

Essay Title ‘ There is nothing new or radical about crossdressing.
,
discuss

Visual Culture

Student Name: Bernadette Nugent
Email Address: 20373203@student.ncad.ie
Year of Study: 2nd
Semester: 2
Department (if applicable): Print and Education

Are you on the Joint Course? Yes
Visual Culture Tutor: Denis Keogh
Essay Due Date: 30/3/2022
Word Count: 2566

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6.) There is nothing new or radical about crossdressing - discuss

Life in the twenty-first century is weird. An unstable relationship seems to have formed between fact and fiction meaning fabricated information, which in many instances, gives little to no regard towards our perceived logic or fact, has become widely accepted as true. The profound shift in contemporary culture happening around us every day is highlighted by this relationship and it has brought to light the exceptional artistic creativity of today. People will be offended by, and even upset, by things which they do not understand or cannot fully grasp. This sensitivity to offence is not a new phenomenon. Is that a man in a dress or is that lady just very tall with big hands? A simple question, yet probably one we have all asked ourselves before. It makes some of us uncomfortable, to not *fully* know. But perhaps that is the ultimate goal of crossdressing – to make someone, maybe the individual dressing or a spectator, anyone, *feel* something.

A cross dresser is a person who dresses in the clothing of the opposite sex. Yet there is a continuum in the world of cross dressing that stretches from the fetishist to the postoperative transsexual. (Allen, 1996) Therefore, we must contest that crossdressing can describe only a common characteristic which is seen within a broad and incredibly diverse spectrum of behaviours and motivations. Why then, given their evanescence, do we even attempt to create a group of categories to push crossdressing individuals into? Why risk reducing some of our most creative people to mere instances of pattern? It seems to undermine the very principles that differentiation, crossdressing, are built on.

Freud did not invent the unconscious, but he deepened our understanding that we are not simply conscious, rational beings and that we are often motivated by impulses, fears, desires, and of course our subconscious, things that we are not aware of. These are often things that we cannot help nor change, similar to our sexual orientation or sexual preferences. Things we can change, however, include our appearance. Crossdressing for many may be the first step, an indulgence saved perhaps for weekends or special occasions. Grayson Perry speaks of how he used to borrow clothes from his stepmother, stuff them into an Adidas sports bag and cycle on a blue BMX miles from his home to change into these *dangerous* clothes in public toilets. Undoubtedly this was all in an effort to momentarily feel like the true version of himself, even if only for a few hours at the weekend. "I hid my bag in the bushes, which in itself was a dangerous thing to do... if it had been stolen, I'd have been left looking like a prostitute in a mini skirt" (Jones, 2006) We are now used to seeing crossdressing as a general public. It is not new, not sensationalised and sometimes, not even noticed. The next step for those individuals who aren't satisfied with their appearance may be surgery, which isn't quite as normalised. Perhaps it is the permanence here which people pick up on. Clothes can be changed, and makeup washed off, but scars do not heal invisibly. The mind heals slower than the body, and the body does not heal fast.

As a result of strong developments in genetic engineering, plastic surgery, biological reproduction and cosmetic science, our bodies are gradually becoming less of a given, and more-so a phenomenon of choices and options. Science now facilitates greater degrees of bodily intervention. While this is a fantastic step forward for those who have lived their lives feeling they were born into the wrong body, it also destabilises

our knowledge of what bodies are, and perhaps sways our ability to judge just how far science should be allowed to reconstruct the body. Crossdressing presents itself as provocative not because it is a new idea, but because it is a male interpretation of femininity. Yet even more provocative is the newer, transexual notion that actually, a man can now biologically become a woman as far as hormones and genitals are concerned, as it implies that there is now nothing about womanhood which a man cannot obtain, even if done so artificially. As an adjunct to their vilification of their male sexuality, some feminists have characterized male-to-female transsexualism as 'the male establishment's attempt to use surgically modified men to infiltrate and sabotage feminism'.(Allen, 1996) Contradictory to this statement perhaps, is the pillars on which feminism is built. The feminist movement was born in part as a protest to the conventions of gender which were requiring woman to remain underpaid, submissive and afraid of complaining; powerless. How strange then to have those hateful words muttered by the very women who stood against convention, and how sad it is to see the hostility towards others who have themselves felt powerless in their gender. Author Janice Raymond is notes as saying 'masculine behaviour is notably obtrusive. It is significant that transexually constructed lesbain-feminists have inserted themselves into positions of importance and/or performance in the feminist community. Often transgender individuals are met with criticisms such as 'they can not accept reality and who they were born as', 'it's just attention they want' or 'they're trying to be someone they're not, a woman'. This then begs the question of, actually, is it ever reasonable or justifiable for a man to call himself or be referred to as a woman? This question depends entirely on one's own interpretation and personal understanding of what exactly it means to be a *woman*. While we are in a world where we potentially have the means to exert an unprecedented degree of control over our bodies, we simultaneously live in an age

which has thrown into radical doubt our knowledge of the consequences of this control and how we should change/maintain our bodily selves.

Sexual hormones are also gendered, female and male. Oestrogen and progesterone combine to make the group of female hormones and testosterone presents itself as the male hormone. However, in females the adrenal gland secretes testosterone, and in males the testes release oestrogen. This presents a considerable overlap between the sexes. Studies have shown that environmental factors can influence the degree of this overlap. These differences between the sexes seem to shrink even further when brain function comes into the picture. Hormones do not have a direct, one-way influence on the brain, and again environmental factors have been shown to have a substantial influence on it's functionality. (Kaplan, 1990)

Science wise, crossdressing seems to sit on the fence, not officially deemed a disorder but regularly referred to as one. Psychology Today says that Transvestic disorder occurs when an individual experiences

recurrent, intense sexual arousal from cross-dressing, or dressing as the opposite gender, and in which that person's urge to do so causes significant distress or impairment to their daily life. (Anon., 2021) Individuals who are experiencing the 'disorder' are regularly noted as experiencing depression, guilt and anxiety as a result of their urges. It is no secret that these feelings are likely a direct result of reactions and disapproving words met over time. Unsurprisingly, many people seek treatment due to these criticisms, but it is there that they may reach an impasse. To be 'diagnosed', a person must experience persistent and intense sexual arousal from

fantasizing about, or acting upon, urges to wear one or more pieces of clothing normally worn by the opposite gender for at least six months. Having to feel different and unaccepted is surely suffering enough without then having to prove this to health professionals. Individuals who do follow through and seek treatment will find themselves working closely with therapists to try and gain a better understanding and hopefully in due course control of their desires. This surely demonstrates a path of dealing with it, or convincing oneself that perhaps it was all just a phase. Grayson Perry when first caught crossdressing by his father. Instead of trying to deal with the situation at hand, his father believed Grayson's frantic claims that he wouldn't do it again. 'They were so uncomfortable that if it could all be swept under the carpet they'd be happy' (Jones, 2006)

Regardless of personal experience or opinions, no one can disagree that gender and sexuality provide two of the most basic narratives flowing through our lives within which our identities are formed. (Wodward, 1997) Identity for most people is first and foremost a gendered category. The first thing we ask when someone has a new baby is the gender, rarely do questions of how are they or what they look like come first. Is this because we, as a population, have been somewhat subconsciously conditioned to see appearance and feelings/health as things that are changeable and unpredictable. Is it possible that we long for a constant within identity, one that a concreting of our gender can provide?

Although crossdressing does appear as something no longer fresh or outrageous, in fact somewhat normalised, we cannot ignore the fact that the centrality that has been given to sexuality and clearly defined gender in representing the body and identity is

a modern concept. