

## Fin-de-Siecles: Dandyism and Disability Fashion

Petra Kuppers

Manchester Metropolitan University  
United Kingdom

"Not to conform is simply a synonym for progress. Progress is simply the instinct for self-preservation." Oscar Wilde

This paper investigates an uncanny resemblance between aspects of two cultural moments. These moments are the 1890s, with its Yellow Book, the illustrations of Aubrey Beardsley and the fashionable dandies in their salons, and the 1990s, where disabled people feature as fashion highlights, and where contemporary theorists make disabled people carry the connotations of the postmodern condition. The paper does not propose a similarity or coincidence between these two fin-de-siecle moments. Rather, it attempts to make sense of some current images through recourse to the ways that people at the end of the last century engaged with personae that contained 'elements of grace, wisdom, wit, reserve, nervousness, masochism and perversion mixed in strange but attractive proportions' (as I.K. Fletcher remarked on the dandy Ronald Firbank, in Horder, 1977, 23).

I am employing the mechanism of 'constellation' which does not seek correspondences and mirroring, but instead searches for illuminating differences, connotations and generative echoes. I am embracing a methodology which understands the creation of meaning in a field of movement: meaning is created in acts, and is neither fixed nor stable or unitary. Attention to the playing field of meaning, the realms of the legible, can help to focus on the mechanisms that complexify attempts to categorise images into specific social and political agencies.

This paper does not attempt to engage with the question of whether specific images of disabled people are 'positive' or 'negative'. I am opening up my enquiry to other questions which need to be answered if we want to move on representational politics. What makes images legible, what is the condition of beauty, power and strength in these images, how does the construction of categories such as disability and gender interact with the very construction of the concepts of 'beauty,' 'truth' and 'agency'?

The images that are at the core of this investigation are fashion photographs created by fashion designer Alexander McQueen and photographer Nick Knight in 1998. The feature, which casts some disabled people as fashion models bedecked in expensive haute couture clothes, was the cover story, Fashion-Able, of the September 1998 issue of the magazine *Dazed and Confused*. The shoot reverberated through the British and international press, and coverage of the images was given in *The Guardian*, *The Sunday Times* and other newspapers.

These images accompany a rising interest in disabled people - not as benefit recipients, not as politicians, not as social commentators, but as style icons. The data base that allows me to make this claim is still relatively small. It includes films such as David Cronenberg's *Crash* (1996), where the sexual attractiveness of amputees and car crash victims is playfully or offensively invoked. Detective novels have discovered the disabled person as hero rather than victim. *The Coffin Dancer* (1998) and *The Bone Collector* (1997) by Jeffery Deaver feature Lincoln Rhyme, a paraplegic detective surrounded by expensive equipment and a sexy, also disabled love interest. Rhyme's portrayal and narrative placing seems to exceed the various categories of 'crip' as narrative device.

Another example of the glamorous disabled person can be found in Sally Potter's *The Tango Lesson* (1997). In this film, David Toole, a highly visible disabled dancer well known in Britain, appears as a fashion photographer in a dream sequence, racing on his hands through a park, accompanied by lifeless high fashion beauties. TV productions such as the dancefilm *Outside In* (1995) by the dance group CandoCo also work with aesthetics that cite the history of the freak but query any one narrative of disability as well as conventional understandings of 'positive images' and 'normalisation'(1).

Whether legislation such as the US ADA (Americans with Disabilities Act) or the DDA (Disability Discrimination Act) in the UK are cause or effect of the increasing visibility of disabled people is secondary to my argument - I am interested in the kinds of images that comprise 'Chic Disability.'

The first image of the Fashion-Able shoot that I want to discuss depicts Mat Fraser, a rock musician and actor who describes himself as a 'Thalidomide Warrior', and who has short upper arms and no forearms. Fraser is one of a group of disabled people who are relatively visible in the UK. He has been featured on the various disability magazines on UK television, and he and his music have appeared in the short film *Freak Fucking Basics* (1995), which has been screened at venues such as the British Film Institute and the Norwich Film Festival as well as in disability specific contexts.

In the photograph, we see Fraser in a relatively close shot, lying on his side. His head, shaved apart from a strip of longer hair running over his scalp, takes up the most space in the image. Under his face, with his intensely blue eyes and a generous, red, wet mouth, are his two hands. He rests his chin on one of them, the other is lying by his side. We also see the upper part of his torso, clad in a golden-green waistcoat, which the accompanying text identifies as a 'hand-made plastic waistcoat by Catherine Blades.'

