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2022

This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis in Fashion Theory: the Journal of Dress Body and Culture on 29.05.2020, available online:
<http://www.tandfonline.com/10.1080/1362704x.2020.1766228>.

The Deceptive Mirror: The Dressed Body Beyond Reflection

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keywords: dress, mirror, body, self, affect

abstract:

This paper explores the role of the mirror in the act of getting dressed. It argues that in daily practices of dress/ing the predominance of the sense of sight in defining the experience of both dress and our self is materialized and enhanced by the omnipresence of an object: the mirror. Despite being mostly ignored in analyses of dressed body, the mirror performs a crucial role in defining both dress and the self in visual terms. By considering how the mirror is implicated in processes of subjectification, we analyse how this affects the relationship people have with clothes as signifiers of their selves. We maintain that in order to escape the gaze and its solidifying effect, we need to look away from the mirror and think of the body not as a subject, but as a fluid composition of forces. By drawing insights from phenomenology and then adhering to the Spinozian philosophy of Deleuze and Guattari, we interrogate the body as something that affectively transforms in the encounter with clothes to then explore it as a site of becoming with and through clothes. It is our aim to offer an experimentation in thinking that might lead to different ways of experiencing our clothes in the everyday as well as of theorising about their relationship with the human body and the wearers' (supposed) identity.

Introduction

In our culture the act of getting dressed mainly unfolds through the mutual correspondence and interaction between three material elements: the human body, dress and the mirror. While the first two elements and their interaction have been amply discussed by scholars engaged in studying dress and fashion as embodied phenomena, the third element – the mirror – has hardly been examined. Its performativity in the event of dressing has remained largely implicit or taken for granted.¹ Despite their omnipresence in reflective and digital form (Rocamora 2011), mirrors have “received little academic attention” (Coleman 2013b, 48).

In this article, we propose that the mirror, far from being a neutrally reflective presence, actually performs a crucial role in defining both dress and the self in visual terms. In the mirror, dress becomes mainly an image. Its function as a visual representation of a person’s identity is foregrounded. When looked at more closely, the history of the mirror reveals how this object has been profoundly embedded in processes of subjectification that underpin the very notion of individual self-contained identity. As a result, the discourse of individualization has extended to define the relationship people have with their clothes that are taken as signifiers of their persona. The belief that the self is immanent in appearance (Sennett 1977) is thus linked to the mirror. In this context garments are viewed as tools to express real or ideal Egos that are rendered visible on the public/social stage. As some scholars (Entwistle 2000; Negrin 2016; Smelik 2016; Woodward 2007) have noted, this leaves out a whole set of other engagements with fashion and dress, that elude the image and involve our bodies in different forms of experience². However, while clearly criticizing the representational approach and calling for the appreciation of the multisensorial and affective experience that make up the “feeling of being dressed” (Ruggerone 2017), these authors have largely overlooked the role of the mirror in creating and reinforcing the visual bias.

This article wants to contribute to the current debate on the extra-visual engagement with dress by retracing its intellectual origins and by weaving it together with an analysis of the crucial role the mirror has played in defining how people make sense of who they are. Indeed, we think that the story of how our relationship with clothes has evolved cannot be told separately from the story of

¹ Analyses of the role of the mirror in relation to fashion have been undertaken in more art-based scholarship; see Evans (1999) and Shane (2018).

² Authors who have explored dress as a multi-sensory embodied practice include: Cunningham (2011), Johnson and Foster eds. (2007), Shusterman (2017).

how our sense of self has developed in close connection with the image of the body, at the same time obscuring the more complex engagements we (can) have with the elements of our attire.

While different authors, mostly contributing to affect theories, have proposed different ways of tackling this complexity, two philosophical traditions have been most often cited as sources of inspiration. The first and most frequently invoked is phenomenology (Negrin 2016; Sampson 2018; Young 2005), particularly in its embodied version found mainly in Merleau-Ponty's work. Secondly some recent strands of fashion studies have highlighted the relevance of a poststructuralist perspective that pays attention to the material elements involved in dress and fashion and to the ways in which these interact with human bodies (Bruggerman 2017; Eckersley 2008; Robinson 2019; Ruggerone 2017; Smelik 2016, 2018).

In this article we explore both these perspectives to extract ideas that can help us explain how in our culture *feeling good* has been surreptitiously assimilated with *looking good*. Following a socio-cultural contextualisation of the mirror (part one), we start from a consideration of the strong coupling between the gaze and the sense of self, as described in psychoanalytic and phenomenological literature, and show how the mirror can indeed be thematised as an ambivalent technology (part two). We argue that the deceptively neutral mirror reflections can actually be seen as traps confining us into a set of normative identities, at the same time suppressing our potentialities to become different. On this stance we join some feminist authors inspired by phenomenology (Bartky 1991; Young 1998, 2005; Negrin 2016) who have emphasised the multisensoriality of dressing, without however thematising the role of mirror in this process (part three). Conversely, we maintain that in order to escape the gaze and its solidifying effect, we need to literally and symbolically look away from the mirror and embrace the idea of a body not as a subject, but as a fluid composition of forces.

This is why in part four we turn to a different philosophy to search for conceptual tools that can help us transcend the visually based definitions of body as image and of dress as representation. Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) notion of the body as knot of intensities, and of subjectivity, as a transient effect, appear to us as crucial complements to phenomenology in the attempt to capture the affective atmospheres created by the encounters of human body with dress. From within this perspective and by applying these conceptual tools specifically to the act of dressing, we can finally extricate both body and dress from the visual paradigm through which they have been long interpreted. We can then begin thinking of dress as a line of flight, opening up new scenarios for the dressed body as a line

of becoming for both wearer and garment. This direction however requires the abandonment of the mirror to free both body and garment from the solidifying trap of the image.

