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# **We Need To Talk About Fancy Dress: Connections (and Complications) between the Catwalk and Fancy Dress Costume<sup>1</sup>**

## **Abstract**

Many fashion designers repudiate the influence of fancy dress within their work. This marginalisation likely reflects a socialised attitude that fancy dress is a short-lived, skill-less and superficial spectacle that lacks credibility. Many scholars and fashion commentators concur. They argue that this sartorial form and the circumstances in which it is worn are not affective, that it does not influence how wearers perceive themselves and others, and thereby lacks a fundamental characteristic of most clothing. Arguing that fancy dress is affective, this article reappraises the connections between dressing up and fashion design. It summarises, first, the long-standing interplay between fancy dress and contemporary vogues. Second, the article considers the presence of non-normative fashions on the modern catwalk. Two suggestions are made to further academic discussion. First, recent discussions about ‘critical’ and ‘experimental’ fashions can become more globally and culturally relevant if they are expanded to include fancy dress costume. Second, fancy dress costume can be more usefully understood, and readily incorporated within academic studies, if it is acknowledged that this term is not unidimensional and encompasses a variety of garments, reflecting the diverse motivations of people who choose to dress up. The article uses recent clothing collections as case studies.

## **Keywords**

1. Fancy dress costume
2. Fashion
3. Costume
4. Critical Fashion
5. Experimental Fashion

Fancy dress costume and fashion have a dynamic, but difficult relationship.<sup>2</sup> With the exception of Lee Alexander McQueen, most fashion designers repudiate the influence of fancy dress within their work, often forcibly. This marginalisation appears to reflect a socialised attitude, prevalent since the 1970s and 1980s, that fancy dress is a short-lived, skill-less and superficial spectacle that lacks credibility. Conventional arguments suggest this sartorial form and the circumstances in which it is worn are not affective, that it does not influence how wearers perceive themselves and others, and thereby lacks a fundamental characteristic of most types of clothing (Nadoolman Landis, 2017, 8; Wild, 2020, 4). Arguing that fancy dress is indeed affective, this article calls for a reappraisal of the connections between dressing up and fashion design by considering, first, the long-standing interplay between fancy dress and contemporary vogues. Second, the presence of non-normative fashions on twentieth- and twenty-first century catwalks; that is, clothing that may alter the wearer’s silhouette and use cut, colour and texture in unexpected ways. Academic study is slowly becoming cognisant of the importance of costume (generally), and a non-normative aesthetic within the fashion industry (specifically), and this article makes two suggestions to further these enquiries (Hann, 2017, 1-17). First, recent discussions about ‘critical’ and ‘experimental’ fashions can become more globally and culturally relevant if the dialogue is expanded to include fancy dress costume (Geczy and Karaminas, 2017a; Granata, 2017)). Second, fancy dress costume can be more usefully understood, and readily incorporated within academic studies, if it is acknowledged that this term is not unidimensional but instead encompasses a variety of garments, from the patently comic and homemade, to the machine-made and bespoke commission, reflecting the diverse motivations of people who choose to

dress up. The article uses recent collections by Viktor and Rolf, Thom Browne, Rottingdean Bazaar, Bruce Asbestos and Anne-Sophie Cochevelou as case studies.

### **Non-normative fashions on the catwalk**

Non-normative fashions have existed on the catwalk from at least the 1970s. Rei Kawakubo and Thierry Mugler were among the first designers to pioneer new ways of conceiving and creating garments that used atypical materials and proposed genderless silhouettes. Non-normative fashions, characterised by their arresting and unexpected use of colour, cut, texture and silhouette, have become prevalent on the catwalk in couture and ready-to-wear collections since the beginning of the Millennium, and notably within the last five years. Established brands and designers, as well as newer names, from Balmain and Charles Jeffrey, to Palomo and Eda Yorulmazoğlu, have recently shown garments that challenge conventional thinking about the role and meaning of gendered clothing. Balmain's Spring/Summer 2019 couture collection featured ethereal garments in metallic and mirrored fabrics with distended silhouettes; Charles Jeffrey's ready-to-wear collection for Spring/Summer 2019 included brightly coloured garments inspired by British military uniforms; Palomo's current ready-to-wear menswear collection eschews a binary interpretation of gender and takes inspiration from classical and historical styles of womenswear, using bold colours and luxurious fabrics; Yorulmazoğlu's clothes, which are not for general sale, incorporate neon colours and quotidian materials and are similarly gender-defying. Many of these non-normative clothes appear doubly distinct because of their use of humour and satire that challenge political attitudes, typically about gender, cultural discrimination and the environment.

The extent to which non-normative fashions on the twenty-first century catwalk constitute a difference of degree or kind from more conventional clothing styles is equivocal. The creation of Instagram accounts to visually document fashion's more incongruous styles, many with large followings – notably, @trashfashionshit (112k followers), @badfashionillustration (3107 followers) and @fashion\_for\_bank\_robbers (73k followers) – implies that something new, certainly notable, is thought to be occurring within the fashion industry. Some fashion journalists have encouraged this impression. In August 2018 Jamie Huckbody of *Harper's Bazaar: Australia* wrote an article entitled 'The Ugly Truth' in which he questions why contemporary designers, including Calvin Klein, Gucci and Prada, are 'trying to out-fugly each other' with the 'so-bad-it's-good phenomenon' (2018, 120-123). Other commentators suggest a compulsion for unbridled creativity and expression is an intrinsic characteristic of fashionable dress. In a review published in *Elle* magazine before the opening of *Camp: Notes on Fashion* at The Metropolitan Museum, New York, Laura Craik avers that fashion 'by its very nature ... is inherently camp, predicated as it is around notions of costume and dressing up' (2019, 185). Academics have been more cautious in their analysis. Adopting a diachronic approach to study the prevalence and meaning of non-normative fashions, they suggest these designs exist on a continuum that largely begins with Kawakubo. The newly coined analytic concepts of 'critical fashion' and 'experimental fashion', by Adam Geczy and Vicki Karaminas and Francesca Granata, respectively, seek to interpret the work of non-normative designers as part of an ongoing dialogue through which parts of the fashion industry respond, perhaps instinctively and consequently more viscerally, to changing global political and social circumstances. The urgency with which academics such as these are seeking to explain non-normative fashions does appear to be a reaction to current catwalk trends.

