Practices of resistance: The Antwerp fashion scene and Walter Van Beirendonck’s subversion of masculinity

Introduction

Once upon a time, in a grey city called Antwerp, a gang by the name of King Kong Kooks was fighting to save fashion from boredom. This is not a Walt Disney story, even if its creator, Belgian fashion designer Walter Van Beirendonck, is often defined as the ‘Walt’ of fashion for his extremely colored and original designs. In the presentation of his Spring/Summer 1989 collection King Kong Kooks, in the form of a comic strip in collaboration with comic artist Jan Bosschaert and Flemish cartoonist Marc Legendre, he tells the adventure of a group of ‘[s]oldiers for nature, brightness and fun’, involved in a battle against the so called ‘grey smokey bears’. While the former is a group of ‘weirdos’ who love to scorn rules and tradition in the name of positive thinking, the latter represent what historian George Mosse defines as respectability, ‘a term indicating “decent and correct” manners and morals, as well as the proper attitude toward sexuality’ (1985: 1), the foundation of bourgeois morality.

This comic strip epitomizes the philosophy behind Walter Van Beirendonck’s conceptual fashion, which aims to ‘épater les bourgeois (shock the bourgeois) and to draw attention to social and political issues’ (Geczy and Karaminas 2017: 150). Although Van Beirendonck has touched upon different topics throughout his decades-long career, from rituals and ethnography to futuristic technology, this article will focus on masculinity, sexuality and the body, and discuss how the designer has been able to subvert the bourgeois discourses surrounding these elements through a queer and anti-binary approach to the clothed body. Analyzing Van Beirendonck’s collections from the late 1980s and the 1990s will allow us to take a critical position against the bourgeois cultural construction of masculine identity and body from an aesthetic perspective, showing how the designer’s creative practices open up new possibilities stretching the boundaries of masculinity.

As far as the relationship between fashion, gender and the body is concerned, the analysis will start by retracing their relationship in the modern context, showing how fashion represented, according to Joanne Entwistle, ‘the “armour” of the modern world’ (2000: 120). Indeed, a set of scientific discourses, such as physiognomy and the medicalization of homosexuality, created visual stereotypes of what was considered normal/decent and abnormal/indecent. In this context fashion played an extremely important role for the
presentation of the self in the anonymity of the city crowd, with modern masculinity focusing its communication of bourgeois values on a visually-oriented strategy, which continued throughout the twentieth century.

The rigid bourgeois separation of gender roles was reflected in fashion as well, creating binary and strictly gendered aesthetics. However, this tradition started to be challenged with the advent of postmodernism, also through the so called ‘avant-garde’ fashion. An example of this change will be provided through the city of Antwerp, which is considered as a site for ‘creative resistance’ against the middle-class ideal of the relationship between fashion, body and gender, focusing in particular on the Antwerp Fashion Academy and how its educational philosophy shifted from a bourgeois to a personal/individual perspective, allowing a new approach to fashion design.

Based on this cultural change, the impact of Antwerp fashion in the ‘production of situations of creative resistance’ (Martinez 2007: 2453) will be demonstrated through the figure of Walter Van Beirendonck, showing how he has been able to create a new grammar for the relationship between fashion and gender. As for methodology, the article will be developed through a qualitative analysis of visual and audiovisual material combined with press articles of the period, generously provided by MoMu archive, in order to understand the ways in which Walter Van Beirendonck’s clothing is represented and how material objects are presented through images, text and narratives. The timeline under study (1983-2000) focuses on the designer’s early career, providing an overview of the stylistic evolution through selected collections significant for the redefinition of gender, sexuality and the body. Therefore, a parallel between bourgeois and normative masculinity and its subversion and liberation through a critical approach to fashion will be built, demonstrating how menswear is not just a site for conservatism, but rather a form of expression and identity formation, and most importantly a site for radicalism and resistance (Bowstead 2018).

**Fashion and identity in the formation of the modern masculine stereotype**

Fashion and identity always had a close relationship in Western history, marking social, class and gender differences. Nevertheless, this connection reached its climax in the context of modernity and the metropolis, in which anonymity was seen as a threat and led to an emphasis on how we perform our identity through dress and body as something to be read for symbolic meanings. In order to clarify the position of this article, in the next pages, the terms *modernity*...
and modern will be used in relation to “the historical period that began with the Enlightenment, and thus [they refer] to assumptions about the world, and to ways of understanding the world that have been characteristics of western culture since the 18th century” (Morgado 1996: 42).

Specific to this historical moment is a new perception of masculinity in relation to fashion and consumption (Breward 1999; Edwards 1997; Kuchta 2002), supported by the emergence of disciplinary and scientific discourses defining what it meant to be a man. The latter, indeed, contributed to the stigmatization of male vanity, delegitimizing self-expression and bodily autonomy by enforcing conformity through fashion as the first means in the making of the male social body and identity.

