Reconstructing a National Silhouette: Avant-Garde Fashion and Perceptions of the Japanese Body

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Reconstructing a National Silhouette: Avant-Garde Fashion and Perceptions of the Japanese Body

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of Bachelor of Arts in Interdisciplinary from The College of William and Mary

by

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Accepted for High Honors (Honors, High Honors, Highest Honors)

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Introduction

The phrase “Japanese fashion” elicits a vast array of imagery ranging from the garish costumes plastered across fashion blogs and magazines to the perfectly fitted suit of a Salaryman. One with an interest in fashion may recall the “big three” Japanese designers, a group comprised of Issey Miyake, Yohji Yamamoto, and Rei Kawakubo, who are often credited with bringing Japanese fashion to Paris in the 1970s and 80s. This paper will explore how these designers have influenced fashion as a whole, and through what specific means they have incited change in the industry and society.

The paper is divided into three sections. The first, heritage, looks at what it means to be Japanese in an industry where most non-Europeans are viewed as outsiders. It will consider the effects of label-dropping, wherein designers like Rei Kawakubo express their desire to not be described as “Japanese designers” but instead simply designers. It will also analyze how the tenants of Japanese aesthetics and clothing design are expressed in their work, and to what extent Japanese youth subcultures have played a role in the creation of Japanese high-fashion. Finally, it will ask what it truly means for the fashion industry to be “trans-national,” and examine the relationship between Tokyo’s precarious position as a fashion capital and the work of these designers.

The second section, gender, considers the ways we present our identities through the aesthetic choices we make in regards to our bodies. Using two of Rei Kawakubo’s collections as case studies, this research aims to understand how fashion can redefine society’s image of a clothed body’s race, gender or ability, while simultaneously delineating the political and social
expectations of that body’s behavior. In other words, how has Kawakubo’s work shaped fashion’s view on the body, and is there something inherently Japanese to this reconstruction process? The section investigates two specific collections, “Dress Meets Body, Body Meets Dress” (S/S 1997) and “Broken Bride” (A/W 2005). The dates of these collections offer two distinct snapshots of the industry’s willingness to accept Japanese fashion. Analysis of the clothes’ silhouettes, patterns, materials, construction and deviations from tradition underscores the capacity of fashion to create meaningful change in the embodiment of class, gender, race and disability.

The third section, power, attempts to coalesce the first two sections to understand the ways in which we derive power from fashion at a national, societal, institutional and individual level. It asks what impacts do these radical ideas expressed through clothing have, and how do they materialize outside of the fashion world. Ultimately, this section will trace each of these four categories of power back to the work of Rei Kawakubo, and gain insight into the merits of understanding fashion as realm for academic discourse.
Heritage

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Introduction

The analysis of fashion through the lens of Japanese Studies raises a multitude of questions regarding identity that are proving more and more pressing as major designers express their distaste for heritage as a label. Recognition of Japan as a major contributor to fashion is the result of the cutting-edge work of a handful of designers. With so many up-and-coming fashion students looking to major designers for inspiration, their desire to shed the “Japanese” prefix from their titles could easily gain traction. At a time when Tokyo is struggling to stand comfortably as a capital of the so-called “transnational” industry of fashion, this identity crisis could pose serious problems for Japan’s reputation, economy, and cultural recognition as a key player in fashion. Considering the degree to which Parisian fashion has dominated, it is understandable that some of the appropriating and exoticizing practices of well-established designers may be reason enough for Japanese designers to disregard the label altogether. Rei Kawakubo and Yohji Yamamoto not only were two of the earliest Japanese designers to successfully debut in Paris, but did so at the same time with similar color schemes; consequently they were often referenced in tandem by fashion press. At the very beginning of her rise to fame, Kawakubo told Women’s Wear Daily in 1983 “I’m not happy to be classified as another Japanese designer… there is no one characteristic that all Japanese designers have.”¹ The degree to which fashion permeates the realms of gender, sexuality, political power, and aesthetics, to me, makes it one of the most significant cultural artifacts for understanding Japan. In this chapter I seek to understand not only why and how the most influential Japanese designers are choosing to

disassociate their work from their heritage, but what implications this practice could have for Tokyo and Japan on the global stage.

Throughout fashion commentary and writings, these three designers are referred to as Japan’s “avant-garde.” The industry has more or less accepted this descriptor, though art historians’ definition of the term may not be entirely reflected in their careers or body of work. The term’s current meaning originated when Charless Baudelaire used it to refer to writers of the political left in the 1860s. Not until a decade later does “avant-garde” begin to apply to the advanced, artistic-cultural movement; most specifically 1918-1926. Greenberg argues that the role of the avant-garde is not to simply experiment, but to find ways to keep culture moving amidst ideological confusion and violence.\(^2\) He goes on to delineate avant-garde and kitsch, the latter of which he describes as communication and vulgarization of art to popular taste and mere fashion. Though this would seemingly exclude the Japanese (or any) fashion designers from identifying as avant-garde, art-historians have reshaped the definition since Greenberg. The definition which resonates with the Japanese designers, particularly Kawakubo, is avant-garde as a critique of the dominant status of art in bourgeois society. Although they partake in the Parisian fashion industry, it is through their questioning of its established norms that they simultaneously critique their own system.

**Impacts of the Kimono**

Although these fashion designers may not wish to be known by their heritage, Japanese influence on their work is undeniable. Japan’s innovations in advanced textiles have allowed and

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\(^2\) Clement Greenberg, “Avant-garde and kitsch,” *Partisan Review*, 1939
encouraged Issey Miyake to experiment in collections that blur the line between aesthetics and function. In the New Yorker’s profile of Rei Kawakubo, Judith Thurman remarks that some of Comme des Garçons’ earliest collections were “inspired by the loose and rustic garb of Japanese fishermen and peasants.”

In addition, all of the major Japanese fashion designers who have exhibited in Paris have at some point taken inspiration from the cornerstone of Japanese fashion: the kimono.

Japanese ideas of color schemes, seasonal changes, formality, sartorial practices such as folding, layering and concealing, and even the way the human form is accentuated are reflected in the kimono. Therefore, understanding the history of the kimono is critical for an analysis of Japanese fashion because of the light it sheds on the way dress, sexuality, gender, politics, and society have changed (or in some ways, remained stagnant).

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4 Rei Kawakubo, Tricot COMME des GARÇONS (sweater), COMME des GARÇONS (skirt), ed. Takashi Hatakeyama, 1983.
One of the most important effects of the kimono has been its ability to prime Japanese society for the acceptance of fashion culture. Penelope Francks argues that the changes seen in the Kimono from the eighteenth century to WWII not only had important implications for conventions of gendered dress, but also implied that the idea of fashion was not explicitly Western. The idea of fashion as a distinctly European invention laid the groundwork for the relationship between Eastern and Western presence on Parisian runways. The kimono is made efficiently from a single bolt of cloth and does not require any sort of tailoring. Instead, the fit is altered by use of folding and the sash called an obi. Because of its simple construction, the kimono is often not associated with the constant change and renewal of the fashion world. Closer inspection of the kimono’s history, however, reveals that although the shape of the garment has remained somewhat static, the popularity of certain materials as well as variations in accessories such as the obi show evolving tastes and preferences. The high price, durability, and reusability of the kimono may have made the process of development slower for the kimono than some western clothing, but Francks concludes that these trends are highly indicative of the presence of fashion in Japan before exposure to the western fashion world. This cultural predisposition to subtle changes in what is fashionable, such as the length of a kimono sleeve, certain fabrics, and varying accessories, has in some ways sharpened Japan’s eye for noticing details in the world of changing fashions.

The kimono has done more than simply prime Japanese consumers for the acceptance of fashion on a macro scale. Some of the most integral practices for wearing a kimono have shaped

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how Japanese designers interact with and challenge conceptions of human form and sensuality. Key aspects of wearing a kimono such as layering, folding, color coordination, and body concealment can be traced from the original garment to the most influential fashion designers, including Hanae Mori, Kenzo, Yohji Yamamoto, Issey Miyake, and Rei Kawakubo. All of the aforementioned designers’ brands are their own name, aside from Kawakubo’s Comme des Garçons. Claire Wilcox, fashion curator of the V&A Museum, points out that Miyake’s design is “about opposition to body shape… a Miyake Pleats Please dress moves in opposition to the natural form, and Kawakubo’s bumps collection was a total distortion of the human body.” ⁶

Many traditional Japanese garments, like hakama (loose, pleated pants originally intended for horseback riding) offer free mobility, unlike the Kimono which dictates a specific poise and stature of the wearer. The concept of altering or restricting a body’s free movement through its attire, thus, is not a modern notion, or an exclusively Western one.

These major designers have all interpreted the kimono, among other traditional Japanese articles, through their own creative perspective to match the identity of their brand. One of the clearest examples of inspiration derived from the kimono is Kansai Yamamoto’s fashion show “Passion Nights,” wherein crowds gathered to watch what seemed more like an extravagant play or kabuki performance (seen below). Much of the fashion being showcased was Kansai’s Yamamoto’s modern take on the kimono, featuring contemporary designs and fabric with traditional shape and fit. 7 In the 1990s, Yohji Yamamoto’s trench-coats and shirts in particular drew from the kimono’s lines, and he has always incorporated various traditional techniques such as embroidery, shibori dyeing, and yuzen coloring.

Issey Miyake also drew inspiration from the kimono but initially in a more conceptual sense. He placed importance on the ornamented decorations and worked with the intention of creating clothing that “resonated physically and spiritually with the wearer” in the same way the kimono could. 8 The name of his first book, East Meets West, includes imagery of the kimono and its introduction to a global stage, and this imagery is consistent with his subsequent collections. His line A-POC, an acronym for “A Piece of Cloth,” used the kimono as a springboard and went on to take inspiration from other cultures such as Guatemala, Bali, India, and Tibet. After beginning to explore these cultures, Miyake’s relationship with his own heritage started to change. He “insisted that this inane tendency to stick to Japanese tradition or cultural localities had to be abandoned, and that nothing more could be gained from making distinctions

such as Japanese, American, and European.” 9 Miyake’s idea was radical. Fashion’s dependence on regional descriptors for designers and pieces has been intrinsic to the industry and press since its beginning. Moving away from regional boundaries and descriptors, Miyake focused on a what he calls “universal clothing.” Most clearly visible in the 1993 “Pleats Please” collection, the concept of universal clothing seeks to transcend boundaries of race, religion, gender, and class. Ironically, this collection was not totally devoid of kimono influence, as the shape remained relatively consistent between pieces which were differentiated by their color. Even the pleating technique itself is believed to be inspired by traditional Japanese methods. The tension between Miyake’s desire to transcend regional boundaries and his continued use of Japanese techniques like pleating, shibori, and inspiration taken from the kimono indicates the difficulty these designers must grapple with in deciding how to embrace or relinquish their own heritage every collection.

Rei Kawakubo has taken another kind of inspiration from the kimono in the way she approaches concealment in her clothing. Integral to Comme des Garçons’ collections and one of Kawakubo’s mantras in creating fashion is the tendency to conceal the body instead of showcasing it. As Richard Martin points out, Kawakubo’s deep respect for the contours of the body, the fabrics, other cultures, and the wearer herself have stemmed from the kimono. The kimono reveals little to no skin of the wearer aside from the nape of the neck, and as a result forces the observer to make assumptions about the wearer’s beauty, using skilled color coordination, poise, and quality as indicators. Martin contrasts the haphazard nature of appropriation in Western fashion “propelled by erotic desire” with the “women of power and

9 Ibid, 38
independence” that continually reappear on the runways of Kawakubo, Miyake, Kenzo, and Yamamoto. 10

One of the most ground-breaking examples of concealment is Comme des Garçons’ “Lumps and Bumps” collection from 1997. By placing large amounts of fabric in unconventional areas on the models’ bodies, Kawakubo momentarily altered form itself. The lines where body ended and fabric began were blurred, and clothing was deconstructed in such a way that its very purpose was questioned by fellow designers and critics alike. In the words of Akiko Fukai, head curator of the Kyoto Costume Institute, “clothing does not exist to adorn women as sex objects but as logical attire,” and this truism can be observed not only through the kimono but in the swathing, layering, and wrapping (as opposed to tailoring and form-fitting) practices so frequently employed by Kawakubo.

Perhaps the most important distinction to make in examining the work of these designers is that having grown up with the concepts integral to the kimono does not necessitate the use of those concepts in each of their collections. Fashion critics often utilize heritage as a crutch for analysis of a perplexing piece, a behavior which is exactly what these designers are trying to avoid by insisting they not be referenced as “Japanese.” More important is the increased awareness of the institutionalized norms of the Euro-centric fashion industry that these designers have gained from learning fashion in a non-European culture. The radicality of the first Japanese collections to show in Paris is indicative of the vigor with which critics clung to European fashion traditions. Lumps & Bumps, one of Kawakubo’s most controversial collections, utilized

large clumps of fabric in nonconventional places on the body. This technique hardly resembled
the traditional practices of Japanese fashion, and in fact bore more resemblance to European
practices of padding, as in bespoke style. The reaction to this collection may have been so sharp
because of the enormous contrast between the voluminous pieces and the stereotypical
demureness ascribed to the Japanese on the whole. This collection is a prime example of a
designer’s awareness of Japanese traditions and ability to diverge from those traditions. Being
Japanese, Kawakubo saw the padding practices as “other” and thus toyed with the idea in a way
no Western designers had ever thought to do.