### **'Critical' and 'Experimental' Fashions**

The terms ‘critical fashion’ and ‘experimental fashion’ can be briefly summarised. Geczy and Karaminas argue that contemporary fashions possess an evaluative and interrogative role that can express ‘skepticism’ and ‘accurate judgement’ about any aspect of contemporary culture (2017a, 1). Their concept of critical fashion explains, first, the genesis of this process and, second, the function of fashionable clothing that possesses an analytical quality. They suggest that art – understood in its broadest sense – and art criticism became increasingly populist between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, when art’s ‘collusion with the media, and ... gravitational pull to mass appeal, became cornerstones of the art world’ (ibid., 3-4). The ‘devolution’ of art’s ‘criticality’ occurred in inverse correlation (ibid.). Consequently, art relinquished its interrogative role, which was assumed by fashion and dress (ibid., 4). Critical faculties are not present in all garments and the authors describe items of clothing characterized by ‘usefulness’ and ‘unobtrusiveness’ as ‘hermetic fashion’. This a wide-ranging category that includes ‘The T-Shirt, the suit, the black dress’ (ibid.). Critical fashion describes items of dress where signification is ‘stretched and exaggerated’, where it is ‘obtrusive and extension, unconventional’ (ibid.) Geczy and Karaminas analyse the work of ten fashion designers to elucidate the affectiveness of critical fashions, including Rei Kawakubo, Gareth Pugh, Viktor & Rolf, Rick Owens, Walter van Beirendonck and Alexander McQueen.

Francesca Granata’s concept of experimental fashion evolved parallel to Geczy’s and Karaminas’ work and consequently makes no reference to critical fashion; the authors’ books appeared in print months apart in 2017. Focusing on a short chronological period, from the 1980s to the start of the Millennium, Granata seeks to explain the emergence of ‘undisciplined’ bodies on the catwalk that ‘upset gender bodily norms and rules of propriety and beauty’ (2017, 2). Unlike Geczy and Karaminas, Granata does not believe that experimental fashion developed because of critical limitations within the arts. She avers that ‘fashion should be interpreted on a par with other aspects of visual and material culture as a constitutive and influential part of culture’ (2017, 3). However, in proposing that ‘globalisation and the condition of otherness and estrangement developed by living cross-culturally is central to the development of grotesque imagery within fashion’, there is an implication that the role of the arts and design changed in the twentieth century and enabled fashion to assume a more important position (2017, 4). Granata suggests that experimental fashions became prevalent during the 1980s because they were adept at challenging ‘normative discourses’, particularly with regards to ‘feminism’s desire to open up and question gender and bodily roles’ (2017, ibid.). Simultaneously, they could mediate ‘fears of contagion and the obsessive moral policing of bodily borders’ in response to the AIDS epidemic (2017, ibid). Her discussion includes some of the same designers analysed by Geczy and Karaminas, notably Kawakubo and Beirendonck.

Popular and academic writing on non-normative catwalk fashions is primarily conceived to place this aesthetic, which is regarded as visually and conceptually distinct from more conventional clothing styles, within an appropriate cultural and sartorial frame. However, none of this work, for all it argues about the creativity, incongruity and polyvalence of the garments it describes, connects them to their closest aesthetic equivalent: fancy dress costume. The striking silhouettes of recent catwalk garments, their use of humour, bold colour, atypical materials, bricolage construction with myriad motifs drawn from popular culture, share many of the characteristics of fancy dress costume, which I define in my research as follows:

A performative form of dress, imaginative and incongruous, worn for a discrete occasion and limited time that disrupts the place of the individual within the social and political relationships of a specific community (2020, 1).

The marginalisation of fancy dress costume is not surprising. My research has emphasised how much this term and the type of clothing it labels elicits a ‘love’ or ‘loathe’ response, and this mitigates against sustained and serious evaluation (2020, 2). The definition I propose is conceived to encourage a reappraisal of the nature and role of this sartorial form. It is sufficiently broad to encompass the many different types of fancy dress costume, from that worn to private parties through to large-scale street protests. It also seeks to identify dressing up, which I use as a synonym for fancy dress, as a specific form of costume, distinct from other types of live performance. Deliberately, the definition assumes that fancy dress is affective; that it changes the feelings and behaviours of its wearers and the people in their immediate vicinity. This position is in line with Hajo Adam and Adam D. Galinsky’s term ‘encloded cognition’ that ‘designate[s] the systematic influence of clothes on the wearer’s psychological processes and behavioural tendencies’ (2012, 918-925).