Mirrors in an ocularcentric culture

Most lay and scholarly discourses of dress and fashion prioritize the sense of sight in understanding and interpreting the act of getting dressed and the role of clothing in everyday life. While this might seem quite ‘natural’ in our ocularcentric culture, it is our contention that the predominance of sight in apprehending clothes and in the act of dressing influences both the relationship that people have with them (it intellectualizes it) and the ways in which scholars interpret and explain the role of clothes and fashion in forging personal and social identities. Instead of considering the practice of dressing as a set of actions inspired by well formulated intentions about the identity people want to project and its suitability for the situation at hand, we propose to consider the material elements that are at play in the act of dressing (the human body, the garment and the mirror) and to explore the effects created by their mutual interactions.

We place particular focus on the mirror in our discussion, as it has been side-lined and taken for granted as a neutral element in this triangular relationship. While for most of us, our vestimentary transformations involve a mirror as an essential tool, its physical and perceptual impact as a technology of the self (Foucault 1988) has received little attention. Mirrors are commonly understood as neutral reflective surfaces (Coleman 2013a, 2013b) of bare facts. Yet, specular reflections are optical illusions based on light and its energy. Mirrors have a flattening effect and do not reverse us. They transform us from three-dimensional physical beings into two-dimensional, virtual and visual ones. Mirrors reduce the act of getting dressed to a series of mostly frontal images of ourselves³. They reduce our texturally rich clothes to visual ones, confounding the idea of the visual garment which dominates Western fashion, a garment concerned with its look rather than its feel, that is softer on the outside and hides its traces of construction on the inside (Stauss 2019). Thus, the omnipresence of the mirror risks skewing the act of getting dressed into an impoverished mono-sensorial experience. Moreover, it renders not only dress, but also the body and ultimately

³ ‘The absent back’ in fashion is the subject of the exhibition *Back Side / Dos à la mode*, at Musée Bourdelle by the Palais Galliera, 5.7.–17.11.2019.

the self, visual, as discussed below. As a virtual social presence, the mirror plays a vital role in the process of constructing and maintaining the self. It is deeply gendering (de Beauvoir [1949] 2011)⁴, and indeed performative.

In our view, the mirror is central in the discussion of the dressed self for two main reasons. First, in daily practices of dress, it materializes the predominance of the sense of sight and frames the act of dressing as a body-project aimed at creating an *image*. Secondly, and more broadly, in Western culture the history and power of the mirror have been deeply involved in the definition of a vision-based subjectivity that underpins the approach to fashion and dress as a representation of the self⁵ The importance of sight in creating identity has become an implicit assumption underlying a wide range of interpretations of the dressed body not only by fashion scholars⁶, but also lay people and dress makers alike. As a consequence, how the body *looks* has taken priority over how the body *feels* and what it can possibly *become*.

While most of us get dressed in front of a mirror, its omnipresence in people's everyday life is much more recent. Cultural histories of this object (Anderson 2007; Melchior-Bonnet 2002; Pendergrast 2003) tell us that for centuries, the reflective material used in mirrors was a much coveted and precious item available only to a few elite members of society. It is only since the beginning of the 18th century that the mirror became a popular piece of interior design and a widespread commodity available to all strata of society (Melchior-Bonnet 2002,

⁴ Throughout *The Second Sex* Simone de Beauvoir ([1949] 2011) refers to the mirror as a gendered and gendering object. She “holds up the image of the mirror as the key to the feminine condition” (Chadwick 1985, 92). The little boy, according to de Beauvoir ([1949] 2011, 333) is told that “A man doesn’t look at himself in the mirror”, while girls are encouraged to look and learn through self-reflection. “Through compliments and admonishments, through images and words, she discovers the meaning of the words “pretty” and “ugly”; she soon knows that to please, she has to be “pretty as a picture”; she tries to resemble an image, she disguises herself, she looks at herself in the mirror, she compares herself to princesses and fairies from tales” (340). De Beauvoir goes on to argue that the mirror holds a particular significance for the construction of femininity. It is supposed to contribute to the self-understanding of women, their very becoming. “But throughout her life, woman will be vigorously encouraged to leave and come back to herself by the magic of the mirror. [...] It is above all in woman that the reflection allows itself to be assimilated to the self. Male beauty is a sign of transcendence, that of woman has the passivity of immanence: the latter alone is made to arrest man’s gaze and can thus be caught in the immobile trap of the mirror’s silvering; man who feels and wants himself to be activity and subjectivity does not recognize himself in his immobile image; it does not appeal to him, since the man’s body does not appear to him as an object of desire; while the woman, knowing she is and making herself object, really believes she is seeing herself in the mirror: passive and given, the reflection is a thing like herself; and as she covets feminine flesh, her flesh, she enlivens the inert qualities she sees with her admiration and desire.”(757–8).

⁵ As Hollander (1975/1993: xiv) points out, in the tradition of Western fashion, garments have primarily contributed (and seen as contributing) to the making of an image of the self, “an image linked to all other imaginative and idealized visualisations of the human body”.