As a result of coming from a culture that is so often fetishized, exoticized, and
appropriated in the West, these Japanese designers have learned how to interact with foreign
concepts in a respectful way. For example, Kawakubo’s spring 1991 collection alluding to
Gothic stained glass, in Martin’s words “is of an erudition and enthusiasm unaccustomed in
western fashion and deeply respectful of the Western visual tradition.” 11 Other exemplary cases of borrowing without appropriation include Kenzo’s use of Egyptian motifs and an interaction with Georgian customs seen in Kawakubo’s Tbilisi photoshoot in 1989 (seen above.) 12

Starkly contrasting these respectful interactions with foreign cultures is today’s faux-kimono that is plastered across fashion blogs and fast-fashion retailers. Essentially a mix between a poncho and robe made of thin materials, this “kimono” bears no resemblance to its namesake aside from the occasional use of clichéd oriental floral patterns. Often ornamented with fringe, and frequently worn open in the front layered over a skirt or dress, this popular new garment contradicts many of the most crucial components of the traditional kimono because it exposes the midriff and is typically cut with short sleeves. Two key factors in the debate over appropriation and appreciation are the authenticity and intentionality of the item in question. While the concept of cultural appropriation is a deeply personal issue, it is safe to say that the research, accuracy of portrayal, involvement of locals, and intent to educate that were central to the collections of Kawakubo and Kenzo situate it much more favorably than the mass, inaccurate production of faux-kimonos in the fast-fashion market.

While some examples are more direct than others, we can see the tremendous effect that the kimono has had on the development of Japan’s avant-garde fashion designers as well as the societal changes that allow these designers to thrive. Despite the fact that several designers have expressed the desire to shed the “Japanese” prefix from their introductions, they undeniably interact with and challenge their heritage. The kimono is just one visual manifestation of this

11 Martin, Kimono, 220.

heritage; others include more abstract concepts such as hade and jimi, wabi and sabi, and aesthetics inspired by non-mainstream traditional fashion like the apparel of the Japanese working class. These words are difficult to translate into English, but hade and jimi roughly reflect the opposite aesthetic values of garishness and mature subtlety, respectively. Wabi and sabi are the concepts of rusticity and the beauty that comes when an something has aged. It is important to understand what these complex relationships with heritage mean to the major designers as they are effectively bringing Japan, or perhaps only Tokyo, onto the global fashion stage collection by collection.

**Tokyo vs Japan: The Urbanity of Youth Subcultures**

Study of fashion is often subject to harsh criticism because of a perceived lack of relevance to visible change in attitudes. Even if a designer creates a piece that is truly revolutionary or radical, how will that piece’s impact be felt outside of the tight-knit fashion community? In Japan, the link between the eye of the mass public and the exclusive world of high-fashion is the zoku, or youth subcultures.

From Shibuya’s scramble crossing, one of the busiest intersections in Tokyo, to the back streets of more remote neighborhoods such as Ura-hara or Koenji, Japan’s capital city has been a hotbed of rich subcultural history for decades. Young adults express their unified yet still unique tastes both aesthetically and ideologically in the way they dress, the geographic areas they frequent, and the manner in which they interact with the public. The idea of subcultural studies was pioneered by Dick Hebdige, who states “in our society, youth is present only when its
presence is a problem, or is regarded as a problem.” 13 Perhaps through attempting to understand youth subculture in a more nuanced sense, we can lend these subcultures the weight they deserve; to make the transition from talking about the youth to speaking with them. This section will look critically at the role Japanese youth subcultures have played in shaping the aesthetics of Japanese fashion as seen by the rest of the world, as well as analyze the relationship between some of the most respected brands and the subcultures who patronize them. It is through youth subcultures, some of fashion’s most devoted followers, that the niche work of cutting-edge designers comes to be seen among crowds in some of the most populous areas of Tokyo, and as a result becomes a face for the city in a global context.

In addition to strengthening the voice of these youth subcultures, subcultural studies offers another benefit: understanding trends which may legitimize Tokyo’s status as a fashion capital. For some, Tokyo does not come to mind at the mention of fashion with the same immediacy as other capitals such as Paris, Milan, or New York, and even this slight discrepancy can signify the difference in the revenue lost to fashion tourism and the lower value given to clothing made in Japanese design houses. This discrepancy can also affect the legitimacy of a brand. One Parisian critic, quoted by Kawamura, acutely describes Tokyo’s difficulties in taking ownership of the title “fashion capital:”

Is Paris going to have its Oriental rival soon? Those Japanese creators who do not look for the consecration on the Parisian podium are hoping some day to have the same power to replace Paris with Tokyo … Japanese are trying to include Tokyo among the traditional route of

fashion, such as Milan, New York and Paris. But isn't it ironical that many of the Japanese brands have French names, such as Coup de Pied, C'est Vrai, Etique, Madame Hanai, Madame Nicole and so on. How can Tokyo replace Paris?  

It should be noted that even Rei Kawakubo’s brand, Comme Des Garçons, has followed this pattern of what may look like an attempt to mask the Japanese-ness of a brand with a sophisticated French name. Paris is unrivaled in the fashion world, and while it may be true that the mere sound of French vowels can give Japanese consumers a sense of refinement, Kawakubo has explained her reasoning differently. An article in the on-line fashion blog HighSnobiety points out that “it was not, as some commentators have suggested, playing off preconceptions about snooty Parisian couture,” but in fact a reference to a lyric in a Francois Hardy song recorded a few years prior to the brand’s creation. However, when one of the most successful brands born in Japan utilizes a foreign name, it does detract from the legitimacy of Tokyo as a fashion capital, intentionally or not. The phrase “Tokyo fashion” still elicits images of ridiculously garish getups and cosplays, but in reality the elevated attention to detail and creativity displayed on the streets of Tokyo is blurring the line between street fashion and high fashion.

This is where the importance of subcultures becomes clear. Unlike many of the most well-known Japanese designers who must exhibit in Paris before receiving global recognition, the trends that are born out of Japanese subcultures do not have to run some sort of gauntlet to

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legitimize their success. The incredibly ingenuity of style demonstrated by these youth subcultures is changing how fashion is made. It is no longer a unilateral process wherein designers create and consumers mimic. Instead, the habitués of the most stylish neighborhoods are engaged in a more bilateral, collaborative process where prescriptive style rules are frequently broken, clothing is subject to home-made alterations and thrift stores have become an essential element in creating one’s wardrobe. This is how quintessential Japanese fashion is being made today, and the relationship between the major design houses and the various subcultures of Tokyo will define how the city is perceived in the global fashion sphere in years to come. The key difference between Tokyo’s situation and that of other fashion capitals is the degree to which Japanese fashion is able to maintain a distinctly Japanese feel to it. Unlike many high-end French or American brands, even some of the most successful Japanese brands (aside from those of the Big Three) have difficulty entering foreign markets. Brands such as “A Bathing Ape” or “Evisu” have just begun entering markets abroad despite global name recognition and acclaim from foreign fashion communities. Thus, although many foreign brands are selling in Tokyo, many of the most successful Japanese brands are remaining domestic making Tokyo’s youth subculture style particularly unique, and in a way, inaccessible.

In order to understand the subcultures of Tokyo today, it is crucial to first examine their roots. The link between youth subcultures and fashion may not have originated in Tokyo, but Hiroshi Narumi, a Kyoto University professor specializing in sociology of fashion, media, and popular culture, points out the semiotic similarities between Japanese and British subcultures in the postwar era. Japanese classification of subcultures invokes a geographic or iconic nomenclature followed by the suffix “-zoku,” meaning clan or tribe. “Zoku” was a suffix
originally utilized by the Japanese media when describing the subcultural groups, often in regards to the unrest they were causing. Narumi argues that “in Japan, as in Britain, the media has played a central role in the formulation of subculture” and that in “many cases tribes have been identified with deviancy and crime, rather than with culture.” ¹⁶ This tendency can be seen in some of the most well known groups of the postwar period such as the “Harajuku-zoku,” “Takenoko-zoku,” and “Roppongi-zoku,” each of which displayed distinctive styles of dress and were viewed by the public in different ways.¹⁷

The Roppongi-zoku and Harajuku-zoku were two of the earliest examples of well-established Tokyo subcultures, mainly appearing during the early 1960s. The media was


predominantly able to name these tribes because of the high degree of uniformity of dress within
them; it was easy for the public to spot members out in public. The Roppongi-zoku look was
characterized by a well-fitted blazer layered on top of a shirt and cotton trousers, or for a more
casual setting American style jeans and T-shirts for men, and a “Euro-American dress” for women,
though women’s fashion in the Roppongi-zoku tended to allow for a bit more flexibility.\footnote{Kosuke Mabuchi, 『「族」たちの戦後史』 (Post-war History of the ‘Tribes’), (Tokyo: Sanseido. 1989).}
Another essential characteristic of the Roppongi-zoku was their comfortable financial situation.
Due to Roppongi’s proximity to Keio University’s Mita campus, which had a reputation for
being a school for children of the upper-class, many well-off students would make their way to
Roppongi after a day of classes with monthly allowances of upwards of 300,000 yen (about
6,000 dollars when factoring for inflation) to burn. Due to the fact that a majority of Roppongi’s
buildings were destroyed during the firebombings, there was very little in the way of scenery that
would draw large crowds from the more developed, brightly lit areas of Tokyo. Furthermore, the
lack of any public transportation access to Roppongi at this time allowed it to remain a
playground for these college students. As a result, they were some of the pioneers of youth
culture who were, in a quite revolutionary way, creating trends instead of following them. While
the media intended on exposing the more deviant behavior of the Roppongi-zoku, they were
essentially giving them a medium for showcasing their newest trends to the less affluent groups
of youngsters.

Narumi credits the Miyuki-zoku, among other tribes, with the creation of Japanese
dandyism. He explains that up until the early 1960s, spending more than twenty to thirty minutes
on your appearance in the morning was viewed as somewhat conceited for men. With their fastidiously measured pant-lengths, immaculate James Dean hairstyles and formfitting blazers, the Miyuki-zoku challenged this conception and effectually normalized the prerequisites for becoming a fashion capital. Had these tribes not received the media coverage that brought them into the public eye, they might not have laid the groundwork for the culturally ingrained fashion-consciousness that is visible in Tokyo today.

The Oxford Dictionary defines dandyism as “[those] unduly devoted to style, neatness, and fashion in dress and appearance.” Taking a ride on the Tokyo metro or walking through a busy city intersection, it seems difficult to imagine a time where rigid attention to detail was not part of every Tokyoite’s daily routine. Dandyism allowed for the relationship between the Japanese and consumerism to flourish. During the late 1970s, one urban development was instrumental in this acceptance of the ideas behind dandyism. Hokosha-Tengoku (pedestrian paradise), was the name for the section of Harajuku that was closed off to through-traffic on Saturdays. The amount of young people visiting this area exploded, and it became a living runway. Kawamura explains that young people often would showcase their own handmade styles in this area, and even though the streets were reopened in 1998, the atmosphere remained the same.  

When this is coupled with Koren’s explanation of mimicry in the Japanese fashion field, we can see how powerful a visual motif Harajuku and similar areas became at the hands of these youth subcultures. Koren argues that “imitation in Japan does not have the stigma that it does in the West. It is a social act, not a confession of feeble imagination. In a traditional art like brush

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19 Kawamura, *Fashioning.*
painting, the learner copies the master’s composition stroke by stroke. Fashion in Japan works much the same way. It is not a matter of finding the look that suits ‘me’ best. Rather, it is making the choices that will take the “‘fashion’” to its most perfect state, be it preppie, avant-garde, or white collar.” Subcultural hubs continue to function as melting pots where mimicry and adaptation can coexist.

Today, subculture does not look exactly like it did in the postwar period. Groups are much less codifiable and frequently borrow trends from one another. However, there are still geographic boundaries that differentiated the Roppongi-zoku from the Harajuku-zoku or the Miyuki-zoku. The trendiest areas among the youth today, such as Harajuku, Daikanyama, Ikebukuro, Koenji, Shimokitazawa and Jiyugaoka all have distinctive looks. Kawamura quotes one of her interviewees as saying “if you are in Jiyugaoka and dressed in a Shibuya style, you would be totally out of place. That's something really embarrassing, and no one would do that.” These regional styles closely mimic the strict style guidelines imposed by the various “-zoku” of the postwar period. In Tokyo, fashion does not act in a prescriptive manner exclusively from the designers and fashion magazines, but from youth subculture norms as well. As Crane points out “today's fashion is consumer driven, and market trends originate in many types of social groups, especially adolescent urban subcultures.”

