RUSCA. Revue de sciences humaines & sociales

N° 13 | 2022
Miscellanées vol. 1

Myth of androgyny and androgynous fashion in menswear

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Édition électronique :
URL :
https://rusca.numerev.com/articles/revue-13/539-myth-of-androgyny-and-androgynous-fashion-in-menswear
DOI : numerev_1917
Date de publication : 22/12/2022

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Pour **citer cette publication** : SUN, R. (2022) Myth of androgyny and androgynous fashion in menswear. *RUSCA. Revue de sciences humaines & sociales*, (13). https://doi.org/10.34745/numerev_1917

This article explores the relationship between man’s fashion and the myth of androgyny. Inspired by Gilbert Durand’s Mythanalyse and sociologie de l'imaginaire theory, as well as some works on the myth of androgyny, I briefly analyse the mythological symbolism of androgyny. Then, I explore the relationship between the 20th century menswear revolution and androgynous fashion. Finally, by using Frédéric Monneyron's method of fashion analysis, I analyse the current menswear designs of several Western and Chinese designers. The research materials are mainly the images from vogue.com and show reviews from some mainstream fashion websites. We can find that androgynous fashion is back to the stage today. It not only satisfies the imagination of new gender constructs, but also brings some new ideas to the contemporary menswear fashion design.

Mots-clés :
Gender, Androgyny, Menswear, Fashion, Imagination

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The myth of androgyny is not a foreign concept, it has repeatedly re-emerged in literature and artworks in both western and eastern countries, in people's collective unconsciousness and their imaginations. In recent years, the androgynous style has gradually become today's fashion mainstream, particularly has an impact on menswear sector. The trend of androgynous fashion has been featured in many of the mainstream fashion media, such as Vogue[1], WWD[2], the Business of Fashion[3], etc. Besides, many contemporary fashion designers are known for the design in androgynous style. Generally speaking, the androgynous fashion has subverted conventional views of gender, of masculinity and femininity.

Inspired by Frederic Monneyron's fashion analysis method in his work *La frivolité essentielleï¼Du vêtement et de la Mode* and Gilbert Durand's theory in *Les Structures anthropologiques de l’imaginaire,* in this article, I will briefly introduce and analyse the relationship between androgynous style and men’s fashion as well as its symbolic meaning to contemporary gender construction and masculinity. In the first part, I will review the recurrence of myth of androgyny and its symbolism in western and other societies, especially in China. Then, in the second part, I will present the history and development of androgynous fashion in menswear during the 20th century, from which I

will explore the significance of androgynous fashion for menswear and masculinity. Finally, in the third and fourth part, I will introduce some contemporary fashion designers and their works from both western and eastern countries. Through their work, we will see the latest evolutionary forms of androgynous fashion in menswear industry and its significance for the construction of gender and masculinity today.

THE SYMBOLISM OF THE MYTH OF ANDROGYNY

The term androgyny is a combination of a Greek word andros (man) and guinaikos (woman). As the term suggests, it represents bisexuality, the fusion of masculinity and femininity. The myth of androgyny has recurred at different times in western cultures and societies, in western mythologies, theaters, arts as well as literature, and it has also been the subject of study in different disciplines for centuries. In general, the appearance and disappearance of the myth of androgyny represent people's attitudes towards gender. In Gilbert Durand's *Les Structures anthropologiques de l'imaginaire*, androgyny is one of the fundamental archetypes in *Synthetic Structure*. Androgyny is one of the "symboles cycliques", also known as a symbol of reunion, which represents the fusion of both sexes, of past and present and of the ideal sexuality[4].