**Physiognomy and bourgeois masculinity**

In his analysis of the metropolis, philosopher Georg Simmel states that ‘[i]nterpersonal relationships in big cities are distinguished by a marked preponderance of the activity of the eye over the activity of the ear’ (1958: 486). Moreover, the constitution of the new science of physiognomy, which aimed to uncover personality traits through the study of facial features, body structure and overall physical appearance, had a great impact on the development of the modern masculine stereotype from a visual perspective. Indeed, according to fashion scholar Joanne Finkelstein:

> […] the importance of scrutinizing the physical appearance of the other, of analyzing each element of conduct and appearance in order to be aware of the concealed attributes of character and the hidden dimensions of the self. It is an idea that also had currency in the emergence of contemporary manners and our styles of conduct in the modern city populated with strangers. (1991: 65)

This creation of crude stereotypes led to behavioral determinism based on the appearance of individuals, since physiognomy became a means of calculating and understanding the invisible based on the visible. The importance of fashion in the management of the self emerges in this connection between the interior soul and external appearance, which in the city context is always under the normalizing judgment of the penetrative eye of the other.

In his work *The Image of Man*, historian George Mosse retraces the birth of the modern masculine stereotype as something that was not only based on comportment anymore, since looks and physical appearance also started to have an important role. Pointing out the impossibility of establishing a precise moment in which the ideal of modern masculinity
emerged, Mosse affirms that it was modern society that diffused this new ideal of masculinity, making it a political and social force: ‘[t]he construction of modern masculinity was closely linked to the new bourgeois society, that was in the making at the end of the eighteenth century. It was then that a stereotype of manliness emerged that we recognize even today’ (1996: 17).

Although Mosse’s research does not focus on fashion, I believe it can be useful to start to analyze masculinity and its cultural meanings from a visual perspective. Indeed, Mosse’s main point is that this modern stereotype of masculinity was conceived as a totality based upon the nature of man’s body in a visually oriented age, in which the body started to be instilled with symbolic meanings. This led to a great importance of adornments and to a standardized image of man to which all men were supposed to conform, creating a normative aesthetics.

The visual aspect of masculinity was also based on its public nature that made the invisible visible to the crowd, and as Mosse states, ‘the strength of true masculinity was so powerful precisely because, unlike abstract ideas or ideals it could be seen, touched, or even talked to’ (1996: 17). It was a visual reminder of what each man should incorporate in his everyday public performance. In term of aesthetic features, by the mid-eighteenth century we can observe a clear distinction between masculinity and femininity, which are now perceived no more as complementary but as distinct, creating narrow and specific human types. In particular, man’s aesthetic ideal drew inspiration from Johan Joachim Winckelmann’s theory on Greek beauty, and his influential work Reflections on the Painting and Sculpture of the Greeks (1755), focused on the need to rediscover the beauty of Greek sculpture and its embodiment of power, virility but also harmony, proportion and self-control.

According to Geczy and Karaminas, Winckelmann’s theorization of the concept of the Greek ideal became a ‘benchmark for thinking about quality on grounds that brought the quality of life into consequence with aesthetics. In other words, a good style was the consequence of a good and robust culture’ (2013: 14). Winckelmann’s contribution permitted the integration of the study of style into human activity, giving style moral impetus. As a consequence, the ideal of mens sana in corpore sano provided by Greco-Roman style became the perfect aesthetic standard for the modernist preoccupation with self-image management, considered something to be read in the anonymous context of the metropolis, providing the modern idea of the ‘classic’. Modernist style was mainly based on the idea that ‘there is an essential core that must be protected against the violation of wanton, extraneous additions […] the pared-down modernist armature is socially productive if not democratic, while the over-adorned form reflects an obscurity inimical to the unimpeded progress of culture and industry’ (Geczy and Karaminas 2013: 17). This idea of something to be protected but at the same time
to be communicated is well stressed by fashion scholar Elizabeth Wilson in her seminal work *Adorned in Dreams*:

The nineteenth century bourgeoisie, anxious to preserve their distance from the omnipresent gaze in the strangely inquisitive anonymity of the crowd where ‘anyone’ might see you, developed a discreet style of dress as a protection. [...] street dress became full of expressive clues, or indeed even more important, to let the world know what sort of person you were. (1985: 136-37)

Therefore, masculinity represented the foundation of modern self-definition, becoming something to be protected and made clear through the armour of fashion. An armour based on conformity and impermeable boundaries between masculinity and femininity, which “consisted of an undifferentiated, rather thick wool suit for day and informal wear, and a constricting arrangement of severe black and white for formal occasions” (Breward 1995: 172). This led to a chromophobic, functional, clear-cut and simple approach to menswear to emphasize the conventionally accepted masculine form.

**The Countertype and the medicalization of homosexuality**

The emphasis on male appearance and normative patterns of morality and behavior, dear to bourgeois society, were not only a consequence of physiognomy. Other scientific discourses, like clinical medicine, saw the body as an architectural metaphor of society, the site in which normality and abnormality could be individuated. Particularly sexology and the consequent medicalization of homosexuality provided the criteria to set up a negative visual stereotype of the ‘other’, or what Mosse defines as the ‘Countertype’, which helped to strengthen modern masculinity.