### **The changing perception of fancy dress costume in fashion**

Specific reasons why fancy dress costume has not generally been discussed in connection with contemporary fashions are difficult to isolate because of the blanket marginalisation of this sartorial form. Nonetheless, a diachronic approach towards the study of fancy dress costume can demonstrate, first, that the sartorial form is affective and has long possessed the interrogative capabilities Geczy, Karaminas and Granata attribute to more recent fashions; second, that a socialised negativity towards fancy dress costume developed during the 1970s and 1980s, at which point it came to be seen as almost wholly frivolous (Wild, 2020, 4-26). Fundamentally, it is not contentious to suggest that there exist aesthetic, technical and affective connections between fashionable dress and fancy dress costume, and that these are longstanding. The contemporary fashion industry is certainly cognisant of the harmful impacts of negligently chosen fancy dress costume. For example, in 2011, *Teen Vogue*’s ‘My Culture Is Not A Costume’ campaign highlighted the ‘dehumanising’ effect of fancy dress worn without reflection and consideration of people’s feelings. A powerful video explained how costumes that appear ‘funny and harmless’ cause offence by perpetuating racial stereotypes through cultural appropriation.<sup>3</sup> Whilst this campaign implicitly perpetuates the idea that dressing up is often thoughtless (albeit affective), historically the relationship fancy between dress costume and contemporary fashions has been positive and symbiotic.

Between the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, when masquerades were widely popular across Europe, contemporary vogues were frequently incorporated into fancy dress entertainments. According to Christoph Heyl, the enigma of the anonymising eye masks worn by seventeenth-century women as fashion accessories led to their adoption by costumed revellers (2001, 117-121). In a similar way, Aileen Ribeiro has shown how the eighteenth-century masquerade provided an opportunity to enjoy and critique current fashions and concerns, long before the emergence of Geczy’s and Karaminas’s critical fashions; from the Macaronis, conspicuous in their physically restrictive garb, to the gravity-defying hairstyles and headpieces of fashionable ladies (1984, 33-35). Indeed, the appeal and opprobrium of the masquerade stemmed from its preoccupation with contemporary topics and tastes. Ribeiro observes that improved relations between Britain and the Ottoman Empire sparked an interest in oriental costumes; the visits of American chiefs to London in 1734 and 1762 inspired Indian costumes; British support for Austria in its war against Prussia popularised hussar

dress, in fashion and fancy dress (Ribeiro, 1984, 217-249, 420-431, 445-452). So relevant did the masquerade seem that many (aristocratic) people commissioned portraits in which they were arrayed in masked costumes, real and imagined (Ribeiro, 1984, 136-204). Jennifer Van Horn has shown how British women, newly settled across the Atlantic, commissioned portraits of themselves wearing masquerade outfits even though costume entertainments are not known to have been held in America before the nineteenth century (2009). The relevance of fancy dress to quotidian issues was such that moralisers and naysayers often warned that fancy dress costume revealed its wearer's truer – critics frequently suggested baser – character.

The connection between contemporary fashions and fancy dress costume continued after the masquerade's decline as subscription balls and artists' balls became commonplace throughout nineteenth-century Europe. Costume balls hosted by the social elite and royalty were also organised with increasing frequency as dressing up, now established as an appropriately bourgeois entertainment, was elevated to an edifying art form (Wild, 2020, 14-20). The interplay between fancy dress costume and fashionable dress was patent at more opulent costumed events where revellers commissioned outfits from Worth, the period's most sought-after and expensive couture house. By way of one, probably exceptional, example, the costume made by Worth for the Duke of Marlborough to wear at the Devonshire Ball in 1897 cost approximately £860,000 in today's money (Wild, 2020, 42; Murphy, 1984, 62-63). Where some people desired to be costumed by one of the period's most fashionable couture houses, still others delighted in the affectiveness of fancy dress costume; in particular, the opportunity to satirise contemporary events and lampoon public figures. In 1896, J. Malcolm Frazer reported on a costume worn to Covent Garden's Opera House, London, that resembled a toad. The outfit's description and affect is worth enjoying in full:

When at the commencement of last year a certain Earl was raised to the rank of Duke, the ill-favour with which his elevation was regarded was made known by the individual who took upon himself the dress of a "Court Toady".

Clothed in a green material made of a woven wool, with two incandescent lights in place of eyes, he resembled an enormous toad ... [A] blue sash – the insignia of a duke – was passed over his right shoulder and partially covered the Royal Arms, which had been worked upon his back, while in his right hand he held a dispatch box and in his left a bulrush. On entering the ball-room the subtle sarcasm of the whole costume was at once perceived, and the judge thought fit to award a bicycle to the happy wearer (Frazer, 1896, 651-652).

In the twentieth century, perhaps the zenith of costumed entertainments that were hosted and attended by the social and political elite, the elision between fancy dress and fashion became more patent. Many of the most-celebrated parties of the twentieth century were attended by jeweller Fulco duc de Verdura, who made jewellery for guests to wear (Corbett, 2002, 57, 60-61). At Truman Capote's Black and White masquerade ball, held amid great media attention in New York's Plaza Hotel on 28 November 1966, hackneyed costumes and bejewelled couture gowns were worn with equal enthusiasm. Interior designer Billy Baldwin wore a unicorn mask by Gene Moore; socialite Isabel Eberstadt wore a two-headed black and white swan mask made by Bill Cunningham (Davis, 2006, 191). Taking greater inspiration from contemporary fashions, Princess Luciana Pignatelli hired the \$600,000 sixty karat Schwab Diamond from jeweller Harry Winston (ibid., 224). Gloria Guinness, who wore a white coat dress from Antonio Castillo of Lavin, sought advice from the editor of French *Vogue* about her jewellery. According to a much-quoted story, she asked Francoise de Langlade about the

merits of wearing a diamond or ruby choker. The advice was to wear both (ibid, 232). In a *Women's Wear Daily* feature after the event, the couture of female guests was rated (Ibid., 240). As superficial as these dressing choices may seem, the affectiveness of fancy dress – its impact on wearer and audience – was a source of continued, even urgent, debate throughout the century. Whilst undoubtedly adopting an extreme view, American author Lawrence Langner, writing in *The Importance of Wearing Clothes*, published in 1959, argued that '[t]he selection of the fancy dress costume is never an accident when there is full freedom of choice; but an expression of a conscious or unconscious desire of the wearer ([1959]1991, 149). In earnest, he suggested that infant girls who dress as boys could 'in extreme cases' become homosexual, and vice versa for boys (ibid., 147).

