagazine.com/2012/10/12/string-theory-meeting-of-the-minds/> [last accessed 15/02/14]

“beautiful” body and the ‘beautiful’ dress within high fashion². The viewer wonders: where does the dress end and the body begin³? Is that arched silhouette the handiwork of Rei Kawakubo (who is the head of *Comme des Garçons*) or does her model have scoliosis⁴? Is that girl on the runway ‘one of them’ or “one of us”?

We can understand such questions by locating the collection within the existing history of “deformity”, disability and the grotesque in the visual culture of post-World War II Japan. This can be achieved through studying the *ero-guro* (erotic grotesque) genre and the avant-garde dance movement Ankoku Butoh (dance of darkness).⁵ To focus this comparison, I have selected one particular case study, the 1969 film ‘Horrors of Malformed Men’. Directed by Teruo Ishii (1925-2005), a prolific Japanese film director, who created a number of *ero-guro* films, it was adapted from a collection of stories by the Japanese horror writer, Edogawa Ranpo (1894-1965), an avid fan of ‘freak show’ culture. Ranpo’s work, from the 1930s onwards, serves as an earlier example of the *ero-guro* genre in literature⁶. The film exists as both a powerful example of *ero-guro* and a showcase for the Ankoku Butoh dance form. This is due to Ishii’s casting of Tatsumi Hijikata (1928-1986), the dancer and choreographer who founded this movement, and his dance troupe, starring in the film.

It should be stressed, however, that this comparison is not an attempt to either homogenize or essentialise the works of *ero-guro* literature as inherently “Japanese”. It is

² Hammarlund, ‘String Theory’, *l’etoile*

U. Poschardt, ‘An analysis of deconstructionism in architecture and fashion’, *032c*, Issue #02 (Summer 2001)

³ S. D Seely, ‘How Do You Dress a Body Without Organs?’ *Women’s Studies Quarterly*, Volume 41, Numbers 1 & 2, Spring/Summer 2013 p.251-254

⁴ Miriam Rom Silverberg, *Erotic Grotesque Nonsense: The Mass Culture of Japanese Modern Times* (California: 2006)Xv-vi
Kurihara Nanako, ‘Hijikata Tatsumi: The Words of Butoh’, *TDR*, Vol. 44, No. 1 (Spring, 2000) P.12

⁵ Chris Desjardins, *Outlaw Masters of Japanese Film* (London: 2005) p.152

⁶ Jim Reichert, ‘Disciplining the Erotic Grotesque in Edogawa Ranpo’s Demon of the Lonely Isle’, in: ed. Alan Tansman, *The Culture of Japanese Fascism* (North Carolina: 2010) p.356

a model of writing which has its own uniquely grotesque history in Western journalism, with its portraits of warped Orientalism being every bit as lurid and as disconnected from any lived reality as an Edogawa Ranpo story. This is the work of publications such as *Women's Wear Daily*, whose bizarre prose includes quotes such as: "Ah, the delicately winning ways of Rei Kawakubo, the samurai geisha of fashion."⁷ This is an outlook so obsessed with "the glib generalisation about the impact of post-Hiroshima deprivations" that red lipstick was mistaken for open wounds, designers' own explanations of collections were ignored and with Western writers favouring their own idea of a 'tragic Orient' producing "post atom bomb fashion" and "Hiroshima chic" collections⁸.

Butoh underwent a similar fate, with reductive readings of the work, as a simple product of post-war trauma, abounding⁹. This was despite the fact that Hijikata himself did not see the dance style as "exclusively Japanese", arguing that it "could as well emerge from Northern England as from Northern Japan", a point illustrated by his cited influences of the post WWI Surrealists of Western Europe and transgressive French authors such as Jean Genet.¹⁰ (A parallel to Rei Kawakubo choosing the French lilt of a Françoise Hardy song over her own supposedly 'Japanese' name when christening her label.)¹¹ The cultural critic, Mark Holborn, emphasises this issue of Western misunderstanding, arguing that, by exposing Butoh to a Western audience, "the change of context, like all translation [...] may have distorted the original meaning. It confirmed the accessibility of Butoh as spectacle, even if the translation dampened the subversive fire."¹²

⁷ Ed, 'Mugler: more epic than fashion; Paris RTW', *Women's Wear Daily*, March 23rd, 1984

⁸ Barbara Vinken, translated by Mark Hewson, *Fashion Zeitgeist* (New York: 2000) p.99

⁹ D. Sudjic, *Rei Kawakubo and Comme des Garçons* (New York: 1990) p. 54

D. Kondo, *About Face* (New York: 1997) p. 67

¹⁰ Nanako, 'Hijikata Tatsumi' p.17

S. Barber, *Hijikata: Revolt of the Body* (Chicago: 2010) p. 65, 93, 34

¹¹ The name *Comme des Garçons* is an adaptation of lyrics from Françoise Hardy's song "Tous les garçons et les filles" which features the line "Comme les garçons et les filles de mon âge".

