

Reclaiming the Substance of Clothing: The Surreal Spectacle of Lady Gaga

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Abstract

This paper is motivated by the spectacular appearances of Lady Gaga, and the frequent misconception of her as a split personality and artificial copycat. The aim of the paper is to explore the difference between fashion as image and fashion as embodied experience, in an attempt to reclaim the substance of clothing. Although reclaiming the substance of clothing through an analysis of spectacular appearances may seem like a contradiction, it is possible by combining practical experience with philosophical considerations of clothes in conjunction with the act of dressing. Adapting a phenomenological perspective enables us to consider clothes as objects and their significance to human life. Through Surrealism's original engagement with fashion, we come to understand fashion and its instruments as the correlation between objects of the mind and the real world. Through a philosophical notion of the depth of life revealed in the spectacle, it all comes together, as I argue that Lady Gaga, through her engagement with clothes reclaims the substance of clothing.

Introduction

It is often said that fashion is a superficial pursuit of the vain. As if being conscious about one's appearance is a one-dimensional and shallow affair. I argue that there is nothing superficial about fashion itself, but that one can choose to have a superficial engagement with fashion. Although *Fashion* is a term that encompasses an entire industry, it is important to remember that fashion in its pure simplicity boils down to items of clothing, which individuals may or may not choose to position themselves in. As random and un-reflected this positioning might be for some, as consciously considered it is for others. Oscar Wilde, who was accused of being obsessed with the superficial, summed this up. In a now famous quote he said, 'it is only shallow people who do not judge by appearances'. But as Lauwaert (2006) argues over the last decades the fashion industry seems to have increasingly entwined itself with the 'logic of the illustration' to such extent that fashion seems to play itself out in images, rather than in the streets. Fashion has thus become something people participate in with their eyes, more than their bodies.

The image of clothing is such a prominent presence – so festive so obtrusive – that we miss out something very essential, indeed that it is [us] ourselves who turn clothing into image. Image of and for myself, of and for others, but most of all for the unknown third part. (Lauwaert 2006:182)

Trough my practice of teaching Fashion (2010) I have considered the frequently used two-dimensional illustration approach to fashion, yet through my practice as a personal Stylist, the approach always starts with an actual garment in conjunction with a three-dimensional body. This has led me to contemplate the difference between fashion as *image* and fashion as *embodied experience*. As these two experiences of fashion are rather incompatible, the conclusion is that when addressing fashion one has to distinguish between the *wearer* and the *viewer*.

This paper is thus about identifying ways of relating to fashion, as objects of clothes, by contemplating clothes' significance in relation to human beings. By adapting a phenomenological perspective we can come to understand the significance (the) objects has on the formation of human identity. Through Surrealism's engagement with fashion we can come to understand clothing's role in the connection between humans interior and exterior worlds. Surrealism's fascination with fashion came not only to 'identify the insurrection art offers to daily life' (Martin 1987: 9), fashion became the connection between the ordinary and the extraordinary, and the abiding membrane between art and life.

I claim that Lady Gaga is the most current and poignant example of an individual who has, not only embraced the surrealist vision as part of her art, she also embodies the notion that clothes, as objects, are an integral part in the formation of personal and in her case artistic identity. But since the objective of this paper is to reclaim the substance of clothing, we need to go beyond the visual surface of her spectacular appearances, by considering clothes as objects in an act of embodying experience.

The depth of life revealed in the Spectacle

Through my practice of teaching fashion, and perhaps more so, through my practice as a personal stylist, I recognise that if we consider fashion and clothes primarily as *objects to looking*, we fail to understand the *embodied activity* they are subject to.