The waistcoat reveals one of his nipples, which is pierced with a small silver ring. The image connotes intimacy: it is unconventionally close to the viewer. This makes it hard to take in the whole picture at once. My own gaze travelled from Fraser's face to the right of the photo, from the lustre of his hair, to the shine in his eyes to the shiny silver in his nipple. In *The Guardian* issue in which this image is depicted, a quotation by Fraser runs beneath the image: 'As disabled people, we are invisible, we're suffering from apartheid. You've got to declare yourself disabled and beautiful.' The image declares Fraser beautiful, indeed. But what are the conditions of that male beauty?

Several categories mix and merge in Fraser's photo: he is, although clearly male, depicted within the conventions of femininity. He is passive, lying down, lit beautifully to emphasise the colouring of his eyes and mouth, and dressed in gold (the waistcoat) and silver (the ring). Wearing jewellery is another gender-bending attribute of the image. The 'punk' connotations of the nipple ring and the shaved hair and lock are usurped by the feminising, soft aspects of the image. Although Fraser does not look androgynous himself (*The Guardian* describes him as 'six-foot tall, with an athletic physique and a startlingly handsome face,' Frankel, 1998: 16), the appeal of the photo is androgynous. Of course, contemporary fashion photography delights in upsetting gender categories, and current advertisements ranging from Gap to the toiletries of Armani create a 'uni-sex' look underscored by the long hair-dos of young male models and the thinness of the women. But the effect here is different. I would posit that the photo does not so much create a unisex appeal, but that it echoes a register of male fashion iconicity which goes back to the figure of the dandy.

The dandy is a figure which excited French, and later English, commentators on society. A development of the Renaissance and Regency Beau, the dandy became a focal point for the heated discussions about the relationship between society and art in the second half of the 19th century. At the core of dandyism is the delight in artifice, and the celebration and cult of self in careful presentation and self-stylisation. Dandyism is predominantly associated with modes of masculinity - the issues regarding control and the balance between the 'artificial' and the 'natural' are historically and discursively different for modes of femininity.

Richard Pine quotes Charles Baudelaire, whose work 'The Painter of Modern Life' became a core text of a debate in which the relationship between aesthetics and ethics is traced, and which influenced dandy figures such as Oscar Wilde: 'Evil,' says Baudelaire, equating 'evil' with 'crime,' 'happens without effort, naturally, fatally' where 'Good' which he equates with 'beauty,' 'is always the produce of some art.' Baudelaire can then announce: 'I am thus led to regard external finery as one of the signs of the primitive nobility of the human soul' - a brilliant extrapolation of the outward adornment of the dandy as the sign of an inner 'beauty' or 'goodness' which is a noble superiority of man to nature. (Pine, 1988: 20, quoting Baudelaire, 1964: 32)

The representation of Mat Fraser recalls some of these attributes: the body as a self-fashioned art object, the 'otherness' worn outwards on one's sleeve. Identity is fashion, but fashion is more than just outer style, it also reveals itself as inner attitude. As Jules Barbey d'Aureville writes of the dandy: 'Dandyism is social, human and intellectual. It is not a suit of clothes, walking about by itself! It is the particular way of wearing these clothes which constitute Dandyism. One may be a dandy in creased clothes Dandyism is a complete theory of life.' (1897: 20)

Disability, gender, clothes, jewellery, hairstyle, the body itself can become 'a complete theory of life,' a foregrounding of the wearing, not the being. Dandyism refers to the artifice, not to the registers of 'the natural.' To make artificial the natural, to blur the boundaries, is the aim of the Wildean dandy. The cult of the self foregrounds the constructed nature of selfhood. Fraser's self-aware referencing and playful citing of the categories of female traditional beauty and male counter culture beauty creates for me a sense of artifice, even if Fraser's photo reveals more flesh than it conceals in clothes.