The myth of androgyny first appears in Plato's Symposium in a story told by Aristophanes. It not only represents the fusion of both sexes but also a symbol of perfection[5]. Jung interprets the concept of androgyny from a psychoanalytic perspective. He proposed the existence of a male archetype in female, which is known as *Animus*; and a female archetype in the male, known as *Anima*. Jung believed that each sex, whether male or female, has characteristics of both sexes. Therefore, masculinity and femininity are in harmonious symbiosis[6]. The androgynous figures presented by Virginia Woolf in her works such as *Orlando* and *A Room of One's Own* not only subvert the conventional male-centred value in western societies, but also express the author's desire and pursuit of harmony between both sexes and the original idea of gender fluidity[7]. In 1970s and 1980s, western feminist re-explored the symbolism of the myth of androgyny because it's an important basis and source for examining the establishment of the human gender system[8]. In his books *L'androgyne romantique. Du mythe au mythe littéraire* and *L'androgyne décadent, mythe, figure, fantasmes*, Frédéric Monneyron explores the androgynous figures and its metamorphosis in western literature. For Romanticism writers, the androgynous figure represents the "dream of unity", while for writers in Decadent Movement, this figure not only appears as a fusion of both sexes, but also as a feminine young male, through which we can also explore the development of gender relations in western society[9]. It is clear that the recurrence of the myth of androgyny and androgynous figures in western society symbolizes the fusion of the sexes, a rejection of conventional gender binary and a desire for a new gender "order".

The myth of androgyny and androgynous figures occur in many cultures and societies. For instance, there are androgynous and bisexual gods in ancient Egyptian and Indian mythology. Androgyny in different myths and cultures "reflect not only the

psychological need and spiritual imagination of human beings for their own perfection, including their biological sexual functions, but also the simple sense of gender equality held by 'primitive' humans"[10]. In classical Chinese philosophy, especially Taoist philosophy, androgyny is equal to the classical Yin-Yang doctrine. The Yin-Yang theory represents the cosmology of Chinese Taoist philosophy and it is applied to explain all phenomena in the world. In the context of gender and sex, 'Yin' represents female and femininity and 'Yang' represents male and masculinity. In contrast to traditional western binary system such as Mind-Body, Reason-Sense, Yin and Yang are interconnected and they live and develop together[11]. Similarly, unlike the conventional gender/sex dichotomy in western society, Taoist believe that all genders are interrelated and they can influence and complement each other. The ideal gender system is described in *Yi (ã□□æ□□ç»□ã□□Yi Jingï¼□*, the Taoism classic: "Both Yin and Yang are important"(*é□´é□³å¹¶é□□ Yin Yang Bing Zhong*ï¼□and "Yin contains Yang and Yang contains Yin" (*é□´ä¸æ□□é□³ï¼□é□³ä¸æ□□é□´ Yin Zhong You Yang, Yang Zhong You Yin*). Thus, traditional Chinese philosophy also embodies the concept of androgyny, emphasizing the companionship, the equality and integration of different genders.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF ANDROGYNOUS STYLE FOR FASHION AND MASCULINITY

Similar to the myth of androgyny, androgynous fashion also represents an ideal sexuality and the expectation of gender fusion. Androgynous fashion has undergone a major development in the 20th century both in womenswear and in menswear. It has brought lots of creativity to fashion industry and subverted the imagination of gender, masculinity and femininity.

In the early 20th century, androgynous fashion was basically featured by cross-dressing, which means women wears men's garments and vice versa. For instance, in 1920s, Hollywood stars Katherine Hepburn and Marlene Dietrich worn tail-less suit and they become the androgynous fashion icon. In 1966, inspired by those Hollywood icons in 20s, Yves Saint Laurent incorporated menswear into his womenswear designs to give birth to the famous smoking suit and it became iconic in the history of androgynous fashion in 1975 when featured by Helmut Newton in French Vogue.

