

Disability and the Non-normative body

When we speak of the “disabled body”, the “fat body”, the “trans body”, or the “old body” we are, of course, dealing with essentialising, culturally and socially constructed categories. Both disability studies and queer theory have worked to expose the normative nature of the scientific and notionally objective typologies that shape public discourses surrounding disability, gender-identity, obesity and age.

Disability studies and queer theory help us to interrogate fatness, age and trans identity by questioning the idealised corporeal conventions that underpin mainstream representation of the masculine physique. This article seeks to continue this work by investigating images of “other” men – men who, in one way or another, don’t conform to the able-bodied, cis, youthful and thin or athletic conventions that have traditionally dominated men’s fashion (and aspirational images of men more generally). As theorists of disability have pointed out, people with impairments of various sorts are not aberrations from some supposed norm – to be human is to be vulnerable, sometimes reliant on others, and to experience pain. Those of us who think of ourselves as able-bodied, are, nevertheless, likely to experience some loss of sight, hearing, mobility or strength at some point in our lives.

Luc Bruyere

Nevertheless, while disability may be substantially socially constructed, this doesn’t make the experience of being disabled – and therefore marked as different – any less real.

The disabled body has often been “situated within a cultural discourse of *enfreakment*” in which the disabled body is either fetishized and othered, or transformed so as to disguise an imagined “absence” or “lack”. But, according to the burgeoning Disability Arts Movement, the cultural contributions of disabled

creatives are central to challenging oppression: disabled artists can disrupt *enfreakment* by situating their bodies in spaces where they have been historically excluded - disrupting representations of the disabled body as infantilized and asexual.

The model, dancer, comedian, artist, and screenwriter Luc Bruyere is French, queer, polyamorous and was born with one arm. In the early stages of his modelling career, Bruyere explains that the hardest part of the job was facing casting agents, who didn't realize he was "missing" an arm until they encountered him in person. He was repeatedly told there was nowhere for him to belong in the modelling market, despite his striking features. Bruyere describes how he had seen his face as his most attractive asset until a cover of *Citizen K* magazine instead depicted his nude body: at that moment, he realized his disabled body could also be beautiful – and he now sees being a model as a means of "revolt" against normative beauty. He says:

"For me, nothing was missing. My body is complete. It was others who pointed out I was missing something."

In the spring of 2018, Bruyere was for *Paper* magazine: an iconic New York-based publication that has long provided creative, high-fashion images that stand in contrast to the glossy commercial publications that dominate the American market.

In one photograph from the editorial reposted to Instagram, Bruyere sits on the floor his legs jutting out in front of him while he leans against a dark background. Curiously outfitted in vertiginous, red, patent platform boots; a white t-shirt accessorized with a leather harness; and, most curiously of all, a detachable mannequin's arm which protrudes from one sleeve, he stares directly into the photographer's lens. His whitened face, mop of black-hair and glossily painted lips recall

Robert Smith of *The Cure* and the image works to signify a provocatively androgynous approach to menswear that evokes 70s and 80s subculture. But the use of a prosthetic limb is a striking addition – especially in the context of a shoot in which Bruyere’s nude, one-armed torso is frequently pictured.

In this sense, the styling deliberately plays with conventions of depicting the disabled body: not only in the way that it highlights the model’s anatomy, but also in the weird, queer, decadent and eroticised mood evoked. But instead of this seeming fetishistic, as it easily could, the sense of agency and power projected by Bruyere – as he gazes directly, almost confrontationally into the camera – resist discourses of *enfreakement* rather than reproducing them.

As an up-and-coming model, Bruyer’s Instagram platform is less widely publicized than some of other influencers who we shall go on to explore in the remainder of this article. Nevertheless, his feed operates as a crucial space of resistance to hegemonic embodied norms. The images he showcases are often audacious, sensual, and experimental, celebrating both his body and his disabled identity.

In this way, Bruyere challenges, and resists the normative body usually championed by the media. As the pioneering disability rights activist Paul Hunt argues in his brilliant essay of 1966, disability is a spectre that haunts mainstream culture and society: the desire to “otherise”, to distance and to maintain an imagined cordon sanitaire between “normal” and “abnormal” bodies demonstrates the fragility of normalcy as an identity claim.