The connotations of the flesh and the clothes become one: style, surface through and through. Micheal mac Liammoir describes Oscar Wilde as 'dandy of dress, dandy of speech, dandy of manner, dandy of wit, dandy even of ideas and intellect' (1978: 22) - fashion embraces everything, flesh, thought, and clothes. The Fraser photo clearly creates an intensity of sensual encounter, a field of textures and colour, which destabilizes gender connotations without obvious recourse to the conventions of drag. This attention to detail and surface pleasure links to the dandyism of the senses, which delights in the hypersensitive openness to exquisite stimulation.

Oscar Wilde gave the name 'Orchid' to his friend and illustrator of his books, Charles Ricketts, who together with his partner Charles Shannon inhabited 'The Vale,' a house in London famous for its collections, its catholic splendour, its visual sensuality. It was the details, sumptuousness, proliferation of objects, surfaces, textures and colours associated with 'the connoisseurs' or Aesthetes which were ridiculed by the 'tweedy, pipe-smoking "Hearties" such as W.E. Henley or Rudyard Kipling' (Calloway, 1997: 44).

Even in contemporary fashion photography, the viewer is likely to encounter male models in black and white, in austere arrangements, or surrounded by woods, jungles or women, who are the carriers of the textured, sensual audience address. The open sensuality of Fraser's photograph marks it as 'other' even before the disability is read as a sign of social otherness. The 'dandy of thought' can also be found in the presentation of Fraser's image.

In order to trace this tradition, I need to refer to the intertextual framework of the photo. In the quotation that frames the photo, 'beauty and selfstylisation are referenced: the dandy is in pursuit of beauty, effortlessly, arriving on a wave which defines 'beauty' according to his standard, setting the trend. Disability, culturally linked to invisibility and the 'ugly,' needs re-performing, re-claiming, re-validation if it is to appear in the registers of the beautiful. The narcissistic body, beautiful against 'nature,' is created. As was seen in the Baudelaire quote, for the dandy of the late 19th century, the need for self-emancipation from the natural was imperative.

In Fraser's artistic persona, this destabilization of the natural has been a recurrent theme. Fraser became known in the disability arts circuit through his in-your-face rock performances, in which he attacked the 'body fascism' of non-disabled culture. His texts courted offence, and his delivery equally played on the stereotype of the 'disabled beast.' The lyrics of his song 'Outsiders' include:

So! Let's strip down to the freak-fuckin' basics  
And address the ones to whom this idea makes sick [sic]  
Yes I have a penis why should it seem incredible  
That I'd like to have access to someone who'd find it edible?  
Does my physical difference put up a barrier?  
Are you scared I'll fuck your sister or even worse marry her?

That's right I said fuck - do you find that offensive?  
I just wanna shake you up and maybe you will then give  
Consideration to the concept, that disabled people have passion  
And personally I'd like to work towards it becoming high fashion  
Please don't label me a perverted culture  
All I've done is reject your body fascist culture  
(Fraser, personal communication)

In the genre of rock, Fraser addresses very similar issues to the ones that are referenced in his work with Alexander McQueen and Nick Knight. The effects of being labelled 'disabled' are here coupled with the citation of the hypersexual figure of the rock star, out to corrupt young girls. The audience address of rock - shock tactics, references to sexuality, the (particularly) American hysteria surrounding naming of genitalia and 'offensive content' in hard rock and metal lyrics - are brought together with the vocabulary of the disability movement ('barrier,' 'access,' 'disabled people,' 'label,' 'body culture').

Masculinity and its construction and the convention of the body beautiful are both at stake in the representation of men in the rock and fashion industries. The two industries create potentially opposing images of men. Within the rock world exists the figure of the rock beast, so aptly caricatured in the Jim Henderson Muppet, and hysterically referenced in the spoof rock documentary *This is Spinal Tap* (1983). The figure refers to a voraciousness which deals with music, drum sticks, young female groupies, cocaine and guitars in similar fashion: they are all consumed and destroyed by the wild hero, by the man out of control, a law unto himself.

