Fashionable Technology
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Fasten your seatbelt, because I will take you through some abstract theory. I will argue that we need two theoretical concepts in order to better understand the shifting relation between technology, body and identity: performance and materiality.

We use technology with the idea that we can control and enhance our body and our identity. While the future of fashionable technology, or 'wearables', has been announced many times, the praxis lags behind. Wearables rarely leave the lab or catwalk, because they are not tested through the entire production chain; the aesthetics of the design is not integrated in the technology; or they remain a gadget without taking into account the wearer's body or identity. The new interdisciplinary research project 'Crafting Wearables' that José Teunissen and I have put together with the Technical University of Eindhoven, aims at designing wearables that are robust, fashionable, and commercially viable within the production chain.

But back to theory. In order to understand the shifting change in the relation between technology, body and identity, we need a new concept of identity. Traditionally, identity is understood as something fixed and unchanging; as an essence given to you at birth, by God, nature or chance. Since post-structuralist theory that was introduced by the so-called 'linguistic turn' in the late 1960s, identity is understood as more dynamic. Identity is a social construct, that is to say it is something 'made' in a complex process of negotiation between the individual and society, between nature and culture. In this view, identity can also change. It can transform throughout our life. We know this from experience: we are no longer exactly the same person as when we were young(er).

The problem of the linguistic turn was that it put too much emphasis on language. Here, the notion of *performance* is important, because it puts back the focus on identity as an *embodied* practice. Performance originally comes from theatre studies and indicates a display of skills demonstrated to an audience, often involving someone who pretends to be someone other than oneself. There is then self-awareness. The philosopher Judith Butler argues that we *perform* our identity, by repeating certain words and acts every day according to the social rules. For example, we may be born as a man or woman, but through unspoken rules of society or written laws, we behave in a certain way that confirms our identity as a man or woman. The idea is here that identity is based on 'performativity'.

The 'performative turn' puts forward that humans, either collectively or individually, have the *agency* to shape themselves in their behaviours and beliefs. People are – at least to some extent – agents in their own drama:

Crafting Wearables, 2013

Leigh Bowery, Session III, look 15, augustus 1990

they narrate and perform their selves. In the words of sociologist Zygmunt Bauman, people are 'artists of life'. We *are* not who we are, but we *perform* who we are. In this theoretical view, identity is a performance that we shape each and every day again in embodied behaviour. Identity is a process that involves change, minimally or dramatically, but inevitably.

You can probably see the relevance for fashion studies of this more dynamic, performative notion of identity, because the clothes that we wear are an important way of performing our identity. In this democratic era, we are free to choose the way we dress, as fashion sociologist Gilles Lipovetsky claims. The body is not a given, it is something we can put in shape or dress up for a performance of identity. Especially the fashion show explores the boundaries of the human body and of dress. Many avant-garde designers experiment with the ways in which we can shape our bodies or perform our identities beyond our wildest dreams.

This is where we touch upon the next concept: materiality. Because of the exclusive post-structuralist focus on language, we have neglected that our identities are *mediated* materially. The recent 'material turn' brings back a renewed focus on the materiality of identity. Our agency, our performance, our identity, takes place through material things and objects—such as clothes. Identity 'matters'. We mediate the social relations to objects, and social systems through which objects become meaningful (or not). The general idea is that people's relationship to objects is socially and culturally dependent. Our identities function within a material culture, as we all know too well from our emotional relations to objects, whether it is a chocolate bar that soothes our anxiety, a song that reminds us of

Barbara Kruger - *Untitled* (*I Shop Therefore I Am*), 1987

Lady Gaga in Bart Hess' slime dress, 2011

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WE ARE
1   2   3   4   5
NOT WHO
6   7   8   9   10   11
WE ARE
12   13   14   15   16
BUT WE
17   18   19   20   21
PERFORM
22   23   24   25   26   27   28
WHO WE
29   30   31   32   33
ARE
34   35   36

Courier 60pt, ‡67pt, ↔20

a lost love, or a particular dress that makes us feel sexy. Food, music, or clothes have a value. Of course, in high capitalism the value is always financial, but, as good old Marx demonstrated, the value is mostly a surplus value because of our affective relations to material things. Matter, objects, have an intrinsic social quality. 'Stuff' does not merely exist, but is always transformed by social interaction into a certain value: "I shop, therefore I am."

Here I want to arrive at the topic of today: fashionable technology. With the notion of performance we can now understand how fashionable technology can help us to shape and change our identities. With the notion of materiality, we can focus on the actual materiality of the technology and how our – material – bodies relate, often intimately, to the technical objects that enhance our clothes and our selves. Our relation to technology is bound to change, because smart materials have agency, not unlike ourselves. Also, the whole notion of materiality is precarious in an age of digital and virtual technologies. If we perform and mediate our identities through objects, which become more and more virtual, what does that say about our identity? And what if the materiality of a dress is slime, like the slime dress that Bart Hess created for Lady Gaga? Here we find an image that expresses perfectly, if not literally, the performativity and fluidity of the body and of identity.

I want to end with a notion by the French philosopher Gilles Deleuze, which has been an inspiration to me: 'the fold' ('le pli' in French). He poetically argues that our identity is like a fold: unfolding, refolding, folding in, folding out, folding open. Deleuze has most radically thought through the fluidity of identity, by claiming that our body has no central fixed

organisation. He speaks of the body-without-organs, by which he means a dis-organised, de-territorialised, body without a pre-ordained meaning or function. It is a carnavalesque body that is in a constant state of flux, of transformation, of 'becoming'. We are not, says Deleuze, we become. And we become who we want to be. Or, more philosophically, we *become* who we are. The notion of the fold positions us differently in time and in space, turning us inside out, or outside in, not unlike Bart Hess's slime dress.

Each new shape is a renewed process of becoming. Fashion can help in that process of transformation. Technology can help us to become who we want to be. In this era of fashionable technology, let us take up the challenge to think of our body, of our identity, as a dynamic process of multiple becomings.

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