

# **The Aesthetics of Mainstream Androgyny:**

A Feminist Analysis of a Fashion Trend

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**I confirm that the work presented in this thesis is my own.**

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## **Abstract**

Since 2010, androgyny has entered the mainstream to become one of the most widespread trends in Western fashion. Contemporary androgynous fashion is generally regarded as giving a new positive visibility to alternative identities, and signalling their wider acceptance. But what is its significance for our understanding of gender relations and living configurations of gender and sexuality? And how does it affect ordinary people's relationship with style in everyday life?

Combining feminist theory and an aesthetics that contrasts Kantian notions of beauty to bridge matters of ideology and affect, my research investigates the sociological implications of this phenomenon.

My thesis explores in what ways the new androgyny, apparently harmless and even radical, paradoxically reinforces traditional gender roles, and legitimatises particular kinds of femininity over others also in terms of class, sexuality and ethnicity. It interrogates whether this trend, and by extension contemporary mainstream fashion in general, can oppose traditional values, and investigates the relationship between the aesthetic sphere and socio-cultural inequality. In response to classical theories of fashion, and filling a gap in contemporary ones, my study also focuses on social class, now often overlooked, in the analysis of style.

These questions are examined from a twofold perspective: first I investigate representation to identify ideological patterns of legitimation and de-legitimation arising from fashion intermediaries' portrayal of the trend. I then look at how this visual material becomes an object of affective engagement, and analyse emotional responses to the aesthetics. To do this, I employ a mixture of traditional methods, such as semiotics and discourse analysis, and experimental ones, like the collection of creative ethnographic data.

I explore the particular aesthetics associated with the androgyny trend and consider how it is configured by the different fashion intermediaries, what its presence online entails, and what is its relationship with the wider public and their everyday negotiations of identity.

## **Table of Contents**

### **Chapter 1**

#### **Introduction: Androgyny, Fashion and Why They Matter**

|   |    |
|---|----|
| <u>Questioning the New Androgyny</u>                        | 10 |
| <u>Androgynous Fashion and Style in Culture and Society</u> | 17 |
| Fashion and Sociological Investigation:                     | 26 |
| Dress and Style as Markers of Class                         |    |
| <u>Outlining the Chapters</u>                               | 36 |

### **Chapter 2**

#### **Aesthetics Through Ideology, Class and Gender: Theoretical Underpinnings**

|   |    |
|---|----|
| <u>Introduction</u>   | 44 |
| <u>Political, Gendered and Affective Bodies</u>                                 | 46 |
| <u>Emotional Attachments, Affect and Feeling Difference</u>                     | 54 |
| <u>Positive and Negative Affectivity in Context</u>                             | 56 |
| <u>Aesthetics Between Bodily Sensations and Ideological Functions</u>           | 59 |
| Class as a Cultural Manifestation<br>and the Supremacy of the Higher Classes    | 62 |
| Class as an Affective Manifestation<br>and the Portrayal of the Working Classes | 68 |
| <u>Conclusion</u>   | 73 |

### **Chapter 3**

#### **Investigating the New Androgyny: Methodology and Methods**

|   |    |
|---|----|
| <u>Introduction</u>                         | 77 |
| <u>Understanding Fashion Intermediaries</u> | 79 |

|  |     |
|--|-----|
| <u>Finding a Space for the Audience</u>  | 88  |
| Translating the Complexity of the Fashion-Communication<br>Scenario into a Researchable Entity | 90  |
| The Methods (I): Semiotics   | 94  |
| The Methods (II): Discourse  | 99  |
| The Methods (III): Street Style Photography  | 102 |
| <u>Conclusion</u>  | 108 |

## **Chapter 4**

### **Mapping the Themes: Representation and androgyny as a Trend**

|   |     |
|---|-----|
| <u>Introduction</u>   | 111 |
| <u>Affluent Lifestyle</u>                                       | 114 |
| <u>Minimalist Refinement and the Domestic Ideal</u>             | 121 |
| <u>The Heterosexual Wife and the Sophisticated Femme Fatale</u> | 128 |
| <u>Rebellion and Resistance</u>                                 | 135 |
| <u>The Alien and the Work of Art</u>                            | 143 |
| <u>Conclusion</u>   | 146 |

## **Chapter 5**

### **Pulling Off the Androgyny Trend: The Androgynous Body?**

|   |     |
|---|-----|
| <u>Introduction</u>   | 149 |
| <u>Bodies in the Fashion Market, Stylistation of the Self and Value</u>           | 151 |
| The Androgynous Body as a Project:<br>Transformation, Cultivation and Consumption | 155 |
| <u>The Androgynous Body as Cyborg Femininity</u>                                  | 164 |
| <u>The Aestheticised Moral Affectivity of the Androgynous Body</u>                | 172 |
| <u>Androgynous Body Consciousness</u>   | 177 |
| <u>Conclusion</u>   | 181 |

## Chapter 6

### **The Re-mediation of the Androgyny Trend: Blogs, Legitimation Struggles and Affective Negotiations**

|  |     |
|--|-----|
| Introduction   | 185 |
| Bloggers and the struggle over Legitimacy (i):<br>Minimalist Refinement, the New Androgyny<br>and the Insider's Look | 187 |
| Bloggers and the Struggle over Legitimacy (ii):<br>Excess, the New Androgyny and the Outsider's Look                 | 194 |
| Blogging about Androgyny as a Public Intimate Engagement<br>with Affect and Creativity                               | 201 |
| Blogging as an Intimate Experience Between Writers<br>and Readers: Are They Peers?                                   | 206 |
| Conclusion   | 211 |

## Chapter 7

### **Engaging/Disengaging with Androgyny and Reconfiguring the Trend: Affective Online Interaction**

|  |     |
|--|-----|
| Introduction   | 215 |
| Androgyny and the Affectivity<br>of Contemporary Fashion's Online Audience Engagement                              | 217 |
| Direct Engagement: the Audiences' Imagined Audience<br>and Personal Investments in Androgynous Fashion             | 219 |
| <i>Bashing and Judging</i>   | 219 |
| <i>Investing</i>   | 228 |
| Indirect Engagement: Online Procrastination as a Tool<br>for the Mainstream Reconfiguration of the Androgyny Trend | 232 |
| <i>Social Class and Online Participation</i>   | 232 |
| <i>Creativity and Semantic Alterations</i>   | 234 |

|            |     |
|------------|-----|
| Conclusion | 242 |
|------------|-----|

## **Chapter 8**

### **Androgyny on the Streets: Street Style and Symbolic Play**

|  |     |
|--|-----|
| Introduction   | 245 |
| Street Photography, Access and Hanging Out                 | 248 |
| Wearing Androgyny (I) Androgynous Fashion in Real Life     | 252 |
| Wearing Androgyny (II) Androgynous Fashion and Business    | 257 |
| Smelling Contemporary Fashion: Perfume and Style           | 262 |
| Comfort and Spontaneity Versus Femininity in Everyday Life | 264 |
| <i>Old Clothes and Sitting on the Streets with Friends</i> | 271 |
| <i>White, Black and Bright Colours</i>                     | 275 |
| <i>Dressing for the Occasion</i>                           | 279 |
| <i>Creativity</i>  | 282 |
| Conclusion   | 286 |

## **Chapter 9**

### **Conclusion: Making Sense of the New Androgyny and Assessing its Potential**

|  |     |
|--|-----|
| Introduction   | 290 |
| Towards a More Androgynous Future?   | 296 |
| Androgyny in the Contemporary Fashion Scene:<br>Self-Presentation and Negotiations of Identity | 305 |
| An Alternative Model of Fashion Distribution:<br>Variations in Aesthetic Distinction           | 310 |
| The Potential and the Future of Androgynous Fashion  | 316 |
| Conclusion   | 320 |

|                         |     |
|-------------------------|-----|
| <b>Bibliography</b>     | 323 |
| Social media references | 346 |
| <b>List of Tables</b>   | 351 |
| <b>List of Figures</b>  | 351 |
| <b>Appendix 1</b>       | 353 |
| <b>Appendix 2</b>       | 354 |
| <b>Appendix 3</b>       | 355 |

## Chapter 1

### Introduction: Androgyny, Fashion and Why They Matter

#### Questioning the New Androgyny

In the past few years, androgyny has gained a significant prominence in Western women's fashion that can be compared to the popularity and the clamour caused by the *Garçonne* look of the 1920s, the *Glam* ambiguity of the 1970s or the *unisex* style of the 1990s. In 2010, *The New York Times* commented on the androgyny tendency, arguing that not since the 1970s has there been such a media frenzy about gender bending styles; only this time, instead of stressing the mysterious charm of ambiguity, such portrayals focus on 'empowerment' and 'pride' (Van Meter 2010). The article quotes the editor of *LOVE* magazine Katie Grand's comments on how this new positive attitude of the fashion industry towards androgyny is reflected by its very presence in high fashion advertising, as well as in *Vogue* magazine and in Oprah Winfrey's popular TV show. After being flirted with for decades, androgyny has recently entered the mainstream, to such extent that new discussions spark everyday on the internet about whether the trend has already gone too far.

The androgyny trend is seen in many places: in photoshoots (*New Dandy - Flair* Sept 2011, *New Kid in Town - Vogue Paris* Oct 2012, *Macho Libre - US Elle* 2012, *Rebel Rebel - Vogue UK* Sept 2013, *Boy Talk - Vogue UK* Sept 2012 are only a few examples) and advertising campaigns (*Calvin Klein* AW11, *Donna Karan* AW12, *Miu Miu* AW12, *Burberry* AW10) as well as in catwalk trend reports, articles, fashion blogs and so on. *LOVE* magazine even released an entire *Androgyny Issue* for SS11. Large high street clothing chains, such as *River Island* or *Topshop*, offer a wide selection of 'boyfriend blazers', 'tomboy crop tops' and 'boyish shorts'. Even a recent popular trend in designer perfumes encourages women to 'borrow from the boys' and experiment with fragrances that mix masculine and feminine olfactory notes together (*Elle* Sept 2014). In fact,

lately, one cannot flip through a magazine or visit a fashion website without encountering terms like *tomboy*, *mannish*, *boyish*, *androgynous* (often paired with the word *chic*) associated with womenswear. These terms are thus suggesting that the new trend is seen as chic, a concept once described by *Harper's Bazaar* in terms of elegant simplicity, arguing that “elimination is the secret of chic” (*Harper's Bazaar* 1938).

But what does this obsession with gender-ambiguous clothing entail? Is *The New York Times* right describing it as symptomatic of a widespread greater acceptance of gender and sexual diversity? And, recognising the role that androgyny has come to acquire within the fashion media and as a marketing tool, what can we say about its effects on configurations of gender and sexuality? How does it affect people's relationship with style in everyday life? While the first two questions are concerned with the features of the new androgyny and their connection with current socio-cultural issues, the last two questions deal with lived experiences with fashion, with how trends are received, and what is the outcome of such interactions.

Instead of constituting a traditional sociological study, my research combines theories from different fields such as feminist theory, fashion theory, media theory, cultural theory, queer theory and philosophy, and aims at making a contribution to scholarship not simply in one area of study but in the sociology of fashion and dress, the sociology of popular culture and the sociology of class all combined. I maintain that contemporary fashion trends, and, in particular, that of the new androgyny, are very complex phenomena that cannot be explained simply in terms of fashion, consumption, aesthetics of class relations. I argue that they can only be understood as the sum of a series of different interrelated processes and dynamics between different actors and fields of interaction, all worthy of attention. For this reason, in this thesis, I do not focus on a singular point of view, but, instead, on the multiplicity of points of view and on the relations between them. Accounting for the fluid phenomenon of contemporary androgynous fashion, I consider the ways in which fashion intermediaries produce and circulate meanings, and how different audiences receive them, but, instead of explaining

such meanings in terms of simple paradigms of production and reception, the focus is placed on the dynamics between all of the various actors that participate in the development of the new androgyny. This allows me, for example, to also pay attention to fashion bloggers' re-mediation of the androgyny trend, or to the way in which audiences play an active role in remixing the new androgyny in a creative way.

With this project, moreover, I intend to study the field of contemporary androgynous fashion assessing its dangers and potentialities, and examine how this particular trend is interlaced with problems that transcend the fashion world and connect to crucial social issues, even beyond matters of gender. In particular, as London is often regarded as the “most innovative” of the world's four fashion capitals (“LFW AW13 Press Release”, 2013), British fashion is here identified as an especially interesting field for the investigation of the new trend of androgyny, celebrated for being cutting-edge and radical.

Although the succession of fashion trends happens in a continuous flux of small transformations, in terms of the observation of cultural and media products, 2010 can be marked as the start of the new androgyny and its mainstream impact. It was also the year in which I opened a fashion blog, and it is precisely thanks to the proximity to the fashion scene which I gained as a blogger that I became interested in the role played by fashion intermediaries in the shaping and spreading of new trends. After four years spent collaborating and working in close contact with the fashion industry, PR people, journalists and fellow bloggers, I found myself increasingly uncomfortable with the trend and its messages. The messages about free self expression and the defeat of traditional gender roles, which I often saw being juxtaposed to the portrayal of the androgyny trend, did not mirror what I saw on runways and in promotional imagery. And, in turn, this imagery did not quite match examples of fashionable androgyny found on independent fashion blogs or in street fashion.

Is it really possible to see in the 'instructions' of cultural intermediaries a new frontier in

the defeat of patriarchal gender roles? I doubted. One of my aims became in fact that of exposing the androgyny trends' problematic reproduction of exclusionary models of femininity, while, at the same time, studying how the trend is received by consumers and the deeper implications of their responses. Articles associated with the new androgynous fashion describe pairs of jeans as boyfriend jeans and t-shirts as tomboyish, they teach women how to wear masculine clothes and look sexy and feminine rather than “mannish”, or suggest they wear their androgynous coats without their arms in, so that it will look like it was draped on them by their man (*Vogue* September 2011). Instead of constituting a refreshing break from traditional and hypersexualised representations of women in the fashion media, this new androgynous style seems, somewhat paradoxically, to reinforce gender roles and conventional femininity. Moreover, heteronormative relationships are implicitly stressed as a way to make acceptable the (apparently) otherwise-too-threatening androgyny, and to avoid any possible interpretation about mainstream fashion promoting alternative gender identities and sexualities.

On the other hand, the androgynous look is often portrayed with references to Dandyism, preppy university fashion, and British heritage style, three class-charged themes to which we will return more fully later. Since it is also interpreted as a new kind of modern, if not futuristic, well-groomed, subtle and discrete femininity, displayed on slim and athletic models, with sleek hair and minimal make-up, it is also possible to identify a conflicting dynamic that hints at class antagonism. Such an antagonism is demonstrated if we consider Beverley Skeggs' (1997, 2004, 2012 with Wood) arguments about how, in dominant culture, working-class women and their bodies are portrayed in contrast to middle-class standards, and in a symbolic class war, as unmodern, excessive, tasteless, unruly and displaying a threatening sexuality.

In this sense, androgyny often becomes also a means for the display of social status. Diana Crane (2000) writes that the “principal messages [of fashion] are about the way in which women and men perceive their gender roles or are expected to perceive them”,

moreover “[f]ashionable clothes are used to make statements about social class and social identity”. (Crane 2000: 16). If we assume that (a) clothing is used as a means through which to indicate one's gender identity and (b) at the same time, clothes are also markers of a particular position in the social hierarchy (since this second statement is less straightforward and needs more clarification, I will address it separately in a later section), then we can presuppose a connection between particular gendered clothes, in this case androgynous ones, and social class.

My study seeks to examine the development of the contemporary androgynous style and consider how meanings circulated by fashion intermediaries legitimate certain kinds of femininity over others, affecting, in particular ways, specific groups at the intersection of gender and class, but also sexuality and ethnicity. Motivated by the need to bring light to the wider, and often dangerous, implications of such an apparently innocent cultural phenomenon, I hypothesise whether this trend, and possibly by extension contemporary mainstream fashion, can provide a challenge to traditional values, like that usually associated with anti-fashion and counter culture.

In an attempt to convey the richness of the ways in which the phenomenon of the new androgyny manifests itself, and to account for its many different dimensions, I approach its study in the form of a mixed-methods enquiry. The question is examined at first from the perspective of representation in order to identify patterns of social inclusion and exclusion, legitimation and de-legitimation. As Richard Dyer states “representation never 'gets' reality” (Dyer 1993:3) but

“[R]epresentations here and now have real consequences for real people, not just in the way they are treated [...] but in terms of the way representations delimit and enable what people can be in any given society (ibid.).

At this stage, I consider different examples of representation found in the work of cultural intermediaries and examine how androgyny is produced as a mainstream trend. A second key focus of the study beyond representation concerns instead the possibility of alternative aesthetic responses that emerge within the mainstream as a creative

reaction to the socio-cultural exclusion implicit in fashion culture. In this regard, instead of being solely read as representations, the material products of the fashion media are treated as objects of affective engagement, able to complicate and shed new light on straightforward, preliminary interpretation. Rebecca Coleman (2016) underlines how, although the study of the representation of images remains crucial, it is also important to reflect on the relationship between affect, language and discourse and on how images are affective themselves.

I analyse the points of view of audiences, both online and in real life, but also the intermediate ones of fashion bloggers who occupy a position between those of established cultural intermediaries and the general public. By combining all of these aspects with the initial focus on representation, I attempt to grasp the complexity of ways in which the androgyny trend exists and is experienced in the contemporary fashion scene. Moreover, instead of thinking about androgynous fashion as a stable object, the multiplicity of perspectives and the attention to the interaction between them allows me to consider the dynamic nature of the trend and its development in the socio-cultural context.

Apart from providing an exploration of a prominent current fashion trend with significant social implications, with the investigation of these issues, my study also helps to fill a particular gap in the still understudied area of contemporary style and clothing: as the current 'hot' trend is interpreted as an instrument for social distinction, class is re-established as a fundamental concept in the analysis of fashion. Moreover, the project deals with the relatively unexplored topic of an aesthetics that deviates from the particular taste associated with the middle-classes, not interpreted in terms of inadequacy and disadvantage (like in the influential analysis of sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, 1984), but as playing a positive and active role in the negotiation of gender roles and social identity.

Following Terry Eagleton's (1990) idea of the underlying ideology of aesthetics, I

interpret fashion aesthetics as symptomatic of class struggle, while reconnecting aesthetics, at the same time, to the sphere of emotion and bodily sensations, with reference to different theories of affect, such as Ahmed (2004, 2010), Berlant (2006) and Coleman (2009, 2013). In particular, my understanding of gendered and androgynous bodies is a feminist and social constructionist one, based on Michel Foucault's (1980) conception of power/knowledge and Butler's (1990) idea of the performativity of gender. In the discussion of class, instead, I draw from Bourdieu's (1984) definition of capitals and Skeggs' (1997) analysis of working-class women and value, in order to investigate the dynamic of passivity/reaction in the relationship between mainstream fashion and women's classed perceptions of themselves and their clothes.

On the more practical side, the research is conducted using a mix of traditional and innovative methods of qualitative research (described in Chapter 3). Through a combination of semiotic and discourse analysis of conventional media, and less common ones such as blog posts, online comments and forum discussions, together with the use of experimental street style photography as an ethnographic research method, I offer a well-rounded perspective on the issue, able to take into account both the work of intermediaries in the fashion industry, and different kinds audience's responses, perceptions and reactions. Using an interdisciplinary and diverse approach to the investigation of the androgyny trend, I do not focus on a single side or a single perspective. The study is thus not simply concerned with representation or audiences' responses, but examines a variety of points of view using a set of different methods. Although the goal is indeed ambitious, and it would be impossible to account for all of the different aspects of the phenomenon of the new androgyny in detail, this approach allows me to capture the richness of a complex and multifaceted phenomenon like a contemporary fashion trend.

In conclusion, since most academic discussions in this field make a point about the different meanings of words such as fashion, clothing, dress and style (see for example

Entwistle 2000, Barnard 2002 and Kawamura 2005) I find it useful here to clarify my use of the terms. Although they can often be used as synonyms, clothing, dress and apparel refer to the more material side of fashion, that is the act of wearing clothes; style and adornment instead are aesthetic concepts describing a distinctive way of dressing; fashion, finally, in this thesis, indicates the succession of different styles as well as particularly popular styles at any given moment, or trends, such as androgynous clothing.

### **Androgynous Fashion and Style in Culture and Society**

Having identified and illustrated the main issues that this research tackles, it is necessary to explore the relationship between the different key concepts that define it, namely the relationships between fashion and androgyny and fashion and class.

Deriving from the union of the Ancient Greek words for man (ἄνδρ, anēr, andrós ) and woman (γυνή, gynē, gynaikós), androgyny refers to the combination of feminine and masculine traits in a same object or subject, as well as to an intermediate entity between the feminine and the masculine (*Encyclopedia Britannica*). Although much more could be said about the definition of androgyny and its constitutive characteristics, I will not delve into it since, even though my project focuses on androgynous fashion, it is beyond the scope of my research. As a matter of fact, the object of my thesis is not androgyny per se, but instead *fashionable* androgyny, which, as we will see, has its own specific features, often quite different from those of what is commonly understood as androgyny. In other words, since my focus is on androgyny as a fashion trend, rather than on androgyny itself, I will concentrate on the social, cultural and political elements that are specifically relevant to the emergence of the androgyny trend.

Androgyny has always been a constant in Western culture. It has travelled in and out of dominant society, finding moments of mainstream appeal, but mostly living at the

margins as subculture or counter culture. In order to answer the question of when androgyny has come to represent a central issue in contemporary culture, it is useful to go back in time and examine a few key cases from the recent history of its representation through the decades. I would like to clarify that this account is thematic and not intended to be a comprehensive history of androgyny in the fashion industry in Western Europe and North America; instead it aims at highlighting those moments that lead (through both their presence and absence), like breadcrumbs, to my research problem. This history, moreover, shows the connection between fashion and the sociological notion of class, the significance of which will be discussed more in detail in the next section. Albeit always present, as a matter of fact, class constitutes one of the most overlooked concepts in the history of androgynous dress, and thereby an interesting angle for my research.

A major milestone in the chronicle of the relationship between androgyny and 20<sup>th</sup> century culture and society can be found in Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness* (1928) and the case born out of it. The novel was deemed immoral and obscene for its (by today's standards extremely chaste) portrayal of lesbianism, and encountered harsh critiques in the press. In 1928, the *Sunday Express*' James Douglas notably argued that he would “rather give a healthy boy or a healthy girl a phial of prussic acid than this novel” (quoted in the introduction to Hall, 2008). The book was even subjected to an obscenity trial in 1928, where the chairman declared it “more subtle, demoralising, corrosive and corruptive than anything ever written” (Hall, 2008). In spite of, and largely thanks to, the bad publicity, *The Well of Loneliness* became a best seller, and the female protagonist's “masculinity” and men's clothings, paralleled by those of the author, became a popular topic of discussion. As Doan (2001) explains, the masculine clothing of Stephen (the heroine of the story) emerged as the symbol of her sexual inversion. *The Well of Loneliness* characterised thus not only an unprecedented public visibility of lesbianism, but also the birth of a link between women, gendered clothing and sexual orientation. However, as argued by Doan (2001), *The Well of Loneliness* cannot be interpreted outside of its historical circumstances; we need to place the female

androgynous style that the book and its author symbolised, within the context of its contemporary fashion.

In the 1920s, boyish and androgynous styles became a prominent feature of feminine fashion. Corsets and wasp waists were abandoned for simple and slender silhouettes hiding bust, waist and hips, and hair often cropped as short as a man's. The androgynous style of the 1920s, often called *garçonne* look, is commonly seen as mirroring a new generation of young women that, after being exposed to the ideas of the suffragette movement, and after having seen women capably taking over men's jobs during the war, used gender ambiguity to reject traditional passive roles, adopt instead an active lifestyle, and demand more independence, as well as the freedom to take up roles and mores usually restricted to men (Thesander 1997). Although a certain anxiety existed about the possibility of youthful slender women looking more masculine than their male peers, the look was generally seen as inoffensive. The 'modern girls' for example, as Doan (2001: 105) reports, were described by *The Daily Mail* as fashionable and unthreatening 'boyettes' dressing up as boys but without male authority. Moreover, she also underlines how they were themselves aware of the fact that they could not pass as boys, and did not even desire to (Doan 2001: 104). In fact they still used make-up and jewellery to be immediately identified as trendy boyish girls rather than actual boys. Similarly, Entwistle (2000) cites Steele (1985) arguing that instead of placing the focus on androgyny, 1920s *garçonne* fashion put emphasis on youthfulness. For the most part, lesbianism was not seen as linked to the look, and gender ambiguity in clothing was not yet immediately associated with sexual ambiguity and inversion.

The uproar that surrounded the publication of *The Well of Loneliness* however resulted in the establishment of masculine clothing as a lesbian uniform, and thereby as a symbol for moral and sexual deviance; it is therefore not surprising that the popularity of the look started to decline in mainstream fashion. "The trial of *The Well*" Doan (2001) writes, "no doubt hastened the demise of the Modern Girl and the 'severely masculine' look" (Doan 2001: 122). Therefore, although the dominant fashion of the 1920s played

with gender ambiguity, it did so only as long as it did not upset heteronormativity, nor the gender binary. In addition, it must be noted that both the popular boyish fashion and Hall's own masculine lesbian style were restricted to white and well-off women. It was only women from the upper-middle and upper classes who could invest time and money in the physical exercise necessary to acquire the popular slender and muscular figure, as well as sustain the lifestyle and display the self-confident emancipation characteristic of the new feminine ideal. Hall herself was an “upper class snob” whose masculine style reflected a dandy aesthetics in its display of aristocracy (Gever 2003: 51). The entire novel, Henson (1997) argues, is permeated with a marginalising class consciousness that validates aristocratic butchness by diminishing working-class women and poor femmes. For example, she notes how the effervescent sexuality of Angela (Stephen's working-class femme lover) is contrasted with the bourgeois and stern asexual tone of Stephen, to highlight the stereotypical sexual depravity of the working class. Finally, despite the negative reaction that *The Well of Loneliness* elicited, arguably, the book would not have had the same coverage, impact and influence on society, if it would have not been for the author's class and display of social status. As Doan underlines, “[w]ealth and class enabled the 'mock hermaphrodite' to deliberately ignore public opinion and wear any style she desired” (Doan 2001: 101).

After gay characters started getting widespread visibility with the Film Noir of the 1930s in which, Dyer (1993) explains, they were represented in negative terms within homoerotic subtexts, from the 1940s to the 1960s, many parts in Hollywood films were written for a long series of more or less androgynously attired queer types. For example, in Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960) (the homophobia of which is often the object of critical reflection; see for example Hepworth 1995, Wood 1995), Norman Bates' cross-dressing serves to signify his moral turpitude. The moment we discover Norman wears women's dresses is also the moment in which we realise he is a psychotic cold-blooded killer. The film tells us: gender ambiguity is evil. In the case of lesbians portrayed as having androgynous qualities, a case which is particularly relevant in terms of this research, Dyer (1993) underlines how they are usually represented as dangerous and threatening

characters parading a 'malignant lesbian power'. Similarly, analysing the representation of sexuality in the film *Rebecca* (1940), Benerstein (1995) argues that a parallel is drawn between lesbianism, ambiguity and evil, all of which find important signifiers in clothing. Although none of the characters is explicitly described as homosexual, the clothes of each, in their own way, symbolise gender ambiguity, which in turn hints at a threatening, sinister and ambiguous sexuality. Rebecca combines feminine and masculine elements. Benerstein (1995) notes how Mrs. Denvers, her devoted housekeeper and presumably also secret lover, states that “she had the courage and the spirit of a boy” and that “she ought to have been a boy”. Even her husband once remarks that “she looked like a boy in her sailing kit, a boy with a face like a Botticelli angel”. As the story progresses she is stereotypically revealed as “monstrous, diseased, nonreproductive, destructive, unnatural, masculine and a men hater” (Berenstein 1995: 255). Mrs. Denvers herself, gloomy and severe, “dressed entirely in black [...] haunts Manderley's hallways” (Berenstein 1995: 252), and ultimately, blinded by her abnormal and perverse devotion to the late Rebecca, ends up burning the entire manor. Finally, White (1995) underlines how across the 40s, 50s and 60s queer actors were usually relegated to asexual supporting roles.

In all of these instances, the homosexual and androgynous characters found in mainstream representations are again almost exclusively upper class and/or extremely well mannered and, even more markedly, white. Following what argued by Dyer (1993) about the cultural discourse of race, on one side these characters are used to create spine-chilling fiction, while being at the same time blamed for the 'abnormal' sexuality, which is portrayed as intrinsic to an androgynous appearance. On the other side, their widespread representation is made possible by precisely their whiteness, in a binary where white stands for 'order', 'rationality' and 'rigidity', while black signifies 'disorder' and 'looseness' (Dyer 1993: 145).

If in dominant culture, over the decades, androgynous attires have been associated with evil and doom, used to distinguish people with non-traditional sexualities and to mark

them as negative examples, the development of underground culture, as a silent parallel history, had been gradually negotiating different kinds of meanings and representations. During the late 1960s, 1970s and early 1980s emerged a wave of predominately male androgyny that played with the line between femininity and masculinity and resisted dominant ideas about appropriateness and morality.

In the 1960s' New York underground scene, a powerful example is represented by Andy Warhol's rejection of traditional masculinity through the use of particular clothes, wigs, bags, make-up, as well as his work with trans-women from disadvantaged backgrounds which elevated them to the status of superstars, without forgetting his own occasional cross-dressing. Glam rock hit 1970s Britain with a wave of androgynous male musicians, among which David Bowie as Ziggy Stardust, who wore platform heels, glitter and garish camp outfits. As Auslander (2006) notes:

By asserting the performativity of gender and sexuality through the queer Ziggy Stardust persona, Bowie challenged both the conventional sexuality of rock culture and the concept of foundational sexual identity (Auslander 2006: 106).

Even though women's androgynous style did not gain the same amount of cultural prominence, we cannot forget to mention how, during the 70s, feminists often adopted an androgynous style characterised by “flat shoes, baggy trousers, unshaven legs and faces bare of make-up” a look meant to “combine practicality with a strong statement about not dressing for men” (Blackman and Perry 1990: 68). It must also be noted, however, that this style was more about anti-fashion rather than fashion, which was perceived as an evil of patriarchal capitalism.

After the 1970s, more openly-gay people started to work in the creative industries, and over the years, and increasing number of independent music and film festivals have publicly tackled issues of representation and homophobia (Creekmur and Doty 1995). During these decades, the previously-mentioned forms of androgyny rising from the margins have been blurring the lines between legitimate culture and counter culture, and

subversive examples of gender ambiguity were able to gain large-scale positive recognition in youth culture. The popular fashions of those years as well developed increasingly unisex styles, and, for example, trousers and trouser-suits became a staple in fashionable women's dress (Watt 2012). However, the popularity of more androgynous styles was mostly due to their spectacularity and shock value; the adult mainstream fashion of the time, as a matter of fact, never completely embraced androgyny and fluid gender roles the way alternative culture did. For example, while the 1980s welcomed androgynous celebrities like Boy George or Grace Jones, their styles were mostly admired for their novelty and eccentricity and were not replicated by ordinary people in ordinary life. The punk phenomenon, in fact, Barnard (2002: 136) states, emerged precisely as a reaction to the fashion and culture of the 1970s, perceived as still too safe, boring and bourgeois. Punk style, for its part, allowed men and women to wear openly tasteless and outrageous outfits, with often little difference between the genders, before being appropriate itself by the dominant aesthetics as 'punk chic', and turned 'harmless' (ibid.). PVC fabrics, safety pins, ripped clothes, and spiked and neon-coloured hair, for instance, were worn indiscriminately by either gender.

The under-represented segment of female androgyny instead witnessed a reborn attention in the second half of the 1980s and the 1990s. Stein (1995) talks about a strand of androgynous female singers (e.g. Tracy Chapman or Melissa Etheridge but also Sinead O' Connor or Grace Jones) who proved to be able to gain commercial success while using their look to transcend conventional definitions of white femininity. On the other hand, however, she argues that gender ambiguity and lesbian symbols represented themselves a short-cut to fame; actual lesbianism, similarly to what happened decades earlier, was never publicly taken into account, and any reference to it had to be silenced. The same mechanism can also be identified in the world of marketing and advertising, especially with regard to fashion. Gender ambiguity, tinged with lesbianism, became a means through which the fashion industry was able to open new profitable markets, but only insofar as it remained ambiguous, without any open discussion of matters of sexuality. Clark (1991) points out how:

In fashion magazines such as *Elle* and *Mirabella*, and in mail-order catalogues such as *Tweeds*, *J. Crew*, and *Victoria's Secret*, advertisers (whether knowingly or not) are capitalizing on a dual market strategy that packages gender ambiguity and speaks, at least indirectly, to the lesbian consumer market (Clark 1991: 186)

She also stresses that the lesbian target segment only included that part of the lesbian population which is “predominantly white, predominantly childless, middle-class [and] educated” (Clark 1991: 186). Moreover, this approach never completely erased the heterosexual point of view, which still remains the norm:

Lesbian readers [...] know that they are not the primary audience for mainstream advertising, that androgyny is a fashionable and profitable commodity, and that the fashion models in these ads are quite probably heterosexual (Clark 1991: 188).

During the 1990s, unisex and androgyny were the biggest trends on fashion catwalks. According to Arnold (2001) however the anonymity of this style only served to accentuate differences of gender. Moreover, the predominance of clean shapes and spotless total white as the prevailing colour on the runways can be seen as hinting once more at the cultural dynamic described by Dyer (1993), in which white signifies cleanness and hygiene while black stands for dirt, with dangerous implications in terms of race, but also class. In fact, as Skeggs (2004) underlines quoting Haylett (2001), even among white people, not everyone is white in the same way, “there is pure white and dirty white” (Skeggs 2004: 91), and working-class white is turned into an illegitimate 'other'.

Clark (1991) also talks about the phenomenon of female androgyny turning mainstream during the 1990s in terms of 'commodity lesbianism' and the problematic democratic assimilation of non-normative sexualities into the dominant discourse. A similar point is discussed by queer theorists associated with the anti-social turn (Bersani 1996, Edelman 2004, Halberstam 2008). Reflecting on the relationship between queer politics and the mainstream, they argue that the increasingly widespread visibility of queer people and symbols in culture is not matched by an equally widespread acceptance of alternative

forms of gender and sexuality. The disruptive power of queerness and its own intrinsic features are lost when it is democratically assimilated by dominant society, where the ideal queer becomes a gender-normal, respectably desexualised, middle-class, content individual embracing the dreams and the values of the heteronormative community (Bersani 1996, Edelman 2004, Love 2007).

This tension between greater mainstream visibility and the repression of queerness' unsettling potential emerges as a constant in examples of popular culture even the 1990s, throughout the 2000s and in the present day. Focusing again on the particularly relevant case of female androgyny in the contemporary context, Reed (2011) interprets Ellen Degeneres's own androgyny as a post-gay lesbianism that erases lesbian sexuality. Ellen, Reed argues, is completely desexualised and, after coming out as a lesbian, moves beyond gay, in order to appeal to the liberal heterosexual public that is open to homosexuality as long as it does not disturb heteronormativity. Dove-Viebahn (2011) talks about the fashionable normativity of the highly-stylised lesbian characters in *The L Word*, and, citing Dittmar, (1998) states:

Through lesbian chic, a fashionable alternative that rendered common markers of a minority identity mainstream, lesbians are cunningly redefined to fit the parameters of a suburban, middle-class ideal of normalcy and decency (Dove-Viebahn 2011: 76).

Finally, Gever (2003), noting again how androgynous and lesbian visibility only exists for those who are white and middle-class, argues that ambiguity is still used as a marketing tool and no unambiguous reference to lesbianism can yet be found in the mainstream. Passing through years of homophobia, silence and being turned into a spectacle, thus, from the years 2000s, androgyny starts witnessing a process of severe normalisation and assimilation into dominant society and culture.

## **Fashion and Sociological Investigation: Dress and Style as Markers of Class**

A major theme in the investigation of the androgyny trend concerns the field of fashion. Although fashion and style do not represent a classic focus of traditional sociology and are still, arguably, a neglected topic, we have just seen that the history of androgynous clothing reveals an intricate web of social implications. Far from being frivolous, trivial and unprofound, as even several of its early theorists hint, it is now accepted that fashion is not only one of the most prominent, palpable and pervasive attitudes of our contemporary society, but also a highly politically and ideologically charged arena in which, as we are about to see, major social issues find expression. In fashion, in fact, on a daily basis and through something as apparently innocent as the adoption of different styles and particular garments, our social condition is reflected, identities are negotiated, and inequality reproduced and legitimated. I intend now to demonstrate the sociological significance of studies of fashion, while arguing for a specific pathway in its exploration.

While, in recent years, fashion theory and sociological accounts of fashion are expanding, theoretical discussions that look at the relationship between fashion and class are arguably declining. Insightful studies have emerged examining how clothing styles relate to current issues of gender, sexuality, ethnicity, the body, religion and so on, giving the field a new depth and new potential for social change. Class still figures in present-day inquiries as one of the chief topics in both the sociological and the fashion theory traditions. Its application in discussions about contemporary Western society and mainstream culture, however, has drastically declined.

The concept of social class is now commonly used to talk about, for example, the cult of luxury items such as particular designer handbags, or the social significance of clothing among the nineteenth century working class, or in contemporary Asian markets (see for example Jones 2003, Richmond 2013, Boyd 2014). Moreover, fashion theorists Crane (2000) and Yuniya Kawamura (2005) note how a shift has occurred from class fashion to consumer fashion, mirroring social class becoming more secondary and also less

evident in fashion matters. While, as we have seen, class was frequently mentioned in several arguments about moments in the history of androgynous fashion, it rarely becomes a central unit of analysis. In this sense, I intend now to show the how early fashion theories, which explain its economic dynamics in nineteenth century Western countries focusing on class, can, despite many limitations, still provide fertile ground for new sociological research.

Let us now look more in detail at what classic studies of fashion, in particular those of Thorstein Veblen (1899) and Georg Simmel (1904), can teach us, and how they can be implemented in contemporary sociological investigations of clothing and fashion. A key salient feature common to classic studies of the sociological aspects of clothing is the idea of fashion as imitation. Moreover, early theorists such as Veblen (1899), Tarde (1903) and Simmel (1904) all explain fashion in economic terms, drawing connections between clothes and social position. Class, therefore, plays the leading role in such interpretations. According to these authors, a primary function of clothing is that of distinguishing and differentiating social classes, enabling people to express membership and belonging to particular groups, and, at the same time, to exclude other people from said groups. Here the concept of imitation comes into play, as, in order to gain access to the desired social groups, and social acceptance in general, people from the lower strata are seen as imitating the fashions of the more privileged.

Veblen, in particular, talks about clothing in terms of a satiric critique of the leisure class of his days (late nineteenth century society in the U.S.A.), and its conspicuous leisure and consumption. He sees the latter as a demonstration of wealth and power, in the form of capacity to purchase and freedom from labour, of the upper classes:

Refined tastes, manners, and habits of life are a useful evidence of gentility, because good breeding requires time, application, and expense, and can therefore not be compassed by those whose time and energy are taken up with work (Veblen 2005: 26).

In this sense, fashion becomes a way of showing off: a social performance intended to

mark one's distance from those perceived as social inferiors, and, at the same time, also a means for the lower classes in the social hierarchy to imitate and emulate the higher ones, making styles spread. According to Veblen, this phenomenon is not only characteristic of the Western world of his time, but can be found across geographically and historically diverse cultures and societies based on a class system.

Unlike Veblen, Simmel takes the topic of fashion more seriously, and, avoiding the American author's ironic approach, treats fashion as a meaningful socio-cultural phenomenon instead of merely criticising it as an odious waste. However, in line with Veblen's theory, Simmel discusses how aesthetic choices in clothing are governed by a desire for social imitation and differentiation. He sees this phenomenon as one in which social classes chase after one another in a vertical manner. Those from the higher classes are the ones who come up with styles, which people from the class immediately below start copying, and so on descending the social structure. Eventually, those at the top move to new styles in order to maintain their privilege and to preserve social distinction, making fashion progress.

Other contemporaries of Veblen and Simmel, such as Gabriel Tarde (1903), William Graham Sumner (1906) and Ferdinand Toennies (1909) (cited by Kawamura 2005; 2011), mention fashion and costume in the context of imitation and distinction among social groups. We can therefore stress the way in which early theorisations of fashion from the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century all agree about the unyielding connection that links fashion with social class, and highlight how preferences in clothing feed on the stratified character of society.

The analyses of early theorists like Veblen and Simmel have the merit of having opened up the whole new field of fashion theory, which before them, was virtually unexplored. They have drawn attention to how styles of clothing can be interpreted as significant expressions of social life, and as carrying important implications beyond merely material, aesthetic, anthropological and psychological ones. A whole strand of

subsequent research, theories and studies in academic but also non-academic contexts, have used, expanded and re-elaborated Simmel and Veblen's thoughts, and many others are still being inspired by them. Nevertheless it cannot be denied that both interpretations carry an undeniable series of problems and limitations.

First of all, the positions of both Veblen and Simmel have been criticised for their excessively deterministic and simplistic quality (see for example Davis 1993, Wilson 1985, Crane 2000). For instance, Veblen talks about how the rich adopt objectively ugly styles. According to him, this happens since clothes are not used for material functions like protection or modesty, and are not selected for their aesthetic quality. Instead they function, primarily, as an indication of wealth and social position, to the extent that people prefer to “go ill clad in order to appear well dressed” (Veblen, 1899: 168). As a consequence, they come to perceive grotesque clothes as beautiful, as long as they are expensive. Dress, in this sense, functions ultimately and inescapably as proof of one's monetary value and, as a consequence, as a marker of class, to which every social group subdues.

Analogously, Simmel talks about how fashion as a “product of class distinction” (1904:544) satisfies the human tendency towards passive imitation unifying through style those belonging to the same class, and that towards differentiation excluding other classes. This phenomenon triggers the so-called trickle-down theory, explained above.

The position of Veblen, but also that of Simmel, are pervaded by the underlying ideas that there is no explanation for fashion outside of social stratification, that every decision about clothing is fundamentally one about belonging to, or being excluded from, one social group or the other, and finally, there there is no alternative use of dress (e.g. for resistance or as erotic) and no escape from this process.

Another major criticism to the works of Simmel and Veblen concerns the concept of gender, and their ideas regarding women and femininity. It must be noted that, as it

emerges from the reading of their works, both theorists recognise the male supremacy in society, and both appear hostile against the sexism of their time. In fact, the North American sociologist addresses the question of the differences between the sexes in terms of clothing and their roles within society, inquiring about the reasons behind their existence. He also explains the socio-political inferiority of the female sex stressing the historical contingencies that have brought it about and confined women to a status of chattels and vicarious agents, subsidiary to their husband's conspicuous consumption. Furthermore, talking about women's roles in relation to particular forms of leisure and consumption, Veblen ascribes these in part to an “imperative conventionality” which “is [...] strongest where the patriarchal tradition – the tradition that the woman is a chattel – has retained its hold in greatest vigour” (Veblen 2005: 45).

In a similar manner, the German critic, as noted by Carter (2003), questions common stereotypes about women's weakness, describing it a social weakness, explained not as an effect of their frivolous nature, but rather as a disadvantaged historical condition to which they are condemned. Veblen and Simmel do thereby include women in their analyses of society, and see their inferior role, the unpractical dresses they had to wear, their specialised consumption of goods and so on, as an unfortunate expression of it; for this reason, it is possible for us not to dismiss their theories all together as obsolete and offensive, and still use them as foundations for a contemporary reflection on fashion that has women's clothes as its central focus. However, we cannot ignore the fact that they are still fundamentally sexist in a way that cannot be fully justified by the period in which they are writing. From the writings of Veblen and Simmel emerges the influence of a Darwinian perspective, based on notions of natural species, adaptation, and evolution applied to the unfolding of fashion and cultural processes. In this sense, the condition of women, despite resulting from unfavourable social and historical developments, is seen as the outcome of an evolutionary process, and thereby as natural and not unreasonable. Women, in fact, lack essentially masculine qualities, such as aggressiveness, agility and force, and this lack has naturally led to the state of things (Veblen, 1899). For this reason, neither of the two authors even takes into consideration

the idea of doing something to change the situation, nor predicts such a change.

Moreover, although women are indeed present, and also given considerable attention in their studies of fashion, both Veblen and Simmel arguably fail to produce a valid account of femininity. According to Veblen, women are basically property of their husbands, similar to servants, invested with the subsidiary duty of vicarious consumption and morally forbidden to indulge in conspicuous one themselves. Their impractical clothings, with their bonnets and crinolines, reflect this. Simmel, on his part, underlines women's propensity for fashion, describing it in terms of their tendency to avoid differentiation and to embrace the average. "A weak person steers clear of individualization", he writes (Simmel, 1957 [1904]: 550). As Entwistle (2000) denounces, accounts of this kind are now outdated in that they leave no space for women's agency, and describe fashion as a paralysing agent that reinforces their oppression and passivity. In Veblen and Simmel's texts, women appear as weak individuals who, enslaved by their social impotence, conform and adhere blindly to the most impractical and ugly fashions of the moment. No space is left for scenarios in which women are not servile wives (no other role is in fact discussed) following fashion for the reputation of their husbands and households, albeit in an admittedly unjust patriarchal society. If matters of gender, as we have seen, are treated in a very questionable and definitely problematic way, other social categories are ignored all together: age, sexuality, and most notably, race and ethnicity do not feature at all. Simmel and Veblen's accounts are ethnocentric ones, where fashion is treated as a Western-only phenomenon. In this regard, Jennifer Craik (1994) and Sandra Niessen (2003) underline how according to Simmel and other key scholars of dress, non-Western clothing is unfairly described as traditional and fixed and therefore as non-fashion.

A final crucial inadequacy of classic theories of fashion can be found in the methodological sphere. When Veblen describes the conspicuous consumption of the leisure class and the characteristics of the *nouveau riche* in satiric terms, and when

Simmel explains how classes chase after the latest fashions invented by their social superiors, they are both speaking in an essentially speculative manner. “Classical theorists gave mostly an intuitive and anecdotal observation of fashion providing no empirical evidence to support their theories” acknowledges Kawamura (2005:28). Even though there are subsequent empirical studies, both quantitative and qualitative, conducted by a multitude of different researchers influenced by Simmel and Veblen's arguments about fashion, we cannot ignore how their own work was carried out applying notions of evolutionism to the cultural and economic reality of their time, without conducting any actual empirical research. The works of these two key fashion theorists therefore offer useful concepts for a theoretical framework, however they lack a coherent methodological foundation, and therefore methodological viability.

The classic theories of fashion by Veblen and Simmel have been, and still are, indeed deeply influential. But, after having considered the several major issues they have, issues that undeniably complicate their relationship with present day sociological inquiries, can they still be seen as relevant in contemporary times? It is now hard to think about a serious analysis of fashion, let alone a feminist one, that does not recognise, tackle and expose the effects of asymmetric power relations in matters of gender, sexuality, age, class, race and ethnicity, and intersections between them. Do classic studies that, as we have seen, are so lacking in this respect, still matter today? What can we learn from them?

Veblen and Simmel have the merit of having moved the discussion of dress, fashion and style into the social context. As underlined by Carter (2003), they have shown how choices of dress, instead of being arbitrary expressions of individual, personal and psychological impulses, have a prominent social dimension. Through Veblen and Simmel's analyses we are able to explore the way clothing styles can be grouped in terms of particular features, and can be found disseminated across society in a precise manner. Some groups of people adopt particular types of clothing, while other groups adopt different ones, sometimes similar, sometimes completely different. These styles

are not picked in a neutral way, but instead according to specific criteria, which, rather than being fixed through time, constantly change and transform, reflecting wider social relations. In this regard, we can say that the two authors played a key role in establishing fashion as an important site for the investigation of large-scale social processes. The most significant contribution of classic theories of fashion, which can provide a prolific framework for new research, however, coincides with their biggest limitation: the pervasive focus on class.

On the one hand, as we have seen, Veblen and Simmel's attention to the connection between clothing and social stratification has confined their interpretation of fashion to an explanation that is too narrow-minded, mechanistic and oversimplified, and cannot account for the diverse contemporary socio-cultural scenario. On the other hand, however, the application of these early economic theories allows us to reinstate the central position of matters of class in studies of fashion. Recent contributions have tended to pay attention to social issues that had been previously ignored or understudied, while, in the study of today's consumerist culture, class has now been supplanted by consumption as an analytical concept in fashion. I argue, however, the understanding of fashion as profoundly concerned with class relations still needs to inform new studies.

Things are indeed more complicated than what emerges from the readings of Veblen and Simmel. Let us think for example about the concept of imitation of the attire of the higher classes by those of the lower ones. This 'trickle down' model has been now quite widely criticised. Herbert Blumer (1969), for example, replaces the functionalist 'trickle down' explanation, which sees fashion as operating in mysterious and uncontrollable ways, with one that focuses on a process of 'collective selection'. Although Blumer's account pays less attention to the dimension of class, it provides valuable insights on how fashion is constituted through choices that are the outcome of social and cultural dynamics between key groups of individuals in the fashion industry: a perspective which also opens up an interesting space for a discussion of the role of different kinds of

fashion intermediaries as key players in the unfolding of fashion itself.

Studies concerned with working-class cultures and subcultures (see for example Dick Hebdige, 1979), moreover, contrast the idea that styles are invented by people from the higher classes and copied by those of the lower ones, and explore the way in which the styles of social groups that are lower in the social hierarchy often give birth to new fashions for the elites ('bottom-up' model of fashion diffusion). More recently, Davis (1992) and Crane (2000) argue that neither of the 'trickle down' and the 'bottom-up' models can actually account for the complex ways in which fashion spreads in the present day world. Entwistle (2009) and Aspers (2011) underline how contemporary fashion circulation is fast, extremely variable and dependant upon various different factors. There is now a great multiplicity of actors who play a role in the process of symbolic valorisation of cultural objects, from designers and journalists, to models (Entwistle 2009), buyers (ibid.) and photographers (Aspers 2006). Such valorisation is highly fluctuating and fashion products, but also fashion bodies, as underlined by Entwistle (2000, 2009), change from fashionable to unfashionable at an extremely fast rate. Moreover, in accordance with Entwistle (2009) and Aspers (2011), I would also like to stress how such dynamics, through which aesthetic value in fashion markets is created, are more than ever dependant upon unstable symbolic and cultural processes that cannot be simply explained through economic models. These are all aspects that need to be taken into account when dealing with contemporary fashion phenomena. My own analysis, in this sense, will underline the fast-changing quality of today's fashion world, as well as the variety of actors and processes that shape symbolic relations of aesthetic and cultural value within the fashion industry. This will be done paying special attention to the different kinds of fashion intermediaries that characterise the current fashion scene, such as, for example, different kind of fashion bloggers, and particular practices of active, and creative, symbolic consumption.

Nevertheless, while Veblen's and Simmel's concept of imitation from below and their 'top-down' theories might not apply well to the study of contemporary fashion

circulation trajectories and need to be re-elaborated, the idea of the transformation of money into status through the adoption of particular styles, and that of clothing as a marker of social distinction are very much current. The conceptual framework provided by Veblen's and Simmel's understanding of the link that ties fashion and class at the social level, can therefore be used to think about what contemporary fashions have to say about processes of social inclusion and exclusion and relations of superiority and inferiority on the basis of class belonging. Even though social class is no longer commonly seen as a key feature of fashion, there are in fact present-day clothing styles with undeniable connotations of class such as the preppy, originally from the USA, or the typically-British chav.

This kind of approach has also been further developed by Bourdieu (1984), whose contribution will be explored more in detail in the next chapter. Despite sharing similar limitations to those of Veblen and Simmel (most strikingly, the lack of consideration of gender, and his determinism and utilitarian biases), Bourdieu reinstates, in a more sophisticated manner, how different cultural tastes, for example in the field of fashion, correspond to different social classes, and are used to compete for status and for the reproduction of inequality through processes of symbolic violence. Together with Bourdieu's contribution to the area, Veblen and Simmel's theorisations of fashion provide an insightful perspective from which to analyse dynamics of class associated with the adoption of particular styles, and related practices of social stigmatisation and distinction on the basis of dress.

At this point, I have illustrated the main object of my research and its aims, and have provided a brief outline of the recent socio-cultural history from which the new androgyny has emerged. Finally, in this last section, I examined the legacy of classic economic theorists of fashion, namely Veblen and Simmel, in order to assess their potentialities for contemporary sociological research. First, I have identified the common traits shared by early accounts of clothing and style in the understanding of fashion as imitation and its aims of class distinction. Then, I analysed the limitations of

the two authors, underlining the key criticisms that can be moved against them, and discussed their applicability for a feminist study like mine. We have seen how despite the significant issues regarding problems of excessively simplistic and deterministic explanations, misunderstanding of women's relationship to fashion and class and masculine biases, as well as omissions of other social categories, and methodological difficulties, such problems do not invalidate their positions. I have argued that the contributions of Simmel and Veblen do indeed still matter and can also profitably inform new research on the subject. In fact, I have talked about how Veblen and Simmel's extensive attention to social class and their idea of fashion being ultimately concerned with it, although on the one hand it restricts their contemporary relevance, on the other hand, represents their most significant legacy. While tackling and investigating asymmetrical relationships of power in the field of fashion, the seminal theories of Veblen and Simmel can be used to further investigate the underdeveloped relationship between class and present-day style. By looking at connotations of class present in contemporary fashion, it is possible to explore important patterns in the reproduction of inequality across the social structure. By demonstrating the sociological relevance of classic theories of dress and clothing, I also stress the theoretical importance of fashion, as a serious unit of analysis. Fashion is deeply rooted in the social sphere and a highly useful concept in its study.

### **Outlining the Chapters**

Departing from this introduction, which has defined the principal focus of my study, and the relationships among its key concepts, the thesis unfolds as follows:

#### *Chapter 2 - Aesthetics Through Ideology, Class, and Gender: Theoretical Underpinnings*

This chapter constructs the theoretical structure upon which the research rests. First, I define gender in terms of its relationship with the human body, through the Foucauldian

concept of internalised political power. In the wake of gender theorist Judith Butler's (1990, 1993) and queer theorist Jack Halberstam's (1998) contributions, the performatively gendered body is considered in terms of its potential for challenging gender through gender itself. The body is also discussed as a key site of sensuous and affective aesthetic experience, while the concept of affect is further explored in relation to the politics of emotion (Ahmed 2004, 2010; Berlant 2006). A focus on the affective and sensuous body is also the way in which, following Marxist theorist Eagleton's (1990) arguments, I state that the appreciation of beauty has come to acquire an ideological role in the silent imposition of class interests. Here the attention shifts to the question of aesthetic taste as a marker of class distinction with an examination of Bourdieu's (1984) legacy. I explain how his approach opens up a definition of class that concentrates on cultural rather than merely economic determinants, and also consider its limitations. In particular, I stress that while his work helps to highlight the crucial role that class still plays today, Skeggs' (1997, 2012) studies show how the sphere of affect and emotions is a very prominent feature of contemporary gendered class relations, which cannot be overlooked, especially when dealing with the sensuous concept of aesthetics. Again drawing from Skeggs, but also Bennett (2011), I also raise the question of the adequacy of Bourdieu's account of the working class, underlining how it deprives it of any form of redemption from, or positive reaction to, its disadvantage, especially in the field of cultural appreciation. In this regard, I also introduce the idea of an aesthetic reaction to ideological positions of class and gender, in contrast to 'true' and legitimate forms of beauty traditionally associated with the privileged end of society.

### *Chapter 3 – Investigating the New Androgyny: Methodology and Methods*

In this chapter I discuss the methodology and methods employed throughout the research. I show how a combination of semiotics and discourse analysis of material produced by different kinds of fashion intermediaries and bloggers, as well as of audience reactions to them, is used to produce data that enable me to tackle the question of the social implications behind the androgyny trend, from the point of view of both fashion intermediaries and the audiences. In this regard, I explain who fashion

intermediaries are and who, in the contemporary scene, can be considered one. I also discuss how they can be classified and categorised, while hinting at the differences that exist among them in terms of factors like expertise, authority, value, and influence.

Then, I consider: where do audiences stand in the age of online communication, to what extent, can their voice be compared to that of actual cultural intermediaries, and how can it be effectively accounted for?

In terms of methods, I explain how, through semiotics, I am able to uncover sets of patterns and themes within the representation of androgynous styles in the fashion media. Then, I show how discourse analysis helps me to take into account people's actual relations with such images, and thus to re-interpret the conception that the images create. I also introduce an experimental ethnography based on street style photography as a method of research, and describe why and how translating this prominent phenomenon in contemporary mainstream fashion into a research tool allows me to investigate the aesthetics of androgyny from the perspective of ordinary culture in everyday life.

In addition to a discussion of how the different methods enable me to collect the appropriate data to support my thesis, this chapter defines the philosophical underpinnings of these methods and my reflexive position as the researcher. I explain why my study is a qualitative feminist one, why this particular kind of enquiry is needed, as well as how my experience in the fashion world has shaped my approach, and also clarify the methodological tenets of visual research.

#### *Chapter 4 – Mapping the Themes: Representation and Androgyny as a Trend*

After having set out the context of my research, with chapter 4 I start engaging with the actual analysis. This first analysis chapter paints a general picture of fashion intermediaries' representation of androgyny as a trend. Through the semiotic analysis of selected images from different well-known sources, I identify recurring themes and patterns and investigate their ideological meanings. Five main motifs are grouped as follows: (I) Affluent Lifestyle, (II) Minimalist Refinement and the Domestic Ideal, (III) The Heterosexual Wife and the Sophisticated Femme Fatale, (IV) Rebellion and

Resistance, (V) The Alien and the Work of Art. Examples of the first group show how androgyny is used to evoke an image of well-off, educated elite masculinity, and a closed circle of privilege, which the small number of women who are capable of doing androgyny in the right way can have access to. The second equates androgyny with genderlessness and the restraint of sexuality, which in turn are equated with respectability through an image of the well-mannered traditional femininity associated with middle-class culture. The wife and the woman as a man's counterpart, who borrows her partners' masculine clothes and occasionally declines into an elegant seductress, constitute the third group, while in the fourth, we find examples of androgynous and alternative femininity that are presented as resisting the norm but ultimately still reside within its reassuring walls. Finally, the fifth theme, symbolised by the figure of the alien, and characterised by an artistic feel, shows a more unconventional representation of gender ambiguity, which can be seen as a step away hegemonic gender roles, but, nevertheless, ends up constructing androgyny as a problematic and possibly hostile 'other'.

This preliminary chapter works as a map of how my main object of study is portrayed in mainstream culture. Through a detailed discussion of examples, I point out how such representations, instead of moving away from oppressive traditional fashion imagery, as it is presented to do, reproduces old patterns of power and, consequently, class and gender-based inequality.

#### *Chapter 5 – Pulling Off the Androgyny Trend: The Androgynous Body?*

This chapter deals more closely with the concept of the body, which features throughout the whole thesis. Here, I return to the mediated trend of androgyny described in Chapter 4 in order to consider what kind of bodies are able to pull it off, and whether these can be called androgynous bodies. While, until this point, I have looked at the connections between dress and particular social realities, I now place the attention on the mediatory entity of the body, considering which kind of gendered, raced and classed bodies are produced through this specific type of clothing.

In the first part, through an analysis of a varied selection of examples, I show in what

sense bodily change and transformation are constitutive features of the androgyny trend. I investigate the construction of the new androgyny from the point of view of body technologies and cultivation in contemporary culture, which leads, in a climactic crescendo, to the conception of the androgynous body as futuristic cyborg femininity. After introducing the theme of the cold trans-human machine, a second part explores the androgynous body as the warm source of emotions and feelings, and inspects the affective links between it and manifestations of the trend. First I look at how fashion is often described and commented upon with words that suggest a moral assessment which connects the clothes and their wearers, and finally explore the affective and transformative relations between images of 'androgynous' bodies and the 'real' bodies of bloggers.

*Chapter 6 -The Re-mediation of the Androgyny Trend. Blogs, Legitimation Struggles and Affective Negotiations*

While in Chapter 4, I explored dominant mainstream representations, and in Chapter 5, focusing on the body, I began to show the complexities that surround fashion bloggers' take on the androgyny trend, opening up questions about their intermediate and ambivalent role, with this chapter, I conduct a more in depth analysis on the figure of the blogger.

Through the study of selected blog posts, along with readers' comments to such posts, I investigate in what sense the medium of the blog operates as a new space that bridges between mass communication and its public.

The chapter starts with an analysis of the bloggers' struggle over legitimacy and authority in the fashion industry. The discussion of this point is divided into two sections, both of which focus on how clothing represents a key means of inclusion and exclusion. In the first one, I examine a mixture of corporate and independent blogs to define the characteristics of the fashion-insider's look and observe how different kinds of bloggers relate to it. In the second one, I focus instead on the look of the outsider, and consider how the blog can become an affective space of resistance to dominant taste.

These two sections also highlight the link that exists between the particular way of

dressing that distinguishes fashion insiders from the outsiders and the one associated with the new androgyny.

I then highlight the role of the fashion blogger as an intermediate cultural intermediary and in relation to the wider audiences. On the one hand, thanks to their intimate, friendly and informal way of talking about the trend, bloggers are able to offer new interpretations outside of the dominant discourses. Androgynous fashion is, in such a way, reconnected to everyday scenarios and ordinary people, undergoing, at the same time, symbolic transformations and creative manipulations. On the other hand, I draw attention to the reasons why it is not possible to equate the perspective of bloggers to that of the general public. Despite the fact that bloggers' presentation of androgyny are personal, autobiographical and articulated through self-expression, their dependence upon external legitimation and their ambivalent relationship with the fashion industry, ultimately comes between them and the wider audiences.

*Chapter 7 –Engaging/Disengaging with Androgyny and Reconfiguring the Trend: Affective Online Interaction*

In chapters 5, 6 and 7, the understanding of androgyny as a fashion trend is progressively examined in juxtaposition to the discursive and emotional reactions of the audiences to this aesthetic experience. At the same time, these three chapters start laying the bricks that constitute the argument of Chapter 8, which looks at androgynous style from a perspective that is diametrically opposite to that of the initial analysis chapter which looked at media representation: that of fashion photographed on the street.

With this chapter and the following one, I draw attention to the role played by the audiences in the shaping of contemporary androgynous fashion, highlighting their relationships with the trend and the implications of such relationships.

At first, I focus on the particular case in which there is a direct engagement between members of the public, fashion communication professionals, and the product of their work. In this regard, through the analysis of interaction on official social media channels, I study to what extent it is possible to observe a rather straightforward

connection between the encoded and the decoded messages that make up the dominant understanding of the new androgyny. With reference to Berlant's (2011) concept of cruel optimism I show how, in the context of this kind of direct audience engagement, androgynous fashion becomes a form of investment, regardless of differences among audience segments.