Since manliness was considered basic to the definition of bourgeois society, it was important to safeguard and reinforce this precise image in every possible way. Therefore, as Mosse states in *Nationalism and Sexuality*: ‘[a]ll those who attacked the norms of bourgeois behavior or trespassed beyond the circumscribed limits of male or female activity were considered abnormal – strangers outside the tribe – and judged to be a threat to society’ (1985: 24-25). This notion of abnormality was specifically found in sexual perversions which were built in opposition to the heteronormative matrix. In Victorian bourgeois culture, as Michel Foucault points out in his first volume of *History of Sexuality*, ‘[s]exuality was carefully confined: it moved into the home [...] into the serious function of reproduction. On the subject
of sex, silence became the rule. The legitimate and procreative couple laid down the law. The couple imposed itself as model’ (1990: 3). Consequently, every form of sexuality that developed outside the heterosexual and reproductive context was stigmatized as deviant and abnormal. Among these ‘other Victorians’, homosexuals and effeminate men were considered some of the most dangerous enemies of modern masculinity.

Taking into account the social history of homosexuality, we can understand how clothing, and the more general performances of the body, have been a primary method of identification for and of gay men (Cole 2000). Indeed, if fashion was important to delineate the modern masculine stereotype, it was also used to identify the ‘countertype’. An example of the negative visual stereotype of the countertype is provided by fashion historian Valerie Steele in her analysis of queer fashion history:

[one of the most influential studies was Ambroise-Auguste Tardieu’s *Medicolegal Study of Assaults on Decency* (1857), which characterized pederasty in terms of an effeminate appearance and suspicious interest in fashion: “Curled hair, made-up skin, open collar, waist tucked in to accentuate the figure; fingers, ears, chest loaded with jewelry, the whole body exuding an odor of the most penetrating perfumes, an, in one hand, a handkerchief, flowers, or some needlework: such is the strange, revolting, and rightfully suspect physiognomy that betrays the pederast…”].(Steele 2012: 18)

The modern style, conceived as sober and protective, is clearly confronted here with an over-adorned form characterized by arbitrariness, excess and flamboyance, the rise of a queer style opposed to a straight way of thinking and adorning the body. Indeed, Geczy and Karaminas affirm: ‘[i]t is therefore of no surprise that homosexuality and lesbianism are so often associated with flamboyance. Queer celebrates flamboyance in and for itself, whereas the bourgeois ethos considers it intrusive, ostentatious – and treacherous’ (2013: 17).

The medical analysis of homosexuality, together with physiognomy, was able to develop a visual stereotype used to identify the physically anomalous, those men who were attacking the bourgeois norm and threatening society. Fashion and external appearance became a way to stigmatize those performances of the body which subverted the social order and to determine what was considered decent or indecent according to the idea of respectability. A tension is specifically found in the construction of the male social body and identity in the particular historical context of modernity. Therefore, the rise of bourgeois values between the
eighteenth and nineteenth century and the deep changes in the relationship between fashion and gender identity represented two sides of the same coin.

Since bodies are socially constituted and always situated in culture, we can affirm here that modernity and bourgeois society had a great impact in creating a new way of conceiving menswear. The narrowing of possibilities was becoming more claustrophobic, leading to a strictly binary approach to dress. Particularly masculinity, and its transformation through modernity, was created in a monolithic form which distanced itself from everything that was considered feminine, giving shape to a normative, decent and sober aesthetics for men. In this way, fashion became a strong tool in the micro-social order for the regulation of individuals, and in the modern heteronormative context became particularly useful in the individualization of deviant identity and sexuality, normal and abnormal men.

**The postmodern challenge**

What fashion reflects concerning this change in masculinity is its normative power. The bourgeois uniform, symbol of power and hegemonic masculinity (Connell 2005), was able to become the ground zero for menswear from the nineteenth century onwards, affirming itself throughout the twentieth century and acting as a sartorial translation of the rooted conception of modern masculinity. As Mosse claims:

> [t]he idea of manliness with which we have been concerned was an ideal proclaimed in public […] and yet, the normative stereotype of manliness undoubtedly played its part in most individual lives. It had penetrated too deeply into society and reflected too many of its needs and hopes. Normative manhood had become central to society’s manners and morals, to the respectable pattern of behavior that informed all aspects of life from attitude toward human body and sexuality, clothes, appearance, and the conduct of personal relations. (1996: 192)

Mosse’s affirmation demonstrates the power of hegemonic masculinity rooted in both macro and micro-social dimensions, also resisting eradication by reconfiguring and adapting itself to new historical contexts (Connell and Wood 2005). As a consequence, the overlap between fashion, the body and masculinity is something to take seriously in itself to understand fashion as an embodied practice from a gender perspective (Entwistle 2000), and to criticize and deconstruct the toxic lining of men’s fashion, characterized by the omnipresent force of hegemonic masculinity (Barry 2015).
However, modern masculinity and its visual representation were subsequently fundamentally challenged in the postmodern era. Despite the difficulties in defining its principles and meanings, fashion has been recognized as one of the driving forces of postmodernism, as demonstrated in the work of many scholars (Baudrillard 1993; Kaiser et al 1991; Martin 2008; Morgado 1996; Tseëlon 2016; Wilson 1992). Together with masculinity, which starting from the 1970s went through a process of revision through the political agenda of the second-wave feminism and the sexual revolution, fashion also began to change its relationship with the body and identity.