⁶ According to Stauss, two of the central analytical models frequently applied to the field of fashion theory, particularly when exploring the relationship between dress and identity, are semiotics (e.g. Barnard 1996, Barthes 1985, Davis 1992, Lurie 1983) and symbolic interactionism (Finkelstein 1991, Hunt & Miller 1997, Kaiser 1997, Stone 1962, Woodward 2007).

85). Before they became a quotidian object, for centuries mirrors were mysterious and ambiguous things, mostly surrounded by a magic lustre and often symbols of the sacred and the divine. As well as bearing occult powers, the reflective surface constituted an important part in the development of scientific thinking, with mirrors being used as lenses and conductors of light to explore terrestrial space and the universe. With the Enlightenment and the final separation between science and magic, the mysterious aura surrounding mirrors has mainly been cultivated in psychoanalysis and art, while scientific thinking has emphasized the function of the mirrors, and the vision they allow, as tools of scientific objective knowledge.

In the Western philosophical tradition, the ability to produce objective knowledge and the ability to recognize one's own reflection in the mirror are viewed as tightly linked properties that distinguish the 'superior' beings from the others: the ability to be self-aware, to objectify oneself, to exchange places with the other is the basis for the formation of a mind (the human) which is capable of developing objective thought.

The creation of knowledge has been largely vision-based in our culture, where "thinking itself [is] thought of in terms of seeing" (Pallasmaa 2005, 15). Indeed the optical sense has been at the top of the hierarchy of senses since antiquity. In *Modernity and the Hegemony of Vision*, philosopher David Michael Levin (1993:2) maintains that "beginning with the ancient Greeks, Western culture has been dominated by an ocularcentric paradigm, a vision-generated, vision-centered interpretation of knowledge, truth, and reality". Indeed, particularly after Descartes, western thought has been marked by an ocularcentric bias implying a split between a subjective (human) self, looking (down) on an objective world exterior to it, as from a vantage point and "outside time" (Jay 1994, 263). Reflecting on this ocularcentric tradition the German philosopher Martin Heidegger (1977, 134) describes it as "the conquest of the world as picture," which he regards as "[t]he fundamental event of the modern age".

Of course, ocularcentrism has not been uncritically accepted. According to Martin Jay (1994), there is a whole tradition of 20th century philosophy that sets out to call into question and counter the ocularcentric tendency of the traditional paradigm, by highlighting that the dominance of sight overshadows a whole range of different engagements with the world. It ultimately produces a worldview that enhances some dimensions of life at the expense of others. Within this tradition, some authors particularly explored the impact of the scopic regime on intersubjective relations and on the processes of subjectification. At the same

time, the mirror, both as material and metaphorical object, has repeatedly been used to explain the construction and maintenance of the self (Stauss 2017). It is to these differing discourses that we now turn.

The mirror and the visual construction of subjectivity

The metaphor of the mirror is used in a number of disciplines to explain the emergence of subjectivity as well as subsequent stages of developing and maintaining the self.

Within sociology, for example, the mirror conspicuously appears in Cooley's theory of the looking-self-glass ([1902] 1922), according to which selfhood is built through the internalization of others' feedback and our imagination of the judgements they make about us⁷. Two decades later, George Herbert Mead (1925) elaborated on the themes identified by Cooley with greater insistence on the part of social interaction, the process of taking the role of the other. Although not explicitly using the mirror metaphor, Mead also explains the formation of the self as a process in which communication of meanings to and from others are reflected internally to create a consciousness. Imitation is vital to Mead's formulation of the developmental process, in which an individual comes to adopt the perspective of a more generalised group sharing a particular societal perspective about the self. Mead's theory of symbolic interactionism (Mead 1934) remains highly influential, but is entirely based on the sense of sight (Stauss 2017).

In psychoanalysis the importance of the mirror in forging our individuality and, at the same time, the alienating potential of the mirror image is epitomized in the work of psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, who describes the formation of the self as a process which relies on seeing: seeing the self in relation to an 'other'. In his influential lecture on the 'Mirror Stage', Lacan ([1949] 1977) explains that when, between six and eighteen months, the infant begins to recognize and identify with her/his image in the mirror, s/he derives from it an illusionary sense of wholeness and totality. For Lacan, the first foundational step in identity formation is therefore essentially a narcissistic phase producing an Ideal Ego that doesn't really exist, so our sense of self is based on an illusion. This self is definitely a "decentred subject" (Evans 1999) always on the brink of dissolution, it is "a hoax

⁷ Cooley writes: "Each to each a looking glass, reflects the other that doth pass" ([1902] 1922, 152).

by which we normalize an incoherent inner reality” (Wiley 2003, 504), which we cannot make sense of and cannot be symbolized nor represented. Participating in a general cultural climate in post-war France, marked by the attempt to produce a new concept of self⁸, Lacan like others did set out to uncover the “unthought and hidden foundations of performing subjectivity” (Habermas 1987, 263), but he finally concluded that the true self is actually inaccessible, irreparably alienated from its origins, which are irretrievable (Dean 1992, 5)⁹. His theory of identity formation uncovers the mis-apprehension upon which identity is founded, at the same time “proposing that modern identity is rooted in the visual – the image of the self as other” (Evans 1999: 18).