Here, I focus especially on the example of a regular *Grazia* feature entitled “You, the fashion jury, VOTE!” which asks people to judge celebrity and street-style outfits on *Grazia's Facebook* page, for a chance for their comment to be published in the magazine alongside those of the “experts”. Through a discussion of this case, I show how fashion magazines (not only *Vogue*, the 'fashion bible', but also less pretentious weeklies) appear to invite women to internalise dominant standards of taste and use them, in turn, to judge others, and also explore different audience responses.

Finally, the chapter examines forms of indirect engagement, where members of the public are able to make sense of the androgynous trend using the materials filtered through by mainstream intermediaries without, however, directly interacting with them. Here I underline how the very aesthetics of the androgyny trend is transformed through people's engagement with it.

#### *Chapter 8 – Street Style: Symbolic Play and Androgynous Creativity*

At this point I have established that, on the one hand, the current trend of androgyny reproduces the gender binary and class hierarchies, while justifying heteronormativity and racism, but, on the other, it also gives rise to a whole set of affective responses outside of the dominant intended readings, which become an integral part of the phenomenon, and shape its own development.

This final chapter of analysis, examines how both resistance to the oppressive character of the androgyny trend, and a new aesthetics of androgynous fashion can spring from individual people's relationships with it in the contexts of popular culture and everyday life. The analysis reflects on a diverse set of data collected as the result of a one-month long experimental fieldwork that focuses on sensory experience (the sense of smell in the form of perfume is here included alongside vision to make sense of different

perceptions of the androgyny trend) and affective responses to androgynous fashion in everyday life. Adopting street style photography, which is itself a big trend in today's fashion scene, as a tool, and a method of research, I explore the way in which the creative consumption of mass-produced fashion, as aesthetic taste displayed directly on the human body, together with sensuous and affective takes on taste, can give rise to a mainstream opposition to dominant culture, with regard to both class and gender.

### *Chapter 9 – Conclusion*

## **Chapter 2**

### **Aesthetics Through Ideology, Class and Gender: Theoretical Underpinnings**

#### **Introduction**

After illustrating the problems that my study tackles, and defining its different dimensions, this chapter constructs the theoretical structure upon which this thesis and my arguments about the androgyny trend in contemporary mainstream fashion rest. I present here a set of different theories, sometimes even seemingly irreconcilable one to the other, to elaborate a framework that guides me through a varied and multi-dimensional understanding of the contemporary fashion trend of androgyny. I would therefore like to start from the key notion of androgyny. Acknowledging it as the fusion of feminine and masculine characteristics, a first subject that presents itself as essential to discuss can be found in matters of gender identity and the critique of gender roles. More specifically, since I believe that the understanding of these issues cannot be separated from that of the body, even more so in the context of gender ambiguity, I will address it in relation to questions of bodily practices and embodiment. In this manner, I will be able to craft my definition of gender, which underlines how claims about masculine and feminine identities are both inscribed in and played out on the body, and discuss, at the same time, the ways in which this functions through the action of power, while also examining the disruptive potential of bodily practices of resistance.

Androgyny, not only within the sphere of fashion, but as a manifestation of gender as well, which I argue, is to be understood in relation to the body, would not make sense without reference to the field of vision. Therefore, given the very visual nature of the concept, as well as my own focus on its cultural, rather than for example psychological, dimension, I will use a discussion of aesthetics to complement the picture. The study of

contemporary androgynous fashion would be too reductive if we were to concentrate on a single aspect such as the gendered body or consumption. I believe that the phenomenon of the new androgyny, in fact, exists through the complex entanglement of different dynamics, which should all be seen as juxtaposed and taken into account both together and separately. The idea of aesthetics enables me to bridge often unrelated theoretical strands: with reference to aesthetics, I will expand the discussion of the role played by affect and emotions in relation to bodily and cultural experience, and also introduce that of class. If we interpret aesthetics through the angle of ideology, which, as we are about to see, is an intrinsic and very prominent part of it, the discourse inevitably turns to social class.

But does class still matter today? A good part of the contemporary media, politicians but also academics believe that if social classes are not yet dead, their significance is visibly declining. For example, Pakulski and Waters (1996) argue that class “[i]f it ever was real and salient, [...] it is no longer” (1996: 7). According to them, class has been an important historical reality, however, in advanced societies, ideologies, subcultures and identities related to it have decreased, if not all together disappeared. Accordingly, they encourage sociologists to stop explaining issues, from women's subordination to taste in terms of this dying/dead category. In contrast to such perspective, introducing her defence of the contemporary relevance of class, Lawler (2005a), talks about how political and industrial changes, as well as the increasingly fragmented nature of society (in relation to concepts such as gender, ethnicity, age and sexuality), have been wrongly used to explain the death of class. Moreover, she adds that the class structure and its repercussions have not disappeared at all, “[r]ather, the drawing of class distinctions is displaced and individualized” (Lawler 2005b: 110), and are is now manifested in symbolic and cultural processes of normalisation and pathologisation of specific individuals. Finally, she argues that, while conventional theories of class are of little help in the investigation of this phenomenon, Bourdieu can instead provide valuable support in this direction.

This chapter also aims to reinstate the theoretical importance of matters of class not only for sociological and cultural studies of fashion but also for feminist ones, which classic theories of class are often seen as having little to do with. I intend to show that class is in fact not dead at all. It could be less visible according to economic indicators, but class distinctions and inequality not only still manifestly pervade the cultural sphere, but are also reproduced through it on an everyday basis. Furthermore, as Lawler (2005b) also notes, gender is a key site for the creation and perpetuation of class difference, particularly in the form of classed femininities and classed masculinities. A crucial intent here, while bringing attention to how relevant and evident class still is in relation to particular aspects of culture and society, is that of focusing on how class is reinforced and how inequality is reproduced in the context of culture and matters of identity. We will see this through a critical exploration of Bourdieu's legacy, and its use by key theorists influenced by him. Finally, this theoretical discussion enables me to stress how important the dimension of class is also in terms of its relationship to aesthetics, especially if we are to consider the possibility of an aesthetic resistance to ideology that operates precisely through fashion.

### **Political, Gendered and Affective Bodies**

As I have mentioned, the theoretical grounding of fashionable androgyny, intended as gender ambiguity, cannot fail to include a discussion of gender and body politics that tackles the relationship between society and culture on the one hand, and issues of gender, sexuality and the body on the other, as well as key debates about resistance to the gender norms and the subversion of the binary division between femininity and masculinity.

Before discussing how Judith Butler's and Jack Halberstam's theories inform my theoretical framework, I find it important, first, to go back to Foucault's writings and consider their usefulness and limitations in regard to a feminist take like mine on

matters of gender.

Foucault's most significant contributions to the study of gender can be found in the argument that our understandings of bodies and sex are the result of power discourses (e.g. medical, religious, psychiatric, judicial. See Foucault 1973, 1977 and 1979). Let us consider this more closely. According to Foucault, the human body is not, like naturalistic explanations argue, a fixed material reality out there in the natural world, from which meanings about the self generate. On the contrary, it is power and power relations which give meaning, shape and ultimately invent the body. Such process, he believes, happens through discourse, which, acting upon individual bodies, comes to construct them as a whole. In the form of systems of ideas and beliefs, discourses have the power of constituting knowledge and producing what is then perceived as true. Entering the psychological discourse, for example, people practising the act of sodomy, start becoming constructed and widely identified as homosexuals. Three key things are implicated: sexual identities are not fixed, but fluid, and socially and historically specific; they are impressed into bodies and normalised by power discourses; and finally the figure of the “other”, or the “abnormal”, referring to those outside the norm, is created. This dynamic is made possible by the particular relation between knowledge, discourse and power. It is thanks to their conjoined action, in fact, that specific objects come to be constructed as the truth. In other words, discourse can be said to transform ideas into actual existing things, such as the gendered and sexualised bodies that populate our society.

While from the above-described views, and from much of Foucault's theorising, individuals emerge as passive beings, subjugated by the dominant discourse, his later concept of technologies of the self (Foucault 1988) reflects on the way in which people are able to police themselves and regulate their own bodies through practices of self development and self-cultivation. It must be noted, however, that this still resides within structures of power.

In the wake of Foucault's body of work, it appears important for any critical analysis of matters of gender and sexuality, to question knowledge about apparently normal and innocent things, in order to consider what is being produced, what interests are pursued, and how to resist this. With the adoption of Foucault's theories to define concepts in a contemporary feminist study, nevertheless, come also a few significant dilemmas. A key major problem of his work concerns precisely his approach to gender, or more accurately, his failure to approach it. When talking about the conception of the body as inseparable from discourse and the relationship between power and knowledge in the production of truth, as well as the way in which technologies of the self can act upon people's bodies, Foucault completely fails to take gender into consideration or even talk about the experience of women. For this reason, he has been frequently accused of sexist and androcentric biases. As Braidotti (1991) points out "Foucault never locates woman's body as the site of one of the most operational internal divisions in our society", and "the campaign against little boys' masturbation" gets more attention in his work than "the issues more closely linked to women and to female sexuality: pregnancy and birth control, but also lesbianism and feminist critiques of the family" (Braidotti 1991: 87). Braidotti underlines how Foucault's male-centred perspective induces him to avoid topics that would have very easily fitted into, but also enriched, his analysis of how bodies become sites for power negotiations through organised strategies. Similarly, McNay (1992) comments on the androcentric quality of the work of the French philosopher arguing that his gender blindness prevents him from taking gender into account as one of the key ways in which bodies are categorised in society. She also notes how he avoids talking about the differences that characterise women's and men's experiences in relation to power. Nevertheless, while stating that relationships with power are indeed gender specific, McNay also warns against separating them entirely, as the risk would be that of suggesting an intrinsic separation of the sexes.

On the one hand, it is indeed true that a contemporary analysis of power relations cannot ignore a crucial issue such as that of gender, and differences in gender certainly go hand in hand with different relationships with power. On the other hand, however,

Foucault's ideas have been proven very productive for feminist theorisation, thanks also to the neutrality of his writings on this matter, as noted by McNay (1992), which brought him not to endorse an essential separation of the male and the female; but also due their focus on the human body, traditionally associated with the female sphere, and for a long time neglected in male-led research.

A second important critique moved against Foucault, which is meaningful in regard to a feminist use of his work, regards the concepts of agency and resistance. His understanding of bodies as constituted through the action of power and discourse, and thus as fundamentally passive, can easily be seen as precluding individual capacity to act. Docile bodies are bodies that can be “subjected, used, transformed, and improved” (Foucault 1977: 136). McNay (1992) and Entwistle (2000) argue that since Foucault overlooks the issue of practice, he also falls short of explaining how power can be resisted.

Foucault [...] fails to give an adequate explanation of how resistance to discourse is possible. Rather he produces an account of bodies as the surveilled objects of power/knowledge (Entwistle 2000: 24).

As I have mentioned, in his later work, Foucault himself partially amends this problem, introducing the idea of techniques through which individuals act upon their own selves (it should be noted that these still, nevertheless, entail the internalisation of the dictates of power).

Despite the above-explained limitations of Foucault's theories, his legacy still provides a valuable framework for looking at ideas of gender, sexuality and the body as shaped by the actions of power discourses, rather than being subject to a natural law. A very influential example of this, is that of Butler's work (1999). She offers a way of transferring the Foucauldian ideas about how the body, perceived as natural, is instead the result of forms of social control, and is constructed by the discourse which describes it, to the critical realm of sex and gender. In this regard, she affirms that,

'sex' is an ideal construct which is forcibly materialized through time. It is

not a simple fact or static condition of a body, but a process whereby regulatory norms materialize 'sex' and achieve this materialization through a forcible reiteration of those norms (Butler, 1999: 236).

Moreover,

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. And there will be no way to understand "gender" as a cultural construct which is imposed upon the surface of matter, understood either as "the body" or its given sex (Butler, 1993:2).

In other words, Butler sees the male/female binary that characterises our society as the effect of the dominant discourses around gender. Human bodies, accordingly, can be understood as outcomes of a making of gender, rather than as biological entities preceding gender.

A key contribution of Butler, in this regard, is that of considering not only gender, but also sex, and human bodies as we know them, as cultural constructs. This concept enables us to put bodies and identities that rely on ideas of sex and gender into question, and to look at them as constantly being made in particular ways, which in turn can become objects of investigation.

Here comes into play the idea of performativity, defined by Butler as a "discursive practice which enacts or produces which it names" (Butler 1993: 13). Butler describes the process through which discourse materialises our sexed and gendered bodies as performative, reiterative and normative. Therefore, she argues, people become male or female, man or woman, through the repetition of particular performative acts that re-create and conform to the existing norm. She identifies such a process as heteronormative, that is, as reproducing the normative "heterosexual imperative", and (re)creating it, by apparently simply reflecting it. Butler's account is mostly philosophical, she does not spend much time exploring nor distinguishing different kinds of performative acts, and she talks about them in a mainly theoretical manner.

Nevertheless, her work provides excellent ground for research. Thanks to the concept of performativity, not only we can question the nature of current gender models, but also interrogate the daily practices that bring them into being. These, as Butler acknowledges, are written on the body, to the extent that gender can be defined as a “stylization of the body” (Butler 1993: 43). In this sense, a great emphasis is placed on appearance, fabrication, presentation of the body, and thereby also on clothing and adornment.

Drag emerges thus as an instance of 'gender trouble'. Butler finds in drag a model for the disruption of binaries of sex and gender. “In imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself—as well as its contingency” writes Butler (1993: 175). Earlier, I have identified a lack of resistance to discourse within Foucault's work. Butler, on the contrary indicates drag as a potential space for the destabilisation of gender norms. As a parody of gender, in fact, drag can highlight the performative, and thereby not essential, quality of gender and the contingency of the relationship between the body and particular identities. Finally, she argues, it can be proven subversive in breaking both the norm and its naturalisation through repetition.

Butler effectively shows that what we know about what it means to be a man or a woman, but also male or female, has no 'natural' ground to stand on, and gender identity is produced through socially and culturally contingent performative performances. One might argue that biological differences do indeed subsist between the bodies, however, nothing indicates the existence of two, mutually exclusive categories, nor, and even more so, of specific characteristics associated with each of them. Following Butler's advancement of Foucault's ideas, then, I consider sex and gender as categories that have no foundation in nature and no essential reason to exist. I also focus on the problematic role played by power discourses in their production, and reflect on ways to destabilise them. Despite these arguments, it would be dangerous to deny that such categories are certainly present in our contemporary society, and have been also present throughout history. They have structured the world in which we live and are at the basis of much of

its inequality. As argued by Foucault and Butler, as a matter of fact, discourse and performativity actually bring their objects into being. Categories of sex and gender are then a real feature of our society. I find it thereby useful to keep referring to them in order to study and eventually tackle the imbalances of power they sustain.

This principle accords well with Halberstam's (1998) work on female masculinity. After having acknowledged that masculinity and maleness, and femininity and femaleness, are not essentially linked, he proceeds with a critical investigation of the way in which these are constructed and enacted, and examines alternative kinds of identities. As I anticipated that I intend to do myself, Halberstam elaborates a critique that challenges normative categories, by keeping such categories as units of analysis, and problematising how their existence excludes and silences other kinds of identities. Halberstam's naming of categories and grouping of identities, however, has been subject to critique. Talking about a photograph of the author by Del LaGrace Volcano, included within a chapter of *Female Masculinity* (1998), Adams (2000) expresses her feeling that “[W]hat makes Halberstam’s portrait memorable is its bold categorical indeterminacy” and its “refusal of gender polarities” (2000: 472). On the other hand, Adams argues, his analysis suffers from excessive taxonomy and schematism. Halberstam, she adds, criticises the existent categories but stumbles himself on over-categorical thinking and fails thus to fully refuse its logic. I am myself suspicious about the effects of replacing traditional categories of gender and sexuality and creating new ones. Nevertheless, identities that challenge the gender binary from within (i.e. not by pretending it does not exist, but by using it in an instrumental way), like female masculinities, do indeed have much disruptive and destabilising potential. While describing cases in which masculinity is embodied by female subjects, for example through the use of clothes, Halberstam reflects on what constitutes masculinity, underlining, at the same time, the complexity of women's gender identities. When talking about female masculinity, it is important to note that Halberstam does not intend an imitation by women of maleness or of dominant masculinity, but instead, silenced, alternative forms of masculinity. His aim is that of separating masculinity from its dominant conception as heterosexual,

white, middle-class, powerful and privileged maleness, and he does so by highlighting cases in which masculinity is embodied by different and diverse kinds of individuals.

Similarly to Butler then, Halberstam stresses the performative nature of gender, and implicitly demonstrates that of masculinity, which, he argues, as opposed to femininity, is usually seen as innate and non-performative. Moreover, Halberstam's work can also be used to make poignant connections between clothes, body presentation and social expectations of gender. In his analysis of the figure of the tomboy, he argues that tomboyism in pre-adolescent girls tends to be more accepted than other (adult) forms of female masculinity, and is generally identified as a "natural" desire for greater freedom and mobilities enjoyed by boys" as well as "a sign of independence and self motivation" (Halberstam 1998: 6). Upon entering adulthood, masculine women start being seen as a threat to the heterosexual normative, the family, and to male-dominated society in general, and girls are forced into 'acceptable' forms of femininity and acceptably feminine clothes. In this sense, tomboyism cannot ever become an adult identity but, at most, a rebellion against adulthood.

Halberstam, Butler, and before them, Foucault identify the body as a paramount element in the study of roles, norms and expectations concerning sexuality and gender. Moreover, commenting on popular representations of queer bodies and, in particular, the transgender look, Halberstam (2005) stresses the affective dimension of the issue. In this regard, he observes how this kind of portrayals "rely on the successful solicitation of affect" in order for the mainstream public to be able to grasp and make sense of such an unusual and subversive subject (Halberstam 2005: 77). For example, he argues that in big production films, such as *Boys Don't Cry* (1999), sympathetic and familiarly comforting queer characters are used to engage the audience at an emotional level, while leaving stereotypes about gender and sexuality intact. In another instance (Halberstam 2008), he argues that in order to have an actual oppositional political relevance, and in order to be able to bring change, the kind of alternative way of life epitomised by the queer identities should abandon the comfort zone of dominant

society, reject any compromise with it, and instead embrace disruptive negativity. Halberstam's words are helpful in calling attention to the gap that exists between authentic, real-life and unsettling identities, and, on the other hand, the watered-down and inoffensive versions conforming to the dominant values that are found in mainstream culture and media. In terms of my own research, a comparison with Halberstam's work can help to highlight tensions between androgyny's potential in the disruption of gender normativity on the one hand, and unthreatening manifestations of androgyny in mainstream fashion on the other.

### **Emotional Attachments, Affect and Feeling Difference**

Since affect constitutes not only a crucial feature of bodily experience, but, as we are about to see, also a cornerstone in the development of aesthetics as the philosophy of beauty, I will not describe my use of the term and define it with regard to its relationship with both ideology and aesthetics.

Deleuze (1992) talks about affect with reference to its relational capacity to constitute bodies. Through affective relationships, he claims, bodies can “affect [...] other bodies, or [be] affected by other bodies” (Deleuze 1992, 625 quoted by Coleman 2016). As Coleman (2016) explains, a Deleuzian approach allows us to perceive things as coming into being and existing through their relation with other things.

Together with a rapidly increasing concern with the world of feelings and emotions, the turn to affect has represented a marked tendency in feminist research for the past ten years or so. The diverse set of queer and feminist works associated with what has been defined as the 'affective turn' (Clough 2007) in cultural studies forms a highly variegated field, comprising many different strands, and stemming from different theoretical traditions, from engagements with psychology (see for example Sedgwick and Frank (1995) and Wilson (2010)), to the Deleuzian influences on the writings of

feminist thinkers like Braidotti, Probyn and Grosz (see for example Braidotti 2013, Probyn 1995 and Grosz 2008). Despite the different models for thinking about affect and emotions, the sum of these approaches can be seen as a materialist reaction to, and critique of, the representational, textual, semiotic, discursive and linguistic angle within post-structuralism (including the work of Foucault and Butler), guilty of overlooking the affective realm of sensations. As a relational and fluid entity, affect circulates between bodies shaping them, and represents thus a highly significant concept to understand bodily experiences in relation to ideas of interaction and sensation, and outside of the dominant structures of representation. I turn thus to the study of affect in an attempt to integrate other perspectives and provide a more encompassing view on the object under study.

A first thing that is important to underline, when using the concept of affect to approach the study of a phenomenon like a fashion trend, is the conception of emotions as social and political rather than as a mere expression of individual states. Describing this perspective, Koivunen (2010) quotes Sara Ahmed's (2004) work in which she argues that emotions are 'relational' and “feelings do not reside in subjects or objects, but are produced as effects of circulation” (Ahmed 2004: 8):

[E]motions are not something 'I' or 'we' have. Rather, it is through emotions or how we respond to objects and others, that surfaces or boundaries are made: the 'I' and 'we' are shaped by, and even take the shape of, contact with others (Ahmed 2004: 10).

According to Ahmed, moreover, emotions are capable of bringing people together as well as against each other, due to their positions in terms of value and ideology, history and context. For instance, reactions of hate and disgust and experiences of shame become attached to particular bodies, which, through the reiteration of such emotional responses, are then turned into, and recognized a priori as, objects of hate, disgust and shame:

[S]ome words stick because they become attached *through* particular affects. So, for example, someone will hurl racial insults [...] precisely because they are affective, although it is not always guaranteed that the

other will be 'impressed upon' or hurt in a way that follows from the history of insults. It is the affective nature of hate speech that allows us to understand that whether such speech works or fails to work is not really the important question. Rather, the important question is: *What effects do such encounters have on the bodies of others who become transformed into objects of hate?* (Ahmed 2004: 60)

In a phenomenon that Ahmed calls 'affective economy', due to the political and communal quality of emotion, and its capacity to generate things, through the reproduction of meanings and narratives, particular emotions stick to particular bodies like black bodies or queer bodies, which are thus affectively produced as problematic, and stuck in networks of negative attachments.

### **Positive and Negative Affectivity in Context**

The line between positive and negative forms of affectivity is often blurred. For example, in queer theory, feelings of shame have been interpreted in terms of their productive and transformative force by scholars like Sedgwick (2003) and Halberstam (2005), who maintain that shame is a crucial element in the formation of identity and needs to be reclaimed. Similarly, in some cases, the pursuit of positive emotions such as particular forms of happiness and good feeling can hide negative implications. Hopeful investments in positive affectivity often lead, paradoxically, to misery and unhappiness, for instance, when objects constructed as 'happy', once obtained, fail to produce the expected results.

Ahmed (2010) argues that there are different forms of happiness, the distinction between which is based upon a moral judgement. “[S]ome forms of happiness are read as worth more than other forms of happiness, because they require more time, thought, and labor” (Ahmed 2010: 12). “Ideas of happiness” Ahmed (2010) continues, “involve social as well as moral distinctions insofar as they rest on ideas of who is worthy as well as capable of being happy 'in the right way'” (Ahmed 2010: 13).

Although every human being optimistically and dutifully wishes to be happy and is fundamentally concerned with the pursuit of personal happiness, this quest, rather than being personal and individual is very much entangled with wider social mechanisms. In order to be perceived as real and worthwhile, happiness needs to follow specific paradigms and formulas. In this regard, Ahmed underlines the performative quality of this kind of affectivity and explains the way in which once positive emotions are believed to be found in particular objects, they gradually turn into universally recognised 'happy objects', promoted as being good and sought after for their goodness. The industry of happiness and the logic behind it, thus, produce it as only being attainable through the proximity to specific objects, and by following specific pathways holding the promise of a happy ending. Getting married, having children and starting a family, for example, are indicated by Ahmed as conventionally accepted milestones in the pursuit of happiness.

This discussion is especially relevant when dealing with the field of fashion, as tied as it is to myths of self and life-improvement and aesthetic transcendence. "Selling dreams" is a phrase often associated with the business of fashion magazines, fashion advertising and the fashion industry in general. Instead of aiming at portraying life as it is, fashion images construct emotional narratives of hopes and fantasies. By promoting consumer goods, while offering glimpses into the perfect lifestyles of perfect people embodying particular ideals, the fashion discourse constructs the objects portrayed, as well as their whole aesthetics, as holding promises of positive emotions and, ultimately, happiness. Coleman (2013) expresses this well talking about how, across popular culture, images appeal to those who are not satisfied with their present, through affective promises of a future 'better life'. Expectation and anticipation, Coleman argues, are key ways in which images operate in contemporary capitalism, and their pervasive power is to be found in the intense affective nature of their action. In the particular field of fashion, which he defines as "a manifestation of the human striving for the beautiful and the better" (Meinhold 2013: 67), Meinhold describes how "[t]he fashion myth [...] makes

consumers believe that they can acquire a style or life or even an art of living via consumption or lifestyle” (Meinhold 2013: 66).

Problematic as the moral hierarchy of different forms of happiness may be, recognising certain things as holding promises of it, and pursuing them as goals, is not enough to actually achieve a better life. In spite of accepting and pursuing the ideas of the good life acknowledged by dominant social discourses not everyone is capable of finding happiness in those determinate ways or being happy in the 'right' way. What Ahmed (2010) calls 'happy objects' might not meet the hopes and expectations entrusted to them, or, in some cases, might not even be obtainable at all. In terms of fashion, for example, economic limits often stand in the way of fulfilment. As Arnold (2001) states:

Fashion advertising and magazine images constantly hold out the promise of the attainment of such ideals, yet for all but the very wealthy the products contained are unobtainable (Arnold 2001: 14).

In wider terms, an identity other than white, heterosexual, beautiful, family-oriented and middle-class becomes an obstacle to happiness, where the dominant idea of happiness, in a society like ours, obsessed with the need to be happy, necessitates whiteness, heterosexuality, conventional beauty, a desire for family life and an at least middle-class status. Berlant (2006) describes this condition well by introducing the idea of 'cruel optimism' intended as a “relation of attachment to compromised conditions of possibility” (Berlant 2006: 24). When people invest their hopes for happiness in dreams of an idealised 'good life' that is nevertheless unobtainable, they get attached to particular objects with a desire that is both optimistic and cruel at the same time, as those very objects turn eventually into obstacles to the realisation of their fantasies.

Returning to the case of fashion, we can then see how the fashion industry can often be interpreted as enabling and even fuelling cruel relationships of attachment through its trade of sparkling and unreachable dreams. Indulging in the promises of the fashion industry we lead our lives making choices that allow us to

follow the pathways it sets and presents as leading to a happy, worthy and aesthetically superior way of life. Often, we care very little whether these objects for which we sacrifice ourselves do not actually hold the power of making us happy, and, on the contrary take us further away from happiness, or even that this happy ending we pursue is in reality the dream of the dominant society and the privileged few, rather than our own.

### **Aesthetics Between Bodily Sensations and Ideological Functions**

A consideration of the concept of the gendered body and its connection to particular solicitations of affect also enables us to recognise a second major dimension in the study of androgyny: that of aesthetics. As a matter of fact, if we consider aesthetics as an experience that is felt in an affective way through the body, and also has the body, as art history tells us, as one of its preferential subjects, we cannot fail to discuss the relationship between the two.

Modern Western aesthetics, as a major branch of philosophy that has occupied the minds of many influential philosophers over the centuries, was first born, Eagleton (1990) underlines, as a theory of the sensuous body. In particular, the German philosopher Alexander Baumgarten (1750), in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, introduced it in opposition to the (higher) realm of logic and rational thought as that in which reside, instead, emotional and affective perceptions of beauty, experienced through the human body. Eagleton continues by arguing that the sensuous relationship between the body and aesthetics was lost, in conjunction with the key role played by sensuous dimension, with Immanuel Kant's theorisations, and never really recovered until much later. The key role played by the body only re-emerged with Karl Marx's (1990 [1867]) attempt to free bodily drives from the oppressions of capital, Friedrich Nietzsche's (2001 [1882]) cry for the free (but individualistic) realization of the power of the human being, and finally Sigmund Freud's (2011 [1923]) focus on bodily desire. Following Eagleton's

reconstruction and take on its philosophical history, we can see how the aesthetic experience of beauty, alongside the construction of gender, is epistemologically grounded in the human body. The connection becomes even more interesting when we use the body as a starting point for the understanding of instances in which the construction of gender becomes an aesthetic object itself, such as in the case of the production of androgyny as a beauty standard in the contemporary fashion world.

A second crucial aspect of aesthetics, as well as the focus of Eagleton's (1990) book, can be found in its relationship with ideology, another particularly significant concept in a sphere like the fashion system, whose study is traditionally interested in the role it plays in the transmission of particular interests and politically-charged ideals. In this sense, besides being concerned with the bodily and sensory appreciation of beauty and the philosophy of art, aesthetics functions as a link of connection between the otherwise relatively distant realms of the body and class conflicts:

[T]he category of the aesthetic assumes the importance it does in modern Europe because in speaking of art it speaks of [...] other matters too, which are at the heart of the middle class's struggle for political hegemony. The construction of the modern notion of the aesthetic artefact is thus inseparable from the construction of the dominant ideological forms of modern class society (Eagleton 1990: 3).

Eagleton's position can best be understood with reference to the wider field of Marxist aesthetics, which, in contrast with Kantian philosophy, define the experience of beauty not in terms of universal judgements that are disinterested and detached, but instead in relation to the specific socio-economic conditions in which culture emerges. Within a framework of this type, aesthetics, which for Eagleton is always grounded in the body, and finds both material and affective expression through it, becomes an instrument of social domination in the hands of the bourgeoisie, acquiring a high political relevance.

This phenomenon, Eagleton argues, is rooted in the aestheticisation of power which marks the transition from absolutist coercion to the internalised law of morality. "The ultimate binding force of the bourgeois social order, in contrast to the coercive apparatus

of absolutism, will be habits, pieties, sentiments and affections” (Eagleton 1990: 20). Talking about discipline, Foucault (1977) already discussed the way in which sovereign coercive power has been replaced by a new kind of domination, more subtle and discreet, which is embodied and internalised by the individuals. With Eagleton, this is examined in terms of the aesthetic sphere, which, in the form of power internalised at the deep level of the human body, becomes a way for the middle classes to silently impose their values, and, as a consequence, their supremacy, by naturalising specific sets of customs and moral principles through the solicitation of sentiment.

With industrial development and the emergence of the capitalist society, following Marx's theory, the relationship between the individual, sensuality and bodily expression, becomes even more complicated. Eagleton (1990) notices how, for Marx, capital becomes a sort of second body and a surrogate, to which sensory experience is alienated, and only through which the individual is able to recover a (fictitious) sensuous life. “Private property” Eagleton states, drawing from Marx's writing, “is the 'sensuous expression' of humanity's estrangement from its own body, the dismal displacement of our sensuous plenitude onto a single drive to possess” (Eagleton 1990: 199). In this sense, after being instrumentalised for the internalisation of the ideological imperatives of the bourgeoisie, sensuous and affective experience is transferred into money and commodities, and thus estranged from the human subject. Moreover, what deprives people of the use of their senses in a capitalist society is especially the way in which goods are fetishised as commodities, when their worth starts being established, within a system of other goods, in terms of their value for exchange, or exchange value.

Marx himself, as Peter Stallybrass (1998) narrates, once recalled how he had to pawn “a coat dating back to [his] Liverpool days in order to buy writing paper” (Marx and Engels 1983 [1852-55]: 221 quoted by Stallybrass 1998). In an essay entitled precisely *Marx's Coat* (1998), Stallybrass takes the garment as a metaphor for how capitalism forces the relationship between things and people to be reduced to a mere matter of exchange value. This happens when objects' use value, and their capacity to evoke

memories and emotions, are given up, and private property starts being appraised for its cost and the money one could gain by selling it. "To have one's coat, to wear it on one's back, was to hold onto a memory system that at a moment of crisis could be transformed back into money" (Stallybrass 1998: 202). For Marx and his family, however, standing for the impoverished stratum of society and the working classes, as Stallybrass points out, the overcoat and other pieces of clothing also represented their social respectability which, in turn, became a commodity to be pawned:

Without 'suitable' clothes, Jenny Marx [Karl's wife] wouldn't go out on the street; without 'suitable' clothes, Marx would not work at the British Museum; [researching for what will be *Capital*] without 'suitable' clothes, the underemployed worker was in no state to look for new employment (ibid: 202).

With this example, thereby, first, capitalism is marked for its role in distancing aesthetic, affective and sensorial experiences from the everyday life, when everything starts being conceived in terms of potential for exchange. Secondly, instead, and particularly for the working class, clothes are underlined for their role, in signalling, through an aesthetics that can only survive in a substitute and vicarious sense, one's social worth as well as one's chances to participate in the social game. I will return to this aspect later, when I will delve more deeply into the question of class.

### **Class as a Cultural Manifestation and the Supremacy of the Upper Classes**

A further highly significant contribution to the theoretical linking of aesthetic taste and social division can be found in the work of Bourdieu. Before proceeding to a discussion of his contributions to the sociology of taste, I would like to examine the usefulness of these theories and their applicability to my particular problem.

Bourdieu's ideas have been applied to produce a series of very insightful feminist theories, studies and reflections (see for example Moi 1991, Skeggs 1997, McNay 1999,

Lawler 2000, Lovell 2000, Huppatz 2009 Skeggs and Wood 2012). One of his most significant contributions can be found in the conception of class as a cultural phenomenon, also expressed in that of cultural consumption and cultural taste as playing a key role in the reproduction of inequality and asymmetrical relationships of power within the social structure. In this sense, Bourdieu's work represents a highly valuable alternative to traditional theories of class that provide merely economic, and in several instances sterile, explanations. Bourdieu believes that traditional class analysis is too focused on labour and industrial and monetary factors to the detriment of other non-neglectable determinants. He writes:

[t]aste is at the heart of these symbolic struggles, which go on at all times between the fractions of the dominant class and which would be less absolute, less total, if they were not based on the primary belief which binds each agent to his life-style. A materialist reduction or preferences to their economic and social conditions of production and to the social functions of the seemingly most disinterested practices must not obscure the fact that, in matters of culture, investments are not only economic but also psychological (Bourdieu 1984: 310)

and again,

Social class is not defined solely by a position in the relations of production, but by the class habitus which is 'normally' (i.e., with a high statistical probability) associated with that position (ibid: 372).

In spite of how significant and relevant for my work Bourdieu's words are, since they allow me to conduct a research that sees in fashion choices and cultural preferences a reflection of class structures, it is still useful to consider and point out the possible problems that arise from such application.

A first issue that needs to be taken into account when using Bourdieu for approaching the relationship between women and gendered clothing, is his problematic understanding of it and of women's experience, despite gender often being a key unit of analysis in his work. It should be mentioned in that *Masculine Domination* (2001), for example, is entirely dedicated to the discussion of social relations between the sexes and

gender inequality. Skeggs (2004) talks about this issue in terms of a “striking [...] lack of attention to feminist theory, even though Bourdieu does explore gender relations” (Skeggs 2004: 19).

Bourdieu's work is limited for understanding women's social life and matters of identity in a further way, since he does not seem to be able to acknowledge the diversity of women's experience in relation to other issues such as ethnic background, gender or sexuality. Skeggs puts this well arguing that,

Bourdieu's terribly organized habitus cannot encompass all the practices between gender and sexuality, all the contradictions, plays, experimentations, swappings, ambiguities, and passings both within gender and between gender and sexuality (Skeggs 2004: 27).

The structuralist elements in Bourdieu's sociology can be held responsible for two further problems: firstly, his reductive understanding of women as the principal carriers of taste in the private sphere, as opposed to men's public and dominant practices of capital accumulation; and secondly, his focus on reproduction that envisages no alternatives. These two ideas leave in fact little space for the questioning of traditional gender roles (see Skeggs 2004).

Finally, the discussion of how gender as a category can fit into the complex theoretical apparatus elaborated by Bourdieu, which I will not delve into now, only contributes to make embracing his theory of gender more difficult. For instance, is gender an embodied capital in itself? Or is it a hidden disposition within cultural capital, as he suggests in *Distinction*, (1984)? Can gender be considered a field? An act of symbolic violence? And so on. In this regard, for example, Butler (1998) also problematises the way in which Bourdieu's limiting notion of habitus precludes prospects of social change, so much needed when talking about matters of gender.

When dealing with gender, thereby, I prefer to turn to other points of view on the issue.

For example, Butler's own take on gender is more suitable for describing the fluidity of manifestations of gender and to conceive the potentially unsettling effect of non-conformative, and in a sense counter-performative performances. Nevertheless, Bourdieu still remains highly relevant in that he opens up the analysis of femininity as classed, and classed in very culturally specific ways, for instance, through fashion.

The issue of the rigidity of Bourdieu's view of society also brings us to a second potential limitation of his work regarding the concepts of resistance and the possibility of social change, both of which seem to be, to some extent, lacking. His theory of class relies heavily on the idea of reproduction, and is committed to explaining why and how the privileged classes are able to legitimise and maintain such privilege. Bourdieu's theory is therefore not one of social resistance. Of course, he does indeed take the issue into consideration, but, as Lawler (2004) suggests, analogously to Foucault's perspective, his conception of resistance to power goes hand in hand with that of domineering power itself, and never exists independently from it. If we follow Bourdieu's view then, one that is undeniably pessimistic, every act of resistance has to be seen as inscribed within, and to some extent determined by, the logic of power. While on the one hand, this conception sheds an interesting light on the relationship between 'perceived' practices of resistance and symbolic domination, on the other hand it represents a clearly problematic stance if we are to use Bourdieu to look at those in disadvantaged positions, for example women, the working class, or working-class women. In this regard, Skeggs and Wood (2012) state that

Bourdieu's theories provide exceptional explanatory power (empirically and theoretically) for understanding how middle-class privilege remains unchallenged [...] but are much less useful for understanding the powerless" (Skeggs and Wood 2012: 14).

Skeggs also demonstrates this fallacy of Bourdieu elsewhere (1997), showing how the working-class women in her study, which he would have seen as ultimately lacking value and trapped in their valuelessness, do instead reclaim it and struggle for recognition and revaluation.

We have just seen how with Bourdieu's influential theories come also several problems, especially with regard to their application to a feminist study. On the other hand, his work remains highly relevant and useful, even for the understanding of the social experience of women, thanks to his many insightful arguments. Let us now see more in detail what Bourdieu means when he talks about the key concepts of habitus and symbolic struggles in the context of culture.

First of all, in order to re-balance the defining features of class, he puts alongside the concept of economic capital, those of the symbolic, the social and the cultural capitals, shifting the focus from the unequal distribution of money and means of production alone, to include the more encompassing sphere of lifestyle. People's value in the social hierarchy, he argues, is the result of intricate practices of accrual, and the sum of different types of capital.

Bourdieu also has the merit of adding the theme of the body to the equation, and showing how social inequality also has an important embodied dimension. Capitals, as well as the classifications that they carry, are inscribed in and lived on the body on a daily basis. Bodies then, come themselves to reflect and display one's style of life, cultural preferences and position within the social structure, in the form of habitus. The term habitus is used by Bourdieu to indicate a set of acquired, internalised, and habitual dispositions, which shape people's social identities, lives, beliefs and conduct, or using his own words, as:

systems of durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures, that is, as principles which generate and organize practices and representations that can be objectively adapted to their outcomes without presupposing a conscious aiming at ends or an express mastery of the operations necessary in order to attain them (Bourdieu 1984: 53)

If we subscribe to Bourdieu's view that the legitimate taste of the higher classes leads their members to appreciate more composed pleasures, lighter food, and more refined

cultural activities, while the lack of taste of people from the working classes induces them to appreciate merely the necessary, then we can expect the bodies of those from the dominant classes to appear more slender, well-groomed and even more conventionally attractive than those of the people from subordinate groups, which in turn will appear rough, unkempt and so on. As I have already talked about briefly, Bourdieu's description of this classification, and especially that of working-class culture and their (lack of) taste has often been seen as problematic (see also Jenkins 1992) and I myself will argue for a different perspective on the issue. Nevertheless, Bourdieu's legacy is without question a very significant one in that it allows us to think about the body as a carrier of symbolic value and, as a consequence, of social inequality.

Moreover, culture, taste and lifestyle are not only associated with particular positions within the social structure and do not merely reflect social stratification, but, on the contrary, play an active role in it, legitimating distinction, difference and inequality between the dominant and the subordinated classes. A useful concept in the understanding of this is the idea of symbolic violence, a “violence which is exercised upon a social agent with his or her complicity” (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1996: 167). Bourdieu uses this argument to talk about the way in which power relations are legitimated thanks to a symbolic reference to claims of superiority and inferiority. In other words, according to symbolic systems of meanings associated with culture, the dominant groups are able to assert their particular way of life as superior, make their privilege appear as legitimate to the unprivileged, and thus dominate them with their own unconscious and implicit authorisation. This process through which good taste and high culture are (quite arbitrarily) established and legitimised in the interest of the privileged classes, is so powerful and pervasive also because of how it is reproduced and institutionalised, for example by the law and within the educational system. The concept of symbolic violence then allows us to consider how different institutions, including, for example, the media or the fashion industry, produce symbolic violence against those whose culture is established as inferior (i.e. the working classes), and reproduce, in this way, the unfair social hierarchy.

## **Class as an Affective Manifestation and the Portrayal of the Working Classes**

In the introduction to this chapter I talked about how, although many declare class to be dead, others, including myself, believe class and its effects are instead very much alive. Class structures and relations in the contemporary scenario can be exposed by abandoning traditional economic models of class analysis and adopting a more cultural perspective, such as that delineated by Bourdieu. However, as we have begun to see looking at the limitations of the French sociologist's work, these aspects alone cannot account for the ways in which class is manifested, especially in the present situation, throughout society. Class has in fact a very prominent affective dimension that needs to be taken into consideration, especially if we are to think, in Eagleton's terms, about the domination of the ruling classes as working through an aestheticised power that appeals to affects, sentiments and morality.

Boyne (2002) argues that while it might be true that class has changed, and is now less noticeable as a social structure, it is indeed still striking. However, he adds that now, “expressions of class cultures are much more marked by reflexive attitudes – rueful, ironic, envious, reflectively proud” (Boyne 2002: 119). In other words, at present, manifestations of class, if less visible in the economic sphere, have an evident affective dimension. Including the topic of affect within class analysis, furthermore, not only enables a more comprehensive perspective, especially in the contemporary context, but also opens up the field to a new perspective on the traditionally problematic understanding of the working class, with its anger, its shame and its emotionally charged struggles.

In her study of working-class women and respectability (1997), and in the more recent one about reality television, class and value (2012), conducted with Wood, Skeggs

shows how the legitimization of middle class culture goes hand in hand with an affective and symbolic devaluation of the working class. Women from the working classes, in particular, are judged, de-valued and pathologised as unrespectable, shameful, disgusting and immoral, and hatred against them is regularly legitimised. Their way of eating, of caring for their children, their bodies, clothes and appearances, as well as their whole lifestyles become objects of antagonistic and derisive judgement. Both studies show how class is very much entangled with daily affective struggles that see working class women facing judgement and shame, but also reacting to them in a quest for reevaluation.

A similar case is noticed by Tyler and Bennett (2010) who, in the context of celebrity culture, argue that the media treatment of the so-called 'celebrity chavs' works to reproduce the association of working-class women with moral abjectness. The relationship between class and stardom, they state, is one that revolves around legitimated visceral hate towards (mainly female) chav celebrities associated with vulgarity and excessive behaviour, to the extent of fuelling a moral panic against young working-class women:

Chav celebrities, marketable because they 'act badly', are constructed by the same media conglomerates and institutions that blame them for producing a generational underclass of morally bankrupt young women (Tyler and Bennett 2010: 388).

Disgust, as a moral attitude towards the working class, is also discussed by Lawler (2005c) in terms of taste and Bourdieusian distinction. Even outside the feminist academia, Sayer (2005) emphasises the moral dimension of class talking about how contempt, shame, evaluative judgements and negative emotions are fundamental features of today's social inequality.

The understanding of inequalities within the social structure is thereby tightly bound to that of a negative affective response towards the working classes. Using Bourdieu's work as a starting point, it is exactly through a consideration of this relationship that we

are able, following Skeggs' theoretical route, not only to question his ideas regarding the working class, but also to better understand what really is at stake in contemporary class distinction, and how the working classes react to their devaluation.

Reconnecting the discussion to the key idea of aesthetics, Bennett (2011) tackles again the question of the inadequacy of Bourdieu's framework for a study that aims not only at explaining how disadvantage is constituted and reproduced, but also at actually understanding the reality of the working classes. He does so through a critique of the French sociologist's Kantianism and conception of working-class taste. According to Kant's hugely influential aesthetic philosophy, expressed in his *Critique of Judgement* (2005, [1790]), taste for beauty is identified as follows:

[T]aste in the beautiful is alone a disinterested and *free* satisfaction [...] Taste is the faculty of judging of an object or a method of representing it by an entirely disinterested satisfaction or dissatisfaction. The object of such satisfaction is called beautiful. [...] The beautiful is that which apart from concepts is represented as the object of a universal satisfaction. (Kant 2005, [1790]: 44-45).

Beauty, as Kant claims, can only be defined as such when it is universal, detached from contingencies, needs and desires, as well as when it emerges from a pure and disinterested act of contemplation. Bourdieu's conception of taste, instead, as it has already emerged, is quite the opposite. He argues that (i) judgements of taste are not universal nor essential but arbitrary, and reflect the present cultural reality and class structure, (ii) they are taught and learned, and, finally, (iii) far from being independent from everything, taste is political, and functions as a means for social domination. What Kant indicated as pure beauty for Bourdieu is only the (acquired) taste of the affluent classes, the hierarchical superiority of which is reproduced to maintain their privilege. While he recognises that beauty, in a Kantian sense, is not universal and innate, but a manifestation of class inequality, Bourdieu still associates it with the higher end of the hierarchy of taste and with legitimate culture. The taste of the working classes, instead, is described by him in opposition to Kantian aesthetics as a taste of necessity, and thereby in a negative form.

According to Bennett (2011), such a conception of cultural preference “deprives working-class culture of any possible positive content except for purely defensive practices” (Bennett 2011: 532). Moreover, he argues that

[t]he picture Bourdieu paints is one of absolute closure which, offering no way out of the restricting effects of necessity for any fraction of the working class, also deprives the class of any capacity to project social, political or cultural horizons leading beyond dominant-class norms and values (ibid: 534).

Bennett, like Skeggs, criticises Bourdieu for not being able to understand the working class as much as the dominant one, and, as a consequence, for failing to provide an adequate framework for the study of its culture, outside of an idea of 'lack'. He believes that this shortcoming can be ascribed to the methodological choice of limiting the size of the working-class sample, in order to better focus on how the higher classes reproduce their privilege. Despite his highly significant contribution in this direction, which provides a sophisticated analysis of the complexities of the cultural practices of the working classes (see for example Bennett 2007 and Bennett, Savage, Silva, Warde, Gayo-Cal and Wright 2009), Bennett remains anchored to Bourdieu's quantitative survey methodology, which, in my opinion, and in terms of my research, is not able to account for a significant part of class experience.

Bourdieu writes:

Necessity imposes a taste for necessity which implies a form of adaptation to and consequently acceptance of the necessary, a resignation to the inevitable, a deep-seated disposition which is in no way incompatible with a revolutionary intention, although it confers on it a modality which is not that of intellectual or artistic revolts (Bourdieu 1984: 372).

From these sentences emerges how, as Skeggs and Bennett already pointed out, Bourdieu's account of working-class culture precludes any possibility of a positive reaction, and describes it within a framework of passive surrender to cultural inferiority, resulting from the exclusion from forms of legitimation. More specifically, Bourdieu argues that while the working classes can be revolutionary, their rebellion will never happen at the cultural level of art and creativity, and thereby of aesthetics. Is the

working class thus unable to use aesthetics for reclaiming its value through the reclaim of beauty?

Debates have been going on about whether the artistic *avant-garde* can provide a route for the creative resistance to ideology. Adorno (2001), who believes that the inferior, popular, mass-produced culture, which does not have any aesthetic value, works as an instrument of deception, argues that *avant-garde* can instead provide an aesthetic challenge to ideology. However, when it reaches a certain fame, this kind of art as well is often incorporated by the ruling classes as part of the legitimate aesthetics, and, using Eagleton's (1990) metaphor, ends up on the walls of some big bank. If not even the revolutionary *avant-garde* can escape from ideology, and often ends up turning into exactly what it was born as a reaction against, perhaps popular culture, identified for example by thinkers of the Frankfurt School as the very manifestation of ideology, can give rise to its opposite. Willis (1996) claims that, while high art is indeed a means of social exclusion, within everyday common culture, space is left for creative consumption and what he calls "symbolic creativity", which in turn give rise to a new kind of "grounded" aesthetics. Fashion, for example, becomes, in this regard, a site in which popular culture is consumed in a creative way. Willis (1996) maintains that clothes "remain amongst the most visible forms of symbolic cultural creativity and informal artistry in people's lives in our common culture" (Willis et al 1996: 85).

During the 1970s and 1980s, moreover, studies associated with Birmingham's Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) provided further important examples of how, in youth cultures, style often becomes a resource for young people from the working-class, and a means through which to express resistance to hegemonic mainstream culture. Hebdige (1979) talks about how, for example, through the practice of 'bricolage' members of the punk subculture use their clothes to creatively subvert the aesthetics of the dominant class. Criticizing the tendency to focus on male youth, other members (e.g. McRobbie and Garber 1976) draw instead attention to the ways in which young women negotiate their cultural identities through practices of experimentation

with beauty and fashion and the reading of teen girls-oriented magazines.

In view of these kind of accounts, and following critiques to Bourdieu's idea of a taste of necessity, cultural taste can be regarded not only as a crucial site to study the mechanisms of reproduction of social inequality, but also as a creative field for the aesthetic, and thereby bodily and affective negotiation of social identity, able to ascribe to low, popular culture and everyday interactions with style a whole new meaning.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has introduced the reader to the main theoretical debates in response to which this research will depart, and which constitute the foundations for my arguments. First, I expressed the view that sex and gender identities are inscribed in wider dynamics of power (in a Foucauldian manner) and ultimately serve its interests. I underlined how the dominant gender roles, in this sense, can be held responsible for much oppression in our society, and need therefore to be challenged.

I also discussed how, despite its extensive impact, the binary between the two sexes and the two genders is social, arbitrary and performative and has no actual material ground. Nevertheless, since performativity has precisely the result of producing the objects it describes, I believe it is important to treat the binary as real, and work with it, in order to eventually disrupt it and change perceptions about both sex and gender. For this reason, I introduced notions of drag (Butler) and female masculinity (Halberstam) as ways of playing with the dominant identities and exposing their constructiveness. In this regard I stressed the potential of non-conformative reiterated performances, in this case ones that blend the traditionally feminine with the traditionally masculine, for breaking up conventional expectations about the body, identities and aesthetics.

We should also take note that it is not possible to talk about gender independently from

other factors such as race, and class, and their different relationships with power, which lead to different experiences of inequality. Given my interest in matters of class, I noticed that both Butler and Halberstam stress the key role that it plays in conjunction with gender in matters of identity and power. However, neither of them examines the question more in depth, and both focus their analyses almost exclusively on gender alone. Even though I underlined that the application of Bourdieu's theories is not without problems (e.g. his rigid approach does not leave enough space for thinking about self-expression and self-fashioning), his concept of embodiment can effectively be combined with the theories of bodies and gender discussed above. Different capitals and whole social structures in fact, Bourdieu argues, are internalised by individuals and expressed through their bodies, and contribute to the reproduction of social inequality.

To sum up, in studying gender, I pay particular attention to issues of body presentation and embodiment. I also acknowledge that, while the sex/gender binary and the common-sense categories of masculinity and femininity are cultural constructs influenced by the dominant interests, they have been performatively brought into existence. However, since they are not fixed but always changing, an effort can be made to destabilise their current form. Non-conformative performances that acknowledge the 'rules' but play with them in an alternative way can represent an effective pathway for this. Finally, in this context, it is important to take into account manifestations of power relations in all their nuances, for example combining the study of gender inequality with that of class disadvantage.

The connection between the dimensions of the gendered body and social status is offered by the concept of aesthetics, which, while it was born as, and, I argue, still primarily is, a sensuous phenomenon concerning the human body and its capacity to experience feeling, throughout history has been turned into a means of subtle social distinction and domination in the hands of the ruling classes. Before turning to the concept of aesthetics to express the view that its affective component has been historically increasingly overlooked, I defined the study of affect and emotions in

relation to theories (e.g. Ahmed 2004, 2011 and Berlant 2006) that understand them in terms of what they do, in a social and political sense. Aesthetics, intended as the study of the appreciation of beauty and the display of cultural taste, is then interpreted with regard to its relationship with the social structure and its reproduction.

Along these lines, in opposition to all the claims about the death of social classes, I argued that they are indeed still present in our society and also represent a primary cause of today's social inequality. While economic indicators may show that 'we are all middle class now', with reference to Skeggs (1997) and others, I claimed that class antagonism is now a largely cultural and affective phenomenon. Expanding this idea, in this chapter I outlined a perspective on the matter of social class that makes a foundational use of key concepts elaborated by Bourdieu in relation to the cultural dimension of class, and develops them through the adoption of a feminist take on its relationship with affect.

Despite its intrinsic limitations, especially regarding its compatibility with feminist analysis, Bourdieu's contributions are very useful for thinking about the ways in which those in power are able to reproduce and maintain their privilege through cultural practices. They also allow us to think about how, as a consequence of practices of symbolic violence, the identities and lifestyles of the dominant groups become legitimated, for example by the media or the cultural industries, and others, as a consequence, dismissed and problematised.

On the other hand, focusing on the cultural aspects of class in a Bourdieusian sense is not enough if we are to conduct a feminist analysis which aims at understanding not only privilege but the unprivileged as well. Looking at matters of affect, for example approaching the study of evaluative moral judgements and emotions of hate and shame within class relations, as suggested for example by Skeggs, it is possible to have a more comprehensive view on how social oppression works. This approach enables us to see the working classes not simply as lacking in taste, and without a way out of their

disadvantage, as in Bourdieu's pessimistic view, but instead as able to resist and reclaim authority for their culture and identities. This turn to the sphere of emotions represents a first step in a connection of the aesthetic discourse to the traditionally non-aesthetic. A second step instead, is found, developing a critique moved by Bennett to Bourdieu's description of the subordinated classes' taste, in the focus on alternative beauty (i.e. not conforming to hegemonic standards) arising from mass culture.

Finally, this chapter also lays the theoretical foundation for the investigation of aesthetic reactions to ideological positions of class and gender, outside of the privileged aspects of society traditionally associated with 'true' and legitimate beauty. Fashion, as aesthetic taste displayed directly on the human body, stands as a privileged area from which to study how, through creative and affective takes on taste, it is possible to challenge ideology with regard to both class and gender. Eagleton as well maintains that, although aesthetics is monopolised by the elites, it can still represent an emancipatory force, a force which manifest itself through the human body: “[i]f the aesthetic is a dangerous, ambiguous affair, it is because [...] there is something in the body which can revolt against the power which inscribes it (Eagleton 1990: 28).

## **Chapter 3**

### **Investigating the New Androgyny: Methodology and Methods**

#### **Introduction**

After briefly summing up the key focus of this study and the research questions that guide it, this chapter will aim at developing a practical line of inquiry, backed by an appropriate theoretical paradigm, that will enable me to answer such questions in the best possible way. In other words, here I examine the different methods, or tools, I use during the investigation, and discuss particular issues concerning their application. At the same time, I display the methodological framework that informs my decisions concerning the object of study and the approach to its analysis, and reflect on the kind of knowledge that is being produced.

With this research project, as I have stated in the previous two chapters, I intend to investigate, in a multidisciplinary and multidimensional way, what the emergence of the androgyny trend in western mainstream fashion entails. My aim is that of understanding what happens when a potentially subversive style like androgyny, which can potentially problematise heteronormativity and conventional gender roles, is appropriated by dominant fashion, and what are the implications of this phenomenon in terms of wider social categories, as well as for the development of the trend itself. In the first place, I want to study in what ways androgyny is portrayed and produced by the fashion media, highlighting what its legitimate and acceptable version is made to look like, and what is excluded, in relation to questions of embodiment and matters of gender, sexuality, ethnicity and class. This also allows me to consider what kind of ideals about the self are reproduced by fashion, as well as whose interests this serves, stressing at the same time the decisive role that the industry of appearance and aesthetics plays in shaping social conditions. On the other hand, however, I am aware that analysing representations

is not sufficient to account for the complexities of these issues. It is necessary to gain more insight on the points of view of fashion intermediaries and contextualise these representations, but also to consider the decoding of representations by different audiences, and study the affective and everyday life reactions of the audiences to such representations. Audience engagement with the fashion industry is now arguably largely digital, and, I believe, it is exactly via this digital dimension that, for example through the use of social media and personal blogs, affect comes to play a key role in contemporary fashion. In this regard, through the study members of the audiences' active role in the shaping of fashion trends, the project also aims to explore alternative kinds of aesthetics that, arising from the affective experience of taste, and moving away from the concept of legitimate objective beauty, recognise fashion as a space for the active negotiation of identities even outside of the normative standards it sets. A final objective is researching the potential of popular fashion for posing a creative and aesthetic challenge to hierarchical notions of taste.

In this chapter, I start the narration of the research process with the definition of two key issues, namely the role played by people working in fashion as cultural intermediaries on one side, and audiences who receive and respond to their messages on the other. In order to set up my own position in the research in terms of my background and expertise in fashion communication and with blogs, I begin by explaining who fashion intermediaries are and who, now, can count as one. I then continue with a discussion about how they can be classified and categorised, while hinting at the differences that exist among them in terms of factors like expertise, authority, value, and influence. I consider then where audiences stand in relation to cultural intermediaries, the extent to which, in the age of online communication, their voice can be compared to that of actual cultural intermediaries, and how their role can be effectively accounted for. At this point, I review in detail each method I use in the research: I examine the foundations of semiotic analysis, explaining what particular knowledge is produced using this method of analysis, and addressing the key issues that arise from its application to the particular case of androgynous fashion; I present my definition of discourse and state why a

particular approach to this method can help me bridge the fields of the media and the audience, and those of ideology and resistance; in conclusion, I show how the widespread practice of street style photography can be turned into an experimental ethnographic method of inquiry and be used to investigate everyday-life negotiations of identities in relation to fashion. By outlining my use of the different methods, I also highlight why and in what sense each one is appropriate for the study of fashion, and the contemporary trend of androgyny more specifically. It is important to underline how my mixed-method approach, with its different modes of analysis, allows me to analyse androgynous fashion from a series of different perspectives, which are all constitutive of the trend (e.g. production, communication and different steps in the circulation of content, the interpretation of such content, and the living out of the androgyny trend itself). The multiplicity of tools, finally, is also useful to explore the variety of theoretical debates introduced in Chapter 2.

### **Understanding Fashion Intermediaries**

Before embarking on this research project, I had already been working as a blogger, in close contact with fashion insiders of all kinds, for four years. During this time, I have collaborated with other bloggers, chatted about what it means to have a blog, shared tips, and even made friends with some of them. Moreover, I communicate with people working in fashion public relations on a daily basis, and receive their press materials, along with indications about how they would like the press to interpret such material (e.g. PR people may provide information about a new collection and, through their descriptions, also suggest which terms should be used in the write-up). I have also been photographed by street style photographers and taken street style pictures myself. I have browsed the pages of thousands of magazines (gifted for promotion or purchased) monitoring the latest trends and aesthetic tendencies. I have attended and observed the dynamics at the fashion shows of London Fashion Week, press events, the British Fashion Awards, and other occasions. I have taken an interest in online fashion

communities, and found myself a spectator of countless more or less amicable conversations on the internet between brand representatives and the audience, bloggers and the audience, as well as among different members of the audience. Leaving aside for one moment all the implications arising from a critical analysis of the relationships between these actors and the content of all of these exchanges, I would now like to draw attention to the differences that exist between all the different actors in the fashion field. With the exception of the role of the audiences, which is a more ambiguous one, and will be discussed in a later paragraph, the other subgroups can all be brought together under the name of cultural intermediaries.

Pierre Bourdieu was the first to talk about the emerging category of cultural intermediaries describing them as the people working

in all the occupations involving presentation and representation (sales, marketing, advertising, public relations, fashion, decoration and so forth) and in all the institutions providing symbolic goods and services (Bourdieu 1984:359).

Moreover, Maguire and Matthews (2010) underline how, following Bourdieu's theory, the work of cultural intermediaries should be seen as focused on forms of culture that are not yet legitimate, since the value of legitimate culture does not need further recognition. In this sense, the angle of cultural intermediaries and their interventions represents a particularly interesting approach to the study of how something like androgynous fashion, which, as shown in Chapter 1, has never been truly part of legitimate culture, is framed as not only legitimate but also desirable.

Since the 1960s, when Bourdieu conducted the research that brought him to identify this emerging professional group, much has changed. The prominence of cultural intermediaries has grown, they have become more numerous, their roles more multifaceted and, despite and due to the different degrees of cultural value and symbolic significance, increasingly ambiguous. Moreover, the contemporary fashion discourse can be thus identified as an intertextual one, which can only be made sense of through a

comparative exploration of all the dialogues and negotiations between its different actors. Although Bourdieu mentions fashion, alongside other fields such as public relations and advertising, as a particular space for the work of cultural intermediaries, it should be noted that they are not to be understood as independent and separate fields. I find it impossible to make clear distinctions between these areas or even talk about one separately from the others; instead I believe it is crucial to consider how these intersect with, and mutually shape, one another. For this reason, in my research, I examine how fashion products are mediated to consumers through the combination of a variety of interrelated spaces of fashion intermediation, analysing their particular and relative content, status, influence, and effect.

Focusing on the more visual material, and thereby leaving out the influence on fashion of, for example, the radio or the news, in this project, I analyse the mediatory action of:

- Editors and journalists (in magazines, on their websites or official blogs and on their social media channels)
- PR people (in press releases, on their own blogs, those of the brands they represent, and on social media)
- Advertisers (in print and online fashion advertisements)
- Photographers (in published photoshoots and advertising campaigns)
- The TV and film industry, film stars and celebrities (through the actresses' on screen presence and media coverage)
- Independent bloggers (through their blog posts and presence on social media).

If we focus instead on modes of expression, rather than material products, the same sources can be grouped into:

- (i) traditional and established fashion intermediaries with a high level of legitimacy such as people working in journalism, advertising, marketing and public relations, who produce authoritative guidance on how to interpret fashion

(ii) creative fashion intermediaries, for example in the fields of photography, film or illustration, whose mediatory action coexists with an artistic component  
(iii) the new media, a category which combines both the work of emerging independent intermediaries and new outlets of the established ones, and rely on negotiations of influence and audience engagement.

Despite their specificities, the different kinds of cultural intermediaries are brought together by their role in the production, negotiation, communication and circulation of symbolic meaning, which of course still depends on the levels of legitimacy and influence of the individual intermediary. If within the category of cultural intermediaries we have several different, although not always clearly distinct roles, even among all of those who I grouped as independent bloggers there are significant discrepancies. For example, there are blogs of influential and established bloggers with a celebrity-like following, and smaller ones managed by ordinary people with a passion for fashion.

