What are we looking at? The photograph, clothing and identity.

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Introduction
In the last fifteen years the representation of the body has received increasingly serious scholarly attention across a range of academic disciplines. It is being “re-thought and re-considered” (Ewing, 1994: 9) As the critical perspectives have developed, the issue of the clothed and unclothed human form has arisen. Thus the intellectual examination of ‘the body’ has secured the critical scrutiny of clothing as worthy of significant scholarship. This essay raises some of the key issues of the clothed body in relation to the images in this book and the construction of identity.

A Glimpse
The photographs in this book give us a glimpse of the everyday. The range of images document a moment of dynamism but also freeze it for a longer look or gaze. The question is what are we looking at? Or, are we looking for something? We may study the pose, the face, the clothes; are we looking for a moment of unguarded expression (as in portraiture), which reveals something about the person previously hidden or unknown? Individual pages invite us to look longer than others, are we identifying with the person? Does the image captures something of ourselves? Collectively there is a story unfolding, with one simple action (jump) a strangely diverse set of readings occur. As we move from one image (page) to the next our view ‘builds’ into the story of an event that is time-based both of minutiae and longevity. As Mary Price comments in the book, A Strange Confined Space,
Unlike a portrait, these images are not posed, dressed for, or constructed with careful direction from the photographer. The pictures are focused on a single action and a moment of ‘real’ time. As images, they picture apparel as part of everyday life. Unlike fashion photography the ‘performers’ are focused on the action, not on how they look or what they are wearing. The clothing is secondary to the movement therefore we are offered a more accurate, or more real, portrayal of the moment encapsulated. The ‘illusion’, which is part and parcel of fashion photography and portraiture, has been denied in the process of capturing an instant activity and there is a more ‘natural’ collation of images of attire. That is, it is not a constructed image (of carefully selected clothing) to portray a particular image of the self, but one that documents or records what one is wearing at the time. The images expose the attired human body for gaze and exhibition.

The Active Image
In history there are many more photographs of men than women, one of the reasons given for this is that men were/ are more active in public life and in their pursuits such as sports. So ‘masculine’ actions have been given a higher profile in the field of representation. Levitt suggests that traditionally women have been valued for their “beauty, wealth or husband” (Levitt, 1991: 9) and therefore photographic images of women engaged in activity are less numerous. The command ‘jump’ transcends gender yet can we see more suppressed leaping action in the images of women and a more gregarious free delivery from men? Have these cultural impositions been borne out in this set of images? Is this tendency also reflected in the clothing? The history of fashion for men has often been about reflecting function and purpose, for
example, the suit was designed to allow flexibility of movement through the tailoring process, at the same time, creating an image of power and status. (behavioural) Alternatively for women, ‘feminine’ fashions have been designed to embody concepts of decoration, ornamentation and sensualities. (visceral) Fashion theorists see this as the difference between doing – masculine, and being – feminine. (Entwistle, 2000). The uniform is a good example of clothing that is deemed ‘fit for purpose’ in one gender (male) and then appropriated by another gender (female) once women move into a traditionally male field of work. Photograph 1 and 2 illustrate that when women move from the private domestic sphere into the public sphere of work male clothing is co–opted, adapted and re–worked into a female version. It could be said to be ‘re–gendered’ i.e. from male to female. However an alternative view is that it serves to “neuter” women (Craik, 2005:76), in other words, it de–genders and simply reinforces the masculinities of the garment.
These two images embody these points. The uniformed police officers (Photograph 1) appear to be wearing identical clothing, yet historically the uniform was invented for men and then translated into a female version. The image is showing us the similarities and equalities of purpose via the uniformity of clothing. There is little ‘personality’ evident in the attire, the underlying purpose of the police uniform signifies law and order, their protective clothing is a metaphor for the protection they offer us. Therefore the uniform emphasises and conveys this message through its attention to similarity across genders. In Photograph 2, Claire is also wearing a uniform historically connected to masculine form, yet adopted by women to ‘perform’ in the patriarchal workplace. (Wright, 1996) However there are a few signs of traditional female forms of clothing, most noticeably the high heeled pointed – toe shoes. They are the antithesis of practicality especially in performing the jump action! The trousered suit is associated with work, masculinity and authority, the stiletto is associated with pleasure, desire and femininity.
(Wright, 1989) By combining the two opposing clothing symbols, Claire (in Photo 2) treads a fine line between a public identity and the personal.