Comme des Garçons has had an instrumental role in the formation of these subcultures. As evidenced by the cult-like following that Rei Kawakubo has accumulated, as well as the articles of vintage Comme des Garçons collections enshrined in upscale resale shops, the brand

20 Koren, New Fashion Japan, 18

is truly respected by almost all urban youth subcultures of Tokyo. Combatting social norms as a tenant of both Kawakubo’s work and the style of youth subcultures is a key reason it has seen such success domestically. Rei Kawakubo is perhaps the single designer who has pushed limits the furthest and questioned established norms at the intersections of fashion, gender, form, aesthetics and even politics. As a result, the Japanese history of Tokyo youth subculture is wedded to her clothing.

**Transnationality of the Fashion Industry**

The manner in which fashion is created, showcased, revered and sold is unlike any other form of art. Considering Paris’ comfortable position at the top of the fashion world’s hierarchy, this section seeks to understand how the structure of the fashion industry has affected perceptions of Japanese-ness both within Japan and globally. It will also attempt to illuminate reasoning for the consistent practice of labeling designers by their heritage and the cultural effects this may have.

Paris’ position in the fashion industry has lent the city a magnetic pull for top designers, regardless of nationality. Although not a designer, we see this in effect first Japan with early 20th century painter Foujita Tsuguharu who left Tokyo for France in 1913. In addition, traditional dressmakers such as Shimamura Fusano, Tanaka Chiyo, and Sugino Yoshiko studied in France before returning to work and teach in Japan as fashion designers. Though these early designers may have worked in a different time period than the designers being examined here, their acclaim upon returning to Japan (particularly of Foujita) helped to establish the pilgrimage to Paris as a way for Japanese artists and designers to earn validation. Patricia Mears elaborates on this idea in her essay on the exhibition of Japanese art globally, explaining that Japanese
museums tend to “valorize the prestige of Western art and design, and to display Japanese creative work as being outside the world mainstream.” She goes on to underscore how the Japanese view of domestic art and fashion requires a stamp of mainstream validation before it can be comparably appreciated domestically. This is consistently true within the Japanese fashion industry.

The first Japanese fashion designer to illustrate this was Hanae Mori, who made her trip to Paris in 1961. As indicated by her status as the first and only Asian member of the highly exclusive and traditional Chambre Syndicale de la Haute Couture, it is evident that Hanae Mori rigidly followed classic sartorial techniques and Western silhouettes. Although Mori did occasionally draw upon her heritage as a source of inspiration, such as in her kimono-inspired coat, it was often in a ornamental sense.

The next designer to find acclaim and validation in Paris was Kenzo. With his first collection in 1970, Kenzo showcased his Japanese heritage in a different way. Kenzo introduced the Japanese idea of excess fabric through means such as “smock tent dresses, oversized dungarees, [and] enlarged armholes” that actually began to challenge the engrained Western fashion silhouette. In addition, the inspiration Kenzo found in the happi coat and the peasant short kimono inspired such designers as Yves Saint Laurent. However, Kenzo is frequently perceived as the only Japanese designer to be fully accepted by the French as non-foreign designer. His Vogue biography lists his nationality as French, likely because he permanently moved to France at the age of 25. However, his fashion education at the Bunka Fashion College in Tokyo and the name of his first boutique, “Jungle Jap,” indicate that Japan was not amiss in

his work. For this reason, it seems peculiar that he was able to somehow shed his Japanese label, unlike the Big Three.

The pattern continues with the paths of the Big Three Japanese designers. Although his first show was in New York in 1971, Issey Miyake had already trained at the Chambre Syndicale de la Haute Couture and taken an apprenticeship with Givenchy in Paris. Similarly, Kawakubo had established Comme des Garçons in 1959 but did not reach global acclaim until over a decade later with her groundbreaking Paris introduction in 1971. For many reasons, Tokyo seems to function only as a springboard for its talented designers to reach a global audience elsewhere.

This phenomenon raises the question “Are designers from Western nations subject to the same Parisian prerequisites?” One academic, Dorinne Kondo, argues the negative. She states that “international fashion commentary tended to group Japanese designers on the basis of nationality rather than on individual design achievement, in contrast to the treatment of European and American designers.” 23 We see this in the harsh language often used to describe the arrival and following shockwave created by the Japanese designers in Paris that used descriptors like “invasion,” “Jap,” and “Hiroshima-chic.” 24

In addition, certain fashion magazines strongly resisted acknowledging the creativity being exported from Tokyo. One of the earliest Vogue articles to take note of the Japanese influence on the Paris fashion scene condescendingly points out that “Kenzo, Issey Miyake and Kansai Yamamoto, while born in Japan, are more international designers.” 25

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article published that year entitled “Designed in America, worn in Japan” opens with the sweeping statement that “Japanese women dream of living the way American women do, want to look like them.” Often times *Vogue* would discuss trends that were introduced by the Japanese designers such as the abundance of dark clothes, excess use of fabric or deviation from the standard silhouette in the early nineteen-eighties without crediting the designers, even though many fashion historians argue that the Japanese designers, especially Kawakubo, were solely responsible for changes like reintroducing black to Western fashion during this time.

Finally, in September of 1982 when *Vogue* finally ran a piece on the Japanese designers, years after some Japanese designers had arrived in France, the piece begins by stating “for years they have been studying the West.” The magazine tacitly implied that although they were finally acknowledging the presence of the Japanese designers on the Western stage, they were only able to get there through careful study and mimicry of Western “correct” style. Furthermore, the piece superimposes the heritage of these designers in places where it blatantly does not fit. One writer comments that the rips and tears in Kawakubo’s collection are “reminiscent of secret kimono openings,” and one corner of the page’s spread is a picture of a zen garden described as “what Japan is all about,” despite not making any connection between zen and the fashion being showcased. In fact, there was an arguable lack of tranquility characterized the earliest Comme des Garçons collections. Combined with frequent references to Kawakubo’s “diminutive” stature and the explanation of her intent to “slim the body,” the spread seems downright inaccurate.

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26 Ibid, 233
27 Ibid, 193
One of the only well-known designers to break this mold is Kansai Yamamoto, who also left Japan in order to find success but went to London instead of Paris for his first show in 1971, four years before his Paris debut. By doing so, Kansai was the first Japanese designer to showcase his works on a London stage. Perhaps Kansai was attempting to break the mold instead of simply contributing to Paris’ hegemonic control over the fashion industry and the validity of its designers, because in 1974 he was a founder of the Tokyo Designer Six. Though the other members are hardly known outside of Japan, this group was the first to attempt to put on a Fashion Week in Tokyo. Kansai achieved great success after being personally asked to design wardrobes for David Bowie’s concert series. These designs were heavily inspired by Kabuki, both graphically, with large-scale prints of Kabuki actors’ faces, ukiyo-e inspired designs and large Kanji characters; and functionally, with multiple tear-away layers allowing for quick, onstage costume changes. Perhaps because the heritage Kansai injected into his work was recognizably Japanese, it did not elicit feelings of xenophobia or defensiveness in Western critics to the extent that Kawakubo and Yamamoto did. Kansai did not feel like as much of a threat to the established norms so long as his work remained in some way consistent with the West’s preconceived notions of Japanese aesthetics.

There is a noticeable degree of contradiction in the structure of the fashion system as it relates to the Japanese designers. The critique by French journalist Piganeu referenced above chastises major Japanese brands for adaptations of French names such as Madame Hanai and Comme des Garçons. However, harsh language with racist undertones condemns some Japanese designers for their outsider status. It is understandable that some labels would wish to appear

French so as to avoid the frivolous fight for validity in a French dominated industry. The inability to showcase fashion from Tokyo with global impact is closely connected to the issues plaguing perceptions of Japanese designers overseas.

The reasons for Japan’s questionable status as a fashion capital are quite contentious as well. Valerie Steele, one of fashion’s most revered historians, claims in one of her lectures that it is “often said Tokyo is the 5th fashion capital, but this isn’t entirely true.” ²⁹ Kawamura argues that the reason for this is “due to the fact that there was a lack of an institutionalized and centralized fashion system in Japan.” ³⁰ Thus, although Penelope Francks argues the aesthetic changes in the kimono throughout Japanese history demonstrate Japan’s capacity to absorb fashion, this does not necessarily mean the institutions for fashion reproduction were in place. Although the line between cultural fashion sensibility and aesthetic sensitivity becomes blurred here, the seemingly contradictory nature of Japan’s historic ties with clothing and self presentation alongside its inability to stand assertively on the global fashion stage raise quite a few questions.

Surprisingly, a linguistic data survey carried out by the Global Language Monitor that measures the “buzz” surrounding certain cities and their fashion atmospheres indicates that Paris is not consistently the most discussed. The validity of this survey in determining a city’s position in the fashion circuit hierarchy is questionable due to the fact there is more to a fashion capital’s success than simple “buzz.” The survey does not take into account revenues of clothing sold, prestige of designers or critical reception to shows. Nevertheless, there is value in the underlying

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³⁰ Kawamura, Fashioning.
implication that Paris is not rigidly posed at the top of the fashion pyramid. It is reflective of the fact that Paris does not have a hegemonic position at the industries top, and that it may be possible for other fashion capitals to assume that position. For this reason, being able to acutely understand the advantages and limitations of playing the fashion “game” on a foreign stage for Japanese designers becomes particularly important.  

Conclusion

Heritage seems to be an unavoidable topic of conversation for Japanese designers. The kimono illustrates the ways in which the most successful designers are able to interact with their heritage. These interactions are less superficial than borrowing a specific cut, pattern or material. Rather, the kimono has afforded designers such as Kawakubo, Miyake, Yamamoto and Kansai a heightened sensitivity to how cloth falls on and interacts with the body, a nuanced understanding of fabric utilization, and a close understanding of a culture that is frequently appropriated by mainstream fashion. Where many critics stumble is in remembering that awareness does not necessitate the constant use of or reference to their heritage. Relying on a designer’s Japanese-ness as the sole lens for examining their work is reductive, and explains why many designers disdain the “Japanese” label.

Another way heritage impacts these designers is in the disbursement and popularization of their clothing through youth subcultures. Born out of postwar desire for rebellion, subcultural groups have created a culture of repurposing, borrowing, and creating new trends in high fashion. Especially in relation to the requirement of exterior validation observed by Mears, these youth subcultures are participating in high-end fashion in a new and unique way. Moreover, they

are bringing fashion into the public eye by congregating in some of the busiest areas of Tokyo. The codependent relationship between designers and groups of young fashion consumers illustrates the impossibility of truly ignoring or disregarding one’s heritage in creating Japanese fashion.

If Tokyo were able to legitimize its own fashion week, native designers would not only extricate themselves from the misapplication of Japanese themes or subtly racist reviews but would also be sacrificing the questionable benefits of exoticization. The impact of the arrival of the Big Three Japanese designers in Paris was fueled by the “exotic” nature of their heritage and aesthetic inspirations. Furthermore, the necessity of validation in Paris implies that Japanese creativity may be unappreciated domestically if it never leaves the country, regardless of how successful Tokyo’s fashion week might become. This is especially true given the relegation of fashion to the status of an inferior art. Perhaps, as is often the case with avant-garde artists, the most influential of the Japanese designers will begin to win the appreciation they deserve at home only as they reach the ends of their careers.
Gender

2
Introduction

We perform identities, and by extension our gender, both wittingly and unwittingly through the aesthetic decisions we make in regards to our bodies. These choices extend beyond the shapes, colors and brands of our clothing and encompass elements including but not limited to hairstyles, grooming, and clothing’s appropriateness in given social circumstances for either men or women. Consequently, fashion itself has become an industry and an art form entirely predicated on the gender binary. The heavy influence of gender’s continual recreation can be observed in the fashion periodical sector’s binary views on male and female oriented magazines, the nature of any apparel store’s male/female layout, or even the structure of fashion design presentation itself being explicitly gendered to the extent that men’s and women’s fashion weeks are separate events.

The strong relationship between fashion and gender speaks to designers’ ability to either reinforce or challenge the gender norms society upholds. In pioneering the female suit, Coco Chanel was not only creating new fashion but new norms by making accessible to women the power associated with a suit in a business context. In her biographical profile of Rei Kawakubo, published in the *New Yorker*, Judith Thurman compares the two designers’ feminist implications. She argues that while both work under the egalitarian assumption that “a woman should derive from her clothes the ease and confidence a man does,” she differentiates the two designers in terms of their career-long consistency. Thurman claims that “Chanel formulated a few simple and lucrative principles, from which she never wavered, that changed the way women wanted to
dress, while Kawakubo, who reinvents the wheel – or tries to – every season, changed the way one thinks about what a dress is.”  