The following table (Table 3.1) shows a cross section of how I classify fashion blogs on the basis on different elements. Vertically, blogs are grouped up in terms of format, while horizontally we have categories of content. Since the two biggest groups are made of blogs that cover fashion news and the latest trends in a magazine-style form, and blogs about the bloggers' own style that use instead a personal diary form, we can already see how a correlation exists between format and content. In the preliminary stage of the research then, the table helps me to assess the specificity or universality of fashion discourses, and guides me in the observation of the connections between different kinds of blogs and different patterns of mediation.

Moreover, as it also emerges from the table, it is also important to note that beside the broad segment of independent blogs, run by dedicated fashion enthusiasts who do not necessarily have any connection with the fashion industry, has recently emerged a significant number of corporate blogs, including blogs by fashion brands, by PR agencies, and linked to print magazines. While blogs are usually inspired by magazines

and the traditional fashion media, and often try to mirror their style and replicate their content, peculiarly, following the popularity of blogs, established names have decided to benefit from this and open their own online diaries. Of course, however, when it comes to the analysis, they cannot be put on the same level as personal blogs. As a matter of fact, the point of view of the former has to be acknowledged as an expression of the brand/business/magazine's identity and as reflecting their own commercial interests, rather than a personal perspective.

## Magazine Style

|                               | Shopping | Inspiration | Event Reports | Lifestyle | Fitness | Beauty | News/Trends | Personal Style | Celebrity Style/Gossip | Street Style | Plus Size | How to/DIY |
|-------------------------------|----------|-------------|---------------|-----------|---------|--------|-------------|----------------|------------------------|--------------|-----------|------------|
| <b>Private Blogs</b>          |          |             |               |           |         |        |             |                |                        |              |           |            |
| Coco's Tea Party              | ✓        | ✓           | ✓             | ✓         |         | ✓      |             | ✓              |                        |              |           |            |
| Liberty London Girl           | ✓        |             |               | ✓         |         | ✓      |             | ✓              |                        |              |           |            |
| Kingdom of Style              |          | ✓           |               |           |         |        | ✓           |                |                        |              |           | ✓          |
| Fashercise                    | ✓        |             |               | ✓         | ✓       | ✓      | ✓           |                |                        |              |           |            |
| The Swelle Life               | ✓        |             | ✓             | ✓         |         | ✓      | ✓           |                |                        |              |           |            |
| British Beauty Blogger        |          |             | ✓             |           |         | ✓      | ✓           |                |                        |              |           |            |
| Mademoiselle Robot            | ✓        |             |               | ✓         |         | ✓      |             | ✓              |                        |              |           |            |
| Style Bubble                  |          |             | ✓             |           |         |        | ✓           | ✓              |                        |              |           |            |
| The Fash Pack                 |          |             |               |           |         | ✓      | ✓           |                | ✓                      | ✓            |           |            |
| Disney Roller Girl            | ✓        |             |               |           |         | ✓      | ✓           |                |                        |              |           |            |
| The Fashion Police            |          |             |               |           |         | ✓      | ✓           |                |                        |              |           |            |
| My Fashion Life               |          |             |               |           | ✓       | ✓      | ✓           |                | ✓                      | ✓            |           |            |
| Coffin on Cake                |          |             |               | ✓         | ✓       |        | ✓           |                |                        |              |           |            |
| Katch This                    |          |             |               | ✓         |         | ✓      |             |                | ✓                      |              |           |            |
| Lingerie Stylist              | ✓        |             |               | ✓         | ✓       | ✓      | ✓           |                |                        |              |           |            |
| Vanessa Jackaman              |          |             |               |           |         |        |             |                |                        | ✓            |           |            |
| Tin Roof Press                |          |             |               | ✓         |         |        |             |                |                        |              |           |            |
| <b>PR Blogs</b>               |          |             |               |           |         |        |             |                |                        |              |           |            |
| Modus Publicity               |          |             | ✓             |           |         |        | ✓           |                |                        |              |           |            |
| Models 1 Blog                 |          |             | ✓             |           |         |        | ✓           |                |                        |              |           |            |
| <b>Brand / Designer Blogs</b> |          |             |               |           |         |        |             |                |                        |              |           |            |
| Inside Out Topshop            | ✓        | ✓           |               |           |         |        |             |                | ✓                      |              |           |            |
| Mulberry Journal              |          |             | ✓             |           |         |        | ✓           |                | ✓                      |              |           |            |
| The Daily Brief - Debenhams   |          |             |               | ✓         |         | ✓      | ✓           |                | ✓                      |              |           |            |
| New Look Daily                | ✓        |             |               |           |         | ✓      | ✓           |                | ✓                      |              | ✓         | ✓          |
| Style Insider River Island    | ✓        |             | ✓             |           |         |        | ✓           |                |                        |              |           |            |
| House of Fraser Blog          |          |             |               |           |         | ✓      | ✓           |                | ✓                      |              |           |            |
| Office Blog                   |          |             |               |           |         |        | ✓           |                |                        |              |           | ✓          |
| Schuh Blog                    |          |             |               |           |         |        | ✓           |                |                        |              |           |            |
| Style HQ - Dorothy Perkins    | ✓        |             |               |           |         |        | ✓           |                | ✓                      | ✓            |           |            |
| Evans Fashion Fix             |          |             | ✓             |           |         |        | ✓           |                |                        |              | ✓         |            |

# Diary

|                          | Shopping | Inspiration | Event Reports | Lifestyle | Fitness | Beauty | News/Trends | Personal Style | Celebrity Style/Gossip | Street Style | Plus Size | How to/DIY |
|--------------------------|----------|-------------|---------------|-----------|---------|--------|-------------|----------------|------------------------|--------------|-----------|------------|
| <b>Private Blogs</b>     |          |             |               |           |         |        |             |                |                        |              |           |            |
| Camille Over the Rainbow | ✓        | ✓           |               |           | ✓       |        |             | ✓              |                        |              |           |            |
| Afroblush                |          | ✓           | ✓             | ✓         | ✓       | ✓      |             |                |                        | ✓            |           |            |
| A Little Bird Told Me    |          |             |               |           |         |        |             | ✓              |                        |              |           |            |
| Lily Melrose             |          |             |               |           |         |        |             | ✓              |                        |              |           |            |
| Bow Dream Nation         |          |             | ✓             |           |         | ✓      |             | ✓              |                        |              |           |            |
| Frolics and Fashion      |          |             |               |           |         | ✓      |             | ✓              |                        |              |           |            |
| Wish Wish Wish           |          | ✓           |               |           | ✓       | ✓      |             | ✓              |                        |              |           |            |
| What Olivia Did          |          |             |               |           |         | ✓      |             | ✓              |                        |              |           |            |
| La Petit Anglaise        | ✓        |             | ✓             | ✓         |         |        | ✓           | ✓              |                        | ✓            |           |            |
| I Want You to Know       |          |             | ✓             |           |         |        |             | ✓              |                        |              |           |            |
| Fashion Foie Gras        |          |             | ✓             | ✓         |         | ✓      |             | ✓              |                        |              |           |            |
| Eclectic Enchantments    |          | ✓           |               | ✓         | ✓       | ✓      |             | ✓              |                        |              |           |            |
| Strangeness and Charm    |          |             | ✓             | ✓         |         | ✓      |             | ✓              |                        |              |           |            |
| Chloe Witty              |          |             |               |           |         | ✓      |             | ✓              |                        |              |           |            |
| Hi Fashion               | ✓        |             | ✓             |           |         |        |             | ✓              |                        |              |           |            |
| She Loves Mixtapes       |          |             |               |           |         |        |             | ✓              |                        |              |           |            |
| Saraluxe                 |          |             |               |           |         |        |             | ✓              |                        |              |           |            |
| Rosie Glow               |          |             |               |           |         |        |             | ✓              |                        |              |           |            |
| At Fashion Forte         |          |             |               | ✓         |         |        |             | ✓              |                        |              |           |            |
| Fashion Train            | ✓        |             |               |           |         | ✓      |             | ✓              | ✓                      |              |           |            |
| Niomi Smart              |          |             |               | ✓         |         | ✓      |             | ✓              |                        |              |           |            |
| Bang on Style            |          |             |               | ✓         |         | ✓      |             | ✓              |                        |              |           |            |
| Cece Bloom               |          |             |               |           |         |        |             | ✓              |                        |              |           |            |
| Give Me More             |          |             | ✓             | ✓         |         | ✓      |             | ✓              |                        |              |           |            |
| The Style Rawr           |          |             |               |           |         | ✓      |             | ✓              |                        |              |           |            |
| From Gem with Love       |          |             |               | ✓         |         |        |             | ✓              |                        |              |           |            |
| Bloomzy                  |          |             | ✓             | ✓         |         | ✓      |             | ✓              |                        |              |           |            |
| The LDN Diaries          |          |             |               | ✓         |         | ✓      | ✓           | ✓              |                        |              |           |            |
| Bags and Bun             |          |             |               | ✓         |         |        |             | ✓              |                        |              |           |            |
| Gymbags and Gladrags     |          |             |               | ✓         |         | ✓      |             | ✓              |                        |              |           |            |
| Fitness on Toast         |          |             |               | ✓         |         |        |             | ✓              |                        |              |           |            |
| What Katies Does         |          |             |               | ✓         |         |        |             | ✓              |                        |              |           |            |
| London Beauty Queen      |          |             |               | ✓         |         | ✓      |             | ✓              |                        |              |           |            |
| Take a Bow               | ✓        |             |               | ✓         |         | ✓      |             | ✓              |                        |              |           | ✓          |
| A Model Recommends       |          |             |               | ✓         |         | ✓      |             | ✓              |                        |              |           |            |
| Lily Pebbles             |          |             |               | ✓         |         | ✓      |             | ✓              |                        |              |           |            |
| Zoella                   |          | ✓           | ✓             | ✓         | ✓       | ✓      |             | ✓              |                        |              |           |            |
| The Little Plum          | ✓        |             |               | ✓         |         | ✓      |             | ✓              |                        |              |           |            |
| She's Called Claire      |          |             |               | ✓         |         |        |             | ✓              |                        |              |           | ✓          |



Table 3.1 – Classification of blogs

Poynter (2010) defines a blog as “a website organised as a chronological set of posts, for example an online diary or a collected set of thoughts and musings” (Poynter 2010: 404). It is exactly blogs' characteristic function as personal diaries, where individual reflections and meditations find expression in a colloquial manner, which makes them so valuable for the inclusion of more variegated opinions in the analysis, and for the reduction of researcher biases deriving from unguided interpretation. Moreover, the emotional quality of bloggers' language, as we will see throughout the analysis, is particularly important in that it opens up the aesthetic subject of fashion to a research that focuses on affect.

An investigation that looks at this kind of data is also helpful to shed more light on the idea of images as affective. By looking at blog commentaries and reasonings about the phenomenon under study, and examining the feelings and affective experiences embedded into them, while making reference to Coleman's Deleuzian framework (2009, 2013), I bring into the analysis a consideration of the affective relations of becoming that tie images and people together. The possibilities opened by the study of blogs in terms of the concept of becoming is also stressed by Rocamora (2011) who states that “the blogosphere [...] is a space in a permanent space of becoming, never fixed” and argues that the particular format of blogs “allow[s] the reader to be always on the move within a continuously changing textual space” (Rocamora 2011: 96). In the contemporary scenario, where fashion communication increasingly relies upon involvement and immediacy, blogs, but also social media, emerge as especially insightful sites for the study of the entangled dynamics that link the fashion imagery of the androgyny trend to different experiences of the self and social identity.

## **Finding a Space for the Audience**

Although, lately, the role of the audiences has been problematised, and members of the audiences are no longer seen as passive receivers of information (Hall 2007), in the contemporary fashion scene, their position has become increasingly ambiguous. At the moment, sharing one's own thoughts in a free-to-open and free-to-maintain personal space on the internet is all it takes to be able to become a cultural intermediary; interpretations and opinions are shared to a potentially infinite public with just one click, and the indicators of an intermediary's value are getting more and more unclear. Beer and Burrows (2010) argue that the distinction between producer and consumer is today a very complex issue since consumers often actively participate in the production of what they consume. "The opportunities that Web 2.0 has created for forms of consumption that require active participation", they stress, "are crucial in understanding contemporary consumption" (Beer and Burrows: 2010: 4). Who, then, can be rightfully indicated as the audiences? Where can we draw the demarcation line between experts and the public? When does one cease to be a member of the audience to become an influencer? Bloggers themselves, as we have begun to see, inhabit an intermediate and transitional space between those of fashion intermediaries and the audiences, and thus constitute themselves a particular kind of audience.

As I have already mentioned, the blog functions very much like a personal diary, where bloggers can express, in a self-managed space, their own feelings, views and opinions, commenting on what they find meaningful and relevant in the fashion scene. This makes them particularly valuable for a study of intimate and emotional responses in relation to the discourse of the androgyny trend, even more so if we also take as units of analysis comments sections, where readers can ask questions or simply talk about the posts. While also functioning as a means for the bloggers to interact with their followers, increase their own popularity, keep such followers loyal, and gain new ones, comments also contribute to highlight the symbiotic connection between contemporary fashion, the immediacy of reaction and the solicitation of affective involvement. As

Rocamora (2011) writes:

Indeed, blogs' ability to quickly report on an event and update readers on its evolution on a frequent basis lends itself particularly well to the constant desire for new information key events generate, while the presence of a 'commentary' section that allows readers to join in a discussion constitutes an important platform for dialogue and communion around such events (Rocamora 2011: 408).

Furthermore, if we also think about online diaries as spaces where self-appearance is shaped and discussed, blog entries and discussions between bloggers and readers come to constitute a very interesting perspective for the analysis of processes of identity construction, in relation to the realm of style and clothing. This is particularly true in the case of personal style blogs, where, mostly young women publish daily pictures of themselves to show their style, present a particular, and often highly fabricated, version of themselves, and receive feedback.

If on the one hand, I have described fashion bloggers as the latest example of cultural intermediaries, on the other hand, it must also be acknowledged how their role is still close to that of the audiences, and how fashion blogs represent sites of struggle over legitimation. Despite the popularity and the extent of the influence that many bloggers, who now appear on the cover of magazines and sit on the front row at Fashion Week, have reached, the category of bloggers keeps receiving a rough treatment within the industry. Bloggers remain, essentially, for the most part, fashion outsiders. This is reflected, for example, by the fact that, following much criticism from journalists, the *British Fashion Council* has been making it more difficult each year for bloggers to attend *Fashion Week*, drastically reducing the number of accreditations granted to them. Nevertheless, even though for this reason it is useful to analyse the particular case of bloggers as part of both the action of cultural intermediaries and the audiences' response, we should also remember that their position is always an intermediate one. Bloggers filter content to the public usually mimicking the contents and discourses of the traditional media, while at the same time reacting and responding to them as members of the audience themselves. However, we should not forget that the bloggers'

ultimate preoccupation is that of ensuring the growth of their own blogs. This is usually done by trying to obtain the recognition of established intermediaries, creating a bond with the readers and taking care of matters of impression management and self-presentation (Trammell and Keshelashvili 2005).

Even outside of the blogosphere, thanks to the increased level of participation permitted by new internet technologies, at present the audience is almost able to compete with intermediaries in terms of influence, in the mediation of fashion content, and taking part in the conversation about styles and trends. Fashion forums such as *The Fashion Spot*, *Purse Forum*, *Fashion Beans*, *Bellazon* are active online-communities where users can have a chat about the latest fashion news, discuss their tastes and make friends with people who share their interests. Despite, and possibly thanks to, the informality of this kind of channels, they have become important spaces where consumers can find a voice and also get heard. For example, *The Fashion Spot's* website regularly covers fashion news quoting the opinions of the users of its forum, and Susie Lau (*Style Bubble*), one of the most popular and influential British fashion bloggers, started off writing forum posts.

Finally, social media too can be effectively analysed to study the dynamics between experts and the wider public. Since, as I have already mentioned, much of contemporary fashion communication depends upon the immediate affective engagement of the audiences, social media channels have come to play a deeply significant role in the shaping of mass style and fashion.

### **Translating the Complexity of the Fashion-Communication Scenario into a Researchable Entity**

After having described the different roles within the cultural sector of fashion intermediaries, and before moving to discussing my application of the different

methods, it is necessary to explain the way in which examples of the work of the former can be translated into objects of analysis in terms of the latter.

Rose (2001) argues that “there is no concern among semiologists to find images that are statistically representative of a wider set of images, for example, as there is in content analysis” (Rose 2001:73) This is due to both the interpretative nature of this kind of analysis, which starts at the sampling level with the selection of 'interesting' and 'meaningful' material, and to the extremely wide and scattered selection of visual material available, of which there is usually no list available. Given the nature of my research, and my methodological choices, which start with a preliminary semiotic analysis, I decided to proceed with what Patton (1990) calls purposeful sampling. “The logic and power of purposeful sampling lies in selecting information-rich cases for study in depth” writes Patton (1990: 169). This kind of selection enables the researcher to deliberately pick the critical cases that will eventually provide abundant relevant information. Issues of probability, systematic representativeness and generalisability here are put aside in favour of an in-depth, knowledge-driven study of a qualitative socio-cultural phenomenon.

My sample is then made of a purposively-selected set of textual and visual materials from a wide range of sources, all representing examples of communication by fashion intermediaries regarding the androgyny trend. A large part of this material is easily accessible from widely distributed publications, or public websites. Thanks to my position as a blogger, in the fashion field, I was also able to gain access to more exclusive ones, such as communications intended for the press or releases and brochures available only to those invited to the events at London Fashion Week. In order to select the relevant material that would allow me to investigate the contemporary trend of androgynous fashion, I needed to isolate the new androgyny and its aesthetics. In other words, before being able to look at images of the androgyny trend and assess their implications, it is necessary first to determine which images represent examples of the new androgyny. In many cases, written words came to my aid. As I mentioned in

Chapter 1, words and phrases like “androgyny”, “the new androgyny”, “androgyny chic”, “borrowed from the boys”, “tomboy”, “mannish” or “dandy” have been lately featured very frequently in magazines and other fashion publications and outlets to describe fashionable new styles in womenswear. Using such pictures and the corresponding taglines and captions as a legend also allowed me to recognise the same patterns elsewhere and identify them as linked to the androgyny trend. In other instances, however, I had to rely on my own knowledge and let it guide me in the selection of material regarding the object of study. Entwistle (2009) talks about the existence of a specific aesthetic knowledge linked to a fashion habitus, which is acquired through proximity with fashion, “a shared professional position, shared spaces of interaction and regular, routinised encounters in the fashion world” (Entwistle 2009: 139). In this sense, the sampling procedure and the selection of materials that are relevant to the study of the new androgyny was often informed by the fashion knowledge I have been able to gain thanks to my role as a fashion blogger and the years spent attending shows at London Fashion Week and collaborating with fashion professionals.

To limit the scope of the research, which focuses on a phenomenon in present-day mainstream Western fashion, I decided to look only at British sources. British fashion, linked to London Fashion Week, represents one-fourth of dominant fashion's power fulcrum, with London being one of the four internationally recognised fashion capitals (the others are Milan, Paris and New York). Moreover, London fashion has a reputation as the “most innovative” on the global scenario (“LFW AW13 Press Release,” 2013), and is therefore an especially interesting angle from which to analyse the latest trends, and, in this case, the trend of the new androgyny.

I also set a temporal delimitation. In order to analyse the contemporary meaning of the way in which the trend of androgyny has recently re-emerged, and since fashion styles and trends are usually identified in terms of decades, I concentrate on material produced in the current decade, that is from the year 2010 onwards.

Finally I did not predetermine a precise adequate number of data to collect for analysis. Instead I kept on digging into different sources until I reached a satisfactory level of saturation. Theoretical saturation is defined as the point in which

no new data appear and all concepts in the theory are well-developed. Concepts and linkages between the concepts that form the theory have been verified, and no additional data are needed. No aspects of the theory remain hypothetical (Morse 2004: 122).

Putting it in a more straightforward way, since there are so many different fashion media and intermediaries that it would have been impossible to make a list of all of them, instead of reaching a saturation of sources, from which to select a sample, I aimed at finding conceptual saturation. Although, on several occasions, I still listed, categorised and classified the different sources, trying to be as comprehensive as possible, instead of aiming at identifying all the sources, I kept categorising them until I found enough cases and satisfactory conceptual patterns that left no other explanations, and generated theoretically-meaningful understandings of the phenomenon under study.

The sources from which I picked significant cases for my sample include:

- Articles and editorials from paper and online fashion and lifestyle magazines with a high distribution (*Vogue, Elle, Harper's Bazaar, Glamour, Grazia, Cosmopolitan, LOVE, W, Muse, Tatler*)
- Advertisements of popular fashion and beauty brands (*Alexander McQueen, Jack Wills, Colenimo, Margaret Howell Paul Smith, Balenciaga, Cartier, Tom Ford, Jil Sander, Lancome, Yves Saint Laurent*)
- Press releases from PR agencies representing *London Fashion Week* designers and organisations (*British Fashion Council PR, London Fashion Week PR, Goodley PR, Blow PR, Ella Dror PR, Modus, Forward PR, Felicities PR, Pop PR, The Wolves PR, H PR, Exposure, The Communications Store, Trace Publicity, DeVetta PR, RMO Comms, Bryan Morel PR, Starworks group, Village, Dyelog PR and Rainbowwave*).
- Newsletters of popular high street stores, written by internal PR people (*Topshop, Free*

*People, Urban Outfitters, Miss Selfridge, River Island, Evans, Jack Wills)*

- Articles from British fashion blogs (see table 3.1)
- Discussions posted on online forums (*The Fashion Spot, Purse Forum*)
- Posts on social media and micro-blogging platforms (*Facebook* pages, *Instagram, Twitter, Tumblr*)

In order to focus on dominant fashion I only looked at mediated materials that are intended to reach mainstream audiences. For this reason, I tended to restrict the focus to the highest selling magazines, blogs with the largest readership, and advertisements and press material of established designers/brands, while still trying to ensure a representative variety of sources. Moreover, although I do indeed point out how differences in readership and demographics might have an impact on the findings, before commencing the actual analysis, I did not make prior distinctions among sources. This was done in order to consider the mainstream fashion scene as a whole, and keep the focus on the dominant portrayal of androgyny, without making assumptions about a direct correlation between the different messages of fashion intermediaries and real-life experiences. The readership of *Vogue* is certainly different from that of, for example, *Grazia*, just like the target customer of *Mulberry* is not the same as that of *New Look*.

However, what is at stake, when focusing on the dominant representation of androgynous fashion, is the way in which dynamic configurations of identity exist in relation to the dominant fashion discourse, which is in turn shaped by the sum of all means of fashion communication, albeit reflecting only very specific power interests.

### **The Methods (I): Semiotics**

Due to the very visual nature of fashion itself, the object under study lends itself quite easily to a semiotic analysis that aims at understanding and uncovering existing socio-cultural structures through the breakdown of visual elements.

Several contemporary theorists have stressed the prominence of the visual dimension of

present-time western society. Influential thinkers such as Baudrillard (1994), Jay (1993) and Jenks (1995), for example, have all been preoccupied with the way in which, in our society, governed by the supremacy of the visual, there exists an increasingly dangerous entanglement between what we see and what we know, sometimes to the extent of each nearly dissolving into the other, and being no longer distinguishable. Taking this perspective to the extreme, Baudrillard describes the contemporary world as “a world of simulation, of the hallucination of truth, of the blackmail of the real” (1994: 8).

The fashion world and its production of images, in particular, have been the object of extensive visual analysis that focuses on how power interests are served through the concealing and deceiving action of fashion imagery (to name just a few examples, see Williamson 1978, Crane 2000, Wolf 2002 and Barnard 2002). According to this perspective, instead of being seen as transparent lenses that display an exact reproduction of 'the real', images are interpreted as offering a filtered version of the world; as Rose (2001) writes: “images are never transparent windows onto the world. They interpret the world; they display it in very particular ways” (Rose 2001: 2). Acknowledging the crucial contemporary relevance of the field of vision, especially in terms of dynamics of power that tie together seeing and knowing, and identifying fashion visual material as a key site for this process, I approach the preliminary critical analysis of selected fashion texts with the following aims: analysing visual material with reference to the politicised and ideological meanings behind their aesthetic surface (fashion visual material is not neutral), perceiving visual material as making sense and operating inside a particular cultural context (fashion visual material is not independent from the wider scenario in which it is produced), exposing the means through which 'truth' is constructed and analysing the social practices and the relationships of power embedded in the texts (fashion visual material works towards the reproduction of inequality).

Using a semiotic approach, based on the contributions of its founding fathers Saussure, Lévi-Strauss, and Barthes, I look at the material under study paying particular attention

to which particular signs are featured what they signify in relation to broader power relationships. In other words, through the interpretation of the meanings and the different signs found in visual material about androgynous fashion, I highlight their implications in terms of the wider contemporary socio-cultural scenario, and matters of class reproduction, and race, gender and sexuality-based inequality.

Saussure (2011 [1916]) maintains that signs have a dual nature. They are made of a signifier (i.e. a carrier of meaning) and a signified (i.e. its content), whose relationship is arbitrary, rather than essential and stable. Following what is theorised by Barthes, as an elaboration of Saussure's ideas, I treat each sign, as intended by Saussure, as a signifier itself, with its own signified meaning. Barthes (2009 [1972]) calls the first and more straightforward order of signification, which represents the literal meaning, denotation, while the second order, referred to as connotation, designates all the sets of meanings associated with a particular sign. A considerable part of this first step of my research takes place at the level of connotation. It is in fact here that the social and the cultural contexts are reflected and shaped. Barthes also links connotation to the idea of myth. He describes how, the chains of cultural meanings associated with signs, not only make reference to, and are only understandable in relation to a particular social reality, but also have strong ideological implications. Myth, he states, “has the task of giving an historical intention a natural justification, and making contingency appear eternal” (Barthes 2009: 142). In other words, the signs' connotations serve the function of naturalising politically-charged concepts and making them appear as universal truths. Although this kind of approach does not address the intentions of media texts' authors, and audiences' interpretations of them, I find it useful, here, adopted in a preliminary stage of analysis, to define the trend of androgyny, identifying its key characteristics and understanding their role in relation to crucial social issues. In line with Barthes' ideas, I look at the content of images (e.g. the represented elements and their positioning, focal points, layout, composition, colouring, words, background) making connections with wider concepts embedded in them, and pointing out their relevance for social issues that transcend the fashion scene. By considering what kind of perceptions the images

encourage, I show how imperatives about appropriate fashionable appearance, but also, and most importantly, appropriately-feminine gendered appearance produce a particular aesthetic ideal, which is presented as universal. Speaking in more practical terms, at this initial level I look at images associated with the androgyny trend, taking note of what kind of signs are used to portray it, what other connotations such signs carry, and how these can be organised into patterns, from the analysis of which will spring further discussion.

The work of Barthes is especially relevant due to his interest in fashion and its changes. In *The Fashion System* (1990) he draws a distinction between real clothing and represented clothing, deciding to focus his analysis on the latter, and further distinguishing it into image and written clothing. His attempt to analyse the language of fashion is nevertheless not without considerable problems. By Barthes own admission, this ambitious project, filled with over-complex analysis, is difficult to abstract from, and ended up, to some extent, in failure. In addition, Barthes fails to take into consideration the possibility, on the part of the reader, but also of the intermediaries that work with such images, of alternative, oppositional or resistant readings that move away from the intended understanding. Indeed, this lack can also be regarded as a general disadvantage of using the semiotic method. We will see how this aspect is instead implemented in my research through a particular attention to audiences' responses. Nevertheless, Barthes' study works well as an example of the way in which fashion images and texts can be put into a semiotic framework that shows how it is possible to translate physical clothing into a coded system to communicate symbolic meanings.

Bearing in mind the limitations of this method, I do not use semiotic analysis to make wider considerations about the contemporary fashion scene in general or to assume the responses of the audiences simply deducting them from what is embedded in the texts. Instead, I employ this kind of investigation as a preliminary, albeit still essential, step in the research process, in which I only look at one highly significant side of the problem, and map out the issue under study, highlighting patterns that lead to an analysis that

contextualises representations and their role. In other words, while semiotics is not useful to explore the crucial relationship between media representations and different groups of people, most notably their intended audiences, I still believe that portrayals of the androgyny trend can be effectively studied from a semiotic point of view to uncover and map out problematic representational patterns. Nevertheless, instead of assuming the audiences' passive role, I will then turn to other methods to investigate their active engagement with such representations.

As discussed, my project is carried out from a feminist point of view, and follows, therefore, guiding principles associated with feminist research. Hesse-Biber (2012) maintains that feminist praxis implicates challenging “knowledge that excludes, while seeming to include” (Hesse-Biber 2012: 3) and the dominant understanding of things, as well as problematising hierarchies. She also underlines how looking at intersections of women's differences (e.g. gender, race, class), as opposed to seeing them as ontologically separate categories, has emerged as a very important tool that enables to account for the different experiences in the diverse spectrum of femininity, and undermine the status quo.

Along the same lines, at this stage of the research process, by looking at representations of androgyny produced by key fashion media, I aim to reveal and expose inherent biases that result in the (tacit) exclusion of a particular group of people. This group can be located at the intersection of the most disadvantaged ends in the spectra of class and gender (i.e. working-class women), with an additional rejection of non-heterosexuality and non-whiteness. We will see in fact how the androgyny trend, going beyond matters of gender and sexuality, not only reinforces traditional gender roles and heteronormativity, but also promotes race and class-specific versions of femininities. Through the use of the semiotic method, I question the implicit cultural superiority/inferiority of determinate styles and aesthetic standards, study the way in which such privilege operates, and problematise its legitimation.

## **The Methods (II): Discourse**

At the initial stage of the research I keep the focus on representation and visual accounts of the androgyny trend in mainstream fashion. Building on this analysis and, in order to avoid making assumptions and speaking on behalf of other people, solely based on my own interpretation of such material, I then used discourse analysis to investigate how this particular aesthetics is made sense of by the audiences, but also by different groups of fashion intermediaries themselves. At this second stage of the research, I compare the concepts that emerged from the analysis of representation with different kinds of texts produced by intermediaries and the audiences. These include, for instance, print and online articles written by fashion journalists, press releases distributed by PR people and blog posts and Facebook-page updates by either established fashion insiders or emerging independent bloggers, together with audience responses shared on online forums, or published as comments on blogs or on social media. It is important to note that, although here I attempt to understand people's perspectives using only second-hand sources and without direct observation or interrogation, this kind of data is highly valuable in that it is by no means manufactured and artificial. If on the one hand, I had to consider not only the position of who produced the text, but also the conditions behind its production (e.g. a blogger's report on a fashion show might not entirely reflect their personal point of view and be part of a broader negotiation of value and legitimacy), on the other hand, although this is not my primary aim, I can positively know that no case under study was influenced by the research process.

Moreover, the choice of using discourse analysis as a method of investigation also allows me to keep referring back to the wider implications uncovered through the use of semiotic analysis. Similarly to semiotics, discourse analysis enables me to look at cultural material not as a transparent reflection of the world but as constructed, in a very specific way and for very specific purposes. The combination of these two methods helps me to analyse how implicit cultural understandings have the capacity of

promoting or condemning determinate identities through a process of normalisation. This is not to say that ideology and discourse can be used as synonyms, as they are in fact two separate, although not necessarily mutually exclusive, concepts. The critique of ideology is a critique that speaks from the outside, and can be especially useful in the study of the authority. In my case, for example, even though I am critical about its application to other issues, I find it useful to investigate the point of view of the institutionalised media as a whole. The analysis of discourse, on the other hand, is already placed within authority and aware of the limits imposed by it, but, at the same, time it also permits a wider spectrum of experiences and engagements with discourse itself (Mills 1997). Mills also stresses the importance that this has for feminist research, underlining that the

categories and narratives which discourse constructs for subjects are not simply imposed, but are subject to negotiation by those subjects. It is the process of engaging with discursive structures that constitutes us as particular types of individuals or subject positions (Mills 1997: 96).

Hence, after having examined the semiotic connotations embedded within the aesthetics of the androgyny trend, I transport them into a larger-scale discursive perspective in order to consider how different identities are shaped by particular discourses, as well as how social positions are actively constructed through engagements with discursive constructs. By turning to discourse I opened up the possibility of fashion being employed by the women who wear it to negotiate social relations, instead of merely constituting an oppressive force. As Smith (1990) argues:

When the codes and images are viewed as women use, play with, break with and oppose them, the discourse of femininity appears not as a managed construct of the fashion industry manipulating people as puppets, but as an ongoing, unfolding, historically evolving, social organisation in which women and sometimes men are actively at work. (Smith 1990: 204)

Since the concept of discourse is often taken up in a variety of different contexts and with a variety of different meanings, I will now explain my viewpoint on the matter. My use of the method draws from Foucault's understanding of discourses as "practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak" (Foucault 1972: 49) and outside of

which “nothing has any meaning” (ibid: 32). Language, in this sense, is acknowledged as a means of doing things, rather than reflecting them or describing them as they are. I also stress how, as theorised by Foucault, this happens within a process that manifests itself through the conjoined action of knowledge and power. It is in fact the relationship of interdependence between the two which makes the production of truth, and later the establishment of 'regimes of truth', possible. In the wake of these ideas, discourse analysis can be used to uncover the dynamics through which knowledge serves the interests of power, influencing people's perceptions, and ultimately actually constructing the objects described. Using discourse analysis, I look at textual features (i.e. choice of words, construction of phrases, use of figures of speech, symbolisms, binaries, genre, intended audience and purpose) in individual texts, and connect them to the wider context in which they are positioned, and only in relation to which they acquire their meanings.

Furthermore, my perspective is also informed by the theory of critical discourse analysis which, shifting away from the simple description of linguistic textual material, focuses on the broader structures of power operating within society, and the intertextual dimension. We will see how all these elements can be put together to approach the study of fashion discourses in a more nuanced manner, considering recurring textual themes and patterns and acknowledging the intertextual nature of the matter, where different kind of texts constitute larger discursive formations. In other words, drawing from Fairclough's (1992) arguments, instead of simply carrying out a detailed textual analysis that points out underlying discursive structures, I also pay attention to how these are affected by wider systems of power, and to the connections between power, discourses and social conditions.

As I have mentioned, discourse analysis also enables me to obviate one of the intrinsic limitations of Barthesian semiotics: the assumption of the universality of the preferred reading. By paying closer attention to the wider frameworks of interpretation, I was able to examine how dominant readings are sometimes challenged even at the very level of

cultural mediation. In this regard, my notion of resistant readings is informed by key works in cultural studies, such as those by Hall (2007 [1980]), Hebdige (1979), and Morley (1980). If on the one hand, I investigate the way in which common understandings of feminine identities appear in the fashion media almost as universal truths, on the other hand, I do not treat members of the audience as passive receivers of those truths. I also look at how discourses and preferred readings, encouraged by and implied in the text, are resisted, and consider whether ambiguous or oppositional understandings function against, or still in favour, of the dominant structures of power. In other words, thanks to a discourse analysis of this kind, I am able to combine the analysis of how particular truths are produced, established as such, and circulated, with that of how people themselves negotiate with them.

### **The Methods (III): Street Style Photography**

In order to explore ordinary people's relations with androgynous fashion in everyday life I decided to introduce street style photography, a popular practice which involves stopping strangers in the streets to document their style, as a further method. Let us now see more in detail what I mean by it and why, although street style photography has generally nothing to do with social enquiry, it can effectively function as a way of studying the relationship between the imageries disseminated by fashion intermediaries and the creative and aesthetic experience of ordinary people.

Rocamora and O'Neill (2008) talk about the prominent role of street fashion in contemporary culture arguing that

[i]n the media, the street has become as conspicuous a context for fashion as the space of the photographer's studio or that of the catwalk. No longer simply occupied, in fashion images, by the glamorous figures of professional models, it is the everyday setting of ordinary people whose fashionable looks feed the content of numerous fashion reports (Rocamora and O'Neill 2008: 185).

Following what argued by Mies (1993), who emphasises how crucial it is to analyse 'the invisible', and struggle to change the status of things in the interest of the oppressed, and by Reinharz (1992), who stresses that feminist research should expose asymmetrical relationships of power through the study of lacunae, that is erasures that are excluded from the mainstream, I used street style photography precisely to gain more insight on the kind of fashion that is excluded from mainstream representation. Documenting popular fashion directly from the street, outside the filter of cultural intermediaries, and outside the veil of privilege of the high-fashion world, I examine how the androgyny trend is lived in the real world and interpreted by real people. In this phase, I also attempt to understand what is beyond the representational space in which intermediaries operate, whether we can actually talk about androgynous fashion outside of the context of representation, and where real people with real bodies stand in this debate.

On the practical side, while preliminary street-style research was conducted while still defining the research problem and structure, the actual ethnographic process, upon which the last chapter of my thesis is based, mostly took place immediately following the months of visual and textual analysis, and thereby informed, and was informed by this first stage of the inquiry. The method involves me, as the researcher, entering the field in an ethnographic manner, and collecting rich descriptive, photographic and oral data through direct observation and interaction with the subjects. Sticking to the essence of the popular practice of street style photography, I hung around particular areas and neighbourhoods with my digital camera, selected women on the street based upon what they were wearing, using 'effort' and 'fashionability' as a main criteria (i.e. without making distinctions of age, apart from legal age, or of gender, ethnicity, national origin, disability etc.). Although effort and fashionability are not easy to isolate as coherent categories, my 'fashion knowledge', as defined earlier in this chapter, and previous experience in the fashion scene and as a street style photographer guided me in this. All the women I approached caught my eye for either wearing something that I recognised in terms of style and the current fashions, or looking as though some thought was given to their appearance. I then asked them whether I could take a picture of their outfit.

The selection of the areas in which I went street-style hunting was also meaningful. I decided to conduct this step of the research in central areas of London that are known for being particularly fashionable and for being populated by people sporting stylish, trendy, and edgy looks. In order to do this, I selected four areas (Shoreditch High Street – Shoreditch, Chalk Farm Road - Camden, Westbourne Grove – Notting Hill and Brixton Village – Brixton), featured by *Grazia* in 2014 (*Grazia* Staff 2014) as London's most fashionable one, as starting points for my style hunting. *Grazia's* article invites the general public to vote for what they think the most stylish streets are, and to see the results published in the magazine, while at the same time limiting the option only to those four pre-selected area. Nevertheless, it is also important to note that the relevance for street style of such spots is not recognized only by industry professionals such as *Grazia's* staff. In fact, they emerge as independent fashion bloggers' favourite locations for street style photography (e.g. *Modeable.com*, *Talltale.london*, *Fromthecornersofthecurve.com*) as well as for personal style shots (e.g. *agirlastyle.com*, *llymlrs.com*). In this sense, with this final step of the research I was able to keep on bridging the perspectives of fashion authorities like journalists, intermediate entities like bloggers, and a particular selection of the general public, in order to investigate the phenomenon of androgyny as a scene, rather than from a particular point of view.

The initial idea was that of photographing the selected participants and asking them a few questions, in form of unstructured interview, about what they were wearing. This interview would have started with a general “what are you wearing?” question and then moved to more specific questions about their style, their intentions or about a particular piece of clothing. As I will explain in a more detailed manner in Chapter 8 when I describe the findings of this last step of the research, I eventually found the need to modify my research strategy as I went along. Along the same lines, in the context of her own visual ethnography, Pink (2007) points out the importance of “allowing our visual methods to be shaped through our interactions with the people and the institutions we encounter during the research process, rather than being preconceived” (Pink 2007: 77).

As I will describe in a more exhaustive way in a dedicated section in Chapter 8, the method that I used for this last step of my inquiry, is a creative and an experimental one, developed in the field through my interaction with participants and in response to particular contingencies. During the initial testing stage, the method of the traditional interview appeared to be perceived as too cold, formal and serious; it put a barrier between the respondents and me, and failed to produce the expected results, as well as to capture the cultural vivacity, the richness and the peculiarity of the scene.

According to Lury and Wakeford (2012), in conjunction with the varied and flexible research routes offered by the contemporary social world, attention should be paid to diverse, creative and inventive methods of research “oriented towards an investigation of the open-endedness of the social world” (Lury and Wakeford 2012: 2). These, they add, can

enable the happening of the social world – its ongoingness, relationality, contingency and sensuousness – to be investigated. Our belief is that, to address these dimensions of social life, the full actuality of the world, its indeterminateness, what AbdouMaliq Simone describes as ‘the unregulated thickening of relationships among things of all kinds’, it is not possible to apply a method as if it were indifferent or external to the problem it seeks to address, but that method must rather be made specific and relevant to the problem (Lury and Wakeford 2012: 2-3).

Since I approached my participants while they were hanging out with friends on different streets of London, my method turned itself into a purposeful form of hanging out. Adapting to the context, after taking the participants' pictures, and together with a friend who accompanied me in order to help creating a relaxed and friendly atmosphere, I sat down with them and used a series of devices to collect meaningful data while spending a few moments together. I had a fancy dress plastic hat full of questions on colourful pieces of paper for participants to answer, envelopes and cards for a little sorting game, and notebooks and markers for drawing. I asked them to pick up questions to answer, put each card in one of the

envelopes, and to draw a picture of something that represented their own personal style. Answers to the questions, which were colour coded depending upon different thematic groups, cards (the purpose of which will be better explained in Chapter 8) and participants' drawings were later categorized and grouped to form patterns of information.

Through this kind of creative methodology, the participant observation, and through the data collected thanks to a particular kind of interviews, the style photography, and the small drawing sessions, I immersed myself into the street style scene to investigate the way in which the respondents' sense of style and self-presentation relate to, affect and are affected by the mainstream androgyny trend circulated by fashion intermediaries.

When it comes to access, the process was facilitated by my role as a blogger. Since street style photography is a very popular practice at the moment, people are generally very open to having their picture taken by street style photographers, and usually appear flattered when approached, and even ask where they can check out their published photograph. Thanks to my position as a blogger, validated by the business cards which I handed out before or after taking every picture, finding voluntary participants was not an issue.

In the UK, the law does not require photographers to hold permits, or to get model release forms, in order to be able to take pictures of people in public places, nor to use those pictures. However, aside from legal questions, this kind of investigation also raises a few further significant ethical issues. Since the previous stages the research did not directly involve, and thereby potentially harm, human participants, up until this point there have not been any major ethical problems, especially inasmuch as all the analysed texts were public (e.g. found in magazines or on blogs), or intended for publication (e.g. press releases that I get access to as a blogger). At this point, however, some considerations have to be made. While it is true that I am legally allowed to photograph people and publish their pictures, I always made sure to ask for their oral

consent, left them a link where they could see the pictures, as well as my contact details in case they would like to have them removed. Moreover, although once the photographs are online on my blog they are already public, and, since I am the author, I own their copyright, and I am thus permitted to use them for research, I still informed all the participants that the material was intended to be used for a sociological investigation and spent some time telling them about the outline of the project and its purpose.

In terms of the ethical dimension of this fieldwork, I also made every effort to ensure that participants felt secure and at ease. I conducted the research in public spaces that were familiar to the participants. For example, I approached them while they were hanging out on the street and collected data on the spot, without leading them to any other location. Moreover, I tried to look for people who were in small groups, rather than alone, and give participants the choice to answer my questions as a group, in pairs, or individually. Before proceeding, I also requested their informed oral consent. After using the street style photography and my fashion blog to start the conversation, I introduced my research project. I told potential participants I was doing a sociological research about fashion and style, and informed them about my purpose of investigating the relationship between the current trend of androgyny and style-conscious women's way of dressing in everyday life. At this point I asked them whether they would have liked to take part in the project, and discussed their preferences about anonymity and expected uses of the collected material (e.g. for an art or photographic exhibition). In order to ensure confidentiality, finally, I asked people what name or nickname they preferred to be associated with, and whether I could include their faces in the photographs or not.

Since fashion is generally considered frivolous and not a sensitive matter, there was no major need to take precautions beyond normal ethical sensibility. Nevertheless, I made sure that participants were aware that they had the power to influence the discussion and the freedom not to comply to my requests or not to answer specific questions. My 5-

years experience as a street photographer (for an independent blog publication) also put me in a favourable position to conduct a research that follows the above-mentioned guidelines of ethical practice, especially with regard to matters of integrity and trust, professional competence, and public communication.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has constructed the methodological foundation of the research project. The objective has been that of elaborating the most effective procedure to investigate the problem under study. With this purpose in mind, I tried to identify the most significant aspects that define the rise of androgyny to the status of mainstream fashion trend as a sociological issue. I discussed the role of the key figures in this process and explained why, in my opinion, a visual and aesthetic field like fashion can be effectively studied with reference to matters of representation, through which I am able to question the cultural production of the androgyny trend. Shifting away from representation, and looking instead at the affective relationship between people and fashion imagery, I also stressed the importance of looking at the symbolic struggles hidden behind it. In this sense, I stressed how the study can be enhanced by a consideration of all the different processes through which mainstream fashion, and the androgyny trend in particular, become a means for the negotiation of social identities. I thus explained why discourse analysis can be used to investigate the way in which the aesthetic manifestations of the androgyny trend are understood, made sense of, used and reacted to, while still referring back to the ideological sphere. I also argued for the importance of street style photography on the contemporary fashion scene, and as an ethnographic method for the study of the relationship between the androgyny trend and the everyday, low-culture, aesthetics of the people in the streets of London. For each method, I also detailed the particular conditions for its application.

I also mentioned how important it is to take into consideration the implications of my own role as a researcher within the research project. This issue is especially significant

in terms of a study like mine, where results are generated in great part through my own interpretation of cultural material. In this regard, it is also important to consider the impact of location, another recurrent theme in feminist research, and reflect on how the positionings occupied by the person who produces knowledge inform the whole orientation of the research. Skeggs (1995) argues that our “locations and positionings impact upon whether we do research, consider ourselves to be researcher and the research we actually do” (Skeggs 1995: 7). My own position, and my own experience as a feminist woman, for example, has certainly influenced me in the choice of the research problem. It has also put me in an advantaged spot for studying and understanding the mechanisms of the patriarchal society and women's oppression. Being a blogger myself, in the field of fashion and culture, has not only played a key role in my decision to study the fashion mediation of androgyny, and in the choice of the methods to do it; it has also granted me access to materials for my research and to the knowledge to interpret them. It is in fact due to my work as a blogger that I have obtained much of the textual material I analyse, and that I was able to conduct my ethnography involving street style photography successfully. Furthermore, although even while working as a blogger I always aim to keep an impartial view, during the research I also do my best to take into account the way in which my personal relationships, created over time, with people in the fashion industry or other bloggers, may have an influence on my analysis. I must, in fact, recognise that all of the bits of knowledge that I generate in this research project, are inevitably influenced by the filter of my own position. As Haraway (1988) maintains, every position is already inherently situated and there cannot be any innocent ones. Moreover, she argues that the reason why standpoints that are less legitimated by power and are socially excluded are preferable is still a political one, as not even these points of view are able to grant epistemic objectivity. It should also be said, however, that my position as a self-funded PhD student, with an irregular income, enables me to keep seeing the fashion world out of its shiny bubble of privilege. When I arrive at fashion shows by bus or by walking, when everyone else is carried there by private cars or taxis, when I attend the British Fashion Awards or press days of luxury fashion brands, wearing a £3 secondhand dress,

or when at events I am asked “where are you from?” and my instinctive reply is still “Italy” rather than the name of my publication, I am able to separate myself from the scene I am immersed into.

## **Chapter 4**

### **Mapping the Themes: Representation and Androgyny as a Trend**

#### **Introduction**

Chapters 1, 2 and 3 introduced androgynous mainstream fashion as the object of my research, placing it in its historical context, and stressing its significance in the contemporary sociocultural scenario. Through an overview of the key literature and the methodological framework, I defined its study as a mixed-methods inquiry that focuses on the aesthetic aspect of fashionable androgyny, with a particular focus on the body, affect, and matters of gender, class, sexuality and race and ethnicity. With this chapter, I aim to show the different ways in which androgyny is defined by representation in the context of fashion. Through a semiotic analysis that focuses on how meaning is constructed, I intend to use selected materials (e.g. images and features from magazines, advertisements and newsletters) produced by established fashion intermediaries as examples of what fashion does in terms of the peculiar production of androgyny as a trend. The term 'established fashion intermediaries' is here used to indicate traditional cultural intermediaries in the field of fashion, while cultural intermediaries can be defined as “market actors who construct value by mediating how goods [...] are perceived and engaged with by others” (Smith Maguire and Matthews 2014: 2)” as well as “by their claims to professional expertise in taste and value within specific cultural fields” (ibid.).

With these purposes in mind, I also look for patterns and connections within and among images, to identify the main themes that emerge from the trend. Such themes link androgynous fashion to broader sociological issues, which I will discuss in detail in separate sections in this chapter, and will also function as a guide for further analysis. At this stage of analysis I therefore adopt a perspective according to which images can be

'read' as representations embedded with politically-charged meanings, which can be studied in a semiotic way to uncover underlying complex structures of belief.

Before starting with the analysis of examples of the representation of the new androgyny created and circulated by intermediaries, I would like to draw attention to the fact that in this chapter I do not focus on the differences and peculiarities of the individual sources. Instead, I concentrate on general groupings and shared patterns that define the construction of androgyny through fashion; all sources used in this chapter are treated as part of the same unit, that of mediated material produced by established cultural intermediaries. In fact, within mainstream representation, as we are about to see, the vast majority of examples of androgyny can be seen as constituting different reworkings of the same dominant themes.

Androgynous fashion and instances of encouragement to play with the line between masculinity and femininity are found particularly frequently in media that reflect a conventional, affluent middle-class point of view. This could come as a surprise if we think about commonly-acknowledged traits of middle classes culture such as restrained refinement, cultural and political conservatism, and respectability, which have apparently little in common with a controversial matter like androgyny. In a different context, Judith Williamson (1986) writes:

I would argue that you must look not so much at the men who dress as women, or the women who dress as men, but at the 'feminine' or the 'masculine' characteristics they adopt and the values placed on these, no matter who 'wears' them (Williamson 1986: 47).

This is exactly the key here: we should not simply stop at the fact that traditional fashion media manifestly embrace the mixing of gender characteristics, but rather, it is crucial to inquire about which specific aspects of femininity and masculinity are taken up or dismissed, while, as Williamson underlines, reflecting at the same time on the value embedded in them. In this sense, this chapter does not just take note of the instances of fashion intermediaries promoting the trend. Instead, I also try to uncover

the particular meanings linked to them, and expand the discussion to include wider structures of value, within the realms of gender and class, but also sexuality and ethnicity. The over-representation of androgyny in contemporary mainstream fashion media is thereby investigated in terms of patterns inscribed within determinate forms of femininity and masculinity. Semiotics presents itself as an especially useful method in the analysis of such issues in that it allows an exploration of the deeper patterns of meanings embedded in popular images.

At this level of analysis, I decided to focus the analysis on images and leave out other categories of materials as a whole. For example, posts and comments on blogs, *Facebook* and forums, as well as interviews or longer feature articles will not be inspected at the current stage. These kind of sources lend themselves more easily, and with more productive results, to other forms of investigation. After having laid out the key patterns of representation linked to the construction of particular kinds of androgyny, and while keeping them as a thematic and semantic blueprint, further chapters will use exactly these other forms of textual material to investigate the matter from the perspective of affective engagements and subjective experiences.

Let us now explore the matter in a more concrete way through the analysis of selected images. First, I will discuss how contemporary androgyny is often defined with reference to a history of aristocratic privilege, with its lifestyles, tastes and preferences regarding leisure time. A second key theme instead connects androgynous fashion to a particular kind of elegance that is defined through the concepts of minimalist elegance and restraint. I will show how the aesthetics of such theme is also expressed through a conservative ideal of domesticity for women. Introducing another pattern of representation, I will also highlight how, in the mainstream context, heterosexuality is stressed as a necessary component of androgyny, and how the androgynous woman is identified as a wife or a man-enchanted seductress. Finally, I will describe how two further themes, those of the rebel and the alien, which apparently do not conform as strictly as the previous ones to conventional standards of women's fashion, are also,

albeit in different ways, rendered innocuous.

### **Affluent Lifestyle**

A feature from *Vogue's* December 2012 issue shows a set of nine objects, among pieces of clothing and accessories, positioned in circle (Figure 4.1). Let us explore it more in detail. At the centre of the circle, we read: "Gentlemen's club". With a closer look, we see that all of the featured items are made of printed silk. These include: two shirts, two pairs of high-heeled shoes, a pair of trousers, one coat and three scarves. The colour palette is quite homogeneous: burgundy and midnight blue with small-print details in black and white. Both the types of clothing and their colours have quite clear connotations, already conveyed by the title, that is to say, masculine, upper middle-class, or even aristocratic, leisure. Both colours, burgundy and deep blue, are typically used for men's suits and ties. Moreover, while business suits tend to come in neutral shades of grey, from charcoal to dove, more 'eccentric' hues such as deep reds and blues are usually found in those intended for recreational occasions; ones, of course, where the dress code prescribes suits, such as, for example, going to the theatre or having dinner at a fine restaurant. Similarly, in the September 2010 issue of *Vogue*, among the ten spring essentials of the season we find "the white dinner shirt", described as "masculine" and inspired by gentlemen's dress shirts from the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. In a *Grazia* (25 January 2010) feature about "Boyf shoes", androgynous footwear is instead presented in form of a selection of leather Oxford shoes, spectator shoes and loafers: a kind of footwear associated with the 19<sup>th</sup> century male youth of elite universities, often linked to preppy style (Figure 4.2). The preppy look, born as subcultural style in the US, and now of widespread popularity also in the UK, is described by Lurie (1992) as one that "expressed not social protest but social conformity" and had "its origin in the casual [...] sports clothes worn by upper-middle-class suburbanites in the conservative fifties and early sixties" (Lurie 1992: 164). On the other hand, the flamboyant shirt, the luxurious silks and the eccentric accessories evoke

the particular fashion of the dandy, a figure commonly associated with the display of aristocratic taste and lifestyle, and with the artfully eccentric attire of 19<sup>th</sup> century (male) aesthetes (Breward 2003). In all of these examples, the emphasis, is thereby placed on leisure, which Roach and Eicher describe as “a scarce resource monopolised by the social elite” (Roach and Eicher 1979: 19).

Leisure has traditionally been described in relation to the display of one's social position through clothing. Veblen, in particular, talks about it as the “non-productive consumption of time” which emerges from “a sense of the unworthiness of productive work, and as an evidence of pecuniary ability to afford a life of idleness” (Veblen 2005: 20). The kind of fashion just analysed, in this sense, stands for both the economic capacity to splurge on expensive clothing, and spending time engaging in determinate re-creative activities (e.g. going to the theatre or dining at restaurants), which require a particular attire. Moreover, it does so on a twofold level: first, by referring back to an imagined previous socio-cultural reality, characterised by the 'leisure class' described by Veblen, and second, by re-enacting it in present times. While Veblen explains this concept in relation to the spending and display of money, Bourdieu's theories can be applied to this case to produce a more contemporary and insightful analysis. The 'dinner' at a restaurant, as a moment of social recreation, for example, is described by Bourdieu as part of the enactment and consequent reproduction of a bourgeois lifestyle; meeting for just a drink, on the other hand, is seen as characteristic of the lifestyle of the working classes (Bourdieu 1984: 197). Although the partition may not be strictly accurate, translating this idea into the realm of fashion, what is important is the way in which, using Bourdieu's perspective, fashion is seen not only as a way of displaying one's status through expensive or up-to-date clothing, but instead it can be placed in a wider context of taste-based cultural consumption, associated with particular lifestyles. It becomes then a symbolic site where different classes engage in struggles over symbolic power and recognition. Wearing clothes like the ones advertised, in order to engage in a particular sort of social activity, can therefore be intended as part of a display of the 'right' kind of cultural capital, which in turn marks both one's privileged status, and the

legitimacy of such privilege.

Talking about the development of menswear, Crane (2000) argues that, presently, the sales of men's suits have considerably dropped, and their use has recently been largely restricted to men from the middle-classes in occupational sectors such as management and finance. After looking at the extremely wide selection of pictures in mainstream fashion material representing women borrowing this particular garment from menswear, thereby, we cannot fail to see, once again, the androgyny trend's relationship with class and social position. In these three cases of androgynous style, it is not simply masculinity that is taken up, but rather a white higher/middle class masculinity. Moreover, qualities such as classic appeal and timelessness (terms that very frequently appear besides images of this kind of style) are so accentuated that the masculine elements become expressions of past historical periods in which the social structure was especially rigid, and acquire thereby a connotation of being elite. The *Vogue* (Dec 2012) article itself underlines how only a “set of distinguished women” are allowed to enter this exclusive world, making it clear that at stake is not only women's appropriation of traditional male privilege, but also a statement of class distinction.

This is also reflected in the diffusion of androgynous preppy fashion, a look that Lurie (1992) describes as being associated with elegant restaurants and tennis courts, which, as argued before, are to be seen as expressions of an affluent lifestyle. A style that can be identified with a tomboyish preppy look is that created by British designer *Paul Smith*. Let us take two images from his advertising campaign for Spring Summer 2013 as an example. Again, the androgynous tomboy qualities appear to be more concerned with embracing a fashion trend and conveying a particular lifestyle, rather than actually subverting the gender binary. Both images depict a woman at the centre, surrounded by men. Important implications here can be found at the level of the body. All models are approximately the same age and their bodies have the same build. The look of the female model has no explicit feminine overtone, and her hair and her pose fit well with those of the male models. While the female model is wearing lipstick, her red lips are so bright that they convey freshness, youthfulness and assertiveness, a traditionally male characteristic, rather than seductive femininity. However, as with other representations of the new androgyny, a clear line is drawn between the female and the male, and the

feminine and the masculine, and the gender hierarchy is left untouched. The first demarcation is physical: in both ads, the woman is placed at the centre, on a different level from the male models. The second is numerical: the way in which the woman is outnumbered by men in advertisements focused on womenswear reinstates male dominance. The third is stylistic: while the men are all dressed in the same way, suits and ties, in different colours, she is not wearing a suit, but a more 'appropriate' blouse that features flowers and pink details (i.e. two of the most common signifiers of femininity in fashion). If androgyny is in a sense 'faked', the focus here is once more on gender and social distinction.

The classic tailoring, the formal belted trousers, the ties and tie pin, that feature in the advertisements on both men and the woman, convey a sense of exclusivity and refined, yet fashionable elegance, typical of the wealthier classes. Moreover, as common in advertisements of other brands associated with the preppy style, such as *Tommy Hilfiger* (US), *Ralph Lauren* (US), *Jack Wills* (UK), *Lacoste* (France), and *Burberry* (UK), the *Paul Smith* advertisements feature a small crowd of beautiful young people, male and female, with similar physical attributes and clothes, in order to signify belonging to a group: privileged affluent, mostly white youth, associated with college life and prestigious universities. Although one black model is featured, his presence can be interpreted along the lines of what argued by Lury (1994) regarding *Benetton* advertisements, which, she explains, naturalise race implications by portraying people from different ethnic origins as a mere matter of aestheticised skin colour. The connection between the social elite and education is especially interesting considering how Bourdieu (1990 with Passeron) marks the latter as a key site for the reproduction of social inequality and the class system. It is in fact in this kind of elite universities, which only a privileged few have access to, that the future dominant classes are shaped. Going back to the *Paul Smith* ads, the body language as well communicates exclusivity and perhaps snobbery. In the first of the two, the models pose as if to block the viewers' way, rejecting them with their hostile, superior look, straight-up posture and frown. In the second advertisement, we see the backs of the men, walking away, while the woman, turns to face the viewer, with the same body language as the previous ad, as to say "you cannot come with us". These ads can therefore be interpreted as an example of what Williamson (1978) describes as "product as currency", where the "product is able

literally to buy status in the external world” (Williamson 1978: 38). The *Paul Smith* clothes are presented as holding the power to give their customer access to a particular way of life and an exclusive world of privilege.

A further popular example of British preppy fashion can be found in the style of Alexa Chung, known for sporting outfits that are usually described by the fashion press as both preppy and boyish/tomboyish. Chung is a television presenter and a fashion influencer, she won the British style award at *British Fashion Awards* for three years in a row in 2010, 2011 and 2012, and interestingly is also a contributing editor at *British Vogue*. A further example is fashion brand *Jack Wills – University Outfitters*, whose website offers a wide selection of 'boyfriend jeans' for 'ladies' and, in 2012, had a special feature on the trendy 'Tomboy Twist'. A semiotic analysis of *Jack Wills'* promotional pictures from summer 2012 shows significant similarities with the *Paul Smith* campaign in terms of signifiers and signified meanings. The androgynous style epitomised by the blazers, shirts and brogues, as the images show, is counteracted and made femininely safe, even more evidently than in the *Paul Smith* ads, by the feminine floral patterns, the pink hues and the young woman's bare legs. Heterosexuality is also protected by how the girls appear to be accompanied by boyfriends. Here as well, the attention is placed on the exclusive lifestyle of *Jack Wills'* ideal costumer, as well as the ideal lifestyle of the *Jack Wills* costumer, accessible through the clothing advertised, which *The Guardian* once described as “reassuringly expensive coed-collegiate, Anglo-preppy” (Mills, 2009).

Along these lines, and in relation to preppy style can also be interpreted chic sportswear, another subfield of androgynous fashion. A trend report published on *Tatler* (March 2010), the *Conde Nast's* magazine targeted to the wealthiest readership, features a two- page spread on the 'retro preppy' look. The style is described as “relaxed boyish tailoring with a nautical theme” (*Tatler* 2010) and the designer clothes presented can all be seen as examples of leisure fashion for sailing and yachting (i.e. not actually intended for the labour of manoeuvring a boat, but rather for lounging on the deck), characterised by white cotton trousers, blue-and-white, or red-and-white stripes, navy blue jackets and scarves. Sports like sailing, horse riding, and tennis all commonly found in representations of the new androgynous look, function as further signifiers of

upper-middle-class leisure. Often, as in the case of the *Colenimo* advertisement, and as already seen in other instances, these are filled with hints at past historical periods, where a distinctive class structure was especially evident. In this kind of context, clothes are described as 'classic' and 'timeless', legitimising this way the social hierarchy, by presenting it as constantly outside historical contingency, and thereby as natural.

### **Minimalist Refinement and the Domestic Ideal**

The lights go up and the models start walking the runway, one by one, at a determined but light pace. It is J JS Lee's catwalk show for Autumn Winter 2013. There is no set design or decoration on the catwalk, and the look book released shortly after does not display any either: the designer is not trying to evoke any magical world, everything is simple and minimalist. There are two-tone jumpers, J JS Lee's signature turtle-necks, A-line skirts, Bermuda shorts and different styles of coats. The shapes are clean and sharp and everything is slightly oversized. The predominant colours are monochrome black and white, with splashes of monochrome baby pink and pastel blue. Everything is clean, crisp and sugary. The collection was later described by the press, as well as in the official press release (compiled by the PR team at *Modus Publicity*) as 'androgynous', 'minimal' and mixing 'feminine and masculine' (Modus PR 2012). The masculine quality is said to be found in the chic minimalism, the loose-fitting but structured shapes, the sleek edginess and the lack of prints. The press release also informs us that the dominant colour is not simply white, but a more sophisticated 'ivory'.