The scale and frequency of elite costumed entertainments has diminished in the twenty-first century. The widespread commercialisation and democratisation of fancy dress during the 1970s and 1980s, which saw the proliferation of civic-centred and parochial occasions for dressing up, has strained the relationship between fancy dress costume and fashionable dress. These were decades when – to focus on the UK – television celebrity Jane Asher published a book of 'make-it-yourself' fancy dress costumes (1988); the BBC first aired cartoon *Mr Benn*, a fourteen-part series focusing on the adventures that ensued when the eponymous hero wore different costumes; Enid Blyton's juvenile crime-stoppers had a costume-themed escapade in *The Famous Five in Fancy Dress* (Blyton, 1983); and sartorial sub-groups, often associated with the club scene, began to incorporate quixotic designs and incongruous materials into their daily, certainly evening, attire (Stanfill, 2013 15). Fashion brands appear to have become wary of having too close a relationship with a sartorial form that was becoming almost wholly associated with quotidian celebration, jocularity and popular culture.

The concurrent emergence of non-normative garments on the catwalk by designers including Rei Kawakubo and Thierry Mugler may have hastened the ideological, if not aesthetic and technical, separation between fancy dress costume and fashion in order for the messages of the latter to be critically understood. Popularity and commercial success did not mean the wearing of fancy dress costume became culturally meaningless. The belief that fancy dress costume was affective persisted, even if substantiating evidence was largely anecdotal. In the 1980s, for example, it was argued that dressing up provided a psychological salve for people wishing to escape the decade's economic woes. Nevertheless, newspaper articles that considered the escapist virtues of dressing up whilst describing the popularity of Little Bear and Miss Piggy costumes could not but jeopardise the sartorial form's credibility in the eyes of the fashion industry (Thomas, 1982).

The annual Costume Institute Gala at the Metropolitan Museum of Art is probably the only contemporary event to approximate the aesthetic wonderment of historic costume balls that have now gained 'legendary' status and to maintain an explicit connection between fancy dress and fashion (Foulkes, 2011). The Gala is not conceived as a fancy dress entertainment but every year certain outfits, inspired by the Institute's latest exhibition and created by the world's largest fashion houses, gain attention for their incongruity and theatricality. At the 2018 Gala, the papal-esque gown worn by Rhianna, made by Margiela and bejewelled by Cartier, and the gilded nativity-themed gown worn by Sarah Jessica Parker, made by Dolce & Gabbana, were much discussed in the media because of their uniqueness (Rose, 2018; Moss, 2018). No commentary, so far as I know, associated the gowns with dressing up, but their striking silhouettes, humour and, in the case of Parker's ensemble, bricolage construction with myriad motifs, share defining attributes of fancy dress costume.

In view of the apparent disconnect between fancy dress costume and fashion since the late-twentieth century, the idiosyncratic outfits worn at the Met Gala could be considered exceptions that prove the socialised rule that the two sartorial forms do not – or at least no longer – mix. The gowns of Rhianna and Parker highlight the unusual instance of contemporary fashion brands creating fantastical, controversial clothing to be worn for a one-off occasion. However, the importance of brand extension or, more prosaically, product placement at this twenty first-century event is not dissimilar to Verdura's involvement in twentieth-century costume balls, or Worth's involvement in nineteenth-century entertainments. The creative participation of couturiers and jewellers in contemporary and historic costumed events (albeit those with large budgets), emphasises an enduring continuity between fashion and fancy dress from the past into the present; namely, that these occasions were, and remain, *gesamtkunstwerks*. They bring together skilled artisans from different creative disciplines to establish immersive aesthetic experiences. In these circumstances the elision between fashion, couture and costume is championed rather than chided. Obliquely, Anna Wintour alluded to this creative potential in an interview included within Andrew Rossi's film-documentary *The First Monday in May*, which focuses on preparations for the Costume Institute Gala of 2016. She suggests, 'It's a kind of theatre ... Fashion can create a dream; a fantasy'.<sup>4</sup>

People within the fashion industry often seem reticent when contemplating the meaning and implication of dress, but Alexander McQueen was forthright. In 1997 he appeared to recognise and appreciate the relationship between fancy dress and fashion when he suggested that a jacket from his 'It's A Jungle Out There' collection, his first collection for Givenchy as Creative Director, could be considered 'costume', albeit 'costume with a deadly meaning'.<sup>5</sup> This view remains exceptional. A more typical opinion from within the contemporary fashion industry about fancy dress costume is that expressed by Walter van Beirendonck in an interview with *Vestoj* magazine. Whilst his work often appears to be influenced by traditions of live performance and dressing up, in discussing his 2003/2004 collection 'Gender?', he distanced himself from fancy dress costume, which he claimed is not serious:

There's a thin line between being masculine and dressing up in women's clothes. which isn't what I wanted to end up with. I had to watch out for that — otherwise you end up with something that's more like dressing up. I don't want to put that on the catwalk or even consider it; my work is a serious proposition for what men should wear (Cronberg, 2016, 254).