Considering these two fashion tactics from the perspective of Judith Butler’s work on gender performance casts an interesting light on each designer’s ability to strengthen, alter, parody, or reject the gender binary and the means by which she does so. Butler’s theory of the performativity of gender posits that our gender is not derived from predetermined biological sex, but rather established gradually through a “stylized repetition of acts.”  

This theory applies well to fashion because it carries the new understanding that our clothing choices are not merely reflective of sex or gender but are in fact constructing it. Butler confronts the presuppositions of philosophers Beauvoir and Irigaray who claim that the female as a self-identified being is a given foundation of our understanding of gender. As argument, Butler introduces the idea that gender does not and cannot exist independently of the acts which shape it. It is in fact merely the repetition of acts and performances that coincide with our understanding of the gender binary that ultimately allow genders to materialize in society. Perhaps most important to note here is that gender is not created through a singular act, but through the stylized repetition of acts. In this repetition there is room for deviation, thus giving gender a “social temporality.”

Key elements of this way of conceptualizing gender, such as actors, performance, audience, repetition, spectatorship and deviation bear a striking resemblance to the language we use to discuss high fashion. In Gender Trouble, Butler employs theories of drag to illustrate gender performativity because drag mocks the expressive model of gender and the actuality of a

32 Thurman, “Misfit.”

true gender. While the tones of a drag show and a high fashion show differ markedly, at least with regards to Kawakubo, the mainstays of questioning and mocking gender’s immutability remain consistent. Dress after dress, seasons after season, Kawakubo subtly changes historically molded “givens” of how a gendered piece of clothing should prescriptively fit or look, thus exemplifying Butler’s performativity of gender through fashion.

Whereas Chanel may have initially challenged gender standards but “never wavered” after the fact, Kawakubo’s ability to continually challenge the idea of “what a dress is” helped redefine what gender is and afforded wearers of Comme des Garçons a multitude of choices on or off of the gender spectrum from which they could make their own performative decisions which may not have been options before.

Some critics claim that the work of Kawakubo so far strays from any socialized or widely understood conceptions of gender that it is actually failing to shape gender at all. Stefan Hirschauer believes that the relationship between our clothing and biological bodies is moot, and that a clothed body is “always a materialized fantasy of an ideal or imaginary body— be it male, female, androgynous, asexual.” 34 Gertrud Lehnert builds off of this idea to argue that some designers choose to operate in a genderless environment by creating “aesthetic artifacts” that are unbound by gender rules.35 Her claim that “fashion cannot be pinned down to an unambiguous representation of a specific gender” seems to be speaking directly to those designers she cites as creating “aesthetic artifacts,” chief among them she names Rei Kawakubo and Yohji Yamamoto.


However, I will argue that although these avant-garde Japanese designers may have been frequently challenging gender norms by choosing to implement asexual themes in their clothing, they are still engaging in the gender discourse by attempting to shift the fashion industry away from the binary upon which it is predicated.

In a rare interview about her views on the purposes of fashion, when asked whether or not fashion is a purely aesthetic activity, Rei Kawakubo responded “what you wear can largely govern your feelings and your emotions, and how you look influences the way people regard you. So fashion plays an important role on both the practical level and the aesthetic level.”  

This observation can ground our analysis of Kawakubo’s fashion and its contributions to the way society perceives and wears gender. In other words, Kawakubo views all fashion as possessive of a dual functionality: the individual and the social. She differs greatly from her contemporaries, who often tend to design prioritizing the spectator. In a runway show, the spectator is the buyer, so this perspective makes sense financially. Kawakubo, however, has reiterated her focus on the other side of the spectrum. Viewing fashion as the key intersection between the individual’s gender identity and social gender performance, as Lehnert suggests, affords academics a wealth of possibilities in understanding and criticizing the role of the fashion designer in the creation of cultural identity and norms. Kawakubo’s contributions to Japanese cultural identity, and gender identity are of critical importance, considering her role as a Japanese woman leading a revolutionary fashion company. Historically, fashion has served as one of the oldest arenas wherein women can serve as legitimized creative and business decision makers.

This section will first offer a brief historical overview of the relationship between fashion and gender as they relate to the what Lehnert calls the heterosexual duet, and other tenets of modern feminism. It will then examine two Comme des Garçons collections, “Body Meets Dress Dress Meets Body” (S/S 1997) and “Broken Bride” (A/W 2005) as case studies. It will then conclude with a comparison to other boundary-pushing designers’ key collections, impacts on behaviors of the wearers, and ways in which these two collections have been incorporated into other performative venues.

By analyzing the use of color, cut, fabric, silhouette, hairstyles, makeup, and themes, this section will attempt to understand their impacts on those designers influenced by Kawakubo and the industry’s overall interpretations of the gender binary. Many designers see the physical differences between normative male and female bodies as reason enough to completely divide their creations into male and female categories, but this is not the case for Kawakubo. Although in order to display her clothing on a global stage she must “play the fashion game” by creating lines for men and women, lines are blurred and often entirely erased on and off the runway. Masculine and feminine elements are exchanged, power dynamics are broken down and rebuilt, the layout of Comme des Garçons stores are entirely un-gendered, and many key pieces allow the wearer ownership and choice in their gender presentation. Many pieces are shaped in such a way as to look becoming on bodies of varying sizes, races, and ages, allowing for intersectional gender performance. In allowing the wearers of her clothing flexibility in aesthetic, gender, and body presentation, Rei Kawakubo is using her clothing to confront the gender binary by making clothed gender performance the choice of the individual, not the industry or society.
History

In order to most acutely understand the developments in fashion’s relationship with gender caused by these two collections, it is important to contextualize them within the broader history of gendered clothing’s trajectory. According to Anne Hollander, “the history of dress… so far has to be perceived as a duet for men and women performing on the same stage.” 37 By outlining these historical developments, we can identify the key turning points in the underlying gender theories that attempt to explain them. This history revolves around the concept of heteronormativity which “produce[s] and reproduce[s] two sexes that are defined by their respective relation to each other, resulting in complementarity and leaving no space for identities other than male or female,” and therefore reducing fashion expression to masculinity and femininity. 38

Because the fashion industry is deeply rooted in European conceptions of fashion aesthetics, this section will predominantly examine the history upon which that industry was built. Lehnert argues that the fundamental distinction in the Western world in regards to men’s and women’s fashion is that which is based around the lower half of the body, specifically trousers and skirts. With respect to utility, bifurcated trousers allow for ease of mobility and also showcased men’s legs—at the time considered a masculine erotic zones. In contrast, women’s fashion predominantly ignored the legs while showcasing arms, busts, and hips. Lehnert goes on to point out that the sumptuousness of 18th-century men’s fashion cannot be deemed feminine, even though by today’s standards it may seem so, because “vestimentary sumptuousness was not


38 Lehnert, “Gender.”
defined as feminine at that time.” Her observation highlights the need to observe gendered differences in clothing as a means of understanding historical norms, rather than imposing today’s norms on clothing that was created and worn under a significantly different mentality.

One rapidly changing element of fashion that is of great relevance to Comme Des Garçons’ dramatic runway pieces is silhouette. Alterations to the body’s silhouette can be as drastic as the wires which enlarged women’s hoop skirts and constricting corsets or as minor as collar stays and shoulder pads. Although the specific guidelines for silhouettes of men and women have been far from consistent throughout fashion history, what has remained consistent is the importance of silhouette as a tool for delineating male and female bodies.

In the book Fashioning the Body: An Intimate History of the Silhouette, a collection of fashion-focused academics explore the concept of shaping the body’s silhouette through the use of “whalebones, busks, hoops, padding, laces, hinges, drawstrings, pulleys, springs, retractable mechanisms, and elastic fabrics.” These methods often limited the body’s mobility, and when this practice is considered within the context of gendered norms, it speaks to the ability of fashion to act as a moral, ethical, and functional tool for society—no longer simply encourage but to force a specific gender to stand, sit, talk, walk, and interact in a certain way.

Historian Georges Duby argues that, dating back to the the fourteenth century, the era that is commonly cited for the earliest traces of what we now understand as “fashion,” the haute couture sought to “disguise the body [by] developing it in unreality, masking the attributes of

39 Ibid.

men and women alike.”  

Study of these archaic falsifications of body lines and curves clarifies the distinction between modern close sheathing of the body and other means of stimulating sexual thought through clothing. Although the dresses of the fourteenth century did not showcase the wearer’s curvature, they obfuscated the wearer’s natural body and in doing so suggested new shapes and created an entirely new body for the wearer. Interestingly, this ancestor to modern fashion does not, in Duby’s eyes, play into the theory of the heterosexual duet. This theory draws on ideas of heteronormativity and argues that the actual aesthetic characteristics that define a society’s perceptions of masculinity and femininity are not permanently linked to the genders themselves. Instead, these characteristics are fluid and merely need to maintain a degree of difference between the genders. Lehnert notes general historical tendencies such as women becoming more masculine when men become feminine by today’s heteronormative qualifications. This duet extends throughout the entire process of fashion’s production and reproduction, and arguably allows for fashion’s existence and growth. Challenging this duet by reducing the distance between the genders, as seen in both fourteenth century gender overlap and the Comme Des Garçons’ collections to be analyzed later in this section, risks self-destructively challenging the premise of the industry which allows designers’ continual creation and success. Despite this, dismantling the cornerstones of the fashion industry has put Kawakubo at its top.

We see the heterosexual duet’s first noteworthy appearance in historical fashion in the sixteenth century. In Europe, a woman’s body “came to be considered the pedestal upon which

rested the most important element: her head; [and] men’s bodies were expected to express the
virility believed to be inherent in their nature.” 42 This dichotomy between gendered bodies in
European mainstream fashion (seen above) 43 44 would continue to develop, turn itself over and
reaffirm itself through present day. At this earliest point, the intention was to artificially elongate
the bodies of women and to widen the bodies of men. The important distinction to make here is
that among all the transfigurations to the human from dating back centuries, as gruesome,
restricting, and unsightly as some mechanisms may seem by today’s standards, these sartorial
decisions were never made without the intention of aestheticizing the body for the pleasure of the
opposite sex.

Stephane Mallarne regards the mid-1870s as a turning point for the fashionable silhouette
and the beginning of the “slow elimination of excess.” It was at this time that dresses started to
become formfitting and women’s mobility became a more important consideration for couturiers.

42 Sophie Vesin, “Women's Undergarments and the Submission of the Body in the Sixteenth
Century,” Fashioning the Body: An Intimate History of the Silhouette, (New Haven: Yale UP,
2015), 57.

43 Moroni, Giovanni Battista. Moroni Prospero Alessandri, (c. 1525–1578), Public Domain.

44 The "Ermine Portrait" of Elizabeth I, (c. 1585-90), Public Domain.
Paradoxically, as women’s clothing gradually became more physically liberating by removing mechanisms and artificiality, it also presented a new method of objectification. Bodies were no longer being judged on their falsified counterparts but rather their natural state as it was revealed by formfitting clothing. The process was not instantaneous though, as formfitting in its earliest stages was hugging a body that was being reconstructed by a corset. In the broadest sense from today’s perspective, this new fluidity in women’s clothing was a lateral move for women’s liberation from falsified body constriction to organic body sexual objectification. The inversion taking place gave way to the idea of curves, and was to the benefit of the slim “and to the despair of everyone else.”

With this move came the first instances of the theory of the normative/male gaze in fashion. A theory which has been applied to a wide range of critical analyses, Foucault’s argues that power is “not possessed as a thing or transferred as a proper” but instead functions like a piece of machinery that does not need to operate in a specific way. Power uses a “spectacular system of regular looking, worked through the social body.” In society’s subjection of individuals to the gaze, the separation of subject and other fuels the gender normalization process. The consistent problematization of bodies and social pressure to fix these problems gradually becomes a defining characteristic of the fashion industry as artifice is removed from the object of the normative gaze, in this case: a body deemed undesirable or wrong.

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As we will see in the case studies to follow, S/S 1997 represents a radical attack on Mallarme’s “slow-elimination of excess” by adding literal excess of fabric to each piece in the collection. In doing so, Kawakubo is designing against the grain of the industry, distancing the models from the normative gaze and affording them a form of social power that was independent of their gender-based sexuality.

I selected the following two collections for the monumental impact they have had in the fashion world, in addition to the diversity of implications they carry for gendered bodies. In terms of female representation, the collections are quite different. S/S 1997 abstractly and idealistically represents a “what-if” of sorts, wondering aloud the possibility of the fashion community to accept radical changes to gendered silhouettes and expectations. This collection forces spectators to ask not just how but why we gender and sexualize the clothed bodies we view, and encourages wearers to consider the implications of adhering to the established norms of the fashion world. A/W 2005, on the other hand, does not consider possibilities, but instead examines the current state of gender and gender roles. It asks “once a body has been gendered in society, what are the expectations of that body?”