Let us observe now how pieces from the collection are presented when placed in the

context of a photo-shoot in two examples of the way in which the J JS Lee collection is featured by the media: British 'online shop' and 'hub of style advice' *Motilo* and British magazine *Notion* (issue 066, 2013) respectively. It is interesting to note how, in both images, the models are wearing pastel pink clothes, styled in a very feminine way; the *Motilo* model with pink eye-shadow and blush, and the one from *Notion* with floral high-heeled shoes. Moreover, the hairstyles and the make-up, as well as the simple pearl earrings, recall 1960s' women's styles inspired the Jackie Kennedy look, and thereby those of the respectable, upper middle-class older generation rather than the fashions of the mod girls who popularised the controversial mini skirt. References to the 1960s are used here as a cultural code which connotes a particular kind of accentuated femininity, composed and well-mannered, but still presented as 'pop', young and fun. The ambivalence between mature respectability and playful youthfulness is also matched by the ambivalence that exists between androgyny and ultra-feminine connotations.

Similarly to what described in Chapter 1 about the marketing potential of gender and sexual ambiguity, in this case, ambivalence can be seen as an instrument that enables to reach different audiences by displaying a symbolic degree of ambiguity, (i.e. rather than displaying explicit examples of gender transgression) while, at the same time, erasing subversive messages. Besides the use of soft-hued colours as obvious signifiers of traditional delicate femininity, the *Motilo* animated image also expresses an idea of traditional femininity through the presence of the cakes. The elegant frosted double-layered cake decorated with ribbons and coloured in the same delicate palette of the clothing, stands, in a synecdochic relationship, for the lifestyle of the exemplary retro housewife who supposedly baked it. Finally the way in which the model seemingly creates the cake, as well as the little outfits of the models on the cake, by blowing tiny stars, communicates the effortless way in which the right kind of woman is able to look the right kind of good. The picture from *Notion* magazine portrays a similar femininity by further playing with ambivalence and contrasts already from the title of the editorial: "Daisy goes to Dungeness". The name Daisy sounds old-fashioned, sweet and girly, just like the look of the young woman who has it, while Dungeness is known as a picturesque but inhospitable landscape characterised by a vast dry shingle bank, which constitutes the only classified desert in Britain. The picture, therefore, constructs fashionable femininity not by combining it with masculine qualities through androgyny,

as the press release, and presumably the designer herself, intended, but, instead, by juxtaposing it with an external masculinity in a structure of mutually-exclusive binary oppositions. As Davis (1992) notes, “the symbolic aim of [androgynous] fashions is to dramatize cross-gender tensions, not resolve them” (Davis 1992: 36). The model's outfit, with its pale pink dress and white heels, is in stark contrast with the barren surroundings, and the contradiction is further underlined by the wind messing up her neat hairdo. Through such contrasts, the picture reinforces binaries of feminine vs masculine, female vs male, private vs public, domestic indoor vs wild outdoor, weak vs strong, delicate vs rough and so on.

In both pictures featuring the J JS Lee collection, as we have seen, the masculine elements found in the previously analysed representations of androgyny are lost. What is left is a subtly ambivalent, pastel-coloured, 1960s-inspired, young woman playing (in a post-feminist, rather than serious way) the role of the prim and proper housewife. Clothes associated with androgynous fashion then, ultimately become a symbol of a refined minimalism associated with a chic respectable femininity, expressed through clean, flawless and spotless looks. In this regard, the new androgyny becomes again entangled with questions of class. Respectability is in fact described by Skeggs (1997) as “one of the most ubiquitous signifiers of class” (Skeggs 1997: 1), and a key parameter in middle-class beliefs and values regarding femininity. Through the concept of respectability, middle-class femininity is defined in relation to domestic standards, proper manners and self-presentation, and a bourgeois lifestyle, and in opposition to working-class women's femininity, which “has always been produced through recourse to vulgarity” (ibid: 100). On the other hand, Skeggs argues, working-class femininity is pathologised for being excessive, tasteless and over-sexualised in terms of both clothing and bodily expression.

An aesthetic restraint that symbolises sexual restraint and self-regulation is also epitomised by the emergence of representations of androgyny that tend towards angelic genderlessness. Instead of a combination of the feminine and the masculine, as the definition of androgyny would suggest, the new androgyny often appears thus to favour the absence of both gender and sexuality. Discussing my theoretical framework, in Chapter 2, I have argued that through the dynamics of performativity, the artificial

distinctions between the sexes and the genders have become a highly significant aspect of our society. Moreover, sexuality is also an undeniable feature of human experience. As a consequence, this kind of refusal of gender, which, as we are about to see, is mostly fictitious, does not challenge difference or inequality. At best, it ignores issues instead of tackling them. Moreover, it represents a further instance of the promotion of characteristics that are defined in opposition to those associated with the working-classes, and which are used in their cultural devaluation.

In a *Topshop* newsletter from February 16 2014 entitled “Timeless pieces for all year round”, we see how the term 'timeless' returns again in association with androgyny. In the picture, a young woman is wearing what is described as “the flawless £100 suit”. The suit is structured and slightly oversized, modestly hiding the shape of the model's body. The femininity of the her is emphasised by the pale-pink colouring of both the suit and the whole image, the slightly exposed cleavage, as well as the model's hairstyle, make-up and doll-like facial features. The combination of these elements connotes girliness, and, as with the previous examples of androgyny, it is possible to see this case as an expression of alluring ambiguity rather than a subversion of gender identity. The model's genderlessness, which is nevertheless still oriented toward femininity, can be seen in opposition to the pronounced sexuality associated with women from the working-classes and their clothes, often accused of being too tight and revealing (see for example Skeggs 1997).

In representations of this kind, (hetero)sexuality is never completely excluded, and a certain degree of ambivalence is maintained also in this regard, and the looks remain sexy and contemporary and are never too overly conservative. Also in terms of body presentation, moreover, the models are styled in order to appear attractive in a conventional sense. Nevertheless, through a reference to almost genderless angelic figures and pure and asexual prepubescent ones, androgyny is employed to signify an absence of sexual urge, and, as a consequence, to indicate middle-class respectability. This can be interpreted in opposition to the 'tarty' look, which, as Skeggs (1997) writes, commenting on the words of one of the women in her study, is “the sign of the working class woman” (Skeggs 1997: 85). In the *Topshop* advertisement, the text that underlines how wearing the 'flawless' suit will make its wearer look wealthy, only serves to stress class connotations.

Other instances of a similar use of androgyny can be found in pictures from the runways of London Fashion Week circulated by PR agencies, and on the pages of magazines as well. Just to mention a few examples, *Zoe Jordan's* and *Preen by Thornton Bregazzi's* collections for Spring Summer 2014, and inspirations for outfits from the 'Fresh Start Issue of *Net-a-Porter's* online magazine (Jan 2 2014), use androgynous fashion to promote minimalist refinement and respectability, as with the *Topshop* promotional image. While still keeping on the safe side of androgyny, and never straying too far away from traditional femininity by employing signifiers such as heels, pure white and soft hues, and feminine-looking models, sexuality is restrained, and 'good taste' is expressed in form of elegant minimalism through clean shapes and the use of spotless monochromes.

Similar connotations of understated elegance and the display of an unthreatening androgyny can be found in the modern take on the *Annie Hall* look. This style, worn by Diane Keaton in the film (1977) of the same name, and involving large-fitting clothes taken directly from menswear, has become known as a symbol of progressive and independent femininity, free from conventional standards. Lurie (1992), however, argues that its meaning is twofold. She claims that,

these clothes convey an ironic anti-feminist message. Because they are worn several sizes too large, they suggest a child dressed up in her daddy's or older brother's things for fun, and imply "I'm only playing; I'm not really big enough to wear a man's pants, or do a man's job (Lurie 1992: 229).

In this sense, an ambiguously androgynous look is made unthreatening in terms of men's dominance and loses its unsettling power. An advertisement for *Margaret Howell's* Spring Summer 2011 collection reflects this phenomenon in the real fashion world. The model's trousers, like *Annie Hall's*, are oversized. They might not be hers at all, and appear in fact to be borrowed from someone else, supposedly a man. The large fit is also underlined by the fact that she has to roll up the legs in order to make them the right size. As in Lurie's (1992) analysis, the loose clothes can be seen as revealing women's inadequacy to wear men's clothes, and, on a symbolic level, to be their equals. Furthermore, besides making androgyny safe for the cis-gender and heterosexual viewer through references to the men in the female models' lives, as we have seen in

previous examples, this advertisement as well turns androgyny into a sign of timeless chicness (conveyed through the use black and white photography) and asexuality or innocence (expressed through the neat white shirt buttoned up to the top, the ladylike cardigan, and the loose fit of the clothes itself).

### **The Heterosexual Wife and the Sophisticated Femme Fatale**

Similarly linked to ideas of elegance and ladylike allure are two opposing but complimentary further tropes of androgynous fashion's representation: the heterosexual wife and the sophisticated femme fatale.

The British online luxury fashion shop *Net-a-Porter*, which in Spring 2014 launched its own glossy magazine as a competitor of *Vogue*, has dedicated much space, and two whole issues in its weekly online magazines, to the trend of androgyny. One of the online magazine's issues is emblematically called "Mannish Chic" (7 November 2013) and features on the cover and in a photo-shoot, French actress Emmanuelle Seigner. The cover is in black and white, and we see Seigner walking on a bridge in Paris, glancing back at the camera with a smile. She is wearing a loose-fitting dark trouser suit and a fedora hat. The subtitle reads "throw on the softest suit and slip into luxurious loafers: borrowing from the boys just got super sensual". In the photo-editorial, moreover, we find more pictures of her, strolling around Paris and smiling at the camera, while wearing tailored coats, shirts, waistcoats, brogues and fedoras. We see her walking relaxedly around a rich neighbourhood in central Paris, apparently carefree and enjoying the surroundings. The editorial is entitled "It's a man's world..." and the subtitle underlines the French actress' "sensuality, strength and style", and how she "speaks her mind, stands firmly by her man, and loses nothing in translation". At a visual level, the clothes that she is wearing convey, in analogous ways to some of the previously discussed examples, affluent and powerful masculinity as well as refinement. Furthermore, as the captions on the pictures inform potential customers, they were all produced by high-end elite luxury brands such as *Dolce & Gabbana*, *Vanessa Bruno*, *Saint Laurent*, *Jil Sander*, *Bottega Veneta* and *Church's*. In this set of

pictures, we find again themes that emerged from previous readings of representations: affluent lifestyle, chic minimalism and refinement.

This example also embodies particularly well a concept in the transmission of representational meaning, which Williamson (1978) calls 'referent system'. The case of Seigner's photoshoot in fact presents several analogies with Williamson's well-known analysis of the *Chanel No. 5* advertisement featuring Catherine Deneuve. Williamson (1978) argues that, through her presence in the ad, the famous actress works as a referent system, which the audience already recognises and associates with particular characteristics that distinguish her from other actresses. Thanks to this connection that already ties one object in the picture to a determinate set of ideas (e.g. sophistication and French beauty), these concepts are automatically transferred to the object that is being promoted, *Chanel No. 5*, distinguishing it, in turn, from other perfumes.

The photo-shoot with Emmanuelle Seigner works in an analogous manner, except, here, not only the French actress but also the city of Paris itself function as a referent of meanings. Paris and Seigner both are already positioned in systems of signs, with similar signified meanings of chicness, beauty, sophistication and culture, all of which are also enhanced by the choice of black and white photography for the cover and some of the editorial shots. As with Williamson's example, such meanings are then transferred to the masculine clothes advertised, and thereby to this kind of androgynous style.

Moreover, a further connotation of Paris is that of romantic love. Seigner herself is known for being the wife of award-winning director Roman Polanski at least as much as for her own career. A new, almost paradoxical, image is then added to the representation of androgyny: that of the beautiful, heterosexual wife. Differently from the theme of the retro housewife that appeared from the previous semiotics readings, in which androgynous fashion serves to symbolise proper minimalist elegance, this kind of androgyny, here personified by Emmanuelle Seigner, is more contemporary and more ostensibly masculine, and apparently needs, therefore, to be openly defined in relation to a heterosexual relationship. The text on the cover hints at this from the beginning, talking about how sensual it is for a woman to 'borrow from the boys' and temporarily

adopt the clothes of her man in order to enhance her own erotic appeal to him. It is also underlined how Seigner “stands firmly by her man” as a devoted wife. Even the way in which she frequently poses glancing back with a loving smile creates the suggestion of her lover's point of view. Furthermore, in the last picture of the spread we notice that she is not wearing the arms of her *Bottega Veneta* coat. When looking at this particular picture, this detail brought to my mind another feature, this time from *Vogue* (September 2011), which shows a selection of coats, described as 'mannish' and very similar in materials, colours, and cut (i.e. tailored and structured) to the *Bottega Veneta* one. A caption instructs “Wear over your shoulders like a cape, it will look like the man in your life has lovingly draped his coat over you” (*Vogue* September 2011). Both articles hint at a new way in which androgyny is constructed by the fashion media. In sharp contrast with the assumption that the mixing of traditionally feminine and masculine styles coincides with the questioning of the conventional gender roles, the examples show how, for a woman, dressing in an androgynous manner means being able to display the presence of a male counterpart, who boasts gallant manners, loves her enough to let her borrow his clothes, and dresses with good taste.

Androgyny is often made harmless and acceptable by representations through its juxtaposition with conventional feminine images and themes, which enable the viewer to insert the masculinely-dressed woman within a reassuring heteronormative binary in which femininity is still the complementary opposite of masculinity. For example, an editorial from *Vogue* (September 2011) shows model Karmen Pedaru wearing different types of winter coats; one of which, is the ubiquitous mannish/androgynous coat. In the picture, she wears a masculine outfit, complete with white cotton shirt and pinstriped trousers, and her pose, with her upper-body bent forward, her hands in her pockets and her face directed towards the camera, appears self-confident and even slightly confrontational. The overall connotation of the image, however, is not different from more conventional representations of hegemonic feminine beauty. On a physical level, the model has soft doll-like features, big pale-green eyes and light blonde hair with a classic fringe. Both the slightly-parted lips and the innocent look on her face are

characteristics usually found in normative representations of women, symbolically portrayed as submissive, and as sensual objects of the heterosexual 'male gaze' (Mulvey 1989). Finally, the mannish coat itself here hints at conventional femininity, since it is coloured in a saccharine pastel pink, with the manifest intention, as the caption states, “to turn an androgynous overcoat feminine”.

Even in a trend like that of the new androgyny, thereby, we have seen how a common representational theme concerns the promotion of characteristics associated with traditional femininity. Also if we think about the examples in terms of archetypes, a key concept in Carl Jung's (1980) psychological theory, now widely used in film, literary and semiotic analysis, as well as in feminist cultural critique, we can see how this kind of representation of androgyny can be easily placed within the context of the symbolic figure and the physical iconography of the archetype of the wife. This category has been object of a sharp critique not only for reproducing the gender binary, but also for defining the feminine only in relation to the masculine, and men's desire (see for example Rushing 1989, Kuhn 1990). The fact that the potentially subversive subject of androgyny still lies within these pattern is thereby very eloquent about such representations. Moreover, from a semiotic analysis of the trend, emerges also a second key traditional archetype of femininity: the femme fatale.

In antithesis to the figure of the wife, which perfectly embodies the middle-class woman, restrained and respectable, the femme fatale is a sensual seductress. In a *Harper's Bazaar* spread from October 2011 we see a woman in a white shirt and masculine attire, apparently in the act of getting dressed or undressed. In a *Glamour* photoshoot from October 2012, actress Emma Watson wears a similarly a half open white shirt and an undone tie. From both pictures, emerges at a first glance, a symbolic narrative of masculinity and power. The model's and the actress' looks, composed of a tuxedo shirt and trousers, and a silk cummerbund or tie, hint at the well-off masculinity that already emerged from previous analysis in this chapter. The accent here, however, is placed more evidently on masculine power. The formal outfits, as accentuated by the two watches worn by the *Harper's Bazaar* model (which, as the caption inform us, cost £9,130 and £2,140), are symbolic of a particular category of men: rich, powerful and in-control. As an article from the *Guardian* underlines, “magazines today are stuffed with

advertisements for power watches”, and their commercial success derives from their connotations, since “owning one of these puts you in the same club as the most powerful men in the world” (Langmead 2009).

Davis (1992) and Crane (2000) note how there exists a common characteristic agenda in contemporary fashion magazines, according to which women are represented as successful, powerful and self-assured. What is of particular interest here is the fact that, in this specific context, the women portrayed are usually styled with masculine or androgynous pieces. In this regard, representations associated with this genre might be seen as constructing gender ambiguity in fashion as a way for women to gain power, authority and control, albeit through the imitation of dominant masculinity. If the Emma Watson photograph can be interpreted at least as a compromise of this kind, however, this is unfortunately not the case for the image from *Harpers Bazaar*. The shiny and soft waves of the golden platinum blonde hair of the model, together with the parted crimson red lips and partially exposed breast, together with the jewellery, all sum up to convey an idea of voluptuous femininity, and refer back to the iconic figure of the femme fatale. The way in which her head is twisted to the right and her eyes are gazing around as to check whether she is alone, instead, puts the viewer in the scopophilic position of the voyeur, described by Mulvey (1989) as an expression of the objectifying male gaze. The same connotations of 'fatale' femininity, moreover, can be found also in the enticing and provocative look in Watson's made-up eyes and the way she smirks with a slightly-open mouth. The wavy blonde hair of the *Harpers Bazaar* model, the predominance of black and white in both pictures, as well as the dramatic low-key lighting, moreover, constitute a cultural reference to divas of film noir, such as Marlene Dietrich, Veronica Lake or Lauren Bacall, femme fatales par excellence, sophisticated, ravishing, seductive, and made even more desirable, and not less womanly, by a whiff of gender ambiguity. An analogous reading is expressed also by Wilson (1985), who, talking about fashion and sex appeal, argues that,

there is nothing androgynous about Marlene Dietrich or Greta Garbo, for

example, it is rather that the mysterious quality of their allure comes in part from a hint of manliness at the very heart of their feminine presence (Wilson 1985: 120).

A caption next to Watson's picture further accentuates this by describing the look as “masculine made feminine and seriously sexy” (Glamour October 2012: 249).

## **Rebellion and Resistance**

All of the themes that have emerged from the analysis up until this point worked along similar lines. In all cases I have just analysed, androgyny is used, with different degrees of gender ambiguity, as merely another way of reproducing the dominant tastes, heteronormativity and gender stereotypes. But what happens when androgyny is inserted within a context of rebellion and resistance to the norm?

In Britain, many working-class subcultures, over the years, have made use of fashion to express a rupture from the values of dominant society and bourgeois culture. Hebdige (1979) emphasises the key role played by fashion in this kind of social resistance arguing that

the challenge to hegemony which subcultures represent is not issued directly by them. Rather it is expressed obliquely, in style. The objections are lodged, the contradictions displayed [...] at the profoundly superficial level of appearances (Hebdige 1979: 17).

In the 1960s, mods confronted the conventional style of the dominant classes taking the elegant and decent suit-and-tie look to the extreme, and wearing suits and accessories that were perceived as too elegant and too garish both to be appropriately masculine and to be worn in ordinary settings. The skinheads, on the other side, accentuated the stereotypical look of the working-class worker with shaved heads, braces and sturdy boots. The youth subculture associated with glam rock, Hebdige argues, turned instead to a fantasy world, escaping from class and gender through the adoption of David

Bowie' signature sexually ambiguous look. The punks rejected the safe dominant culture by wearing dirty clothes made of cheap materials and in vulgar and excessive styles, paired with outrageous objects that had nothing to do with the common-sense wardrobe, such as safety-pins, razor blades and chains.

A feature from *Vogue* (July 2011) focuses on British model Stella Tennant, described as “the queen of punk androgyny”. The use of the adjective punk, besides making reference to the transgressive subculture, is made even more meaningful by the androgynous quality that punk style itself had and still has. Differently to the fashions and attitudes of other youth subcultures, punks adopted unusual hairstyles with mohawks and extravagant hair colours, without particular distinctions of gender; even make-up was used by both men and women and their clothing was fairly unisex. Arnold (2001) underlines how “[whereas] previous subcultures had usually cast women as marginal figures, [...] punk allowed young women a strong, if intimidating dress code” (Arnold 2001: 46). In the picture of Tennant, which occupies a good part of the left side of the page, we see her clothed in black leather boots, black tights, and a dirty-looking blue dress worn untied and over a greyish shirt with the sleeves rolled up. Her face, unusually for a model in a photo-shoot, and unusually for *Vogue*, appears to be completely make-up free, and her black hair is cropped short and uncombed. Her scruffy and unkempt look, represents a different take on the androgyny trend and a break from all the examples I have previously looked at. Here, androgyny has apparently nothing to do with the display of a wealthy lifestyle, spotless bourgeois taste, ambiguous sensuality and so on. Instead, as the association of 'androgyny' with 'punk' already indicates, it is clearly intended to make a reference to the subcultural style of the streets and the ordinary people. This is also connoted by the background: a stained brick wall. Through these elements, Tennant's full-length portrait recalls working-class subcultural style, and hints this way at a history of contempt for dominant society and conventional morality. The connection with androgyny, moreover, takes gender ambiguity itself to the same level of provocation and rebellion to the mainstream, which failed to transpire from the readings of other material.

Nevertheless, the connotations of the rest of the page could not be any more distant. In a circle around Tennant's name, we are presented with a set of objects selected by her to represent her lifestyle. The text eloquently stresses how “[t]he queen of punk androgyny is equally at home in couture or her kitchen garden” (Vogue July 2011). This sentence already marks the contrast between couture (the public space of fashion shows, where Tennant, as a model, is under the spotlights, or of fashion magazines distributed internationally) and kitchen garden (the private space of the home and everyday life). However, what is most striking is the contradiction in the juxtaposition of the word 'punk' with 'couture' and 'kitchen garden'. We have seen how the word punk carries connotations of working-class rebellion against the values of the dominant society. Couture and kitchen garden, instead of being opposite one to the other in a public/private dichotomy, can both be seen as signifiers of a wealthy lifestyle, and thus, in contrast to social resistance. They are, moreover, indicative of a traditional, domestic and appearance-obsessed femininity, rather than of androgyny. In fact, Haute Couture, which Bourdieu (1980) describes in analogy with 'haute culture', represents the most elegant, expensive and elitist fragment of the fashion world, and owning a kitchen garden presupposes having a large-enough house and enough time to cultivate it as a hobby, both of which imply having a large amount of money. Tennant's selection of 'favourite things' and the quotations that go with them only contribute to confirm this interpretation. Mundane normative femininity is conveyed through flowers, high heels, floral dresses, sparkling earrings, wallpaper and beauty products, which, at the same time, display the model's sophisticated taste. “Taste classifies, and it classifies the classifier”, argues Bourdieu (1984: 6); her picks, rather than simply reflecting her individual preferences, indicate and mark a particular position in the social structure. Wallpaper alone, as opposed to simple paint, is enough to imply a middle-class taste for home decoration, and Tennant stresses this commenting on how her favourite wallpapers are hand-printed designer ones by *Marthe Armitage*. She also recommends small luxuries such as Barefoot Botanical's bath oil, '100% natural and therapeutic', or the flat diamond earrings by *William Welstead*.

The article seeks to reassure the reader that, even though Tennant might pose in a punky outfit, and display a scruffy androgynous look (which arguably only someone immediately recognised as respectable and from a good family can get away with,

especially in *Vogue*), she is not a threat to bourgeois values and is able to display, and even give advice on, the right kind of cultural capital. Even when she hints at her signature androgynous and laid-back style, narrating how she buys pretty dresses but always ends up wearing men's jeans because “you can't wear precious things when you have dogs” (Stella Tennant in *Vogue* July 2011), the jeans she recommends are by *Dior*, the legendary luxury fashion house.

Finally Tennant herself, as a sign, has a very distinctive significance. While Emmanuelle Seigner stood for French sophistication, on the one hand people recognise Stella, the model, for her masculine look, while on the other hand, she is well-known for her connection with the British Royalty: she is the granddaughter of Andrew Cavendish, 11<sup>th</sup> Duke of Devonshire. Connotations of aristocracy, which had already emerged from the first section of this chapter, return again as a key theme in the representation of contemporary androgyny.

From the analysis of Stella Tennant's *Vogue* “Style File”, therefore, emerges the way in which both punk and androgyny are appropriated and stripped of their disruptive potential. Instead of challenging dominant views on the appropriate way of dressing, the hierarchical legitimacy of the culture of the dominant classes, and normative expectations about gender, they are used, through a soft, and non-threatening version of them, to communicate an edgy and hip style. Commenting on a similar phenomenon, Barnard (1996) reflects on how

much tamed and 'domesticated' versions of punk hair may be found in eminently respectable places today, [...] watered-down versions of [Vivienne Westwood's] work are to be found in every 'Top Man' and 'Chelsea Girl', [and] what started as a challenge to [the dominant] system and those classes is rendered harmless to them (Barnard 1996: 132).

In other words, by entering mainstream fashion, the androgynous look becomes associated with young, alternative and even radical lifestyles, and is turned into an emblem of the hip and cool. However, its meanings are removed and substituted with an artificial and safe version of them: the style is thus still able to align itself to the ideals and values of the dominant society, while alternative subcultures are incorporated into the mainstream. This also appears clearly, for example, from the 'Denim' newsletter by the fashion brand *Free People*, which targets young, bohemian and free-spirited female

customers. Here, the model is wearing tomboy clothes and even though in this case as in many others, they have nothing truly masculine about them, they represent a departure from Free People's usual style characterised by lace maxi dresses and floral patterns. This kind of clothing is justified by the presence of a boyfriend. A caption, in fact, probingly asks “who's your boyfriend?”, while another describes the style as “borrowed from the boys”. Androgyny is therefore made safe by coding it as heterosexual.

*LOVE*, a bi-annual British magazine founded by Katie Grand, which, compared to mainstream fashion monthlies has a more artsy and independent feel, but is still part of the *Conde Nast* family, dedicated a whole issue to androgyny for Spring Summer 2011. On the cover, models Kate Moss and Lea T lock lips with each other. A caption underlines “This is hard core”. The image's impact relies on the assumption that the audience knows Lea T, and what she stands for on a symbolic level. In fact, she is the first transsexual woman who has been able to make her name in fashion modelling. She has recently been the face of *Givenchy* and has appeared in major fashion magazines such as *Paris Vogue* and *Interview*, becoming one of the world's top models. Kate Moss is a British icon and one of the world's most famous models, and this as well is key for the image's meaning. The picture, as underlined by the text, is supposed to be shocking: two women kissing passionately on the cover of a mainstream magazine, and one of them even used to be a man. Kate's black leather jacket, fingerless leather gloves, black nail polish, piercings, and hairstyle are signifiers of punk subcultural fashion and rebellion and contribute to the overall construction of the picture as subversive. However, as with previous examples, even if in a more sophisticated manner, the symbols are made innocuous through how they are represented. First of all, Kate's clothes are not 'authentic' punk, but instead examples of luxury punk-chic fashion by *Burberry* (the jacket) and *Chanel* (the gloves, which display the *Chanel* logo very clearly). The elegant black and white photography, the monochrome background and the diffused studio-like lightening, further contribute to undermine possible claims of genuineness. Working-class culture, also epitomised by Kate's own background and life before becoming a top model, is appropriated, stripped of anything potentially unsettling, as well as of any affective connotation, and reduced to style.

Finally, there is nothing really androgynous about Lea's nor Kate's looks, and everybody knows that British fashion's beloved Kate Moss is heterosexual. It should also be considered that when *LOVE's* Androgyny Issue was on sale in 2011, other fashion and glamour magazines were covered in pictures of Kate's wedding, where she smiled in a white bridal dress. The cover of the Androgyny Issue has thereby an ambivalent and twofold meaning: on the one hand it encourages people to be shocked about the two models' androgyny and rebellion; on the other hand, however, it comforts its readers letting them know that the kiss is actually fake and staged, the punkish clothes are actually by *Burberry* and *Chanel*, and heterosexuality is still the norm. Here as well, the new androgyny is symbolically representative of a provocative, but ultimately inoffensive, up-to-date and edgy style.

## **The Alien and the Work of Art**

The previous section exposed how even the themes of the new androgyny that are presented as more openly resisting normative expectations about femininity, such as punk rebellion, in reality turn androgyny into a harmless and edgy look that fashionable consumers can safely experiment with. Let us compare such case with androgynous fashion's theme of the alien.

In August 2011, *Conde Nast's W* magazine featured an androgynous editorial by British photographer Tim Walker modelled by British actress Tilda Swinton. The predominant colour in the photographs is a pure white, and both shapes and composition are clean and minimalist, as in other representations of the new androgyny. The same elements have already emerged from my analysis in terms of problematic implications regarding gender and class identities. However, for the first time, immaculate androgyny is unsettling. Nothing here connotes femininity and Swinton's body is styled accordingly. Her make-up, instead of accentuating her femininity and her attractiveness as a woman, strips her of it. Her skin is pale white, her eyebrows invisible, and the black eye-shadow at the corners of her eyes makes them look small and deep-set. In a close-up portrait of her face we are also able to note how they have been retouched so that the colour of her irises is now an unnatural bright green. Although it would be impossible to erase them completely, class connotations are toned down as well. Instead of communicating middle-class femininity as many other representations of androgyny do, Swinton's bodily appearance, as well as her clothes, connote the extraordinary or the alien; the non-human is also signalled by what looks like a transparent piece of plastic inexplicably applied to her forehead. The bald head and the unusual hairstyle she sports in the other pictures (i.e. the sleek white hair kept back with a white paste), as well as her unusual clothes (e.g. the large and stiff white tuxedo suit which completely hides her figure or the orange latex coat), also hint at a genderlessness that is alien instead of angelic, and provocative rather than reassuringly polite.

On the background of one of the pictures, we see what appears to be a power station with three metallic towers in a desolated landscape. The fact that no smoke is coming out of the cooling towers, even though it is not sufficient proof that the station is abandoned, further signifies a general sense of barrenness, conveyed also by the stark

land. While in the photo-shoot that features the *JJS Lee* dress, Dungeness was used to mark the contrast between its wildness and the model, here Swinton appears to completely belong to the surroundings, and hence, the setting further accentuates her distance from the domestic and everyday sphere. Finally, the landscapes on the backgrounds, and Swinton's extraterrestrial appearance, as well as the dramatic intensity of the images, and her symbolic figure as a well-known actress, make reference to a whole new myth in terms of androgyny and, another system of meanings: that of Sci-fi cinema, and in particular, because of the visual similarities, *The Man Who Fell To Earth* (1976), where the leading role is played by androgynous icon David Bowie.

It is interesting to note how this kind of construction of androgyny is much more common in artistic (e.g. photo-shoots) rather than documentary (e.g. articles and trend reports) examples of the work of fashion intermediaries. This is particularly meaningful in terms of the allusion to works of science fiction, since, on the one hand, it produces androgyny not as reassuring as other examples do, but as provocatively ground breaking. On the other hand however, it dangerously constructs it as 'alien', 'other' and 'different'. Finally, although unusually for representations of androgyny, Swinton's clothing, make-up and hairstyle, actually appear to escape from gender stereotypes, they are arguably not fit for everyday wear, and this contributes to draw a line between 'real life' and an 'unnatural androgyny'. Sci-fi cinematic references and futuristic elements, so frequently found in mainstream representations of androgyny (see also the *Cyber Tribe* editorial from *Vogue* March 2010, the *Like Dreamers Do* one from *Vogue* December 2012, or *Alexander McQueen's* SS14 campaign) have three major effects. First, androgynous women are not only othered, but also portrayed as eerie, alien, and hostile; second, androgyny is associated with an artistic context, which again serves to detach it from reality, and justified through the implicit claim that art is supposed to be provocative; and third, connotations of futurity mark its contrast with the present, relegating it to the reassuringly far-away realm of the 'not now'.

## **Conclusion**

It might not adhere to traditional definitions of androgyny, but the androgyny trend is indeed all over the fashion media. We have seen how the work of fashion intermediaries, such as magazines, advertising, press releases as so on, regularly provides women with instructions, both explicitly and through the use of images, about how to include masculine elements in their style, how to look androgynous, and how to use this kind of attire to communicate a particular kind of power, independence, and rebellion. Gender representation is thereby becoming less and less straightforward, and the mixing of the feminine and the masculine has found a widespread fashion appeal.

Talking about images in women's magazines, Crane (2000) argues that “[a]dvertisers have been forced to incorporate oppositional elements into their advertising in order to hold the attention of increasingly sophisticated consumers” (Crane 2000: 18). The pervasiveness of the new androgyny in the contemporary fashion scenario then can be ascribed to the growing ability of the audiences to decode representation, which results in the mass media being forced to keep diverse audiences interested and engaged by playing with what is outside the norm. Crane (2000), quoting Goldman, Heath and Smith (1991), also talks about this tension as an “internally contradictory hegemonic process - an ongoing dialectic between dominant and oppositional discourses” (Goldman, Heath, and Smith 1991: 71 quote in Crane 2000: 18). This is mirrored in my analysis. While it is true that the studied materials invite, to some extent, women to step away from stereotypical feminine appearance, which is implied to be boring and not up-to-date, and often infuse gender ambiguity with positive meanings of power and independence, a friction still exists within this discourse. Androgyny still represents a potentially threatening entity, and in order to be included in mainstream representation, it has to be tamed and made safe. In this regard, we have seen how, in order to become acceptable, androgyny is placed within a series of normative systems. For example, it is inserted in the context of an imagery characteristic of the cultural capital and tastes of the dominant classes; it is constructed as heterosexual; and it is transported into distant and artificial spheres from which it can cause no harm. The issue of ethnicity will be tackled more extensively in the next chapter, which will focus on the kind of bodies associated with the androgyny trend, rather than on clothing. Nevertheless, it is

necessary to underline how the examples analysed here feature almost exclusively white models, and underline the problematic importance that whiteness itself has in establishing androgyny as safe. Besides constituting a way to engage the disenchanted contemporary consumer, who is always looking for new stimuli, androgyny is also turned into a means for the promotion of particular identities, which appeared, not surprisingly, to be normative ones.

McRobbie (2009) argues that within the sphere of contemporary, post-feminist popular culture, the “faux-feminist language of 'empowerment' of women” is used to “defuse, refute and disavow the likelihood of a new solidaristic vocabulary being invented which would challenge these emerging forms of gendered, racialised and class inequalities” (McRobbie 1999: 135). In an analogous manner, then, this spread of imagery and lexicon related to androgyny, often presented as a form of empowerment for women, can be seen as part of a reshaping of dominant culture that, while apparently including oppositional and feminist aspects, ultimately tries to control them. By neutralising challenging elements, making them safe, and incorporating them within normative discourses, the mainstream media eventually appears to ideologically reproduce the social legitimacy of the tastes, the interests, and the conventions of the privileged and the powerful. Even though it seemingly promotes an increasingly open attitude towards gender ambiguity, the new androgyny instructs women about how to look modern and edgy by including elements of masculinity in their performances of femininity, without, however, ever stepping out of hegemonic heterosexuality. Moreover, the new androgyny is produced as strictly connected to the habitus of the higher-classes, and thereby as another means of social distinction. Placed within a network of tastes and cultural references legitimated as superior, androgynous fashion becomes a new way in which valid lifestyles and class positions are signalled. More challenging kinds of androgyny, on the other hand, are distanced from reality and everyday life.

This chapter has used a semiotic analysis of selected images produced by different kinds of established intermediaries in the fashion world (i.e. editors, journalists, photographers, advertisers, PR people), in order to study how the new androgyny is defined through fashion. By using this approach, I am not suggesting that it is the only, nor the best one. A textual analysis of hidden meanings in media-produced material can

indeed constitute an insightful way of studying socio-cultural phenomena. However, we should not forget that a point of view of this kind presumes that images are decoded and interpreted by the audiences as intended during their production, and this may not always be the case. For this reason, I will use these findings as a thematic map against which to investigate discursive understandings and affective responses to the trend of androgyny. While representation and even ideology, as we have seen, are still highly relevant in the study of contemporary popular culture, in the age of the internet and social media, which the fashion world has embraced relatively late, immediacy and personal involvement turned affect into a key area for investigation: "Now with social media, we have a voice. We have a way to express what we feel, why we feel certain things. It's incredible." (*BCBG Max Azria's* chief creative officer quoted by Daily News 2014).

## **Chapter 5**

### **Pulling Off the Androgyny Trend: The Androgynous Body?**

#### **Introduction**

After having broken down the new androgyny into five main representational themes and clusters of meaning in Chapter 4, this chapter engages with mainstream androgynous fashion with a particular focus on the human body. In fact, since the topic of the body plays a very crucial role in the discussion of not only gender ambiguity and aesthetic experience, but also fashion itself, it deserves to be addressed separately and more thoroughly.

In the semiotic analysis of mainstream media representations in Chapter 4, I have identified the key themes associated with the androgyny trend in the field of fashion and clothing. We have seen how the bodies on which androgynous clothes are displayed are almost exclusively those of either top female models (e.g. Miranda Kerr, Kate Moss or Karmen Pedaru), actresses (e.g. Emmanuelle Seigner) or standard models without a marked personal identity who can therefore signify and connote different meanings depending on the needs of clients. In most cases, taken out of specific contexts, none of these women has anything androgynous, masculine, or different from usual mainstream fashion imagery about them. Developing this idea, this chapter investigates whether the ideal embodiment of the androgyny trend is a matter that depends upon physical traits of bodies or instead on external characterisation. Starting with the proposition that the focus of new androgyny is not androgynous bodies in the literal meaning of bodily gender or sexual ambiguity, the discussion also addresses the question of what the characteristics of the 'androgynous figure' then are, who is performing it, and what it does.

Entwistle claims that although “fashion is about bodies” (Entwistle 2000: 1) since it both addresses and dresses them, most theorists of fashion tend not to include the body in their studies, and usually separate the study of the body from that of clothing. Sometimes, when it is seen as an art object, for example, dress is analysed in purely aesthetic terms, other times, it is treated as a cultural product and its meanings read as if it was a text. What is seldom acknowledged, Entwistle argues, is how dress, the body and the self are linked with one another, and the way in which dress is not only “an embodied activity [but] one that is embedded within social relation” (Entwistle 2000: 10). Building on this perspective, here I look at the relationship between clothes and physical bodies, exploring how fashion, and, in particular what kind of fashion, and what kind of fashioned bodies, emerge from specific encounters between the two.

I investigate which kinds of bodies are associated with the androgyny trend asking whether it is actually only androgynous bodies that can embody it, or whether other characteristics are required to represent the look. In this regard, bodies linked to the new androgyny are analysed in terms of the sociological categories of gender, ethnicity and class in order to explore how, within the androgyny trend, bodies play a very specific role in the mediation between fashionable clothing and broader issues of identity, in relation to which they are produced and positioned. In other words, while until now I have looked at the connections between dress and the making of particular social realities, I now place the attention on the body as a mediatory entity, considering which kind of gendered, raced and classed bodies are used and produced through this specific type of clothing. In this sense, this chapter on the one hand gets back to some of the key themes of androgynous fashion that have emerged from the analysis up until now, and applies them to the study of the body, to define, through recurring patterns, its particular case. On the other hand, it develops new arguments that will inform subsequent analysis.

I will begin by providing a brief framework that, by illustrating the structures that configure the fashion market and the different groups of people working in it, also

delineates the methodological basis of the analysis. The chapter is then divided into two parts, which in turn are made up of two smaller sections. In the first two, through an analysis of a varied selection of examples from different sources such as magazines, blogs and advertisements, I show in what sense the contemporary fashionable body is a site of ongoing production of the self. I then move to an investigation of the construction of the fashionable body from the point of view of body technologies and cultivation in contemporary culture, which leads, to the conception of the androgynous body as futuristic cyborg femininity. Moving away from the cold image of the cyborg, the last two sections explore the androgynous body as the source of emotions and feelings, and inspect the affective links between it and manifestations of the trend. I look at how fashion is often described and commented on with words that suggest a moral assessment that connects clothes to their wearer, and finally interrogate the impact that the androgyny trend has on bodies themselves.

### **Bodies in the Fashion Market, Stylistic of the Self and Value**

Along the same lines of how, as we have seen in Chapter 2, the contemporary relationship with clothes can be seen as focused on a circuit of exchange and use values (i.e. for what they signify and stand for, as much as for what they can be used for), it is also interesting to consider the way in which not only properties and commodities but bodies themselves can be interpreted in relation to their own value for exchange.

Skeggs (2004) illustrates how authors like Rose (1999) and Du Gay (1996) describe the emergence of the new figure of self-enterprising workers, who, by turning their own persons into a marketable commodity, are able to optimise themselves and thereby their success on the job market. What is peculiar about this phenomenon is that this is done not so much through the acquisition of particular skills, as through the embodiment of particular social and cultural dispositions, which have the power to grant people new value and possibilities in the marketplace. Skeggs (2004) also maintains that this cannot

be done easily and in a straightforward manner by just anyone, as the process is very specific to middle-class experience. As a matter of fact, symbolically de-legitimised types of capital, such as the cultural capital of the working classes, do not have potential for exchange nor can be used as a commodity. Symbolic classifications “establish the conditions of possibility for exchange. Being classed, raced, gendered or sexed by culture places limits and/or enables advantages” (Skeggs 2004: 75). Skeggs also underlines how this process of production of middle-class marketable selves relies heavily on particular aestheticised stylisations of the body, which in turn becomes a bearer of symbolic value.

Although this phenomenon can be described as characteristic of an entire contemporary symbolic economy, it becomes particularly significant in a field like the fashion system, where appearance is the primal focus. In the fashion world, among people working in different sectors of the production process (e.g. designers, factory workers), retailers, and those who represent the stage of consumption (i.e. customers), we find a varied group of people whose job is that of enabling the transition from the production of goods to their consumption by shaping the public's perception and relationship with them. These cultural intermediaries traditionally include figures such as advertisers, magazine editors and journalists, public relations people, TV producers and presenters (Bourdieu 1984); but more recent studies have opened up the category to include models (Wissinger 2009), celebrities, including film and TV stars (Warner 2013), representatives of new media, like bloggers (Smith Maguire and Matthews 2014) or fashion buyers (Entwistle 2009). As Bourdieu (1984) argues, these “sellers of symbolic goods and services [...] always sell themselves as models and as guarantors of the value of their products (Bourdieu, 1984: 365). For cultural intermediaries in the field of fashion, this process of self-entrepreneurship, especially in the form of self-stylisation, becomes an essential feature of their job, as well as a crucial part of their experience on the labour market. For example, in order to be hired to represent a brand, models need to prove they are able to produce themselves as the right kind of persons, and to embody the particular identity that the brand wants to convey. As Entwistle (2009) argues, a

model's 'look' is a marketable entity that, rather than simply reflecting a physical appearance, is carefully constructed through a series of social processes. Bloggers, moreover, need to continuously demonstrate their own adequacy against established editors and journalists, through practices of self-marketing focused on self-presentation. As Entwistle and Rocamora (2011) stress, cultural intermediaries have to embody specific images in order to keep their jobs.

[B]odies demonstrate they belong, they are inside through their appearance, and this appearance is essential to the reproduction of the key players whose careers depend upon it (Entwistle and Rocamora 2011: 266).

Smith Maguire and Matthews (2012) instead underline how “all cultural intermediaries rely more or less on personal dispositions and cultural capital as the basis of their professional credibility” (Smith and Maguire 2012: 556). In this sense, we can say that the status of fashion intermediaries as creators of value and guarantors of legitimation is in turn enabled by their self-presentation, good taste and display of personal habitus and certain dispositions.

Besides being players in bodily processes of symbolic exchange through self-stylisation on fashion's labour market, cultural intermediaries of course play themselves a very crucial role in the production and shaping of value. However, when it comes to legitimacy, professional authority and symbolic value, not all professional figures are the same. Much has been written about how advertisers and the press act as taste-makers, about their interdependent ideological agendas and their symbolic power in shaping the value of commodities (e.g. Barthes 1990 [1967], Williamson 1978 and Hall 2007). In such cases, both semiotic and discourse analysis have been widely adopted, and with excellent results to the study of these issues. More interesting, because less explored, is the role played by the emerging category of fashion bloggers. Bloggers engage in a constant struggle over recognition, trying to gain legitimation and validation in a field previously restricted to the traditional press and other key industry insiders.

The relationship between bloggers and the more traditional media and fashion industries is in fact a deeply ambiguous one: on the one hand, blogs are hailed as the future of

fashion communication by big fashion magazines such as *Vogue* or *Elle*, which have even included blog sections on their own websites. On the other hand, however, independently from a blog's popularity which, sometimes with hundreds of thousands of daily visits, can rival the online following of those very magazines, bloggers are always under the scrutiny of both the established press and the public, who often attack them for their presumed lack of professional entitlement and expertise in what they do. It is possible, then, to see bloggers as an intermediate entity between the fashion industry and the audiences, and as a group that while participating in the validation of particular forms of culture, is engaged, at the same time, in a quest for its own symbolic legitimation. As Rocamora (2011) underlines, bloggers are still in great part considered as fashion outsiders from the actual insiders, who give bloggers the cold shoulder for not knowing the right people, not having enough expertise and knowledge, as well as “the critical faculties to know what's good and what's not” (Robert Johnson, *GQ* associate editor, quoted by Rocamora 2011: 100). In other words, bloggers are seen as lacking necessary social, symbolic and cultural capitals.

In this regard, in the case of blogs, discourse analysis can be used to study both the value systems, power relations and discursive structures emerging in mainstream fashion, and the way in which these are addressed, critically embodied and reinterpreted by bloggers, as intermediate cultural intermediaries. In fact, although it is true that the values of the dominant groups in society turn into the dominant values of mainstream society, regardless of who disseminates their messages, it is also true that the medium of the personal blog, as it is mostly independent from advertisers, and akin to personal diaries, potentially facilitates the emergence of independent, and potentially divergent opinions. Furthermore, it is important to remember that also within the field of personal blogs, there exist significant differences of format (e.g. magazine-like, personal diary or photo archive) and content (e.g. personal style, news and trend reports or lifestyle and celebrity fashion, just to name a few), which further complicate the analysis of the bloggers' point of view by fragmenting their perspective. In the internet-and-social media age of fashion, virtually anyone can attempt to act as a cultural intermediary and influence others' perception of what is legitimate, tasteful and desirable. Smith Maguire and Matthews (2012), argue that the category of cultural intermediaries is now used to describe any creative occupation indiscriminately, but, I ask, can it paradoxically also

include audiences? Given their active role in shaping the contemporary fashion scene, can they be regarded as cultural intermediaries themselves? Or what other role does their particular sort of cultural mediation have? In this sense, this chapter also starts to investigate online considerations and responses of the audiences to the androgyny trend.

### **The Androgynous Body as a Project: Transformation, Cultivation and Consumption**

A first noticeable characteristic of the new androgynous body is its ability to transform itself. If the most popular female top models can take up, embody and personify the trend for the occasion, then an androgynous look is something that can be achieved, not only in terms of clothes but of physicality as well. This is also evident if we look at the way in which, in model recruitment, the emergence of the androgyny trend has not brought any major change in the 'kind' of models selected for catwalk jobs and brand representation. Throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the standards of female beauty, epitomised by fashion models, have witnessed a succession of different body ideals, for example, masculine and youthful in the 1920s, voluptuous in the 1950s, skinny in the 1960s or statuesque in the 1980s. In the 1990s, the entrance on the fashion scene of a young Kate Moss marked the emergence of the so-called waif look, characterised by an extremely young, thin and fragile appearance. Since the 1990s, although there is indeed more variety, and celebrities like Kim Kardashian or Beyoncé have been able to popularise an alternative to the thin white ideal, when it comes to mainstream fashion, nothing much has changed in terms of beauty ideals; Kate Moss is still one of the most esteemed models, and her steps have been followed by a whole set of young, tall, thin and predominantly white and blonde newcomers with prepubescent-looking, doll-like physiques. Interestingly, the androgynous style is portrayed by the same names, and on the same versatile bodies that populate the contemporary fashion world. In this sense, only the styling that has changed. Instead of bringing a change *of* bodies, the advent of androgynous fashion is characterised by changes *on* bodies.

In 2013, *Vogue* underlined the connection between the wave of fashion androgyny and physical transformation, dedicating an article to Elliott Saylor, a female model who,

after having worked for major womenswear brands reinvented herself as a male model.

Sailor comments:

I wrapped my breasts and didn't pose as you would for womenswear, but stylists and make-up artists still saw me as a woman - and the make-up was all wrong, shading my face to make me more manly - so I knew I had to cut my hair. [...] A lot of people assume my husband and I are a gay couple, which doesn't bother either of us [...] Sometimes I do still wear a sexy dress and heels, even with my short hair, but Adam just wants me to feel sexy, he doesn't care what I wear. (Sailors quoted by Milligan in *Vogue* 2013)

Working on her appearance and subjecting her body to a series of practices with the purpose of concealing her feminine characteristics and substituting them with masculine ones, Sailors is able to switch from womenswear to menswear and back from masculinity to femininity in her private life. Initially she struggled to be taken seriously; however, by adding a masculine haircut to breast-binding, posing and make-up, and thereby completing the 'look', Sailors was able to pass as a man, to the extent of being mistaken for one on the streets. Her switching between femininity and masculinity exposes the performative nature of masculinity, which in contrast to femininity, as Halberstam (1993) claims, is usually seen as natural rather than constructed. As a consequence, Sailors' transformation also brings attention to the fabrication of the fashionable androgynous body itself. *Vogue's* article however takes androgyny back into the safe zone, stressing how embracing the trend and having an ambiguous appearance does not mean becoming less of a woman or wanting to be a man:

Sailors isn't "becoming" a man, she's a woman - a very tall, very beautiful, very happily married woman. She harbours no desire to be a man (Milligan in *Vogue* 2013)

With these words, *Vogue's* journalist reconnects the androgynous model, and by extension, the embodiment of the androgyny trend in general, to a non-threatening patriarchal ideal of femininity. Through a climax from less appropriately feminine to more feminine, the adjectives 'tall', 'beautiful' and 'very happily married', together with the repetition of the word woman, serve to put emphasis on how, in spite of her new androgynous look, the model is still a 'normal' feminine woman.

References to the understanding of androgyny in relation to the malleability of the body can also be found by looking at audience responses to media representations of the

trend. In a thread on *The Fashion Spot* forum, dedicated to the AW15 *Balenciaga* campaign featuring top model Gisele Bündchen (Figure 5.1), a user states that,

This is the most androgynous we've seen Gisele in a long time. (Luxx 2014)

Again, talking about Bündchen's cropped hair, comments read:

I would love to know how they make it look like she has a buzz cut. (Luxx 2014)

I so want to know as well! just a wig, just photoshop or a combination of both? either way it looks so real, if I haven't seen recent candid I would have thought she cut her hair for real. (kokobombon 2014)

Similarly to the examples I analysed in the previous chapter, Gisele's appearance in the advertisement is not particularly androgynous if we think about androgyny in terms of the challenging of traditional gender norms. According to the androgyny trend, nevertheless, both clothes and styling display minimalism and understated elegance. However, it should be noted that the look represents a departure from Gisele's usual one, characterised by blonde locks and sun-kissed skin. Even as outsiders, the trend-savvy users of fashion forums are aware of the artificiality of the look. While lately the fashion industry is facing a growing criticism for its inauthentic, deceptive and usually heavily digitally-manipulated images, responsible for setting unrealistic beauty standards, when artificiality is linked to androgyny it appears as an integral part of the trend and it only seems to make it more interesting, even adding to its appeal. Along these lines, talking about the career of top model Alessandra Ambrosio, another user states:

Honestly I don't think anyone can accuse her of just being a [Victoria's Secret] model anymore. She has hands down proven to be one of the MOST versatile models right now. She can go from selling bras and tampons to rocking a completely androgynous look on the runway and back without blinking. All I really want now is one BIG cover like a *Vogue* Paris or Italia. You can do it Ale!! (marsnoop2 2014)

For marsnoop2, versatility and the ability to embody the androgyny trend are positive qualities, interpreted as a way of ditching the excessive and commercial femininity defined in negative terms through a reference to the over-sexualized shows of *Victoria's Secret* and the advertising of typically feminine products such as tampons and lingerie. Differently from the tone of *Vogue's* journalists, members of the audience, who use the internet forum as a space where they can enter a metaphorical dialogue with the fashion

media, and, thanks to their knowledge of the subject, go beyond the passive digestion of mediated material, offer more personal and visceral perspectives. For example, marsnoop2 identifies and sympathises with the model at the emotional level, saying that all s/he wants now is a next 'BIG' step in Alessandra's career, and ends by cheering her on, using a nickname and two exclamation points.

marsnoop2 also sees the adoption of androgyny as something one can make a personal investment in. The new androgynous look becomes a form of symbolic capital which the model can invest in and then convert into social and economic capitals by using it to land big jobs for *Vogue Paris* or *Vogue Italia*, the most prestigious fashion magazines. In an analogous way, several personal-style bloggers show how, in view of a job interview, they use particular pieces of clothing (e.g. a blazer which made her feel a bit “manly” and uncomfortable, *Frolics and Fashion* (2011), or a new pair of trousers, *Bow Dream Nation* (2011) ) to gain an androgynous appearance. Although they do not talk about this process as a deliberate strategy, they both seem to just know that opting for the androgyny trend will put them in the right direction to obtain the job. Bourdieu (1984) connects the way in which people attend to physical presentation to conform to certain standards of appearance to the chances that each social group has to gain access to the labour market. The different classes, he claims,

depend on the existence of a labour market in which physical appearance may be valorized in the performance of the job itself or in professional relations; and on the differential chances to access to this market and the sectors of this market in which beauty and deportment most strongly contribute to occupational value (Bourdieu 1984: 202).

Similarly, in terms of age, the androgynous body, achievable through self-transformation, emerges in relation to its power of conversion. This appears for example in Sailors' interview, where, acknowledging that the high-fashion market for womenswear models into their thirties and forties is much more limited than that of menswear models, and having turned thirty-one, she hopes that “the change [she has] made will mean [she will] have the same time [she has] already had over again” (quoted by Milligan 2013). While, if she had stuck with femininity, her career might have been over, *Vogue's* article shows how by investing in androgyny Sailors is able to re-value herself as a model and find a new place in the job market. If the magazine builds Sailor's story around the peculiarity of the situation, and uses it to associate fashionable

androgyny to a seemingly empowering message for women, forum users and bloggers instead appear to have a more intimate approach to the subject; they use an emotional language, and, ignoring deeper social implications, talk about it in relation to narratives of self realisation and success.

Besides the different implications, what is constant is how the androgynous body is established as a process and a project. According to Featherstone (1982), in the contemporary reality of mass consumption, where the mass media exhort consumers to take responsibility for their physical shape and appearance, the body is increasingly treated as a project open to manipulation and change, as well as the focus of an articulation of practices of maintenance that range from grooming, manners training, and make-up to exercising, dieting and actual makeovers. These bodily practices are also discussed by Coleman (2013), who sees contemporary socio-cultural life as characterised by an affective imperative of transformation that focuses on self-improvement. With the new androgyny, as the analysed sources suggest, body transformation is not only something that is done in order to achieve a particular look, but instead a core feature of the look itself. In other words, rather than practices of transformation being necessary in order to acquire the right appearance to embody the trend, by engaging with particular transformations, consumers are already engaging with the androgyny trend. Transformation is not just a means but also an end in itself. Let us now move to a more detailed consideration of the procedures and outcomes of such transformations through an analysis of the different discourses that define it.

The expanding popularity of gender-ambiguity has gone hand in hand with fashion paying an increasing attention to fitness and sportswear. Since 2010, activewear-inspired outfits have been appearing on both catwalks and the high street, while in 2014, with androgynous styles in highest demand, for example, major online fashion retailers such as *Net-a-Porter* or *Yoox* have introduced sections specifically dedicated to sportswear. As it has emerged in Chapter 4, moreover, particular kinds of sports (i.e. mainly those associated with the habitus of the wealthier classes such as tennis, sailing and riding), have become representative of this new look. In a fitness special, *Cosmopolitan* interviews Hayley Newton, the personal trainer of singer Pixie Lott who in several occasions showed and expressed her appreciation for the androgyny trend.

For Newton, the perfect body form should be toned, lean and strong, without looking bulky and 'mannish'.

I know many women who say "I don't want to lift weights because I don't want to get big and bulky." This is a myth. Perhaps it's due to stereotypical images of the tanned women, parading around in tiny swimsuits, flexing their pecs and looking mannish on ESPN. Whatever the reason, don't be put off ladies! Lifting weights is KEY to toning the body and WON'T turn you into the hulk over night. So ladies, if you want to get that sexy, lean, strong physique, you really need to start pumping some iron. The more elements we add to our gym routine, the more complete our figure will be. It's like a guitar, the more strings, the sweeter the chord. (quoted by March in *Cosmopolitan* 2013)

The personal trainer argues that women do not exercise as hard as they should. This, Newton claims, is because of a misjudged apprehension that she describes evoking the figure of "big and bulky [...] tanned women, parading around in tiny swimsuits, flexing their pecs and looking mannish on ESPN" (quoted by March in *Cosmopolitan* 2013). However, she reassures her intended readers that training and building lean muscle, as the latest fashion demands, does not mean giving up their immaculate whiteness for a brown (tanned) body, their decorous sense of modesty for a skimpy swimsuit, also associated with masculine female body builders, and their femininity for manly muscles. The key, it is implied, can be found in moderation and balance in contrast to excess.

Halberstam (1998) underlines how if the key features of dominant masculinity are 'maleness', 'power', 'domination' and 'whiteness', "arguments about excessive masculinity tend to focus on black bodies (male and female), Latino/a bodies, or working-class bodies" (Halberstam 1998: 2). Similarly, Bordo (2003) notices how, in contemporary society, excessive muscularity is linked to notions of excessive masculinity, which, analogously to what Halberstam argues, bears associations with black and working-class bodies. Moreover, the connection is also underlined by Skeggs and Wood (2012) who illustrate how excess, and in particular bodily excess, plays an important part in the pathologisation of the working class in popular culture, where working-class bodies are identified with out-of-control physicality and physical manifestations. Interpreting Newton's words along these lines, we can see how the fashionable body required to embody the androgyny trend on the one hand keeps mainstream gender-ambiguity in the realm of the feminine, excluding what is presented

as extreme masculinity. On the other hand, it represents a rejection of those bodies that are culturally associated with excessive masculinity, and excess in general, namely working class and non-white bodies.

While the tendency in magazines is that of playing on the transformative character of the new androgyny in order to work on individual bodies and make them conform to a specific ideal, on blogs we can find a few examples of different approaches to the matter. The blogger behind *Mademoiselle Robot*, for example, suggests that to transform the androgyny trend, it is necessary to adapt it to one's own body shape instead of the other way around:

I mainly ended up sitting [at Fashion Week' s shows], looking at the clothes modelled by all those tall and thin teenagers with similar body shapes and wondering what they would look like on someone else - someone of a different shape. It is a common mistake to think that your clothes size dictates what you "should" or "shouldn't" wear, when really you want to base it on your body shape. Then regardless of size, whether you are a 6 or a 16, you can look for certain cuts that will work on your body type. Having an hourglass figure doesn't mean you can't play around with androgynous styles - sure you will never look very masculine with such feminine curves BUT you can make it work. (*Mademoiselle Robot* January 2014)

Instead of embracing the widespread characterisation of the androgyny trend's connection with body change as positive and potentially empowering, the blogger comments about how, on the contrary, the tall and thin figures of the models portraying the style, deny other women the chance to be on trend. She further underlines the difference between them and the models describing the latter as very young and all looking the same. Criticizing the fashion media's obsession with body cultivation and standardised beauty ideals, she argues that independently from their sizes, all women should be able to indulge in the latest fashions. In the end, however, the blogger does not seem to find a suitable solution to conciliate her opinion with the androgynous look. The alternative she offers, in fact, is the 'dress for your shape' idea, popularised in the UK by Trinny and Susannah, whose work as fashion advisers and cultural

intermediaries has been analysed by McRobbie (2005) in terms of symbolic violence and the feminised embodiment of class division. Dressing for your shape, ultimately offers nothing more than just another way of obsessing over body differences, and invites women to work on them, concealing and highlighting different aspects of the body, in order to conform to the same standards.

### **The Androgynous Body as Cyborg Femininity**

In the contemporary age of fast marketing and quickly evolving fashion trends, the dividing line between different forms of popular culture is becoming increasingly blurred. The relationship between fashion and film, in particular, has become an especially entangled one. When *Black Swan* (2010) starring Natalie Portman was released, fashion magazines started filling their pages with different takes on the 'ballerina trend'; after Baz Lurhmann's adaptation of *The Great Gatsby* came out in 2013, every clothing retailer on the high street had its own selection of flapper dresses and 1920s-inspired accessories, and in 2014, British designer Stella McCartney teamed-up with *Maleficent's* (2014) star Angelina Jolie to create a capsule collection influenced by the new film. In view of this, for a focus on the new androgyny, it is particularly relevant to consider the impact of Sandra Bullock's role in the award-winning *Gravity* (2013). Although the Hollywood film industry obviously lacks many of the kind of fashion-specific social and cultural resources that Entwistle and Rocamora (2006) refer to as 'fashion capital', its symbolic capital, and thereby credibility and recognition on the mainstream cultural scene, can be compared to that of key names in the fashion world. In this respect, when it comes to style and attire, film stars often become real and proper fashion intermediaries. In the case of Bullock, the actress' on-and-off screen androgynous style has attracted the attention of fashion and lifestyle commentators with bloggers praising her new 'fierce' appearance and major magazines dedicating whole features to the actress' look. *Cosmopolitan* quotes Bullock saying that:

The other side was what I wanted her to look like, or not look like, as a

human being. She had experienced great tragedy, and a loss no-one should ever feel, which was the loss of a child. I wanted her to look as though she's trying to do everything she can to remove anything that would remind her of what she once was, which was a mum. I wanted the body to look almost androgynous (quoted by Dray in *Cosmopolitan* 2013).

As with previous examples, if we compare Bullock's usual appearance with her androgynous body in *Gravity*, and correlated promotional events, it is clear how it is the outcome of a process of transformation and cultivation. Her hair is cropped short, her physique is made more slender, toned, and muscular by an intense work-out regime and her figure is accentuated by a gender-neutral ensemble of vest and boxer shorts. What is most significant, however, is how such evolution, in its final stage, seems to turn the actress' body into an androgynous cyborg, or machine. In the interview, Bullock talks about her portrayal of the protagonist, setting her androgyny against maternity, femininity and even humanity. Instead of being placed in the context of the encounter of the traditionally masculine and the traditionally feminine, blurring the gender binary, Bullock's words define androgyny in opposition to a particular kind of femininity. The caring mother gives space to the impassible space-traveller. Having lost a child, the character strips herself of maternal feelings and abandons her life as a woman to pursue a career as an astronaut. She ultimately goes into space, where her body, floating around attached to cables and surrounded by shuttle debris and the open space, becomes a symbol of *almost* (as she herself says, underlining how femininity is never really compromised) genderless, futuristic non-human.