When it comes to menswear, the androgynous fashion came into the spotlight in 1960s and 1970s. The 60s and 70s saw a huge change in menswear with the development of feminism and gay liberation movement, and the awakening of young generation. Menswear began to borrow and adopt many elements from womenswear[12]. Pop music stars become fashion icons, especially David Bowie and Mr. Fish, who also created the androgynous fashion in 60s and 70s. Bowie stunned the western world with his long wavy hair and blue velvet dress on the cover of his third album *The Man Who Sold the World*. Mr. Fish, who was the stylist for many of the pop starts of the time, not only styled Bowie, but also designed lots of androgynous look s for starts such as Mick Jagger. Bowie and Mr. Fish's influence continue to this day. Many contemporary designers such as Haider Ackermann[13], Dries Van Noten[14] have paid tribute to them through their work. While Bowie has been defined by fashion critic Vanessa Friedman as "fashion" itself[15], Patrick Mauries credits Mr. Fish with being a huge influence on men's

fashion. Fish's designs not only incorporated historical elements but also influenced the androgynous fashion[16] designers of the post-2000s.

By the 1980s, many pioneering designers used the concept of androgyny to create stunning menswear. Jean Paul Gaultier, for instance, created a sarongs and a dress for male. It is in the late 1990s and early 2000s that the androgynous fashion became more diverse in men's fashion. Hedi Slimane, who worked at Yves Saint Laurent and Dior Homme, launched the minimalist androgynous Dior Homme collection. Slimane's Dior Homme not only provided a sustainable model for masculine silhouette design at Dior, but also had a significant impact on men's fashion in general[17]. "Slimane made 'feminine' menswear popular, many contemporary menswear designers continue to be influenced by him, such as J.W. Anderson's Spring/Summer 2011 collection"[18]. In addition, several menswear designers in the early 2000s embodied a queer aesthetic, such as Raf Simons, Helmut Lang. Luxury house and designer brand such as Fendi and Dries Van Noten also created some looks with a dandyish glamour feel. The androgynous fashion in menswear in the early 2000s revealed "a desire to disrupt, challenge, and destabilize essentialist and heteronormative models of gender"[19].

During the 20th century, the androgynous fashion underwent an evolution from cross-dressing to queer aesthetic. Its emergence and recurrence in 20th century reflected the quest for gender equality and freedom in western societies and reconfigured the concept of femininity and masculinity. Besides, androgyny fashion has a revolutionary impact both on womenswear and on menswear design. Especially for menswear, it has injected lots of fresh energy into "conservative" male fashion since 19th century.

THE REPRODUCTION OF ANDROGYNOUS FASHION AND MYTH OF ANDROGYNY IN CONTEMPORARY MEN'S FASHION

The androgynous fashion is back to stage now because many menswear designers are now trying to subverting traditional masculinity[20]. It has been evolving and becoming more subtle and sophisticated since the early of 2000s. Coralie Comblez believes that androgynous fashion symbolizes an ultimate beauty[21]. Meanwhile, as aforementioned, androgyny is one of the basic archetypes in Gilbert Durand's *Synthetic Structure,* I found that the androgynous fashion represented by contemporary menswear designer is also in line with Gilbert Durand's *Synthetic Structure* - a trend towards fusion. This fusion is not only represented by the harmonization of masculinity and femininity, but also by past and today, east and west[22].

Many contemporary fashion designers are no longer confined their designs to the dichotomy of menswear or womenswear or identified themselves as a designer of a specific gender. Genderless has become a buzzword in fashion industry. More and more designers tend to incorporate the terms or concepts such as genderless, gender fluidity, gender-free or non- binary into the DNA and storytelling of their brands[23]. No matter

how they define their design or brand, unisex or gender-neutral, they hardly distinguish themselves from androgynous fashion. Besides, all of them have a same aim, to break down the gender dichotomy in fashion design and the gender stereotypes in general[24]. In addition to some of the most iconic designers and brands such as Rick Owens, Jonathan Anderson, Hood by Air, in this section I will focus on the analysis of menswear of two western brands, Gucci, a prestigious historic fashion house whose current creative director is Alessandro Michele, and Charles Jeffrey Loverboy, a club and a fashion brand founded by Charles Jeffrey in 2014. We will see that both long-established luxury house and emerging talents in fashion industry have been deconstructing traditional gender models and reconstructing masculinity through androgynous fashion.