**S/S 1997**

“There is no excellent beauty, that hath not some strangeness in the proportion”

~Francis Bacon

Comme des Garçons’ S/S 1997 collection, entitled “Body Meets Dress, Dress Meets Body” was derisively nicknamed “Lumps and Bumps” by some fashion critics following its release at Musee d’Art Afrique et D’Oceanie for Paris Fashion Week due to the large billows of fabric in varying locations on the dresses and tops. Although the collection has received reviews varying
from laudatory praise to outright disgust, it garnered a seven-minute ovation following its initial runway showcase and remains one of Kawakubo’s most widely recognized collections of her 30+ year career. It was selected as the first of two collection case studies because of the enormous impact it has had on the relationship between fashion and the fabrication of gender, and the resulting breadth of academic analysis on the collection. This case study will attempt to draw on the existing research on S/S 1997 while incorporating my own findings about its impacts on gender, femininity and identity within a Japanese context and globally. The collection is comprised of 57 “looks” all united by the theme of “Lumps and Bumps,” henceforth known as billows. These billows were so striking to the audience that often times the other technical components of the collection are overlooked. Therefore, this section will conclude with an analysis of the billows, but first will examine the more subtle design choices Kawakubo made to stage her famous collection.
Like the first page of a classic novel, the first piece onto the runway (seen above) \(^{47}\) often holds key meaning that may not be coherent/sensible/understandable until considered within the broader context of the whole collection, and this is undoubtedly the case for S/S 1997 due to the introductory dress’ abnormality. Aside from white knit sleeves and collar, the top of the first piece in the collection is entirely sheer, exposing the model’s breasts and chest, and is paired with a puffy, asymmetrical white skirt, white tights and white lace up flats. Beginning the show in this manner was a bold creative decision if Kawakubo’s intention was opening a dialogue about gender, body form and fashion. Kawakubo is calling into question the very function of fashion as a means of concealing one’s body while showcasing an established motif of femininity and gender identification, breasts, in a distinctly non-sexual way. The model’s facial expression is stoic, her body language is assertive and uninviting. The dress’ conservative length and the lack of high heeled shoes throughout the show all speak to the fact that Kawakubo is not attempting to beautify her models for the sake of anyone but themselves. In an interview with Dorinne Kondo, Kawakubo claims “I’ve never once thought about a woman’s beauty.” \(^{48}\) One would assume that a top as sheer as this was not meant for a woman to wear without a bra or some sort of garment underneath. In openly showing the breasts of her first model, Kawakubo is challenging prescriptive norms about body concealment for women before proceeding to conceal her following models. Just because the models may or may not have untraditional silhouettes which she concealed by no means implies that they need to be.

\(^{47}\) Comme des Garçons, S/S 1997; Look 1/57, Conde Nast Archive.

The following piece (shown above) is significantly closer to the central themes of the collection. For most spectators, the shocking characteristic of this dress is the untraditional feminine silhouette. However, the designer’s choice of gingham as the primary pattern is equally alarming given her vocalized preference for and the predominance of shades of black in her prior collections. Considering the irregularity of this pattern decision, it is worth looking at the historical and symbolic implications of gingham. Stereotypically, gingham is most frequently associated with youth in a feminine context. It is a breathable material that is reversible, inexpensive and easy to make which lend the fabric its high degree of utility. Due to its prevalence in mid-1900s American clothing, it often is perceived as a symbol of nostalgia.

Several countries have claimed to be the originator of the gingham pattern, and the fabric possesses rich cultural implications for each of these respective countries. Gingham was first exported to Europe and the colonial United States from India and Indonesia, and was first produced in the West during the mid-18th century in North England textile mills. Gingham

\[49\] Comme des Garçons, S/S 1997; Look 2/57. Conde Nast Archive
gradually became a dependable choice for domestic use, which allowed the image of “homestyle domesticity” to be closely connected with it. 50 In the early 20th century, gingham had become a standard for schoolgirl uniforms and smocks, and boys’ rompers and playsuits.

It was not long before gingham seeped into popular culture, establishing its foothold in Hollywood visual culture with the gingham dresses of Katharine Hepburn in “Philadelphia Story” and Judy Garland’s character Dorothy in “The Wizard of Oz.” These dresses were created by American film and fashion designer Adrian, who also incorporated gingham into his “Americana” theme, including a quilted silk hostess gown appliquéd with cotton gingham motifs and a long gingham evening coat. The combination of his unique fashion choices and implementation of them through his film expertise allowed gingham to rapidly gain popularity. The third key woman to lend her face to the growing popularity of gingham in the 1940s was American actress and singer Doris Day. One fashion historian summarizes the relationship between gingham and gender at the time with the following facetious quotation: “Catch your perfect man with feminine home-spun gingham. Throw away modernity, ladies, and get back to the wholesome 19th century.” 51

Gingham also became a key element of “rockabilly” style wherein women wore men’s dress shirts and tied the ends together to make them more formfitting. By the 1960s, gingham had been appropriated by British mod style and effectively parodied any of the traditional or gendered motifs associated with the pattern beforehand. Both mod style and rockabilly were sources of inspiration for various youth subcultures in Tokyo. In deciding to stray from her


51 Ibid.
typical color and pattern choices, Kawakubo was sure to select a pattern that was overflowing with themes she could subvert in a collection that called into question the very essence of norms and tradition. A utilitarian pattern that was originally from the East, industrialized in England, symbolized youth and American housewife femininity, and was subject to subversion by both British and Japanese subcultural movements seems to be the perfect choice for a collection as ideologically rich as “Dress Meets Body, Body Meets Dress.”

Following the set of seven gingham bump dresses are five similarly constructed pieces in either solid navy or umber. These are proceeded by five ensembles that share a common billowy, brown skirt resembling a wrinkled paper grocery bag. Afterwards, the collection returns to its recognizable cuts but this time exclusively in heather gray for the next seven dresses. These slight variations on the cornerstone gingham dresses continue in waves until the end when the most dramatic billows can be seen in the what may be considered a finale. The last three dresses are an arresting, monochromatic shade of red with enormous mounds of fabric on the models’ shoulders, hips, and stomach. Some wrap the models’ upper arm and shoulder in such a way as to restrict mobility. Joanne Entwistle eloquently describes the result on body and gender awareness in stating “dress lies on the boundary between self and other, by forcing a sort of self awareness, form a second skin which is not usually an object of awareness [and] this consciousness is heightened when something is out of place” by being too tight, constricting or inappropriate for a given social situation. 52

Though mobility may be restricted for the models’ upper body on the runway, other aspects of the collection allow for enhanced or ease of mobility. Throughout this show, and almost all of Kawakubo’s work, the models wear flats. The shoes of S/S 1997 are simple and appear comfortable, which afford the models an ease and assurance of movement that emanates confidence. In accordance with the Comme Des Garçons mantra that fashion is for the benefit of the wearer and not the spectator, the footwear decision is one of many that actively confronts the idea of the normative gaze. This decision is especially pertinent considering the unspoken requirement of wearing high heels in Parisian Fashion shows. Other exemplary decisions include makeup and hairstyle choices. As for makeup, all of the models in S/S 1997 sport thick eyeliner, crimson eye shadow, and various lipstick shades. It is not uncommon for Comme Des Garçons’ to be seen on the runway with no makeup at all, so the decision use such noticeable makeup in this collection should not be overlooked. This particular makeup does nothing to soften the features of the models who are already wearing aggressively stern facial expressions.

The hairstyle (below) consists of an uncentered lumpy bun (not dissimilar to those on the dresses) and several thin strands of hair pulled out and plastered just below the hairline on the models’ foreheads. This aesthetic decision is highly functional, and should not be taken lightly considering the rich history of hair as a social signifier for gender. According to Geraldine Biddle-Perry and Sarah Cheang, the abundance or lack of hair has functioned as a form of “somatic border control;” an ideological mechanism that regulates class, gender, race, and sexuality. In modern fashion and performance, looseness of hair often symbolizes a moral

53 Comme des Garçons, S/S 1997; Look 41/57. Conde Nast Archive
looseness, and highly disciplined hair, such as that of a ballerina or school teacher, operates in the same way. As a body element which aligns so closely with gender performance and signifies the very human capacity for self-conscious manipulation and display, the non-traditional hairstyles of the models in S/S 1997 are key elements of Kawakubo’s gender creation process. Working as a foil to the dresses which occasionally sacrifice function for form, these hairstyles defy modern beauty standards and instead prioritize functionality by keeping hair away from the face.

The element that earned S/S 1997 its notoriety and its nickname is the blatant abundance of bumps. For the sake of this research, I chose to refer to them as billows due to the ableist, condescending tone with which “bumps” is so frequently written or spoken in reference to the collection. It is important to understand from where this condescension stems and what it means for the collection and Kawakubo’s impact on gender as a whole. As we have seen, the body’s silhouette has had an intimate and tumultuous relationship with gender throughout fashion’s history. In an industry so ephemeral, why would one designer’s changes to the female silhouette in one season’s collection, despite the constant ebb and flow of body silhouettes across history,
create such a stir among media and critics? The reason is S/S 1997’s direct confrontation of a pillar upon which society’s conceptions of gender are based: clothing. Fashion moves quickly but changes slowly. As stated earlier, Mallarme’s view of the 1870’s as the beginning of “the slow elimination of excess” has still not reversed its course. In a single season, Kawakubo overturned the multi-century fashion trend toward slimming, stripping, and simplifying the silhouette. Our society’s understanding of gender changes at a similarly glacial pace, and the interconnectedness of these two core societal needs, clothing and gender representation, is no coincidence. Perhaps this is the reason for the sharp reactions against the S/S 1997 collection; Kawakubo altered what many people assumed to be unalterable in clothing, and forced spectators to ask themselves those same questions about what truly is alterable with respect to gender.

Collectively, the elements of “Body Meets Dress Dress Meets Body” unite to mold an aggressively independent wearer. The mere sporting of a dress of this magnitude vocalizes an absence of concern for those who may find it unappealing and lends the wearer a unique combination of confidence devoid of body reliant sexual seduction. Kawakubo has on numerous occasions cited her intention to design for independent businesswomen like herself. At the time of its creation, the direct confrontation posed to the “slow elimination of excess” was striking visually and symbolically. The billows themselves offer a unique interpretation of the directionality of the industry, but when combined with the other design elements mentioned above and understood in the greater context of Kawakubo’s work, the collection’s meaning and significance become incredibly perceptible.

If we consider this collection with regard to Butler’s Theory of Gender Performativity, the collection takes on new meaning. Specifically, Butler underscores the symbolic importance of
the dichotomy between the anatomy of the gender performer and the gender being performed. With reference to theories of drag, this dichotomy is typically understood by the audience, but in S/S 1997 that is not necessarily the case. Unlike drag, the performance upon the stage does not transfer the performer from one pole of the gender spectrum to another, but instead to a more abstract spot. Furthermore, fashion shows, particularly Kawakubo’s, are entirely devoid of humor. Butler mentions the importance of humor in creating parody, and how its absence creates pastiche instead. It is possible that the parodying aspects of drag hinder its normalization whereas with high fashion this hindrance does not exist. The intention of a fashion show, unlike drag, is that the clothing may be purchased and worn by the public. In this regard, the performative aspects of high fashion are more routinized through regular use.


**A/W 2005**

Comme des Garçons’ Autumn Winter 2005 prêt-a-port collection, “Broken Bride” is markedly less ambiguous than many of Kawakubo’s other works. The clear title and iconography of design motifs indicate unequivocally that this collection is about women as brides and the
associated damage. In addition, the critical and popular reception were, opposite to that of “Dress Meets Body, Body Meets Dress,” universally laudatory. Perhaps the messages being expressed through this collection on gender roles were easier to swallow. In the words of Thurman, “the show, in its melancholy romance, captured the tension between vigor and fragility which dominates most modern women’s lives, including Kawakubo’s.” 55 Comprised of 36 looks with a deliberate chromatic shift from white to black midway through the show, “Broken Bride” lends itself well to critical analysis. This case study will analyze the use of lace, veil, makeup, headdress, color, and form to attempt to understand the nuanced implications for gender and how these two collections coexist within Kawakubo’s ideological milieu.

As complete ensembles, the looks (like shown above) 56 remain recognizable as wedding apparel, yet break convention in a different way with each new model. The first ensemble

55 Thurman, “Misfit.”

56 Comme des Garçons, A/W 2005; Look 1/36, Conde Nast Archive.
establishes the bridal-wear motif with its color scheme, dress’ train, and most noticeably its veil. It then challenges that motif by exposing midriff, and using a non-traditional neckline, uneven sleeve lengths, and replacing the traditional bridal gown with loose fitted, cinch-ankle trousers, and a belt. These subversions of the norms of bridal clothing are not unanimously gendered in nature. Showing midriff is a predominantly feminine act of defiance whereas loose fitting trousers are a more masculine, conservative piece of formalwear. Other elements such as the unusual neckline and sleeve lengths are asexual subversions. The amalgamation of gendered and non-gendered design choices elicits the conflicting expectations and double standards to which, in Kawakubo’s eyes, women are subject. The “tension between frailty and vigor,” femininity and masculinity, and obedience and defiance manifests through these gender-bending components to express the strife and complexities of womanhood that were absent in the ideals of S/S 1997.