While Jacques Lacan was delving into the perils of the decentred subject in the field of psychoanalysis, French phenomenologists Sartre and Merleau-Ponty were engaged in recovering the self from the Cartesian dualism of mind and body, which reduces the latter to a machine and exalts the former to an immaterial function. Sartre ([1943] 2003) shared with Lacan a distrust of the mirror (Jay 1994, 347) that they both saw as a misperceptive tool that skews the process of identity formation toward inauthenticity and alienation. According to Sartre, looking at one’s reflection in the mirror enters the subject in a game (or struggle) of looks and gazes that interrupts the feeling of “being for-it-self” (an absolute centre of subjectivity) and replaces it with “being for the other” (an object among many in the Other’s visual field). Similarly to when the self is under the gaze of another, the person looking in the mirror becomes self-conscious and his/her acts are fixed and defined within an alien perspective (Weinstein and Weinstein 1984). Being for another breaks the state of transcendental consciousness the subject is in, while it restricts or completely suppresses the subject’s freedom, solidifying her possibilities into objects in someone else’s plans. Interestingly, for Sartre, being seen by the other, hence becoming an object, is always accompanied by a sense of shame; the gaze of the other does not indicate “a neutral *seeing*, but rather, it is a value-laden *looking* which has the power to objectify and causes the subject to turn attention to himself or herself in a self-reflective manner” (Dolezal 2017, 426).

⁸ According to Dean (1992) during the Great War the boundaries between Self and Other had disappeared creating a cultural climate that would eventually lead to the poststructuralist rejection of the humanistic notion of ‘Man’ as a rational, knowing subject

⁹ As previously noted by Stauss (2017), an important corrective to this dominant notion of an imagistic self is to be found in the work of French psychoanalyst Didier Anzieu (1989) and his notion of the “skin ego”. Anzieu, who underwent analysis with Lacan (Jay 1994, 342n) and was one of his seminar members in the 1960s and 1970s, grounds the development of the ego in the body, opposing Lacan’s notion of the ego as being structured like a language (Anzieu 1989). Anzieu’s concept of the skin ego grounds the development of a first sense of self not in the visual, as Lacan and the symbolic interactionists do, but in tactile experiences of the surrounding world.

Reading Sartre's work from a feminist perspective, Sandra Bartky (1991) focuses on the feeling of shame implicit in the battle of gazes between self and other. She shows why the shame linked to bodily appearance, uncovered by Sartre, needs to be differentiated along gender lines. Bartky argues that the intensity of the emotion of shame associated with being seen ultimately depends on our position in society¹⁰. In a patriarchal society, women have been traditionally more exposed to the feeling of shame derived from being seen and looked at, as the cultural role they are assigned in this social order consists of being for others all the time. As a consequence of this social position they are more likely to experience the "distressed apprehension of the self as inadequate or diminished" (Bartky 1991, 86).

Moreover, due to their cultural dependence on their appearance – as "men act and women appear" (Berger 1972, 47), finally reducing their existence to being for others –, women are encouraged to pay more attention than men to their looks. They have therefore been more subjected than men to the ruling of the mirror image. Throughout their lives girls and women are urged to refer to the mirror as a reference point for self-understanding and self-making, observes de Beauvoir ([1949] 2011, 757). Thus, mirrors are constructed as a gendered and gendering technology of the self. So much so, that the self could be described as collapsing into the mirror, according to Meyer (2002, 123), who argues that "women are positioned to believe that they will perish if the image in the glass disappears". We have become used to constantly checking our looks, thereby continuously reproducing for ourselves a situation of self-consciousness that repeatedly redefines our bodies as body images and ultimately affects our performativity in the social world (Young 2005, 66–7)¹¹.

Merleau-Ponty too explores the experience of looking at oneself in the mirror and notes how it produces a split in the self's pre-reflective state and its automatic coherence with the surrounding world. He writes (1968, 136):

At the same time that the image of oneself makes possible the knowledge of oneself, it makes possible a sort of alienation. I am no longer what I felt myself, immediately to be; I am that image of myself that is offered by the mirror [...] I leave the reality of the lived me in order to refer myself constantly to the ideal,

¹⁰ Commenting on Bartky's take of Sartre, Metcalf (2000, 14) writes: "the particularity of my body's visibility is crucial, for my subjection to powers outside me is always a subjection to concrete powers, whose regard of me has much to do with my body's particulars".

¹¹ The fact that especially young men are increasingly becoming preoccupied with their image, rather than empowering women, seems to be disempowering men, as possibly demonstrated by current debates and media talk about 'the crisis of young men' (see Peterson 2018).

fictitious or imaginary me, of which the specular image is the first outline. In this sense I am torn from myself ...

The sort of bifurcation Merleau-Ponty hints at is the split between “bodiliness” and “corporeality”, where these terms indicate two different states of our physical presence: the former being a constant outward movement participating in the world and the second emerging where/when this movement is paralysed or stopped and the body becomes an object. This objectification is paralleled by a sudden awareness of our physicality, and therefore implies an exit from the pre-reflective outward looking disposition, replaced by an inward focus of attention upon ourselves. In phenomenological literature (Fuchs 2003; Merleau-Ponty 1968; Sartre [1943]2003) the transition from bodiliness to corporeality is explained as an effect of the gaze: “the other’s gaze reifies or corporalizes the lived-body [...] it petrifies it for the moment, as the look of the Gorgo Medusa does in the Greek myth” (Fuchs 2003, 226). As we have seen, for Sartre, Merleau-Ponty and their followers, the mirror plays a crucial role in affecting the inversion of experience from the outward movement of the lived-body back towards the corporeal body: “the mirror [...] is the paradigm for the external aspect of oneself, internalized as a reflection. The mirror represents the perspective of the others on my body” (Fuchs 2003, 226–7). The reflection of the body in the mirror is what Merleau-Ponty calls “body image”, the image of the body purified from the other non-visual sensations, to be distinguished from the “body schema”, the total awareness of my posture in the multi-sensorial world¹². The body schema is thus a more primordial way of experiencing the body than the body image produced by the gaze, and it involves all senses. However, although the body image is predicated on the body schema, in our ocularcentric culture the image becomes prevalent and ultimately tones down (dulls) the other types of bodily experience¹³. Talking specifically about the relationship between women and their clothes, phenomenologist Iris Young (2005, 69) suggests that: “we might conceive a mode of vision, [...], that is less a gaze, distanced from and mastering its object, but an immersion in light and color”. What Young proposes is a notion of perception that involves the use of all senses alongside the mere sense of sight and that entails the immersion of our body into the world, by erasing the distance