The same futuristic theme, which constructs the androgynous body as clean, strong and artificial, recurs also in fashion journalists' and bloggers' coverages of the trend. Naomi Mdudu of the blog *The Fash Pack*, for example, writes about the “android affair at Todd Lynn”, with its sci-fi elements and structured, minimalist and ultra-slim silhouettes, mentioning how the “android looking models [have] peroxide white eyebrows and similar hair” (*The Fash Pack* 2010). The hygienic whiteness of the androgynous cyborg woman is here perfectly embedded in the term 'peroxide white', since the chemical

compound, beside evoking the aseptic setting of the laboratory, is a bleaching agent used to whiten skin, hair and teeth, as well as, as a sanitising disinfectant. Jamie Roy, UK editorial director of *Popsugar*, instead, describes the *Erdem AW12* collection invoking the cyborg superiority of the androgynous woman through images of an 'army' of "beautiful, clean, simple, minimal, yet a touch futuristic and androgynous" robots (*Popsugar* 2012).

While the prevalent message associated with this kind of representation is seemingly a positive one, in which the futuristic androgynous machine-body is portrayed in terms of the pursuit of desirable standards of beauty, high power, hygiene and invulnerability, several responses betray a certain intimidation. In her post on the magazine-style blog *The Fash Pack* (2010), for example, the blogger states that Todd Lynn, not afraid of straying away from the masses, sent on the runway models that looked like androgynous cyborgs and sported clothes that "if [she were] alive in the year 3000 [she] wouldn't mind wearing" (*The Fash Pack* 2010), implying that they are too 'futuristic' to be worn today. If Mdudu just hints at being uncomfortable with this extreme manifestation of the androgynous look, the London-based blogger behind *Mademoiselle Robot*, which also follows a magazine-like format, uses a more explicit language of fear. She reviews a set of SS15 androgynous menswear shows, grouping them under the theme of 'supermodernity' (reading her blog we understand she uses this term to describe some sort of sci-fi futurity, rather than extreme modernity):

A handful of designers presented collections which pushed their aesthetic forward, embracing contemporaneity when not futurism. Agi and Sam's SS15 collection was clean and sleek with an androgynous if not feminine edge. There was a clinical element to the designs, like futuristic hospital scrubs. Actually after ruminating on the collection I finally locked down what it was that the collection reminded me of. It was George Lucas' art-house predecessor to *Star Wars THX-1138* (1971). I guess the inevitably nightmarish dystopian future that awaits us all will at least be a stylish one. [...] Some looks have a kind of ecclesiastical feel as if our future dystopia involves a terrifying genderless master religion that enslaves us all and makes us wear these gorgeous clothes. Sounds good to me. (*Mademoiselle Robot* June 2014)

The blogger's understanding of androgyny is shaped by the same discourses produced by the mass media. Although she reviews the clothes, rather than the models, the writing evokes particular contexts and images that place the focus on the bodies that

populate them. These are defined, for example, with reference to the aseptic setting of the clinic, which, in turn, refers back to the images of modest (a)sexuality and clean whiteness that emerge again in contrast to the more disadvantaged ends of the spectra of class and ethnicity. The image of the clinic also links androgynous bodies to the medical discourse, through which, following what is described by Foucault (1973), subjects are further dehumanized by the entanglement of power/knowledge within the authority of the 'medical gaze', and attention is drawn to the possibility of a contemporary form of biopower responsible for a subtle and rational coordination of populations of bodies. Besides being implicitly reinstated as white and middle-class, the androgynous body, in this sense, is here made sense of through a de-humanization and mechanization that results from the enactment of institutional power upon it. The de-humanized character of fashionable androgyny is further highlighted by the association with science-fiction, which also serves to transport it to the future time, a future described as 'nightmarish' and 'dystopian', where people are ruled by a “terrifying genderless master religion” (*Mademoiselle Robot* June 2014). On the one hand, the blogger resists the dominant reading of the new androgyny, exposing its disturbing character, on the other hand, however, she ultimately declares to accept it in the name of style. In fact, while, for bloggers, embracing a more magazine-like format often involves embracing also magazines' dominant discourses, these examples show how the increased legitimacy resulting from having a more professional-looking blog, which in turn is made possible by having particular knowledge, means and skills, allows, and in a sense authorises, bloggers to express less-conforming opinions.

The blogger of *Tin Roof Press*, who, as a gay woman, speaks from a slightly different point of view, writes in a post about femme/butch lesbian style:

Andro will never work on me and it BREAKS MY FUCKING HEART. All I want is to look like Tilda Swinton, that genderless, mystical, magical, glorious alien goddess that she is, or like that beautiful alien boy-god on Stargate. (*Tin Roof Press* 2014)

Like *Mademoiselle Robot's* blogger, she understands fashionable androgyny through a discourse of futuristic, sci-fi post-humanity. While, similarly to other accounts of the trend, she describes the androgynous figure in terms of superiority, beauty and glory, she ignores its claims of femininity, praising instead its genderlessness and alien divine

boyishness. In this sense, we can see how, through ambivalence and the glamourisation of gender ambiguity, the androgyny trend is able to incline also queer people towards mainstream fashion. However, what constitutes an element of negativity regarding the androgynous look here is her impossibility to achieve it. Through the medium of her blog, which serves as an online personal diary, she gives a very intimate account of her personal experience with gender-ambiguous style. The blogger, whose actual job is working as an illustrator, also draws a picture of her androgynous ideal, or as she calls it “What I Wish I Looked Like”. The drawing too underlines the non-human quality of the new androgyny. The use of black and white and the chiselled folds of the shirt, which make it look like a rigid robotic armour rather than a fabric garment, together with the stiff hairstyle, blank eyes, fantasy-like pointed ears and inexpressive face all contribute to convey the idea of the impassible cyborg androgyne. Moreover, although in words she does not express any uneasiness with this androgynous look, the light-and-shade of the drawing, as well as its setting, night time in the woods, may be seen as presumably betraying an unspoken sense of inquietude. Finally, another aspect that the picture highlights is the figure's flat chest, a recurring element in the representation of the cyborg androgyne.

Constructedness, futurity and concealed breasts are key themes also in the announcement of *Victoria's Secret* model Alessandra Ambrosio's double cover for *Muse* magazine, published on the blog of one of Britain's leading modelling agencies: *Models 1*. Through the description of how she “takes on an androgynous persona” (*Models 1* blog, 2011), where the term 'persona' underlines the artificiality of the look, and by hinting at times to come with the title 'Futureshock', Ambrosio's appearance is defined as futuristic and android-like. The same connotations emerge also from a semiotic reading of the images. In the photographs of this double cover, Ambrosio's hair is cropped short in a rigid geometric shape and dyed an unnatural pure white in one picture and pitch black in the other; she looks directly at the camera with an emotionless face, and she wears sci-fi inspired outfits in black and white with metallic details. The graduated shading of the background, the cold palette and the eerie lightning effects complete the supernatural look. Audiences who know the model for her work at *Victoria's Secret*, would immediately notice that in these photographs her breasts are unusually covered.

Tyler and Bennett (2010) argue that:

large breasts [...] are a key signifier of working-class female celebrity associated with glamour modelling and pornography, especially when surgically enhanced (Tyler and Bennet 2010: 385-386). *Models 1's* blogger (2011) further stresses this aspect writing that, by showing that she is able to successfully embody the androgyny trend, Ambrosio “proves that she doesn’t need wings” (a reference to the model's status a *Victoria's Secret* angel). This way, through yet another innuendo about the superior women of the future, characterised by a subdued, composed, highly-disciplined and dignified bodily display of gender, this corporate blog, from a position of professional authority, reinstates the diffused connection between the trend and a kind of femininity defined against working-class women's bodies. Furthermore, according to Wilson (1992), the way in which bourgeois taste has been dictating the rules of fashion and body appearance throughout history can be interpreted as a form of Foucauldian surveillance aimed at the production of optimised 'disciplined bodies'. Along these lines, we see how the ideal figure of the fashionable android androgyne is translatable into the criteria of bourgeois taste also in terms of a process of institutionalised moulding of bodies.

In terms of space, the androgynous body, through the figure of the cyborg, is placed within a temporal framework of futurity. Moreover, as I have hinted at, but as we will be able to see more clearly with further examples, it also inhabits space in very distinctive ways. As Entwistle (2000) states, commenting on Goffman's ideas about negotiations of space, when moving among different places, the dressed body also moves through questions of morality:

There is a moral order to the social world that imposes itself upon individuals who generally come to recognize that there are 'right' and 'wrong' ways of being in space, 'correct' and 'incorrect' ways of appearing (and dressing). [...] To be a 'good' person requires conformity to this moral order: when dressing we have to orientate ourselves to different spaces which impose particular sorts of rules on how to present ourselves. (Entwistle 2000: 33)

In the case of bodies travelling through particular spaces which have their own sets of social rules, such as the workplace or the church, the codification of appropriate and inappropriate attire is relatively straightforward. However, the issue becomes more complicated and thereby more interesting if we are to consider the way in which the

new androgynous bodies travel through the moral spaces of the everyday scenario in the negotiation of gendered standards of beauty into the imagined future.

### **The Aestheticised Moral Affectivity of the Androgynous Body**

Eagleton (1990) notes how, through the medium of bodily experience, aesthetics functions as a link between the structures of power of modern class society and the world of feelings, passions and physical perceptions. In other words, because of this connection, the human body becomes the residence of an internalised and aestheticised ideology that operates through the affective dimension of morality. While examples of aesthetic morality connecting style to questions of class struggle can be found abundantly in fashion (e.g. in the case of different kinds of clothing being used to vilify particular class cultures, see for example Barnard 2014 and Tyler 2008 on chav style) when we enter the taboo-area of gender blending, the question cannot be reduced to the existing literature and must be analysed considering the specificities of the issue.

We have now seen how the androgynous body is created through a whole set of practices of cultivation and management. Mainstream, and thereby acceptable and fashionable, androgyny is so entangled with such processes that when it is 'done' without them, it becomes a reason for derision, scorn and shame. In a *Vogue* article entitled *Girl Meets Boy* (2012), Kristen Stewart talks about her old tomboy self:

I wore my brother's clothes, dude! Not like I cared that much, but I remember being made fun of because I wasn't wearing Juicy jeans. I didn't even think about it. I wore my gym clothes. But it's not like I didn't care that they made fun of me. It really bothered me. I remember this girl in sixth grade looked at me in gym and was like, 'Oh my God! That's disgusting-you don't shave your legs!' (quoted by Milligan in *Vogue* 2012)

Stewart's words hint at the fact that there are right and wrong ways of playing with ambiguity and ambivalence. The actress is now known for her androgynous sense of style. As another example of how a gender-ambiguous appearance can be used to

increase marketability and reach new potential audiences, her look has helped her gain a loyal following of lesbian fans, and even that of a group of straight girls, nicknamed with the portmanteau *Krisbians*, who declare they would 'go gay' for her. The only thing that has changed from her tomboy past is her way of embodying androgyny.

Fashionable androgyny is minimalist, clean and meticulously calculated, and its ambiguity ranges from discreet, or young and rebellious femininity, to immaculate asexuality, usually, without ever going into masculinity, or straying too much from the dominant beauty standards. Before learning the correct way to embody androgyny, Stewart carelessly wore her gym or her brother's clothes and did not bother to shave her legs. The men's rather than andro-chic clothing, the unkempt body and her overall un-groomed look constitute an object of shame, even after a few years have passed. Ahmed (2004) describes shame in relation to "how the subject appears before and to others" (Ahmed 2004: 105) and as a "feeling of negation [felt on the body], which is taken on by the subject as a sign of its own failure" (ibid: 103), in this case, a failure to appear androgynous within the dominant aesthetic ideal. When its feelings are internalised, moreover, as Ahmed (2004) argues, and as Stewart style evolution infers, shame becomes the symptom of one's own failure, through the idealised gaze of other people, or a social ideal. Through the incitement of shame, in this sense, the androgyny trend stimulates the self-imputation of guilt and a visceral attachment to the standard it promotes.

At other times, the process is not as subtle, and fashion intermediaries, taking up the role of authorities in the field, end up becoming the moral judges of androgynous fashion. Katherine Ormerod, a journalist from *Grazia*, in a piece entitled *Not Ready for the Full Suit?* (Ormerod 2013: 82) makes a five-point list which presupposes that not every woman is fit for the androgyny trend. Nevertheless, she implies that, for fashion's sake, everyone should at least try, and the article is there to tell them how to 'fake it'. In the first point she writes:

There are two ways to work this. One: channel a masculine vibe. Two: actually wear menswear. If you're petite and narrow-shouldered, real men's

tailoring will NOT work for you. (Ormerod 2013:82)

The remaining four points are tips on how women who do not have the right body for it can still embody, in some way, the androgyny trend. The whole tone of the piece is firm and concise, authoritative but compassionate. It confronts the reader, who identifies with the physical attributes that the article describes in opposition to fashionable androgyny, telling her that she has a problem: her body is 'NOT' of the 'right' kind. However, it argues that there are things she should try to fix this. The form and the positioning of the text, a set of points, in a separate box at the end of a bigger feature which describes the successful experience of another *Grazia* journalist (Ferrier 2013), who wore only menswear for 48 hours and felt “good, smart and cool”, contributes to signal the idea of an organized incitement to recognize the problem and make amends. The emotional tone is very sedated but intense; in fact its emotional character is fundamental to a positive outcome. Achieving the fashionable androgynous body is a project that requires the investment of time, money and the right kind of cultural capital. In the wake of this, having a 'petite' and 'narrow-shouldered' body, unfit for the androgynous look, implies not having successfully worked upon it, and suggests a physical defect deriving from a personal fault, and hinting in turn at a moral responsibility that has not been met. The subtitle finally establishes a very clear power relationship between the writer, “*Grazia's* Katherine Ormerod”, where her full name and the genitive *Grazia's* serve to establish her authority and expertise, and the reader. In the hands of the expert, the reader is addressed as the 'beginner' in the phrase “beginner's guide”, and put thus in a hierarchically-subordinate position. The relationship between the failing subject and the guiding authority can also be placed within the morally-charged context of the confession, where, Foucault writes, “the authority who requires the confession, prescribes and appreciates it, and intervenes in order to judge, punish, forgive, console, reconcile” (Foucault 1977: 61).

Moreover, the way in which, in relation to the new androgyny, particular corporeal features (e.g. narrow shoulders), become objects of embarrassment, representing

personal failure to embody the fashionable ideal, can be interpreted in terms of what Skeggs and Wood (2012) identify as a process of metonymic morality. They note how in reality TV, “the reactive behaviours and bodies of television participants are subject to a process of 'metonymic morality', which forensically focuses on their body parts and practices to evidence their failure to perform as a proper person” (Skeggs and Wood 2012: 114). A similar phenomenon can be found in the relationship between women's bodies and the transformative trend of androgyny, with its hardly-achievable aesthetic requirements, which nevertheless become standards of self-worth. In this regard, through the means of morality, the trend reinstates again the connection between the body and questions of status and class culture. Bordo (2003) argues that, in contemporary society, where fat is still seen as characteristic of the working classes, the slender body, becomes a means for the moral problematisation of working-class people, with “fat being perceived as indicative of laziness, lack of discipline, unwillingness to conform, and absence of all those 'managerial' abilities that, according to the dominant ideology, confer upward mobility” (Bordo 2003: 195). This occurs even more dangerously, in the case of the cyborg-like androgynous body, where not even the average slim body is enough, and the non-properly worked-out body becomes a symbol of social inadequacy linked to moral deficiency.

A British blogger, mimicking a popular fashion media format, writes a feature about the *Kid's Choice Awards* 2013 using a language of inadequacy. Cataloguing celebrities into “best and worst dressed”, she puts singer Christina Aguilera in her 'worst dressed' list and comments:

Despite recent news of her dramatic weightloss, I was disappointed by Aguilera's outfit. Androgynous may be in fashion, but the singer went about it in the wrong way. Her suspenders and hat looked too butch, and is that a camel toe I see? (*Heart of Glass* via *Glipho* 2013)

Once again, androgynous dressing is put in an affective context of disappointment, appropriate and inappropriate choices, and good and bad ways of presenting oneself. Aguilera's androgynous look, as it is reported, was accompanied by an extreme loss of

weight. The blogger, in accordance with the widespread 'instructions' on how to pull-off the trend circulated by the major fashion media, as well as with the dominant beauty standards according to which fat is not only ugly but a moral fault, perceives such transformation in positive terms. Despite the weight loss, however, she argues that Aguilera is still unable to do androgyny correctly. Excess too returns here as an expression of mainstream fashion failure which, through its juxtaposition with self-control and restraint, creates a link between the androgyny trend and class consciousness. While the trend of androgyny makes use of ambivalence in the case of gender, when it come to class, and, also sexuality, its message is rather unequivocal. Aguilera's fashion faux pas, as a socially embarrassing 'mistake' in body presentation, is a fuel for social stigmatisation. In particular, the blogger is outraged by the 'camel toe' (i.e. a slang term that indicates the effect of clothes that are too tight-fitting in the crotch area), which is a symbol of vulgarity and inelegance if not indecency. This can be understood, again, through the concept of the “body beyond governance”, linked to working-class women's moral condemnation (Skeggs 2005: 965). Finally, by describing the singer's choice of accessories as too 'butch', she stresses how, even though androgyny is fashionable, in order to be acceptable it needs to stay feminine and heterosexual.

When talking about androgyny as a trend in a professional tone, the point of view of bloggers who write on personal websites that follow a more magazine-like format, as in the case just analysed, tends to conform more or less to that of the traditional mass media, and they usually reproduce messages that bear a high similarity to those those spread by the most influential magazines and brands. When the androgyny trend is instead the focus of personal style blogs, which are used as public 'private' journals, it becomes something felt at the personal level, and an experience lived on one's own body.

## Androgynous Body Consciousness

Featherstone (1991) argues that in the contemporary image-saturated society, aesthetic self consciousness becomes a distinctive trait of what he calls the aestheticisation of everyday life. This chapter has already shown how androgyny can be seen as representing a culmination of this phenomenon, for the trend itself lays its foundations on processes of transformation that use specific practices of aesthetic consumption to create a particular version of the self. Body consciousness however, also has very significant implications at the level of affectivity.

Using their blogs as personal style diaries, several bloggers admit that although they feel inspired by the androgynous looks that they see everywhere in the fashion world, when it comes to actually trying it out on their own bodies, it makes them feel uncomfortable and self-conscious. Both their demeanour and their bodies do not seem to be right or good enough to embody the trend. For example

I always admire a woman who can pull off a truly fabulous mannish outfit. Despite my boyish figure I feel uncomfortable in overly androgynous styles; I don't have the attitude to pull it off, and I think my legs are a bit too short as well. (*Coco's Tea Party* 2010)

I dont always do androgynous as I feel like it doesn't really suit me but there are times when it just feels right y'know. [...] Sometimes I dont like dressing super girly. There are days when I like nothing more than rocking a band tee, plaid shirt or a oversized sweater with a pair of ol' jeans. (*LLYMLRS* 2014)

Lily Melrose of *LLYMLRS*, in a personal-style post, states that androgyny is not for her as it does not look good on her body. However, she adds that, sometimes she does not like to be too girly and opts for less feminine but more comfortable clothes such as old jeans and a baggy sweater. Although she presents the outfit as her personal take on the androgynous style, her construction of the phrase with the colloquial filler “y'know”, and the familiar spellings of “dont” and “ol'” when referring to her own version of the trend, as well as the whole description of the look as “nothing more” than comfortable,

old and relaxed clothes, betrays a semantic contrast between the two. The word androgyny is used here as some sort of 'fashion jargon' to evoke the particular trend of the new androgyny in high fashion and its high street applications, rather than to signal non-binary expressions of sex and gender, as in the original sense of the word. The high-sounding 'fashion androgyny' is something that is often perceived by bloggers as a bit intimidating and not something they would normally wear; even more so considering the connotations of the machine-like androgynous ideal.

Another blogger writes:

After my time at London Fashion Week [pret-a-porter designers] and The Look Show [high-street brands], I came home with a notebook full of inspiration for my Autumn/Winter wardrobe. All this week I'll be creating looks based on the AW11 trends. [...]

Aaaah, the androgyny trend. It [...] strikes fear into the heart of anyone over a size 12 and a B cup. The art of dressing like a boy while still looking like a girl is one I've always found impossible to pull off. My natural style is quite girly, so wearing mannish brogues, minimalist jewels and buttoned-up shirts is way out of my comfort zone. But, androgyny is a big trend for AW11 and no one ever said this blogging thing was easy... (*A Little Bird Told Me* 2011)

Despite the feelings of physical inadequacy, like the other bloggers, she perceives the visual depictions of the latest trend as ideals to admire and imitate. Such images, some of which are tangible ones (e.g. those found in magazines), while others digital (e.g. those seen on fashion websites or online newsletters) or even immaterial (i.e. the internalised ideal deriving from the first two), cause the bloggers to see their attitudes and especially their bodies as defective. However, as Coleman (2009) notes,

it is not so much that popular media images exist as images that are *separate* to the images of the girls' bodies as that is *through* the images that the girls experience their 'own' body as limited or fixed in particular ways (Coleman 2009: 100).

Drawing from Deleuze's theory, Coleman (2009) investigates the entanglement that exists between young female bodies and images outside of frameworks of media cause and effect. Similarly to the girls in her study, the bloggers use the

different kinds of visual images linked to the androgyny trend together with their own images, produced for their personal-style posts, to shape their own bodily trajectories of becoming, in the Deleuzian sense (see Deleuze and Guattari 1987). Instead of perceiving images as simply representational and as more or less accurate reflections of femininity, they approach them affectively, allowing an ongoing process of transformation and mutual ontological shaping.

As we have seen, behind the façade of androgynous ambivalence, the new androgyny reproduces an ideal of white, affluent, morally-impeccable and physically-strong women, which ultimately culminates in a cyborg femininity. Leaving now aside the important questions of representation that arise from such images, the way in which they set aesthetic standards that, in real life, for the average woman, are almost impossible to meet, is found to arouse feelings of self-consciousness and limitedness of one's own body in those exposed to the trend. This however, does not stop consumers from engaging with it. The bloggers are affected by visual representations of the trend in a way that, rather than enabling the transformation of their bodies, as the transformative character of fashionable androgyny is presented as doing, limits their possibilities. Nevertheless, they still play with it, without appearing to let this negativity restrain their bodily experience of the aesthetics.

Instead of increasing freedom regarding one's body image and perceptions (e.g. from gender expectations), from the point of view of personal-style bloggers, the androgyny trend emerges as a source of heightened self-consciousness. A further lack of bodily self-confidence arising from the androgynous trend originates from the other side of its ambivalence. While, on the one hand, the style encourages women to flirt with gender-ambiguity, on the other, it promotes a particular kind of cyborg-like femininity that, through entanglements with matters of race and class, reproduces mainstream norms. The women taking up the trend know very well that playing with ambiguity does not mean giving up on femininity. In order

to stay within the margins of the mainstream, and thus of social acceptability, you have to “be very, very careful with 'boyfriend clothing’” (*A Little Bird Told Me* 2010).

The general premise behind 'boyfriend clothing' is that you're a toned, tanned, tumble-haired beauty who's slipped on her man's jeans/shirt/tee/tie (that last one's maybe a bit Ellen DeGeneres) after a night of Hollywood-standard passion. You're so in love that wearing his clothes makes you feel closer to him, or maybe you wear them because you can't be bothered ironing your pencil skirt after leaving it in a crumpled heap on his bedroom floor. Whichever, it's sexy, it's adorable and with all that bed-head hair, it's feminine too.

Wearing your boyfriend's clothes without that hair, however, is dangerous. Because from behind (and sometimes from the front if you're hungover/out of blusher), you look like your actual boyfriend. [...]

I learned the hard way (being called 'Sir' while buying a calculator in Argos was a particular low point), but you, my dear short haired friends, can avoid any confusion over your physical composition AND wear your boyfriend's shirt when you're too lazy to do your washing, by following these simple tips. (*A Little Bird Told Me* 2010)

In accordance to the messages that emerged from the semiotic analysis of media representations of androgyny in Chapter 4, the blogger sees the person that adopts the new androgynous look as a conventionally beautiful woman in a heterosexual relationship, whose 'boyfriend clothing' merely serves to make her more lovable and attractive, as well as to further emphasise her heterosexuality (and by extension her femininity). The blogger also stresses her mainstream identity using the adjective “Hollywood-standard” to describe her conduct. She also underlines the importance of not looking homosexual while wearing gender-ambiguous clothes, telling how stealing your man's tie might be considered too Ellen DeGeneres (i.e. too lesbian). Her own failure at doing androgyny in the correct manner, that is, without straying too far from dominant feminine ideals, as in previous examples, results in an embarrassing and shameful situation. She cannot afford to leave femininity, since the fashion industry

itself instructs her not to, but neither she can easily inhabit the role created by it, since her body does not conform to the androgynous ideal.

After the first diary-like part, in which she talks about her personal reaction to, and experience with the trend, the blogger goes on, producing a list of style tips about how to make 'boyfriend clothing' more feminine, for example by knotting the end of an oversized shirt to give it shape, balancing baggy pieces with tight ones, or adding dainty jewellery or make-up to give the look a softer feel. Both the bullet-point format and the assertive tone reflect those of real fashion magazines and websites, suggesting a stronger connection between them and this last part of the post. In fact, leaving aside her self-consciousness and mixed feelings about some of the trend's characteristics, here she starts providing herself suggestions about how to best conform to the ideal. As it has already emerged through the examination of the reactions of other bloggers to the messages of the big fashion media, and from the comparison of these two points of view, the tone and content of the bloggers appear to depend considerably on the form and the format used to express their opinions, the more magazine-like these are, the more magazine-like also is their way of treating the subject.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has shown in what sense the 'androgynous' body associated with the androgyny trend is constructed, shaped and defined by the dominant fashion discourse as well as by its reception. The embodiment of the androgynous look happens through an intricate pattern of practices and affective negotiations, which ultimately place it at the centre of wider social debates.

The analysis demonstrates that fashionable androgyny is not a physical characteristic found on particular bodies; on the contrary it is fabricated and lived out on the body through style and the internalisation and actualisation of fashion's structures of

knowledge. In this sense, the new androgyny can be seen as performative in the Butlerian sense, apart from the fact that the object that is produced and materialized is not androgyny. As a matter of fact, while on the outside the androgyny trend appears as a performance of gender ambiguity, on a deeper level, it has emerged as a reiteration of conventions about gender, and thereby as the culmination of the normative gender discourse. The androgynous body is a malleable one in continuous transformation, to the extent that change becomes an intrinsic part of it. However, instead of de-stabilising and subverting ideal notions of femininity and masculinity, as, according to Butler (1990), playing with gender performances, like in the case of drag, can do, the new androgyny reinstates them.

The androgynous body is not only a process, but a process that promotes particular identities while implicitly, or sometimes even explicitly, diminishing others. Practices of body modification and cultivation, through which women can achieve the right body image to successfully embody the trend, use the idea of gender ambiguity to produce ideals that are defined against masculinity, blackness and working-class taste, reproducing, through claims of superiority, white upper/middle class privilege, and, at the same time, maintaining the gender binary intact. Both blackness and working-class connotations are used as basis for comparison to evoke the opposite image of ideal femininity, through racist and classist symbolisms of excessive, dirty, unfit, vulgar, unrestrained, and unruly bodies. While the semiotic analysis of Chapter 4, for instance, has revealed the connection of common patterns in the presentation of the trend. such as white-coloured clothing, and sartorial elements, and connotations of middle-to-upper class privilege, here, black and working-class exclusion is expressed at the level of the body, in the form of symbolic violence. Skeggs (1997) suggests that the right kind of femininity, necessary for social legitimation, and enabling the conversion of capital, has always been white, heterosexual and but most importantly middle class. “[H]istorically, [...] working-class women (Black and White) have been positioned against femininity with the sexual. They were precisely what femininity was not” (Skeggs 1997:115). By forging an identity for women based upon the pursuit, through time and money-

consuming practices, of cultivation and consumption, sexual constraint, modesty, physical rigour and minimalist elegance, the trend, rather than introducing an androgynous physicality, defines new race and class-conscious standards of feminine appearance.

Moreover, the androgynous ideal figure is also constructed through references to a context of futurist cyborg femininity. The machine-like body of the female cyborg, cold, optimised and superhuman, has emerged as the culminating point of the process to acquire the androgynous look. On the one hand, such representation is portrayed as empowering femininity, by connecting its fashionable androgynous version to ideas of dominance and superiority. Nevertheless, on the other hand, such claims of supremacy, in view of the temporal dimension of a post-human futurity, but most importantly of the trend's implications about class and race, come to acquire a disturbing meaning.

The aesthetics of androgyny also operates at the level of morality and its workings are in great part affective. Through the means of morality, and definitions of right and wrong, appropriate and inappropriate ways of embodying the new androgyny, the trend has been found to use shame and embarrassment as means to endorse the physical standards it sets. While in terms of gender, ambiguity and ambivalence are sought after, when it comes to sexuality, ethnicity and class, legitimate and morally acceptable androgyny eschews homosexuality, and traits associated with black identities and working-class taste. Since in contemporary society, androgyny lingers precariously at the edge between the acceptable and the non-acceptable, the emotional and affective involvement that derives from the moral significance of the trend also leads its consumers to an increased self-consciousness. In the wake of Coleman's (2009) work, I have shown how, instead of being able to embrace the transformation integral to the look, the women that try to sport it feel the becoming of their bodies limited by its imagery. In spite of this, however, instead of being stopped by such limitations, they still allow their bodily experience to be entangled with the new androgyny in productive, rather than simply negative terms.

We have also seen how the discourses (re)produced by the mainstream fashion media are disseminated throughout the work of other cultural intermediaries. In particular, since bloggers, obtain their own knowledge from traditional and more established intermediaries, blog-posts fundamentally reflect their perspective, in terms of themes and often even form and tone. This can also be interpreted as linked to the fact that bloggers still need the approval of actual insiders and established media in order to be able to carve out a space for themselves in the fashion world. The role of blogs is however an ambiguous one, since on the other hand, the greater control that they can allow themselves to have upon their own content enables the emergence of a more diverse set of opinions. Finally, their personal and intimate perspective, produces a form of affective value that, competing with other forms of value, puts bloggers in a very interesting place on the contemporary fashion communication landscape.

## **Chapter 6**

### **The Re-mediation of the Androgyny Trend:**

### **Blogs, Legitimation Struggles and Affective Negotiations**

#### **Introduction**

In Chapter 4, I looked at how androgynous fashion is portrayed in mainstream print media, and identified the main clusters of meaning that define its dominant representation. Focusing the attention on the human body, in Chapter 5 on the one hand I further explored normative representation, while, on the other, I began showing the complexities that surround fashion bloggers' take on the androgyny trend, opening up questions about their intermediate and ambivalent role. With this chapter, I will conduct a more in depth analysis of the figure of the fashion blogger. Through the study of selected blog posts along with readers' comments to such posts, I investigate in what sense the medium of the blog is constructed as a new space that bridges between mass communication and the mass. From this perspective, I also underline what particular part fashion bloggers play in the mediation of the androgyny trend, and what their position is, in terms of the dynamics through which the subversive crosses the boundaries of the mainstream, becoming trendy. In other words, this chapter studies the crucial role of bloggers within the contemporary mediation of androgynous fashion, trying to pinpoint a place for their intermediate action, through the study of their relationship with the traditional media on one side, and the wider audience on the other. Manuel Castells (2009) claims that “[i]n our society, the protocols of communication are not based on the sharing of culture, but on the culture of sharing” (Castells 2009: 126), while Bourdieu (1984) underlines cultural intermediaries' aesthetic focus on lifestyle talking about their work in terms of the promotion of an 'art of living'. In this kind of scenario, a particularly significant role in the field of fashion intermediaries is precisely that of bloggers, who style culture through experience and find their unique

voice in the sharing of opinions, emotions, tips, inspirations and details of their personal everyday lives.

I find it important to give bloggers, as a subgroup of fashion intermediaries, adequate space and attention, also since their presence is one of the most distinctive features of the contemporary fashion scenario in the Western world. As Rocamora notes:

“[W]ith more than 2 million bloggers listed, in July 2010, by *Blogger.com* as being 'with an industry of fashion' (Blogger 2010), and following the launch in 2003 of the first fashion blog—*nogoodforme*— the fashion blogosphere has asserted itself as a key space for the production and the circulation of fashion discourse”(Rocamora 2011: 409).

Independent personal blogs are generally regarded as a democratic alternative to traditional media, where information is treated in an informal and subjective manner, outside of the influence of traditional channels. Even blogs curated by fashion professionals, and associated with brands and companies, have emerged as an attempt to ride the wave of this new kind of more authentic and accessible fashion communication. Due to their enormous popularity, and the particular demographics of both blogs writers and readers, the fashion blog, as I will illustrate, can also be thought about as a space of opportunity for young women to get their voice heard in a world that is still paradoxically very male-oriented, such as that of women's fashion (Duffy 2015). Reflecting on the role of the blog in terms of the androgynous fashion discourse, in this chapter I look at the relationships between traditional fashion intermediaries, emerging bloggers and members of the public, considering in what ways the androgyny trend articulates itself through dynamics that link these figures to issues of validation, autonomy and authenticity.

The chapter starts with an analysis of the bloggers' struggle over legitimacy and authority in the fashion industry. The discussion of this point is divided into two sections, both of which focus on how clothing represents a key means of inclusion and exclusion. In the first section, I examine a mixture of corporate and independent blogs

to define the characteristics of the fashion-insider's look and observe how the different kinds of bloggers relate to it. In the second, I focus instead on the look of the outsider, and consider how the blog can become an affective space of resistance to dominant taste. These two sections also highlight the link that exists between the particular ways of dressing that distinguish fashion insiders from the outsiders. The consideration of these issues will lead me to the next part of the chapter in which I look at the practice of blogging about androgynous fashion with regard to the dualism between publicity and intimacy. Here, I will stress the ways in which the blog constitutes both an intimate site for identity formation and a public window on the self, while also asking what this entails for the mediation of the androgyny trend. Adding to this argument, the fourth and final section of this chapter deals with the, equally public and intimate, relationship between bloggers and their readers, providing more insight on both of their roles in the contemporary construction of androgyny.

### **Bloggers and the struggle over Legitimacy (i):**

#### **Minimalist Refinement, the New Androgyny and the Insider's Look**

In an article about the mainstream popularisation of fashion inspired by, or even directly borrowed from, South Asian culture, Puwar (2002) talks about the dangers of creating innovation drawing from the exoticised and stereotyped subordinate 'other'. When they are adopted by white, affluent and hip upper/middle class women and celebrities, she argues, objects like, for example, bindhies, pashmina shawls and sarees stop being pathologised to become objects of glamorisation and aesthetisation. Moreover, this is only able to happen precisely because they are adopted by white, affluent and hip upper/middle class women and celebrities, and thereby disassociated from their original significance, and from the 'authentic', non-idealised Indian women who originally wore them. When Asian girls, who used to be teased at school for the mendhie on their hands, see white girls similar to those who taunted them, parading their own mendhie as a

trendy night-out accessory, what we are witnessing, Puwar argues, is “the power of whiteness to play with items it had only yesterday almost literally spat at” (Puwar 2002: 75), which works to “grant legitimacy to items that have previously been 'othered’” (Puwar 2002: 76).

A similar argument can be applied to the discussion about the processes through which androgyny becomes fashionable and mainstream. As I have briefly shown in Chapter 1, in Western culture and society, throughout the decades, masculine styles for women have become a sort of uniform for queer women, a means of recognition, but also an object of derision and a pretext to discriminate against them. Like South Asian clothing and accessories, the androgynous look has ceased to signal otherness and ugliness to become a style inspiration for the privileged. The Western mainstream popularization of South Asian fashion is problematic in that it places particular symbols outside of their intrinsic and inescapably diasporic context and imperialistic past, and fails to recognize them as such. The appropriation of androgynous fashion, on the other hand, deprives queer people of its potential to challenge the gender binary and the heteronormativity by which they are oppressed. In fact, as I have already hinted at through the semiotic analysis of imagery associated with fashionable androgyny found in mainstream magazines, this new style normalises gender ambiguity making it innocuous. The appropriated androgynous style, associated with the new androgyny trend has emerged throughout my analysis in Chapter 4 as a minimalist, structured, subtle-coloured and understated look adopted predominantly by white, middle-class, cis-gender and heterosexual women as a way to play with the rebellious and the avant garde, while still distancing themselves from characteristics associated with identities perceived as problematic. In light of the analysis of mainstream representation, and as Wilson (2003: 122) suggests, this flirting with ambiguous fashions, separating particular styles from their cultural context, can also be interpreted as a way of depriving such problematic identities of their danger and power. Let us now take a look at the specific features that this process acquires when it is played out through the particular medium of the fashion blog.

I have mentioned in previous chapters how the blogosphere is made up of both corporate and independent blogs. Although blogs differ from the traditional media because their distinctive mode of communication and fashion mediation is based upon the establishment of an affective, friendship-like bond between writer and readers, there are indeed significant differences among different types of blogs. Corporate blogs, among which we find, for example, blogs written by fashion brands' employees and PR people, are more obviously bound to commercial interests and more conditioned by specific marketing needs. They talk about androgynous fashion through journal-style updates, where they address the audience in a familiar tone using a colloquial language and usually closing the post with a greeting or a question, asking for the reader's opinion. This kind of blogs' understanding of the new androgyny, unsurprisingly, essentially replicates the messages that emerge from the semiotic analysis of mainstream magazines. Androgyny, divested of its connection to gender-and-sexual non-conformative identities, and linked to elements of the dominant taste, is no longer a taboo. Instead of being the exclusive prerogative of fashion photography, hidden behind the intrinsic muteness of the medium, and artistic justification, it becomes the subject of mundane and informal blog discussions.

On the blog of British shoe brand *Schuh*, shoeblogger writes:

We've always had a soft spot for a good brogue: androgynous and easy, a pair of brogues will assure you look presentable. The Bessie is an adorably shiny silver lace up which will look great with tanned legs and mini skirts à la Alexa Chung. (*Schuh* 2014)

It immediately stands out how the writing style of the blogger is different from that of fashion journalists. She talks about the type of shoes she is promoting as something she "always had a soft spot for", a phrasing that displays both a familiar conversational tone, as if she was addressing a friend, and the expression of a personal heartfelt opinion. At the same time, it refers to the temporal dimension of her feeling ("always had"), giving the impression of a deeper connection between her and her audience. The

way in which she describes a pair of shoes as “adorably shiny” too is not simply factual and informative, but colloquial, and hints at an emotional attachment to the topic.

However, her use of the plural pronoun 'we', makes us aware from the start that she is not expressing her own personal opinion but speaking on behalf of a wider entity, be it *Schuh's* bloggers' team, *Schuh's* head office, or the brand in general. Moreover, the writer's perspective on the androgynous style brings up, once again, the same representational patterns reproduced in other instances by the mainstream media. According to *schuhblogger*, the masculine touch of a pair of brogues needs to be balanced by a girlish 'adorably shiny silver' colour and a mini skirt, which should be sported with healthy-looking tanned legs and styled according to Alexa Chung's distinctive boy-meets-girl preppy look. The choice of talking in the first-person plural also creates the illusion of a group, to which the author belongs, preppy tomboy-chic icon Alexa Chung belongs, and, it is implied, the reader can belong too, if she follows the blogger's style tips and wears *Schuh's* androgynous metallic brogues. In this regard, through a language of affect and even friendship, enabled by the medium of the blog, the author creates a discourse of inclusion/exclusion where the new androgyny becomes a uniform to distinguish members of a selected group.

The matter becomes more ambiguous when instructions about the insider's androgynous look are given by independent bloggers. Offering a solution half-way between corporate and independent blogging, on the blog of British plus-size brand *Evans*, we find posts written by independent guest bloggers. In one instance, for example, *Evans'* blogger asked several plus-size independent bloggers to put together different outfits, displaying different styles, brought together under the theme of the 'Summer BBQ'. The post itself, entitled “Summer BBQ Outfit Challenge”, where each blogger is introduced with a picture, with her first name underneath, can be understood as a way of creating a link between brand and customers in a playful context, through the friendly figure of the blogger. At the same time, moreover, this format highlights the difference that exists between different kinds of bloggers. While *Evans'* own blogger represents an

intermediate entity between a brand and its customers, independent bloggers are thus presented as inhabiting a further intermediate arena between corporate bloggers and fashion audiences.

Guest blogger Tiffany from *Fat Shopaholic* decides to reinterpret the androgynous look. As she has probably learned from the myriad of fashion articles on the matter, Tiffany is aware of how the appropriate version of androgynous style (i.e. detached from too subversive connotations of androgyny), prescribes the subdued and low-key balancing of masculine, or more frequently unisex, elements, with soft and feminine ones:

Summer BBQs are all about being comfortable and having fun, so that's the direction I went in with this outfit. I love mixing feminine and masculine elements in outfits. The distressed boyfriend jeans add a masculine element, but still manage to look comfortable and relaxed. The flow of this top adds a feminine element, but is also super comfortable. Animal print is one of my favourite styles for both spring and fall. (Tiffany on *Evans Fashion Fix* 2011)

Tiffany's priorities, however, are different from what emerges from established cultural intermediaries' readings of the trend. When playing with androgyny, her aim is not that of looking sharp, classy, chic, sensual or avant garde (see Chapter 4), but relaxed and comfortable, a word which she stresses, repeating it three times. As we can see for her picture, Tiffany's physical appearance does not conform to the androgynous body that emerged from the previous chapter. Instead of white, slim, toned and discrete, she is black and overweight, she has a tattooed arm, half of her head is shaved and she wears heavy make up. The blogger inserts herself inside the androgynous fashion's discourse of inclusion, writing on a major brand's blog about how to adopt the hip and distinctive look of the new androgyny, and it is exactly due to how she adheres to the trend's rules that she is able to find the legitimation that appearing on the website of such a popular brand grants. On the other hand, nevertheless, she uses her role as a blogger, and the very features of the blog as a means of communication, to carve a niche within the mainstream, where androgynous style opens itself up to women whose bodies do not conform to the trend's representational ideal, and who choose to complement their 'boyfriend jeans' with a bold animal-print top, rather than a prim-and-proper pastel-coloured blouse.

In a personal journal-style post entitled *Boy Girl Thing*, in which she shares her emotions upon meeting *J.Crew*'s Creative Director Jenna Lyons, Ella Catliff, the very popular blogger behind *La Petite Anglaise*, recalls:

Given Jenna's well known knack for androgyny with a playful, girlish twist [...] I wanted to look cool, chic and fashion forward but with just the right amount of prep. In other words, I wanted to look J.Crew. So I opted for boyfriend jeans which, having never EVER worn them before was something of a risky move for me but after last week's punk (ish) experience I was feeling daring. (*La Petite Anglaise* 2013)

Like Tiffany, Catliff too uses androgynous fashion as a means to find legitimation as a blogger. In view of an important appointment with a key exponent of the fashion industry, known for her own appreciation of the new androgyny look, Catliff decides to opt herself for a boy-girl styling. Similarly to the bloggers who decide to dress androgynously for a job interview, knowing that it would give them the right kind of bodily appearance, able to increase their chances on the job market (see Chapter 5), Catliff is aware of the hidden potential of wearing what has become the 'insider's uniform'. Bourdieu talks about uniforms in relation to working-class and petit-bourgeois women's occupations and in terms of their role in dignifying their wearer by hiding any existing trace of individual taste and vulgarity (Bourdieu 1984: 206). The androgynous uniform of fashion insiders is however a non-uniform, which on the one hand imposes a standardized dress code that distinguishes those who legitimately belong to the fashion world, from those who cannot be anything more than outsiders. On the other hand, however, it is a non-uniform because, contrary to the case analysed by Bourdieu, it does not systematically prescribe the same coordinated outfit for everyone in order to conceal individual traces of taste. The fashionable uniform does quite the opposite; in fact, its meaning is purposefully that of bringing out the taste of its wearers. To be able to sport the look, one needs to have the right preferences, dispositions and comprehension of fashion's rules, which, as we have seen, are not readily at everyone's disposal. This, in turn, reinforces the original meaning of the uniform, that of signalling belonging to a closed group. Echoing the messages of traditional fashion intermediaries, Catliff describes the look she wants to achieve as 'cool', 'chic', 'fashion-forward', preppy and a bit 'risky', and thereby in terms of the images that I have interpreted as reproducing white, heterosexual, middle-class women's prerogative to fashion-enabled cultural superiority.

## **Bloggers and the Struggle over Legitimacy (ii): Excess, the New Androgyny and the Outsider's Look**

As we have just seen, embracing the new androgyny and adopting the insider's look is frequently used by bloggers, more or less knowingly, as a bargaining chip in exchange for the recognition and legitimation that, as bloggers, they often lack. Other bloggers deal with the matter in a different way. Susanna Lau (also known as Susie Lau), of *Style Bubble*, one of the most famous fashion blogs in the UK, writes a quite lengthy piece precisely on this matter. The blog is a response to an article by renowned British fashion journalist Suzy Menkes, in which Menkes advocated against the emerging figure of the blogger, who she frames as guilty of having turned the contemporary fashion landscape into a circus. Lau writes:

Rebuttal is an ugly word. Well, firstly it has the word “butt” in it but, mostly in my head, it sounds like a physical and violent affront to whoever you’re “rebutting”. [...] It’s certainly not rebutting anything that Menkes says. [...]

It’s an ambivalent position that I occupy. Yes, I am a blogger. Yes, I dress in a way that can be construed as peacocking. But I have also worked at a publication. I now freelance for other publications. I’ve now been going to shows for a good four years and more. [...]

Depending on who I am speaking to, I’ve also had to add that “Oh, and I write for other publications” just to feel like that validates me as someone who isn’t a complete fraud. [...] I’ve hopefully gained some respect from designers, editors, stylists and journalists. You might ask, why does it matter if I’ve not earned any respect from the industry. Aren’t you an independent fashion blogger who flouts the rules? As we all know, that isn’t how it works. I don’t work within my own parameters or to put a pun on it, in my own bubble. I have to work with the industry to get the content that I’m after and I’m happier for it. (*Style Bubble* December 2013)

Lau's words are symptomatic of the struggle that bloggers go through trying to gain a place in the fashion world. Lau proudly declares herself a blogger and argues that she has not simply used her blog as a means through which to land other jobs in fashion; in fact she has been a commissioning editor at *Dazed and*

*Confused* but resigned to focus on blogging. Although *Style Bubble* is now part of *Conde Nast's* blog network *Now Manifest*, a choice which, she admits, was mainly linked to money issues and professional opportunities (*Style Bubble* December 2013), Lau argues that she still thinks of herself as an outsider in the fashion world. Nevertheless, her wish to remain an independent blogger, as it already emerges from the way in which she feels the urge to excuse herself for joining the blog network, is in contrast with the needs she feels for professional validation. From the first lines of the post, this contrast emerges quite clearly: on the one hand she wants to contest Menkes' accusations, on the other hand, nonetheless, Lau does not seem to feel confident, authoritative or assured enough to properly object to Menkes' point of view. Commencing her piece with a 'butt joke' Lau distances herself, from the beginning, from the journalist, contrasting traditional intermediaries' proper and decorous way of speaking with her own informal and unaffected one. On the other hand, she promptly makes sure that her post will not be taken as an attack on Menkes' respected opinion, stating that she is "certainly not rebutting anything that Menkes says." In spite of her position as an independent blogger, and also as a direct consequence of it, Lau still needs the external legitimation that only established insiders like Menkes can grant her.

Recognizing the ambiguity of her own position, she talks about how she often tries to justify her job as a blogger by mentioning how she has also written for more legitimate publications, because she feels that, without this more appropriate background, her work would not be respected, validated and approved by the industry. In admitting that "flout[ing] the rules [...] isn't how [blogging] works" (*Style Bubble* February 2013), and describing how she always has to collaborate with the industry in order to be able to keep blogging the way she does, Lau acknowledges the aestheticised battle between the traditional fashion insiders and aspirational outsiders.

Looking at the relationship between print media and fashion blogs in terms of the

shifting nature of contemporary taste making, Rocamora (2012) maintains that “new and old media, rather than excluding each other, feed into each other” (Rocamora 2012: 104) and, thereby, the relationship between the two should be thought about as one of co-dependence rather than rivalry. We have seen how this is indeed reflected by the way in which traditional fashion intermediaries, wishing to keep up to date, have been opening up and experimenting themselves with blogs and their particular communication style, while, at the same time bloggers have been mirroring print media's format and contents and relying on them for both access to information from the industry, and validation. Nevertheless, even though it is true that they both feed into one another, what is particularly interesting here is the unbalanced relationship of power between the two. In fact, even if the established media play with the blogosphere's values of genuineness, spontaneity and familiarity, they do so from their position of cultural superiority, making sure not to jeopardise their privilege. In this sense, going back to the discourse of appropriation, from the heights of their institutionalised vantage, the traditional mainstream media do not only borrow androgynous styles without embracing their contexts, strip them of their subversive potential, and use them to reproduce their own advantage, granted by their social positionings: they do the same with the blogging community.

Moreover, it is also interesting to note how this process relies on the aestheticisation of power relationships, described by Eagleton (1990) in terms of the combination of the social, political and cultural domination of the ruling class, and the appeal to the bodily domain of taste and sentiment. Fashion intermediaries' symbolic conflict over value takes place at the level of affect and the sensuous body. With their moralised interpretation of androgynous styles, and through the appropriation of alternative means of communication, mainstream institutionalised media contribute to a reproduction of the dominant taste that is seemingly animated by affection and human bonding. On the other hand, however, bloggers use the exact same vehicles to reclaim these for themselves.

Lau comments:

Do I lose respect of others because I get my picture taken? Probably. A editor can get away with it because he/she has a title. Alas I have a blog, no chic Celine and a sick preference for strange and funny textures. That leaves me in a precarious position. [...]

The doubts that I carry, however strong they may be or however low I might feel during fashion weeks, aren't enough to push me into a uniform of a sleek black blazer, a neat button-down shirt and some discreet but still insanely expensive Alaia shoes. [...]

My anxieties that I outlined above are even more heightened than ever before. That won't stop the clashing prints and colours, the fugly shoes and the unflattering outfits. (*Style Bubble* February 2013)

Defending the role of the fashion blogger, Lau, who self-identifies as working class, mobilises the same affective sphere that in the dominant fashion discourse serves to naturalise hierarchical taste. In the title of the post, she describes herself as a 'Sad Clown', talks about losing respect, and feeling embarrassed when stopping and posing for street-style pictures, due to the pressure put on her by legitimated professionals who do not stop, but also about stopping anyway out of sympathy for those who ask her to. She also mentions doubts, feeling low and anxieties. This conflict becomes aestheticised, turning into the sphere of the fashioned body. Lau contrasts the insider's uniform described above, with her own style, which is hence produced as 'outsider'. She describes the first with reference to those that have emerged as the cornerstones of the new androgyny trend. Using the adjectives 'sleek', 'neat' and 'discreet' associated with a black blazer, button-down shirt, and expensive shoes, she evokes the new androgyny look, reconnecting it to the elements of sharp elegance, pure and hygienic cleanness, and a combination of respectable restraint and luxury flaunting that I have observed to be typical of its representation. This image is put by the blogger against her own taste for what she labels, antithetically to the standards of the new androgyny, as 'strange', 'funny', 'clashing', 'unflattering' and 'fugly' (i.e. slang for fucking ugly), linking her style to the grotesque, excessive and out-of-control

appearance associated with working-class women, and their inability to adhere to the rules of 'good' taste dictated by the ruling classes (see Skeggs 1997, 2004).

The conceptual and affective impact of Lau's words is reflected by the heated comments that the post received:

I was in Milan fashion week last September, and I saw the like of Menkes and other top people passed by me with their entry card in the air; while poor us could only circus about the best we could. There is room for everybody. what and whom is she frighten of?

You have written an excellent article, Susie.

XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX (SACRAMENTO on *Style Bubble* February 2013)

You mention the notable editors invariably 'discreet' style (Celine, Alaia etc). That discretion is just as loud a statement as a directional blogger's style. The Editors' style shouts 'I am refined and legitimate and I want to be taken seriously'. The Bloggers style shouts 'I do my own thing, fashion's fun, I'm independent!' Equal and opposite. [...] Saying no [to a street style photographer] in order to maintain a feeling of 'superiority' or in an attempt to differentiate ones-self from those that do say yes seems desperate and shallow. We all own fashion. Self-proclaimed ownership from certain editors could be seen as a desperate attempt to maintain grip on an increasingly democratising industry, where the old rules simply don't apply any more. Viva the digital age. The rules need to be re-written. (BR on *Style Bubble* February 2013)

[Menkes'] comment on 'If fashion is for everyone, is it fashion?' baffles me completely. Fashion is, and always will be something meant for the masses. (LuciePanda on *Style Bubble* February 2013)

[I]t would be a horrible shame if you had to dress traditionally/conservatively just in order to be taken seriously by the old school fashion crowd.

Break down the barriers Susie. Break them right down. xxxxxxxxx (the style crusader on *Style Bubble* February 2013)

With a similar response is met also the post of Catliff on *La Petite Anglaise*, who, after reading Lau's piece, decided to write her own defence of bloggers. Catliff's personal style (Figure 6.2) pretty much adheres to middle-class norms of good taste, many of her other posts show her wearing styles associated with the

androgyny trend, and her argument is mainly focused on bloggers' right to enjoy dressing their best, and trying to get 'papped'. Nevertheless, her passionate contribution, in which she declares herself “amused, embarrassed and outraged” (*Ella La Petite Anglaise* 2013) by Menkes' article, is met with comments that fundamentally follow the same themes that emerged from those in reply to Lau's post, highlighting how important a role affect plays in the reformation of contemporary fashion communication:

Fashion is all about fun and creativity, something that the all black uniforms are devoid of, however chic they may be. [...] Vive le blogging revolution and fashion democracy for all! xxxxx (Zoe on *Ella La Petite Anglaise* 2013)

From the comments also emerges the contrast between the legitimate crew of fashion insiders and real people, of whom bloggers become in this case representatives. A reader, for example, puts independent bloggers against the print media, describing the latter as “elitist, hierarchical and agenda-driven” (BR on *Style Bubble* February 2013).

In this regard, the conflict between different kinds of fashion intermediaries is brought into the socio-political sphere. The androgynous insider's uniform is interpreted not as an empowering tool, able to liberate women from gender expectations, as the dominant narrative around the style expresses, but it is rather perceived as conservative, traditional and ostensibly discreet, as well as displaying legitimacy and refinement in an attempt to exhibit the superiority of its wearers. If, according to Veblen (2005) and Simmel (1957), between the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century, it was luxury and sumptuous fashion that was used to mark one's social prestige, in the contemporary context, masculine, demure and minimalist apparel become associated with the parading of privilege.

It is also interesting to observe how, ignoring the new androgyny's futuristic and avant-garde quality (see Chapter 5), the readers of blogs see it merely as an expression of old-fashioned tradition and an obsolete etiquette. As a consequence, bloggers who oppose such out-dated conventions are attributed with the progressive and radical potential typically ascribed, instead, to androgynous fashions. Using a discourse of revolution and mass action, in the comments, exponents of the traditional media are described as an elitist group who tries to maintain its own exclusive legitimacy by excluding ordinary people, epitomised by the figure of the 'poor' independent blogger, from the industry of which they claim ownership. In this sense, blogs' audience, which is in good part made up of smaller, or occasional bloggers without the opportunities and possibilities of more established ones, acclaim blogging and the digital age for their power to bring fashion back to the masses, using terms like 'revolution' and 'viva', which have themselves connotations of revolution and mass enthusiasm, and exhort bloggers to break down barriers and re-write the rules.

## **Blogging about Androgyny as a Public Intimate Engagement with Affect and Creativity**

We have just seen how, as a consequence of its own struggle over legitimation, the figure of the independent fashion blogger has been constructed as the defender of the interests of the mass against the fashion elite. The question is however much more complex. An in-depth analysis of several independent bloggers' posts associated with androgynous dressing, in fact, shows the presence of different dynamics at work.

A common way in which bloggers mediate the androgyny trend is by contrasting the distant space of fashion imagery with a personal context, where androgynous style is worn by real people, the bloggers themselves. Sometimes, this does not entail any real break from dominant representation. Catliff (*La Petite Anglaise*), for example, talks about her personal experience with androgynous dressing replicating the common discourses of empowerment and distinction embodied through understated elegance. The context of her post, where she wears a sleek trouser suit, is in fact that of a photoshoot in collaboration with *Ted Baker*, at *New York Fashion Week*, which for British bloggers is even more inaccessible than *London Fashion Week*, due to the need of money and international recognition as requirements for access:

Every time I wear a trouser suit I ask myself, “why the hell don’t you do this more often!?” There’s something about androgynous tailoring that just makes you feel like the coolest, most nonchalant person on the planet. (*La Petite Anglaise* 2014)

Other bloggers instead remove androgynous fashion from the context created around it by the traditional media, to associate it, instead, with more accessible contingencies that are easier to relate to. For instance, commenting on a show, in which pieces taken directly from menswear are transformed into womenswear, Lau of *Style Bubble*, shows her appreciation for the way in which the look can be taken up by anyone, with just a little bit of manipulation and DIY (DIY should also be remembered for its role as a key instrument in punk subcultures' fashion-driven attack on middle-class taste). At the

same time, in a light and ironic tone, she criticises dominant fashion's body-image standards, and thereby what I have identified as the androgynous body. For example, while showing the picture of a model wearing a reinterpretation of a pair of men's trousers, fitting both legs in the same hole, she writes: "I need to gets me a pair of XXXXL trousers to try this one out..." (*Style Bubble* 2011).

Another blogger, Lily Melrose of *LLYMLRS* integrates her androgynous dressing within a familiar context of everyday life.

Went for a androgynous look with a girly twist today with my oversized tweed coat that cost me far too much! [...]

[The beaded shirt] [h]as inspired me to maybe DIY collar a few of my boring shirts! [...]

I don't know why I feel like I have to wear coats in all my outfit photos at the moment! I could probably do with getting some decent cardigans as all mine are bobbly/ill fitting!

Mini drama today as I stepped on my eyelash glue (obviously with some force for it to break!) and it smashed and ended up with glass in my foot. Thankfully my brother rescued me and I was able to get it cleaned and plastered up! (*LYMLRS* 2011)

Melrose's outfit, made up of a *Topshop* oversized tweed coat, *H&M* black leggings, a gifted pastel pink shirt and a *Primark* scarf, can be interpreted as a low- budget version of the androgynous insider's look that many outsiders attempt to exchange for access to the exclusive fashion industry. However, the semantic context in which the style is placed is not one of exclusion and distinction, but rather of inclusion. She shares confidential details about how, for example, she had to splurge in order to buy the *Topshop* coat and now wears it with every outfit, or how, she should probably wear a cardigan for a change, but she cannot since all of hers are too old and worn-out. Instead of using an androgynous outfit for flaunting expensive buys, a sense of good taste, and proximity, through style, to the elite, for Melrose, androgynous dressing is a chance to talk about her personal problems in finding the money to always be on trend, her inspirations and her real-life mini dramas. Similarly to Lau, she makes sense of the trend in her own terms, seeing in it the opportunity for a DIY project with her old

clothes, rather than simply translating it to impulse to purchase new ones. Finally, telling her readers about her accident with eyelash glue, she gives away more details about her private and mundane life, mentioning her brother, while at the same time, she implicitly juxtaposes the image of the composed, immaculate, almost android-like body associated with the androgyny trend, to one of visual excess and chaos, symbolised by flashy fake eyelashes and a bleeding foot.

“Androgyny just happens to be a trend and a really cool one at that and this is just a small teensy albeit eye-blinding accessory. [...] Why should I buy this? I can just make it at home” writes another blogger (*Take A Bow* 2013). While showing an appreciation for the androgyny trend, instead of reporting the messages of the traditional media as instructions on how to get the look, or passively adhering to the rules they set, like Lily, she addresses the topic in a light and informal manner, and engages with it creatively through DIY, reinterpreting, this way, the trend itself, Louisa of *Afroblush* (2012), instead, writes about how, inspired by androgynous clothing on the runway, she purchased a masculine second-hand cape at her favourite vintage shop. Both DIY and second-hand shopping emerge thus as ways through which ordinary people can, on the one hand have the possibility to approach and play with the dominant fashion discourse without rejecting or feeling rejected by it, nor merely adhering to it in a passive way, and on the other, transform the trend itself in a stepping stone for the construction of a new understanding of it.

The disparity between the fashion-promoted dreams and real possibilities is a common issue for bloggers whose blog is not able to grant them the money to buy the right clothes to get the proper androgynous look, nor the status or the fame necessary to be given them as a gift from brands' public relations teams. For Chloe Plumstead of *The Little Plum*, who has a particular taste for boy-meets-girl fashion, androgynous dressing becomes a matter of adjustment and an encouragement to go the extra mile to look right with the means she has:

I like to call this look 'dressing Zara on a Primark budget'. Every day I find myself trawling through instagram (I love it ok) and I'm always coming across the most beautiful girls wearing the most beautiful clothes, which inevitably leads me to feeling as if I need to run into Zara ASAP Rocky and

grab myself some new knitwear. Alas my student budget will not allow for such outbursts, so I'm having to work with what I already got. I bought these trousers in summer from ASDA and I'm always pleasantly surprised whenever I pop them back on as to how much I love them. They were only £8 but they look and feel way more expensive. (The Little Plum 2015)

In the text that goes with the pictures of one of her androgynous outfits, Plumstead shares the insecurity she experiences while comparing herself to other girls, and discusses how, while she feels the urge to go shopping at *Zara* 'as soon as possible' (she jokingly types ASAP as '*A\$AP Rocky*' as a reference to the Harlem rapper), she has to manage with what she has got. Her monochrome minimalist outfit, which from the outside appears just like one of the looks associated with the new androgyny, she stresses, is actually put together with budget items, bought at *Primark* and *ASDA*, and retrieved from her wardrobe. Adding some insight into her private life, and connecting once again androgyny to the sphere of the ordinary, the blogger ends the post with a tip about shopping at the local supermarket's clothing section, and announcing that she plans to spend the weekend studying. "Please feel free to make me feel jealous and let me know what your weekend plans are below; I promise not to hold too much of a grudge" (*The Little Plum* 2015), she adds with a friendly sentence that further underlines the affective component of blogs' popularity.