Utilizing the institution of weddings as a grounding concept opens a discussion ranging from cultural implications of marriage and rapidly evolving traditions to societally imposed solidification of gender roles. In “Wedding Dress Across Cultures,” Helen Bradley points out that almost universally the female’s wedding attire is more closely linked with tradition than the male’s, likely due to the cross-cultural relationship between women and production of cloth. Furthermore, wedding apparel is one facet of clothing that seems to be immune to the fast paced, evolving nature of the fashion world. Kawakubo borrows the ceremonial meanings imbued in the wedding dress as a cornerstone for her collection, and draws attention to the lack of scrutiny to which bridal gowns have been subject from fashion’s perspective. What ideals are we as a

society perpetuating by maintaining bridal apparel norms? Some looks in A/W 2005 subvert the very concept of a wedding dress itself through the use of trousers without sacrificing meaning by maintaining color, cut, and material.

Many of the looks in this collection utilize lace, frill and other forms of trim; a design element that today is universally considered feminine but historically has ties to clothes worn by men in Western religious ceremonies. 58 Barbara Vinken writes extensively on the semiotics of the frill in fashion, and in “Eternity — A Frill on the Dress” specifically discusses the frill and lace with respect to the veiled bride. Vinken cites the works of Baudelaire in arguing her point that perfection in fashion is defined by ephemerality, and a frill is the very epitome of short-lived beauty lacking function. Standing at odds with the indisputable, unchanging aesthetic beauty of classical sculpture, fashion’s actualization simultaneously serves as its own destruction. Vinken expounds on this point stating “for the same reason, perhaps, the last dress of every show is traditionally the veiled bride, a woman at the threshold of great expectations.” 59 At the crux of her argument is the concept of travesty: the clash between eternal beauty and the moment in which it is disfigured. Predicated on conflict, travesty is most palpable when caught between polar ends such as creation and destruction, ancient and modern, or mourning and eroticism. She shifts the direction of her analysis to consider where this opposite end may lie for a bride and concludes it to be “a widow in the funereal relevance of black mourning.” 60 Kawakubo’s “Broken Bride” collection engages with these theoretical concepts of fashion, and elevates them


60 Ibid.
by removing their intrinsic heteronormativity. Kawakubo uses lace and frill liberally in the collection to accent asymmetrical lines, slow the spectator’s gaze, serve as a unifying element between the first and last look and ultimately function to create a center for the collection’s point of travesty.

The makeup in this collection presents a puzzle to its analysts and critics. All models sport a thick eggshell white base coat that covers the entire face with natural lip coloring and most noticeably colorful jewel designs surrounding the eyes. The headdresses, though all ornate, vary from bleached white roses to piles of synthetic fabric or flowers that match the colors of the facial jewels. Every model has a unique veil (they differ in pattern, length or stiffness), but only two wear the veil covering their face; one dressed in all white and the other dressed in all black. The makeup brings to mind a heightened sense of eurocentrism, coating already white models in an artificially white pigment, only to contradict it with non-traditional jewels and headdresses. Some elements, such as the uncolored roses and more understated veils, would be acceptable in a standard wedding ceremony, while others are reminiscent of pipe cleaners, neon pompoms, or silver Christmas tinsel. Unlike the S/S 1997 makeup which hardened and accentuated the angles of its empowered, unrestricted models’ faces, the A/W 2005 makeup functions less as an accent and more as a mask. Facial differences are smoothed over and models are unanimously adorned with jewels to create a doll-like effect. Facial expressions are no longer confidently glaring but instead soft and occasionally exhausted. These women stand at odds on the brink of ephemerality; the death of female independence and the birth of a new married life.

The whites of this collection range from pearl to bone to snow, whereas the blacks are monochromatic. Although not entirely linear, there is a distinctive transition from white to black.
as the show progresses. The colors are the most important aspect of drawing the allusion to western ceremonial clothing of weddings and funerals. The form of the dresses is asymmetrical, layered, and loose. Looks often borrow elements which belong to different levels of formality, such as look 22 (seen above), which combines the belt, lapels, and shoulder pads of a formal women’s jacket with the underlying dress that resembles a nightgown in both material and cut. The effect on the spectator is visual overload, while still clearly vocalizing the themes of the collection. Though bodies remain un-sexualized in accordance with wedding norms, the silhouettes of the dresses are more human than those of S/S 1997.

When we consider this collection in regards to gender performativity, we see how performance can reinforce the gender binary in the same way it can alter it. A wedding gown is an unquestionably feminine article of clothing that has come to exist through centuries of ritualized wedding performance. Kawakubo is speaking to the ability of clothing to solidify

expectations of a gendered body. Butler extensively discusses the relationship between gender and power, largely utilizing the work of Foucault. Butler challenges the underlying assumption that power produces sexuality with the concept of gender ambiguity. A/W 2005 speaks to this underlying assumption, whereas S/S 1997 hints at the possibilities of power in gender ambiguity.

In A/W 1990, Kawakubo shocked her audience by showing a bridal gown as her finale, a practice usually implemented by established couturiers. 62 Kondo comments that the presence of a single bride on the runway “combines with staging to produce recognizable gender performances.” 63 To show a collection entirely of bridal gowns is no longer a production but a hyperbolic assault on gender performances. What does it mean to be a “broken bride”? While the gender ambiguous pieces of S/S 1997 afford the wearer a flexibility and level of self-assertion, A/W 2005 shows how a wedding dress clearly designates the wearer female, no matter how far removed from norms or tradition. The descriptor “broken” may not be referring to the wearer’s status as a bride but perhaps her position as a female in general. There is a chronology to this season, and as soon as the black begins to appear on the dresses the wearer has said her proverbial vows and her independence is undermined and shattered by her newfound responsibilities.

Implications

These two collections represent two distant poles of Kawakubo’s perspective on the subject of gender. “Dress Meets Body, Body Meets Dress” is an idealist view colored by cheery gingham


63 Dorrine, Kondo, About Face: Performing Race in Fashion and Theater. (New York: Routledge, 1997), 134.
on the possibility of lifting standardized body silhouettes, gender expectations, and the damaging effects of heteronormativity. “Broken Bride” on the other hand, is a more realistic commentary on the status of women and the institution of marriage. Fashion is an art form that merges the wearer with the art under the gaze of the spectator. It is necessary and outwardly apparent, and as a result is subject to the critical reception of the masses, despite Kawakubo’s attempts to vocalize her focus on the individual. The inseparable nature of fashion and gender, as demonstrated through the heterosexual duet earlier in this chapter, makes this public critique of fashion particularly influential on society’s understanding of gender.

Just one year after the runway debut of “Dress Meets Body, Body Meets Dress,” Vogue magazine ran an article in its personal style section entitled “Doing The Bump.” The first phrase in the largest text reads “it takes a brave woman to wear a Comme des Garçons ‘bump’ dress.” 64 The article is duplicitous in its tone, referring to the dresses from this collection as “walking works of art” while simultaneously referencing critical consensus on “the ugliest dress of the year” and offering backhanded compliments to the four women interviewed who have worn one of the dresses in public. One wearer, Carolyn Wade, exclaims that people would come up to her to ask if she was deformed or if her back was ok. Her son chastised her for drawing so much attention to herself at public events. Ironically, a woman who draws too much attention to herself by wearing a risqué outfit is seldom berated with this intensity. Wade cites an almost “teenage desire to shock” that she shares with other Comme fans.

Although the intentions of the designer are crucial in understanding the significance of these collections, a single designer alone can not alter the institution of gender so much as she

can give the public a tool for doing it themselves. The women interviewed in the *Vogue* piece repeatedly state how they feel like walking pieces of art in Comme dresses. This comment highlights one of the shortcomings of the collection in shifting women’s objectification from sexual to aesthetic, and ties directly back to Lehnert’s theory of the aesthetic artifact. We see how the fast pace of the fashion industry is confronted by the slower rate of acceptance of these dramatic changes to gender. If a woman is to be praised without the underpinnings of sexuality, she still must be reminiscent of some form of beauty such as abstract sculpture or artifact.

The article also cautions on the appropriateness of wearing a bump dress in “Comme-friendly zones,” implying that pushing boundaries for gender and fashion is only acceptable in very specific, vetted outlets. One of the outlets suggested is the theater where Merce Cunningham’s ballet *Scenario* was performed by dancers wearing modified versions of the dresses from S/S 1997. These modifications allowed the dancers to move more openly as some of the original versions of the dresses significantly restricted arm movement. It is noteworthy that *Vogue* cites this venue as appropriate for wearing a bump dress, likely because its already strong connections with the avant-garde. The tone of this recommendation is that it is ok to shock those who are expecting to be shocked, but to wear a piece of clothing that confronts gender norms anywhere else requires bravery and implies backlash, perhaps even from the magazine making the recommendation itself.

A presumably large audience had access to this article in *Vogue*, considering it is one of the most established fashion magazines, and thus its importance as a means of dispersion of Kawakubo’s work cannot be ignored. Additionally, the exclusivity of fashion shows themselves, which offer a notably more objective view of the fashion than a review, prevents widespread
access to the fashion at its source. In dispersing the collection to the general public through the condescending frame of the article, Vogue is undoing many of the benefits the collection could have presented.
Power

3
Introduction

Fashion has been inextricably linked to the more overarching pillars of the national, social, sexual, and political discourses in an attempt to bolster its importance as a field of critical investigation. We see this practice in the breadth of academic writings on the relationship between fashion and class, wealth, trade, democracy, gender, sexuality, race, ego, and identity, to list a few. Investigation of both the individual designers and the more perplexing fashion system are grounds for polarizing discord on the significance and meaning of fashion historically and in the contemporary world. To link specific articles of clothing with semiotic meaning is a relatively straightforward task, but to read one meaning into the fashion system—a multi-national industry predicated on novelty and ephemerality—is a different gauntlet entirely. For this reason, an explanation of fashion has both intrigued and eluded researchers for centuries.

As many theorists have pointed out (Kant, Simmel, Gronow, Lauer), fashion presents a convenient solution to one of the paradoxes of basic human needs: simultaneously to express one’s individuality and to conform to a larger group or society. We can visualize cultural differences in the relative importance with which these two conflicting needs are made manifest in fashion, in accordance with Geert Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions Theory. Fashion can also represent a means of class identification and boundary definition. Some critical scholars have, for instance, suggested that the exorbitant prices of high-fashion indicate a display of conspicuous consumption and the ability to waste income. Trickle-down theories argue that in order to prevent mimicry of expensive fashion in more economical ways, the higher classes of wealth-based social hierarchies find it necessary to discard old trends, invent new ones and give birth to fashion. However, this somewhat one-sided idea that creativity and fashion move linearly
down the economic ladder ignores the strong counter-evidence the rise of “street-fashion”
presents. As counter-evidence, “street-fashion” suggests that the ability of fashion to
simultaneously express individuality and confirm extends beyond the realm of class and that
fashion is more than a tool for showing wealth.

Fashion also has always been organically related to definition and rejection of specific
roles--occupational, social, gendered, and more. McDowell comments on the tendency in the
recent history of fashion to exploit sexuality for commercial gain. As a result of this tendency,
fashion’s ability to dictate roles has extended beyond gender to encompass definition of sexual
norms as well. For example, fashion and advertising directed at gay men imply expectations with
the same mechanisms used to shape ideals of a woman’s body. As the scope of fashion’s
influence widens to include subtle regulation of more and more societal norms, it also is finding
new ways to contest those roles. Consumers look to the avant-garde to simultaneously engage
with, reject, and predict new definitions of societal roles before they reach the mainstream
fashion industry. Group-oriented cultures, like Japan in particular, are dependent on fashion for
aligning with some groups and expressing individuality within them. On a larger scale, fashion is
an art form that effects even the most basic social interactions. The ways people perceive each
other’s tastes, social awareness and creativity consciously and unconsciously revolve around
fashion. For this reason, the project of this essay is to pull out the common thread amongst the
varying shapes of fashion influence and to analyze the work of Rei Kawakubo within its context.
In my view, that thread is power.
Contextualization

This analysis will consider a variety of theorizations of the importance and meaning of fashion, drawn from a number of disciplines including anthropology, sociology, gender studies, political science, cultural studies, aesthetics, and Japanese studies, and attempt to gain a comprehensive view of how fashion lends its wearers power. It will group those wearers into four categories: national, societal, institutional, and individual. Measurements of power can be quite ambiguous, and for this reason will be executed on a largely comparative basis. Due to the fact that Rei Kawakubo’s gender and nationality are two defining yet controversial characteristics of her success, many of these comparisons will take her status as Japanese or female as a point of origin.