Morgado’s (1996) contribution on the postmodern for apparel scholars is undeniably useful to understand the evolution of the term in contraposition with the modern, and to subsequently locate Belgian designer Walter Van Beirendonck’s use of fashion as a critical tool to subvert bourgeois masculinity. According to Morgado, “[p]ostmodernism represents a break with, a reaction against, and a challenge to […] [modern] assumptions” (1996: 42). With Western society undergoing a radical transformation in values and sensibilities, “features of contemporary fashions and styles of appearance constitute highly visible evidence, and thus support, for the idea of a shift from modern to a postmodern culture” (1996: 46). Morgado lists some characteristics of the postmodern cultural sensibility in dress:

an unstable aesthetic code, in contrast with modernist rules […] disregard for modernist assumptions about unity and harmony in dress, expressed in disordered combinations of garment styles or fabric designs […] the high visibility of previously marginalized ethnic and subcultural styles […] the collapse of previously meaningful coded references to race, gender, status, time, and occasion […] disregard for assumptions about the naturalness of relationships between the structure of garments and the structure of the body. (1996: 46-47)

The collapse of the modern bourgeois certainties in a more complex and fragmented view allowed clothes to act as an extension of the self and the body in plural meanings, embodying and representing different forms of male bodies and identities, beyond the monolithic foundation of bourgeois respectability.

In the next part of the article, the Antwerp fashion scene will be investigated as an example of this shift from the modern to the postmodern idea of fashion through the analysis of the evolution of the Antwerp Fashion Academy pedagogy. Furthermore, considering the bourgeois approach to fashion as a way to exercise normative power on docile bodies (Foucault
1995; Wilson 1992; Tynan 2016), the study of Walter Van Beirendonck’s critical fashion will provide an example of postmodern fashion in resisting to the normalizing relationship between dress, body and identity.

**The Antwerp fashion scene’s creative resistance**

In his analysis of the urban, political and cultural conditions that allowed Antwerp to become an international fashion capital, design historian Javier Gimeno Martínez (2007: 2449-64) claims that only starting from the 1980s we can talk about the construction of a discourse on avant-garde Belgian fashion. Indeed, according to fashion scholar José Teunissen, during the twentieth century Belgium was a close follower of French fashion, and in 1919 it ‘initiated a Chambre Syndicale de la Haute Couture Belge that worked in close cooperation with the French Chambre Syndicale de la Haute Couture, dedicated to crafting and selling authorized copies from Paris’ (2011: 164). Consequently, Belgian fashion was mainly based on reproductions of the French *haute couture* models, with the exception of the Norine house (1916-1952) in Brussels.

The hegemony of Paris fashion in Belgium remained strong throughout the twentieth century, but began to face some challenges from the early 1980s. Among the most important actions aimed to promote Belgian creativity are the *Textiles Plan* launched in 1981 by ITCB (Belgian Institute for Textile and Fashion), a five year plan aimed at ‘protecting domestic textile and clothing by eliminating the apparent disadvantage Belgian products had compared with Italian and French ones’ (Martinez 2007: 2452), followed by the *Dit is Belgisch* (This is Belgian) campaign and its official magazine *Mode, dit is Belgisch* (Fashion, this is Belgian) in 1983.

The tone for the affirmation of Belgian fashion was set, and it brought along visible results when a group of designers from Antwerp, the so called ‘Six’ (Walter Van Beirendonck, Ann Demeulemeester, Dries Van Noten, Marina Yee, Dirk Bikkembergs and Dirk Van Saene), made their appearance at the London Fashion Week in March 1986, attracting the British and international press.

Although each designer had a different style and followed an individual path, they all shared their training at the Antwerp Fashion Academy, which, as we will discuss, mirrored the evolution of Belgian fashion and actually became its epicenter. The history of the Fashion Academy and the retracing of its educational changes are quintessential for an understanding
of the Belgian fashion revolution. We can identify its beginning in 1963, when the Fashion Department was set up under the leadership of Mary Prijot.

Wearable, elegant and practical were the keywords in Prijot’s training, an education path delineated by the classic guidelines of good taste and bourgeois aesthetics. As she used to say to her students: ‘Be like Mozart, always in harmony’ (Debo 2007: 35). In her words, we can find a sense of rejection of everything that did not belong to the bourgeois relationship between fashion and body. Consequently, in her courses she reproduced the hegemony of French fashion with its hierarchical approach to taste. Prijot and her program gave the basis for the creation of a reference point for fashion in Belgium, but the historical and generational changes started to create a gap between her bourgeois approach to education and the new students’ need for freedom and revolution.