In the fashion world through, masculinity is often referenced through control. This control and reticence creates a deep structure within the male fashion apparatus: '[T]he rhetoric of men's fashion takes the form of a set of denials that include the following propositions: that there is no men's fashion, that men dress for fit and comfort, rather than for style; that women dress men, that men who dress up are peculiar (one way or another); that men do not notice clothes; and that most men have not been duped into the endless pursuit of seasonal fads.' (Craik, 1994: 176)

As an effect of homophobic fears, anxiety about gender roles and the need to be 'aloof,' male fashion, with noticeable deviations such as the dandy period, has often been characterised by 'an aggressive indifference to dress and a silent avoidance of bodily display' (Pumphrey, 1989: 96). Even where that control is relaxed, it is only relaxed on the condition that it is already vouchsafed by other references. Thus, Barbara Vinken analyses Armani clothing and their nostalgic citing of Italian Neorealism and working class culture as well as sensual textures - this relaxation of male, body-denying discipline is only possible because of the references to power and riches embedded in the label 'Armani.' The brand evokes a feudal past, a moment before the bourgeois emphasis on the work ethic. Armani's fashions suggest that one can have both: the new power consists in the fact that one can perform relaxed sensuality. 'Masculinity' is guaranteed through citation of a heroic, male history, the history of the industrial proletariat, on whose labour modernity is founded. (Vinken, 1993: 90, own translation)

Craik delineates in her study of fashion how new images of masculinity such as the gentle 'new man' and the hedonistic 'new lad' transgress the codes of masculine restraint and control, but acknowledges that ultimately male fashion remains embedded in the registers of discipline, not in the all embracing display of the peacock. But the fringe spaces of social self-representation have often provided the source for playfulness, and relatively safe exploration of 'dangerous' images. This is the other side of Stallybrass and White's argument that the 'Other' has such an important status for the centre, for the top includes that low symbolically, as a primary eroticized constituent of its own fantasy life. The result is a mobile, conflictual fusion of power, fear and desire in the construction of subjectivity: a psychological dependence upon precisely those Others which are being rigorously opposed on the social level.

It is for this reason that what is socially peripheral is so frequently symbolically central. (Stallybrass and White, 1986: 5). Thus, the archetypal man-beast of rock (and, of course, the either disavowed or beastly sexuality of the construction of the 'disabled man') hold powerful connotations for a male identity which is held in place through careful control mechanisms. The collision of rock music and fashion has spawned surprises before - in 1991, *Vanity Fair* published a fashion shoot supplement on Calvin Klein jeans which depicted members of a rock band undressing themselves and a group of groupies in a wild orgy (Grant, 1992). In a similar fashion, Fraser's liminality as rock musician, actor and disabled man allows for a shoot which articulates sensitive areas of male self-representation.

What becomes symbolically central in this meeting of fashion, rock and disability with masculinity is the concept of the 'natural.' The natural becomes a pose, an artifice, a style. Just as the 'rock beast' is a performance, not a 'natural' expression of overbearing masculinity, the 'natural' of the disabled body becomes problematic. Fraser adorns his body not only with silver rings and golden vests, but also with the conscious performance of his physicality. His physical difference, the short arms, are not 'naturalised,' but are central to his presentation.

They are central to the photo of his body - his hands frame his expressive mouth, the arm which reaches down from the top of the image to the floor dissects the image, providing a strong counterbalance to the eye that reads the image from left to right. In the song lyrics quoted above, when Fraser sings of his sexuality, it seems to be the sexuality of a 'disabled man,' framed as a 'category,' a social text, rather than of 'Mat Fraser' - his physicality is politicised, put into discourse, framed and performed in his acts.

In the manner of camp performance, 'disability' and 'masculinity' are two categories which are performatively cited in Fraser's performance. Framed within the discourse of fashion, both markers of identity become destabilized as 'natural' attributes - they enter the style of the dandy who plays on the limits. This foregrounding of the performative does not point to the absence of the performed (gender and disability), but to the heightening of the identity signs, those markers of social meaning, into style and fashion. Fraser's beauty is based on a complex negotiation of categories, and the emergent style owns more to the tactics of the play between categories than to the content of any of them.

At this point of my discussion, I have crossed from the 19th century moment of the dandy into the 20th century moment of the 'performative': this mastersign of contemporary identity theory. But my constellation of the two fin-de-siecles does not aim to conflate these two moments, but instead endeavours to bring out aspects of each that might illuminate the other. To see performativity within the horizon of a fin-de-siecle moment imbues it with the sadness of 'endings.' Like the dandy, the play with Fraser's image is bound by melancholia. For Baudelaire, Dandyism, an institution beyond the law, itself has rigorous laws which all its subjects must strictly obey: 'What then is this passion, which, becoming doctrine, has produced such a school of tyrants?' (Baudelaire, 1964: 27)