But as Lauweart (2006) argues, because the fashion industry has become so ‘intimately entwined with the logic of the illustration’ fashion is now played out in images, rather than in the streets. Lauweart points out that ‘fashion as it is presented in photographs limits the reach of attention and sensitivity’. What we see are primarily formulas, no unique resolutions that should direct us to our own resolutions’ (ibid: 183). As the arbitrary choices in our clothing decline, the differentiation between us disappears and clothing without our involvement and engagement become banal. This is, according to Lauweart, resulting in ‘a rapidly spreading incapacity to dress oneself’, which is being obscured behind the ‘fascinating spectacle of fashion’ which people take part in with their eyes, but hardly ever with their bodies (ibid). So when contemplating fashion we need to distinguish between *the viewer* and *the wearer* as two rather incomparable modes of experiencing clothes. Whilst the viewer has a *visual experience of an image*, the wearer has an *embodied experience of wearing a garment*.

When contemplating Lady Gaga (LG) the word *spectacle* comes to mind. This word is often associated with superficiality, but according to Collins English Dictionary (2004) Spectacle means: ‘1) public display or performance, 2) a thing or person seen - especially unusual or ridiculous, 3) a strange or interesting object or phenomenon’. LG as artist, musician and performer seem to embody them all. Although she says that “Music is the place where I’m allowed to be as strange as I am” (McCormick, 05.07.11 The Telegraph), it is through a conjunction between music and visual aesthetics that she has established her unique persona. Music is her vehicle, but the clothes give her density and integrity beyond being a voice. It is important to underline that I in no way wish to undermine or downgrade her music and voice, as secondary to her visual appearances, but the objective is to examine the vestimentary phenomena she has become. Wherever she goes and whenever she meets the public she never fails to evoke marvel. Her appearances are down right spectacular, but I argue far from superficial. But in order to see their depth we have to philosophically consider the spectacle as phenomena.

‘The exterior spectacle helps intimate grandeur unfold’, wrote Bachelard (1994:192) first in 1958, when he explain how, in the spectacle, the vast world and the vast thoughts are united. ‘This grandeur is most active in the realm of intimate space. For this grandeur does not come from the spectacle witnessed, but from the unfathomable depths of vast thoughts’ (ibid). ‘In certain almost supernatural inner states, the depth of life is entirely revealed in the spectacle’ (Baudelaire in Bachelard 1994:192).

I argue that LG does not *only* conduct ‘exterior spectacle’, but that she through the *act of dressing* materialises profound thoughts and meaning, by which she allows ‘intimate grandeur unfold’. Clothes, when considered in conjunction with the living and experiencing body wearing them, play a significant role in bridging internal perception to external appearance. Although not everybody does experience the connection between themselves and the clothes they wear, as strongly as LG does, clothes enables imagined concepts to operate in the sphere of the real.

The Surreal spectacle of Lady Gaga

LG has on several occasions pointed out that she exists in a state between fantasy and reality. 'I know not the difference between the hair that grows from my head and the teal wigs that grow from my imagination. They are the same' (Metro 11.07.11). Some critics have taken such statements as an expression of LG having 'lost touch with reality' claiming that she is confusing her 'outrageous stage persona with reality' (Bellinger 09.07.11). In an attempt to understand the duality of LG's statement we can turn to the Surrealist art movement, to which fashion is the '*correlation between real objects and objects of the mind*' (Martin 1987:11). No other art movement has embraced fashion and its instruments as surrealism, so it is no wonder that surrealism became fashion's favourite art. Not only did Surrealism touch on the imagery of woman, more significantly, it pointed fashion out as 'the correlation between the world of real objects and the objects of the mind' (ibid). For the surrealists, fashion became the most compelling friction between 'the ordinary and the extra-ordinary, disfigurement and embellishment, the body and the concept, the artifice and the real' (ibid: 9). Through fashion the surrealist vision and faith became the connection between everyday and the exceptional, by which they came to 'identify the insurrection art offers to daily life (ibid: 9). I argue that since the surrealists, no other artist has embraced the meaning of fashion like LG. She has not only embraced the surrealist metaphor, as she shows us through her visual aesthetic she seems to live by it. Through her choice of clothes, objects to wear, she herself forms part of the art.