The punk and street culture of the 1970s, together with the rise of avant-garde fashion in Paris and the Japanese subversion of Western beauty ideals, began to appeal to emerging fashion students, and ‘in a few years, a kind of competition evolved between the fashion design teachers and the students, who were showing a growing sense of self and a determination that would later form the springboard for their international breakthrough’ (Debo 2007: 36).

This new development was accelerated by Mary Prijot’s retirement in 1982, when she was replaced by Linda Loppa, who contributed to free the Academy from the narrow bourgeois tendency in favor of an internationally oriented course and personal expression. Despite Prijot’s and external critiques on the Academy’s extravagant tenor, Loppa deeply believed in these new principles and defended them:

[s]ome people criticize us because we do not think in commercial terms. It is my belief that you have to build up the self-confidence of designers. You have to encourage them to try things out and push them to the limits of what is achievable. They can always learn to deal with the limitations later. (Grauman 1987: 23)

This important shift in the Fashion Academy curriculum, from a Paris inspired and bourgeois approach to the development of a more postmodern, experimental perspective on fashion, was what permitted Antwerp to become, in Martinez’s words, a city of ‘production of situations of creative resistance’ (Martinez 2007: 2453), a city that played with new rules in the fashion system, challenging the already affirmed realities of Paris, Milan and London. The strengths of Loppa’s new curriculum were creativity, individuality and the development of a
personal identity against bourgeois aesthetic boundaries. Consequently, in her opinion, students should not be ‘like Mozart’, but rather follow their own spirit and inspiration.

The *avant-garde* approach to fashion promoted by Loppa and later by Walter Van Beirendonck, who became head of department in 2007, allowed the Fashion Academy to be recognized around the world for its contribution to the fashion world. And it is not a coincidence if a series of unique and talented designers, still famous today, all passed and graduated in Antwerp. For Linda Loppa fashion is more than clothes, and the Academy needed to send this message:

> [t]he Fashion Department of the Antwerp Academy sees fashion in the broadest sense of the word, as a form of expression for the emotions of our time. Clothing reflects and questions society. People in fashion are not an isolated clique, but engaged individuals who question those existing concepts of ethics and aesthetics. (Windels 2004: 44)

**Aesthetic terrorist: Walter Van Beirendonck and the subversion of the male body and aesthetic boundaries**

Dropping ‘bombs’ on the fashion system with non-commercial and experimental creations is not for everybody. But if there is one designer who has been successful in doing so it must be Walter Van Beirendonck. He has been controversial since the beginning of his career in 1983, maintaining this rebellious soul as a student, a teacher and as an internationally acclaimed fashion designer. Therefore, he is the perfect figure to describe Antwerp as a site of production of situations of creative resistance.

Described as the wildest and the loudest of the ‘Antwerp Six’ because of his particular use of vibrant colors, this description is also appropriate for the topics he addresses in his collections. Indeed, his designs deal with social and political statements, using bold graphics and clear slogans, always with a strong dose of positivity. Born in 1957 in Sint-Antonius-Brecht (Belgium) and educated in a boarding school for boys, the young Van Beirendonck started to confront the gender issue from his adolescence, learning to fight for what he wanted to be. In an interview with fashion journalist Tim Blanks, he confesses: ‘[w]hen I was 14, I knew I was gay. I hadn’t told anyone – I had girlfriends – but this gender thing was so important to me. Bowie, Lou Reed… It was amazing to see internationally known singers playing with such ideas.’ (Blanks 2013: 93) The dream of making the Ziggy Stardust inspiration a reality
began after reading the article *Met beide voeten in de wolken* (With both feet in the clouds) by Agnes Adriaenssen, which appeared in *Avenue Belgium* in July 1975. This article made the Antwerp Fashion Academy more widely known in Flanders and inspired the young Walter to give a precise direction to his creativity, applying to the Academy in 1976, in the same year as Martin Margiela.

Soon after his graduation in 1980 (one year before his colleagues from the ‘Six’), he began to shock Belgium, first, and then the entire fashion world with exquisite subversive imaginaries. His first collection *Sado*, presented at the *Vestirama* trend show in Brussels in 1983, was based on sado-masochism, horses and erotica artist Allen Jones, a naughty mix that was not very well accepted by the press. Only three years later, the international press discovered him with clamorous enthusiasm dressed as a fairytale character and seated on a giant plastic mushroom presenting his *Bad Baby Boys* collection in March 1986 at the British Designer Show, as part of The Antwerp Six. Independent magazines such as *i-D*, *The Face* and *Blitz* adored him and summed up this thrill for Belgian fashion in a clear statement: ‘[i]t seems that St. Martin School of Arts is no longer the place to study […] Po-faced, apathetic London fashion students please note. It can be done… in style’ (Webb 1986: 5).

‘For a lot of people, I’m a strange person, but it’s just a bourgeois reaction to the way that I look. This is […] an observation about the power of clothing in shaping the way that we perceive each other’ (Lobrano 1987: 26), the designer states. Indeed, his work becomes a war against bourgeois claustraphobic identity policies, with fashion as the strongest weapon and beauty as a political statement. Van Beirendonck’s critical fashion has as its epicenter the idea of otherness, always in search for new types of beauty in order to go beyond the normative idea of the human being. He likes to define himself as an aesthetic terrorist, able to shake the binary foundations of the relationship between fashion and identity: ‘[m]y aesthetics are a bit about terrorizing the fashion world, and the world in general, with different ideas. I wanted to drop some bombs on the fashion world, which is definitely something I like. That’s why I called myself an aesthetic terrorist’ (Steele 2013: 143).