The need for a catwalk presentation to be serious was underscored by Rick Owens in the same series of *Vestoj* interviews. Owens is no stranger to catwalk controversy and he claims '[t]he artifice I like is always exaggerated and borderline ridiculous' (Cronberg, 2016, 231). This outlook is perhaps most readily apparent in his 'Sphinx' collection for Autumn/Winter 2015, which featured garments that exposed men's genitalia (Akbareian, 2015). Nevertheless, whilst people may expect 'surprise and challenge' from the catwalk, Owens avers that '[t]he most successful men's fashion is conservative with just a hint of rebellion' (Cronberg, 2016, 233).

In part, McQueen's interest in costume was unique because his early career involved him working for one of the UK's largest fancy dress and costume suppliers, Bermans Angels (Knox, 2010, 8). However, several lead designers, creative directors and owners of eponymous clothing brands either started their careers with roles associated with live



performance and dressing up, or have since contributed to commercial franchises where an elision with fancy dress costume is apparent. For example, Tom Ford and Thom Browne were actors, Miuccia Prada was a mime. In 2003, Yohji Yamamoto designed costumes for Elton John's 'Red Piano Show' (Menkes, 2003). In 2011, Dries van Noten created costumes for the ballet 'Rain' (Crisell, 2017). In 2018, Walter van Beirendonck curated *PowerMask: The Power of Masks* with Rotterdam's Wereld Museum; he has previously designed stage costumes for rock group U2 (Lennon, 2017).<sup>6</sup> In sum, the marginalisation, even repudiation, of fancy dress costume within the contemporary fashion industry looks to be the result of a socialised negativity that has crystallised over the past three decades. Aesthetically, technically and ideologically the difference between fancy dress costume and fashion is of degree rather than kind. Moreover, the fashion industry has continued to argue for the affectiveness of fancy dress costume, even if this is typically to highlight the malevolence of the sartorial form and the negative impact of poorly chosen outfits that offend through cultural appropriation and trivialisation, as demonstrated by the *Teen Vogue* campaign. Two catwalk presentations for Spring/Summer 2019 – Viktor & Rolf's couture collection and Thom Browne's men's ready to wear collection – can serve as illustrative case studies to clarify the purposeful connections that continue to exist between fancy dress costume and the fashion industry, and the need for a reappraisal of this relationship.

### **Fanciful fashions on the twenty-first century catwalk: Viktor & Rolf and Thom Browne**

Viktor & Rolf's catwalk show, 'Fashion Statements', was variously described as 'playful' (Foreman, 2019), 'ironic' (Fisher, 2019), 'odd and jarring' by journalists (Stern, 2019). The garments within the show consisted of a series of voluminous skirted dresses made entirely of brightly coloured tulle that were adorned with slogans inspired by Instagram memes. The decorative phrases included, 'No Photos Please', 'I'm not Shy I Just Don't Like You', 'Trust Me I Am A Liar', 'F\* This I'm Going To Paris'. The designers explained that the collection, which had many hallmarks of fancy dress costume, was conceived to show the 'expressive power of clothing' but with a 'strange contradiction', where seemingly impactful slogans were really only a 'simplification' and consequently meaningless (Young, 2019; Yalcinkaya, 2019). Viktor & Rolf have created incongruous catwalk presentations before. In 'Action Dolls', a couture collection for Autumn/Winter 2017, models wore oversize doll-like head coverings and commensurately overproportioned, silhouette-distorting clothing. Commentators suggested the brand's 2019 collection was fundamentally different for pointedly addressing quotidian concerns about social media usage and for being aimed at a new, younger clientele (Bain, 2019). Some reporters spoke of the disruptive nature of the collection and its message, suggesting this could be the end of couture as a rarefied creative form (Fiorentino-Swinton, 2019). The design duo's presentation was ostensibly interrogative, it certainly challenged normative discourses about dress. However, its aesthetics and affect upon commentators, who emphasised the absurdity and ambivalence of the collection's message, which the designers themselves had said was for the viewer to formulate, suggest a discontent – a missing link – between what was shown and how it was understood. The fissure between clothing and cognition was even more apparent with Thom Browne's catwalk presentation that occurred two months earlier, in November 2018.

Browne's ready-to-wear menswear collection, unveiled in Paris in a plastic, primary-coloured garden, had a more patent connection to fancy dress costume. Two male models wore gnome-like hats and faux beards and pretended to mow the lawn. Another model gave flowers to the audience, bringing them into the performance. Inspired by America's Preppie Style, the clothing was characterised by oversize jackets and three-quarter length trousers, decorated with a variety of multicoloured prints, cloths and furs. The overall effect of a

collection conceived to champion ‘diversity and tolerance’ was, in the words of various commentators, ‘kooky’ (Conti, 2018), ‘surreal’ (Leitch, 2018), and a celebration of Browne’s ‘wacky savoir-faire’ (Anon., 2018). According to Browne,

we started with gnomes because they are funny, just nonsense ... It was really taking where it all began and playing with the proportions ... It was just nonsense and ridiculous and I wanted it be all that. And pride ... a world where everybody gets along (Quoted by Leitch, 2018).

Reflecting on the show, journalist Luke Leitch said ‘most [reporters] did not connect the note Browne [had] left [on their seats] next to a sunglasses box and lollipop that read, “Please see the world through my eyes ... please ...”’, with the collection. Such confusion indicates there was something unexpected, even misunderstood, about the show’s intention and its exposition. That Browne was trying to convey a serious and relevant message through his clothing and catwalk resonates with remarks by Geczy, Karaminas and Granata about the interrogative qualities of some ‘exaggerated’ and ‘undisciplined’ fashions. However, the collection’s genesis from the ‘ridiculous’ and ‘nonsense’ – terms rarely used by established fashion designers to describe their own work – suggests the audience were caught off guard and could not fathom a coherence within the show.