In their comprehensive volume *Fashion Power: The Meaning of Fashion in American Society*, Lauer and Lauer identify four key metaphors for power observable through fashion history: force, royalty, tyranny, and divinity. In their view, these are the four sole arenas in which power can be construed. I adopt these as loose equivalents for my own aforementioned categories. National power can be described as force, societal as royalty, institutional as tyranny, and individual as divinity. Although these equivalencies will raise some questions, I believe that they provide a solid framework for conceptualizing power while contextualizing it within fashion’s reach.

In addition, the paper will not examine a specific facet of the fashion industry (for example, consumer, producer, designer, or reproduction) exclusively, as this would paint a biased

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depiction of power as it relates to fashion. Instead, it is more useful, and arguably more important, to understand how the significantly different manifestations of power all relate back to fashion as an industry, an art form, and a social regulator.

**National - Force**

The link between nationally recognized power and “force” as Lauer and Lauer describe it is perhaps the clearest of the four equivalencies. While they do caution their readership on the dangers of confusing fashion’s national and individual power, they note that the extent of forcefulness should be considered in a sense of influence. While it is arguable that fashion as power is most clearly visible on the individual scale, the national scale should not be overlooked, since the relationship between the nation and the individual is bilateral.

Fashion’s power at the national level is visible through the shift away from provision of garments towards provision of fashion and design-based images. As discussed in the heritage section of the thesis, Tokyo’s repeated attempts and arguable success in positioning itself among the established fashion capitals reflects the importance of global recognition for city-specific fashion. Jansson and Power attempt to understand the idea of a “cultural industry” as it relates to fashion and influence, and argue that “actors — who share an interest in gaining competitive advantage through the operationalization of fashion and design knowledge — use certain cities for their own branding and differentiation strategies.” 66 In other words, a specific actor, in this case Rei Kawakubo, stands to benefit just as much from Tokyo’s global recognition and branding

as Tokyo does from Kawakubo’s ability to act as a purveyor of that branding. This is one instance of the bilateral power-relationship between the individual and the nation.

Perhaps Kawakubo’s strongest and most recognized talent is her ability to create an image with each new collection. In the New Yorker, Thurman claims that “Kawakubo’s experiences as a stylist [have] taught her the importance of creating a coherent identity — a philosophy of design that is followed as strictly in the company’s Christmas cards as it is in the flagship stores.” 67 Consistency across merchandise, print media, interior design, web presence, and even partnerships is the unmistakable brand and “feel” of Comme des Garçons. According to Jansson and Power, this is the direction in which fashion is headed, which would make Kawakubo an incredible asset in the consolidation of Tokyo’s still developing image as a fashion capital. We should remember, however, that involvement does not necessarily entail benefits. Kawakubo’s vocal rejection of her heritage, presumably for reasons more closely related to faults intrinsic to the industry than Japan itself, means that Japan’s most decorated female Japanese designer has been largely absent from the process of branding Tokyo as a fashion capital.

Japan’s diplomatic use of soft power highlights the pressing importance of understanding the shift from garment creation to brand formation in the field of fashion. In 2002, by which time Kawakubo’s position atop the Japanese fashion hierarchy had been clearly established, Douglas McGray wrote in his article “Japan’s Gross National Cool” about the two camps of cultural dispersion: the phenomena of McDonald’s and world music. In McDonald’s case, he explains, “culture flows from American power, and American supply creates demand” whereas in the case of world music “globalization means that fresh, marginal culture reaches consumers in the

67 Thurman, “Misfit.”
United States through increased contact.” In both cases, culture flows from American power, but Japan’s rise to global culture exporter circumvented the U.S., as evidenced by key culture creators who found popularity in Europe and the rest of Asia before America, including the director and actor Takeshi Kitano, the anime director Miyazaki Hayao, and the singer Amuro Namie. Around this time, the style editor of the *New York Times* claimed that “Tokyo [was] the real international capital of fashion,” though this may have been an intentionally controversial statement to increase readership. Ultimately, McGray views Japan as being “postmodern before postmodernism was trendy” and, he suggests, in the early 2000s this assured Japan some of the global influence, recognition, and alliances it forfeited by not having a military.

A recent article in the *Economist* explains some of the missteps the state has made in attempting to cling to its soft power and “keep its cool.” The author laments the slow fall of Japan’s soft power abilities, believing that “the government seems to be confused about what it thinks is cool.” Anime and manga already enjoy a global appeal, and a consultant to the government on the “Cool Japan” strategy advises against focusing too narrowly on these areas. The issue can be summarized by Prime Minister Abe’s opinion that the single most representative item of the nation’s soft power initiative is the kimono. As far as Japanese fashion is concerned, the kimono is certainly the cornerstone, but perhaps not the face, of an international branding scheme.

This tendency raises the question of whether or not avant-garde or high fashion conflict with government regulated images of soft power. Kawakubo as well as other avant-garde

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designers have been a source of sensational trends that caused French, American, British and New York critics to reevaluate their views on cool. However, it is difficult to imagine a Comme des Garçons bump dress on a poster introducing the Tokyo 2020 Olympics, or plastered on the side of an ANA plane in the way Pokemon or other soft power icons have been. Comme des Garçons is far from cute. The works of Rei Kawakubo conflict with Japan’s attempts at solidifying its soft power in a more troublesome way, as well. First of all, the image of the Japanese woman being distributed globally by the Japanese government has virtually no common ground with the female archetypes constructed through Kawakubo’s fashion shows. The *Economist* article describes the prior as a “blend of cutesy yet pornographic,” with accentuated breasts, revealingly short skirts, grinning ear-to-ear, and with a presumably high pitched voice. 70 A Comme model, on the other hand, seldom smiles and is not dressed or crafted for the pleasure of the viewer or to be an object of the male gaze. This clear disconnect between what the nation believes to be representative of “cool” and what fashion critics in fashion capitals around the world have affirmed to be cool, and the way that disconnect shapes perceptions of Japanese women on a national stage, prevents Japan from harnessing the potential of Japanese high-fashion brands.

**Societal - Royalty**

The connection between the societal power held by fashion through its association with social influencers, and the idea of the royalty’s power is not a literal one so much as a reference to the nature of the power’s validity. Lauer and Lauer describe this resemblance as a power that

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70 Ibid.
“follows its own laws which are established by its own authority.” 71 The laws of both fashion and royalty are entirely undemocratic, and failure to abide by them can pose serious social repercussions. In the Elizabethan era, sumptuary laws were a literal linkage and enforcement of the royalty and the social power held by fashion. Today, fashion’s societal influence and meaning are not enacted through legislation but rather normalization. In the same way that a successor or revolution can indicate potential changes to royalty’s law, the work of the avant-garde can foreshadow alterations to the fashion norms of society.

Fashion has innumerable social effects. In recasting these effects as functions, the fashion system evolves from mere phenomenon to active producer of social capital and power. Ultimately, that power stems from fashion’s potential to adorn bodies with identifiers of power through social status, rank, class, wealth and even sexual competition. For example, the lack of added functionality of high fashion apparel and its often exorbitant pricing demonstrate diminished efficiency as a form of wasteful expenditure display, therefore signaling a high income and solidifying observable class disparities. Differences between class-based fashion norms at each point of the class hierarchy illustrate just some of the many social grouping mechanisms fashion facilitates. Just as an individual can express individuality while still conforming to an interest group, ethnicity, team, locality, or institution, they can accept or reject to varying degrees their compliance with the fashion norms of their respective hierarchical tier.

Class, a defining characteristic of social power, is unlike other in-groups in that until recently, one could move only down the social ladder by rejecting fashion’s prescribed norms, not up. That is, a member of the upper class could afford to move down in this way, but a

71 Lauer and Lauer, *Power*, 82.
member of the middle or lower class could not afford to move up. This directionality changed with the rise of street, avant-garde, and mass produced fashion. Seidl and Flicker argue that at the turn of the 19th century, with the advent and “rapid growth of mass production and subsequently mass consumption, and the possibility of producing garments without the expenses previously encountered, fashion spread to the lower classes and the common people.” They do mention that “this, however, did not mean that class distinction was no longer visible in people’s dress but rather expanded the opportunity to distinguish between the classes.” 72

Rei Kawakubo becomes a unique case in this reading of power. It seems as though she simultaneously advances and rejects the practice of social power and wealth display through her clothing. The high prices of Comme des Garçons goods underscore the brand’s ability to act as an indicator of wealth. Even in its most affordable PLAY line a T-shirt with the unmistakable heart logo can sell for upwards of $100. Prices of more elaborate pieces, from luxury lines can reach the thousands. Considering pricing alone, it would appear that Kawakubo is actively allowing her clothing to act as a means of wealth-based social power. However, for a few dollars one can purchase iron-on patch versions of the recognizable heart logo to apply to any T-shirt or other article of clothing. In selling these, Kawakubo is creating affordable inclusion in the high-fashion avant-garde group. It is worth considering that this is still only granting access to the least expensive of the various lines, but even PLAY allows wearers to feel a sense of inclusion with celebrities and fashion moguls spotted wearing it in public. Thus, although Comme des

Garçons does not dismantle high fashion’s function as an indicator of wealth and power, it does not simply subscribe to the notion either.

In the same way good fashion can act as a tool for group admission or conformity, bad fashion or fashion ignorance can be grounds for social isolation. As Lauer and Lauer argue, “the question we all face is not whether to conform, but to which group to conform, and the relative costs and benefits of conformity to various groups.” The avant-garde creates a new group wherein rejection of many of the traditional social norms of fashion becomes possible, while protecting the wearer from social isolation on the grounds that it is still fashion. Comme des Garçons’ most devout followers earned themselves the nickname “black crows” as a result of their wandering Tokyo’s streets dressed in Kawakubo’s signature monochromatic looks. In this naming, the avant-garde followers become part of a group that has its own special norms and belonging.

The rules of belonging to the group of fashioned CDG followers have not remained constant throughout Kawakubo’s rise, as she began to experiment with more diverse color palettes and body concealment. What has remained constant between Kawakubo and her “black crows” is the relationship between originator and imitator. This is crucial to understanding social power in Japanese fashion. Georg Simmel asserts “the charm of imitation in the first place is to be found in the fact that it makes possible an expedient test of power, which, however, requires no great personal creative application, but is displayed easily and smoothly, because its consent

73 Lauer and Lauer, *Power*, 82.
is a given quality.”  

By imitating, “black crows” (seen above) transfer not only the demand for creative activity, but also the responsibility for that activity, from themselves to another, in this case Kawakubo. In sporting Comme des Garçons, they are able to indicate social capital through wealth display and membership in a group which is outside the conventions of the traditional fashion system. Rei Kawakubo in turn becomes a source of social capital, and just like the concept of royal power, “follows [her] own laws which are established by [her] own authority.”

Despite this, Kawakubo’s position in the fashion system is not equivalent to that of royalty. Her rise has been primarily democratic, in that it has been fostered by support from a growing consumer base in addition to critical reception. Although she breaks the norms of the

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75 Rei Kawakubo, Crow tribe. カラス族, 1981.
fashion system with regularity, she is still subject to the rules of the game. We see this subjugation in her need to show in Paris, thus racializing and otherizing herself in order to court international success. We see her subject herself to the occasional interview with the fashion media despite her frequently voiced preference for extreme privacy. We also see the gendered nature of her shows and lines, despite her frequent bending or breaking of the gender binary. This rising success and critical acceptance of Comme des Garçons has had considerable impact on the role and strength of its societal power. The rapid rise in popularity seen in the past two decades has lead to a normalization of sorts. The context in which Kawakubo’s designs arrived in Paris was homogenous in design and attitude, according to Bello, making “the austerity of Kawakubo’s collection seem like some sort of affront to the established order.”  

Challenge that order became a new norm among the hoards of Comme des Garçons followers that had unique rules on the fringe of traditional fashion’s dictates.

However, Bello believes that “the 21st century has seen Kawakubo and her brand go mainstream.”  

This has resulted in the weakening shock value of each new collection, and the increase in acceptance of challenging the norms of the industry. Kawakubo’s fame and success are higher than ever; though annual financial reports are not public, the increasing number of brick and mortar, online presence and collaborations with stores like the Nordstrom and J. Crew, it is likely the brand is still experiencing comfortable long-term growth. Alongside economic success in more mainstream markets, rule-breaking has in a way been normalized as well.

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77 Ibid.
Therefore, the expectation of rule-breaking is present and the threat that Kawakubo poses to the fashion industry’s status quo has dropped significantly. Ironically, as the space and group Kawakubo created for prescribed rule-breaking grew in size, her impact on societal power remained the same. Once her popularity rose, the fashion industry adapted to normalize her style and placed her at the top, thus returning her to the status quo.