Rediscovering the affective sphere of androgynous fashion's aesthetics, bloggers re-mediate the trend, negotiating its meanings by engaging with it on the level of everyday life and ordinary creativity. Instead of simply embracing the messages promulgated by the industry and established intermediaries, fashion bloggers offer interpretations that are still within the mainstream, but, at the same time, open up new spaces for the understanding and the consumption of the androgynous aesthetics. As Willis (1990) notes:

"[Y]oung people don't just buy passively or uncritically. They always transform the meaning of bought goods, appropriating and recontextualizing mass-market styles. The appropriation entails a form of symbolic work and creativity as young consumers break the ordered categories of clothes, the suggested matches and ideas promoted by shops. They bring their own specific and differentiated grounded aesthetics to bear on consumption [...]. They make their own sense of what is commercially available, make their own aesthetic judgements, and sometimes reject the normative definitions and categories of 'fashion' promoted by the clothing industry." (Willis 1990: 85)

## **Blogging as an Intimate Experience Between Writers and Readers: Are They Peers?**

The cases analysed up until now have shown how fashion blogs provide a re-mediation of the dominant androgynous fashion discourse through affect. Even the ones which follow a more magazine-like format, and thereby try to mirror the contents and editorial style of traditional print media, make sense of the trend by interacting with it at the autobiographical level of sentiments and emotions. Rocamora (2012) also highlights this quality of independent blogs, linked to their resemblance to personal diaries, talking about the potential of immediacy of contemporary media forms “which favours informality, direct conversational modes of address, and a certain assumption of intimacy (sometimes even of ironic complicity) with the audience” (Tomlinson 2007:100 quoted by Rocamora 2012). It should also be noted that while, when they first opened their blog, many bloggers were indubitably aiming at the popularity and freebies that this new medium seemed to offer, blogs usually start out precisely as online diaries of people who want to express their love for fashion.

The posts where bloggers discuss their relationship with androgynous styles, or their reaction to the messages of traditional fashion intermediaries, are covered with explicit references to the sphere of affect and the informal and personal sharing of sensations. Lau (*Style Bubble* February 2013), for instance, tells her readers about how she is going to “go all Dear Diary on you” and “talk from personal experience”, Melrose (*LLYMLRS* 2014) presents her boy-meets-girl-outfit and comments about how she feels too “chubby and gross” to have her street style picture taken at *London Fashion Week*, Louisa (*Afroblush* 2012) talks about her androgynous styles expressing how flattered she is when people in real life compare her to Grace Jones, and Plumstead's (*The Little Plum* 2015) androgynous inspiration is put side by side with reflections about her worries regarding self-confidence, lack of money and body issues.

This process of public construction of identity through intimate self-reflection, and the consequent re-mediation of the new androgyny through everyday life manifestations of

affect, also enable the blogs' readers to look at fashion communication with other eyes, offering new ways of relating to the trend:

“yo are open to your fans and are just not into the whole exclusivity thing which is why you are respected by us normal folk!” (Zaena on *Style Bubble* February 2013)

“I like how aware and self-reflective you are.” (Kate on *La Petite Anglaise* 2013)

“I love to read your blog because it's a true diary... your dating dramas, the food, friends, fashion. And dogs.” (Alex on *Liberty London Girl* 2010)

“Lily I love you BECAUSE you're not a typical member of the fash pack!

You're sassy x100000! Xxx” (Chloe Plumstead on *LLYMLRS* 2014)

Thanks to the medium of the blog, not only bloggers but readers too appear to be able to construct a more accessible and inclusive space for the discussion of fashion, where intermediaries are just like members of the audience; where they can enter a conversation with one another; and where they participate in a mutual shaping of identities. Rather than witnessing a linear passing of information from bloggers to passive readers, the blogosphere produces fashion as an arena of continuous exchanges among different actors, where there exist no marked distinctions between intermediaries and the audience, the influencer and the influenced. For example, two readers comment:

'Chubby and gross' - are you having a laugh? You've got the best body and thanks to bloggers like you I didn't break down in my teens! Your shirt is spot on - never thought about investing in more khaki until now. Beaut. (Elenimac on *LLYMLRS* 2014)

Just keep being real Susie. We love you for itt. [...] I make zero money on my blog because I'm not in it for the money. Just a love of being free in what I say and do fashion wise. It's the opportunity for personal expression that truly matters to me. I'm happy when others read my blog and enjoy it too (Suzi Maynard on February *Style Bubble* February 2013)

On the other hand, Duffy (2015) notes how, even though fashion blogging is generally portrayed “as a form of cultural production that is more accessible, inclusive, and democratic than the elite, top-down world of high fashion” (Duffy 2015:2), it is always necessary to bear in mind that the practice of blogging also articulates itself through an incontestable commercial logic. According to her, fashion bloggers' driving principles of

'amateurism', 'autonomy' and 'collaboration', which define members of the blogosphere as regular outsiders expressing their own passion for fashion within an informal community, are “myths that conceal the hierarchical, market-driven, quantifiable, and selfpromotional realities” (ibid: 14). Bloggers appear, in fact, to be largely motivated by aspirations regarding their own personal and professional growth as well as that of their blogs. As a consequence of their constant need for external validation and the legitimation of fashion authorities, bloggers often find themselves having to make choices between integrity and individuality, and fame and status. This can mean, for instance, compromising on personal style and preferences to conform to certain models (e.g. in the case of the new androgyny as an insider's uniform), promoting particular items that are normally outside of the bloggers' budget, because they came as free samples, or accepting paid advertisements or commercial sponsorships because without this kind of revenue they would not afford to keep blogging. As Lau (*Style Bubble* February 2013) herself argues:

the b word has been tarnished – asking us how much money do we make, suspicions that every blog post is sponsored, outfits that have been littered with gifts, accusations that we're poseurs and not fashion critics, lack of journalistic standards – things, which, I along with others have been guilty of to some degree or another. (*Style Bubble* February 2013)

In this sense, self-expression is turned into self-promotion and then into a proper investment in the self. Although fashion bloggers' activity can indeed be seen as making a progress in the direction of a reconciliation between androgynous aesthetics and the affectivity of the self, for creative and aesthetic workers like bloggers, the self becomes a matter of enterprise. Entwistle and Wissinger (2006), talking about the 'aesthetic labour' of fashion models, as another group of workers whose value depends upon self-presentation and self-construction, stress how in contemporary society, self-actualisation in the job sphere, is very much based on Foucauldian technologies of the self, and how, in view of this, models have to “refer to ‘strategic’ attempts to develop their image, adapting their bodies to increase their marketability.” (Entwistle and Wissinger 2006:785). Moreover, as Skeggs (2004) argues, the self is already located within pre-existing schemes of value, which, of course, construct certain identities as more symbolically valuable than others. Reconnecting this discussion to the sphere of fashion mediation, in which, as we have seen, bloggers occupy a position of disadvantage due to a

series of factors (e.g. they usually lack the economic means as well as right kind of education, connections and background, that instead allow fashion insiders to maintain their elite status) it is not hard to see why, for bloggers, the construction of the self is inevitably interlinked with negotiations and compromises with those able to grant them the legitimation they seek.

This, however, is also reflected in their relationships with their readers. Albeit less frequent than positive ones, negative comments against bloggers attack them, accusing them of compromising their authenticity through self promotion, selling out, and of irritating normal people by bragging about their little, new-found, spotlight moments, and the privileges they are able to obtain without having to work for. Instead of constructing bloggers as peers, such comments contrast bloggers, or at least some of them, to the ordinary people. They betray feelings of envy that resemble those aroused by the unreachable fashion elite, but at the same time, consistently with the high prominence of affect within the blogosphere and the social proximity of the parts, are even more heartfelt and resentful. For example:

To a long-time watcher like myself, yourself and Tavi are part of a new breed of liberated girls, untamed by societal conventions regarding the expression of your genuine aesthetic desires. Chiara Ferragni wears the same I know it is because she was paid to do it (and paid to instagram it, and paid to post about it) and her team made a calculated decision to give her fans an “eccentric day”. [...] They brag endlessly about “collaborations” with “top brands” which we are treated to in the form of a photo of their face next to a bottle of Disaronno or a new Dolce Gabbana perfume next to a bunch of flowers. [...] all of this bullshit self-promotion [...] That’s what pisses people off. It’s that these money-spinning, clueless, crowd-sourced mediocre wannabe socialites seem to be worth more to the major brands than the people who care (beyond the object of self-promotion. (Miss Ghesquiere on *Style Bubble* February 2013)

[A]ll the cynicism that goes with that scene and the feelings of insecurity that inevitably arise as you shoot photo after photo of people whose outfits are worth half your annual salary, and realizing most of it was gifted, loaned, or purchased with a steep, eye-winking industry discount. The affluence [or presumed affluence] that goes with it all can be hard to swallow for those of us from a “normal” background trying to carve a more traditional, work-up-the-ranks path in the industry. (Kelly on *Style Bubble* February 2013)

Coming from a very troubled third world country [...] I have been taking sh\$# from PRs and working my but off to get somewhere, then and along come these “peacocks” more desperate for attention than Lady Gaga, and are suddenly getting endorsements, free clothes and trips and access to the most coveted shows. (Third World Fabi on *Style Bubble* February 2013)

While the blogosphere usually represents a more genuine and accessible alternative to traditional fashion communication, where intermediaries are just normal people with a passion, on the other hand, their audience does not seem to be able to fully accept their status as simply outsiders, due to their connections and their dependence upon the industry and the mainstream fashion scene. In this respect, and considering the enormous popularity that blogs have acquired, where does the blogosphere stand in relation to the alternative/mainstream culture divide? Should (more or less) independent blogs be considered as examples of niche, counter or mainstream fashion mediation? Such questions appear even more complex if we consider all the nuances that exist among different blogs and levels of authority, even in the category of independent bloggers alone. Evans (1997) quotes Lynge-Jorlén (2012) who claims that due to the fluidity of contemporary culture the distinction between the hegemonic and the oppositional subcultural is also mobile. In this respect, she argues, “[m]aintaining the distinction between subculture, out of which independent fashion magazines grew, and mainstream culture, is out of touch with contemporary culture” (Lynge-Jorlén 2012: 14). If this is true for the print media, it is even more so in the case of blogs, as they inhabit, by nature, a contradictory space of experimentation, fluctuating between different realities, and it is in terms of this ambiguity that their particular mediation of the new androgyny trend should be understood.

## **Conclusion**

Through a varied investigation of the fashion blogosphere, I have established the

blog as crucial in the unfolding of contemporary mainstream fashion, and, in particular, the androgyny trend. If in the previous chapter I had already hinted at the connection between blogs and an affective approach to the androgynous body, this chapter explored more in depth in what sense sentiments have become actual new vehicles for the re-mediation of androgynous fashion. The appeal to the sphere of feelings and emotions in fact emerged as a characterising feature of blogs, regardless of the differences among them (e.g. corporate or independent, magazine-style or diary-style), as well as a key reason behind their success.

Through references to the affective dimension of blogging, the figure of the blogger was analysed with reference to the different tensions that define it, as a balancing act between the status of fashion insider and outsider, as well as between proximity and detachment from the audience and between mainstream and marginal positionings. Corporate bloggers are using the medium of the blog as way of riding the wave of contemporary consumers' affective approach to fashion, but also as an instrument to expand fashion brands' and androgynous style's marketing potential through affect. Independent bloggers instead find in androgynous dressing, identified as the 'uniform' of fashion insiders, a way of gaining legitimation through exchange. By embracing the style, they are able not only to look the part, but to win acceptance and access to the exclusive fashion scene. In both cases, androgynous aesthetics is removed from its controversial history of discrimination and transformed into a mainstream, glamourised and aestheticised version of itself, through a process of cultural appropriation, which strips androgyny of its potential to challenge oppressive norms about gender and sexuality. Bloggers' struggle over legitimation also manifests itself, simultaneously, as the rejection of dominant androgynous style and in terms of the creation of a variegated fashion outsider's look, defined in contrast to the refined minimalism that characterises the new androgyny.

I have also highlighted the role of the fashion blogger as a cultural intermediary

and in relation to the wider audience. On the one hand, thanks to their intimate, friendly and informal way of talking about the trend, bloggers are able to offer new interpretations outside of the dominant discourses. Androgynous fashion is, in such a way, reconnected to everyday scenarios and ordinary people, undergoing, at the same time, symbolic transformations and creative manipulations (e.g. through the spread of new semantic associations and the emergence of innovative engagements with the style), which will be the object of a more in depth analysis in the next two chapters. The blogging community has also been found to constitute a space where young women (bloggers and members of the audience alike) can shape their relation with fashion outside of the dominant male and money-oriented scene. On the other hand, the data brought attention to the reasons why it is not possible to equate the perspective of bloggers to that of the general public. Despite the fact that the bloggers' presentation of androgyny is personal, autobiographical and articulated through self-expression, their dependence upon external legitimation, and their ambivalent relationship with the fashion industry ultimately come between them and the mass.

In this sense, the analysis of blogs has demonstrated the impossibility of thinking about the traditional media and audiences, the media and bloggers and bloggers and the audience, as separate entities tied together by a subject/object relationship. Coleman (2009) discusses how, for Deleuze (1992), things and the world become through their mutual enfolding, and, thus, rather than on individual things, the focus should be placed on the relations between them. Applying Coleman's arguments about relationality to the subject of the intermediation of androgynous fashion, it is possible to make a point that highlights the way in which, without forgetting its crucial representational and ideological dimension, contemporary androgynous fashion is to be understood as existing not prior but through the inter-connected relations that constitute it. Neither bloggers nor their readers can, in fact, be seen as passive receivers of the dominant mediation of the trend; they are instead deeply entangled with androgynous fashion itself and they all develop

through their relation with the others.

## **Chapter 7**

### **Engaging/Disengaging with Androgyny and Reconfiguring the Trend: Affective Online Interaction**

#### **Introduction**

The androgyny trend, as I have described it up until now, would not have had the meanings and significance it has, if it had not been for fashion intermediaries' action (analysed in Chapters 4 and 5) and their transformation of fashion designers' artistic production into objects of cultural consumption. Moreover, without the promotional, facilitating and mediatory work of bloggers (which I examined in Chapter 5, but mainly in Chapter 6), neither it would have been able to gain the quick and pervasive popularity it has acquired. Nevertheless, the phenomenon of the new androgyny fashion trend only exists with regards to an audience. It is thanks to the audience that bloggers have the means necessary to carve their niche in the fashion industry and perform their re-mediation, it is in view of target and incidental audiences that the traditional media construct androgyny in particular ways, and finally, it is audiences themselves which ultimately have the power to determine the existence and lasting influence of the new androgyny.

With this chapter and the next one, then, I draw attention to the role played by different segments of the wider public in the shaping of contemporary androgynous fashion, highlighting its relationship to the trend and the implications of such connections. In particular, the present chapter provides a discussion of the audience's engagements with the new androgyny, and its reactions to the materials provided by cultural intermediaries, focusing on online interaction. In this regard, here I consider what are the specific features of online audience engagement and what this entails when thinking about the development of the androgyny trend. The chapter starts with an examination of this very issue, with particular attention being paid to its affective component. I explain what I mean when I talk about the affectivity embedded in the contemporary

relationship between fashion and social media, as well as what kind of affective relationships arise from this encounter.

I then delve into the question of how members of the audience relate to mainstream representations of fashionable androgyny worn by celebrities, rather than, for example, models, bloggers or ordinary people, as in other instances. In doing so, I examine cases from a selection of different major social media platforms to investigate in what ways the different platforms are used to approach androgynous fashion, and what particular understandings of it are linked to different media. I searched for mentions about androgynous fashion, and its themes described in Chapter 4, in the archives of *Facebook*, *Twitter*, *Instagram* and *Tumblr* pages and profiles and, after identifying the main patterns, I picked out a few of the most significant examples. At first, I focus on the particular case in which there is a direct engagement between the public, fashion communication professionals and the product of their work. In this regard, through the analysis of interaction on official social media channels (a fertile example of which would be users' comments on fashion magazines' official *Facebook* pages), I study to what extent it is possible to observe a straightforward connection between the encoded and the decoded messages that make up the dominant understanding of the new androgyny. With reference to Berlant's (2011) concept of cruel optimism I show how, in the context of this kind of direct audience engagement, androgynous fashion becomes some sort of personal investment, regardless of differences among audience segments.

Finally, looking for an alternative perspective, and alternative forms of engagement, the chapter explores forms of indirect engagement. We will see how through these audiences are able to make sense of, and experiment with, the androgyny trend using the materials filtered through by mainstream intermediaries without, however, directly interacting with them.

## **Androgyny and the Affectivity of Contemporary Fashion's Online Audience Engagement**

Before moving to an analysis of the different ways in which the androgyny trend develops in relation to particular kinds of online audience interactions, it is useful to pinpoint the specificities of this kind of engagement in relation to the trend. In fact, independently from its modalities, the relationship between fashion communication and the public, in the contemporary social media age, should be seen as constituting itself a significant factor in the specific unfolding of the new androgyny.

In the previous chapter, we have seen how, through the re-mediation provided by fashion bloggers, androgynous dressing has been linked to a dimension of affect and the expression of emotions, which, differently from the oppressing moral implications of dominant representation, enables the reinterpretation of androgyny within the context of everyday life. In a similar manner, in the last few years, social media have gained a widespread popularity, transforming the traditionally elitist fashion world into a hyperconnected scene, intertwined with dynamics that tie together the industry, the public and the sphere of affect.

In the time of social media, members of the audience are able to make the fashion world, intended as the exclusive realm of catwalk shows, glamorous models, and VIP events, rather than personal choices in wearing clothes, an ordinary part of their daily experience. Official social media channels offer the possibility to see and comment on fashion shows in live streaming, keep up to date with the latest exclusive events through pictures and videos, express feelings and opinions on announcements, new ad campaigns, or daily celebrities' outfits, gain (digital) access to areas previously restricted to fashion insiders only (e.g. through live updates from the backstage, or from the front row at the shows) and be connected with the fashion world 24/7 through one's own PC, phone or tablet. Leaving aside the commercial interests behind this phenomenon, it is important to recognise the extent to which the existence of

contemporary fashion and its trends is now increasingly connected, and also dependent upon, affective interaction with the public. Social media responses to androgynous fashion are short and simple. Instead of providing insightful commentary, their inputs communicate a range of emotions provoked by such representations of the trend. These range from admiration, excitement, surprise and love, to boredom, disgust, annoyance and anger:

Double leather? No one but Gwen could pull this off. Love the slouchy pants too (Steff in *Grazia* 2013)

Angelina looks INCREDIBLE. That androgynous look. FIT!! #BAFTAs (@FrankiMarie 2015)

I have a serious girl-crush on CD (Rachelle on *British Vogue* 2014b)

Horrible (Gabriela on *British Vogue* 2014a)

I adore her so much! (speendecouture on *Harper's Bazaar UK* 2015)

Bit safe and boring for ADR (Marie-Louise in *Grazia UK* 2014)

Traditional analysis of audience reactions to representation and cultural phenomena is interesting since it allows us to investigate their influence on people, for example through theories of media effects. However, during the 1970s and 1980s, with the emergence of theories of active audience (e.g. McRobbie 1991 and Morley 1992) the matter has been complicated by seminal studies about the public's active involvement in making sense of cultural texts and resisting existing meanings. As cultural theorist Hall (2007) maintains:

since there is no necessary correspondence between encoding and decoding, the former can attempt to 'pre-fer' but cannot prescribe or guarantee the latter, which has its own conditions of existence. Unless they are wildly aberrant, encoding will have the effect of constructing some of the limits and parameters within which decodings will operate. (Hall 2007: 100)

In the contemporary context, characterised by the spread of social media as tools for the exchange of opinions and feelings in the form of user-generated content, it is also necessary to take a further step in the conception of the media/audience relationship. As

a matter of fact, in today's conditions, instead of inhabiting the role of passive receivers of cultural messages, or even playing an active, and possibly oppositional part in their interpretation, members of the audience have now the potential to act as key figures in the actual mainstream shaping of those very messages and cultural phenomena. The new audiences, enabled by contemporary technological means, can engage in public, informal and affective exchanges with communication professionals, and get their voices heard. Today, members of the audience cannot be simply and straightforwardly associated with the act of consumption. “[A] series of recent social changes, especially those associated with the internet and Web 2.0 (briefly, the user-generated web, e.g. Facebook, YouTube, Twitter),” Ritzer and Jurgenson (2010) argue, “have given [the entanglement of user production and consumption] even greater centrality” (Ritzer and Jurgenson 2010: 14). In this kind of scenario, the audiences can also gain enough visibility and popularity, such as in the case of fashion bloggers, to take up the role, to some extent, of a new cultural intermediary.

Of course, on the other hand, it would be naive to think about the social media revolution simply in terms of democratic mass participation in cultural production and mediation, and ignore the more complex dynamics of interest that have led the fashion industry to embrace this new kind of interaction. With this premise in mind, let us now move to an exploration of the particular ways in which the androgyny trend developed, and continues to develop, in relation to the affective engagement of the new audience.

### **Direct Engagement: the Audiences' Imagined Audience and Personal Investments in Androgynous Fashion**

#### *Bashing and Judging*

The analysis of direct audience engagement, where members of the public interact with fashion intermediaries in the form of feedback to published material on official social media channels reveals how, interestingly, reactions can be generally grouped into

positive and negative. As a consequence of social media's mode of interaction, characterised by brevity, simplicity, affectivity, immediacy and informality, responses tend to be short and straightforward and to polarise between enthusiastic positivity and overheated negativity. But what lies behind such passionate statements of love and hate? Are they really the simple expression of audiences' feelings about androgynous fashion?

A few users' responses talk about androgynous fashion in terms that contrast its dominant representation. These users underline how the clothes needed in order to embody the style cost an enormous amount of money, require constant care and are not suitable for everyday use. Furthermore, similarly to what I observed in the case of bloggers, with reference to Coleman's (2009) work, images of the androgynous body itself, which has emerged as the unobtainable lean, tall, strong and optimised figure of the post-human cyborg, are interpreted in terms of their ability to limit or enable the becomings of non-representational bodies. Comments on different social media channels read:

Love this outfits - just need the bank balance to match! (Michele in *Harpers Bazaar UK* 2014)

Getting dirty soon (Eva on *British Vogue* 2015b)

I know I have a seemingly abnormal body shape but do we really have to have all fashion be directed at tall girls with androgynous figures (@loverugby 2015)

J-Lo looks stunning in this all white ensemble, but I would panic about coming into contact with ANYTHING in case it caused stains!! (Caley in *Grazia UK* 2014b).

This last example in particular, expresses androgyny's incompatibility with the everyday drama of ordinary people's life, highlighted by the use of the word 'panic', the capitalisation of 'anything' to indicate what could ruin the model's androgynous clothing, and the double exclamation mark. However, the majority of audience's negative reactions to the visual material associated with the new androgyny displays a

very different mindset. A comment on a picture of Alexa Chung's all-white masculine ensemble, published on *Vogue's Facebook* page reads:

Eeww her feet! (Sarah on *British Vogue* 2015a)

while others, on an androgynous shot of top model Gisele, exclaim,

She looks lika a man! Sorry Tom [Brady, Gisele's husband]! (Judy on *British Vogue* 2014c)

Omg! That woman has no boobies. Man chest (Belinda on *British Vogue* 2014c).

Instead of criticising androgynous images for the particular features of the androgyny trend, a major part of the audience shows feelings of indignation at the particular way in which androgyny is taken up and embodied by models and celebrities. In Chapter 5, in fact, we have seen how embodying the trend through transformation represents in itself a key feature of the trend. For instance, models and celebrities are attacked for not displaying the right kind of composed body associated with the trend (e.g. one commenter expresses disgust at Alexa Chung's long feet), or for not being able to find the appropriate balance between masculinity and femininity. Moreover, the way in which one of the women accuses top model Gisele of looking like a man, while mentioning and expressing her sympathy for Gisele's husband, brings back to mind the archetype of the heterosexual wife that emerged from Chapter 4 as one of the essential ideals in the representation of the androgyny trend. In this regard, rather than denouncing what is wrong with androgynous dressing, negative reactions from the audience appear instead to criticize the published images in terms of the very standards set by the new androgyny itself. Or, in other words, rather than judging the trend, members of the audiences seem to judge other women *through* the trend.

On the one hand, online 'bashing', in the form of heated attacks on web content and other internet users, often linked to fandom and celebrity culture 2.0, can be seen as a distinctive feature of the era of virtual communities and user-generated content. Talking

about this phenomenon in the context of social interaction between American teenagers, Marwick and boyd (2014) observe how their communication necessarily involves an “active, engaged audience” (Marwick and boyd 2014:5) to be performed in front of, and how it is characterised by conflict. Moreover, they argue that although it overlaps with the repeated and unsolicited aggression of 'bullying', 'rational aggression' and 'gossip', it is not reducible to any of them.

On the other hand, audiences' reactions such as those just illustrated cannot be fully explained simply along these lines. These negative comments rely, in fact, upon judgements of value and worth. Skeggs and Wood (2012) note how, in the case of Reality TV, instead of seeing the public become a group of passive observers to the dynamics of representation, the audience is produced as playing itself a judging role in the evaluation of the line between the proper and the improper, good taste and bad taste, moral worth and worthlessness. As Skeggs (2009) writes, in reality television,

audiences are offered the position not just of witness of the performance or collector of evidence but of juror, invited to assess the properties of the person, their investments and their relationships (Skeggs 2009: 638).

Moreover, the judging perspective and the gaze that audiences are invited to adopt are that of a middle-class point of view, where middle-class taste is set as the standard against which everything and everyone is assessed. Similarly, examples of direct social media engagement about the androgyny trend between industry professionals and the wider public seem to induce the latter not only to take up a judging role, but to embrace and internalise, through judgments, the dominant understanding of androgynous fashion, which, as we have seen, goes hand in hand with the reproduction of middle-class, white, cisgender and heteronormative privilege.

A particularly interesting case in this regard, is represented by *Grazia* magazine's regular online feature called “You, the fashion jury, VOTE!”, where readers are asked to judge celebrity and street style outfits published by the *Grazia* digital PR team on *Grazia's Facebook* page, to be able to get a chance for their comment to be published in

the print magazine alongside those of the 'experts'. The title's powerful exhortation, which imperatively addresses the public through the use of the second-person pronoun and the capitalisation of the verb in “you, VOTE”, by recalling war propaganda slogans, constructs judgements of taste in terms of moral duty and adhesion to a higher ideal. Moreover, addressing the audience as “the fashion jury”, it already appoints it with the role, and thus, further urges it to play the part and enact it.

*Grazia's* digital audience appears to accept the conferment with passion and enthusiasm, giving a numerical score to each outfit and affectively expressing its verdicts through references to a whole spectrum of feelings including love, awe, admiration, surprise, disgust, outrage, sadness, disappointment, boredom and annoyance. For example, let us consider these comments on outfits worn by the singer Rita Ora:

“4/5 she wears it well but it is less 'sartorial take on masculine styling' and more 'hot girl dressing as a man and getting away with it” (Gillian in *Grazia* 2014f)

“It's achingly cool but sadly not very flattering. Swap the shorts for a feminine skirt and we might be onto something 3/4” (Genna in *Grazia* 2014e)

“A beautifully cut androgynous outfit, that could have really done with a hint of femininity. 3/5” (Emily in *Grazia* 2013c)

Accordingly to the way in which mainstream representations of androgyny obsessively reinstate questions of masculinity, femininity and bodily appearance at the centre of the trend, the audience's (induced) judgements frequently make references to gender and its embodiment. The emphasis is placed upon the right equilibrium between masculinity and femininity. Rita Ora is accused of sporting an outfit that is simply menswear, instead of being androgynously fashionable, and of only being able to successfully embody it by balancing it with her feminine and attractive appearance. Another ensemble by the singer is deemed too masculine, and a reader (Genna in *Grazia* 2014e) suggests Ora should ditch the shorts for a more feminine skirt, while recognising that although masculine looks, not conforming to the standards of the new androgyny, are

'achingly cool' they simply do not look right. Having learnt their lesson from fashion intermediaries, who, as I have discussed, instruct about how to give a feminine touch to otherwise too masculine ensembles in order to look fashionable and androgynous (e.g. with stereotypically feminine elements such as flower patterns and the colour pink), members of the audience reproduce normative expectations of gender by connecting a perceived lack of femininity to inappropriateness and lack of elegance.

Mistakes in embodying the androgyny trend are also overlaid with class connotations:

It's very white! The trousers look a touch too 'sailor' with the amount of gold buttons. And white shoes as well? But the coat is amazing, stops it being too costume. 3/5 (Raychel in *Grazia* 2014g)

my eyes!! The coat is great.the res looks like dressing in the dark.3/5.  
(Helen in *Grazia* 2014g)

2/5 because I love the suit and the bag. Something went horribly wrong in the styling here. That suit is incredible but looks almost cheap. It's too cluttered with necklaces and neck tie. [...] (Meshenda in *Grazia* 2014d)

She looks lika a Quaker Oats man. The suit itself is ok(ish) but the hat, cane and glove absolutely kill it. And not in a good way. 1/5 (Natasha in *Grazia* 2014b)

2/5 I like the androgynous trend, but Madge takes it way too far with the cane and Quaker hat! (Caley in *Grazia* 2014b)

I hate thos chavvy phone case bags. Makes a sophisticated outfit look cheap. I would love to see her acessory cupboard. 3/5 (Kristie in *Grazia* 2014a)

clown trousers they are! (devinnora on *British Vogue* 2015c)

Several celebrities' attempts at androgynous dressing are judged unsuccessful by 'the jury', and criticised for being 'too much'. Raychel (*Grazia* 2014g), for example, argues that while Jennifer Lopez's white mannish coat looks all right, the way in which she pairs it white shoes and white trousers adorned with eye-catching gold buttons makes the whole outfit look somewhat like a costume, that is, a poor imitation of the authentic androgynous style. Commenting on the same picture, Helen (*Grazia* 2014g) theatrically

claims that the look, with the exception of the coat, is so horrendous it hurts her eyes, and compares it to dressing in the dark, underlining again how the singer is trying and failing. Similarly, other comments complain about how good androgynous outfits (Lily Allen's and Madonna's) are ruined by redundant styling, overdone accessories and going 'too far'. In another instance, striped trousers worn, according to the new androgynous style, with a simple button-down pale blue shirt and a dark-blue jumper, are commented upon on *British Vogue's* Instagram page, as being fit for a clown (devinnora on *British Vogue* 2015c). Through the words of commenters, negative affect, expressed in form of loathing, contempt, bewilderment and disappointment, is associated with aesthetic surplus. In spite of the fact that this surplus is constituted by expensive designer items, the audience does not use this as an opportunity to comment on the excessive luxury of inaccessible celebrity fashion. On the contrary, excess is still interpreted as the cheapening of a good outfit, through an internalisation of the dominant representation of the androgyny trend (see Chapter 4), where a rich aesthetic assortment and the overload of visual signs is defined in relation to vulgarity, and against good taste and the middle-class sense of restrained elegance and chic minimalism. Although it is not usually possible to learn about people's class background from their Facebook profiles, or comments on social media, the examples just analysed hold indeed significant class implications. The comments left on blog posts analysed in Chapter 6 were mainly supportive of how bloggers often reconnected androgynous fashion to the everyday life of ordinary people. Here, on the other hand, the medium invites a particular kind of judgement which results in hateful attacks directed against characteristics associated with working-class culture.

In fact, class is brought directly and unequivocally into the picture, for example, by comments such as Kristie's (*Grazia* 2014a), where eye-catching details, blamed for ruining a sophisticated look making it look cheap, are described as 'chavvy'. Linked to middle-class derision of, and disgust for, white working-class people, chav style is commonly associated with obsession with brands and the flaunting of (fake or authentic) luxury items in contrast with the overall outfit. In this sense, references to

chav style function as a means through which actresses' and singers' designer fashion and their expensive clothes can be linked to trash celebrity culture, and then criticised according to the standards set by the androgyny trend, loaded with class implications. Tyler and Bennett (2010) describe chav as a grotesque pantomime of the working-class and underline how “[c]hav celebrity is constituted by this incompetent or unsuccessful impersonation, and the exposure of this failure is a key source of pleasure in celebrity culture” (Tyler and Bennett 2010: 381). Although the style of high profile personalities would normally be associated with the mainstream fashion portrayed in magazines, through the description of certain designer items as chavvy, and out of context with regard to the elegance of androgynous ensembles, themes of class distinction embedded in the new androgyny become instruments in the judgement of celebrity fashion. The question now is: why does this happen?

While, in Skeggs and Wood's (2012) study, it is underlined how reality TV predominantly invites viewers to cast judgement on average people as a pretext to stimulate the assessment of working-class characters, constructed as 'failing', it is important to note that this kind of mainstream fashion communication instead places models, actresses, singers and other celebrities as objects of critique. Nevertheless, as the examples analysed above demonstrate, the standards that such critiques draw from are in line with those emerging from the oppressive dominant representations of the androgyny trend. Rather than being seen as an opportunity to criticise the normativity of androgynous fashion in mainstream culture, this kind of audience engagement gives members of the public the opportunity, the power and perhaps the moral duty, to stand right next to entitled 'fashion experts' in the war against bad taste. Tyler (2006) stresses how, in the field of popular media, negative affects, and in particular disgust, aroused as a reaction to particular classed figures and individuals has the power of creating a shared sense of community:

Popular media can be effective means of communicating class disgust and in so doing, work to produce 'class communities' in material, political and affective senses. [...] class disgust is performed in ways that are community-forming. (Tyler 2006)

The way in which the audience uses social media to make affectively-charged negative comments on androgynous fashion with reference to its classed dimension can thereby be interpreted in terms of a particular presentation of the self for the sake of community bonding. Nevertheless, it is crucial to recognize how the community that is formed in this way relates to the contexts in which it emerges. As Marwick (2013) argues:

[I]dentity expression is influenced by the perception of audience. Posting to a community of close friends is different from the sprawling mass of contacts most people amass on Facebook, and will affect how people present themselves. (Marwick 2013: 358).

Drawing from Goffman's seminal text, *The Presentation of the Self in Everyday Life* (1990), Marwick and boyd (2011) talk about the deep influence that the space in which a conversation takes place, with its norms and expectations, has on socialisation, both online and in real life. Using *Twitter* as an example, the two authors explain that, when using social media, people adjust their presentation of the self in relation to the particular context, and speak to an 'imagined audience'. Since they cannot positively know who will actually read their words, social media users write for an ideal audience that they construct in relation to the wider context. In the case of direct engagement between members of the audience and exponents of mainstream fashion media, and with reference to the androgyny trend, this phenomenon acquires a particular significance. In fact, when talking about this kind of direct engagement, the audience's imagined audience is inevitably constituted by people working in mediation and communication, and thereby, the fashion experts themselves. This is even explicitly stated in the particular instance of the *Grazia* feature, where it is explained how the judgements of the public are, in turn, to be judged by actual professionals.

In this regard, it is interesting to note how affective comments left by the general audience on major online fashion media outlets not only reproduce the structure of signification created by the dominant representation of the androgyny trend, but, even more frequently than in the blogosphere, they talk about the new androgyny openly quoting emblematic terms and phrases like 'masculine trend', 'androgynous trend',

'menswear trend' and 'boyfriend look', associated with adjectives such as 'sophisticated', 'chic' and 'classic'. Therefore, if on the one hand this kind of communication appeals to a particular audiences, with very specific tastes and dispositions, and invites them to join the conversation about the new androgyny, on the other hand, it also invites its own audiences to interact in particular ways, to the extent that there can no longer be found any significant difference between different audiences and their responses. In other words, intermediaries attract the responses of the segment of the audience that is already socially integrated within the dominant discourse reproduced by androgynous fashion, while, at the same time, they also set up the conditions in which the remaining ones are brought to adhere to that very discourse. As a consequence, spaces of first-hand interaction among members of the industry and the wider public emerge as arenas for the affective reproduction of the normative messages of the new androgyny.

### *Investing*

I am wearing a suit. If it wasn't for the boobs I could be Tilda Swinton androgynous! (@Braintree\_ 2014)

In Chapter 5 I looked at the difficulties that emerge from the reconciliation between bodily representations associated with the androgyny trend and experiences in androgynous dressing. I have illustrated how, despite the many problems of incompatibility between these two spheres, as well as the way in which the trend seems to limit people's conditions of experience, the analysis of bloggers' point of view found them still aspirationally willing to give the androgynous look their best try. Similarly, audience responses to mainstream media portrayals of the new androgyny - both complimentary, and, as we have just seen, critical - predominantly seem to approve and be in agreement with the aesthetic model created by the trend. In fact, they were found to adopt the terminology of the new androgyny and comment on its representations in terms of its themes.

In view of what I have argued in the previous paragraphs, talking about the audiences'

acceptance of the standards set by the new androgyny, regardless of demographic factors, it is possible to interpret this phenomenon in terms of a general tendency to invest in the trend's ideals and the promises of a better, more glamorous and more accomplished life, inherent to the whole fashion discourse.

These investments often rely on the differentiation between celebrities and ordinary people. Interestingly, while previous cases highlighted the irreconcilability of the androgynous dressing of famous personalities and fashion insiders and that of the mass, the line that social media comments draw is instead between those who have the means to embody the androgynous look, and those who have not. This translates into a separation between those who have the moral duty to set the good example, and those who can only do their best:

1/5...only acceptable out of sight...plain, shapeless, unflattering and thoughtless (Amanda in *Grazia* 2013b)

2/5 Rita slipping up with the footwear! This is what my dad looks like putting the bins out on a Thursday morning. (Chloe in *Grazia* 2014e)

Even Riri can't make this shapeless tracksuit look like anything other than an outfit she should only wear popping to the petrol station for milk at 1am. 1/5. (Marie-Louise in *Grazia* 2013b)

This could be any commuter. Lily looks like a normal person! Nope. 1 (Michelle in *Grazia* 2014d)

1/5 Does anyone think she looks like she should be working in airport security? When a Chanel bag doesn't save a look its bad!£ (Mikaela in *Grazia* 2014d)

Lily goes incognito in this yawnsome suit. Looks like a headmistress! 2/5 (Marie-Louise in *Grazia* 2014d)

“At least if the acting dries up Demi can find work as a British Gas man... 1/5”(Laurel in *Grazia* 2014c)

The androgynous outfits of actresses and singers are harshly criticised for being too average and normal. Amanda (*Grazia* 2013b), for instance, judges a look to be

unacceptable, describing it as 'shapeless', in opposition to the new androgyny's signature sharp and structured silhouettes, and both 'plain' and 'thoughtless' in contrast to the calculated and exquisitely calibrated elegance that the trend prescribes. Moreover, negative criticism juxtaposes the sparkling world of celebrities to images of ordinary life, using the latter for vilification. "Lily [Allen] looks like a normal person!" exclaims an outraged commenter (*Grazia* 2014e), who compares the singer to just another commuter. Others evoke the squalor and the mediocrity of ordinary life, by imagining detailed scenarios, such as waking up early to take out the trash on a weekday morning, or shopping at a service station at night, which they perceive to be in contrast with the kind of life associated with the right kind of androgynous fashion. Furthermore, failed attempts at an androgynous look are often criticised with ironic reference to the field of labour, and in particular to humble jobs such as an airport security guard or gas engineer. Work is a normal daily activity in the life of virtually every adult person. However, the audience seem to be attached to an ideal world, populated not by ordinary people, but rather by androgynously dressed individuals that are extraordinary, superior and impeccable in terms of both aesthetics and style of life. Such expectations can also be interpreted in terms of key patterns of representation, described in Chapters 4 and 5, which define the figure of the fashionable androgyne through references to distant contexts such as aristocratic history or alien futurity.

This investment in an idealised version of reality as well as in the promises set by the mainstream mediation for those able to conform to the standards of fashionable androgyny can be best understood with reference to Berlant's (2011) concept of cruel optimism, intended as a vicious attachment to a normative form of happiness. Berlant talks about how, in contemporary society, people are constantly bound to their desire for certain objects, material or immaterial, animate or inanimate, believed to be filled with promises of happiness and therefore sought after. Connected to this kind attachment, which it is optimistic in

that it is based upon a wish for a better life, is an intrinsic cruelty. “Cruel optimism” Berlant (2006) argues, “is the condition of maintaining an attachment to a problematic object in advance of its loss” (Berlant 2006: 21). In this sense, the cruelty of such investments can be found in the way in which people's devotion to commonly accepted sources of happiness may paradoxically constitute an obstacle to the achievement of that very happiness they long for. If external forces create particular objects as legitimate sources of happiness then people will invest in them, and maintain their optimistic attachment even after these have been proved useless or even harmful. As Berlant argues, this results in looking for self-realisation in comforting, because normative, pre-set forms of happiness, despite one's inadequacy to fit the dominant dream. Furthermore, desiring what must be desired, ultimately only serves to reproduce the normative social structure.

In view of this discussion, we can notice how problematic an audience investment in the ideal of fashionable androgyny is, when the audience produces it in terms of its remoteness from ordinary people and detachment from everyday life. Understanding this issue in Berlant's terms, the direct interaction between the fashion media and the public leads the latter to optimistically entrust its hopes to a cruel object, like the new androgyny, which is tainted by social exclusion at its core. Mainstream fashion communication professionals invite audiences to play the role of the androgyny trend's aspirational jury, and evaluate the attempts of others at succeeding in androgynous dressing. At the same time, they induce them to perpetuate its claims of aesthetic, and consequently moral, superiority, and appear, thus, to be able to turn the allegedly democratic and affective space of social media engagement into yet another means for the reproduction of taste-based social oppression. With the hope of gaining access to the glamorous and flawless world featured in androgynous representations, members of the public, ranging from readers of more elitist publications to those of inexpensive weeklies, pursue the path indicated by those holding the authority on the matter, adjusting, their expectations to the legitimate mainstream ideal.

The above-described phenomenon of induced judgements and investments, however, should not be taken to imply that, in spite of how social media interaction is formulated through active participation and the expression of sentiment, audiences of the androgyny trend respond to it in passive accordance to its norms. In fact, if spaces of direct audience engagement are too haunted by the ghost of their prospective audience for the emergence of any alternative and oppositional reaction, indirect engagement offers instead more freedom and possibilities for the re-appropriation and modification of mediated contents.

### **Indirect Engagement: Online Procrastination as a Tool for the Mainstream Reconfiguration of the Androgyny Trend**

#### *Social Class and Online Participation*

boyd (2010) argues that social network users, and the networked public in general, participate in common daily practices of copy, alteration, remixing and recontextualisation of digital texts, which result in the blurring of boundaries between those who create content and those who consume it. Where can we find these forms of creative modification?

In spite of the fact that the connection between internet usage and higher socio-economic status is becoming less significant due to the increasing spread of the necessary technical equipment at all levels of society, inquiries about social inequalities and information technologies observe a correlation between more or less advantaged social positions and modalities of internet usage. As it emerges from Zillien and Hargittai's (2009) comparative study of high-status and low-status internet practices, more privileged individuals tend to use the internet to engage in activities that are oriented towards the accrual of information and the enhancement of capital. In this regard, educated, well-off people can be found occupying themselves with, for example,

political information, economic news, stock prices or work-related emails. This kind of internet usage, not surprisingly, is not only characteristic of groups that are privileged in terms of social class and status, but also gender and ethnic background. The accumulation of information and capital through the internet in the contemporary scenario can then be seen as a prerogative of the socially-advantaged white male. According to Kennedy et al. (2003), men usually focus their time spent online on instrumental activities and personal and solitary hobbies, while the only sphere of internet usage in which women's participation exceeds men's can be found in recreational use that focuses on personal interests and involves a sense of sociability and community. Hargittai (2007) concurs and argues that “women are more likely to use [social network sites] than their male counterparts are” (Hargittai 2007: 285). Nevertheless, she talks about how different social network sites are used by populations with different demographics. For example, determining social class on the basis of the educational level of their parents, she illustrates how at the time of the study, young people from a less privileged background were significantly more likely to be users of *Myspace*, as opposed to their peers from a higher position in the social hierarchy, who were instead expected to be found on *Facebook*. Indeed, it should be noted that while *Facebook* was created as a network to connect university students, *Myspace* is a social network known for its emphasis on music, which, as a form of entertainment, is associated with the internet activity of individuals from lower-status backgrounds (Hargittai 2007, 2010). Mentioning Howard, Rainie, and Jones's research (2001), Hargittai (2010) argues that there exists a negative correlation between level of education and “online engagement in such [recreational] activities as browsing just for fun, playing a game, or gambling online” (Hargittai 2010: 95).

Furthermore, several researchers (Hargittai and Walejko 2008, Correa 2010, Schradie 2011, Dutton and Blank 2014) note how a social divide is also present in the context of participation and content creation. According to these studies, people from a higher socio-economic status and a higher level of literacy are found to be more likely to participate in the active creation of online content (e.g. text, music, videos, photos).

Schradie (2011) talks about the existence of a

statistically significant educational gap between college and high school graduates in the likelihood of producing content. For example, bloggers are more than 1.5 times likely to have a college than a high school degree. College educated users are twice as likely to post photos and videos, as opposed to high school users. The probability that a college graduate would write an online rating or a comment to a newsgroup is three times greater than that of a high school graduate. [...] people with a higher income are more likely to create content (Schradie 2011: 158).

Although this body of research focuses on statistical data and does not offer any more in-depth qualitative insight on these processes, it is nevertheless very useful for the identification of spaces of online creativity outside dominant understandings of internet usage. If affluent males are over-represented in the context of solitary content production and lucrative and informative activities, then a reflection on the perspective of less privileged women can be looked for in instances of sociable entertainment based upon the consumption and the secondary use of existing digital material.

#### *Creativity and Semantic Alterations*

In view of the research findings that I have just illustrated, and of reports that compile lists of social networks' demographic data (see for example *Ignite Social Media* 2012), *Tumblr* emerges as a particularly significant case in the observation of the internet activity of Western women of a quite broad age range and medium income. At the same time, in comparison to other major social networks (e.g. *Facebook* or *Twitter*), it exhibits a significant segment of young and low-income representatives. *Tumblr* is a social network site and a microblogging platform founded in 2007 and counting, as of April 2016, more than 132 billion posts ([www.tumblr.com](http://www.tumblr.com) accessed on 21/04/2016). Differently from other social networking websites or blogging platforms, *Tumblr* is not based on the creation and upload of original content; on the contrary, its users follow other blogs and engage in practices of reblogging. *Tumblr* blogs, in this sense, basically consist of archives of videos, gifs, quotes, music, but predominantly images, that users find meaningful enough to reblog. In contrast to actual blogs (i.e. those analysed in Chapter 6), which mimic fashion magazines, and where content is posted for an



In order to provide visual support to my arguments, I have produced collages collecting images from a small selection of the analysed pages (see Figures 7.1, 7.2, 7.3, 7.4). For each *Tumblr* blog, selected for the presence of pictures associated with the androgyny trend, I have tried to pick a sample of pictures. While being adequately representative of the whole archive of each blog in terms of both themes and aesthetics, these are able to illustrate the main patterns emerging from its study.

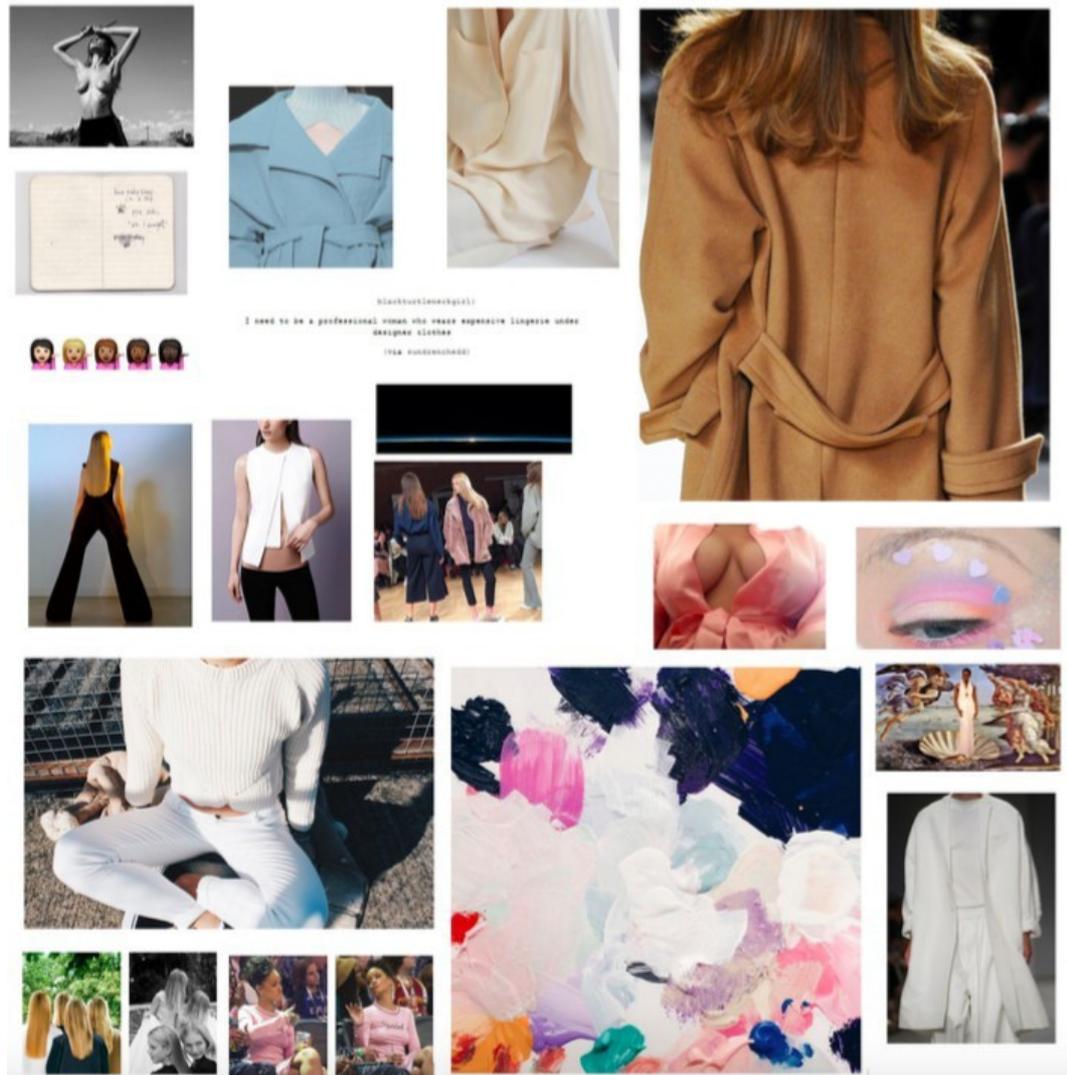


Figure 7.2 *Bad Hearts Club* collage

In several *Tumblr* collections, images of the androgyny trend are reblogged alongside pictures of the naked female body. *A Cultural Boneyard* (Figure 7.1) posts plenty of

pictures that can be easily associated with the androgyny trend. Among these images, which were probably originally obtained from mainstream fashion media outlets (e.g. we see shots taken from ad campaigns, catwalk shows and editorials published in magazines), we find several of the visual themes that, in Chapter 4, have been identified in dominant representations of the new androgyny. There are tall, thin and long-limbed models sporting androgynous coats and suits. There are sportswear-inspired outfits, oversized, structured and minimalist silhouettes, total whites and pristine monochrome pastels. Androgynous shapes are balanced by feminine high heels or exposed legs.

In the representational context of the new androgyny, female sexuality takes the form of a tension between the images of the virginal and angelic respectable woman, and the sophisticated and elegantly sensual femme-fatale, embodying middle-class ideals of femininity and normative expectations of gender. Here, this kind of imagery is put side by side with pictures of high erotic impact. Although most of these are still professional shots of white, slim models, they stand in contrast with the androgyny trend's sexual restraint. Instead of the composed, controlled and disciplined bodies that are usually shown embodying androgyny, the *Tumblr* users' choice of putting androgynous fashion side by side with pictures of undressed women in languid and sensual poses appears as an attempt to reclaim the open expression of female sexuality. Indeed, the focus is mostly placed on breasts and cleavages, which in Chapter 5 have emerged as a signifier of working-class glamour (Tyler and Bennett 2010) and are thereby concealed in representations of androgyny. The contrast also appears clearly from *Tumblr* feeds (e.g. *A Cultural Boneyard*, Figure 7.1, or *Bad Hearts Club*, Figure 7.2) where pictures of breasts and erotica are placed next to portrayals of flat-chested women whose breasts are concealed by high necklines and oversized and structured garments.

The bodies that feature in reblogged pictures differ from those normally associated with representations of the new androgyny also in another way. The imagery characteristic of the new androgyny, which I have identified in Chapter 5 as defined against blackness through a problematic dirt/hygienic cleanness dichotomy, is in fact mixed with one of



faces of the women portrayed, suggests their use in an affective process of shaping of the self, where images become means through which the users are able to negotiate understandings of female bodies and identities in relation to their own. The self is also articulated through quotes and messages intended to be motivating and empowering. For example, alongside visual material, a blogger (Figure 7.1) also shares bits of text through which she defines herself in terms of her intelligence, and ridicules misogyny reblogging a sexist phrase quoted as a “Male proverb”. Others (Figures 7.3 and 7.4) instead use references to popular culture (out-of-context still images from TV shows), everyday life (a screenshot of a text message) and everyday aesthetics (a DIY motivational plaque made with glitter letters and sticker gems), to share snappy comebacks and words of self-affirmation.

In particular, glitter and stickers, often applied to the body, can be very frequently found in feeds, alongside pictures of notebooks, scrapbooks, DIY projects and paint (but not paintings). Although the practice of browsing *Tumblr* from a digital device and reblogging pictures is commonly perceived as passive entertainment, and is commonly seen as a form of procrastination, its content appears instead to be linked to notions of imaginativeness and creativity. Moreover, it is especially significant how instead of conforming to traditional and legitimate forms of aesthetic expression, it recalls instead Willis’ (1990) concept of grounded aesthetics:

The received sense of the ‘aesthetic’ emphasizes the cerebral, abstract or sublimated quality of beauty. At times it seems to verge on the ‘an-aesthetic’ – the suppression of all senses. By contrast we see grounded aesthetics as working through the senses, through sensual heightening, through joy, pleasure and desire, through ‘fun’ and ‘the festive’. (Willis 1990: 23-24),

In this regard, in fact, the new androgyny is contrasted on an aesthetic level. The minimalism of the androgyny trend is here juxtaposed with visual excess, found for example in the kitsch hot pink neon silhouettes of a naked female body and a feminine pout (Figures 7.1 and 7.3), the colourful collages and rudimentary graphics, and the bodies adorned with paint, glitter, stickers and temporary tattoos. Throughout the

chapters, androgynous fashion's taste for a classy restraint has emerged through its association to the superiority of middle-class refinement and defined in contrast to working-class vulgar excess. Here, it is remixed with allusions to a semantically opposed scenario, and so are its aesthetic claims of legitimacy based upon hierarchical notions of beauty.

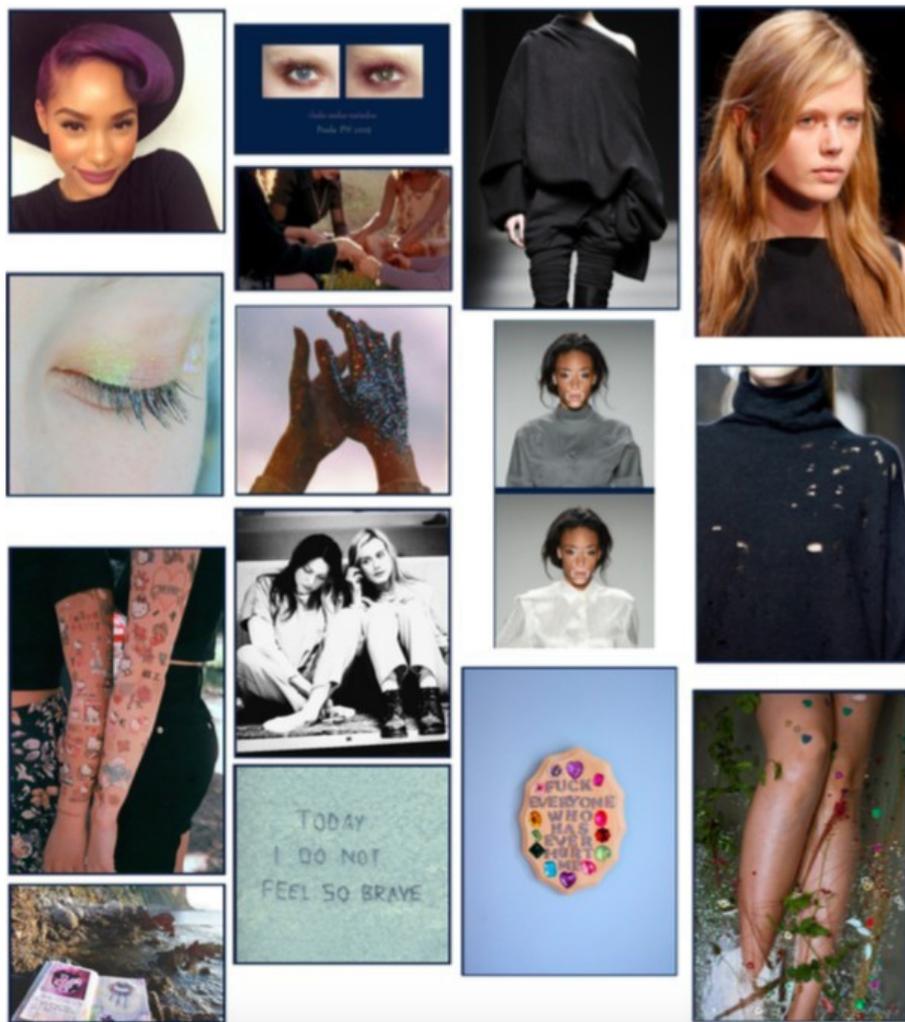


Figure 7.4 *Poison and Butterflies* collage

Moreover, such aesthetic pastiche also reallocates the meaning of excess, making it shift from bad taste to empowerment. For instance, beside opposing the clean and subdued style of the new androgyny, the collages reblogged in *A Cultural Boneyard* (Figure 7.1), and in particular those portraying a female hand with varnished nails holding a handful

of tiny planets, and a giant naked woman against a galaxy background overlooking a scene of swimming pool bathers communicate ideas of feminine power that are in contrast to the new androgyny's proposed empowerment to be achieved through aesthetic minimalism and restraint.

Another related common theme can be found regarding girl power, friendship and sisterhood. A considerable number of *Tumblr* bloggers use the social network to create a community based upon female friendship, placing links in their home pages to the *Tumblr* of their digital, or IRL (in real life) friends, indicated, for instance, as 'BBF' (best friend forever) or 'partner in crime'. We also find popular culture pictures portraying scenes of friendship among women, like a still image of Piper and Alex, friends and on-off lovers from *Orange Is the New Black*, a TV show about friendship, love and rivalry among women in prison, or a screenshot of girls holding hands in a circle from the teenage witch film *The Craft* (Figure 7.4). Even among images representing androgynous fashion, the bloggers often pick those featuring groups of models in more spontaneous poses resembling genuine friends hanging out.

In terms of aesthetics as well, the way in which visual overload creates a contrast with androgynous severity can be linked to the reclaiming of girly style as serious and valid. Traditionally girly colours such as pink and fuchsia, symbols such as tiny stars and hearts, hobbies such as embroidery or scrap-booking, and again, stickers and glitter, are used to remix the meanings of the androgynous style. Along similar lines to what noted by Kearney (2015), who argues that glitter and the 'sparklefication' of girly popular culture hold a potential for the subversion of patriarchy, through its link to creativity and affectivity, it is possible to connect the above-analysed imagery to the re-appropriation of girly culture. Instead of merely constituting silly and frivolous consumption, girly culture can represent an attempt in reclaiming, through everyday creativity, a space for ethnic, sexual, gender and social diversity.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter opened up the discussion about a fundamental dimension of the contemporary phenomenon of androgynous fashion: that of the audiences. Both today's marketing strategies aiming at broadening participation, and audience responses to the messages of fashion intermediaries have been found occurring, in great part, on the internet and social media. A direct consequence of this, I argue, can be found in the prominence of the affective dimension in this kind of interaction, characterised by immediacy and informality.

In order to make sense of the different kinds of experiences in the reception of the new androgyny's mediated material, I categorised different forms of public responses to the androgyny trend, making reference to the audiences' own prospective audience. In this regard, I have identified two key varieties of audience engagement: direct and indirect. In Chapter 6 I noted how, inhabiting an intermediate position between fashion intermediaries and their audiences, bloggers are able to open up spaces for the re-mediation of the androgyny trend. Focusing on the perspective of fashion audiences, and distinguishing between two different types of engagement, this chapter has further underlined how every step away from what are understood as traditional cultural intermediaries (whose representation of androgyny is examined in Chapters 4 and 5), is a step towards more opportunity for resistance, creativity and re-workings of the trend.

In direct forms of interaction, members of the public respond to cultural intermediaries on official social media outlets. The public for whom the audience writes, as a consequence, is constituted by the category of fashion professionals, and, thus, their conduct is regulated with respect to their presence. Instead of asking for the public's opinion in order to find out about its tastes, reception of the trends and real-life perspectives on them, the analysis highlighted how mainstream channels of fashion communication appear to use contemporary means of affective audience engagement to reproduce normative understandings of androgyny. Implicit, but also, more

significantly, explicit invitations to judge become ways in which the audience is induced to internalise the rules of the new androgyny and willingly and aspirationally take up the dual role of juror and censor. Although *Grazia's* feature proved itself a very fertile source of examples due to the way in which it incentivises audience responses, very similar examples have been observed throughout all the fashion conversations on social media.

Moreover, the way in which members of the public are encouraged to invest in the promises of the androgyny trend, which is constructed, even through their own words, precisely in terms of its distance and distinction from the everyday life of ordinary people, has been interpreted as a form of 'cruel optimism', with reference to Berlant's (2011) theory, and an attachment to problematic and normative objects.

Since this kind of audience engagement was found, on the one hand, to attract the comments of the privileged segments of the public, and, on the other, to cruelly impose their point of view on the remaining ones, I have looked elsewhere for manifestations of an alternative perspective. Indirect engagements with representations of androgynous fashion, for example practices of reblogging on *Tumblr*, as a form of entertainment, are outside of privileged circuits of online participation (associated with capital or information enhancing practices, solitary activity and content production) and open up possibilities for the semantic alteration of the androgyny trend. When the new androgyny is largely consumed and circulated independently from the direct action of cultural intermediaries, its meanings are open to re-appropriation and remix. Through this other kind of engagement, without straying away from the mainstream, but instead, still residing within its realms, androgynous aesthetics becomes another element of the visual pastiche through which women make sense of contemporary fashion and the cultural scenario, while also negotiating their own identities along the way. Coherently to what argued by Pat Kirkham and Judy Attfield (1996), who underline how (gendered) objects can sometimes elude control, and be used in different ways from those intended by designers, from this chapter emerges a creative tendency of audiences to propose

new uses for clothes associated with the androgyny trend. This is mainly done with reference to the aesthetic sphere. In this context, androgynous minimalism is reassembled in a creative way, put side by side with the aesthetic excess of popular culture references, kitsch imagery, inspirational quotes and whimsical pictures, and used to communicate ideas that have little to do with the trend's original meaning. The normative new androgyny is transformed, through independent affective audience online participation, into an opportunity to talk about a variety of issues such as ethnic and racial inclusion, feminism, women's representation, and include them into mainstream fashion's agenda. While centuries of theories of art have taught us to reduce the understanding of aesthetics to a few legitimated cases, here aesthetics takes the form of what Willis (1990) calls 'symbolic creativity' and defines, in relation to the concepts of 'common culture' and 'grounded aesthetics' as something that “transforms what is provided and helps to produce specific forms of human identity and capacity” in terms of “who and what 'I am' and could become” (Willis 1990: 11).