My contention is that the ‘otherness’ apparent within the catwalk collections of Viktor & Rolf and Thom Browne, which seemed to confound attempts at decipherment, could be more securely interpreted if the relationship between fancy dress costume and contemporary fashion – certainly non-normative clothing – were constructively acknowledged. In these two cases, the designers appear to have struggled to convey wholly their intended messages because the use of humour, theatricality and, to a greater extent with Viktor & Rolf, satire, surprised audiences. Whilst these concepts are not alien to catwalks of any age, and to fashion generally, they are conventionally marginalised and more readily associated with designers who have established their reputations by distorting or defying sartorial norms; for example, Jean Paul Gaultier who has long been referred to as the *enfant terrible* of fashion, a characterisation he emphasises in the marketing of his *folies bergère*-inspired Freak Fashion Show.<sup>7</sup> Humour, theatricality and satire are concepts more readily associated with fancy dress costume. Whilst Fred Davis reminds us that the meanings of fashionable dress are multiple and contingent, reporters’ appraisal of these two shows, characterised as they were by superficial colloquialisms, reveals a deficiency in the conceptualisation of, and lexicon appropriate for, non-normative fashions. If fancy dress costume, its unique characteristics and cultural manifestations, as outlined above, occupied a more prominent position in discussions about contemporary clothing, there would be greater scope to question and qualify the anomalies presented by Viktor & Rolf and Thom Browne’s presentations. Humour, satire, cultural commentary could become a focus for discussion, rather than a series of discontinuous and footnoted remarks. Fuller consideration of fancy dress costume could act as conduit in which to access and apply the concepts of critical and experimental fashion, which presently appear abstract, even esoteric, in light of responses to these shows (Wild, 2020, 148-149).

### **Fancy dress costume on the twenty-first century catwalk: Rottingdean Bazaar and Bruce Asbestos**

The rationale, even necessity, for acknowledging fancy dress costume in discussions about the contemporary fashion industry is all the greater because recent catwalks have borrowed directly from the dressing-up box. Two catwalk presentations from 2018, that of

Rottingdean Bazaar and Bruce Asbestos, made explicit use of fancy dress costume. In June 2018, Rottingdean Bazaar's catwalk presentation for London Fashion Week Men's consisted entirely of hired fancy dress costumes (Bowman, 2018). Models carried placards identifying the costume supplier on the catwalk. The design duo behind Rottingdean Bazaar, James Theseus Buck and Luke Brooks, exacerbated the polemical nature of their work when discussing it with journalists. Buck and Brooks claimed costumes had been hired because they were without a public relations team and had no means to sell them afterwards, '[s]o if stylists want[ed] to borrow looks, they[d] have to get in touch with the stores we hired them from. We found that quite funny' (Davidson, 2018). In a podcast interview with *i-D*'s Arts and Culture Editor Matthew Whitehouse, they remarked, '[we] didn't feel like making anything'.<sup>8</sup> The dilettantism, perhaps diffidence, of Buck and Brooks is unsurprising considering the fashion industry's attitude towards fancy dress costume, but it is deceiving. In the interview they explain how they use everyday items in their designs and choose symbols that a majority of people can relate to. As British designers they reject the dominance of London and find trends 'disturbing', arguing that people's lives and genders should not be harnessed to sell clothes. Instead, they seek to spotlight and support people from their local community.<sup>9</sup> The irreverence of Rottingdean Bazaar's collection is consequently misleading and a reflection of the designers' efforts to challenge socialised assumptions within the fashion industry. Whilst Buck and Brooks did not explain their decision to use fancy dress costume, the fact that it is a prevalent form of clothing, popular and possessing of longstanding links with contemporary fashions, clearly makes it an apt foil to articulate their non-normative views and to critique aspects of the fashion industry. Similar motives explain the appearance of fancy dress within the catwalk presentation of Bruce Asbestos staged one month prior to the Rottingdean Bazaar show, in May 2018.

**Fig. 1 Bruce Asbestos wearing a Bruce Asbestos x Juliana Sissons 'Yellow Eyes' Canvas Cape, 2019. Photography by Reece Straw**

Bruce Asbestos' presentation for Autumn/Winter 2018 included two looks that were 'directly lifted from fancy dress'.<sup>10</sup> First, the 'carry me' – 'a cheap visual trick where you appear to be being carried by something else' – and second, 'traditional dress in the Black Forest, and the hats with the red pompoms'.<sup>11</sup> Like Rottingdean Bazaar, Asbestos' approach to clothing design embraces fancy dress costume because of its 'lack of fashion feel, its intentional silliness'.<sup>12</sup> Conceiving of his collection as an 'artist', Asbestos suggests he had a 'different set of hang ups' to a fashion designer:

[Consequently], being associated with fancy-dress isn't a problem for me, I just needed enough variation in looks/quality so that I didn't feel it was only from the culture of fancy dress, I didn't want to limit it to that, or only talk about the status of fancy dress – I was trying to keep the reading of the work more open, more uncertain.<sup>13</sup>

Asbestos revels in the creative potential and polyvalence of fancy dress costume, much like Rottingdean Bazaar. For him, 'what the audience imagines or takes away [is] more interesting ... than the experience of the model'.<sup>14</sup>