**Shocking the bourgeois: Fashion against mediocrity**

One of the first direct attacks to bourgeois masculinity was represented by the Spring/Summer 1989 collection *King King Kooks*. As already stated in the introduction, the collection was accompanied by a comic strip which tells the story of a rebellious and colorful gang in a fight against ‘the grey ones’. With the city of Antwerp as a backdrop, these grey men, symbols of power and tradition, are desperately searching for the gang, wearing their dusty
bourgeois uniforms. The visual *fil rouge* of the comic clearly is the contraposition of a monochromatic and conservative fashion against the super accessorized and crazy colorful aesthetics of *King Kong Kooks* members: the Warrior (Walter Van Beirendonck), the Snake and the Rock. They describe their enemies as follows: ‘[t]hey are the grey ones!! The smokey bears! They're keeping tabs on us!! They say we’re agitators! That we’re undermining their authority! Where the hell did they get that idea? Especially our clothes piss them off! Too flashy! Too individual! Too personal!’ (Bosschaert, 1989).

It is clear here how fashion is seen as a form of rebellion and resistance against the normative perception of masculinity dear to bourgeois respectability. The ‘deviant’ subject in Van Beirendonck’s comic is not isolated or repressed but takes its own position and reacts against the imposition of a stereotyped role and identity. At the signal ‘[t]ime to get ready boys!’, they start to accessorize with the craziest weapons, such as kneecaps with shootable spears containing tranquilizers, walkie-talkie rings, survival kits (with knife, refrigerator, corkscrew and fried chicken), life jackets (obviously unisex) and even a steel penis gourd, in order to fight to make the world a place where everyone can be themselves, a world where we are allowed to laugh.

In the end, the *King Kong Kooks’* positive thinking prevails on the dark ‘grey men’ who desperately admit: ‘[w]e’re losing our hold!! The power of our average grey is being undermined. Pretty soon they’ll be everywhere with their stupid clo…’, a sentence broken off by one of them surprisingly revealing a Walter Van Beirendonck outfit. They are defeated, the bourgeois idea of fashion and identity has lost. The public nature of the masculine stereotype is directly confronted here in its own habitat, the metropolitan context, creating a visible and material countertype to Winckelmann’s ideals of power, virility and harmony. As stated in the collection presentation, Van Beirendonck’s gang thinks FASHION = BORN FREE, a positive message which is embodied by the clothes themselves, portrayed in a surrealist *trompe l’oeil* campaign shot by photographer Ronald Stoops.

**There’s sex in everything I do! Exposing sexuality through fashion**

This fight against the mediocrity of bourgeois thinking is also pointed out by publisher and graphic designer Luc Derycke, who observes that ‘Van Beirendonck seemed to be looking for confrontation, his collections are permeated with those elements that had been carefully eradicated, or negated, by modernism’ (Derycke and Van de Veire 1999: 10). If in the modern agenda fashion is used as an armour to channel specific messages regarding normative standards of gender and sexuality, Van Beirendonck deliberately challenges these boundaries
using the body as a battleground. As far as sexuality is concerned, what modernity considered to be abnormal was mainly found in sexual perversions and in all the forms of desire outside the heteronormative matrix, practices that find explicit expression in Van Beirendonck’s critical fashion.

Reclaiming Foucault’s theory of sexuality, we can state that maverick Van Beirendonck takes the ‘other Victorians’ side, breaking the silence around sex and pleasure using fashion as a form of speaker’s benefit, placing ‘himself to a certain extent outside the reach of power [upsetting] the established law’ (Foucault 1990: 6), particularly when he affirms ‘there’s sex in everything I do!’ (Blanks 2013: 87). With a playful and humorous approach to sexuality, some of Van Beirendonck’s collections represent a far cry from the bourgeois model they reject. Starting from Sado in 1983, the designer has continuously experimented with incorporating fetishist and S&M rituals in his designs, moving aesthetic and sexual boundaries.

In his first international acknowledgment in 1986, with the collection Bad Baby Boys, the ritual of submission and domination between cherubic baby boys and daddies was the main theme (which will reappear one year later in the Fall/Winter 1987 collection Dare Devil Daddy, this time with a tribute to the freakshow). The exchange of power in kinky intercourse is made explicit through the clothes and the lookbook shot by Patrick Robyn. Innocent soft over-sized knitted sweaters with pompoms and teddy bears (portrayed with a penis) are contrasted with shorts, kilt skirts over trousers, sailor and military inspired coats and aggressive knee-length black leather boots. These dichotomies between softness/hardness, submissive/dominant and innocent/aggressive are a constant in Van Beirendonck’s work, a philosophy that he himself describes with the following words: ‘I’m not interested to undergo it or experience it, but part of how I’m thinking is, I should know how fist-fucking goes and how fairytales go!’ (Blanks 2013: 87).