Nevertheless, fashion – and indeed much popular representation – hardly claims the mean, modal or median as the basis for the images it produces! Instead, it presents an explicitly idealised physique that – despite its divergence from any statistical norm – nevertheless shapes shared

understandings of our embodied selves, beauty and desirability. The male body conjured into being by fashion imagery is characterised by a smooth, unblemished youthful appearance; a “perfect”, “flawless” physique made yet more ideal by technologies of postproduction and retouching. But what is denied or excluded from representation cannot really be hidden: just as dreams reveal our subconscious fears and desires, forbidden images somehow emerge at the periphery of mainstream representation. The fashion media – especially in its more avant-garde and innovative manifestations – serves the paradoxical role of simultaneously upholding and periodically undermining and subverting conventional models of desirability: style-fashion-dress and its associated image industries frequently acting as spaces of resistance to dominant discourses of gender, class, sexuality and respectability. And it is this process of questioning, challenging and subverting dominant models of the fashionable male body that we are increasingly witnessing, both in analogue representations, and especially in the sphere of social media. Here, substantially unconstrained by the corporeal conventions of commercial modelling, images of diverse bodies have emerged to challenge the status-quo and to reimagine the corporeal criteria of fashionability.

Masculinity and the Subaltern

The fact that these new “disruptive”, diverse, and often self-authored images draw attention to the *male* form has a particular significance: discourses surrounding the fashionable physique and silhouette, have tended to be focused on women (and consequently attempts to diversify the catwalk and fashion photograph have centred on female models).

Moreover, the male body in popular representation has frequently stood in for the values of hegemonic masculinity. The steely, hard, affectless, body that remains idealised in much mainstream representation of men (particularly

Hollywood film) is defined by strength, muscularity and a super-human invulnerability: softness, emotion, pain and vulnerability are denied, forsworn and displaced onto female figures. To this extent, “other” male bodies that do not conform to an idealised model of manhood are frequently presented as failed men or excluded from representation (as if they threaten the coherence of normative masculinity altogether). And while men’s fashion from the turn of the millennium has acted as a crucial space in which competing notions of desirability have been played out – particularly in the foregrounding of a slim ‘androgynous’ adolescent physique – presenting disabled, trans, or fat men as fashionable or desirable represents a radical departure from dominant regimes of meaning making.

Today, however, these men are finding ways of subverting dominant understandings of their physical selves using strategies of resistance and reverse discourse. Today, fat men, disabled men, trans men, and old men are claiming their right to be seen, to be desired and to be in style. In turn, fashion’s gatekeepers are having to rethink their prejudices or risk seeming rather old-fashioned themselves.

Marquimode

In a photograph posted in his Instagram feed the makeup artist, model and social media influencer Marquis Neal also known as Marquimode poses against the background of a domestic interior – the jaunty framing of the photograph and slightly cluttered surroundings lend the image a certain informality and suggestion of authenticity. Neal wears fitted, tailored trousers in a deep jewel-like wine-red hue, these are teamed with a translucent lace shirt in a more vivid crimson, worn along with trainers, a thick leather belt and clear framed spectacles of an early eighties style. The model’s pose with his weight on one hip, one leg crossed in front of the other recalls, in its casual demureness, mid-twentieth century fashion photography, while his beaming face further emphasises a feeling of perky

informality. But though Neal's pose follows some recognisable conventions of the fashion image, his body itself does not: the sheer shirt he wears exposes his ample torso, his rounded stomach and fleshy chest.

While men's fashion in recent years has often employed decorative and transparent fabrics with feminine connotations they have rarely been worn by full-bodied models. And Neal's smiling, bearded face further emphasises his divergence from the dominant male model aesthetics: he is neither the waif-like adolescent – who has become the favoured emissary of androgyny on the contemporary menswear catwalk – nor the muscle-bound athlete of commercial fashion.

While drawing on the framing devices, poses and compositional codes of the 'straight-up' and the fashion photograph, the hundreds of images on Marquimode's Instagram feed make very few concessions to dominant corporeal ideals: loud-prints, translucent fabrics, vivid colours, underwear shots, heavy jewellery and flashes of make-up all draw attention to Neal's fatness and androgyny.

The combination of "masculine" and "feminine" signifiers in Neal's self-presentation of Instagram is hardly new to men's fashion. What makes these images distinctive is the way that these aesthetics are presented on a fat, adult (rather than adolescent) male body, of a type that has been almost universally excluded from the fashion media. Neal's stylistic bricolage (and the queer politics that underpin it) connecting to earlier moments of vestimentary agitation such as the gender-fuck tactics of the 1970s.