The creativity of the dandy is always circumscribed. Activity and passivity are implicated in each other. For the man of fashion, the dandy, holds the same problem that plagues contemporary identity politics. For fashion works within the realm of the legible, and therefore draws its material from the structures and meaningful signs of culture. Judith Butler is aware of the limits of the performative as a source of innovation:

The power of discourse to materialize its effects is thus consonant with the power of discourse to circumscribe the domain of intelligibility. Hence, the reading of 'performativity' as willful and arbitrary choice misses the point that the historicity of discourse and, in particular, the historicity of norms (the 'chains' of iteration invoked and dissimulated in the imperative utterance) constitute the power of discourse to enact what it names. (Butler, 1993:187)

The playfulness of fashion, intend on realigning cultural signs into pleasurable new ensembles, has curious effects on people who embrace its methods. When the dandy mobilises his whole being into style, into parade, into artifice, he is the powerful herald who proclaims that there is no 'innocence,' no origin, no nature, no core truth.

Aesthetics become ethics: the moral imperative is to embrace the artifice as the only possible human act. A new morality needs to be thought, but attempts at it easily go astray and lead into nothingness, for how can a community and society be thought to exist if no 'truth' remains to humanity? Drucilla Cornell writes how a feminist justice needs to harness deconstructive practices in order to find a way to allow for new configurations, outside the known, an openness to that which is not yet there (Cornell, 1991: 115). In a similar manner, the theory of performativity can become the starting point for a project where openness can become theorised. This project is different from those interpretations of deconstructive practice which focus on disembodiment and voluntarism.

Dandifying disability does not mean to move away from the embodied experience of disability, but to fully place one's body within the stream of discourse. Contemporary theorists such as Baudrillard and Virilio have used the disabled body as metaphor for the postmodern condition - a move critiqued by disability scholars. But our bodies and our difference enter the marketplace of meaning, and it is more interesting to see how disabled people themselves (or manipulated by others interested in yet new forms of otherness) can explore the mechanisms of metaphor. This paper has read one particular example of contemporary disability images as an attempt not to 'narrativise' disability, make it stand for something else, but as a potentially radical gesture of displaying the discursive character of bodies and identities by embracing the 'natural' as 'artifice.'

The dandy stands on the limits of the individual and the norm. In the same way, the Fraser image is not merely a statement about either disability or masculinity, and neither an individual image about one person's difference, but is instead an oscillating, complex play which potentially shows up either identity category as discursive. Framed by the institution of fashion photography, it is not easily readable - its politics are shrouded, and, like the dandies of the 1890s, it is easy to dismiss the disabled fashion models as freaks and poseurs.

Baudelaire's manifesto for the high dandies, such as Wilde and his friends, captures the curious mixture of agency and victimisation, of ability and inability, which characterises the passionate yet careless play of the dandy: Dandyism is the last glimmer of heroism and decadence; like the sunset of a dying star, it is glorious, without heat and full of melancholy. (Baudelaire, 1964:29) At the sunset of a millennium, many identity performances are equally characterised by glorious self-display while dimly aware of the spectre of powerlessness. After having shown the complexities and problems in reading an oppositional stance in a film which showcases black dandies and queer voguing, *Paris is Burning* (1991), Judith Butler writes:

Performativity describes this relation of being implicated in that which one opposes, this turning of power against itself to produce alternative modalities of power, to establish a kind of political contestation that is not a 'pure' opposition, a 'transcendence' of contemporary relations of power, but a difficult labor of forging a future from resources inevitably impure. (Butler, 1994: 241)

A historic perspective on a particular phenomenon of self-stylisation, and of the will to art, shows how the historic practice of performativity can be traced in lived negotiations between identity markers and social actors. This historic understanding of contemporary images and their problematic status within identity politics can help us as disabled scholars and artists to place ourselves within commodity culture. 'Purity,' or, to refer to Baudelaire, 'innocence' needs to be given up as an aim, and instead the interventionist, situated and specific mobilisation of categories can be embraced as the political aims of self-representation. As disabled people become stylish in the marketplace of global culture, even if on compromised terms, it is up to disabled artists to ride the wave.

## Note

1. For an in-depth discussion of this film and its aesthetic placing of disabled people, see my article in a special issue on disability and performance, *Contemporary Theatre Review*, forthcoming 2000.

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