¹² Quoted in: D.W. Leavitt, 'Dance Kitchen', *Kyoto Journal*, Issue 70, August 25th 2008

Available at: <http://www.kyotojournal.org/interviews/dancekitchen.html> [last accessed 17/02/2014]

The phrase “distorted” is key, particularly in relation to the question of ‘mistranslating’ Japanese culture. Perhaps, the Orientalist school of fashion journalism, with its butchered Japanese, its misreading of collections and references to “samurai geishas” is a model of ‘deforming’ and distorting the *Comme des Garçons* collection in and of itself. It is a ‘freak’, created not by birth, but by the white superiority complex of colonialism. And whilst, the notion of the ‘freak show’ is an important part of this essay, this particular ‘freak’ is one I do not wish to take over the paper.

With this existing model of *Comme* as sign for the “warped”, “broken” “Orient”, and the positioning of Japanese designers as “inadequate imitates of Western fashion and racial threat” in place, it is possible to interpret this collection as a revenge of sorts¹³. A parallel could be drawn to the finale of Tod Browning’s *Freaks* (1932) where the so-called ‘freaks’ enact revenge on the beautiful Cleopatra (who has “Othered” them, mocked them, and even planned to murder one of their own-her supposedly ‘beloved’ husband) by turning her into a quacking ‘human duck’ — tarred, feathered, legless, with webbed feet in place of hands, one eye gouged and her tongue cut out. Cleopatra, whose very name denotes physical perfection, and who once cried “freak!” in horror of their likeness, now finds herself, in a twist of fate the most frightening “freak” of all.

In this same way, Rei Kawakubo has taken the “flawless” form of the white, Western, ideal of the female, hour glass figure, tall and curvaceous, and using her expert craftsmanship (metaphorically) skinned it alive and given its mutilated remains to her young, white girl models to wear down the catwalk. By “freaking” this Western silhouette, through turning desirable curves into grotesque tumours, in turn rendering her perfect white girl models grotesque by association, the designer seems to

¹³ D. Kondo, *About Face*, p.68

simultaneously mock, both the stereotype of “shapeless” Japanese clothes draped over “small”, “petite”, East Asian bodies and the seemingly natural, neutral space of white womanhood¹⁴.

This is revenge as a redistribution of power, drawing a parallel to Lindsay Lohan’s character Cady, in the 2004 teen comedy *Mean Girls*, who in an attempt to dethrone “the fascist dictator” Regina George, the cruel queen bee of her high school, steals her “hot” body by tricking her into “unknowingly eating 4000 calories a day”. Castrated of her Western beauty queen physique, she is left humiliated, alienated and powerless, too bloated for her pale pink dream dress, she bulges uncomfortably out of maroon sweat pants (a playful parallel to the *Comme* models’ unsightly dress protrusions) and is now mocked by those who once feared her. Barbara Kruger once proclaimed that “your body is a battleground” and, in this case, it seems victory is declared by destroying the opposing territory.

The question of the unwanted transformation, identified in both *Freaks* and *Mean Girls*, returns us to the ero-guro film *Horrors of Malformed Men*, and specifically how these forms of representation intersect with the lived experience of disability in Japan (an important factor to consider in the contextualisation of this particular *Comme* collection). The question of disability is evident from the title in Japanese alone, *Kyoufu Kikei Ningen*, which roughly translates to “those filthy invalids.”¹⁵ The Japanese culture critics Patrick Macias and Tomohiro Machiyama explain this stating:

“Simply put, you cannot call someone, or something, *Kyoufu Kikei Ningen* anymore. The English translation *Horrors of Malformed Men* sounds a bit too

¹⁴ D.Kondo, *About Face* p.68

¹⁵ P. Macias and T.Machiyama, *Freaks in the Head*, included in the DVD release of ‘Horrors of Malformed Men’ by Synapse Films in 2007.

polite. In Japanese the words strongly imply that the deformed are inhuman, but also that one should be afraid of them.”¹⁶

With this issue of ableism in mind, it is significant to consider how the seemingly subversive work of the creative avant-garde fits in with the existing power structures of able-bodied culture. In a *New Yorker* magazine article, Rei Kawakubo once argued that she “likes tradition and history” but also “wants to break the rules”, what better compromise than a freak show, in its confirmation of existing power structures through its exhibition of those that, by mere dint of their existence, radically defy it¹⁷.

This complements the “sometimes shunned but at times made special” position that disabled people occupied in Japanese culture at the time¹⁸. The idea of disability as a mouthpiece for the “unique” creativity of the able-bodied, found in the Quasimodo dresses of *Comme des Garçons* and Hijikata’s “polio-inspired” dance moves, is revealing in its irony¹⁹. For the mission of institutions was to make disabled bodies conform as much as possible to ableist ideals, with children pressured into walking, even if it was physically too difficult for them to do so²⁰. Whilst, outside of the institution, many disabled people underwent the “high psychological price” of “passing” as able bodied in everyday life to avoid being discriminated against and mistreated in so called ‘mainstream’ society²¹.

