

THE POSTHUMAN AND THIERRY MUGLER'S CYBORG FEMININITY

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- Donna Haraway
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- Hybridity
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Footage Referenced

- Thierry Mugler, *Spring/Summer* 1989
- Thierry Mugler, *Fall/Winter* 1989
- Thierry Mugler, *Spring/Summer* 1992
- Thierry Mugler, *Autumn/Winter* 1995

Abstract

Over the course of his career, designer Thierry Mugler envisioned the evolution of the feminine form through a fusion of material garments and immaterial gestures, and organic and inorganic beings. Through a discussion of a selection of his runway shows, notably Spring/Summer 1989, Autumn/Winter 1989, Spring/Summer 1992 and Autumn/Winter 1995, this article considers how Mugler fashioned posthuman dressed femininity, distorting contemporary codes of Western womenswear. Discussion of Mugler's incorporation of animal traits and machine technologies into fashion design are framed by the contemporaneous cyborg theory of Donna Haraway. This article argues that Mugler cohered a futuristic vision of femininity through holistic application of choreography and innovative design.

Introduction

Thierry Mugler was a fashion designer who was simultaneously praised and condemned throughout his career for his designs that extended the feminine form beyond the corporeal and into a state of hybridity between nature, machine, and human. Although Mugler's shows featured both male and female models, contemporaneous commentary on his runway shows in the 1980s and 1990s often focused on the women and pivoted on the postmodern binary subject (a perceptive being with agency and identity) / object (a perceived thing without agency or identity) argument. Critique of Mugler's clothing, that applied this subject/object binary, positioned his clothing as either armor, which empowered and elevated women into powerful goddesses, or restrictive tools which objectified and dehumanised the women who wore them. This was explicitly articulated in a 1994 dialogue arranged by *The New York Times* between Mugler and feminist art historian and critic Linda Nochlin:

NOCHLIN: It's so extreme that these women aren't sex objects, they're sex subjects. Also, we know that this is a kind of artifice -- it's a performance.

MUGLER: It's not artifice; it's a help -- a trick. Because what we're showing exists already; we didn't invent it. We're just presenting it in another way, in a better package.

Through his designs, Mugler was presenting an augmented feminine: a hybrid being that melded features that "exist[ed] already" within womenswear, with aspects drawn from nature and technology to create the "better package" or a new vision of dressed femininity. Critiquing Mugler's designs through the subject/object binary thus denies the complexity of his body of work, and relegates

understanding his envisioning of a future femininity within narrow heteronormative and anthropomorphic categories. These categories have pivoted on whether a human woman conforms to, or rejects, Western standards of fashionability which had previously been built into codes of womenswear design and emphasised elegance, delicacy, and desirability to the “opposite” sex: men.

Interpreting his designs, specifically those in *Spring/Summer 1989*; *Autumn/Winter 1989*; *Spring/Summer 1992*; *Autumn/Winter 1995*, through the “cyborg theory” presented by feminist scholar Donna Haraway can work toward dismissing the simple subject/object dichotomy and address the intricacies of his vision. Haraway’s “cyborg” subverts categorizations of agency and identity and can be applied to the argument that Mugler’s designs, through construction and runway choreography, envisioned a posthuman dressed femininity which combined and mutated attributes of the subject and object.

Posthumanist Feminism

Posthumanist theory emerged in the late 1970s from poststructuralist philosophy led by theorists, including Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida, and Michel Foucault, who sought to interrogate and displace the held truth of a universal epistemology, or way of knowing the world. Posthumanism built on these ideas through critiquing and destabilizing the hierarchy of knowledge which has positioned humans, specifically the Western man, as exceptional and at the centre of existence.

Posthumanism instead argues that humans are fully enmeshed in, and connected with, the natural and technological worlds around us and that humans come into being through our relationships with all matter within these worlds. It is predicated, on what feminist philosopher Rosi Braidotti identified in her book *The Posthuman*, as “the demise of that ‘Man’ – the former measure of all things”. Due to the concept’s emphasis on decentring the (Western) man, posthumanism has often been viewed as compatible with decolonial, ecological, environmental, and feminist studies: areas of research where other ways of knowing and being are examined in-depth.

Posthuman theory as a framework has been applied to the study of fashion which, as design theorist Annamari Vänskä put it in her analysis of posthuman critique, “constantly imagines, creates, gives form to and materializes the human”. In fashion studies, posthuman theory can be applied to support thinking about the embodied and porous nature of being dressed; how the clothing we wear contorts our bodies, while our bodies simultaneously shape our clothing; or how we perform our identity to society through the clothing we wear.

Haraway’s *A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century* (1991) has often been included under the theoretical umbrella of posthumanist thought. Haraway argued that the cyborg, a fusion of machine and human, could be analysed as an example of the negotiable and mutable categorisation of what it means to be “human”. Specifically, she was interested in the ways that a being who does not concern itself with reproduction or biology might help conceptualise a world without gender categorisation. Haraway does not explicitly discuss fashion in *Manifesto*, however one of the essay’s key arguments, that cyborgs create messy hybridities which disrupt categories such as “feminine”, can be applied to thinking about Mugler’s categorization-defying designs.