Accused of being 'calculated and artificial, [...] clinical and strangely antiseptic [and] stripped of eroticism', Paglia suggests that with LG's 'over-conceptualised and claustrophobic' miming of persona after persona, LG represents the exhausted end of the sexual revolution' (The Sunday Times 12.09.10). But Paglia seems to miss a point that is obvious to anyone who grew up with a dressing-up chest. Clothes do not only bridge the state between naked and dressed. Through clothes we can articulate aspects of our being and existence that words cannot. Through the physical act of dressing, we can explore dimensions in our personality, define our appearances, project different characters, and experience our own existence, again and anew. This projection often starts in front of a mirror, as was also the case for the young LG, as she explains in an interview appropriately titled *Inside the Outside*; 'I wasn't a little girl in that mirror, I was Whitney Huston, I was Gloria Estefan. I was whoever I wanted to be' (MTV 2011). So when LG points out that she lives halfway between reality and fantasy, I see it more as a reflected awareness of the power of imagination, rather than having lost touch with reality. Now when asked what's the most spectacular thing she have ever seen when looking into her audience? She replies 'Myself. It's like a magnificent disco ball, with twenty thousand tiny mirrors reflecting back at me. It requires me to be honest. I see myself in my fans [...] without them, I don't exist' (V Magazine No.72, 2011).

There is something heroic about the way my fans operate their cameras [...] like Kings writing the history of their people. They are kings. They are queens [...] while I am something of a devoted jester. It is in the theory of perception that we have established our bond. Or in the lie, I should say, for which we kill. We are nothing without our image, without our projection, without the spiritual hologram of who we perceive to be or rather to become, in the future (From the Manifesto of the little Monsters).

The difference between fashion as image and fashion as embodied experience

LG's appearances excite and provoke, causing commentary around the globe about her integrity, authenticity, sanity and credibility. So how do we come to understand statements such as 'If you ask me to remove my [...] hat at a party [...] is the emotional and physical equivalent of requesting I remove my liver' (Metro 11.07.11). Comparing the significance of an accessory with the importance of a vital organ, may seem more bizarre and distorted than real. How can we come to comprehend such seemingly profane yet profound statement? Adapting a Phenomenological perspective can help, as Phenomenology is the study of phenomena; how things come to appear, the way we come to experience things, and thus the meaning things come to have in our experience. 'Phenomenology insists that identity and intelligibility are available in things, and that we ourselves are defined as the ones to whom such identities and intelligibilities are given. We can evidence the things are; when we do so we discover objects, but we also discover ourselves.' (Sokolowski 2000:4). By recognising the relation between humans and the physical world, phenomenology enables us to consider objects both in relation to the formation of human identity, as well as their significance in relation to articulation of human life and existence. Rather than seeking an objective truth, the agenda of the phenomenologist is to seek understanding of how persons construct meaning. By reflecting on how and what we experience, we can gain insights to the meaning things and events come to have for us.

When a child steps into a pair of high-heeled shoes, it does not *just* step into a pair of oversized shoes; it steps into another experience of being. As the child positions their feet their entire comportment alters, sometimes even the voice and topic of conversation. No different to an adult wearing high-heels, the child experiences itself taller, possibly older, may be even sexy in a way it may associate with being a grown-up. But the act of dressing-up is not only to be considered as copying adults by mirroring their behaviour. Any shoes or outfit for that matter enable the child to connect their imagination to a bodily experience of feeling and being different to how they would experience themselves without the high-heels on. Although the child is playing, what they are projecting is experienced as real and embodied. The shoes literally become a gateway to a new experience of one self.

Clothing puts us into a different scene, in that scene where we can play out our own role and transcend our peers, ourselves. Clothing allows us to appear because it gives us density, stratification, a depth by which we are not only visible in the way that everything else is visible, but where we take on meaning, a significance that only we can disperse (Lauwaert 2006:181)

As clothes are the objects by which humans appear and gain density, their main purpose is not to hide our bodies, but to make them readable. The opposite of the dressed body is the naked body, but nudity itself reveals nothing about us as individuals. Where we belong, which climate we live under, what we think or how we would like to be perceived. Nudity, in this light is to be considered as a democratic state of being, as naked, humans are all equal. A naked body admittedly reveals physical facts such as gender, age and race, but nothing in terms of humans as thinking, articulate and imaginative beings. Clothes do.

