Deconstruction, Absolute Truth, and Fashion

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Abstract

The application of deconstruction in fashion is an interesting phenomenon of debate. This research traces the origin of deconstruction and examines how fashion in the postmodern society corresponds to the deconstruction philosophy proposed in 1966 by French scholar Jacques Derrida. Through the study on fashion designers practicing deconstruction ideology, it is discovered that in search of novelty, deconstruction fashion designers challenge absolute truth and principles built by the traditional fashion society, and hence, transform their design process into one that honors skepticism and deconstruction of set rules. Second, by inquiring the social functions that adhere to existing style, material, form, and symbol, deconstruction designers form personal style, logic, and aesthetic taste to support their design. Third, the course of such inquisition parallels the deconstruction thinking of Derrida, which boldly brings to surface the intention to tactically redefine fashion, to analyze the relationship between an outfit and the body, and to study the underlying cultural ideology of fashion.

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Deconstruction fashion is not only a fashion trend, but a powerful social force. Although sometimes linked to the phrase “anti-fashion,” it is not a social movement, but a concept that exists in the minds of several fashion designers. Deconstruction fashion, to be more specific, is a subculture accepted and functioned within limited circles. What can not be ignored is that such novelty undeniably shook the fashion system. This article analyzes deconstruction fashion from the 1990s to the 2000s through deconstruction fashion designers, presenting to the readers the cause, consequences, and results of these designers' fashion inquiry.

Deconstruction in a Postmodern Context

The powerful concept of deconstruction, as Gill (1998) noted, “... have transformed philosophy, literature, film theory and
production, and related design areas of architecture, graphic design and new media.” This influential philosophy is initially proposed in 1966 by the French philosopher, Jacques Derrida, who claimed that there are always hidden ideas under written texts and spoken languages, which is more complicated in meaning when analyzed in light. Deconstruction, in short, is the critical examination on construction. In the postmodern context, deconstruction queries the existence of absolute truth, the unalterable and permanent fact. The deconstruction proposal suggests a deeper examination into current facts, or what can be perceived easily from the surface, resulting in a reorganization of social structure and conventional principles.

Derrida claims that the rudiments within a structure are not isolated in rigid orders. He rejects absolute organization, announcing that doggedly protecting the customary system is meaningless because all knowledge, idea, and belief are fragile. Overthrowing the old system also entails better respect towards personal originality and individual variation. Above and beyond, deconstructionism also stimulated communication among the mainstream and those who work outside the rules. It encouraged idea exchanges and integration of contradicting groups.

**Fashion or Anti-fashion**

Recently, deconstruction has gained ever-increasing power among fashion and many other art forms such as architecture and film. Is deconstruction fashion or anti-fashion? Gill (1998) believes there is no simple answer. Deconstruction started as an anti-mainstream movement, while Derrida’s descriptions of deconstruction were used as a tool intended to damage and tear down traditional structures. The precursor of deconstruction, legendary Japanese designer Rei Kawakubo, founder of COMME des GARÇONS, started a revolutionary way to redefine the art of ready-to-wear three decades ago. Kawakubo termed this rebel to traditional fashion as “Creative Deconstruction” in order to distinguish the unique style and design logic behind her tattered but wearable garments. Refusing to flow with ordinary fashion, Kawakubo’s devastating experiment combined modern Western ideology and Japanese tradition in the use of elements from opposite cultures, genders, and social classes to assert an exceptional confrontation towards defects within the original system—the lack of inventiveness and to break away from absolute truth in the tradition of fashion. For example, in the Spring/Summer 1997 collection “Body Meets Dress,” Rei Kawakubo intentionally twisted the construction of a dress to challenge the wearer’s aesthetic concept and dressing habit, see Figure 1.

Today, deconstruction provides vital implications for contemporary art and design in aspects of style, form, function and utility, as well as aesthetics. As far as deconstruction is concerned, fashion is not simply about style change based on traditionally formed construction, such as altering the jacket lengths or changing its numbers of buttons. It is all about the underlying ideas and the fundamental construction of garments. Deconstruction fashion, therefore, focuses on the meaning of its appearances and the structural investigations of the use of thread and fabric, seam lines, lining, darts, and the relationship of the garment and the body. It aims at exposing the original construction and achieving innovative shapes that give new meaning to the body and the human posture and character. In other words, clothing
is not merely the result of fads and ever-changing styles anymore. It has become a symbol that represents an individual mind.

What covers the body affects a person’s mental and physical status. It gives one identity and a way of self expression. The outfit one chooses shows one’s recognition of his cultural identity, social status, gender, race, and many more. Besides its functions to protect and cover, deconstruction fashion provides personal expression of the wearer which represents the wearer’s mental and physical status.