¹² What is important to underline here is that the phenomenal body (the body-schema) “is not a conscious image of the body, but a tacit sense of its abilities and of its relation to the world” (Steeves 2004, 20).

¹³ It is telling that “body image”, in its visual bias, has become the dominant term both in colloquial and academic language to designate the way we think of ourselves. Defined in psychology as a conscious visual self-representation (Haggard & Wolpert 2005, 1) it is complemented by the term “body schema” which also here denotes an unconscious form of self-representation (Haggard et al 2003, R171) and includes multi-sensory input, yet largely remains a scientific term.

between the origin of the gaze and the field with which the body is mingled. For example, when we see a woollen jumper, we don't only *see* it, but we also get the feeling of wool as when we are touching it, or if we see a pair of high heels, we might also feel the discomfort of walking in them, and/or the pleasure of our allure in them. Interestingly, Young (2005) also remarks how some clothes become particularly dear to us precisely because of the ways in which they interact with our bodies, the way they fold on our shape (Smelik 2014) and the feeling they give us when we move in/with them. They just make us feel good, whether or not we look good in them¹⁴.

What kind of (dressed) body awareness?

Implied in the arguments put forward by phenomenologists is the idea that the self-consciousness provoked by the gaze (and by extension by the reflective mirror) is a hindrance. Seeing our reflected image obstructs the flow of our participation in the phenomenal world, somehow making this relationship mediated and contrived, although at the same time opening up a space for the intervention of cognition to fill the gap and restore the jammed flow between the self and the world. In talking about the different kinds of awareness that people may have of their bodies, philosopher Heyes (2018, 529) defines the self-consciousness described by the phenomenologists and their followers as an "excess of awareness" and remarks how this notion contradicts the current popularity that body awareness is enjoying not only in the wider public, where practices such as yoga and meditation are increasingly touted as therapeutic, but also the attention that body awareness has acquired in some academic circles (Orbach 2009; Shusterman 2012). She then asks whether it is possible to cultivate a positive awareness of one's body without sliding into the negative forms as those described by Sartre and Bartky.

Heyes's consideration of the double edge of bodily awareness is highly relevant for our argument. When I get dressed and 'encounter' the clothes I chose to wear I initiate a process of body awareness which involves all my senses (Negrin 2016; Young 2005) and returns to me a variety of impressions. Some of these are sensorial stimuli; for example, the roughness or softness of the material, the smell of fresh cotton, the heat of the wool and of course the image of my dressed body. Some other impressions are more difficult to describe and pin down, possibly

¹⁴ Interestingly for our purposes this notion leads us to consider the concept of synaesthesia as a normal characteristic of our perception of the world, thereby contrasting the common view, according to which synaesthesia is a pathological condition of the perceptive function (Marks 2002).

because they lack linguistic signifiers (they are not represented in linguistic expressions): those are the impressions or intensities (often called “affects” in recent literature) charged with which my body attends the flow of everyday acts and situations, occupying a certain space, but at the same time creating it by virtue of its relations and movements. To these ineffable intensities we will return later in the article. But for now, we can say that this cluster of sensations coalesce to give me either a positive, or negative, or most likely ambiguous awareness of my body; it is a level of awareness that makes me feel as part of the living world without being judged by it, as I have not yet become an object for another¹⁵. This pre-judgement state, we argue, if left alone, does not automatically produce self-consciousness; it amounts to a sort of semi-conscious but not cognitive sense of self, resembling more what we might call a *somatic* awareness, rather than a *reflective* one, as only the mirror allows the reflective self to develop into a subjective identity (see Cooley, Lacan, Sartre). Therefore, the moment I stand with my dressed body in front of the mirror, or even more so, if I look at myself while getting dressed, the judgmental attitude kicks in, the normative assessment of myself is brought to the fore and the practical/sensorial self-awareness turns into a more culturally laden self-consciousness. When examining my dressed body, I tend to compare the mirror image with the face I want to project¹⁶ and the plans I made for my representation (Goffman [1956] 1971), asking whether they match, if they make sense from a “generalized other” point of view. It is at this point that I start attending to my “body projects” (Giddens 1991; Orbach 2009) and relate to my clothes (and body) as props in a representation, bearing the responsibility to announce to the outside world the characteristics of my persona: my gender, perhaps social status, habitus, taste, lifestyle and also hint at what I am trying to do: seduce, stick out, disappear, intrigue, etc. .

At this moment in time, a normative attitude towards my body is brought into the picture (sigh) in the form of the desire/need to either reconfirm the image attached to my social persona (when this works well and is aligned with cultural norms, or when it is deliberately transgressive) or to transform it in an attempt to effectively change an ‘inadequate’ self. It is the mirror that materializes the gaze of the other and thus allows the internalization of it in the process of constructing a body-image **and** a self-image. In Foucault’s terms our “normalized identity” is a visual

¹⁵ It is a form of awareness that “refuses judgement-especially the practices of negative comparison that are part of normalization” (Heyes 2018, 531).