An exercise in plagiarism or articulating a stance?

The Video Music Award (VMA) ceremony 2010 became the occasion and one of many examples of how LG uses garments to articulate meaning and draw attention to an issue close to her heart. She was not giving a musical performance, and was thus nervous. Thinking ‘I can’t let my fans down tonight, because then I’m just another bitch in a dress’ (Ellen Degeneres Show 10.10.10). Choosing to wear a dress made out of meat, gave her appearance significance beyond receiving an award. Fighting for gay rights, the meat dress served to symbolise that ‘If we don’t stand up for what we believe in ... if we don’t fight for our rights, pretty soon we’re going to have as much right as the meat on our bones. I am not a piece of meat’ says LG (ibid).

The idea of a dress made out of meat was not original to LG, as artist Jana Sterbak had first executed it in 1987. Sterbak attached 50 – 60 pounds of raw flank to a mannequin and fashioned it into the form of a dress she entitled “*Vanitas: Flesh Dress for an Albino Anorectic*”. With the emphasis on the contrast between vanity and bodily decay the, then extremely controversial artwork evoked thoughts about mortality, and the way time changes our perception of [art] works. The day of the opening, when the dress was exhibited, the flesh was raw, but over the span of the exhibition, the aging process drastically changed the appearance of the work. Sterbak explains as “the meat dries and starts to look like leather. Then everything is better, [as if] it becomes [more] acceptable” (Sterbak, 12.06.11).

Although the two meat dresses are separated by time and motivation, they have in common that they are both considered controversial. But since both artists used raw meat as their material, it is not so much originality of the concept, as it is choice of venue for their appearance, which sets them apart. Where Sterbak created hers for a mannequin in a gallery, LG chose to wear hers on the red carpet. More likely to be an exercise in artistic communication, than plagiarism, it is the individual method of delivering their art piece that is of interest. As LG by positioning herself in the dress, through the embodied act of dressing becomes part of the artwork/articulation.

Her theatrical and spectacular appearances never fail to entertain or shock, inspire or provoke, causing both complementary and condemning commentary. But since her outrageously eccentric costumes are not reserved for stage performances only, they also cause confusion about her integrity, authenticity, sanity and credibility. Cultural critic Paglia writes that LG is ‘a manufactured personality’ and that ‘every public appearance, even absurdly at airports where most celebrities want to pass incognito, has been lavishly scripted in advance with flamboyant outfit and bizarre hairdo [...]’ (The Sunday Times 12.09.10). Critics such as Paglia fail to understand is that the conjunction between LG and the clothes she wears are in so intrinsically connected. LG is a performing artist at work, and that her visual appearances matter, as they are part of her artistic expression. Yet her appearances are considered so extravagant, so incredible that many journalists, in their search of truth, ask what she wears when on her own, out of the public eye? The question is not only inappropriate, it is contradictory, as if a verbal description of what she wears in private, would give a more credible picture of who she is, than her fully dressed appearance in public. LG’s response is ‘What are you looking for? [...] It is an interesting fight, the performance of my life, everyday reminding people that the curtain has not closed’ (Lady Gaga takes tea with Mr. Fry, www.FT.com, 27.05.11).

Clothes as social convention or individual opportunity

According to Bourdieu (1994) the way we come to live in our bodies is structured by our social position in the world. Through what he calls *habitus* individuals are, consciously or not, positioned in relation to social structures where factors such as class, gender, race, age and occupation have become defined and embodied structures. But although the act of dressing can be considered a socially constituted exercise, dressing, certainly in the western world, it is also put into practice individually. Through the notion of habitus, it is thus possible to address the dialectic relationship between social structures (patterned arrangements) and agency (the capacity to act independent of these structures). LG shows a capacity act independent of conventions. It is part of her mission to break down defining structures. 'I define my own fame [and] existence, my own identity [and] my own beauty. No one [else than yourself] can define who you are' (Lady Gaga: Inside the outside, MTV 2011).