**Deconstruction Fashion Designers**

According to Norris (2002), “Deconstruction is avowedly ‘post-structuralist’ in its refusal to accept the idea of structure as in any sense given or objectively ‘there’ in a text.” Deconstruction fashion design is characterized by use of skills such as intentional twist of the body figure, jagged and convoluted structure, lack of human-shape details, disjointed loads of ripped fabric, use of heavy metal, and mixing elements of various sources. Deconstruction fashion designers from the 1990s to the 2000s include: Rei Kawakubo, Issey Miyake, Jun Takahashi, Yohji Yamamoto, Vivienne Westwood, Hussein Chalayan, Walter Van Beirendonck, Martin Margiela, Ann Demeulemeester and Dries Van Noten (Gill, 1998; Norris, 2002; Wei, Y. S, 2005).

For these designers, there is often a focus placed on juxtaposition of opposing concepts and mix-match of elements that do not seem to go together. For instance, Belgian designers Ann Demeulemeester, Dries Van Noten, and Maison Martin Margiela often combine different materials and then slash and rip them. Ann Demeulemeester, known for inventiveness and building designs on contradictions, launched her first experimental women’s line in 1985. She has always included art and music in her contradictory design and her design has consistently appealed to clients who enjoy some artiness in their wardrobes as well as those with high sense of individuality, women who dressed to please themselves.

Deconstruction designers’ mix and match of different themes-underwear, military uniforms, hospital gowns, rock-and-roll costume, sportswear-and various materials to reproduce their sense of modern fashion. Such ideas coincide with the deconstruction’s ‘post-structuralist’ characteristic, refusing structure and form. Demeulemeester often creates an introverted masculine appearance which drew inspiration from her muse, the singer Patti Smith. In addition, besides using the singers’ music for runway soundtracks, she also uses the lyrics poetically as prints on her design, see Figure 2 for Demeulemeester’s challenge towards gender identity-the 1995–1996 “Identità e differenze” Collection.

While the key approach of deconstruction design is to reveal, distinguish, and understand the underlying concepts, assumptions, and structures that form the foundation for thought and belief, the works of Demeulemeester, Noten and Margiela were also heavily based on the art of tailoring. Their clothes may look asymmetric and chaotic, just like they are about to slip off the shoulders or hip, but the clothes are actually quite safe due to their internal structural design. Demeulemeester’s Spring 2007 runway show introduced an easy, floppy look mainly in black and white monochrome-the cutaway jackets with multiple thin stripes for vests as well as her ombré-dyed shirts, see Figure 3.

Margiela’s Spring 2008 ready-to-wear offers a sexy bandeau look. Be it underwear or foundation garment, the tight graphic
stripes elongates the body shape with matched armbands and leggings, see Figure 4. Another example is the "Dissection" jacket designed by the Flemish designer Walter Van Beirendonck, featuring irregularity of the silhouette and juxtaposition of different materials, having one sleeve rather than both cut away to disclose a cross section of diverse fabrics. With solid skills and aesthetics, these young designers infused discreet touches of hope, desire, and uniqueness in highly personal styles. They have given profound depth to the contemporary fashion by reassembling materials, reconfiguring structure, recycling garments, and re-examining ideas.

By using parallel situations or concepts of antitheses, Derrida's major objective is to announce that absolute truth does not exist. Deconstruction fashion designers are no more bounded by established rules of fashion. Elements that represent opposing social status, sex, race, or culture, are used together to state the power of free will.

As Derrida suggested, compatibility, mobility, and interdependency exist among contrasting elements while all coexist simultaneously. With such viewpoint, deconstruction stands against the creed, formula, and doctrine. It overtops what has been build up by history and ridicules the being of absolute truth. Such strong attitude caused much discussion among the fashion community. Rei Kawakubo and other Japanese designers including Issey Miyake, Jun Takahashi, and Yohji Yamamoto are famous for their rebellious deconstruction design. They offered looks which manifested a complete split with the dominant fashion image of the past. Masks, weird make-up, layering, flat shoes, and secrecy were the trademark of such contemporary look. Figure 5, the flying saucer dress, created by Issey Miyake for the Spring/Summer demonstrated a simple poly look of plain weave. It is now collected and displayed by Philadelphia Museum of Art.

Jun Takahashi's renovation finely tuned deconstruction process as he combines traditional Japanese costume and a Tokyo street style with western formal wear. His 2006 Fall collection "Guru Guru" is the best example. The juxtaposition of contrasting cultural elements was the main styling feature as classical tuxedo were matched with free-and-easy eastern wrap-around as well as hoods and studs. The title "Guru Guru" means that the human body is wrapped around with layers of fabric. The western medieval armor and the eastern wrap-around brought to stage the hallmark of this runway show: the models dressed like prisoners in hoods. Not an inch of skin, not even the eyes exposed; the runway models are hidden behind medieval army headdresses. These masks are decorated with studs, chains, and rings. Details such as visible hand-stitched darts and tucks give the collection an unfinished look. Together with the traditional western jackets and tuxedos, the eastern bandaging motifs and wrap-around create an enigma, see Figure 7.