## **Chapter 8**

### **Androgyny on the Streets: Street Style and Symbolic Play**

#### **Introduction**

In exploring the development of androgynous fashion in the mainstream cultural landscape, I move across the different sites in which the new androgyny is engaged with, both online and offline. With this final chapter of analysis the discussion shifts away from the textual analysis of understandings of androgynous fashion, towards an ethnographic exploration of real life, rather than online, experiences with it through street-style photography. Even though my research project aims at investigating the social implications and possibilities linked to the particular development of the androgyny trend on the contemporary mainstream fashion scene, focusing on the peculiar manifestations of this phenomenon, at this point I have mostly paid attention to the online dimension of the issue. This online dimension, albeit extremely prominent and characteristic, cannot alone account for the way in which androgynous fashion is experienced in everyday life, connected to but away from the internet. Previous chapters have tackled the issues from the distinctive points of view of different actors in the field of fashion promotion and consumption: the authoritative figures of professionals, the intermediate and emerging category of the blogger, and finally, the wider audience.

While the last chapter has drawn attention to forms of interaction between members of the public and cultural intermediaries, and responses to the androgyny trend specifically in terms of their presence online and on social media, here I return to the concepts that have emerged from such discussion, transferring them to a new dimension.

This further step in my research also entails the employment of a radically different set of methods. Whereas I had been able to conduct my analysis up until now without almost ever leaving my desk, this stage of the research required going out into the field

to collect information. The present chapter, in this sense, is the result of a one-month long fieldwork and methodological experimentation that aims at integrating the existing material while offering a new diverse perspective on the research problem.

The methodological practice used during the fieldwork represents an attempt at combining the traditions behind the methods of interview and ethnography while going beyond both of them at the same time. This aspect of the research started with the selection and observation of women in particular streets of London (see Chapter 3 for more insight), followed by interviews and “hanging out”. I picked women on the street based on what they were wearing, using 'effort' and 'fashionably' as main criteria, and without making distinctions of age, gender, ethnicity, national origin, disability etc. As I have argued in Chapter 3, the use of effort and fashionability as criteria does not make the selection of participants straightforward, and a certain degree of judgement is necessarily involved. While maintaining my sensibility as a researcher, I have let myself be guided by my experience and knowledge in contemporary fashion to identify women who seemed to have an interest in style. In this context, due to my status as both a researcher and a blogger (a role previously defined in terms of its intermediate perspective) my role is a mediatory one, half way between a position of authority/power and the ordinary people. At first I used the means of street style photography, better described in Chapter 3, and my fashion blog to start the conversation, and then introduced my project. I told potential participants about my sociological research on fashion and style, and informed them about its purpose of investigating the relationship between the current trend of androgyny and style-conscious women's way of dressing in everyday life. After securing their agreement to take part in the project, and discussing their preferences about anonymity and expected uses of the collected material, I started hanging out with them and collecting a series of different data. By drawing sketches, collecting a variety of interview data, drawings, photographs and sensory perceptions, and presenting them in an analytically coherent manner, in this chapter, I intend to present a slice of the richness of the ways in which women react to and engage with androgyny in real life, as opposed to the online responses to the trend analysed up until

now.

Given the methodological novelty of this new angle compared to the rest of the study, I will dedicate an initial section to the explanation of how the fieldwork has been carried out and what this means with reference to its place within the broader project.

Continuing the discussion started in Chapter 3, I begin by considering how the instrument of street style photography can be effectively assimilated within the ethnographic investigation of everyday practices of fashion. Here, I also highlight what ethical, professional and critical principles have guided my inquiry, examining the relationship between affectivity in research, visual methods, and the “secondary” sense of smell. The analysis begins with a consideration of the selected women's approaches to androgynous fashion in everyday life. Drawing from the eclectic set of data collected during the period of my fieldwork, I examine and contextualise the participants' relationship with the androgyny trend from the perspectives of emotional, rational and symbolic approaches to the choice and use of clothing. Smell is also a key focus of this chapter: it is analysed in terms of what it signifies for the androgyny trend and in relation to people's understandings of it. I look at the way in which smell and sight, in the form of perfume and style, are linked to one another in relation to contemporary fashion and the succession of trends. More specifically, paying attention to the olfactory component of the androgyny trend, I examine the succession of different trends in perfume, and analyse representations in androgynous perfume advertisements. I also consider the associations that participants make between perfumes, androgyny, femininity, and how these relate to their everyday life. Finally, I concentrate on the concept of comfort which has emerged in a particularly prominent manner, during the fieldwork. Here I reflect on how the idea of comfort is often mentioned in contrast to femininity when talking about androgyny, and ask what this implies with regard to the shaping of androgyny as a fashion trend.

## **Street Photography, Access and Hanging Out**

Before moving on to the analysis of the data collected through the fieldwork, I will now discuss how the research has been conducted and stress why it would be impossible to concentrate on the former without carefully considering the impact of the latter. In fact, in accordance with what Cornwall and Jewkes (1995) have described as the distinctive features of participatory research, by “[a]ffirming that people's own knowledge is valuable, [I] regard people as agents rather than objects: capable of analysing their own situations and designing their own solutions.” (Cornwall and Jewkes 1995: 1670). In other words, by focusing on the process of this part of the study, rather than merely on its findings, throughout my inquiry I have aimed at creating a situation in which participants felt comfortable taking part in the project, sharing their knowledge and shaping both its form and its content. I have done this through the employment of ethnographic methods, which allowed me to immerse myself in the setting of the research and mingle with participants while creating meaningful information together.

It must be noted that I am aware of the fact that due to my role as not only the researcher, but also as blogger and street style photographer, the participating women and I can never have the same status, with regard to the project, and we can never be considered fully peers. My position as a blogger, as I have already briefly discussed in Chapter 3, has thus facilitated the process, but, at the same time, it has also led to challenges and dilemmas.

On the one hand, I have used the means of street style photography to approach people, trying to avoid making them feel uncomfortable or intimidated. As this kind of practice has been quite popular for a few years now (see Rhodes 2008, Rocamora and O'Neill 2008 and Titton 2013), and since the areas of London selected for the research (see Chapter 3 for more insight on the choice of the streets) are all fashionable, vibrant and very populated hang-out places where people go to be among other people, very few of those whom I asked for a picture, during the whole month of fieldwork, refused. Most

were happy to oblige and appeared flattered to be 'style scouted' and knowledgeable about the practice. However, it is important to underline how all participants fall into a somewhat restricted age bracket (i.e. they are all in their 20s and early 30s) due to the fact that older women were the only ones to opt out. Although I have tried to include women of any age in the study, older ones tended not to understand why I would want to take a picture of their outfits for a fashion project or were nervous about the photographs getting published. Even though, as a direct consequence of this, the demographics of the study population has been restricted it also has significant strengths. By focusing on younger women, I concentrate on the particular portion of fashionable women which are more likely to be aware and follow the latest trends, including the androgyny trend, as well as those more likely to engage with fashion on the internet and social media. In fact, it is also plausible that those who are more comfortable having their photograph taken and potentially published are social media users who regularly share their own pictures online. As a result, besides ensuring that all participants felt at ease and as in control as possible throughout the research process, this spontaneous sampling also plausibly brings the sample of this last chapter closer to those of the earlier stages of the project, which centred on relatively young bloggers and social media users.

In order to obviate the problem of creating an appropriate space where participants' voices could be heard at their own comfort and pace, I adopted a flexible approach allowing the people involved to decide between different levels of participation, and adapted the methods to meet their needs and inclinations. Rather than preconceiving a plan for action to be followed step by step, I allowed the procedure to be configured through the encounter with informants and my interaction with them. In particular, after conducting a pilot study to test the methods, I found out that even though the phases where I took pictures, drew illustrations, asked people to draw, and to group different types of smells into different categories seemed to yield satisfying results, when I started asking questions, participants often got uncomfortable and the ethnographic conversation ended up resembling too much a formal interview and losing its feel of

authenticity. I therefore decided to modify my approach to fit the context. By introducing a friend who accompanied me during the fieldwork, I aimed at presenting myself as just another person hanging out in the same places, rather than a probing researcher. Furthermore, instead of asking questions myself, I abandoned the traditional role of the interviewer/interrogator and prepared a set of questions printed on coloured pieces of paper which I placed into a glittered plastic hat for people to pick. Adding this element of playfulness, participants immediately became more comfortable and relaxed, the interviews started to feel more like a group of friends sharing confidences, and, albeit maintaining an inevitably external position, I was able to briefly become part of the group. It still must be noted however, that apart from Hannah, with whom my sister had worked and acted as an intermediary, and who was kind enough to answer at length, all other participants, understandably, still only granted me 10-15 minutes of their time. In view of the above-described practices, I would like to draw attention, here, to how, while using ethnographic methods, this step of the research does not constitute a traditional ethnography, but rather an experimental fieldwork.



Figure 8.1 Me (left) interviewing and showing magazine pictures to Shivie and Lydia

Figure 8.2 Shivie and Lydia drawing on two pages of the same notebook while answering to questions from the plastic hat



Figure 8.3. Me approaching Marlene and Susie at Camden Lock

On the other hand, the choice of using street style photography has proved to be an effective way to initiate contact and collect a diverse set of responses. Quoting Collier and Collier's (1986) work about photography as an instrument in visual anthropology, Pink (1997) discusses how cameras can be used by researchers as 'can-openers', that is, as instruments that enable them to get access to potential participants by stimulating both interest and trust and becoming a point of connection with them. “[P]hotographing can form a way of getting the research off the ground and establishing relationships with informants” (Pink 1997: 73). Pink (1997) also draws attention to the practice of engaging with the visual culture of the community under study talking about how,

an ethnographer might try to produce the kinds of images that are popular in the informants' photographic cultures, or that refer to local photographic conventions but simultaneously conform to the demands of an academic discipline (Pink 1997: 76).

With regard to what I have argued about the spontaneous exclusion of women past their 30s in the sample, two things should be noted: on the one hand the use of this particular kind of photographic practice has in some way prevented a category of potential respondents from taking part in the study. On the other hand, however, thanks to it I have been able to target a particularly relevant segment of the population, and facilitate access to it. By using street style photography as a way of gaining rapid entry into a particular cultural scene, and opening up a dialogue, I have also laid the foundations for a more in-depth ethnographic investigation. After photographing the subjects, and showing them the pictures to create a contact, I have in fact engaged in a participant observation, which draws from the ethnographic tradition combining it with more unusual forms of enquiry, and spent time with the informants, watching, listening, drawing, playing games and asking questions.

Characteristic features of ethnographic methods, such as hanging out with real people in settings that are familiar to them, and having informal conversations with them, enable a serious consideration of meaningful elements that would not have surfaced through a purely textual analysis or traditional interviews. The relaxed atmosphere and the unstructured format have made it possible for people to freely express their emotional and sensuous reactions without the restrictions of a more structured research format and environment. In the wake of Eagleton's (1990) arguments regarding the sensuous dimension of the aesthetics, in which he traces appreciation of beauty as being originally linked to emotion and bodily sensory experience, ethnography emerges thus as a means of reconnecting both the spheres of sensory experience and sentiment to the aesthetics of fashion.

### **Wearing Androgyny (I): Androgynous Fashion in Real Life**

After this premise, which has highlighted and addressed a few methodological and conceptual issues, we can now proceed to an examination of the themes that emerged

from the different aspects of the fieldwork.

A first crucial thing that the interviews confirm is the pervasiveness of androgynous fashion in contemporary culture. Although one of the interviewees asked for clarification when the word 'androgyny' was first mentioned, all of the other participants knew exactly what I was talking about. For instance, even though I was prepared to explain what I meant when enquiring about whether they owned a 'boyfriend blazer', 'boyfriend coat or 'boyfriend jeans', to my surprise it was one of the few questions that never required further clarification or periphrasis. The response was, furthermore, always positive, as all participants confirmed to possess at least one item labelled as 'boyfriend'. Moreover, while I remember having to explain the meaning of androgyny several times when describing my PhD research to postgraduate students in other fields, every single one of the fashion-conscious women selected for my study was already familiar with the concept and its dimensions, and had an opinion about it, which they expressed with mainly positive but sometimes uncertain or even negative references to the mainstream fashion discourse:

Rosa: Do you think fashion is now becoming more androgynous?

[...]

Ela: Yeah, a bit. Yeah they do. I'm never sure what I should think about it. I think it's all right. You cannot mix it all up completely... that doesn't work because women's bodies are different from men's bodies. Yeah...

Rosa: Do you like the idea of androgynous fashion?

Prachlillith: Personally, I do. Most designers, independent designers I buy from make fashion for both women and men so...

[...]

Prachlillith: I always think... I really like the idea of it. And of course sometimes I also like pairing like women's stuff [inaudible] I think androgynous, I like the idea. I kinda like... everybody can wear what they want. I think it's great.

Both Ela and Prachlillith, two friends I interviewed together, declared to own and wear androgynous pieces. When asked about androgyny as an idea, their responses revealed different attitudes towards its role as a mainstream trend. Ela's choice of words shows a certain degree of confusion with the dominant fashion

discourse as she argues she is unsure about what her opinion about androgyny 'should' be. Her perplexity, which she expresses talking about differences between women's bodies and men's bodies, appears to mirror the tension that exists in dominant representations of androgyny between the celebration of gender bending for women as empowering and the obsession with particular gendered body shapes and roles.

Ela's friend, on the other hand, subscribes to the idea that sees androgynous fashion as liberating, but instead of explaining her perspective in terms of the standards set by mainstream fashion, she associates it with independent one, and talks about dressing androgynously as the freedom to wear whatever one wants, rather than adopting a trend, and thereby following a set of rules.

Tutiqka, a fashion student who I spotted sitting on the pavement with two friends at The Old Truman Brewery just off Brick Lane in East London, and later contacted via email for further questions, agrees in seeing fashion, and androgynous fashion in particular, as a means through which one can be free to express their true self and do their own thing.

Tutiqka: just because you're born a certain gender it doesn't mean that you have to conform to the 'uniform' society gives you. Just do whatever you want.

If on the one hand both women recognize androgyny's status as a contemporary trend, on the other, they are able to optimistically see in it the response to wider issues of identity stemming exactly from fashion. Tutiqka describes her own style as androgynous and, when trying to elaborate, she goes back to childhood memories, associating her more masculine style to freer times when she was younger and played with her brothers:

Tutiqka: growing up with only 3 older brothers and no sisters I tended to go for the more masculine clothing as I wanted to be just like them and do the things they did like jumping over fences and playing 40/40 in. As I grew older I realised that I liked feminine garments either through the colour or the fabrication but they clothes would always have a masculine silhouette to

it.

Halberstam (1998) maintains that “[t]omboyism tends to be associated with a “natural” desire for the greater freedom and mobilities enjoyed by boys” (Halberstam 1998: 6) and is commonly seen in a positive light as indicative of a girl's independent personality. He adds that, once adolescence and puberty begin, tomboyism is not tolerated any longer, starts to be frowned upon and becomes a sign of deviance. For Tutiqka then, the androgyny trend becomes a socially-accepted way of extending the period of tomboyish freedom into adult femininity. Kirkham (with Attfield, 1996) argues that although women are more used to appropriating elements of menswear, the adoption of feminine clothing by men normally goes hand in hand with uneasiness and anxiety about effeminacy and loss of power. Accordingly, for Tutiqka, wearing clothing gendered for men in a patriarchal society, while it does not represent a shocking transgression and she implements elements of femininity through, for example, the choice of colour, implicitly carries the possibility of increased liberty and power.

It is also interesting to note how, along the lines of how bloggers contrasted the impersonal and emotionless media representation of mainstream androgyny with affective references to emotions and personal life anecdotes, participants often make sense of the trend by connecting it to feelings aroused by good memories with loved ones. For Tutiqka, masculine clothes evoke images of happily playing with her three brothers, whereas, in the extract below, Hannah's masculine dressing is linked to her love for the masculine figures in her life, namely her dad and her boyfriends:

Hannah: I have this jeans coat, like huge, which is a Levis jacket, which actually is my Dad's and I stole it. I stole it. He used to wear it in the 80s and now he doesn't anymore. Like I remember him wearing this jacket when I was a kid, I mean like five. And I found it in his closet when I went back home and, I mean, he never wears it and I started wearing it and... I really like it and I always wanted a good jean jacket. It's a little massive for me, because my dad is like 1.92cm, he's huge, but I just roll up the sleeves and it's really comfy, like there's something really comforting about it. Um, what was the question?

Hannah remembers always seeing her father wearing a denim jacket and later 'stealing' it from him to wear it herself. Instead of turning to androgynous styles to look edgy and fierce, as fashion magazines invite their readers to do, like Tutiqka, Hannah's positive experience of adopting this look derives from the opportunity to appear less girly than women are normally expected to and from the comfort of both wearing this alternative style, and the feeling associated with the affective bonds that such clothing evokes. Furthermore, instead of wearing masculine, tomboyish or mannish styles, she describes her experience with clothes actually intended for men:

Rosa: Do you feel androgynous wearing [your Levis jacket]?

Hannah: Um, I guess sometimes. Sometimes you feel like a bit, like... less girly.

Rosa: And is it a good feeling?

Hannah: Yeah, I think it is a good feeling! I'd never felt really great about being really girly or like having really really girly clothes. I like a bit of a mix.

Hannah: Plus it's typical right? To steal all your boyfriend's clothes? I mean, I do that. For sure. I'm one of those people. Especially t-shirts. To like sleep in or, just wear.

If on the one hand, in the last chapter, I have noticed how a frivolous and girly aesthetics is reclaimed by *Tumblr* users as valid, and mixed together with the austere style of the new androgyny through the sharing of digital images in the form of an eclectic visual pastiche, on the other hand, when it comes to actually wearing clothes in their everyday life, other fashionable young women appear to seek in androgynous fashion an alternative to the conventional femininity associated with girly styles.

## **Wearing Androgyny (ii) Androgynous Fashion and Business**

Lifestyle emerged as another key issue throughout the research. After showing them the pictures of examples of androgynous fashion taken from the magazines and press releases analysed in Chapter 4, most of the women interviewed agreed that they were more 'business' and did not fit their own everyday style.

Shivie: Would you wear them?

Lydia: I don't know, I feel like it's more, 'officey'? I don't know it's just a blazer but...

Shivie: Yeah, it's quite er... business... woman...

In previous chapters we have seen how bloggers aspirationally embraced (or felt they should embrace) the androgyny trend to attempt to conform, at least aesthetically, to a particular elite, in order to be able to work in their sector in the more or less near future. Since the look prescribes a polished, tailored, refined and wealthy appearance that was difficult to achieve for bloggers from less-privileged backgrounds, they resorted to their creativity and specialised knowledge in the field to look the part, even with a small budget, and increase their chances of success.

Except from a couple of fashion design students, the women from the fieldwork, on the other hand, are not aspiring fashion workers, but consumers. Most of them, in fact, saw the imagery of the androgyny trend as not their style, and not fitting their way of life. Lydia and Shivie for instance feel that the kind of outfits represented in the pictures is not for people like them as it is too 'officey', and describe the person ideally wearing them as a 'business woman'. On the one hand fashion that echoes business wear fuels the discourse about female empowerment intrinsic to the androgyny trend, through the theme of power dressing, popularised during the 1970s and 1980s, and embodied by the assertive modern woman who leaves the home to establish her authority in high-powered job positions in a male-dominated world. Her look, accordingly, is synonymous of “status, wealth

and power” (Arnold 2001: 1). At the same time, however, this look alienates less affluent women who have always needed to work and whose job is not the epitome of status, wealth nor power, and are not expected to look sharp and polished in fashionable and high-end designer clothes. In this regard, talking about lesbian styles, Karaminas (2014) underlines how masculine power dressing for women concerns class and ethnicity as much as it does gender, arguing that the lesbians who are able to adhere to and benefit from power dressing are only those who are white and middle class (Karaminas: 2014: 153).

With similar connotations, Hye Eun, a Korean student in London, describes the androgynous clothes from the pictures as something a strong and highly successful career woman would wear, and further distances herself from the ideal wearer of the androgyny trend comparing her to the fictional characters she sees in Korean drama, and thereby on TV rather than in real life. Even the way in which she says she 'imagines' this particular kind of woman wearing the style implies a further separation from it, and suggests the fact that people like this are not in fact part of her social circle:

Hye Eun: I think, career woman. I think this style... I feel like this style is for career women. Like for example, in Korea drama if there are very strong and in a high position in the company they usually wear something like this. So, yeah. That's why I imagine like, yeah, I imagine very strong and high-position women wear this kind of style. I feel like that.

Rosa: And would you wear something like that?

Hye Eun: Yeah, if I lose weight [laughs]

Rosa: Why?

Hye Eun: Maybe I can be more fashionable, maybe. I think... yeah.

She also adds another point that has already emerged from the analysis of the particular bodies that the trend is portrayed on: the connection of androgyny with slim, toned and exercised bodies. Instead of perceiving them as promoting the acceptance of one's own body regardless of gender expectations, by embracing alternatives to normative femininity, Hye Eun sees in androgynous body imagery a limitation to her own engagement with the trend. Interestingly, she does not feel

incompatible with it because her body is too feminine and not masculine enough, but rather because she is not thin enough. Finally, by arguing she would need to be thinner in order to be more fashionable and able to successfully embody the androgynous look, she equates both androgynous thinness and mainstream androgyny to fashionability. Fashionable androgyny for Hye Eun is something she does not identify with, and something different from her own style, which, she reveals, is not always traditionally feminine, and includes wearing men's shirts.

Hannah describes one of the styles in a pejorative way as “Nautical Hamptons bitch. Who probably watches *Dynasty*.” (Hannah 2015). In accordance to the representational patterns of the new androgyny that emerged from Chapter 4, she identifies it thereby as rich, preppy and exclusionary. However, differently from the other women, she claims she would see herself wearing outfits like those in the pictures. Although she argues that they do not fit her personal style, she states it is actually the kind of style she buys and wears for work:

Hannah: Um, work, work I want to look more put together, tailored, polished. Then maybe add a few things or wear something that has more to do with my personal style or personality, but not go over the top with it.

Rosa: Why is that you want to look more polished and tailored?

Hannah: Um, because these aren't people... The people you deal with at work, the type of work that I, the type of industry that I work in, I'm not really going to be friends with them. It's not like we're going to necessarily see each other in social settings. And you're expected to look put together, you're expected to look presentable, respectable, fashionable, but it's definitely not like, you know, you can wear something really interesting. You don't.

Rosa: So you think your everyday clothes would be perceived as less appropriate?

Hannah: Yeah, I'm thinking more about the type of places that I used to work in. I think I would like to work in a place where things are maybe a bit more interesting and adventurous. But, so far where I've worked in it's been like, it's been very commercial, very capitalist, very... restricted. A lot of business men and business women. And you don't want to, er, you don't want to be perceived as you could be like really crazy or, um, slutty. And you want to be taken seriously. So you kind of tone it down. Unfortunately. It's what happens when you work with people who have a stick up their asses.

Hannah's understanding of the concept of androgynous apparel, which she expresses through the image of herself finding emotional comfort and relief from societal gender expectations by wearing her father's jacket, is diametrically opposite to that of mainstream androgynous fashion. She defines the latter in contrast to her own personal style and fashion personality. While her personal taste is more 'interesting' and 'adventurous', her work style, which coincides with the outfits from the pictures, is described as 'polished', 'tailored', 'put together', 'presentable', 'respectable', 'fashionable', 'commercial', 'capitalist' and 'restricted'. It is meaningful how the very same concepts that Hannah uses to characterise work-appropriate clothing have already been interpreted within the context of the androgyny trend as constituting an example of the reproduction of the cultural superiority of middle-class taste over that of the working class.

Skeggs (2004) argues that “[h]istorically, the categorization of working-class women who were coded as inherently healthy, hardy and robust — often masculinized [...] was made against the frailty of middle-class women.” (Skeggs 2004: 167). With this contemporary trend, androgyny, and thereby a more masculine and less traditionally feminine appearance for women, together with a celebration of women's strength, becomes part of mainstream culture. The distinction from working-class femininity resorts, thus, to an accentuated emphasis on other middle-class values, such as a polished, respectable and controlled appearance and demeanour.

Hannah recognises and accepts this. Like the bloggers who conform to what 'serious' fashion editors are expected to wear, in order to be able to carve themselves a space, and a job, in the industry, Hannah, who at the moment of the interview is seeking employment, agrees her best option is playing by the rules and, when at work and among people who would not normally be in her social circle, sacrificing her personal style. Excess, as I have already noted in previous chapters with references to Halberstam (1998), Bordo (2003) and Skeggs and Wood (2012), is often pathologically

defined in contrast to the composed physicality and sexuality associated with whiteness, femininity and the middle-class. In this sense, Hannah acknowledges the importance of maintaining a sober work persona that is not perceived by others as “crazy” or “slutty”, in order to be taken seriously. Even though she decides to “tone it down” and comply to what she is expected to look like, Hannah still adopts the prescribed androgynous look while also always including a few elements that, mirroring her 'real' self, distinguish her from other androgynously dressed co-workers.

Interestingly, when asked whether they thought the women in the pictures were wearing perfume, all of the participants answered positively. Shivie and Lydia, like Hannah, commented that they looked 'very together' and guessed their scent was something with rose in it, or maybe *Chanel No. 5*.

Shivie: This person as well, I'd probably...

Lydia: I'd say Chanel! [laughs]

Shivie: Yeah! I would too actually! *Chanel No.5* or something.

Lydia: They look very together.

Olfactory perceptions here are very tightly linked to cultural conceptions. As I have just argued, this kind of androgynous clothing needs a stable and reassuring identity in order to be something fit for the middle-class consumer. Roses and *Chanel No. 5* both have connotations of flawless and classic beauty, timelessness, and chic elegance (see Williamson 1978: 25-26 for the iconographic analysis of Chanel No. 5).

As Orwell (1958) explains, elaborating on his infamous statement about how “the lower classes smell” (Orwell 1958: 128), in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, children were taught to believe that people from the working-class had a bad odour. Even though this was obviously linked to the working conditions and hygienic resources of that particular time and socio-economic context, it should be noted how the corresponding and opposite association of middle-class people and perfume still lingers one-hundred years later. The way in which participants see gender neutrality as characterised by natural, and thereby non-perfumy scents, like those with green and fresh accords, (see types of

notes identified as unisex in Table 7.1), but instead describe the models portraying the androgyny trend as definitely wearing perfume, highlights once again how much the new androgyny has to do with class behind its gender-fluid façade.

### **Smelling Contemporary Fashion: Perfume and Style**

In spite of how, within the Western philosophical tradition it has largely been relegated to a status of secondary importance, smell, in the form of perfume, holds a particular relationship with fashion. I have thus turned to smell to collect different responses on the everyday life perceptions of the androgyny trend. While it is certainly true that clothes, as material objects, are predominantly subject to vision and touch (e.g. in the perception of colour, shape, texture, etc.), the appreciation of fashion trends mainly relies on visual and olfactory stimuli. One of the participants in the study, Hannah, was able to identify in the popularity of *Ugg* boots in the mid-2000s an example of a trend with a marked tactile component, as '*Uggs*' are characteristically ugly yet extremely comfortable due to their shapeless body and soft fleece interior. Apart from this somewhat isolated case, trends, which typically primarily concern the field of vision, often find a counterpart in the realm of smell. As a matter of fact, fashionable smells have been around for thousands of years in the form of perfume.

Because of its ineffable nature, and the impossibility of providing a faithful or even adequate representation of a scent through only words and images, the marketing of perfume relies heavily on the evocation of images and messages that make reference to existing moods, atmospheres, imageries, personality traits, cultural attributes and so on. Many, including Williamson (1978) and Berger (2014) have analysed perfume advertisements as linked to the selling of broader myths, promises and ideals. What is of particular interest to us here is the way in which the different associations used to advertise fragrances go hand in hand with the succession of trends in fashion. For example, in the 1970s fashion emphasized an androgynous and natural-looking appearance with 'peasant' styles, floral patterns hand-crafted accessories and free-

flowing hairstyles. Accordingly, perfumes from the 1970s such as *Chanel No. 19* (1971), *Dior Diorella* (1972), *Revlon Charlie* (1973), *Chanel Cristalle* (1974) or *Yves Saint Laurent Rive Gauche* (1974), feature gender-neutral, green, earthy and woody notes like hyacinth, vetiver and oak moss, and, often, green liquid. As 1980s' fashion introduced bright, loud and unapologetic looks for women characterised by eye-catching accessories, popular fragrances were equally-strong with balsamic and warm spicy accords like the yellow-coloured *Giorgio Beverly Hills Giorgio* (1981), *Chanel Coco* (1984) and *Calvin Klein Obsession* (1985). In an analogous manner, scents from the 1990s such as for example, *Calvin Klein Escape* (1991), *Issey Miyake L'Eau d'Issey* (1992), *Calvin Klein CK One* (1994) and *Elizabeth Arden Green Tea* (1999) are neutral fragrances, suitable (and sometimes even explicitly marketed for) both women and men, characterised by fresh, clean, citrusy and aquatic notes, which mirror the appetite for simple, understated and non-gender-specific fashions of those years. Since the 2000s, with the mass spread of the internet, mainstream fashion has become more varied and has witnessed the concomitant popularisation of several different styles. However, in both clothing and perfume the early to mid-2000s brought a wave of celebrity-inspired, pop, feminine styles which were mirrored by the diffusion of pink and fuschia-coloured scents with sweet notes (from raspberry to caramel and cupcake), often associated with particular celebrities. Notable examples can be found in *Jennifer Lopez Glow* (2002), *Anna Sui Dolly Girl* (2003), *Britney Spears Fantasy* (2005), and *Dior Miss Dior Cherie* (2005).

With the emergence of the androgyny trend, as one of the most distinctive features in the fashion of the 2010s, the industry of perfume has predictably followed suit. The connection is immediately evident by looking at advertisements of different perfumes released from 2010 onwards. Popular contemporary scents like *Yves Saint Laurent Elle Shocking* (2010), *Lancome Tresor Midnight Rose* (2011), *Tom Ford Black Orchid* (on the market since 2006 but receiving revived attention in 2014 thanks to a new campaign with tomboy icon Cara Delevingne), *Cartier La Panthere* (2014) and *Jil Sander Simply* (2014), were all marketed coherently with androgynous fashion imagery. While 1990s'

unisex worked in terms of gender neutrality and erased gender through dressing down (e.g. basic jeans and t-shirt was the universal style for both women and men), the promotional material used to advertise these fragrances features mostly very dressed up women and plays on the contrast between masculinity and femininity through customary stereotypical dichotomies. As observed in Chapter 4, these include dark vs. light, active vs. passive, black and white vs. colour (mainly pink or purple), strong vs. weak, wild vs. tame, and so forth. It is along these lines, that, for example, in the advertisement for *Cartier's La Panthere*, Erin Wasson's masculine suit jacket, decisive glare and severe make-up are set against the model's ladylike halter-neck deep-V dress and blow-dried flowing hair. Embodying the same concept, the perfume bottle itself juxtaposes the fierce image of a panther with a refined and luxurious bottle with thick glass, a pale golden finish and a rose-tinted gem stone shape. In an analogous manner, in other advertisements, masculine cuts, dark colours and manly boldness (epitomized for example by the graffiti, or the self assured looks), are contrasted with ad hoc elements like flowers, the use of traditionally feminine colours, the softness of a pose, the display of particular naked body parts, and by embracing of traditional standards of female beauty through make up and hairstyle. The overall conveyed message, exactly like in so many of the advertisements for androgynous clothing, is one of classic yet contemporary, elegant yet audacious and innocent yet sensual femininity.



Table 8.1 Smells and gender associations

A consideration of the fragrances associated with the androgyny trend, also reveals the olfactory characteristics that are presented as complementary to the style. During the fieldwork, to integrate other kinds of data, I asked participants to play a game of associations, indicating each of the proposed olfactory notes as either masculine, feminine or unisex. 'Not familiar' was offered as a fourth option. Everyone agreed that

floral, sweet and creamy are feminine notes, leathery and mossy are masculine and fresh and green are unisex; however, there were a few cases where traditionally feminine accords like 'powdery' and 'fruity', or traditionally masculine ones such as 'spicy' or 'aromatic' were identified as unisex. In spite of a few discrepancies, the results, displayed in Table 8.1, show the way in which people's ideas regarding scents predominantly reflect the conventional allocation reproduced by the mainstream industry of perfume. It must be also noted that, as we will see more in detail in a later section, such associations were made in an abstract manner, matching smells to ideas of gender, rather than in relation to one's own gender and preferences.

Not surprisingly, all of the above mentioned perfumes combine conventionally feminine accords such as sweet, fruity, creamy and flowery with notes of chocolate, gardenia, peony, violet, rose, dried fruits, raspberry and strawberry, and other accords normally associated with masculinity, such as spicy, leathery, mossy, woody and earthy, with notes of oakmoss, patchouli, cedar, leather and vetiver. In opposition to the unisex fragrances that characterised the 1990s and conveyed a gender-neutral tone through the use of non-gender specific citruses and fresh and natural notes, the new androgyny is conveyed by adding an extra edge and allure to feminine compositions through the addition of masculine olfactory notes. In other words, as noted with androgynous fashion, more often than not, instead of producing androgyny within a context of novelty and deviation from convention (as not even references to alien futurity analysed in Chapter 4 and 5 were able to do), androgyny is expressed here through references to notions of classic femininity and classic masculinity, where classic has already been found to acquire meanings of elitist cultural differentiation.

Besides being linked to fashion through the development of trends, smells also have a pivotal significance that emerges from their affective quality:

Smell can evoke strong emotional responses. A scent associated with a good experience can bring a rush of joy. A foul odour or one associated with a bad memory may make us grimace with disgust. Respondents to the survey noted that many of their olfactory likes and dislikes were based on

emotional associations (Classen et al. 1994: 2)

This connection clearly emerges from my interviews too, when, for example one of the respondents described the scent she was wearing as “really dark tuned. Like a lot of dark flowers and emotions” (Prachtlillith 2015), or another talked about how she “need[s] to be in a certain mindset” (Hannah 2015) to wear a specific fragrance, and about how she “wear[s] perfume for self-esteem, for like a boost” (Hannah 2015).

If we assume that the trend of androgyny in fashion, as I have just argued, is mirrored by a parallel trend in the realm of perfume, and, moreover, that the sense of smell is linked at its core to people's emotional and psychological life, then an analysis of respondents' relationship with scents and fragrances can provide interesting insights into the discussion about the affective implications of the new androgyny. Although the branding of perfume essentially follows the same trends, and adopts the same imagery and conceptual structures as mainstream fashion, it is still able to appeal to the intimate sphere of sensuous emotions and open up new angles on the subject.

Classen et al. (1994) point out the difficulties associated with the study of smell that stem from the very abstract nature of smell itself:

Smell is, however, a highly elusive phenomenon. Odours unlike colours; for instance, cannot be named [...] 'It smells like...' we have to say when describing an odour, groping to express our olfactory experiences by means of metaphors. Nor can odours be recorded: there is no effective way of either capturing scents or storing them over time. In the realm of olfaction, we must do with descriptions and recollections. (Classen et al. 1994: 3)

Nevertheless, it is exactly its ineffability that makes odour good to bridge the materiality of clothes, and the capitalist foundations that lie at the basis of the fashion system on the one hand, and abstract socio-cultural concepts like gender, ethnicity, sexuality and class on the other.

A notable sociological tradition exists in fact around the notion of the role of smell

in social interaction. In *The Civilizing Process*, for instance, Elias (2000 [1939]) underlines how 'good manners' regarding odours did not arise in response to hygienic needs, but rather as moral etiquette and as criteria for social ranking in the Middle Ages. The moral function of smell, as well as its role in social distinction are also recognised by Largey and Watson (1972) who, in *The Sociology of Odors* describe the 'moral stigmatization' associated with non-appropriate smells and the use of odours in the signalling of racial and classed group belonging. Pink (2009), in this regard, draws attention to the way in which an ethnographic inquiry that focuses on senses other than vision and hearing can provide much insight on hidden socio-cultural processes of judgement and discrimination.

Smell functions as a social medium employed by social actors towards formulating constructions/judgements of race-d, class-ed and gender-ed others, operating on polemic/categorical constructions (and also, other nuances between polarities) which may involve a process of othering. (Low 2005: 405 quoted by Pink 2009:18)

Rhys-Taylor (2013) further highlights, through an ethnographic study, the connection between sensorial experiences, with a particular focus on smell, and social classifications. Class culture and ethnicity, he argues, are in fact articulated through different sensorial dynamics and sensibilities in the urban environment.

### **Comfort and Spontaneity Versus Femininity in Everyday Life**

Continuing the discussion before the last section, I would like to draw attention to how, despite the fact that respondents all unanimously agreed that the women from the fashion magazines and the press releases did wear perfume, many had a different attitude towards personal habits concerning fragrances:

Val: [reading] “What kind of perfume do you like smelling on other people?”

[laughs] er... like not too... you know the perfume that smells too

[inaudible], I don't like that.

Rosa: So not too strong?

Val: Yeah, not too strong.

Rosa: What about types of perfume? Like fresh or sweet or...

Val: Fresh! I don't like sweet! I don't wear perfume.

Hannah: I don't really like too perfumy scents, like too much... I don't want to smell like if you smell me you're gonna pass out, like too sweet.

Hannah: You know you wear perfume for... The type of thing that I wear perfume for is like a date, or an appointment, or a work meeting, or work, or a dinner party. Something where I need to make an effort. And something where I care about how I'm being perceived. It's not like I wear it everyday.

Hannah: So I think it's sort of a...it's, it's a special thing. I used to wear perfume almost everyday, and I stopped doing that because it's expensive.

Both Val and Hannah claim not to like sweet and perfumy scents with a big sillage (i.e. the ability of a perfume to leave a scented trail lingering in the air). Val states she does not wear perfume while Hannah's fragrance, which I smelled on her, was creamy and slightly citrusy, but doubtlessly not sweet. The composition of contemporary androgynous fragrances, like those mentioned earlier, relies on the juxtaposition of very sweet and feminine notes with masculine ones like leather, spices and moss. This was, however, not what Val and Hannah meant when they expressed their dislike for sweetness. In fact, by favouring fresh, natural and not-sweet fragrances that do not smell too much like perfume (i.e. not "too perfumy") or even the complete absence of perfume, they take a step away from the androgyny trend.

Moreover, for Val and Hannah fragrances do not represent a fundamental step in their daily routine. Hannah, in particular, talks about how it represents a luxury for her, as it is expensive and not something she can easily afford to wear everyday. Exactly like wearing outfits conforming to the aesthetic standards set by the new androgyny only in certain contexts, she sprays herself with perfume only on special occasions when she feels the need to make an effort and on which she is expected to present herself in ways that conform to the androgyny trend, such as sporting a refined and put together look.

Androgyny as an abstract concept is a somewhat different story from the phenomenon of the new androgyny, as it is interpreted in different ways by different people, also depending on the subject-matter of the questions they are asked, and we need thus to be careful in assimilating the two concepts. For example, outside of the context of the trend, androgynous fashion is usually seen as a liberating alternative from traditional expectations regarding gender. Nevertheless, if we consider how both fashionable femininity and the imagery of the new androgyny are often talked about by respondents in terms of urgency to meet expectations and in relation to particular settings which require certain standards, as well as in opposition to personal expression and everyday life, comfort arises as a particularly significant theme. Indeed, the concept of comfort, differently from its absence in the analysis of the promotion of the androgyny trend, emerged extremely frequently throughout the interviews.

While patterns that I have observed in the mediated version of androgyny were focused on the transmission of particular dominant values such as whiteness, wealth, heterosexuality sobriety and self-control, here, androgyny faces the reality and materiality that defines the everyday life of ordinary people. Edgy, android-like, and pristine looks do not fit ordinary life experience. This phenomenon can also be explained with reference to Barthes' (1990[1967]) notions of 'real' and 'represented' clothing. The latter, described for example as the garments portrayed, through words or images, in magazines, he argues, is not burdened by practical functions like protection or adornment, and simply refers to those functions on a semantic level: “[I]t is entirely constituted with a view to signification” and “the being of the written garment resides completely in its meaning” (Barthes 1990 [1967]: 8). That is not to say, however, that only represented clothing can be understood semantically and non-represented one should be analysed in terms of their material purposes, but rather that the meanings of real clothes worn by real people are to be seen as inevitably tied to real-world conditions, and experience.

Describing their personal style, all the women interviewed seemed to define comfort

against (traditional) femininity and, as a consequence, to contrast femininity not with masculinity but with comfort:

Gomar: [reading] “Do you wear clothes to give off a particular idea about yourself?”

Not really, I think more about comfort, but it could depend on where I go... with what kind of people.

Gomar: [reading] “Do you own a boyfriend blazer, boyfriend coat, or boyfriend jeans? What do you like about it? Do you feel androgynous wearing it?”

Yeah, I have some. And...I don't know if I really feel androgynous, it's more like I feel comfortable and yeah.

Ela: I have a pair of boyfriend jeans... um, I think they're comfortable! That's why I like wearing them! [laughs] I don't feel very androgynous wearing them.

Heidi: I have a lot of men's jackets which I wear, I like them because they always have lots of pockets. I'm usually in some sort of jeans and a tee. Practical and comfy, I'm too clumsy for pretty dresses! I love anything made from jersey!

Tutiqka: Easy and comfortable clothing are best to describe my way of being. I'd like to describe myself as a free spirit so I just put on whatever suits my attitude of the day and not being confined by one trend. But my outfits always have to be comfortable.

Susie: [reading] “Is your style traditionally feminine?”

No! [laughs] I love to wear big men's clothes, it's comfortable.

Rosa: And how would you describe your style then?

Susie: Um, I don't know...

Rosa: Like, in two words...

Susie: Um... comfortable and dark.

Can then comfort be equated with androgyny? Since in the previously analysed statements, the androgyny trend itself was discussed in opposition to spontaneity, ease and good feeling, we can now focus on the identification of an alternative kind of androgyny, one that ordinary people recognise themselves in.

### *Old Clothes and sitting on the streets with friends*

After asking people for permission to take their picture for my research and blog, either

my friend Francesca, who assisted me during the fieldwork, or I always told participants that while we photographed them, they could decide to pose in any way they liked, ask for a close up of any detail they might consider meaningful for their outfit, be photographed individually or as a group or pair, or just ‘act natural’ and keep doing what they were doing before we approached them. Pink (1997) argues, “[t]he intentions and objectives of researchers and informants combine in their negotiations to determine the content of the photographs” (Pink 1997: 76). Besides complying to my needs as a researcher (e.g. portraying women in determinate areas, dressed in a stylish way), the composition and the content of the collected pictures also constitute an expression of the participants' intentions and particular point of view. As a result, many of the pictures feature small groups or pairs of people hanging out sitting on the ground. In figures 8.9 and 8.10, for instance, we see four friends, seemingly unaware of the presence of the photographer, talking and smiling to each other. While it is true that they were certainly aware of the fact that they were being photographed, it is also true that they were unconcerned and unbothered by our gaze. All other pictures, even if posed, show a similar degree of spontaneity.



Figure 8.9 Val and Gomar having lunch in Granary Square

Figure 8.10 Shivie and Lydia drinking beer and hanging out in Holland Park

This tension between self-representation and self-expression when posing before a photographer's camera, and the de-humanising imprisonment of the subject within a photograph are well described by Barthes (2006) who narrates the struggle of

maintaining authenticity:

I lend myself to the social game, I pose, I know I am posing, I want you to know that I am posing, but (to square the circle) this additional message must in no way alter the precious essence of my individuality: what I am, apart from any effigy (Barthes 2006: 11-12).



Figure 8.11 Marlena

Figure 8.12 Anonymous

In Lacan's (1998) theory, the gaze has the power of arising in actively looking subjects the awareness of being passive constantly-looked-at objects. Moreover, extremely influential thinkers such as Foucault (1973, 1977) and Mulvey (1989) bring attention to its connection to unequal relations of power, in cases when the gaze of a more powerful part, be it a figure of authority in an institutional context, or a man in a patriarchal society, results in the objectification, devaluation and disempowerment of the other part. In this regard, despite the camera, the recorder, and the questions, thanks to how I presented myself as a peer (i.e. a young woman of similar age, hanging out with a friend in the same places, dressed myself in a creative and stylish but comfortable and not expensive way), my own gaze was accepted as that of an insider, and I was able to observe fashion being worn in an authentic context and an authentic manner. It must be noted that one of the women was actually not comfortable having her picture taken,

however she still insisted I took the picture, provided that I would not show it to her either on the spot or later. Out of respect and sympathy for her position, I decided to crop her face out (Figure 8.12).

Sitting on the streets with friends puts androgynous clothing in a context of easiness and comfort that is in direct contrast with the austere, aseptic, aloof and individualist one that is used in the promotion of the new androgyny. Instead of tailored, spotless-white designer pieces, most of the women wore comfortable second-hand clothes that would not be affected by not acting like a refined lady (e.g. by sitting on a kerb or on the grass):

Rosa: Would you like to tell me something more about what you're wearing right now, then?

Val: I don't know, it's old very old [laughs]

Rosa: so, did you buy them new or where they second-hand as well?

Gomar: Second-hand, most of them. Like me. [laughs]

Gomar: [reading] "Where do you usually get your clothes from?"

Val: Second-hand!

Gomar: Same.

Tutiqka: I love Instagram and I'm always on it checking what's new. Mostly bloggers and everyday people not so much celebrities. Although I'm a student and my funds are low I tend to use the clothes that I have already, the clothes I was wearing in the photo were 3/4 thrifted and the trousers were made by myself.

Ideas about true selves and authenticity emerge here as a distinctive characteristic of street style linked to the choice of particular kinds of clothes. Discussing her own study of street style Woodward (2009) claims:

This perceived authenticity has become a pivotal part of how street style is mythologized, and as such is still present in the current myth of street style, as it offers an antidote to the lack of authenticity that is alleged to characterize the late-modern world (Baudrillard 1994). This association is seen clearly in the interviews carried out for this research project, where young people interviewed were keen to state that they shopped in "alternative" sources, such as second-hand shops, markets, and jumble sales with 78% of the people interviewed stating that they regularly shopped in charity or second-hand shops (Woodward 2004: 88).

Due to both its connection with authenticity, and its widespread popularity, street style in this sense presents itself as a way for ordinary women to experiment with the androgyny trend and mainstream fashion in an accessible way while participating in a well-known and well-accepted cultural practice. On the one hand it allows them to be part of the dominant fashion scene, on the other, instead, it permits them not to renounce to individual self-expression, thanks to the very quality of contemporary street style.

*White, Black and Bright Colours*

Ela: I don't really go with fashion, like, what is trendy. I just do my own thing, which is basically just black [laughs]



Figure 8.13 Ela and Prachtlillith at the Old Truman Brewery

For many of the women interviewed, colour played a significant role in terms of their reaction to androgynous fashion. In the pictures I brought to show them, as well as in the promotional imagery of the trend as whole, pure monochrome white was, without a doubt, the preponderant colour. Pastel colours like soft pink, baby blue or pale yellow came in a close second. The soft hues were also one of the sartorial elements of new androgyny that participants had more doubts about. Pointing at pictures, I asked them

whether they would have worn those clothes in their everyday life:

Ela: In my everyday life? No.

Prachlillith: If it was black?

Ela: If it was black yeah! [laughs]

Prachlillith: [laughs]

Ela: I mean, I like white as well but I don't think I would wear it in my everyday life, no. It's not really my lifestyle, I like it more grungy a bit more... darker. Because you always have to be careful, it gets dirty... [laughs]

Lydia: I don't think I'd wear them.

Shivie: Hmm, I don't know, there are some things that I'd probably experiment with, like some of these coats. Like these two, the pink and the blue. I think they're quite... interesting. Just these two...

Rosa: So the more colourful ones?

Shivie: Yes! [laughs]

Lydia: [laughs] Definitely not the white ones.

Shivie: Obviously.

Shivie: I like pastel colours for shoes. I think I'd like blue, pastel blue shoes, and thing like that. But, um, in clothes I usually go for brighter colours. Like... I'd potentially go for a pastel top but, yeah.

White and pastel colours, which have been identified throughout the analysis as playing a problematic role with respect to race, gender, and class-based discrimination linked to white and pale colours' associations with hygiene, innocence, frailty and wealth, are rejected by participants who favour instead their exact opposites: black and bright colours. If white and pastels evoke ideas of conservatism and stereotypical self-possessed, white, middle-class and feminine women, black and bright colours can be seen as standing instead for rebellion, non-conformity and playful and unapologetic self-expression.

The aesthetic of the drawings Shivie and Lydia's made, when asked to sketch something that symbolised their personal style (Figure 8.14 ), is also distinct from the minimalism of the new androgyny, often epitomised by the colour white. While Shivie's pineapple automatically inspires brighter and more cheerful colours than Lydia's blackhole (this is also reflected in their outfits), both pictures present a radiantly-coloured fantastic re-elaboration of the object they are portraying, where the monotony of monochrome is

broken up by playful non-realistic hues.



Figure 8.14 Shivie and Lydia's drawings

Prachtlillith, who sported an all-black ensemble and a matching dark-tuned perfume, is also the owner of a correspondingly dark *Tumblr* page whose subtitle reads “dark / nsfw / inspirations / fashion / more power to women / stuff / nature” (Prachtlillith 2015). On it she shares phrases such as “men are so afraid of confident girls and its so funny” (Prachtlillith 2015) along with fashion or popular culture images with more or less gloomy undertones. Through a mixture of feminism, fashion imagery, black colour and visual reflections on gender, Prachtlillith's *Tumblr* blog embodies the significance that the simple choice of black rather than white has in terms of the wider implications of the androgyny trend. Placed in contrast with white androgyny, the colour black can also be seen as opposing the kind of conventional, respectably middle-class and heterosexual femininity that is associated with such conception of gender ambiguity.



Figure 8.15 Hannah

Expressing her own opinion on the colour black, Hannah draws attention to the inherent hypocrisy of the androgyny trend:

Hannah: [reading] “Did you know *Selfridges* just opened a gender neutral space?”

I did not. And that's really cool. I think, er, more places should do that. Because... maybe that's why I like black! It's a very gender neutral colour.

Rosa: Hmm.

Hannah: I think it's great that they've opened a gender neutral space, although I think that more places should open, or do lines of clothing as such. Um, because personally I think *Selfridges* is ridiculously expensive. I don't understand how anybody buys anything there. It's like a gender neutral space is catered to bring in more people but it alienates them with their ridiculously overpriced clothing. And it sounds like a desperate attempt.

Hannah pinpoints the reason why she likes black: it is a gender neutral. Although black is seen as escaping gendering and, as it emerged from previous extracts, is fit for every person and every occasion, the new androgyny publicises white. While its promoters strive to present androgynous fashion in terms of the acceptance of all kind of people

within the mainstream, as Hannah underlines, the only major commercial space entirely dedicated to gender-neutral clothes (as of spring 2015) is inside a luxury store for the rich only, like *Selfridges*. While she embraces the colour black for its gender-neutrality, today's dominant androgynous fashion, epitomised by *Selfridges'* gender neutral space, is dismissed for being exclusionary.

### *Dressing for the Occasion*

Hanging out with friends, which is also the moment in which I caught them, is identified by most of the participants as the occasion in which they feel able to dress comfortably without the pressure to adhere to social rules and meet particular expectations. This emerges, for example, from the words of Marlena, Goman, Hye Eun and Hannah:



Figure 8.16 Marlena and Susie in Camden Lock

Marlena: I think that when I'm hanging out I wear like more baggy stuff... and for going out I dress more femininely.

Rosa: And why is that? Is there a reason why you want to dress in a more feminine way?

Marlena: I feel more comfortable going out in a more feminine dress. I also have a baggy jacket or something but, err, yeah.

Gomar: I think I don't wear something because I think I'll dress like that for

this, but I will most think about something I cannot wear like for example, with my family I don't wear this or, I don't know.

Hye Eun: [reading] How do you describe your style? Um. My style... I think my style is casual, I think. Comfortable-casual. So I just wear, um.... very comfortable clothes. But sometimes if I have an important plan or I don't know, in this case I wear something like a casual suit, like semi-casual. But usually I wear just trousers, or leggings, or just a t-shirt or a shirt, yeah. Usually the top is quite big, because I think I'm quite active so I want to wear a bigger size and, yeah.

Rosa: And do you dress in a more or less feminine way depending on different contexts as well?

Hye Eun: Yes, yes. In some occasions I wear more feminine clothes, like skirts or a one-piece, something like that.

Rosa: When do you dress more femininely?

Hye Eun: For example for a wedding or an interview, or maybe if I have a blind date! [laughs]

Hannah: If it's just going to the local bar and grab a drink, jeans and a t-shirt [laughs] and maybe like a cool jacket. And if it's a date, maybe make an effort.

Wearing comfortable clothes is once again contrasted to both femininity and those kinds of occasions that are instead considered the appropriate contexts in which to adopt the new androgynous style. Gomar, Marlana, Hye Eun and Hannah state that even though their personal style is usually casual and relaxed there are certain occasions when they feel the need to make an effort. Making an effort, for them, comes to signify adopting a more feminine look in order to be more easily accepted in certain situations, for example more formal settings such as a wedding or a job interview, when one is supposed to dress conservatively and look neat, or for a date with a man, when heteronormativity demands a distinctly feminine attire for women.

The connection between femininity and dressing for the occasion is also highlighted by Skeggs (1997). She comments on how the working-class women in her study associated 'going out' with 'dressing up' and 'performing femininity': "femininity was often done as part of an 'occasion'" (Skeggs 1997: 106). Although she argues that this was done for themselves and as a form of camaraderie, she also stresses how 'putting on' femininity

was able to make the women feel validated and worthwhile due to it being part of the dominant beauty ideal, in turn linked to middle-class taste. In an analogous manner, the women I interviewed see femininity, and interestingly also a particular kind of androgyny (i.e. the minimalist businesslike mainstream androgyny and not its street reinterpretation), as something that can be constructed ad hoc when the particular occasion demands it:

Hannah: [reading] “What kind of clothes best reflects your way of being?”  
Um... I would say... like... I would divide my clothes in two, like comfortable-practical, I like a lot of natural fabrics, I like a lot of things you can, um, put together. I like mixing and matching a lot. I have a few staples things that you just always have to have, like boots, a good jacket, I really like scarves, hats, I do like hats, t-shirts... But then I like getting really weird crazy things like with sequins, shoulder pads... I absolutely love shoulder pads! Um, yeah.

Rosa: Do you wear them on different occasions?

Hannah: I do. Sometimes I mix and match them a lot and there are times when I'm just really adventurous, when I feel like I'm gonna be with very creative people and I mix all my weird prints and match sequins and I makes me feel... happy. And it's just fun.

The rigidity of the new androgyny and femininity, when connected to the expectations to meet particular standards that are not necessarily a natural part of one's personal and cultural identity, are set by Hannah in opposition to the concept of creativity. Let us think about casual and comfortable androgynous style as a median status between two extremes. At one extreme, which women strive to reach in particular occasions that require it, we find the restriction linked to high-set standards of appropriateness determined by stereotypical femininity and the androgyny trend. At the other extreme we find creativity: the freedom to experiment with loud and eye-catching outfits enabled by the company of like-minded people. In Hannah's conception of dressing creatively we can find again elements of androgyny linked, this time, to kitsch, camp and the parody of extreme genderisation, with sequins signalling over-the-top femininity and shoulder pads accentuating a stereotypically masculine silhouette.

### *Creativity*

At this point, I have argued that not conforming to gender rules commonly comes to signify wearing comfortable outfits, and that the new androgyny and creativity represent two extremes, which depart in different directions from everyday clothing.

Nevertheless, the participants' style can also be seen as deriving from interaction and symbolic play between the two. Creativity is turned into an instrument used by these style-savvy women to make sense of the ubiquitous androgyny trend and translate it into something able to fit their own style and identity.



Figure 8.17 Heidi, Tutiqka and Priya at the Old Truman Brewery

Tutiqka's androgynous outfit (Figure 8.17 left), for example, features a second-hand over-sized denim jacket and jumper, which fit the description of boyfriend-wear as

intended by the women interviewed (i.e. baggy and comfortable men-sized or actual men's clothings bought pre-owned or taken from loved ones), more than they conform to the preppy paradigm set by the mainstream trend. Her trousers were made by herself. If, on the one hand, she can include them in any androgynous outfit inspired by those we see in fashion magazines, on the other she did not buy them from *Ralph Lauren* or similar shops associated to the new androgyny, but rather she created them herself in accordance to her own style. This involves combining the masculine straight-leg cut and the sober black and white with Caribbean influences, a loose fit and a comfortable light fabric.

For Hannah as well as for Tutiqka, creativity represents an alternative way of engaging with the new androgyny trend:

Hannah: [reading] “Do you read fashion magazines? Do you buy them?”  
No. I used to buy *Vogue* and *Vanity Fair* but, actually it's too expensive. If I do... I buy *Vogue*, *Vanity Fair* or I do like... well you can't buy it, but I love getting *Vice*. *Vice* it's a pretty awesome magazine. It's free! And... which magazines do I like? Um, *Dazed and Confused* is pretty cool. And I like drawing over the pictures!

Rosa: Really?

Hannah: Yeah, I sort of like drawing on the women, like giving them masks and stuff. I just feel kind of bad when you buy a magazine and you just leave it there... Like “oh! I can do a collage or something”. I just feel like I've got to do something with it.

She argues that not only are the androgynous clothes portrayed in fashion magazines expensive, but also the magazine themselves are too expensive to be purchased carelessly. Instead of simply being alienated from the trend, and this kind of fashion in general, she feels stimulated to engage with it creatively, making the portrayed outfits more playful by drawing on masks or using the pictures for collages, through a similar practice to that of *Tumblr* bloggers observed in the last chapter.

The dimension of styling offers further examples of the ways in which, through the use of creativity, the new androgyny is taken into account and, to some extent, embraced, but its meanings are symbolically displaced. Androgynous outfits are in fact completed

with little details incongruous with the trend, such as ear, nose and lip piercings (Figures 8.16 and 8.18), dreadlocks (Figure 8.19), colourfully-dyed hair for example in silver (Figure 8.13), orange (Figure 8.20) or rainbow hues (Figure 8.10), mismatched nail polish (as worn by Shivie), or a 1940s retro styling (Figure 8.20).



Figure 8.18 Levikha  
Figure 8.19 Susie's hair detail  
Figure 8.20 Jane



Figure 8.21 Levikha's shoes detail

Finally, the participants' own drawings, where I asked them to depict something that portrayed their style, constitute a powerful account of the richness, imaginativeness and variety of women's responses to, and interpretations of, mainstream fashion. Initially I feared that by asking women to sketch a representation of their style the result would have been stylized and hurriedly-drawn human figures in black and white with stylized clothes that would have inevitably recalled the minimalism of the new androgyny, regardless of the drawer's intentions. On the contrary, the drawings depict neither traditional femininity nor the androgyny trend. We find instead creative, playful and vivid interpretations: a cheeky green bat sticking out its tongue, a dark skull with flowers on its head, a fairytale-like mushroom, bright-coloured geometrical shapes, a black hole with coloured swirls around it and a cheerful multicoloured pineapple (Figure 8.22). Media representations analysed in Chapter 4 and 5, and examples of interaction on social media between audiences and cultural intermediaries (e.g. the case of *Grazia's* "You, the fashion jury, VOTE!" examined in Chapter 7) were found to encourage consumers to embrace the particular aesthetics of the new androgyny and adhere to its standards. While engaging with both mainstream fashion and androgyny, members of the public appear instead to attach to them a new colourful, whimsical and varied aesthetics.



Figure 8.22 Participants' drawings

## Conclusion

The exclusionary character of the new androgyny does not prevent ordinary women outside of its ideal target from engaging positively with mainstream fashion. Instead, elements and themes from the androgyny trend are taken up, re-interpreted, symbolically played with and adapted to fit different identities and an everyday-life

context. As Willis (1990) argues: “We're all cultural producers in some way and of some kind in our everyday lives” (Willis 1990: 128).

With this chapter I have covered the last major dimension of the androgyny trend, and, using experimental and eclectic methods, I analysed it through a focus on different kinds of responses to androgynous fashion. After having examined the characteristics of its mainstream portrayal, the action of different cultural intermediaries, with different levels of influence, as well as the online reactions to the trend of bloggers and members on the audience, this chapter concludes the analysis accounting for the critical and varied dimension represented by real women in real-life contexts of everyday normality. Departing from the world of privilege that is carefully portrayed in the glossy pages of magazines, prescribed by fashion intermediaries, and imitated by aspirational bloggers, I have hung out with ordinary women in the streets of London to understand, together, through visual, olfactory and experimental processes, their relationship with mainstream androgynous fashion.

Quoting Polhemus (1994), Woodward (2009) argues that street style, which used to be seen as innovative and during the 1980s became a way for emerging magazines to replace the inauthenticity of the mainstream with a more ‘real’ alternative, rapidly gained the attention of large magazines such as *Elle* and *Vogue*. The result of this was that street style turned into a theme, interpreted, in mainstream glossies, in the form of professional models wearing idealised street-inspired outfits (Woodward 2009: 88). Although recently street-style magazine features tend to portray once again ordinary people sourced from the street, according to Woodward, the very essence of street style has changed:

In current mainstream fashion magazines, such as *Grazia* and *Elle*, the “street style” pages now in fact do show “ordinary” people plucked off the street, an ordinariness underlined by their inevitable comment that the outfit was sourced from charity shops (or “vintage”), and a high street shop perceived to be “cool,” such as Topshop. There is nothing wacky or out of the ordinary, as the person selected is wearing whatever the current fashion is. The mediated version of street style, present in fashion magazines, has

mutated: the subversive has become the ordinary (Woodward 2009: 88-89).

Rather than documenting a subcultural formation or the opposition to dominant fashion of alternative groups, in this sense the current status of street style has allowed me to investigate the mainstream reactions of ordinary people to a mainstream trend like new androgyny, while opening up questions about its online and offline, mediated and un-mediated authenticity.