Alessandro Michele's Gucci

Alessandro Michele's work is considered as the Renaissance of fashion. He likes to incorporate gender political statements into Gucci's fashion shows. For instance, Michele named Gucci's Autumn/Winter 2018 runway show "Cyborg Muse". In fact, this collection was largely inspired by feminist philosopher Donna Haraway's semi-robotic manifesto, which was published in 1984. Haraway's view has an androgynous overtone. She argues that the boundaries of genders are as blurred as the boundaries of human/animal and human/machine[25]. Later, Michele applied Michel Foucault's micro-physics of power theory to his Spring/Summer 2019 collection, GQ.com believes that Gucci has turned the the press release of this show into another "Manifesto", in which Michele emphasizes that fashion is a tool for self-expression and it should allow people to walk through all the possibilities[26].

Michele's approach to gender and masculinity is self-evident in his works. Most of the garments that he has showcased in Gucci's fashion shows since 2015, especially menswear, are in line with Gilbert Durand's *Synthetic Structure.* In terms of silhouette, colour, material and pattern/print, Michele's menswear design blends masculinity and femininity, history and contemporary as well as the aesthetic of different cultures and ethnic groups. For instance, as with his womenswear, Michele likes to use bold colours and embroideries in his menswear. The Spring/Summer 2017 collection featured a number of floral, bee and butterfly embroideries (Figure 1); The Autumn/Winter 2018 collection took Gucci to a new cross-cultural level. In this collection, not only we can find Russian headscarves and Scottish tartans, tweeds, but also pagoda hats or pyjamas with a Chinese aesthetic twist. Besides, Michele allows men to wear lots of traditional women's clothing. His Autumn/Winter 2020 collection named "Rave Like You are Five", whose central message was to question toxic masculinity. Michele has his men wearing dresses, skirts and the famous Mary Jane shoes (Figure 2).




Michele often expressed his attitudes towards gender and masculinity directly in media interviews. In an interview with i-D magazine, he believes that masculinity equates to beauty and that should move beyond the gender binary[27]. While when interviewed by GQ.com, Michele mentioned that conservative menswear is no longer the norm. There is more room for menswear design[28]. He also emphasized how the young generation becomes his inspiration. His Muse such as Harry Styles and Jared Leto, has led him to explore more androgynous and gender fluid garments. In general, Michele has revolutionized menswear as well as masculinity through androgynous fashion. As GQ.com comments : "Michele's version of masculinity has become fashion's predominant one, an idea not just of men in skirts but of men embracing loveliness, textual richness and glamour, things that in the 20th century were reserved of women"[29].

Charles Jeffrey Loverboy

As above mentioned, not only the historical luxury fashion house or some well-known designer brands, there are more and more emerging talents joining this wave of androgynous fashion[30]. The most iconic one is Charles Jeffrey Loverboy, who incorporates androgynous or queer aesthetic codes in his works and uses gender-free to define his brand. Jeffrey's works are also corresponding to Durand's *Synthetic Structure*. In addition to the patchwork of different materials, the bold colours and patterns, as well as the combination of many traditional feminine garments with menswear design, which is one of Loverboy's most distinctive features, Jeffrey also incorporates many historical

references such as an Edwardian bathtub or 70s Club looks into his works. His approach to gender, masculinity and body also stems from his support for LGBTQ community and his own experience as a homosexual person.

Since the foundation of the brand, Jeffrey has showcased many men's dress/skirt looks in his shows : Victorian-style dress, pencil skirts, miniskirts etc. In Loverboy's Spring/Summer 2018 collection, Jeffrey celebrated the club culture of late 70s in London and paid homage to legendary drag queen Leigh Bowery,Taboo,New Romantics, Kinky Gerlinku and Boombox[31]. The exaggerated looks, painted face and scribble drawn male bodies are very impressive. Jeffrey puts a mish-mash of shapes and colours together and the collection is a reminiscence of John Galliano of early 2000s, Vivienne Westwood and sort of Jean Paul-Gaultier in the 80s[32] (Figure 3 and Figure 4).