Chella Man

Jack Halberstam, engaging with current pop-culture discussions of the trans experience, has argued that, rather than reifying the gender binary, we should instead recognise

the plurality and fluidity of gender. Halberstam's philosophical intervention in these debates is reflected in the emergent field of trans*aesthetics, which in the words of Jun Zubillaga-Pow "transcend the social construction of gender, race, and state by positing trans* subjects as autonomous."

Chella Man is a 19-year-old, illustrator, model, and designer for American Label Opening Ceremony. He is Chinese, deaf, Jewish and trans and identifies as genderqueer. Chella Man made his first foray into the influencer world when, in 2017, he started a YouTube channel to share his experience of transitioning, using testosterone and undergoing (top) surgery. Perhaps unsurprisingly, his attitude to his transforming physique is self-reflective. In discussing his decision not to undergo further surgery he says:

"My body does not fit into the anatomical binary, and it is just as valid as those whose bodies do."

This understanding of trans* identity as multiplicitous, nuanced and complicated is reflected in an image posted by Chella Man to his Instagram feed in February of this year. Bare-chested but for a jade pendant and Star of David about his neck, he leans on a podium while sporting a grey, pinstripe skirt with a gathered, twist-detail at the front. The image draws attention to his muscular shoulders, biceps, and triceps as well as the expressionistic tattoos that snake along them, and the scars from his recent chest surgery are also clearly visible. The accompanying caption explains that this is the first time he has felt able to wear a skirt since taking testosterone: his ability to sport a garment usually marked as feminine, therefore, marks a moment of confidence and centeredness in his gender identity.

As in the photographs from Luc Bruyere and Marquimode's feeds, Chella Man mixes more masculine elements of dress with more feminine components – but these androgynous

flourishes are especially audacious for a trans person who has had to fight for his recognition as male.

In this way, Chella's transgressive, sartorial activism (which Instagram enables) articulates an intentionally political and creative form of trans*aesthetics that subvert simplistic binary identities, and that reframe masculinity as plural, porous and dynamic.

Influencers as Cultural Intermediaries

The space in which these disruptive representations of the male body appear is, of course, crucial to understanding how such images came about in the first place, how they were disseminated, and what their wider impact on cultures of fashion might be. Instagram, which came into being a little less than a decade ago has had a profound impact on the fashion media. By bundling together image sharing and social networking functionalities the platform's inventors Systrom and Krieger produced a mobile-app designed to be used on smart-phones (rather than desktop computers) that was extremely easy and intuitive to work, and that contained pre-loaded post-production "filters" enabling amateur photographers to produce surprisingly slick content.

Sean Nixon characterises "cultural intermediaries" by drawing upon the class-based analysis of Pierre Bourdieu, the social scientist who coined the term. Nixon describes intermediaries as a "class fraction very attuned to established forms of legitimate cultural knowledge, but also to new cultural currents on the fringes of popular culture – in music fashion and style. In addition to drawing on Bourdieu's field theory, Nixon also makes use of actor network theory and, specifically, Michel Callon's notion of "agencement" in which human and non human-elements come together to form networks that are at once defined by their ability to make meaning, their technological nature, and their social and market

characteristics. These two intersecting characterisations of cultural intermediation capture rather precisely the emergence of the Instagram influencer who has the potential to overturn existing fashionable and corporeal paradigms, whose position at the periphery of legitimate culture lends them a greater freedom and agility than established market players, and who operates within a set of mechanisms that are at once liberating and deeply enmeshed in mechanisms of the market.

The term “influencer” – with its contemporary meaning of a cultural intermediary with a large online following – can be found in marketing literature of the early and mid-2000s: the idea having been adapted from Malcom Gladwell’s analysis of social and cultural change in his book *The Tipping Point* and cemented in popular discourse by Paul Gillin’s marketing text *The New Influencers*. The term was to take on a particular currency in the years after Instagram’s launch, the app proving particularly suited to disseminating trends, fashion, and lifestyle imagery.

As Karen de Perthuis and Rosie Findlay have argued, Instagram has allowed its users to “simultaneously assume the roles of cultural producer, model and consumer”. In so doing, influencers project a fashion image, build a rapport with an audience, and forge relationships with fashion producers in a manner that would have been extremely difficult to achieve in the pre-digital age.