¹⁶ According to Seely (2013) the face is the part of the body that really ties it to a subject. Inspired by Deleuze and Guattari’s critique of facialisation, Seely interprets the designs by Pugh’s in his 2007 collection, where models had hidden faces, as a rejection of the traditional imagery of the human body. More recently Celis (2019, 6) remarked that the “function of the face in disciplinary societies is to individualize the subject within the mass”.

one, not a haptic, nor olfactory, or auditive one. The developing of a reflective self is the type of individuality that corresponds to the visual paradigm of Western modernity. Of course neoliberalism strongly endorses this notion of visual identity as it turns life into a project to perfect the self: a personal responsibility, that we all bear, to optimise our personas using the means that the market makes amply available for us, each one with a price tag attached. This kind of perspective clearly reinforces the mind/body split that Merleau-Ponty was trying to overcome with his retrieval of the lived body as a multisensorial element that defines our being in the world¹⁷. This engrossment with the world, made possible by our lived body, implies a multisensorial participation that goes well beyond the task of intellectually communicating with the world through an exchange of images. However, and against Merleau-Ponty's efforts, the power of the sense of sight and the persistence of a Cartesian dualistic mentality have combined to shape an approach to fashion that largely adopts a representational approach, according to which our main relationship with dress is based on the image of the dressed body the mirror reflects back to us. In our view, there is a whole intimate, intuitive and immediate quality to fashion and dress that becomes lost in this exclusively visual approach. We argue that this quality cannot be discussed in terms of the unity of the subject, but necessitates a more radical shift of perspective than phenomenology's positing of the multisensorial subject.

From the phenomenological body-subject to the flow of becoming: an affective escape

Up to now, we have shown that many of the insights offered by phenomenology and psychoanalysis (Lacan) are crucial for a fuller understanding of the body and subjective identity. By exposing the role of sight in constructing these identities, phenomenologists have clearly highlighted the paradox of the human condition, where the sense of self is made available through the same function, the gaze, which serves to turn the self into an object.

For the study of the dressed body, the phenomenological recovery of the multisensorial experience involved in dressing practices goes some way in contrasting the ocularcentrism that has long dominated the world of fashion and, more generally, the consumption and production of garments and clothing styles. For example, following the phenomenological stance of Crossley and Young,

¹⁷ In his analysis of perception, he emphasized that our body is not a passive receptor of stimuli from the outside world, but the bearer of a practical knowledge that actively mediates these stimuli, thereby defining our way of being in the world, our position in it.

Negrin (2016) echoes Entwistle's call for a paradigm shift in fashion studies and the adoption of framework that enables researchers to explore those aspects of dress that elude the visual. Again, using the phenomenological notion of 'lived body' Sampson (2018) explores how selves and garment become entwined and at the same time cleaved when they encounter. Finally, in a more applied vein, but still drawing on a phenomenological approach, Bruggerman (2017) shows how the emphasis on images and the visual, paralleled by a disregard for the embodied dimension of dressing and for the materiality of making and wearing clothes, has contributed to make fashion and textile one of the most exploitative and ecologically unsustainable industries in the world.

Despite these significant outcomes, we contend that phenomenology needs yet to get deeper enmeshed into the materiality of life, if it wants to thoroughly describe how our being-in-the-world unfolds. In our view, phenomenology falls short of this task because it defines "being-in-the-world" as a self-centred process of engagement that always returns back to the subject of sensations. Although multisensorial and not merely an image or a signifier, Merleau-Ponty's body is still very much a "body subject" (Mullarkey 1994, 347), a *someone* to whom the world presents itself in ways apprehensible by the senses. This means that, although the materiality of the human body is recovered (Crossley 1995; Negrin 2016), what matters for phenomenologists is how this corporeality is experienced *by the subject* who apprehends the world as *Lebenswelt*. It is our contention that, in the very attempt to contrast ocularcentrism, this attachment to the *body as subject* becomes problematic, because it upholds an identity definition of corporeality (Finzsch 2013) which, as we have established above, is itself a product of the visual paradigm.

In order to overcome the notion of dress as a (visual) representation of a subjective embodied identity, we need a different perspective on the body that renounces the notion of body-subject and embraces an idea of body as an immanent flow of intensities, senses and affects no longer attributable to a single entity.

As elsewhere discussed (Ruggerone 2017), Deleuze and Guattari's concept of the Body without Organs (BwO) posits the body as a surface able to connect with other bodies: a myriad of heterogeneous elements with which assemblages are formed (D&G 1987). Influenced by Spinoza's (2002) definition of a body as capable to affect and to be affected by other bodies, Deleuze and Guattari (D&G)

oppose the notion of the body organism¹⁸, advancing instead the idea of the body as a composition of forces and intensities, a stream of pure desire and affective capabilities that escapes, and is indeed prior to, the conventional description in terms of “organic organization of the organs” (D&G 1987, 184). The BwO refers to an ontology which allows for the positing of a pre-conscious, somatic awareness susceptible and sensitive to the connections that the body establishes with other bodies: persons, parts of persons or things, including clothes. This definition foregrounds the affective capacities of the body, contrasting it to the body organism defined as the product of a *power system* that needs “each human subject (...) to experience his or her body (...) through the psychic internalization of the normative body-image” (Seely 2013, 262).