In his Autumn/Winter 2018 collection, Jeffrey showed us the painful experience of growing up gay. In addition to conveying an emotion of sadness and confrontation to the audiences, Jeffrey brought knitted dress, deconstructed torn suit styles with men's heeled boots and pantyhose (Figure 5 and Figure 6); While adding a splash of sportive colour to the Spring/Summer 2019 collection, Jeffrey also celebrated the body modification of transgender community, showing us a his reflection on male body in a way similar to what Rei Kawakubo practiced in her womenswear in the 1970s[33] (Figure 7). The Spring/Summer 2020 collection is more of commercial fashion rather than performances of the previous seasons. However, Jeffrey still showed us lots of womenswear elements or men's garments with feminine twists, such as fishnet vests,

colourful socks and leggings and the “mini-short” for male (Figure 8).





Fenella Hitchcock and Jay McCauley Bowstead argue that Jeffrey demonstrates a “Camp Fashion” which breaks the rules and focuses on showing mood, feeling, emotion, fantasy and imagination. The androgynous tendency of camp fashion can “escape patriarchy and heterosexist”[34]. Jeffrey breaks the shackles of heteronormative by including and embracing the LGBTQ community. In an interview with The Guardian, Jeffrey refers to “gender is an idea”; He believes that fashion should be playful and permissive. Fashion is also a journey of one’s own identity. Which is personal is political[35].

ANDROGYNOUS FASHION AND MENSWEAR DESIGN IN CONTEMPORARY CHINA

In addition to western fashion, the androgynous fashion has been becoming a global trend. It has been being re-interpreted by designers of different countries, cultures and ethnic groups[36]. In fact, androgynous fashion and aesthetics appeared also in the history of non-western countries and it still influences the contemporary designers. For instance, the traditional Chinese dress is androgynous. It is due to the emphasis on ritual and collectivism proposed by Confucianism, the “harmony” (*å□□ He*ï¼□thinking both in Confucianism and Taoism and the “fadeur” (*å¹³æ·¡ Ping Dan*) aesthetic in traditional Chinese culture[37]. Chinese fashion designers today continue to exploring this traditional Chinese androgynous aesthetic through their work. However, as fashion industry and communication become increasingly international than ever, many Chinese

fashion designers are influenced by the genderless trend and combining eastern and western aesthetics or cultures in their design, which is in line with Gilbert Durand's *Synthetic Structure* as well, For instance, When Yushan Li, co-founder and creative director of Chinese menswear brand *Pronounce*, had an interview with *T Magazine China*, he mentioned that *Pronounce* is not a brand based on a binary gender dichotomy. The cutting, tailoring and silhouette of oriental clothes is inherently gender-neutral"[38]. Ziggy Chen also mentioned that "there is a common aesthetics in (men's) clothing between East and West. With globalization and the communication of different cultures, these two different dressing philosophies can merge to each other"[39]. In this final section, I will analyse the menswear of two contemporary Chinese designers: Angel Chen, a graduate from Central Saint Martins and a well-known designer who has showcased her work in Milan and Shanghai Fashion Week; Dayun Tang, a graduate from studio Berçot and one of the emerging talents in recent years. We will find that Chinese designers of young generations do not have the same radical "political" approach to gender and the masculinity as Michele and Jeffrey, the androgynous, but in a milder way. The androgynous fashion/aesthetics that run through their designs express their rejection of gender binary and traditional model of masculinity and femininity. There is also a spirit of "fusion" in their designs.

Angel Chen

Angel Chen is one of the representative Chinese fashion designers of young generation. There is always an androgynous hue in her design, For instance, Chen's classic trench coat, whose silhouette always reminds us of traditional Chinese clothing Pao (*è¢ Pao*), is favoured by many celebrities and consumers of all genders. In her Spring/Summer 2022 collection, Chen moved away from her expertise in luxury street wear and returned to the traditional Chinese tailoring. The collection, which focuses on wide sleeved robes and curved back coats in two classic oriental fabrics - silk and organza, is also a reinterpretation of the androgynous aesthetic of traditional Chinese dress (Figure 9 and Figure 10).