Thierry Mugler’s Total Package

In the same period that Haraway was thinking through the enmeshed complexities of a nature-machine-human being, Mugler was materialising these concepts on Parisian runways. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, until his retirement from fashion in 2002, Mugler designed clothing that contributed to the late twentieth-century concept of ‘power dressing’, specifically in his womenswear. He used bold colors and sharp tailoring, as well as pairing corseted waists and chests with structured broad shoulders to create his vision of modern glamour. Looking back on his designs in a 2020 interview with *Vogue*, he said that his work paid “tribute to the woman and her personality — I give them armour.” Despite his insistence that his garments were a source of power for the women who wore them, his shows were often met with contemporary critique arguing that his clothing over-emphasised the sexuality and desirability of women and reduced them to an assemblage of objectified body parts.

Mugler's testimony about his designs contradicts this assessment. In his runway shows, Mugler worked toward a totality of performance to create his armored woman. In the same *Vogue* interview discussed above, Mugler noted that he coached his models in their movements on the catwalk, and individually designed their makeup and hair to "give them their own part" in the show. A former dancer himself, he was fascinated by the capacity of the body to evolve and morph through the construction of material garments and the power of immaterial gesture and movement. Often what could be viewed as the most boundary-pushing of Mugler's designs were those that looked beyond the feminine form, and even beyond human physiology, for inspiration. Under his holistic direction, model bodies, garments and gestures formed a cohesive unit that told the story of that season's collection.

Drawing elements from nature and technology, Mugler fused disparate parts into garments that constructed a new being. Mugler's own image reflected this vision, as can be seen in a photo by Jean-Paul Goude for *Vogue Paris* in 1998: Mugler is topless, flexing his biceps and smiling a wide, white-toothed grin. It isn't only his carefully conditioned physical shape that reflects this hybrid self, however, but its combination in the photo with his lower half: the mid-canter body of a grey stallion. For Mugler, even his own portrait blurred the boundary between human and animal.

Mugler's Cyborg Feminine

Having briefly discussed posthuman theory, specifically Haraway's *A Cyborg Manifesto*, and Mugler's approach to designing clothing that reconfigured the human body, we can begin to assemble our thinking about his work through key looks drawn from his career. Considering Mugler's approach to womenswear, it is important to consider how he felt himself about fashion. In his discussion with Nochlin, which happened at the apex of his runway career, Mugler said that "Fashion is nothing; fashion doesn't exist". He opined that wearing clothing is a civilizing act, that there was no such thing as a "natural fashion", and that traditional femininity was a myth.

Though Mugler did not discuss Haraway specifically, coupled with his earlier statement about clothing providing "better packaging" for the body, Mugler could be said to agree with her assessment that we come into existence through our relationships within the world. In Mugler's assessment, this coming into existence is specifically cohered through our relationship with the clothes we wear. Mugler viewed clothing as a tool for performing augmented humanity, thus in the act of putting on his clothes, we can *become* an improved, hybrid being: or, the cyborg.

Following Mugler's logic that we are what we wear, we can begin to imagine the posthuman feminine through examples found in four of his runway shows: Spring/Summer 1989, Fall/Winter 1989, Spring/Summer 1992, and Fall/Winter 1995 runways.

In his Spring/Summer 1989 *Les Atlantes* collection, Mugler transformed his models into amphibious creatures, with their hair moulded into fins and tails, wearing jumpsuits featuring tailored pleating in the shape of a fish's gills. The models' transformation into fish-humans was furthered by their movement down the runway: rather than the runway walk of a typical high fashion model, they moved down the runway with a slippery fluidity and in groups, or 'schools', staring at the audience as though the viewers were the ones on display. Metallic earpieces further complicated the materialization of this aquatic creature, attaching an inorganic structure to the body, and extending and strengthening the appendage.

The performance of the models on his runways, and how they interacted with the observer (the photographers and audience) continued in his Fall/Winter 1989 ready to wear show. A contemporaneous review in the New York Times noted how the model Iman playfully pointed at a photographer and said: "I'm going to get you". The reviewer, Woody Hochswender, observed that this break of the fourth wall had an "aura of danger, for the models wore six-inch heels that were, literally, spikes, made of aluminum or steel".

Mugler's models were not only adorned in a protective metal, but with their runway choreography, they performed a type of offensive against those who would otherwise consume their image. As Hochswender noted, "this was fashion as weapon. Fashion as armor. Fashion as, well, the car." This became articulated most literally when model Naomi Campbell emerged wearing a chrome grille, her torso transformed into the frontage of a vehicle, bearing down on the audience.