By arguing that this internalization is made possible by the mirror, which tricks us into seeing our body as an integrated identity, we reconfigure the mirror as a power tool, a “territorialising” device (in D&G’s vocabulary) that serves the purpose of affirming the idea of a fixed identity of the subject incorporated in the body¹⁹. The leap from the somatic into the reflective awareness effectuated by the mirror enters the body into a power-regulated territory, where norms and rules about how to manage it are in force; to put it with Sartre, it is a body subjected to shame.

The flux of becoming that clothes open up for us are forestalled, as the flows of desire get channeled into regimes and patterns that reconfirm and protect the territory of subjectivity. We argue that this is one of the mechanisms through which the clothed body gets restrictively interpreted, by both wearers and viewers, as a sign of a person’s identity and fashion is foremost regarded as a means to communicate the self. Indeed, we think that fashion can do much more than this and that it may change the ways we perceive movement, bodies and clothing, when explored in a framework that does away with the body-subject. Some recent literature in fashion theory (Seely 2011, 2013; Smelik 2018) describes how a number of haute couture designers have been inspired by the idea of *affective fashion* and created garments that facilitate the transformations of the human body into something else²⁰. However, the examples discussed by Seely

¹⁸ In *A Thousand Plateaus* D&G write (1987, 184): “The organs are not its [the BwO’s] enemies. The enemy is the organism”.

¹⁹ Nietzsche, in his *Will to Power* (1968, 481) tells about how we have come to believe in, amongst other things, a stable and unified ego, self, or identity. He writes (1968, 481): “the subject is not something given, it is something added and invented and projected behind what there is”. Of course Nietzsche’s ideas have inspired much of Deleuze’s philosophy (Deleuze 2006; Stark 2017).

²⁰ In his articles, Seely (2011, 2013) analyses, among others, Alexander McQueen’s 2001 design in which the outfit transforms the model’s body into a bird or a deer, or Kawakubo’s 1997 creation for *Comme des Garçons*

and Smelik are limited to the sphere of haute couture and consist of artistic interventions which remain highly visual in nature; by constructing styles that make the human models *look* like something else (a bird, ect.), they create a visual effect by merely transforming the surface of otherwise highly normative modelling bodies.

While these analyses show that fashion theorists are opening up to novel ways of envisaging the role and the performativity of clothes, we here try to push the analysis further. We want to tie our reflections on the role and effects of the mirror in the act of dressing to the conceptual framework outlined through the concepts of BwO, assemblage and affects. To explore the potential of clothes in the body/garment assemblage, we will bring into play the Deleuzian idea of “lines of flight” (D&G 1987). More specifically we suggest that when the focus is shifted from the *looks* to the affective connection between body and clothes, these latter can be deemed to work like a line of flight, an escape from the restricted territory of the body-image, affording both the body and the clothes the ability to invent new self-formations²¹. As D&G (1987, 239) put it: “lines of flight [...] never consist in running away from the world but rather in causing runoffs, as when you drill a hole in a pipe”. So, if we imagine the body as the water flowing in this pipe, we can conceptualise putting on our clothes as the practice of drilling a hole in the pipe, letting the water out to become a new formation; perhaps a stain on the neighbour’s wall or a puddle on the street, or solidifying in an ice formation, if it encounters below-zero temperatures.

Similarly, when we put on our clothes **without** looking in the mirror, we interrupt the flow from somatic to reflective awareness, which means we will not be inclined to check the garments’ power of representation, but will instead more easily let ourselves morph with them to create a form of life that the assemblage makes possible *in the flesh*. The feeling of flux that results from staying with the somatic awareness is a different affective state to the one we experience when reflecting about ourselves as objects; I don’t experience myself as an individual representing him/herself through clothes, on the contrary I feel the transient set of energies and intensities produced by the body in relation with other bodies in the environment.

‘Body becomes dress becomes body’. Smelik (2018) looks at Van Herpen designs as “hybrid assemblages of fibres, materials, fabrics and skin” (34)

²¹ The role that clothes take on in this new paradigm only loosely resemble what other fashion scholars have defined as a “masquerade” (Wilson 2003; Tseelon 2001). Talking about a masquerade in fact presupposes that there is a fixed entity susceptible to be masked, whereas here the idea is that clothes transform and are transformed by the body that connects with them.

In other words, when the focus is shifted from identities to relations and from the body's organs to its affects, we begin to perceive the body as a set of connections latching on the materiality of the clothes and changing through the encounter. This does not happen visually, like in the high fashion designs described by Seely, but affectively, with the body involved in a stream of movement and in directions that weren't available before. The feelings of living a novel life can be potentially repeated whenever we wear different outfits, or with the same outfits, but in different situations. Each time clothes, as bodies latching onto my body, can open up new possibilities of moving, acting and living that weren't there before. These feelings are somatic and not always pleasant; they can be awkward (feeling clumsy in clothes that impede my movements), painful (the label rubbing on the back of my neck preventing me from concentrating and turning me into a situationally incompetent player), anguishing (the mini-skirt suddenly exposing me to unwanted attention and transforming me into a self-aware person). Or they can be exhilarating (a structured jacket that improves my posture and actually entuses me with power), cheeky (the split in my dress that humors me and makes me smile and act daringly), mimetic (that swimming suit that fits so well that makes my swim like a fish) enhancing (the model of trainers that make me a faster runner), ect..