Besides, we often see the same bold colour palette, prints and materials for both her menswear and womenswear collection. There are also a fusion of Chinese and Western cultures and aesthetics, a “East meets West” twists in her works. Sometimes this fusion takes the form of commercial collaborations between Chen, who represents China, and artists from other countries. For instance, in Chen’s Autumn/Winter 2018 collection, she collaborated with Parisian fine fabrics atelier Malhia Kent on a jacquard knitted fabric. She also incorporated an illustration line designed by Korean designer Minju Kim. In 2021, Chen collaborated with Canada Goose on a range of versatile unisex Snow Mantra Cropped Parka. (Figure 11 and 12) Angel Chen’s collaboration with Canada Goose is also a sign of her maturity in working with western brands**.**



Dayun Tang and Garçon by Garçon

Danyun Tang is an emerging Chinese menswear designer in recent years. He founded the *Garçon by Garçon* in 2017. The brand represents two characters, Garçon (means "boy" in French) and Garçonne (means "tomboyish girl" in French). Tang likes to create the image of "Ephebe", a symbol of androgyny in ancient Greek and arts in his design and he always combines the aesthetics and cultures of the East and the West. In his Spring/Summer 2021 collection, in addition to using western medieval clothing structures and motifs from ancient Greek architecture, Tang also applied a classic Chinese fabric - Wild Silk (*æ□□è□□ä¸□Zuo Can Si*) in his menswear collection.

The Autumn/Winter 2021 collection named "Le Soleil", Tang used a number of ruffles and pleats to mimic the state of sun when it shines. The collection also features the brand's favourite medieval mythological motifs, a western medieval silhouette as well as a number of traditional oriental garments such as wraps and belly bandages. Tang also collaborated with L'ELEMENTO, a jade brand, (Jade was always seen as a symbol and myth which represents China), to create a number of accessories.

We can also see that Tang has incorporated many traditional feminine elements into his menswear, such as embroidery, cut-outs, fringes etc. In an interview with *Modern Weekly*, Tang mentioned his fascination with the French word "garçon" and He wants his brand to convey the youthful innocence, romance and naturalness to the audience[40].

CONCLUSION

In many societies and cultures, the myth of Androgyny represents the fusion and harmony of both sexes. When it comes to fashion, designers also like to (re)construct gender discourse through the androgynous code. From the 20th century to present, androgynous fashion has evolved and take on many forms, from a 'simple' cross-dressing to queer style and finally to a "mix and match" gender fluid fashion. The recurrence of androgynous fashion in contemporary menswear, or generally speaking, in contemporary fashion world, symbolizes a confrontation to the traditional masculinity and a rebellion against the conventional gender binary. Also, androgynous fashion has provided lots of inspiration for designers, not only in western countries, but also in China. It makes a contribution to the development and transformation of man's fashion. Moreover, today's androgynous fashion is in line with Gilbert Durand's Synthetic Structure. In the work of western designers, such as Gucci's Alesssandro Michele and Charles Jeffrey. We can see not only the fusion between menswear and womenswear, masculinity and femininity, but also the encounter of past and today. As to the Chinese designers such as Angel Chen and Dayun Tang, they blur the gender boundaries with the androgynous code. We can also see the fusion of East and West, tradition and modernity, and different cultures in their works. Emilie Coutant sees the return of the myth of androgyny in the male images in fashion medias as a "cohesive reliance" , which also symbolizes a profoundly "être-ensemble"[41]. Overall, the revival of androgynous fashion in menswear represents the imagination of the ideal gender construction and also reflects the "fusion" trend in the fashion industry.

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Table des illustrations : (all the figures come from vogue.com)

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