Framed by Haraway's theory, Mugler's designs perplex semiotic understanding. Haraway wrote in *A Cyborg Manifesto* that "bodies as objects of knowledge are material-semiotic generative nodes". To the audience, Campbell was no longer a human woman in a corset and shorts, though that is what she was wearing. To the observer, Campbell's body had become the representation of a car grille and a version of how Haraway described her cyborg: "text, machine, body, and metaphor."

Years later, Mugler revisited the mecha-human hybrid in his Spring/Summer 1992 collection *Les Cowboys* collection, with one of his most emblematic pieces. This next iteration of the vehicular corset took the shape of the front of a Harley Davidson motorcycle. Articulated in gleaming chrome with enamelled flames painted on the front of the corset, four appendages sprouted off the side in the form of sideview mirrors and leather-tasselled handlebars. The corset was worn by Niki Taylor, who strode down the runway in fringed shorts, holding onto the handlebars and, in a sense, 'steering herself'. To paraphrase Haraway, Taylor was responsible for, and not dominated by, the machine. In this respect, the machine had *become* Taylor and an aspect of her embodiment. The effect was not only a machine-human hybrid, but also of the exoskeleton of an arachnid-human, transmuting the human woman into a self-propelling and indefinable creature who was both baffling and alluring to the audience.

The Autumn/Winter 1995 Mugler runway show can be viewed as the culmination of Mugler's holistic approach to fashioning a hybrid feminine. Staged in Paris at the Napoleonic theatre, Cirque d'Hiver, and running over an hour in length, the show featured more than three hundred looks worn by some of the most recognizable women of the twentieth century. The line-up included models Jerry Hall, Kate Moss, and Naomi Campbell; actress Tippi Hedren; and socialite Patty Hearst. In the collection, Mugler's garments incorporated aspects drawn from architecture, nature, technology, with contemporary Western womenswear tailoring.

Models made angular gestures as they moved around the tiered catwalk, wearing oil-slick black latex body stockings topped with black hats that resembled oversized scales, with the models once again recalling insects. Other garments combined the trappings of Western glamour and Mugler's signature silhouette: a long cloak, a narrow-corseted waist, and broad shoulders. The body shape he had created *resembled* a woman, but the suits featured seams mimicking jointed metal plates, and where the model's hands should have emerged there were instead tufts of long hair or bursts of feathered plumage.

Haraway theorised that cyborgs might present a more "partial, fluid, [...] aspect of sex and sexual embodiment". Mugler materialised this fluidity in a dress worn by Italian model Simonette Gianfelici. Like a bi-valve therianthrope, the top (human) half of Gianfelici emerged from the gown, with a crown and belt of pearls. Her bottom half was rendered in a pink satin and black velvet interpretation of an oyster, a hermaphroditic animal which produces both sperm and eggs. The name of the dress, "Birth of Venus" further intimated that Gianfelici was creating *herself* through her wearing of the garment.

The most literal framing of Mugler's design using Haraway's cyborg theory is materialised in his "Gynoid" robot suit. The model strode out onto the runway as a very human, glamorous *grande dame*: the stereotypical elegant and well-dressed woman complete with oversized, magnificent purple satin cloak and black hat. She then began to strip off the trappings of this version of femininity, revealing the shining metal and clear plastic panelling of the robot underneath. In an age of cosmetic augmentation and medical intervention, Mugler materialised a creature who disrupted the false dualism of human/machine and organic/inorganic. The model's body was not separate from the machine, but moved within it. Mugler realised through his designs what Haraway had written in her manifesto: "by the late twentieth century, our time, our mythic time, we are all chimeras, theorized and fabricated hybrids of machine and organism; in short, we are cyborgs".

Conclusion

Haraway wrote that "the cyborg is resolutely committed to partiality, irony, intimacy, and perversity". Mugler can be argued to have brought this partiality, the bricolage of sources into his womenswear designs. Framed within Haraway's cyborg posthumanism, Mugler's direction of his models and their movements when wearing his designs can thus be seen to cannibalize the dichotomies of

categorization that separate organic from inorganic, human from nature, nature from machine, and subject from object.

The legacy of Mugler's cyborg hybridity has reverberated beyond his own runways. It was reflected, for example, in the work of designers such as Alexander McQueen who celebrated an evolved posthuman aquatic civilization in his Spring/Summer 2010 collection, *Plato's Atlantis*. In February 2024, actress Zendaya wore Mugler's Autumn/Winter 1995 Gynoid robot suit on the red carpet for the premiere of the film *Dune 2*, her gestures melding with the movement of the suit to present Mugler's hybrid body outside of the context of the catwalk environment.

Although having not explicitly referenced each other's work, Mugler and Haraway, practicing in the two different mediums of fashion and philosophy, shared the common concern of envisioning a new understanding of femininity that recognised that humans are fully enmeshed with nature and technology. By applying Haraway's theories to Mugler's holistic runway output, we can begin to improve interpretations of his materialization of Haraway's "potent and taboo fusions", and apply these in understanding how his designs combined and mutated attributes of the subject and object into his vision of a posthuman dressed femininity.

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