At another extreme is the English fashion designer Vivienne Westwood who always intends to break boundaries of cultural and social classes. Whether Westwood has turned punk culture into glamorous avant-garde or has twisted avant-garde into trash culture is not so important any more. The fact now is that Westwood has destroyed the dreadfully institution of fashion reality. Derrida's idea, in this sense, parallels Westwood's intentionally created ambiguity between contrasting polar. In most occasions, people dress according to their cultural and social class. Westwood, from a punk and rock-and-roll background, attempts to smash such rigidity through design. In the eyes of apologists, her
work ironically reflects the lack of uniformity of her personal life. In a deconstructive viewpoint, however, deconstruction is the way to advance and discover authentic truth. One of Westwood’s Spring 2007 collection combines outrageous graffiti prints of “Free Leonard Peltier” and “I am expensive” and bold embroidered lace dress that barely covers the body, announcing parity, sexiness, and independence, cracking the wall of rich and poor, high art and low art, see Figure 6.

Derrida’s idea is truly beyond formalism. It is as if turning of the light and allowing oneself to blindly search for insights and lights form heart. This may include redefining meaning, purpose, and value. An good example is the Turkish designer Hussein Chalayan, who incorporated technology wisely into fashion. His novel use and embracement of new technology is a total breakthrough against convention. In such sense, deconstruction centers on investigating the old system to resolve fundamental problems, to totally stand out in deconstruction is to recognize and crack problems. Chalayan’s work reflected development of latest technology which drew attention from all over the world. In his Spring 2007 runways show, Chalayan’s response to reality is a restructure of fundamental elements of outfit as well as an astonishingly beautiful call for the future. The highlight of this show is his high-technology garments that moved and reconfigured on their own, see Figure 8.1 and 8.2.

While designers strive for individuality and creativity, they contribute largely to transforming the design process into one that challenges absolute truth and tradition of the fashion society, creating garments through raising suspicion on conventional methods of making clothes as well as questioning the social functions that adhere to existing style, material, form, and symbol.

Conclusion

In the face of deconstruction, there is no absolute truth as to what rules a fashion designer must follow. Traditional principles of fashion seem unable to find a foothold. The result is a re-shuffle of fashion language, changing the relationship and bind of garments and economic position, gender, culture, racial identity, political notion, and religion.

With playful hearts and serious design spirit, deconstruction designers dig out ideas beneath conventional settings, utter suppressed, depressed, and forbidden thoughts and reveal manifold viewpoints of fashion, hence facilitating a remap of fashion geography that fuses elements from conflicting or extraneous sources. Such deconstructive design process has become increasingly popular, shaping an aesthetic conviction that provides power to its believers.

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Fig. 1 Rei Kawakubo for Comme des Garçons, Spring/Summer 1997, photo by Paolo Roversi

Fig. 2 Ann Demeulemeester 1995-1996 “Identità e differenze” Collection, retrieved from Ann Demeulemeester official website

Fig. 3 Spring 2007 Ann Demeulemeester runway show, photo by Macio Madeira from Style.com

Fig. 4 Spring 2008 Maison Martin Margiela runway show, photo by Macio Madeira from Style.com
Fig. 5 Spring/Summer 1994 Issey Miyake “Flying Saucer Dress” from Philadelphia Museum of Art

Fig. 7 Fall 2006 Undercover runway show, photo by Macio Madeira from Style.com

Fig. 6 Spring 2007 Vivienne Westwood runway show, photo by Macio Madeira from Style.com

Fig. 8.1 Spring 2007 Hussein Chalayan runway show, photo by Macio Madeira from Style.com

Fig. 8.2 Spring 2007 Hussein Chalayan runway show, photo by Macio Madeira from Style.com
ファッションにおける
デコンストラクションと絶対的真実

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要 旨

ファッション世界において、脱構築主義はよく議論され、面白いかたちでもある。本研究は、1996年に発表したフランスの哲学者ジャック・デリダのデコンストラクション（脱構築）という思想が、ポストモダニズムの社会とのかかわりを探ることにした。したがって、多くの有名ファッションデザイナーは、服飾作品を通じ、デコンストラクション的な手法を取り入れ、ファッション世界の伝統や定められた絶対的真実に挑戦しようと試みる。新しいものを作り上げる中、彼らは既存の建築やデザインプロセスに疑問を持ち、ついにそれらを解明しようとする。それと同時に、現存のスタイル、材料、様式またはシンボルなどに対する疑問で、脱構築主義のデザイナーは、個性をもつスタイルや美学感などをもたなければならないと主張する。彼らは主張すること、そしてその精神がジャック・デリダの理論と呼応し、しかも大胆にファッションを再定義し、服と身体及びファッションの脈絡を研究することにした。

キーワード：ファッション、反ファッション、デコンストラクション、ポストモダニズム、絶対的真実