The responses of Rottingdean Bazaar and Bruce Asbestos make it clear that they used fancy dress costume because of its unusual, liminal, status. For the censorious, certainly critical, comments they wanted to make about the contemporary fashion industry it was an appropriate sartorial form. The use of fancy dress within their clothing collections and

catwalk presentations demonstrate that it can be affective; that ‘silliness’ can be meaningful, in much the same way that Rick Owens and Thom Browne have spoken about the ‘ridiculous’ being purposeful. These comments are supported by Roger Caillois’s study of human play. Whilst Caillois considers play to be aberrant, he argues that it is shaped by social structures and mores. This is why games and other forms of ludic behaviour that might appear wholly ebullient ‘educate, enrich’ and ‘contribute usefully to the enrichment and the establishment of various patterns of culture’ ([1958] 1961, 55). A problem of intentionally harnessing silliness, however, is that amusement and laughter is highly subjective and polyvalent. On the fashion catwalk it is unexpected. Walter van Beirendonck’s remarks about the importance of his designs being serious; the reflections of Letch who did not fully understand Browne’s intentions; and Bruce Asbestos’s tolerance of humour’s multiple possibilities (because he wanted his work to be broadly understood), emphasise why the fashion industry is wary of fancy dress costume, a sartorial form conventionally associated with levity. Humour poses problems for the fashion industry because clothing collections and their catwalk collections need to be commercially viable. In the case of Rottingdean Bazaar and Bruce Asbestos this was not the case. Rottingdean Bazaar’s entire collection was hired, meaning that nothing shown was for sale. Asbestos’ online shop included only two items from his catwalk presentation, an embroidered sweatshirt and T-Shirt.

**Fig. 2 Waffle Dress. Bruce Asbestos collection Autumn/Winter 2018. Photograph by David Severn**

In short, whilst fancy dress costume can be affective and convey critical attitudes about contemporary issues, its reliance on polyvalent forms of communication, especially humour and theatricality – themes that became more apparent with its popularisation during the 1970s and 1980s – make it commercially precarious. As Lauren Boumaroun neatly summarises,

costume design is first and foremost about the character and story ... Fashion, on the other hand, involves the design, production and distribution of clothes deemed acceptable by a brand or whichever tastemakers are in power (2017, 654).

**Reappraising the connections between fancy dress costume and fashion: Anne-Sophie Cochevelou**

This problematic position has led to the repudiation of fancy dress costume by the fashion industry and its marginalisation by fashion commentators and academics. However, the prevalence of fashionable clothing on the catwalk that incorporates ideas and techniques associated with the sartorial form indicates that it is untenable to maintain this stance in discussions about contemporary fashion. The difficulty in continuing to marginalise fancy dress costume and the potential benefits of recognising it are demonstrable in the work of London-based independent fashion and dress accessory designer Anne-Sophie Cochevelou.

Cochevelou’s work is best characterised by the repurposing of artefacts associated with childhood.<sup>15</sup> Like Rottingdean Bazaar, Cochevelou uses everyday items to establish a rapport with people. Through her designs she seeks to evoke a ‘sympathetic feeling’ and thereby establish a ‘conversation’ with people. Recent designs have been made using plastic model dinosaurs and miniature dolls’ heads. The dinosaurs she uses have proved successful – aesthetically and commercially – because many people relate to them. Long since dead, politically neutral and consequently non-threatening, they cause people to remark, “I used to have this as a kid!”, which establishes a meaningful bond between object and viewer/wearer.

Cochevelou does not use the term fancy dress to describe her work, chiefly because there is no direct equivalent in her native French, but she says that if someone were to remark, ‘your work is very like fancy dress’, she would take it as a compliment. Cochevelou is nonetheless aware that fancy dress costume is conventionally regarded as ‘tacky’ and when made by hand runs the risk of ‘always being a bit of a failure’. In large part, Cochevelou’s caution about associating her work explicitly with fancy dress is the fact that her colourful and incongruent dress is often met with derision in France, with people sardonically remarking to her, “Is it carnival today?”. She attributes the opprobrium her clothing receives to its bricolage construction that removes conventional status signifiers and consequently prevents people from pigeon-holing her. A vintage Burberry trench coat that Cochevelou embellished with costume jewellery across the shoulders and with a painted slogan on the upper back – “Don’t wear beige, it might kill you” – caused people in London to criticise her when she wore it out cycling because they thought they were being challenged. The subversive intent that people perceived in this garment, which Cochevelou maintains was not present, emphasises, first, the polyvalence and destabilising impact of non-normative dress, and second, the fact that clothing judged to be frivolous is not devoid of meaning, even if this is largely understood to be negative. In microcosm, Cochevelou’s work reveals the creative opportunities fancy dress costume can afford fashion designers seeking to engage consumers in more personal, certainly dynamic, ways and, consequently, what can be lost to commentators and academics if this connection is not critically acknowledged and explored. Reference to consumers is important, for unlike Rottingdean Bazaar and Bruce Asbestos Cochevelou incorporates elements of fancy dress costume in designs that are created to be sold, with prices ranging from £8 to £800.<sup>16</sup>

**Fig. 3 Anne-Sophie Cochevelou wearing her ‘Don’t Wear Beige It Might Kill You’ customized trench coat, 2018.**

Akin to Craik, who avers that all clothing is inherently imbued with some element of fancy dress, Cochevelou suggests there is an equivalence, certainly an interrelation, between fancy dress costume and fashion. She sees parallels between her work and contemporary catwalk fashions, observing that Viktor & Rolf’s tulle couture collection is a more ‘stylish’, ‘upgraded version’ of her designs. Cochevelou suggests there exist different ‘levels of complexity’ and ‘elaboration’ within fancy dress costume, from the bespoke commission to costume hires that can be readily obtained from the high street. This idea, anecdotal though it is, parallels the conventional hierarchy within the fashion industry that commonly demarcates between *haute couture*, which is accessible to a limited number of people because of the aesthetic and technical skill required to create it, and fast fashion, which is more widely accessible. By recognising the relationship between fancy dress costume and fashion a more critical light can be cast on both forms of clothing and, particularly of dressing up, it can help to show how this sartorial form is hierarchical and layered, and not unidimensional.