1989. Same spirit, different line. With the Fall/Winter 1989 collection Hardbeat, Van Beirendonck launches a new parallel line called Walter Worldwide, cheaper and more ‘commercial’, financed by the Sivatex company. Inspired by sportswear, the underground lifestyle of BDSM and master and slave bondage, again the contraposition of soft and hard comes through the interpretation of sadomasochist uniform in gentle and soft fabrics together with latex, platform boots and masks. As an invitation for his show in Paris, he creates a poster featuring a mustachioed macho man wearing a pair of pink gloves and little else, and a cassette sleeve that shocked the press and risked being censored.

With slogans such as “Fetish for Main Course”, “Licks and Kisses”, “Great Balls of Fire”, models seem to be screaming the Walter Worldwide slogan “Leisure for Pleasure”
performing a gender-fluid imaginary. A visual strategy that is strengthened by the use of the mask, a key accessory in Van Beirendonck’s work and central theme of his later curatorial project Powermask: The Power of Masks at the Wereldmuseum in Rotterdam (2018). Surrounded by power, mystery and freedom, masks seduce, intimidate and subvert. Specifically, the designer is fascinated by how the mask can change our identity in a very simple way, as curator Kaat Debo states: ‘[masks] are part of a strategy developed to sound out the limits of aesthetics, gender and sexuality, to question established fashion practices or to deviate from the norm’ (2017: 183).

The mask comes back in all its power in one of Van Beirendonck’s most iconic shows, the Fall/Winter 1995-96 Paradise Pleasure Production, also known as the “Rubber Show”, representing a new era for the Belgian designer. Indeed, from 1993 to 1999, he designs the W.&L.T. (Wild & Lethal Trash) line for the German company Mustang, a ‘streetwear/clubwear line with a designer focus and a heart […] wacky and fun, full of vivid graphic pieces that just don’t go unnoticed [a line for] people who are not so much into fashion but into dressing up: young, open-minded, creative people who dare to use color.” Even if he is under contract with a major company, Van Beirendonck does not stop to use fashion as a resistance practice to take clear social and political positions. Indeed, the Paradise Pleasure Production collection is undoubtedly one of the most relevant regarding the topic of AIDS and safe sex.

With models completely covered in skin-tight colorfull latex throughout the show, the designer presents his collection as a confrontational tool to discuss this delicate issue, in order to campaign against unprotected sex and to overcome the bourgeois tones that surround the idea of AIDS associated with gay people as guilty predators of the deadly epidemic. Consequently, as the designer himself states, ‘the rubber suit was a kind of basic clothing, a protective layer against aggression from external elements’ (Goyvaerts 2009: 66). In Van Beirendonck’s collection, the symbolic meanings attached to AIDS, commonly associated with death, homosexuality and promiscuity, are suppressed by a less moralist and judgmental position embodied by a bright mix of colors combining purple, yellow, acid green and red, always reminding of the importance of playing safely, as a collection top states with the slogan ‘Play my game!’.

**Beautify Big! Re-thinking the male body**

In the W&L.T. alphabet, the letter ‘F’ stands for *Fuck the past!*, a statement that clearly underlines the designer’s will to draw a drastic line between tradition and his vision of the future. Van Beirendonck’s attacks on the modernist agenda do not stop at the policies of male
identity and aesthetics, and the respectable idea of sexuality. Indeed, the designer again affirms beauty as a political statement by exploring body images that depart from conventional ideas of masculinity. From ‘bear’ aesthetics to prosthetic make-up, passing through plastic surgery, Walter Van Beirendonck’s hybrid subjectivities queer the materiality of the body by embracing phenomena often considered to be ugly or extreme, again subverting Winckelmann’s modernist standards. With the Fall/Winter 1991 collection The Bigger the Better, the designer presents over-sized sweaters fully covered in knitted advertisements in different languages, underlining the fact that the obsession with weight, body and thinness is a problem that affects the contemporary globalized world, all condensed in a single message: EAT! A slogan which is strengthened by other statements such as “Beautify Big!”. This critical re-thinking of the body against the fashion system’s normalizing technologies also takes shape through non-conforming bodies in his Fall/Winter 1996 collection Wonderland, and later in the Spring/Summer 2010 collection Wonder, in which he casts forty stocky bearded men from the London ‘bears scene’, a body type which is clearly distinct from the Giorgio Armani’s Adonis or the emerging ‘skinny boy’.

Redefining gender / Redefining menswear

Walter Van Beirendonck’s challenges open up new possibilities for new identities. In our analysis, we want to specifically stress how this aesthetic strategy can help us to understand the cultural construction of the masculine social body and identity, a re-creational process that reaches its peak in Van Beirendonck’s Spring/Summer 2000 collection Gender? As it is stated in the lookbook:

[the] Spring-Summer Collection 2000 is a reaction against the standards of gender, which are universally accepted by our society. This conditioned thinking and these ‘clichés’ find their origin in our education system and social behaviour. Sexual identity always defined itself by means of imitation, and the identity to be imitated could be a completely different one. For example, children playing are already programmed for the acceptance of a particular gender: pink for baby boys, pale blue for baby girls.