**Identity and the Self**

When we convert a real event into an image – a photograph – it is said we create a “timeless space”. (Calefato, 2004:60) However the clothed body communicates an identity, the photograph is disclosing. As Woodward says, clothing is “not seen as simply reflecting given aspects of the self but is co – constitutive of facets such as identity, sexuality, and social role.” (Woodward in Miller, 2005:21) So the timeless space becomes set in time by the physical attributions of our clothing. The ‘self’ is being externalized through what we wear! As artefacts, apparel encases our physical form and as Barthes points out, “the body cannot signify, clothing guarantees the passage from sentience to meaning” (Barthes, 1995: 258) so the manifestation of ourselves is translated through visual language. It raises the question as to the role of clothing in the construction of ourselves. Is it a supplement to our notion of self or an extension of it?

“Clothing marks an unclear boundary. Dress is the frontier between the self and non - self,” comments Elizabeth Wilson in her book Adorned in Dreams. (Wilson, 1985:2) We are all familiar with selecting clothing that suits the occasion, event or social setting, this is what Wilson calls the ‘non self.’ In contrast, perhaps ‘the self’ is most evident when the strict sartorial etiquette of an occasion is not a consideration. So our conscious or subconscious assemblage of garments may reflect true aspect/s of our personal identity or personality.
Photographs 3 and 4 instantly convey messages of personal choice and selection. In Photograph 3 we have a juxtaposition of style, texture and pattern. The synthetic fibre associated with sportswear has the popular characteristics of ‘easy care,’ with brand initials reinforcing the sportive connections. The garment has been taken out of its primary context of sport and transplanted into its secondary context, as fashionable urban wear. In contrast, the camouflage pattern is a defining feature of military garb and the trouser style hints at military style pockets and shape. Are we to read the two clothing forms as the wearer’s affiliation to both cultures? Or does it raise issues of how contemporary female youth culture sartorially ‘plays’ with ideas of masculinity/femininity. There is no simple answer to this question but we can agree that there is an oscillation or visual dialogue between and from the two garments.

“A cultural identity is thus expressed, and verbal communication is established before verbal interaction.” (Barnes, Eicher, 1993:1)

We may be unsure how to interpret some visual symbols, but the text on the sweatshirt in Photograph 4 is a clear message! It makes us participate in the process of reading a visual narrative; we become active ‘readers’ of clothing: It is literally a set of words on a blank surface. The defining narrative is the challenge the slogan ‘throws out’ to us as viewers. The text demands we consider our own sartorial messages. The tracksuit (a combo of sweatshirt and pants) is a sign of leisure. As an appropriation from American sports culture the outfit has been transposed into the everyday. Fashion theory calls this a “merged genre.” (Craik, 2005:159) The ‘comfy’ clothing emphasises the flexibility of movement so rather than the restraint of uniforms (in Photograph 1 and 2) the wearer appears relaxed, the clothing and motion is synonymous.
Final thoughts

The artefacts – the clothing – ‘release’ this information when we exchange what we see for what it means. As readers of the book we are spectators of an event, we are also absorbing the messages conveyed by the clothed figure. One wonders whether the meaning we assign to the images are ones we interpret as viewers or ones that are projected by the actual garments. Are messages inherent in an artefact? How does the moment of suspension captured in the photographs infiltrate or alter our view?

The key to perusing the pictures is the issue of inclusion and exclusion: revelation and concealment. The movement of the body (internal) competes with the movement of clothing (external): it is from this axis or inter-change that we gain insight and pleasure from the captured moments.

References (selected)


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