In contrast to these lived experiences, Rei Kawakubo and Hijikata appear to offer disability to their audience as a form of liberation, challenging pre-existing notions of

¹⁶ P. Macias and T. Machiyama, *Freaks in the Head*

¹⁷ J. Thurman, ‘The Misfit’, *The New Yorker*, July 4th 2005

¹⁸ C. S. Stevens, *Disability in Japan* (New York: 2013) P.28

¹⁹ T. Mes, ‘The Horror of Malformed Men’, *Midnight Eye*, 28th January 2005

Available at: <http://www.midnighteye.com/reviews/the-horror-of-malformed-men/> [last accessed 16/02/2014]

Barber, *Hijikata* (Chicago: 2010) p.46, 66

²⁰ R. Hayashi and M.Okuhira, ‘The Disability Rights Movement in Japan’, *Disability & Society*, 16:6 (2001)

²¹ Stevens, *Disability in Japan* (New York: 2013) p. 35-6

beauty and elegance for an alternative model of being. This is the idea that an able-bodied person's occupation of a vague notion of difference through 'deformity' provides them with a seemingly 'radical' sense of agency.²² The notion of "deformity", as a subversive and empowering tool in the hands of the able bodied creative, is another revealingly ironic point, considering how little control disabled people actually had of their own bodies in institutions such as The Fuchu Ryoiku Centre (with its consent-free use of invasive, experimental, surgery)²³. For much as *Horrors of Malformed Men's* leading man is stabbed in an institution by one of "the crazies", only to be pleasantly surprised that the weapon was merely a novelty retractable knife, the tumours in the Spring/Summer 1997 collection are removable, giving the wearer the option of taking them in and out at will, an option that, needless to say, the disabled person does not have.

But perhaps these subjects are not binary, with prettiness at one end and freakishness at the other. Beauty, particularly in the fashion industry with its warped distance from reality, is in so many ways an acceptable form of 'deformity', begging the questions of whether such themes are as reactive as they appear on the surface. The film critic Peter Bradshaw continues this idea, viewing *Freaks* "as a provocative comparison with the alienated condition of women and the freakish nature of all showbiz celebrity."²⁴ If glamour is freakishness, then Cleopatra was a freak already and Rei's models too; the transformation was simply a gentle reminder to the audience. It is certainly a plausible explanation that is not without grounding in the context of these cultural works. But surely we can go further. For this as "ugly on the outside as they are ugly on the inside" model still feels too reductive, too closely tied to an idea of an ugly-pretty binary where disabled bodies may act as canvases for the able-bodied artist's elaborate metaphors.

²² B. Baird, *Hijikata Tatsumi and Butoh* (New York: 2012) p.166

²³ Hayashi and Okuhira, 'Disability Rights Movement' p. 859

²⁴ P. Bradshaw, *Freaks*, The Guardian, 27th September 2002

I find atonement, not in the original Comme collection, but instead in its recreations online. *Time Magazine* was quick to deride the selfie, shared online as an object of narcissism²⁵. But what is interesting is the discarded selfie; blinking, mouth open, the ones instantly put in the recycle bin, the images that expose rather than conceal, but in that exposure form armour to keep the author safe. I see such images as the meeting of medical photos and model test shoots. And I see one of the most powerful examples in the work of fashion blogger Arabelle Sicardi, a queer Taiwanese-American writer, whose \$15 dollar recreation of a 'lumps and bumps' dress, made as a teenager and shared with her blog followers, navigates these tensions so expertly²⁶. She has blacked her own eyes out, confronting Jeffrey Eugenides' medical photography model as "the black box; a fig leaf in reverse, concealing identity while leaving shame exposed."²⁷ For, in Arabelle's writing on chronic illness, queerness and mixed identity, all against a backdrop of *Comme des Garçons*, we find that ideal self and actual self is not the quintessential rock and a hard place.²⁸ But instead, these tensions between model, mannequin and mortal body can be creatively explored in a model of thought that does not exploit those marginalised by ableism, providing the critical tools that allow this very community to speak more boldly.

²⁵ See: *Time Magazine* Cover, May 26th 2013

²⁶ Arabelle Sicardi, 'Lumps and Bumps' recreation, *Fashion Pirate*, 12th August 2011

²⁷ Jeffrey Eugenides, *Middlesex* (New York: 2002) p.422

²⁸ Arabelle Sicardi, 'In Sickness and in Helmut Lang', *The Style Con*, January 8th 2014

Available at: <http://www.thestylecon.com/2014/01/08/sickness-helmut-lang/> [last accessed 20/03/2014]

Arabelle Sicardi, 'Trauma and Fashion Armour', *The Style Con*, March 3rd 2014

Available at: <http://www.thestylecon.com/2014/03/03/trauma-fashion-armor/> [last accessed 20/03/2014]

Arabelle Sicardi, 'In Defense of Ugly', *The Style Con*, January 20th 2014

Available at: <http://www.thestylecon.com/2014/01/20/defense-ugly/> [last accessed 20/03/2014]