**Conclusions: placing fancy dress costume within the fashion industry**

Recognising that fancy dress costume is not unidimensional is an important step in encouraging commentators, academics and the fashion industry more generally to contemplate its reappraisal. First, it facilitates an understanding of the commonalities – aesthetic, technical and ideological – that can exist between fancy dress costume and fashion designs. A helpful link – a ‘way in’ – is thereby provided to make the concepts of critical and experimental fashion overtly relevant and applicable. This is important in helping to situate recent commentary and analysis about non-normative fashions by journalists and academics within pre-existing dialogues about fashion; the apparent anomalies presented by the designs

of Viktor & Rolf, Thom Browne and other contemporary designers can be analysed with reference to a broadly understood sartorial form. An awareness of the polyvalence of fancy dress can also help to situate existing studies of non-normative clothing; for example, Adam Geczy's and Vicki Karaminas's consideration of the costumes worn by singer and performer Lady Gaga, which I contend possess elements of fancy dress costume. The authors suggest there exists a dynamic relationship between Gaga's non-normative garments and bodily appearance and what might be termed conventional fashions. They argue that her 'fashion triggers social imaginaries blurring the margin between the improbable and the impossible. In other words, Gaga's deployment of fashion offers a powerful tool in subverting the disciplined classical-body-of-the-State by opening up liminal spaces and options' (2017b, 272). The implications of this conclusion are more apparent if it can be established that some forms of fancy dress costume exist within the contemporary fashion industry and contribute to it.

Second, if it is acknowledged that fancy dress costume exists on a continuum, similar to fashionable clothing, the (positive) affectiveness of the sartorial form – its impact on a wearer's behaviour and the people in their immediate vicinity – can be more readily perceived. The incorporation of fancy dress costume within fashionable dress and its role in shaping people's quotidian identities has been broached by Lauren Boumaroun through the concept of 'everyday cosplay'. Along a 'cosplay continuum', she suggests 'consumers appropriate the visual identity of fictional characters for their own self-expression through dress' (2017, 649-650). If study of the formation of people's public identities through dress were more cognisant of the ludic and idiosyncratic strategies that are employed by people, as Boumaroun suggests – and as Rottingdean Bazaar, Bruce Asbestos and Anne-Sophie Cochevelou explore in their work – a more nuanced, certainly authentic, discussion about fashion, self-perception and self-presentation could occur.

Third, and more generally, acknowledgement of the dynamic exchange between fancy dress costume and fashion would encourage commentators, designers and academics to be more open to myriad cultural projects that explore the potential of non-normative clothing to articulate a community's quieter and under-represented voices. For example, Jean Paul Gaultier's Fashion Freak Show uses a 'transgressive energy' to explore 'new issues such as plastic surgery and the creatures it spawns, or the vanity fair of social media.'<sup>17</sup> In a similar way, the globally touring live performance show World of WearableArt, founded by Suzie Moncrieff in 1987, includes an international competition in which entrants from 'fashion, art, design, costume and theatre' submit imaginative garments that represent a 'glorious rebellion against the mundane'.<sup>18</sup>

Fancy dress costume is an inherently disruptive sartorial form and this does not make study of it straightforward, for any period or society. Nonetheless, at a time of pronounced social and political disquiet, when non-normative vogues appear more prevalent on the catwalk and among ready-to-wear and couture collections, this makes its incorporation within fashion-related discussions only more necessary and urgent.

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<sup>2</sup> Throughout my research I refer to ‘fancy dress costume’ to avoid confusion with colloquial American that uses ‘fancy dress’ to refer to somebody smartly or formally dressed. American museums, scholars, and the Merriam Webster dictionary, however, follow British nomenclature and simply use ‘fancy dress’.

<sup>3</sup> [www.teenvogue.com/story-cultural/appropriation-halloween-costume-video](http://www.teenvogue.com/story-cultural/appropriation-halloween-costume-video). Accessed: September 2018.

<sup>4</sup> *The First Monday in May*, directed by Andrew Rossi (Dogwoof, 2016), 00:01:29 to 00:01:36 minutes.

<sup>5</sup> ‘Cutting up Rough’, *The Works*, season 3, episode 9 (BBC, 20 July 1997), 00.56 to 01.00 minutes.

<sup>6</sup> <http://waltervanbeirendonck.momu.be/en/u2.php>. Accessed: July 2019.

<sup>7</sup> See [www.jpgfreakfashionshow.com](http://www.jpgfreakfashionshow.com). Accessed: July 2019.

<sup>8</sup> Matthew Whitehead, ‘claire barrow, art school and rottingdean bazaar on making the everyday extraordinary’ (17 December 2018). [https://i-d.vice.com/en\\_uk/article/ev3kae/claire-barrow-art-school-rottingdean-bazaar-podcast](https://i-d.vice.com/en_uk/article/ev3kae/claire-barrow-art-school-rottingdean-bazaar-podcast). 38.29 minutes to 38.30 minutes. Accessed: December 2018.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.24 minutes to 27.17 minutes.

<sup>10</sup> Personal communication with Bruce Asbestos, August 2018.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> The following remarks are taken from a personal interview with Anne Sophie Cochevelou on 18 February 2019.

<sup>16</sup> <https://sophiecochevelou.myshopify.com>. Accessed: July 2019.

<sup>17</sup> ‘A Message from Jean Paul Gaultier’. <http://jpgfashionfreakshow.com/en/a-message-from-jean-paul-gaultier/>. Accessed: July 2019.

<sup>18</sup> ‘About WOW’. [www.worldofwearableart.com/competition](http://www.worldofwearableart.com/competition). At 00.40 to 00.45 minutes and 01.26 to 01.26 minutes. Accessed: July 2019.