The body so lived as a dispersive flow of desires constitutes, in Deleuze and Guattari's world, a "molecular line"(1987), a mode of existing that breaks down the organization of the molar body by destabilizing it and thereby offering it the possibility to become different. The assemblage body/clothes can very well be described along the lines of desire, as long as we stick to the notion of desire given by Deleuze and Guattari (2013). They resolutely oppose the notion of desire as a lack, taken for granted since Plato and culminated in Freud's theory of the unconscious. Conversely, they write (2013, 39): "desire does not lack anything: it does not lack its object. It is rather the subject that is missing in desire, or desire that lacks a fixed subject". As Deleuze himself declared in a televised interview with Claire Parnet²², "in desiring an object, a dress for example, the desire is not for the object, but for the whole context, the aggregate (...): the aggregate of the skirt, of a sun ray, of a street, of a woman, of a vista, of a colour". If something in this scene were to change, the desire could very well change direction and orient itself to connect with something else²³. This is why, even when we decide to wear an item of clothing anticipating how it will make us feel and move and

²² *L'Abécédaire de Gilles Deleuze, avec Claire Parnet*, Directed by Pierre-André Boutang (1996).

²³ We are indebted to Breuer (2015, 205-206) for this excerpt of Deleuze's interview with Parnet and for the observation drawn from it.

act in a future situation, we cannot be sure whether the outfit will feel ‘right’ or ‘wrong’. The new configurations produced by the assemblage can never be totally predicted or envisaged beforehand; they are unpredictable, messy, random, in their turn produced by casual assemblages of intensities creating unprecedented atmospheres.

Thus, we do not desire clothes as objects we lack, but as bodies we want to couple with to go out in the world. And once we are out there, as an assemblage in search of other material connections, we will sense, mostly epidermically and moment by moment, whether we made the right decision, whether that choice of outfit is enhancing our movements and acts or, at the opposite, hindering and impeding them, whether it is facilitating our life and enhancing our power, or on the contrary it is clogging it up, like a spanner thrown in the works. It is only in the *while* of the becoming that we’ll sense whether the actualisation made possible by the body-clothes coupling is positive or negative (Spinoza’s joy or sadness). When we dress our body without looking at the mirror, we free the body from its subjection to the power of the normative image and of a separate, self-enclosed identity to allow it to access escape strategies, or lines of flight. Guided purely by desire, the BwO can therefore use clothes as escape lines to initiate a journey out of the organism and out of the image towards a new stream of existence. This level of existence is the world of becoming where the intensities, the affects and the feelings that make up the somatic awareness continue to transform due to the encounters with other bodies. There is no time out of this flow, no need to transfix an event into images that wedge people into a false sense of who they are; just a flux of sensations (corporeal) and intensities (energetic) in which our dressed bodies experience differently intense modes of being alive. This option could be called a sort of vitalism of the dressed body, in which no one cares how it *looks*, but everyone let their bodies flow into life, unencumbered by the weight of having to impersonate the visible part of an elusive self.

Concluding remarks

“If I’m Dressing for Myself, Why Do I Need to Look in the Mirror?”, asks editor Haley Nahman (2018) in an article for the digital platform Manrepeller. It is indeed a poignant question. The narration of her failed attempt to do without it while dressing is a proof of how dependent our everyday body techniques are on the sense of sight and the implied gaze of the other. Doing away with the mirror is not easy, as it involves changing our attitude towards clothes and choosing

them for what they allow us to feel in the flesh and not for what they show of us in an image.

Attending to our body as a BwO and not as a body-image when getting dressed actually amounts to what Deleuze and Guattari (1987) define as “becoming minoritarian” or, significantly, “becoming woman” (Deleuze and Parnet, 1987, 2). This indicates an approach that escapes the categories of identity enforced by social powers by attending to the body in an alternative way: no longer as an identity corporeality, but as a substance prone to be affected, to connect with other bodies with unpredictable results. Although becoming woman does not only relate to women - it can in fact involve any body-, we contend that the option of becoming woman in D&G’s sense has a particular relevance for women wanting to challenge the traditional female relationship to fashion and clothes.

What might happen, we’d like to ask, if instead of using clothes to create the image through which, according to de Beauvoir, we exist, we were to start treating clothes as tools to escape traditional forms of female identity and veer towards new, more empowering forms of life? What new social scenarios would open up if a large number of women started overlooking their appearance and prioritising instead an affective bonding with clothes?

Although this would appear as a really interesting experiment to undertake we are not here suggesting that, when getting dressed, we should get rid of the mirror for good. Like D&G themselves remark, we cannot always live in the becoming: returning to the molar line of the organism, and therefore to the body image, is necessary to prevent (self)-destruction (D&G 1987, 178).

However, by turning to their philosophy of the body and to their critique of subjectivity as defined in our culture, in this article we have attempted to point to an alternative way of thinking about our body, which could foster a different consideration of our relationship with clothes focused on what our chosen outfits can *do* for us. This alternative relationship (or assemblage) is not only multisensorial, rather than just visual, but it also allows to capture the affective dispositions that our dressed body can trigger and unfold in a line of movement: a becoming. It is a recognition that there are some imperceptible forces that impact the encounter between our bodies and the clothes and an acknowledgment that these affects are not enclosed in our minds producing recognisable and narrable emotions. These intensities, while escaping a language definition, none the less shape and guide our living experiences. Thinking about fashion in this alternate way allows to uncover the implications that it has for us beyond the

visual and to focus upon the possibilities that it discloses not in terms of what we can *be* but for what we (and the clothes) can *do*.

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