Fashionable Technology
Anneke Smelik

Anneke Smelik is Professor of Visual Culture in the Department of Cultural Studies at the Radboud University of Nijmegen (Netherlands). She is the project leader of the research program ‘Dutch Fashion Identity in a Globalised World’. Her latest books are Ik, cyborg. De mens-machine in populaire cultuur, with chapters on fashionable technology and the beauty ideal; and an edited volume Performing Memory in Art and Popular Culture, with an introduction on the performative turn.

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

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

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

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

The ‘performative turn’ puts forward that humans, either collectively or individually, have the agency to shape themselves in their behaviours and beliefs. People are – at least to some extent – agents in their own drama:
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Leigh Bowery, Session III, look 15, augustus 1990

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

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

This is where we touch upon the next concept: materiality. Because of the exclusive post-structuralist focus on language, we have neglected that our identities are mediated materially. The recent ‘material turn’ brings back a renewed focus on the materiality of identity. Our agency, our performance, our identity, takes place through material things and objects—such as clothes. Identity ‘matters’. We mediate the social relations to objects, and social systems through which objects become meaningful (or not). The general idea is that people’s relationship to objects is socially and culturally dependent. Our identities function within a material culture, as we all know too well from our emotional relations to objects, whether it is a chocolate bar that soothes our anxiety, a song that reminds us of
Barbara Kruger - Untitled (I Shop Therefore I Am), 1987

Lady Gaga in Bart Hess' slime dress, 2011

WE ARE NOT WHO WE ARE BUT WE PERFORM WHO WE ARE
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There are moments when I feel myself transformed, when the universe seems to open up and I am able to see things with a new perspective. It is as if a veil is lifted, and I am able to see the world as it truly is. These moments are rare, but they are precious, and I cherish them.

Syd La Saat

However, I am not alone in these experiences. Many others also feel this sense of transformation, even if they do not recognize it as such. They may not be able to put their fingers on it, but they know that something has changed. It is as if a door has been opened, and they are able to see things in a new light.

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The body-without-organs

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

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

I want to end with a notion by the French philosopher Gilles Deleuze, which has been an inspiration to me: ‘the fold’ (‘le pli’ in French). He poetically argues that our identity is like a fold: unfolding, refolding, folding in, folding out, folding open. Deleuze has most radically thought through the fluidity of identity, by claiming that our body has no central fixed organisation. He speaks of the body-without-organs, by which he means a dis-organised, de-territorialised, body without a pre-ordained meaning or function. It is a carnavalesque body that is in a constant state of flux, of transformation, of ‘becoming’. We are not, says Deleuze, we become. And we become who we want to be. Or, more philosophically, we become who we are. The notion of the fold positions us differently in time and in space, turning us inside out, or outside in, not unlike Bart Hess’s slime dress.

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