Independence, uniqueness, eccentricity, personality and distinctiveness are all synonyms to the term individuality. Finding out who you are is not just an opportunity in life; it is a divine obligation. Trying out as many hats and wigs, jackets and shoes until you find what best describe you, may sound like a profane advice, but is no different to the scenes played out in many bedrooms before hitting a party. This vestimentary philosophy can be adapted and applied throughout life; making your wardrobe a lively and dynamic space, where outfits hang waiting to come alive as servants in your mission of defining and being yourself. To most the daily act of dressing comes as natural as breathing, as humans from a very early age pride themselves on their ability of getting dressed. A concern of what is appropriate to wear, where and when, is less prevalent to the early aged, as social conditioning has not yet fully set in. However buttoning tops and trousers, zipping jackets and tying shoelaces are considered milestones in a journey towards independence. Then, at the age of four, when independence is experienced at its highest for the first time, social convention hits, and it hits hard in the form of school uniform. It is argued that the school uniform is practical, but it also serves a political purpose. The uniform gives the children an equal appearance, and thus they are expected to perceive of each other as equals. Again attention needs to be drawn to the difference between *viewing* the dressed and *being* the dressed. To a teacher the children may all look the same, but to the individual it is the others who look the same.

Breaking down conventions like LG does, takes personal courage and artistic conviction. As she reminds us that in the early days she was considered too theatrical for pop and too pop for theatre. LG's choice of what to wear and how to wear it is a testament to the strength of a visionary individual who faithfully insist on being so.

Being myself in public was very difficult. I was being poked and probed and people would actually touch me and touch my clothes and be like, 'What the f**k is that?' It was like I was being bullied by music lovers, because they couldn't possibly believe that I was genuine' (Fame felt like bullying, www.contactmusic.com 26.05.11).

Clothing can thus define the personal *habitus*, where individuals define, reside and articulate themselves by engaging in the act of dressing. Not just as practical and mortal beings, but as magnificent creatures of creative imagination and presence.

Where reality ends performance begin...

So under ‘the triumphant regime and magical spectacle of fashion, how can such uniformity of clothing prevail?’ asks Lauweart (2006: 183). He argues that as ‘the functionality of clothing’ meanders through western culture and clothing ‘like a perversion’. ‘Slowly, but surely clothing has lost its symbolic and emblematic potential’ as a practical, hence value-neutral solution has become the western consumers field of vision, by which all differentiation in clothing has disappeared. The aesthetics of functionality has resulted in degeneration in clothing, for which ‘the magical spectacle of fashion is required to compensate’. But behind the fascinating spectacle of fashion, which people take part in with their eyes, but hardly ever with their bodies, lies an increasing incapacity to dress oneself (ibid).

With her music and performances, her creative and inspiring personality, wearing outfits most of us could not dream up in our wildest imagination, LG shares everything she has to give with the world. Not for the sake of fame, but because of the obligation of fame, her artistic commitment seems relentless. Whether LG’s personal taste in clothes awakes approval or contempt, her individual fashion regime illustrate what supreme quality clothes can have. From the depth of her surreal spectacle a naked truth pervades, from which she more than reclaims the substance of clothing; as she inspire millions of individuals around the globe, she invites each of them to consider their own potential to transform into something unique and special.