This has allowed the Instagram influencer to enjoy greater reach and connectedness – both to other users and to the fashion and lifestyle industries – than was previously afforded by the practices of fashion blogging that preceded Instagram’s current dominance (even as Instagram influencers build upon the entrepreneurial logic, aesthetic and affective labour developed in this earlier stage of digital fashion intermediation). In this way, “user generated content” has rendered fashion representation more diverse and more porous: permitting

outsiders – including those whose physiques diverge from the fashion norm – to gain a following, and often, ultimately, entry into the inner sanctum of the fashion industry.

As Findlay and de Perthuis, Agnes Rocamora, and Marco Pedroni have argued, the role of digital fashion “intermediaries” is characterised by a paradoxical insider/outsider status in which their apparent proximity to the audience – and the intimate register this allows them to adopt – lends their posts credibility and a sense of emotional connection. These qualities of proximity and intimacy that differentiate user-generated content from conventional fashion media are often converted (from social and cultural capital) into commercial relationships with brands and ultimately into cold, hard cash. Nevertheless, as Pedroni contends, social media’s porosity and dynamism has enabled resistant and disruptive representations of the body to emerge in fashion media – the insider/outsider status of the influencer permitting her, or in our case him, to discard some conventions of the fashion representation even as he incorporates others.

Nick Wooster

Recent qualitative studies by Professor Julia Twigg and, separately, by researchers Ania Sadkowska and Katherine Townsend have explored the ways in which older men engage with style and fashion.

As Twigg rightly suggests, both the ‘feminised’ status of fashion in popular discourse and its association with youth and change has rendered this form of personal expression problematic – and substantially taboo – for older men. But both her research and that of Sadkowska and Townsend points to how this may be changing. Twigg identifies a group of older men with backgrounds in the media and arts who continue to actively engage with notions of style and who use clothing as an important mode of identity construction in often creative and

reflexive ways. For these older men, distinctive dress as well as an enjoyment and interest in clothes continue to form a crucial space of expression and self-actualisation. Similarly, Sadkowska and Townsend's empirical work highlights the ways that older men engage with style in order to construct identities at odds with the rather bland depictions of this demographic that dominate popular media. In their research, distinctive and unusual clothing represented a key site of identification and belonging for male adherents of post-war subcultures – mods, hippies and punks – as it had when they were young.

In this sense, for some 'baby boomer' men the renegotiations of masculinity and sartorial experimentation that formed a crucial part of post war youth cultures continue to inflect on their attitudes to style, fashion and dress. The distinctive – sometimes subversive – forms of self-expression that emerged in the 60s, 70s, and early 80s continue to reverberate and are beginning to challenge the meanings and aesthetics that have often been associated with older men.

In terms of his style, the design consultant, influencer and fashion insider Nick Wooster is significant because of the ways in which he balances a measure of restraint – as mandated by classic menswear's axioms of good taste – and the demands of novelty, individuality and contemporaneity that define a (high) fashion habitus. As a man in the public eye of a *certain age* (59 to be precise), he also reconciles a set intersecting cultural norms surrounding masculinity, seniority and appropriateness. In an image from Paris Fashion week (Autumn Winter 2016), Wooster wears an oversized, drop-shouldered, shawl collar coat in a wide herringbone weave which he has styled along with a grey boiled wool cardigan fastened with a large safety-pin; a white grandpa-collar shirt; slightly cropped wide khaki trousers with a very large turn-up; and thick-soled, whole-cut shoes. Large horn-rim sunglasses complete the ensemble – despite the overcast day – and his grey-white hair is brushed

upwards to form a messy quiff and he wears a close shorn white beard.

This photograph typifies a mode of sartorial self-expression in which classic menswear garments are tweaked, styled and layered to create a highly contemporary silhouette.

Conclusion

Digitally disseminated user-generated content – first blogs, then vlogs and Instagram – has been an engine of disruptive fashion imagery that has challenged previously dominant notions of the ideal fashion physique, while revealing or creating, a substantial audience for alternative images of the male body. In the 1980s, as Frank Mort has described, Men’s fashion was transformed by the emergence of the subculturally oriented, alternative “style press”. Today, a new class of digital cultural intermediaries, often working simultaneously across a range of creative industries, has been at the forefront of no less profound a change. Bringing together the radical drive of the activist with the savvy of the entrepreneur, they harness and subvert the tools of late capitalism – affective, and aesthetic labour, and the networked intermediated self – to serve a humanist agenda. As with previous waves of innovation, these shifts in representational practice, slowly and cautiously at first, are being incorporated into fashion proper as debates around gender, body-size, age and ability are assimilated into the industry.