Upon finding out that participants shared positive views on the new androgyny's messages of inclusion and liberation, I delved more deeply into their personal experiences with it to find out several points of friction with its mainstream representation. When presented with material examples, and asked to look at them from the perspective of their own everyday life, all women agreed that, albeit fashionable, the androgynous style is not something they would or could normally wear. It was instead associated by them with certain body shapes and the lifestyle of important businesswomen, and deemed only appropriate for formal settings when one is expected to conform to certain standards. Also in terms of olfactory perceptions, androgynous clothes were expected to be worn with perfume, rather than without, and interestingly with classic, luxurious and feminine scents like *Chanel No.5*, instead of perfumes explicitly marketed as androgynous.

Personal style was instead often described in opposition to the new androgyny and with very frequent references to the concept of comfort. Instead of seeing the androgyny trend as an alternative to traditional feminine styles, participants tended to group them together and see them in opposition to comfort, which acquired thus the meaning of a new form of androgyny. Comfortable androgyny was defined against the constraints linked to the lifestyle associated with white, feminine and middle-class women. Contrary to mainstream androgyny, this alternative style, due to shape, fit and colour, is gender-neutral and practical enough to be worn in any situation (e.g. sitting on the ground, as many respondents were photographed doing). Due to the way in which it re-

interprets the new androgyny creatively, while still maintaining some of its themes, it also appeared as able to provide a way for the women interviewed to engage with mainstream fashion and the androgyny trend in their own terms. As Willis (1990) argues:

Elite and 'official' culture can no longer hope to colonize, dominate or contain everyday life because there is already something there which grows from its own resources – a meaning-making and ordinary culture production now full of implications for the rest of society: for politics; for the economy; for education and our sense of ourselves and each other (Willis 1990: 128-129).

## Chapter 9

### Conclusion: Making Sense of the New Androgyny and Assessing its Potential

#### Introduction

Since I started planning the research project that eventually became this thesis, a few years have passed and the fashion scene has naturally evolved. One of my concerns, while first defining the subject matter of this study, was that, while the androgyny trend was unequivocally strong, it might be tied to a short and very specific moment, and, as it often happens with fashion, that it might disappear very quickly, thus reducing the relevance, the significance and the potential impact of my research. However, while I am writing these words, mentions and instances of androgynous fashion have kept proliferating in mainstream culture. Reflecting this general tendency, in March 2015 *Selfridges'* iconic branch in London's Oxford Street launched an agender concept space, which sparked conversations about fashion's androgynous and gender-neutral future in major and niche newspapers and magazines, as well as on blogs and the social media. In April 2016, the British edition of *Elle* released an article entitled "How To Do The New Androgyny". Coherently to what emerged from the analysis of the contemporary representation of androgyny by fashion intermediaries in Chapter 4, and 5, the journalist compares old forms of unflattering androgyny to the refinement, minimalism and feminine edge of the new androgyny (Gwyther 2016). Other examples include a recently published article from the website of *British Vogue* which shows how Kate Moss adopts a boyish style and "borrows from the boys" (Hobbs 2015), and a list of the best fashion blogs compiled by *Grazia*, where the androgynous style and the taste for masculine tailoring of one of the selected bloggers is praised (Farmiloe on *Grazia* 2015). Moreover, judging from all the professional shots, the street style and personal style photography disseminated by cultural intermediaries, from established editors to

rookie bloggers, the minimalist androgynous look that I have addressed many times during this project is still apparently in full vogue. The androgyny trend is alive and kicking. It is actually so ubiquitous that it has become a fashionable buzzword. The risk with buzzwords is that they turn into meaningless terms, simply used for their popularity in a particular context, without any significance. Since the word 'androgyny' is not only fashion jargon, but, as we have seen, is also a very socially and politically-charged concept, it is important to problematise the phenomenon of the new androgyny and consider the other side of it; what are the dangers of separating androgyny from its background, what new meanings are ascribed to it, and what is the potential of its spread in popular culture?

Throughout the chapters, I have carried out an investigation of how, in the decade starting from 2010, androgyny has developed into a prominent trend in Western mainstream fashion. Adopting a critical perspective, I have used a mixture of traditional and experimental methods to explore the particular aesthetics associated with the androgyny trend, as well as to consider how it is configured by the different fashion media, what its presence online entails, and what its relationship with the wider public is. In doing this, I have been especially concerned with questions of social identity and the body. In this regard, I have tried to understand in what ways, during these years of mainstream appeal of androgynous styles, different people have been able to negotiate their identities through them. In particular, I paid attention to the way in which ideas regarding issues of gender, class, sexuality and ethnicity are shaped with reference to this particular trend, through forms of social interaction that happen both on and off the internet.

Chapters 1, 2 and 3 introduced the subject area and defined my approach in tackling it. In Chapter 1, in particular, I underlined the crucial role played by androgynous fashion in the contemporary cultural landscape, and raised questions that problematise its role in society. Androgynous attires have also been defined in terms of their history in Western culture. I stressed how, despite enjoying a few moments of mainstream exposure,

throughout the 20th century androgyny has remained a predominantly marginal matter, thus becoming the symbol of an alternative and deviant aesthetics. This, I argued, has resulted, in different historical moments, in androgyny either being used for its power to shock, or needing to be 'normalised' in order to exist. Finally, I articulated my perspective on the study of fashion, claiming that although early theories used to oversee a variety of crucial social factors, the extensive attention they pay to the relationship between fashion and class can be seen as an important starting point for new research.

In Chapter 2 I further traced the theoretical underpinnings of my research and positioned my study of androgynous fashion in relation to existing theories of gender embodiment and subversion, social aesthetics and class cultures. I argued for a perspective that is able to look at fashion, and more specifically the androgyny trend, as balancing two tensions. On the one hand, there is the construction and the display of gender, which, in relation to androgyny, can only be understood with reference to the sensuous body and bodily experience. On the other hand, instead, we cannot forget about the economic foundation of fashion and its culture, which, in turn, opens up the conversation that sees gendered and cultural identities as classed. In order to bridge this tension, I relied on a notion of aesthetics that perceives the legitimacy of judgments of beauty as an expression of the social structure, and, at the same time, seeks to rediscover its emotional and sensuous side.

Chapter 3 discussed methods and their application. It tried to elaborate the most effective way of conducting a feminist study of a current mainstream fashion trend, in view of the specificities of the contemporary cultural context from which it stems. The approach delineated in Chapter 3 uses a combination of textual and empirical, traditional and experimental methods of research. It underlines the need, for an inquiry that investigates the perspectives of a variety of actors such as different kinds of fashion intermediaries as well as their audience, of elaborating a methodological strategy able to take into account all the issues associated with each particular point of view. Only in

this way, I argued, the new androgyny and its manifestations on the social scene can emerge in all their depth and complexity. I matched different sources of data (i.e. material from fashion magazines and websites, official press releases, advertisements, blog content and comments, interaction on social media, and the street style and aesthetic choices of real people) with the appropriate method that enables the understanding of all its nuances and contextual significance. Semiotics was quite straightforwardly identified as the best instrument for looking at media-produced images to consider their deeper ideological implications. Moreover, I underlined how an analysis of discourses that focuses on speech and power relations is a very useful tool in the investigation of both the bloggers' take on the androgyny trend, and the countless instances of audience's engagement with it. The relationship between researcher, researched, and the knowledge produced was more complicated in the study of androgynous fashion and everyday life, since, at this stage, I found it important to interact with subjects in everyday life and solicit participation. Therefore, in this chapter, I described how, drawing from the traditions of ethnography and street photography, I decided to conduct an experimental fieldwork. It combined traditional and unusual methods (e.g. interviews, street style photography, sorting games and question games, smelling, and drawing) and was shaped through the interaction with participants, rather than having a pre-determined structure.

Chapters 4, 5, 6, 7 and 8, analysed different sides of the androgyny trend, asking what does the new androgyny do, and trying to uncover its deeper social implications when it ceases to be something radical and disruptive and enters the mainstream, in order to assess its role in contemporary culture. Chapter 4 focused on the point of view of established fashion intermediaries, whose work can be found in major fashion publications (e.g. *Vogue*, *Harper's Bazaar* or *Grazia*), their features, and photoshoots. I showed how the dominant portrayal of androgynous style is focused around a series of tropes, the sum of which, behind an apparent message about women's empowerment, produces mainstream androgyny as edgy, a bit rebellious, but still, essentially, as a safe update on traditional white, middle-class, heterosexual femininity. Reflecting on the

themes that emerged from the previous chapter, Chapter 5, brought attention to the specific motif of the androgynous body. Here, I stressed that the kind of body seen as connected with the androgyny trend, and as being fit to successfully embody it, is often represented in terms of cold futuristic images of white cyborgs. Characterised by extreme hygiene, austere elegance and self-cultivation, they have been interpreted as problematically defined in contrast to negative stereotypes associated with the bodies of people from unprivileged backgrounds. On the other hand, the take of bloggers and social media users breaks away from the coldness of this representation and approaches the discussion through a turn to sentiments and emotions and, in this way, establishes a distance from the promoted body standards. While affectivity is brought into the discourse by fashion intermediaries themselves and used to produce the new androgynous body as a moral imperative, at the same time it also used by fashion consumers as a way of making sense of such imagery in relation to their own bodies. Hand in hand with such reflection, goes an exploration of the problematic relationship between the body ideals of androgynous fashion and the limits imposed by them on real people who wear clothes.

Chapter 6 dealt with the point of view of fashion bloggers, who are seen as occupying an intermediate position between fashion professionals and the broader audiences. It investigated the ways in which bloggers re-mediate the androgyny trend, drawing on the contrast between their need for external legitimation and validation, and the potential of their particular medium for offering a more personal and intimate opinion. I argued that, by embracing the trend and adhering to its standards, bloggers are able to access the exclusive world of the fashion media and get their own voices heard on the mainstream scene. I finally highlighted how the contemporary androgyny trend does not exist independently from fashion bloggers' re-mediation of it.

Chapters 7 and 8, finally, examined the reactions of the audiences to androgynous fashion and its portrayal. On the one hand, I have argued that one of the key features of the androgyny trend lies in the crucial role played by its existence on the internet. On

the other hand, nevertheless, it is still important to recognise the materiality of fashion and the mundane use of clothing in everyday life. For this reason I produced two separate chapters to pay adequate attention to these two dimensions. Chapter 7 argues that in cases of direct online audience engagement with the trend (e.g. on official social media channels) members of the public tend to internalise the point of view of intermediaries and, albeit in an affective, rather than objective, manner, to reproduce their messages, as well as to make personal investments in their promises. In forms of indirect engagement (e.g. through independent re-blogging on Tumblr) instead I noticed how audiences engage in practices of re-appropriation and remix, transforming the original messages of mainstream androgyny to include issues that are often silenced in dominant discourses. Through ethnographic and creative visual data collected during experimental fieldwork, Chapter 8 demonstrated how, despite the exclusive nature of the androgyny trend, in the normal setting of everyday life, the set of women in the sample has proven to be able to engage with it in a positive way and in their own terms. Through a combination of creativity, symbolic play and reflection of the practicalities of the life of ordinary people, they showed the interesting potential of everyday applications of mainstream androgynous fashion.

Acting as a conclusion, the present chapter will highlight the main themes that emerged from my research, and reflect on their significance in relation to the whole project, as well as to wider current socio-cultural issues and debates. I will start with a consideration of contemporary fashion and popular culture and argue, that, while the androgyny trend reflects a new widespread interest for gender ambiguity, its mainstream manifestation is actually a safe version of it, stripped of any radical message. I also warn against an approach that tries to establish the positive or negative nature of the new androgyny, and bring attention, instead, to the tensions that characterise it. I argue that instead of looking at the phenomenon under study as either a good or bad object, it is necessary to focus on the different dynamics that underpin it and its broader potential. The focus is brought to how the development of the new androgyny in the mainstream is intertwined with different processes of negotiation of social roles and identities.

Instead of simply talking about the reception of the trend, I highlight the ways in which particular actors (e.g. fashion bloggers or ordinary people) make use of androgynous styles, and their implications. An important claim I make is that the androgyny trend is transformed through such interactions, outside of which it cannot be understood. I then discuss in what sense my analysis revealed how it is not possible to explain the phenomenon of the new androgyny with reference to existing theories of fashion distribution, and why is instead necessary to elaborate a new model. Finally, I consider the potential of androgynous fashion and claim that, in light of its politicised dimension, the transformations in the aesthetic sphere of the new androgyny represent a crucial focus in the critical evaluation of the whole phenomenon.

### **Towards a More Androgynous Future?**

In the fashion world, styles and collections are often described with reference to the ideal woman who perfectly embodies them. Without breaking from this convention, the woman of the new androgyny is described as a feminine woman, strong, independent and elegant in a classical way. She is attractive from a traditional male point of view; there is no doubt about her feminine gender and heterosexuality; and if there is a hint of ambiguity it is for aesthetic reasons. Images and references to the trend, found in magazines and promotional material, often make implicit allusion to the 'androgynous' woman's male companion, who is often also the source of her masculine clothes. The body of the ideal woman is traditionally feminine, model-like, and conforming so much to the unrealistic beauty standards often promoted by the fashion industry, that bloggers and ordinary women from the audience often feel insecure, not thin enough, not pretty enough, and paradoxically, not feminine enough to be able to successfully embody the new androgyny. If on the one hand I noticed how the androgyny trend generally appears to be seen in a positive light, and its messages about breaking free from the constraints of an old-fashioned traditional femininity are embraced, on the other hand, I criticised the new androgyny for being too similar to what it supposedly tries to move away from.

The accent in fact is seen as being placed not on the neutralisation of gender, as for example happened in the 1990s with the unisex trend, but rather on the careful balancing of the quintessentially feminine and the quintessentially masculine. This is evident throughout a set of different spheres from perfume, to make-up and styling, to actual clothes, where, for example, a masculine haircut or hairstyle is balanced by a sensual red lipstick; cologne-like perfume notes by floral-fruity ones; and a tailored trouser suit by a pink tint. According to the new androgyny, a high degree of normative and heterosexual femininity is required in order for the consumer to succeed in incorporating masculine elements and embody the trend in the appropriate way.

Following my perplexity regarding these features of the trend, one of the questions I raised when I started this project was whether it was possible to regard this ubiquitous trend of androgynous fashion as reflecting a more widespread acknowledgement of identities that stray from the dominant norm, and whether it could be seen as symptomatic of traditional gender roles becoming increasingly obsolete in Western society. The analysis of fashion intermediaries' portrayal of the androgyny trend, conducted through the use of semiotic and discourse analysis, confirmed the initial perplexity that led me to formulate the research problem in the first place: the androgyny trend is not ultimately concerned with gender ambiguity, alternative gender identities, or even with androgyny itself. Androgynous fashion emerged in fact as being quite straightforwardly about femininity. While Kirkham and Attfield (1996) argue that “relationships between objects and gender are formed and take place in ways that are so accepted as 'normal' as to become 'invisible’” (Kirkham and Attfield 1996: 4) with the new androgyny, the strictly gendered quality of clothes is paradoxically stressed and emphasised, as is the feminine character of womenswear. Already from the semiotic analysis of media-produced images, in Chapter 4 I exposed how, in mainstream fashion, androgyny is rendered innocuous through its juxtaposition to traditional tropes of femininity, that present the androgynous woman as, for instance, a respectable wife or a red-lipped seductress. Instead of constituting a hidden meaning, furthermore, conventional femininity is constantly reinstated as a necessary component of the new

androgyny. It is stressed by fashion intermediaries who instruct on the appropriate balance of the feminine and the masculine, and it becomes a matter of worry and self-consciousness for bloggers and ordinary women who find themselves compelled to conform to a very socially-specific and old-fashioned kind of femininity in the name of an apparently progressive trend.

Crane (2000) argues:

Tracing changes in the nature of fashion and in the criteria for clothing choices is one way of understanding the differences between the type of society that has been gradually disappearing and the one that is slowly emerging (Crane 2000: 236).

According to Crane (2000), an analysis of fashion clothing can reveal the dominant values of the society it develops in, in the particular period in which it emerges. Furthermore, she adds, by looking at the ways in which different groups of people relate to clothing and make choices regarding their use and consumption, it is possible to grab a glimpse of how social groups make sense of their own identities, and position themselves in relation to the hegemony of such values and ideas. Changes in fashion, like the emergence of a new trend, in other words have to be interpreted as reflecting a precise cultural, political and social context. The trend of the new androgyny, in this sense, can be seen as mirroring, stemming from, but also profoundly influencing the specific moment in which we are living.

Audiences are today increasingly open about its interest in gender and sexual identities that deviate from the female/male binary and heteronormativity. Examples are everywhere in popular culture: the British top model Cara Delevingne, one of the most popular faces on the contemporary fashion scenario and often associated with the androgyny trend, has recently openly discussed her sexuality during an interview with *Vogue* and is now in a relationship with Grammy-winning musician Annie Clark. World-famous pop singer Miley Cyrus

has declared herself pansexual and genderfluid, while another genderfluid celebrity, Ruby Rose, was introduced as a genderfluid character in the third series of the successful LGBT-friendly TV show *Orange is the New Black*, leading to a wave of female fans questioning their own sexuality on social media in a more or less joking way. As a matter of fact, popular news and entertainment website *Buzzfeed* published two articles focusing on the many straight women who, on *Twitter* and *Tumblr*, announced they were turning gay for Ruby Rose (Pritchard 2015 and Karlan 2015 on *Buzzfeed*). Moreover, a transgender character in the show, Sophia, played by transgender actress Laverne Cox, together with Caitlyn Jenner's post-transition *Vanity Fair* cover shot have become symbols of the new visibility of transgender celebrities. In spite of the many controversies that indeed emerged, the general tendency is quite clearly towards a greater mainstream acceptance of gender roles and sexual identities that do not conform to the norm. Becoming a hot topic on magazines and social media, the discussion about these kinds of celebrities who appear to defy the normative standards of dominant society is generally positive and celebratory of the women's strength, individuality and freshness. It should be noted at this point that the concept of androgyny, so popular in the fashion field, is now almost exclusively used in aesthetic terms to talk about a particular look or style, rather than an identity. While in the Western classical world, in ancient Greek and Roman culture, the androgyne first emerged as an intermediate category between the male and the female, today the term, even as an adjective, is rarely used in discussions of sexual and gender identity. Contemporary interest in alternative gender roles and sexualities in popular culture, in fact, as we have just seen, is directed towards concepts like genderfluidity, transgenderism or pansexuality.

In this kind of context, androgynous fashion can be seen to open a window on key issues in contemporary popular culture, transposing them into the sphere of aesthetics. The fashion industry was able to recognise the opportunity to participate in the shaping of the cultural scene and make good use of the situation

turning androgyny into a marketing device employed to open up this new potential market. As a new interest started to spark around gender and sexual ambiguity, seen as edgy, cool and up-to-date, the fashion industry kept pace and introduced the androgynous look. Clothing promoted through catchy phrases such as “boy-meets-girl”, “borrowed-from-the-boys”, “tomboy chic” etc. contributed this way in spreading the craze.

The new androgyny is thus a particular aesthetics that draws from a current widespread cultural tendency. But what are the characteristics of the kind of androgyny that is featured in mainstream fashion? Through the analysis of images and articles produced by professional fashion intermediaries, and the comments that bloggers and the audiences make about them, I have identified in the new androgyny a tendency to themes that not only represent a watered-down version of what androgyny can mean, but actually constitute it as a means for the exclusion of alternative identities, rather than for their re-evaluation. Female empowerment is a widespread discourse in the promotion of the new androgyny, however, I highlighted how it does not go beyond the celebration of the power, independence and audacity which only privileged groups of women can pride themselves on. Instead of exposing, through gender ambiguity, the artificiality of conventional ideals about gender, following Butler's (1993) theories, I found in fact the new androgyny to reiterate dominant narratives of gender and, thus, to performatively reproduce the gender binary. Coherently to what I have underlined so far, under the façade of mainstream androgyny, lies a representation of women that is actually very normative and unthreatening.

Moreover, as it emerged from my analysis, but also as bloggers and members of the audience themselves expressed, the androgyny trend also possesses a marked exclusionary quality, especially with regard to matters of class and ethnicity. Another contrast exists in fact between consumers' desire to adopt the latest hot trend, and to welcome it for proposing an alternative to conventional gender roles,

perceived as too strict for the contemporary context, and, on the contrary, the inability, whether physical or intellectual, acknowledged or still unconscious, to do so. A central role in this regard is played by the colour white. By investing the colour white with such importance, the androgyny trend produces fashionability as the triumph of hygienic spotless white, austere elegance and personal restraint. In view of how Skeggs (1997) argues that femininity itself has been historically defined against the characteristics associated with working-class women and blackness, the androgyny trend's focus on traditional femininity also translates as exclusion of the unprivileged. The above-mentioned themes, used in the portrayal of the fashionable androgyne, in fact are in a dangerous binary opposition to concepts like dirtiness, vulgarity and unruliness, often problematically connected to the devaluation of the non-male and the non-white. In an analogous manner, minimalism, clean shapes, understated elegance, and references to either refined and aristocratic figures from the past, or superior and aseptic cyborgs from the future only serve to further signal the new androgyny's exclusionary character. In previous instances of popularity of androgyny in Western culture, as we have briefly seen in Chapter 1, gender ambiguity was marketed in terms of the concept of newness, expressed in relation to points of friction and difference. In this sense for example, in the music field during the 1980s and 1990s black, working class and/or lesbian women like Tracy Chapman, Grace Jones and Sinead O'Connor, came to gain an iconic status thanks to their androgynous style and identities that were atypical with regard to the dominant cultural scene. In the context of the new androgyny, on the other hand, newness and edgyness are still conveyed through the idea of difference, but difference is now created by taking the normative ideals of white middle-class femininity to a non-human extreme.

The new androgyny's refined minimalism and de-sexualised femininity are also the focus of many of the more recent examples of the representation of the trend (e.g. Weir 2015 in *Vogue* and Rochell 2015 in *InStyle*). In such cases, the term “androgynous” is increasingly accompanied by new ones

such as “gender-neutral” and “agender”. Introducing these words, to describe what remains essentially the same look, only re-interpreted each season with new clothes, the fashion industry on the one hand keeps responding to the widespread interest in gender ambiguity, and reproduces its mainstream edginess by constantly reinventing its language, rather than radicalising its contents. On the other hand, maintaining the same themes and visual characteristics, it breathes new life into the new androgyny's problematic connection to purity and a minimalist aesthetics.

The sum of these qualities of the new androgyny is also perceived by bloggers as an instrument used by established fashion intermediaries to distinguish themselves from aspirational 'wannabes' trying to pass (Chapter 6), and is seen by members of the audience as creating distance between famous, successful and/or accomplished individuals, and ordinary people (Chapter 7). In this sense, the trend was also interpreted as unfit for normal everyday life and precluding creativity and spontaneity (Chapter 8). While, as I discussed in my theoretical framework in Chapter 2, the alleged death of class has now become a popular topic of discussion, and several fashion theorists (see for example Crane 2000 and Kawamura 2005) see in class fashion a matter of the past, the androgyny trend emerged as being greatly concerned with it, and even constituted through it. Under the pretence of talking about gender ambiguity, and due to the very danger of dealing with gender ambiguity in a mainstream setting, the new androgyny finds instead some of its key distinctive features, drawing from characteristic motifs of middle-class cultural taste.

Can we then argue that mainstream androgyny is a negative form of androgyny fabricated for marketing purposes and posing a threat to more authentic and controversial forms of good androgyny? My research has examined how the appropriation of an aesthetics of gender ambiguity can be compared to the cultural appropriation of ethnically-specific and racially-charged objects (Puwar 2002, 2003): with the androgyny trend, pieces of clothing that were previously regarded as unattractive and outrageous, and have been used, historically, to discriminate against particular groups, have now become fashionable and are adopted by the same privileged groups who used to treat them with hostility. As briefly shown in Chapter 1, after becoming symbols of sexual inversion at the

end of the 1920s, masculine clothes for women turned into objects of homophobic hate. Although in the entertainment industry, androgynous style has often been used to attract interest, thanks precisely to its ambiguous character, before its recent popularity, androgyny was never fully normalised. Currently, on the other hand, as Chapter 4 highlights, androgynous pieces figure in mainstream fashion magazines as wardrobe staples for white, affluent, straight women. In view of the analysis in Chapter 4, it is indeed the case that, by erasing the history of oppression and discrimination that particular groups of people have experienced because of androgyny itself, its entry into the mainstream puts at risk its disruptive power for challenging the norm. Domesticated and toned-down versions of what used to be a controversial style, like the androgynous look, become a pantomime of rebellion and innovation, thus losing their potential for threatening the status quo. As Barnard (1996) describes, when dangerous fashion is incorporated into dominant society, “what was once a challenge to the dominant system is appropriated or rendered harmless” (Barnard 1996: 132). He continues by arguing that “[t]his is achieved by the dominant system adopting or adapting the values represented by the challenge” (ibid.). The social exclusion of those subordinate groups from which such elements are borrowed is not erased with their assimilation, but rather, it keeps coexisting with it. Appropriation, in fact, always maintains the normative ideals of dominant society, which are simply attached to new symbols stripped of much of their own original context.

While such processes are occurring with the new androgyny trend, nevertheless, throughout my analysis I have been able to notice how the trajectory of androgynous fashion is much more complex and nuanced than what is suggested by simply looking at patterns of appropriation. Although they represent a highly significant side of the issue, it is also necessary to examine the role and impact of different everyday life experiences with the androgyny trend.

### **Androgyny in the Contemporary Fashion Scene: Self-Presentation and Negotiations of Identity**

Beside examining the values attached by fashion intermediaries to the new androgyny, and interpreting them through the contrast with the new audience's perspective, my analysis has also focused on how the androgyny trend is actively employed in processes of negotiation of identity through fashion. I have asked, what spaces does fashionable androgyny occupy in the everyday emotional and practical life of its consumers?

Using a feminist Deleuzian framework, Coleman (2009) maintains that the relationship between bodies and images should be understood “outside of a framework of cause/effect, subject/object” (Coleman 2009: 3), since instead of constituting independent entities, they become, and exist, through their relation with each other. Similarly, instead of focusing on exposing the positive or negative effect of the phenomenon under study (in previous paragraphs I underlined how dichotomies like good-bad and right-wrong are not easily applicable to a subject with so much ambiguity and internal tension like the new androgyny), I investigated the ways in which androgynous styles enable or prevent certain trajectories of identity and affective orientations, but also how the trend itself evolves through people's negotiations with it.

In other words, this thesis aimed to understand how the relationship between the development of the androgyny trend and the people who interact with it are mutually affected by one another and ultimately only exist in the context of such relationship.

As both fashion and gender-ambiguity are first and foremost something that is displayed on the human body, a crucial aspect that emerged from different discussions found on blogs, comments and social media, is that of bodily negotiations of androgyny. The theme of the body was so prominent that, while recurring throughout the thesis, it ended up deserving a whole chapter for itself (Chapter 5). In contrast to the way in which the androgyny trend, as we have seen, is usually promoted as a way for contemporary and independent women to express themselves beyond traditional femininity, and thereby in terms of self-expression and self-affirmation outside of restrictive stereotypes, it appeared instead, from the beginning, as a repressive force. The kind of body associated with the new androgyny is a highly cultivated one, lean and toned, without a hint of fat, and not exceedingly muscular, for the sake of retaining a distinctively feminine silhouette. Such strict ideals are perceived as standards to be met in order to be able to embody the trend and be fashionable, and, through fashionability, also to explore the culturally-prominent concept of androgyny in a safe mainstream context.

In spite of how the body linked to the new androgyny is indeed recognised by consumers for being unrealistic and offering a narrow representation of the reality of women's bodies, it is still widely regarded as an object of desire. Fashion consumers' narratives around it have been found to focus, in an affective manner, on personal attempts, failures and deficiencies in embodying the trend. Trying to acquire the image of the fashionable androgyne, the women in the study, whether popular or small-scale bloggers or members of the wider public, are confronted by their own body limits and self-consciousness about them, and thus their possibilities of embodiment are restricted. Nevertheless, in part thanks to the fact that the concept of transformation plays an important part in androgynous fashion, consumers still allow themselves to be affected by the trend and engage with it in positive rather than simply negative ways. For

example, on two separate occasions and in two very different contexts, fashion blogger Tiffany (Chapter 6) and fieldwork participant Hye Eun (Chapter 8), two non-white women with body shapes different from what is prescribed by the new androgyny, were able to play with androgynous clothes by mediating the trend through the concept of comfort.

Bloggers' negotiations with the new androgyny were found to follow their own distinctive rules, as well as to constitute a very significant side of the development of the trend itself. In the particular context of the blogosphere, in Chapter 6 I have noticed how the trend of androgyny represents an important arena for debates over questions of value, legitimation and professional authority, which constitute a key point of friction also identified for example by Rocamora (2011). Perfectly embodied by fashion professionals such as magazine editors, minimalist androgynous looks are perceived by independent fashion bloggers, discriminated within the fashion industry for their lack of expertise, as marking the distinction between fashion insiders and outsiders. In Chapter 6, I showed how, for instance, for Susie Lau from *Style Bubble*, an eccentric and eye-catching style became a way of displaying pride for her outsider status, while Ella Catliff, blogger of *La Petite Anglaise* used a minimalist and androgynous outfit to pass as a fellow insider in view of a meeting with an important brand's creative director. For this reason, in a more or less conscious manner, androgyny is thus often accepted, embraced, and adopted by bloggers as a tool. It allows them to gain recognition, participate as legitimate players in the fashion game, while re-mediating the androgyny trend through emotions, friendliness and creativity.

I have interpreted this phenomenon in terms of a small-scale manifestation of the conception of aesthetics, outlined in Chapter 2 through a discussion of Eagleton's work (1990). Turning to a definition of aesthetics of this kind is particularly illuminating when discussing fashion, as it allows me to consider visual entities both in terms of the sensuous appreciation of their beauty and their political and ideological role. On the one hand, the aesthetics of androgyny represents an instrument in the hands of the powerful

for the reproduction of their advantage, made possible by the superiority that their taste is able to acquire thanks to their own position of privilege. On the other hand, however, we cannot forget the sensuous and affective dimension that is integral to the very idea of aesthetics. It is exactly through appeal to this emotional side that bloggers are able to get around such aestheticised conflict and carve themselves a space for the re-mediation of the trend.

The already non-linear and co-dependent relationship between androgynous fashion and bloggers is further complicated by how the latter appears to use practices such as exchanging a particular look for validation, in order to increase their own popularity and be able to 'brag'. As authenticity and genuine and unrestricted self-expression are among the alleged features of fashionable androgyny that mostly appeal to the wider audience, this kind of behaviour is generally perceived by blog readers as a form of snobbery and betrayal.

On the contrary, when dealing with the new androgyny outside of fashion bloggers' particular re-mediation, the wider public primarily makes sense of it by investing in its promises, a phenomenon that I interpreted as an example of what has been described by Berlant (2011) as cruel optimism. Due in part to the widespread use of social media and the general ubiquity of the digital on the contemporary fashion scenario, discussions about the latest trends are increasingly characterised by affect, immediacy and informality, both online and offline. We have seen how fashion, but also the new androgyny with its severe-sounding name, are not regarded as something distant and inaccessible, and a prerogative of fashionistas, but rather as a familiar matter. Commenting on images, models and style icons are in fact addressed in a colloquial manner, using their first names, or nicknames, and clothes are discussed with confidence and personal insight. This often translates into emotional investments in the trend. Fashion consumers who engage with androgyny online in their everyday life are connected to it on an emotional and personal level, which brings them to commit to it. A problematic consequence of this is represented by how members of the audience,

feeling affectively involved in the unfolding of the trend, automatically and indiscriminately adopt the point of view of intermediaries, reproduce the particular taste associated with the new androgyny as their own, and start perceiving adherence to its aesthetics as a higher moral duty. Failure or inability to do so, as expressed especially in Chapters 5 and 7, is interpreted as inadequacy and a moral deficiency.

Hand in hand with such interpretation of fashionable androgyny as a requirement, goes the optimistic attachment to its themes and objects, regardless of their elusiveness. In the contemporary digital age, the reach of fashion intermediaries is able to mingle with popular culture and everyday life in such a pervasive manner, and with such affective appeal, that members of the audience internalise their positions, contributing to the cultural and symbolic legitimation of those in power, as well as investing in ideals that find in the detachment from ordinary people their very core. It should be noted, however, that the issue is complex and multifaceted, and, at the same time, consumers also resist and re-appropriate dominant ideas of what the new androgyny involves. In this sense, my study has underlined the threats that arise when, talking about something as innocent as clothes, fashion intermediaries are able to encompass new powerful levels of engagement, in particular, in the case of a trend such as that of androgyny, where social exclusion hides behind an illusory celebration of diversity.

Finally, this thesis has also aimed at examining forms of negotiation between androgyny and its public that are positive, active, and productive, and escape traditional paradigms of representation and consumption. The investigation of women's interaction with androgynous fashion revealed both online and real-life practices of symbolic play and semantic alterations of the trend's meanings. Instead of acting as passive consumers and merely reacting to representation as spectators, and beside, as we have just seen, acknowledging the aesthetic legitimacy of the new androgyny, I showed how women engage with it creatively and transpose its themes in order to adapt them to contexts of popular 'low' culture and everyday life.

In Chapter 2, I opposed the views of Adorno (2001) and the Frankfurt school, and problematised the conception of popular culture being aesthetically valueless. Instead, with reference to Willis' (1996) concept of 'symbolic creativity', I argued that popular culture, and especially mainstream, mass-produced, fashion, represents a fertile ground for the elaboration of new forms of aesthetics able to pose a challenge to dominant culture. In this regard, I noted how the women that engage with the androgyny trend do not dismiss it for being oppressive, and neither do they simply invest in its promises in a straightforward manner. Instead, they remix the contents of the new androgyny and reinterpret it, subverting its themes without, however, invalidating the whole trend. Minimalism and understated elegance are juxtaposed with pastiche and visual excess; austerity confronted with the open expression of female sexuality; spotless white is replaced by entirely black outfits and bold colours; sharp tailoring and rigid shapes are re-interpreted through the concept of comfort; and extreme hygiene is contrasted with androgynous clothes worn to hang out sitting down on the street.

Throughout the thesis, I have thus mapped the development of androgyny as a trend in Western mainstream fashion, in terms of all the processes of negotiation and the relationships between different actors, upon which it is based. I have also underlined how a result of such processes is the mutual transformation of all the parts involved.

### **An Alternative Model of Fashion Distribution: Variations in Aesthetic Distinction**

Kawamura (2005) maintains:

[i]n post-modern cultures, consumption is conceptualized as a form of role playing, as consumers seek to project conceptions of identity that are continually evolving. Social class is less evident and important in one's self-image and identity in contemporary society than before. Style differentiation no longer distinguishes social classes. (Kawamura 2005: 99)

The shift away from class fashion, she argues, can be ascribed, in part, to the

development of new technologies and new means for the spreading of information regarding fashion. Contemporary fashion, according to Kawamura (2005) is getting more and more diversified, and class influences have been replaced, for instance, by inspiration drawn from non-traditional sources such as street style. Talking about the same phenomenon, Crane (2000) affirms that both the “top-down” model of fashion distribution (i.e. a model that follows Simmel's (1957) paradigm according to which people from the lower classes imitate the fashions of those from the higher ones, who eventually move on to new styles in order to differentiate themselves, only to be imitated again, and so forth) and the “bottom-up” one (in which those in a higher social position adopt the new styles that originate from the lower strata of society) are now surpassed, as class is no longer the main axis around which fashion turns:

Consumers are no longer perceived as ‘cultural dopes’ or ‘fashion victims’ who imitate fashion leaders but as people selecting styles on the basis of their perceptions of their own identities and lifestyles. Fashion is presented as a choice rather than a mandate. The consumer is expected to ‘construct’ an individualized appearance from a variety of options. An amalgam of materials drawn from many different sources, clothing styles have different meanings for different social groups. (Crane 2000: 15)

My thesis, similarly to what Crane (2000) claims, has underlined how fashion choices regarding the new androgyny do not derive simply from the passive assimilation of the promoted looks. In the previous section, moreover, I stressed in fact how fashion processes around the androgyny trend are the result of intricate and complex relationships between different parts. Nevertheless, my research has also focused on contemporary manifestations of class culture in the field of fashion. Besides exposing the class implications that even androgyny, which has apparently nothing to do with social stratification, has, I also showed how the development of the trend, and along with it, of contemporary fashion, goes hand in hand with processes of negotiation which bear strong social implications. While it is indeed true that forms of fashion distribution and consumption have recently become increasingly complex, I challenge contemporary interpretations and argue that class still plays a crucial role in their unfolding. Only by explaining the trend through references to class cultures is it possible to grasp the new

androgyny's social agenda and evaluate its impact on both the contemporary cultural scene and people's everyday life. If we were to approach the study of androgyny focusing merely of issues of gender, a great deal of the social inequality and racial exclusion that are implicit in it would remain largely unnoticed.

Whether we think about how the contemporary androgyny trend was born to reflect a particular inclination in wider society and a tendency in popular culture, or how it appropriated themes stolen from the underground history of alternative groups, it is possible to argue that the new androgyny originated from the adoption of styles borrowed from people outside of the privileged end of society. While these groups were mainly identified in terms of queerness rather than socio-economic disadvantage, we should take note of how, as underlined by the moments in the history of androgyny in Western culture described in Chapter 1, there has always been a strict connection between class and androgyny. If in the 1920s masculine *garçon* fashion was taken up by wealthy young women, things started to change at the end of the decade, when a new correspondence emerged linking androgynous dressing and homosexuality (Doan 2001). A key role in this phenomenon was played, as claimed by Doan (2001), by Radcliffe Hall's obscenity trial. Hall's aristocratic status and class privilege allowed her to maintain the freedom to keep dressing in men's clothing and appear publicly accompanied by her female partners, even though it could not protect her from at least a certain degree of social isolation (Dellamora 2011). From that moment on, gender-ambiguous attires began causing outrage, and an androgynous appearance has normally gone hand in hand with the automatic exclusion from the standards set by the bourgeois society, social discrimination and thus, often, with economic hardship. As we have seen throughout the chapters, the phenomenon of the new androgyny involves the re-interpretation of what constituted the subversive potential of alternative styles, which are, thus, turned into unthreatening versions of what they were, in order to fit the dominant ideas. Entering the mainstream, the traditionally disruptive androgyny is able to comply to a normative middle-class lifestyle. In fact, while, for many years working-class style has been associated with butchness and lesbian androgyny, as highlighted by

Munt (1998), with the new androgyny, gender-ambiguous fashion distances itself from working-class identities to embrace instead an aristocratic aesthetics (see Chapter 4).

Up until this point, the development of androgynous fashion bears significant resemblance to the above-mentioned “bottom-up model”, used, for example, to explain how watered-down versions of punk styles have been appropriated by the dominant fashion system and stripped of their original revolutionary messages. Nevertheless, my thesis has also explored how androgyny is then re-appropriated through a diverse set of practices by its consumers, enabled, in part, by the intermediary action of bloggers. If, on the one hand, actors participate in the androgyny trend and allow themselves to be affected by it, on the other hand, they end up working towards the undressing of the trend from its ubiquitous affiliation with middle-class culture and its hegemonic quality. The trend is torn down, through creativity and affect, and modified to include social issues outside of the dominant agenda. Its symbols are reclaimed and transformed to fit contexts of everyday life where women are able to express themselves through androgynous fashion, but independently from the oppressive connotations intrinsic to the androgyny trend. This is not to say, however, that after being appropriated, the aesthetics of androgyny has travelled its way back to the margins. The whole process happens at the level of mainstream fashion and popular culture, and, as a matter of fact, the new androgyny never fully re-embraces its role of subversive gender ambiguity. The androgyny trend, and mainstream fashion, are not rejected, but reworked from within the mainstream. The style, and many of the clothes, are exactly the same as those promoted by magazines (or cheaper alternatives to them): it is the aesthetics that is different. Items are picked up rummaging through second-hand stores, charity shops, vintage markets or the clothing sections of large supermarkets, while others are fabricated or modified through practices of DIY. They are worn several sizes larger than intended and mixed with items that have nothing to do with the androgyny trend. Before taking a closer look at this aesthetic metamorphosis in the next section, let us now keep the focus on processes of fashion distribution and on how such a phenomenon was able to take place.

Besides shifts in content and attitudes towards mainstream trends, my study has also paid attention to the way in which the emergence and the development of the new androgyny are also witnesses of transformations in modes of circulation and reception of such contents. The first few chapters of my thesis have shown how the androgyny trend initially sparked through its coverage by mainstream fashion intermediaries. The aesthetics of the new androgyny was in fact defined through a series of magazine spreads and photoshoots from 2010 onwards in, for example, *Vogue*, *Harper's Bazaar* and *Grazia*, features in fashion brands' promotional material, and official press releases. This kind of content presents androgynous style from a point of view of authority and with a distant matter-of-fact tone. Investigating fashion bloggers' re-mediation of the trend and forms of online audience engagement, I argued that, in present times, models of communication are complicated by the use of new technologies for interaction between cultural intermediaries and the wider public. Not only traditional theories that analyse media effects and influences on the audience, but also more contemporary ones which focus on the public's active role in the conditional assimilation of media content (see for example Hall 2007), are not able to account for the current scenario.

Examples from Chapters 5, 6 and 7 revealed how, currently, thanks to the spread of blogs and social media, affect has established itself as one of the prevalent approaches to fashion communication. Due to the popularity of media such as blogs, which function both as personal diaries and spaces for informal exchanges between bloggers and their public, and different social media platforms, where interaction is characterised by intensity and immediacy, discussions about fashion are largely characterised by an affective language. Even though their roles are incontestably different in terms of expertise, authority, legitimacy and symbolic values, traditional cultural intermediaries, fashion bloggers, and members of the audience interact with one another via channels where information is exchanged through immediacy and affect, in form of emotions, moral judgments, personal confidences, as well as simple expressions of feelings of love, anger, desire, fear, excitement, and so on. In spite of how, in the hands of fashion

authorities, this was interpreted as leading to dominant values and standards about gender, sexuality, class and ethnicity turning into moral imperatives, such phenomenon has also opened up new possibilities for remixing the androgyny trend itself.

Because of the increasing popularity of such new modes of expressions, traditional fashion media have opened up to blogs and social media, starting official corporate channels and including bloggers and social media 'celebrities' in the discussion about the latest tendencies. Thanks to how they draw upon a language of affect to discuss personal struggles and insecurities, but also to their colloquial and friendly tone, their proximity to the audiences, and, in part, also due to their lack of externally validated authority, intermediate figures such as bloggers are able to bridge between formal fashion communication and the mass. Although everything they do is divided between greater freedom for the expression of personal opinions, and the constant need for external validation (the androgyny trend is in fact often adopted by bloggers as something that can be turned into an instrument for ensuring a greater legitimacy for their blog), their action has important repercussions on the trend itself. Closely associated with the partial alteration of the new androgyny's content, brought about by fashion bloggers, are new opportunities for an affective, digital, and audience-led reconfiguration of it.

In this sense, the aesthetic metamorphosis with actual real-life manifestations that I have mentioned above should be interpreted as connected to the rediscovery of aesthetics' original connection to emotional and sensuous experience, made possible by the digital turn in fashion communication. Through affective engagements and disengagements with the androgyny trend, members of the audience negotiate their own identities with reference to the new androgyny, and alter its own form and content along the way. Emotional and informal interaction with the androgyny trend allows audiences to burst the bubble of privilege that surround it, and transport it to the mundane sphere of ordinary people's everyday life.

## **The Potential and the Future of Androgynous Fashion**

As I have hinted at in the previous section, one of the most significant implications of my research is to be found in the transformation witnessed by the aesthetics of the trend. Talking about its portrayal in its mainstream promotion, I argued that the aesthetics of the new androgyny, interpreted as a form of symbolic violence, is implicitly politicised, and reproduces the tastes and, through them, the values of the middle classes.

Fashionable androgyny, in this sense, was found to function as an instrument for social oppression, as well as for the reproduction of the privilege of dominant groups. In spite of its display of messages about female strength and diversity and the embracing of more affective and informal forms of communications, through legitimate channels, the trends' constitutive features still rely on normative ideals. Mainstream androgynous fashion is directed towards conventionally attractive, heterosexual, white, middle class customers, and its particular aesthetics reflects it. However, we have seen how through different kinds of negotiations and a particular approach to its discussion, all characterised by affect, informality and creativity, the androgyny trend itself is significantly modified. Through the re-mediation performed by bloggers, and consumers' acts of symbolic play and semantic alteration, its aesthetics cease to represent the quintessential embodiment of normative values.

Willis (1990) underlines how consumers

make their own sense of what is commercially available, make their own aesthetic judgments, and sometimes reject the normative definitions and categories of 'fashion' promoted by the clothing industry (Willis 1990: 85).

In the contemporary new media age and in the particular socio-cultural context in which the androgyny trend emerged and developed, such practices result in a turn to affect, which, interestingly, also leads to a new interest in everyday life and spontaneity, both within and outside the realm of the digital. But what are the deeper implications of this? Can we identify in the new androgyny the

foundations for social change regarding attitudes towards gender and other key issues?

A key focus throughout my analysis of manifestations of the androgyny trend has been that of implicit judgments and bias against particular social identities along the axis of gender, sexuality, class and ethnicity. Nevertheless, during the investigation of audiences' reactions to the contents of the new androgyny, as well as during the experimental fieldwork, I did not inquire into the demographic data of informants and participants. This choice was made because of unavoidable methodological challenges (i.e. information about social media users is often not immediately available or they prefer to maintain online anonymity, while in the case of fieldwork participants it was due to the particular need, discussed in Chapters 3 and 8, of keeping interactions short and light-hearted, in line with customary street style interviews, and to maintain a friendly and informal atmosphere, to avoid making the interviewees feel like researched subjects). However, the decision of not pressuring people into disclosing this kind of information also meant not collecting important data that would have allowed me to make considerations about interactions between people and androgynous fashion, in terms of different social identities. In this regard, instead of focusing on how and in what ways different groups of people are able to make sense of their own role in society through the mainstream trend of androgyny, my research paid attention to the socio-political potential of the phenomenon under study. Therefore, rather than, for example, selecting a sample of working-class women in order to investigate their particular experience with the new androgyny, I collected information from a set of women with different backgrounds and personal profiles, and aimed at determining what significance do the outcomes of their relationship with the trend have, with regard to class-based, socio-cultural exclusion.

Through the modifications to the original trend, brought about by its consumers, androgynous fashion is in fact increasingly rendered not only approachable, wearable and accessible but also relatable and relevant for a more encompassing public. While it

is true that this phenomenon has created an important space for non-white, non-heterosexual and non-traditionally feminine or conventionally attractive women to engage with mainstream androgyny in their own terms, and without needing to sacrifice their identities and cultures for fashion's sake, a particular significance of it lies in questions of social class.

If, on the one hand, I talked about how feminist studies of class look at the way in which affect is turned into an instrument for the symbolic de-valuation of the working class (see for example Skeggs 1997, Lawler 2005, Skeggs and Wood 2012) and often underlined how this is also true in the case of the androgyny trend, on the other hand, affect has also been the means that has made the reconfiguration of the new androgyny possible. Due to its connection to the more sensuous dimension of aesthetics and to how it contrasts, instead, its other ideological side, an affective approach to androgynous fashion distances it from the perspective of those in power to bring it closer to ordinary people. It is in fact thanks to the affective language that has been incorporated in the discourses around it, that individuals that would not have normally been regarded as its ideal consumers, are instead able to interact with androgynous fashion, and transform it.

Moreover, making reference to the work of Bennett (2011) and Skeggs and Wood (2012), I underlined how Bourdieu's theory of class, which provided the foundation for my own position on it, fails to talk about working-class culture in positive terms and outside a context of lack: lack of economic means, lack of taste, lack of value. In this regard, I would like to draw attention to how the potentiality of re-mediated versions of the androgyny trend concerns precisely an alternative, particular kind of aesthetics with its own style and original specificities. Possibilities for the widespread cultural participation of the working-class, which is closely associated with the re-valuation of particular social identities, are created by an aesthetics, like that of the new androgyny, which instead of being defined merely through its contrast to the dominant one, remixes its contents merging them with their opposites and shifting its focus on inclusion rather than exclusion. This way, the doors of fashionable androgyny are thus finally opened

not only to non-middle class, but also to non-white, non-conventionally feminine and non-heterosexual women.

To conclude, let us now reconnect the trend of androgynous fashion back to the history of androgyny in Western culture, and point out what the contemporary phenomenon signifies in terms of contextually specific attitudes towards gender ambiguity. In Chapter 1, I underlined how historically up until this point, there have been no instances in which androgyny has been able to gain true positive mainstream exposure and popularity. In fact, it has always been regarded as a moral threat to dominant society, and associated with dangerous, or at least not well accepted, sexualities that deviate from the heterosexual norm. Even though androgyny is at the moment widely accepted in mainstream circles, and even different declinations of gender and sexual non-conformity are now embraced for being cool, edgy, and up to date, its mediated portrayal still betrays a need to make it innocuous and turn it into something harmless. What has changed in the contemporary scenario is the way in which every person, regardless of one's social background, has now not an equal, but certainly increased possibility of accessing the latest internet technologies and using the new relationship between fashion, fashion authorities and the public, in order to take up the role of intermediary and change the face of mainstream androgyny.

This thesis has shown that contemporary androgynous fashion was indeed not born as a force able to bring social change by challenging expectations linked to traditional gender roles and concerning other categories such as sexuality class and ethnicity. Nevertheless, it has also identified, in particular features of the dynamics of the new androgyny, a new potential in this direction, not witnessed in any previous instance of widespread appeal of gender ambiguous styles.

## **Conclusion**

I conducted the research upon which this thesis is based in response to a precise socio-cultural moment that is currently still unfolding. Androgyny, which until a few years ago was only associated with underground subcultural style and famous people trying to adopt a provocative public image, has now become a key element in mainstream fashion and gained widespread appreciation. This research is then the result of a need to understand why androgyny is such a hot topic today, and what this means in terms of wider social dynamics. Through my perspective as an outsider to the shimmering and exclusive fashion world, but due to the invaluable access I have to key events, people and materials thanks to my role as a blogger, I have been able to notice and address several key incongruences in its promotion. In this context, I stressed the importance of exposing the problematic discourses that accompany the apparent embracing of alternative gender and sexual identities.

Analysing the particular case of fashionable androgyny, this thesis has showed how, in contrast to a Kantian conception of beauty, the field of aesthetics, far from concerning the disinterested appreciation of an object's artistic value, represents a highly politicised arena. Bringing attention to questions of class alongside issues about gender, sexuality, and race, and identifying in class-based aesthetic judgments a paramount instrument for social exclusion, my thesis reintroduced explanations that focus on social classification in contemporary feminist studies of fashion. It expressed the need in contemporary analyses for a greater consideration of the increasingly often neglected category of class, in order to better understand also other forms of social exclusion embedded in the field of dress and adornment. The topics of clothes, style and trends, just like the sphere of fashion as a whole, are usually not taken seriously and too frequently dismissed as frivolous concerns. In an attempt to stop these assumptions, I also underlined how crucial these matters are in important processes of negotiation of social identities and power relations. Fashion is a key site of social transformation and struggle and should not be ignored. Particularly when it comes to groups of women who, for a series of

different reasons, do not conform to the normative standards set by dominant society, the new androgyny plays a dual role: on one side it constitutes a limiting force, while on the other, as malleable object in constant transformation, it presents significant potentialities.

In terms of fashion's dynamics, my approach has elaborated on both traditional models based on the concept of imitation, and contemporary explanations which focus on individual lifestyle choices. In the contemporary fashion scenario, the androgyny trend and its audiences mutually shape, define and constitute themselves through their relationship with one another. In this sense, while fashion is always in movement and has always been characterised by rapid changes in the succession of new tastes and trends, through my analysis of the androgyny trend I have attempted to grasp the phenomenon in its complexity, and stressed how, at present, it is increasingly transformed through its interaction with its consumers. Although it is true that new fashions regularly emerge in response and in reaction to the particular socio-cultural context of the moment, and are driven by consumer demand, in the case of androgyny, we have seen how the trend is actively shaped by its audiences and their negotiations with it. Since I found traditional methods to be inadequate to capture the richness of experiences with androgynous fashion, I experimented with creative tools to show exactly how creativity, affectivity, sensuousness in the sphere of the mundane are able to influence the contents of the new androgyny and adapt it to fit a broader reality. Instead of being mere followers of fashion, members of the public mould mainstream trends to their own needs, acting upon their multifaceted aesthetic identity. Such processes do not merely reflect personal choices. They also hold important implications for the cultural re-valuation of social groups whose aesthetic choices and experiences with style are not usually considered worthy of serious consideration, and are traditionally demeaned and excluded from mainstream fashion.

The androgynous fashion of the 2010s has been promoted in terms of the liberation of contemporary women from obsolete and oppressive gender stereotypes and, thus, also

of the inclusion of alternative identities. However, it was found on the contrary to hide problematic socio-cultural dynamics that celebrate an aesthetics associated with whiteness, conventional roles regarding gender and sexuality, and middle-class, or even aristocratic values, discriminating, as a consequence against working-class, black and non-heteronormative bodies and identities. The new androgyny represents nonetheless a very interesting arena for the negotiation of potentially destabilising alternatives to the repressive aesthetics of mainstream fashion. Thanks exactly to the particular nature of its contemporary manifestations, the androgyny trend is still being shaped as I write these lines, in ways that, as my analysis underlined, are beyond the control of the fashion industry.

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## List of Tables

Table 3.1 Classification of blogs

Table 8.1 Smells and gender associations

## List of Figures

Figure 4.1 *British Vogue*, December 2012

Figure 4.2 *Grazia UK*, January 2010

Figure 4.3 and Figure 4.4 *Paul Smith* SS 2013 campaign

Figure 4.5 *Jack Wills* Summer 2012 promotional image

Figure 4.6 *Tatler*, March 2010

Figure 4.7 *Colenimo* SS13 advertisement

Figure 4.8 *Harpers Bazaar UK* August 2012

Figure 4.9 *J. JS Lee* AW13 lookbook

Figure 4.10 *Notion* issue 066, 2013

Figure 4.11 *Motilo* website

Figure 4.12 *Topshop* newsletter, February 2014

Figure 4.13 *Zoe Jordan* SS14 catwalk look 9

Figure 4.14 *Zoe Jordan* SS14 catwalk look 14a

Figure 4.15 *Preen by Thornton Bregazzi* catwalk look 2

Figure 4.16 *Net-a-porter* online magazine, January 2014 #1

Figure 4.17 *Net-a-porter* online magazine, January 2014 #2

Figure 4.18 *Margaret Howell* SS 2011 advertisement

Figure 4.19 *Net-a-porter* online magazine, November 2013 cover

Figure 4.20 *Net-a-porter* online magazine, November 2013 photo-editorial

Figure 4.21 *British Vogue*, September 2011

Figure 4.22 *Harper's Bazaar UK*, October 2011

Figure 4.23 *Glamour UK*, October 2012

Figure 4.24 *British Vogue*, July 2011

Figure 4.25 *Free People* newsletter, October 2011

Figure 4.26 *LOVE* SS11 cover

Figure 4.27 *W*, August 2011 #1

Figure 4.28 *W*, August 2011 #2

Figure 4.29 *W*, August 2011 #3

Figure 4.30 *W*, August 2011 #4

Figure 4.31 *British Vogue*, March 2010

Figure 4.32 *British Vogue*, December 2012

Figure 4.33 *Alexander McQueen* SS 2014 advertisement

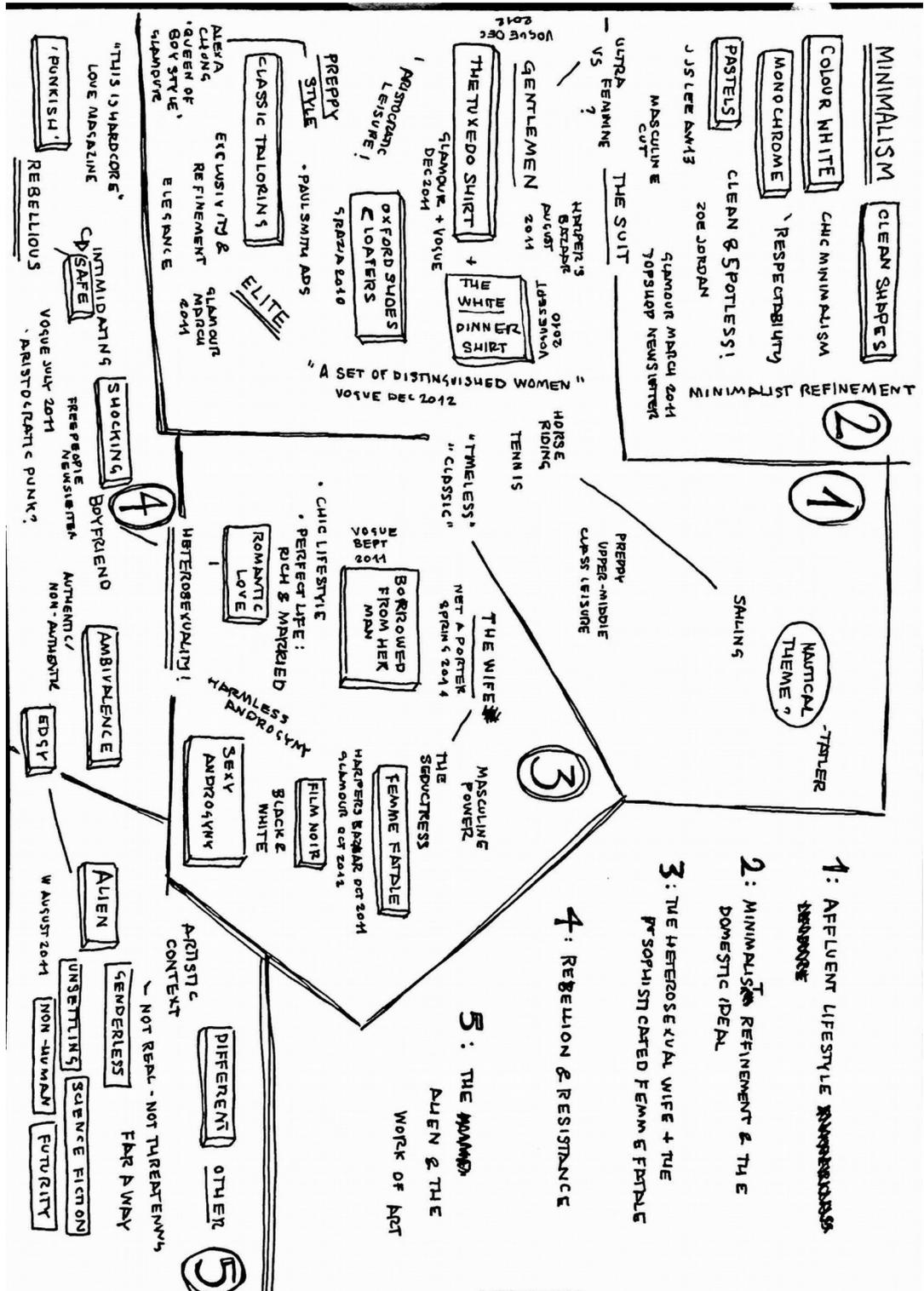
Figure 5.1 Elliott Sailors – Masculine, *Vogue* 2013

Figure 5.2 Elliott Sailors – Feminine, *Vogue* 2013

Figure 5.3 *Balenciaga* AW15 advertisement

Figure 5.4 Alessandra Ambrosio for *Pinko*  
Figure 5.5 Alessandra Ambrosio for *Victoria's Secret*  
Figure 5.6 *Lou Dalton* SS15 pictures from Mademoiselle Robot's post 'Supermodernity'  
Figure 5.7 *Todd Lynn* SS11 published on The Fash Pack  
Figure 6.1 *Fat Shopaholic* for  
*Evans* Figure 6.2 Ella of *La Petite*  
*Anglaise* Figure 6.3 Lily of  
*LLYMLRS*  
Figure 6.4 *Take A Bow's* DIY project  
Figure 6.5 Chloe of *The Little Plum*  
Figure 7.1 *A Cultural Boneyard* collage  
Figure 7.2 *Bad Hearts Club* collage  
Figure 7.3 *Wink, Pout, Ask me out* collage  
Figure 7.4 *Poison and Butterflies* collage  
Figure 8.1 Me interviewing and showing magazine pictures to Shivie and Lydia  
Figure 8.2 Shivie and Lydia drawing on two pages of the same notebook while  
answering to questions from the plastic hat  
Figure 8.3. Me approaching Marlene and Susie at Camden Lock  
Figure 8.4 *La Panthere* – Cartier advertisement  
Figure 8.5 *Black Orchid* – Tom Ford advertisement  
Figure 8.6 *Elle Shocking* – Yves Saint Laurent advertisement  
Figure 8.7 *Tresor Midnight Rose* – Lancome advertisement  
Figure 8.8 *Simply Jil Sander* – Jil Sander advertisement  
Figure 8.9 Val and Gomar having lunch in Granary Square  
Figure 8.10 Figure 8.10 Shivie and Lydia drinking beer and hanging out in Holland Park  
Figure 8.11 Marlena  
Figure 8.12 Anonymous  
Figure 8.13 Ela and Prachtlillith at the Old Truman Brewery  
Figure 8.14 Shivie and Lydia's drawings  
Figure 8.15 Hannah  
Figure 8.16 Marlena and Susie in Camden Lock  
Figure 8.17 Heidi, Tutiqka and Priya at the Old Truman Brewery  
Figure 8.18 Levikha  
Figure 8.19 Susie's hair detail  
Figure 8.20 Jane  
Figure 8.21 Levikha's shoes detail  
Figure 8.22 Participants' drawings  
Figure 9.1 *British Vogue*, December 2014  
Figure 9.2 *In Style* website, August 2015

Appendix 1 (Chapter 4 conceptual map)



## Appendix 2 (List of participants)

| <b>Name</b>              | <b>Age</b>   | <b>Spotted in</b>                  | <b>Nationality</b> | <b>Occupation</b>      |
|--------------------------|--------------|------------------------------------|--------------------|------------------------|
| Val and Gomar            | Early 20s    | Granary Square                     | French             | Students               |
| Hannah                   | 29           | Brixton                            | Peruvian           | Unemployed             |
| Hye Eun                  | 27           | The Old Truman Brewery, Brick Lane | South Korean       | Student                |
| Anonymous                | -            | The Old Truman Brewery, Brick Lane | -                  | -                      |
| Prachtillith and Ela     | Mid-twenties | Brick Lane                         | -                  | -                      |
| Shivie and Lydia         | Late-teens   | Holland Park                       | British            | Students               |
| Heidi, Tutiqka and Priya | 22/23        | The Old Truman Brewery, Brick Lane | British            | Retail Assistant, -, - |
| Levikha                  | 22           | The Old Truman Brewery, Brick Lane | British            | Bartender              |
| Jane                     | -            | Brick Lane                         | -                  | -                      |
| Marlena and Susie        | Early 20s    | Camden Lock                        | German             | -                      |

**Appendix 3 (Fieldwork sketches of participants)**