If clothing is merely functional and not existential, then it is conceivable that we can live without clothing of our own, literally as naturalists, figuratively in uniform. [...] Clothing is the ultimate something to demonstrate that the world of humans is a fleeting phenomenon. [...] The fundamental role of clothing exists to bring the impurity of life to mind as the basis for our vitality, again and again. Clothing is the praxis of a vitalist philosophy. (Lauweart 2006: 175-176)

There is a frequent conception that Lady Gaga is a constructed alter ego of a performing, but otherwise real Stefanie Germanotta. When asked how Stephanie Germanotta each day transforms herself into Lady Gaga, she replies that there is no separation of the two. ‘Transformation? How do you mean? I’m always Gaga [...] There isn’t a stage person and a private person. I am a human being, not a split personality’ (The Big Issue in The North 2010). The misconception may be rooted in a conventional understanding of the stage as the arena for performances, and when the performance comes to the end, the acted character is left behind in the changing room, where the performer undresses and returns to a real and authentic person.

Although LG say that “Music is the place where I’m allowed to be as strange as I am” (McCormick, 05.07.11 The Telegraph), she cannot be seen or understood separate from her visual appearances, as her fashion statements give her density and integrity beyond being a voice. Yet it is not her clothes that define her credibility, her fans do. It is for them she composes and performs, it is for them she appears and exists. As LG has defined her life as her stage, there is no separation between her self and her performance. ‘Where I begin and where the stage ends has no linear quality. It’s centrifugal’ (V Magazine No.72, 2011) - where performance ends freedom begin.

As the power of the imagination becomes reality

The role of material objects, such as clothes, is rarely considered when attempting to understand human life. Instead social science favours ‘the internal psychic processes of the individual or the patterns of relationship between people’ (Csikszentmihalyi 1981:1). Yet as humans we display an intriguing characteristic of both making and using objects. Our reason for this is not merely to create tools for survival or clothes for protection. The objects themselves make skills manifest, embodies goals, and shape identities. So in order to understand what and who people are, or what they may become we must understand what goes on between people and things. Therefore rather than trying to understand LG as phenomena, by separating her performing self from her private self, I argue that she through her visual appearances, her surreal spectacle, is as exposed and naked as it is possible to be in conjunction with clothes. Her musical talent is extraordinary, but the mechanics, by which she explores and visually articulates the magnitude of her human existence, are available to all. Magic can occur when clothes are put on. The moment a garment and/or shoes go from being *static objects*, to becoming extensions of the person wearing them.

I live half way between reality and fantasy at all times because I choose to, and everyone can choose that, and I believe everybody has something magical about themselves and why, as a society, are we so afraid of magic? Why is magic synonymous with artifice? Why is the fantastic synonymous with a lie? If art is a lie, then I will tell that lie every day until it is f***ing true (Lady Gaga takes tea with Mr. Fry, www.FT.com, 27.05.11)

As LG knew she was LG before the world did, I argue that through a combination of vital determination, musical talent, visual aesthetic and a rather phenomenal understanding of clothes Stefanie Germanotta evolved into Lady Gaga. In the same way, by the same mechanics Lady Gaga can chose again to evolve into another state of being. As she did when she dressed up in a white t-shirt and a black suit, and exposed the otherwise invisible concept of Jo Calderone. Temporarily or permanent, imagined male or a real aspect of her personality is not relevant here. What is relevant is that he only becomes visible through clothes. Other artists have touched upon gender as a concept before. Annie Lennox performed dressed as male in 1984, Madonna sang ‘What if feels like for a girl’ (2001) from the imagined mindset of a boy, as did Beyonce in her song ‘if I were a boy’ (2008). But LG goes a step further, as she embodies the concept she turns the words into flesh. Quite biblical really, and in full correspondence with surrealist vision, as clothing was what embraced the naked concepts, they become the inevitable signifier of the concepts the surrealists dressed and addressed. ‘Concepts may be naked at birth, but they are soon swaddled in realities’ (Martin 1987: 9)

As Gaga continues her fearless and exposed exploration of her self, both as artist and being in this world, the term ‘Boundary conditions’ comes to mind. It is a term used in physics, which describes the point where one thing transition from one state into another, e.g. the point when boiling water turns into steam, and the mechanics by which it does so. Her engagement with fashion is a testament to how clothes, when engaged with to their highest potency, are the flesh from which new concepts become visible, tangible and embodied. Now there is something to think about when you are next contemplating shopping for clothes.

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