With a new sartorial language, Van Beirendonck questions the cultural masculine stereotype by playing with design, color palettes and fabrics. The collection is a jubilant appearance of pale pink, green and light blue, knitted dresses and floral patterns, a new ground zero for menswear and for the redefinition of the clothed male body. As the designer affirms:
[m]asculinity is part of the game, but that’s exactly why it is so interesting. In the Gender? Collection Spring/Summer 00, I questioned this matter and tried to figure out why gender and gender-related fashion is mainly dictated by society, the way we are raised and conditioned by the culture we are living. Masculinity is important depending on the context and culture. (Davies 2008: 187)

The regulation of clothing in everyday fashion and its consequent normalizing judgment is challenged here by Van Beirendonck who subverts the identity code of the skirted garment into a code of resistance. In a specific dress code that can be retraced to the fourteenth century, the difference between the female skirted dress and the male bifurcated clothing was used to mark a clear distinction between genders. This secular tradition is challenged by Van Beirendonck with the exploration of the non-gender specificity of the skirted garment through crocheted dresses worn with matching masks, floral pants and deconstructed ponchos.

A new harmony between clothing and the male body is defined here by the use of big volumes and soft and see-through fabrics, embroidered with typical feminine details such as flowers and fringes. Gender? clearly becomes an open critique of the cultural definition of garments, as the designer confirms to fashion journalist Suzy Menkes: ‘[w]ether clothes are for men and women is all in the head – and none of these are 100 percent’ (Bolton 2003: 22).

Conclusion

According to Mosse, ‘[a]ll those who want to change society, as well as those who want to escape their marginalization, have to take the stereotype of modern masculinity into account. […] Taking the measure of men makes a hoped-for contribution to our understanding of the society in which we live and in this manner may provide some signposts of possible change’ (1996: 194). As described in this article, Van Beirendonck’s critical fashion, by taking into account the stereotype of modern masculinity, also takes a clear position against the cultural construction of the bourgeois masculine social body and identity, appropriating all those features repressed or negated by the modernist agenda. Van Beirendonck, faithful to the Antwerp tradition of ‘creative resistance’, deconstructs the normative understanding of the relationship between fashion and masculinity, providing a new metaphor to think about the process of body fashioning in everyday life.
The political significance of Walter Van Beirendonck’s fashion has the strong capacity of creating critical spaces and possibilities outside the normalizing matrix, using the body as the ultimate site of resistance in everyday struggles for power. As fashion scholar Elizabeth Wilson points out, ‘[o] thing marks an unclear boundary ambiguously, and unclear boundaries disturb us’ (Wilson 1985: 2), and Van Beirendonck completely embraces this ambiguous side of fashion in order to play with dress as the frontier between the self and the other. Van Beirendonck’s idea of menswear challenges cultural barriers giving shape to those features repressed by the bourgeois masculine stereotype, claiming the performative power of fashion, both on a collective and individual level, as a tool to resist and renegotiate hegemonies.

His collections, in addition to creating new possibilities for fashion as an embodied practice, can be considered as cultural discourses where multiple aspects of identity intersect, such as gender and sexuality. Therefore, Van Beirendonck’s creative resistance through fashion questions the binary and normative understanding of our society, stimulating the spectator to rethink the political significance of material reality and the importance of the body in the resistance against power.

While the present article takes into account this critical potential of fashion by focusing on the concepts of gender, sexuality and the body, it is important to point out the limitations of the study in not addressing other issues such as race, which also play a key role in his work, as later collections demonstrate (i.e. Hand on Heart Fall/Winter 2011-12, Crossed Crocodiles Growl Fall/Winter 2014-15). In line with the contemporary revisioning of fashion studies and the emergence of an increasingly critical fashion theory dealing not only with issues such as queerness (Barry 2016; Moore 2019) but also postcolonialism (Gaugele and Titton 2019) and body diversity and disability (Barry 2019; Bowstead 2018), it seems necessary in future work to further explore how fashion can be seen as a platform for today’s most urgent social and cultural conversations (Bartlett 2019), taking an intersectional approach to fashion as an instrument for the dissemination of representations and narratives on gender, race, class, body, identity and sexuality.

Aware of this limitation, we believe our research can contribute to the contemporary fashion studies debate in several ways. It will help to expand the literature on Belgian fashion, which today mainly focuses on its institutionalization process, by offering a perspective on its relationship with masculinity, an issue which remains underexplored to date. Thus, the article also contributes to fashion studies’ increasing interest in men’s aesthetics, supporting the need for critically rethinking the categories through which we build the male social body and identity. As a consequence, framing fashion as a social, cultural and political phenomenon
through the analysis of Walter Van Beirendonck’s sartorial resistance, we want to stress the urgency of considering fashion's performative power in the making of non-conforming masculinities in both men’s and queer studies

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