**Institutional - Tyranny**

Tyranny is power in its most dangerous form. Alongside tyrannical views of power come the breadth of harsh criticisms of fashion and its institutions. One of the earliest and most vocal critics of fashion was Georg Simmel, who claimed “[fashion] concerns externals and superficialities where irrationality does no harm. It signalizes the lack of personal freedom; hence it characterizes the female and the middle class, whose increased social freedom is matched by intense individual subjugation.” 78 In stark contrast with the view that fashion presents opportunities for sanctioned self-expression, many critics argue that members of society have no choice in the matter of fashion, conjuring images of undemocratic, tyrannical control. This view is visible in feminist critiques of fashion that describe the oppression and objectification of women through fashion despite an individual female’s willingness to partake in it. A man is typically not criticized as harshly for ignorance or unwillingness to abide by fashion’s laws. Lauer and Lauer support this view by concluding “we cannot be a nation of free people as long as we acquiesce to the tyranny of fashion.” 79 This segment of the argument will

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78 Simmel, *Fashion*, 541.

consider the institutionalized power of the fashion industry, and how Kawakubo subverts, contributes to and benefits from that power.

Perhaps most apparent and most frequently discussed are the ways in which the Japanese avant-garde subverts the power of the industry which allows it to function. This group of designers calls into question the foundation of the institution in which they operate, standing to benefit from the knee-jerk reaction of the industry and its associated institutions. One example of Kawakubo’s subversion of fashion’s institutional power is visible in her treatment of models. By the industry’s standard, models, especially female, are subject to regular policing, endure infantilization and judgment, feel compelled to adapt unhealthy eating or exercise habits and are forced to pinpoint the center of beauty’s ever-changing target. In the words of Mears, “the work of female models is a disciplining labor process in which female bodily capital is transformed into a cultural commodity.” 80 In her view, the disciplining of models is a response to gender instability and the vacillations of the heterosexual duet’s cutting edge. This results in the creation of an unachievable image of feminine perfection against which models are required to compare and shape themselves.

The modifications required to maintain femininity do not just impact the models wearing the fashion. Advertising, print media, fashion blogs, beauty supplies, diets, exercise equipment, and many other smaller industries fall under the influence of fashion. In constantly shifting the image of gender perfection, these industries stand to benefit from consumers’ reactionary subscriptions and purchasing in attempt to keep up. A very clear cause-and-effect, mutually

beneficial, cyclical relationship is formed between the shifting of ideals of models in the fashion industry and the continued success of its dependent subindustries.

Here, the gender politics of Kawakubo’s most radical collections, analyzed in the previous chapter, actually subvert the “tyranny” of the institutionalized power of the fashion system. “Dress Meets Body, Body Meets Dress” and “Broken Bride” in particular were able to redefine the nature of a gendered body and the gender-based expectations of that body, respectively. Some of the ideas most integral to Kawakubo’s work, such as the idea of “dressing to empower the wearer, not to pleasure the viewer,” are in direct contradiction to the sales tactics of many of the institutions which encourage purchase of lingerie, makeup, perfume, etc.

In addition, Kawakubo’s collections are perhaps most analyzed for their ability to challenge the industry’s, and consequently society’s, conceptions of the gender binary. As Mears points out, it is the very lack of precision in this old binary view that allowed the industry to change its views so rapidly and create trends. By “de-gendering” her clothing and introducing it to the public via the runway, Kawakubo created a space outside of gender that afforded some comfort to consumers who did not necessarily want or know how to feel prescriptively feminized by fashion. Models of Comme des Garçons shows are never made to wear heels, do not smile for the cameras, and are universally described as powerful, self-assured women. By actively confronting the industry’s expectations for models, Kawakubo subverts the institutionalized power that extends beyond the runway to affect consumers of any good which promises alignment with the constantly moving feminine ideal.

Just because Rei Kawakubo challenges the institutional power of the fashion system in some ways does not remove her entirely from contributing to it. The work of the Japanese big
three on the whole opposes conventions of race, gender, quality, form, and aesthetics deeply imbedded in the industry over centuries of repetition. But Kondo raises the question “what can their contestations and oppositional practices mean in a domain suffused, indeed constituted, by commodification?” 81 To Kondo, fashion potentially represents a domain whose very existence is defined by infinite reproduction, persuasion of consumers, scheduled obsolescence and re-inscription of class distinctions. In response, she reconsiders fashion outside the realm of the industrial, capitalistic machine and instead the from the perspective of impacts it has on individuals. For Kawakubo, this is absolutely the case.

To exclusively subvert the power which bolsters her creative expression and dispersion to a global audience would be counterproductive. Participating in fashion weeks, being interviewed for magazines and plastered on their covers, hosting luxurious store-opening celebrations and partnering with major fashion and art icons like H&M, Pharell, Yayoi Kusama, Converse, and Louis Vuitton all contribute to the success of the industry’s capitalistic undercurrents. And these interactions with other industries do ultimately detract from the raw, creative process Kawakubo strives for, profit from that detraction, and indirectly oppress women and appropriate race in the process. But, to refuse to participate in the fashion system or subvert it entirely would exterminate Kawakubo’s only means of gradually creating meaningful change and lending power to the fashion’s most crucial recipient: the individual.

**Individual - Divinity**

Lastly, this paper considers how power manifests itself at the level of the individual, and not simply from the perspective of the wearer. It asks — what are you putting on when you step

81 Kondo, *About Face*, 105.
into one of Kawakubo’s outfits, and who do you become? How is an individual body empowered by Kawakubo’s unique views on race and gender, and are those views tangible in the clothing? For their final metaphor for power, Lauer and Lauer cite divinity and look towards the devout followers of the higher powers of fashion. Those who unquestioningly and willingly enjoy keeping up with trends handed down to them are the primary source of this metaphor. This form of power can also be thought of as brand loyalty. When a brand reaches a level of acclaim wherein its followers are not buying because they like an individual item but rather the brand as a whole, the designer of that brand assumes a sort of power over that individual. I take issue with this, in that Lauer and Lauer impose a lack of agency on the consumer in this final metaphor. I offer an alternative to the divinity-based view of individual power, instead considering the idea of power in agnosticism. For a modern wearer of Comme des Garçons, the purest form of power that the clothing can give is a power through independence from the objectifying, racializing, and gendering impositions we subject ourselves to by interacting with fashion.

Power at the individual level returns us to the idea of the gaze, or woman as the object of the gaze. The gaze assumes a distinctive sexuality to its subject regardless of their desire to utilize it. In repeatedly stressing the importance and striking modernity of body concealment, Kawakubo does not desexualize her models or fans. Instead, she proposes an alternative to traditionally objectifying forms of sexuality. In Dressed to Kill, fashion writer Colin McDowell writes extensively on the relatively new marriage of clothing and sex. As fashion moves more towards the use of sexuality as a tool for sales, specifically by means of revealing, McDowell considers the benefits of rooting sexuality in concealing the body instead of revealing it. He cites historian C. Willett Cunnington, who points out “we are reluctant to abandon prudery because it
provides endless aphrodisiacs” and McDowell adds, “a form of censorship and control to subject the individual to the rule of society,” 82 sexuality based in concealment, above all else, gives the wearer the choice of their utilization of the power derived from their own body.

As I explained in the gender section, Kawakubo’s views on nudity and concealment offer much to feminist discourse, and as a result, new forms of power for individuals wearing Comme des Garçons clothing. Women interviewed in Vogue spoke of a bravery they felt when wearing Comme dresses in public, and an attention they received that was not tied to revealing their bodies, and therefore not constitutive of the male, or even homospectatorial gaze. Fuss explains the latter as the fashion industry’s normalization of “women look[ing] at other women with cultural impunity… and a socially sanctioned structure in which women are encouraged to consume” images of other women. 83 In this way, the power internalized through wearing a Comme des Garçons dress is not predicated on one’s gender, body, or exposed skin so much as it is a purely individualistic notion of power. Kawakubo collections have not disregarded nudity; even certain pieces in “Dress Meets Body, Body Meets Dress” expose their wearers, but not with the intention of turning nudity into sexuality. As McDowell asserts, the purest and most long-lived forms of sexual power are derived from clothing on the body, not a body exposed. For this reason, sexuality is not removed from the equation of power creation in Kawakubo’s work, but instead dually affords its wearers individual power in the choice to reject the gaze and maintain their sexuality simultaneously.

Fashion’s relationship with individual power also manifests in forms of “passing.” Passing can refer to “any deception that enables a person to adopt certain roles or identities from which he would be barred by prevailing social standards in the absence of his misleading conduct.” Originally, this term was used in the context of racial passing, usually to refer to non-white passers who were able to enjoy the benefits or safety associated with being white. Passing implies a degree of intentionality, or purposeful disregard of a part of one’s identity and adoption of another. Passing has also become key terminology in the discussion of transgender rights, and the ability of a transgender man or woman to pass as a biological version of their intended gender.

Considering that race and gender are two defining characteristics critics most frequently mention when discussing the success of Rei Kawakubo, it seems appropriate to consider passing as it relates to these qualifiers. In the eyes of critics (both in the 1980s and today), it is astonishing that not just a Japanese designer, but a Japanese designer who is female could have created such shockwaves in the fashion world. An astonishing element of the “Dress Meets Body, Body Meets Dress” collection is the fact that despite the obfuscations of body silhouettes, it still remained a recognizably women’s collection because of the pieces’ resemblance to dresses. To emphasize parts of the body that are not specific to biological males or females (gut, back, shoulders instead of hips, breasts etc.) allows the wearers to remove their own body silhouettes from the presentation of their gender. Teri Toye modeled for Comme des Garçons in the 1980s; making her one of the earliest transgender models to walk at a major fashion show.

Comme has since featured another trans model named Valentijn de Hingh. Though Comme des Garçons and the fashion industry as a whole have far to go in their inclusion of transgender identities, it is noteworthy that Kawakubo’s clothing has lent these two models some relief from the more rigidly binary collections of other top designers.

**Conclusion**

Power achieved through fashion, wearing, subverting, and becoming is multifaceted to say the very least. Using four metaphors for power as a guide, this chapter has touched on the shapes in which power manifests. National power, or force, reflects the ability of fashion to serve as a national unifier and advancer of a state’s soft power agenda. In omitting the “cool,” ultramodern designs of the avant-garde from the government-regulated promotion of soft power, Japan clings to outdated gender-based objectification of women and projects that onto the international stage. Societal power, or royalty, alludes to the ability of fashion to act as an indicator of disposable wealth and a means of social conformity. In creating a space outside the conventions of prescriptive industry norms, the Japanese avant-garde. Power here is constructed in Kawakubo’s ability to create a space in which her devotees can reject convention by breaking fashion rules, wearing ripped clothing, and dressing asexually. At the institutional level, power refers to the unavoidability of fashion’s “tyranny.” Models are made to dress and look a certain way, and images are promulgated across society to create standards. Adhering too closely to these standards is vain, while rejecting them entirely is unacceptable. Kawakubo herself is subject to the power of the fashion institutions, but must utilize them to create power in its final variant: individual power. This power is entirely other from the industry of fashion, and refers exclusively to the change of state one undergoes when wearing an article of clothing. Whether
this may be sexual, egotistical, or racial, the change itself affords the wearer the most potent form of power fashion has to offer. Individual power is the most important to Kawakubo, and is the fundamental starting point from which change in the industry originates.

Judith Thurman calls Rei Kawakubo a “misfit.” She “plays the game” of the fashion industry, but apparently does not have winning in mind. Her relationship with power is unlike that of any other designer to reach her level of success. It seems as though the more she rejects opportunities for power, the more they fall into her lap. She clearly does not align with the industry’s perceptions of a fashion designer, and for this reason has attracted the attention of countless critics and academics. I am not the first to draw the link between fashion and manifestations of power, nor am I the first to thoroughly analyze the impact, motivation, and reception of Kawakubo’s work. I hope, however, that in conjunction with a cross-analysis of the impact of heritage and gender, academia and the arts can use this case study on Rei Kawakubo as evidence of the pressing need to treat fashion as a viable field of critical analysis. In blurring the line between designer, businesswoman, artist and icon, Rei Kawakubo represents the pinnacle of fashion’s ability to shape our perceptions of gender and race and the power they hold.
In Summary

To say the role and impact of a female Japanese designer in the fashion industry is complex would be a gross understatement. Kawakubo, alongside her contemporaries inside and outside the “big three,” has spawned a devoted following of fashion consumers and producers who are at the beginning of their careers, and they will travel along the radical path that she has forged. Norms of heritage and gender in the fashion world have been fundamentally altered as a result of these Japanese designers, but will continue changing at the pace of fashion itself.

The opportunities for further analysis and continued research are abundant. Many Japanese designers take on an apprentice. Kawakubo took on Junya Watanabe, and to begin analyzing his work as a newcomer in the international circuit is one potential area for continuation. Additionally, many of the pieces themselves were inaccessible to me as they were held in museums I could not visit in the timeframe of this project. To be able to study these clothes in person, interview their creators, or discuss with academics studying the same subject matter would further this research immensely.

Fashion is simultaneously one of the most mutable, abstract concepts, and an element of daily life that affects everyone. The concepts of self-representation, creativity, and power that express themselves through fashion are rooted in the work of the designers who permeate the industry and its wearers. Kawakubo herself summarized this idea succinctly: “fashion is something that you can attach to yourself, put on, and through that interaction meaning is born.”


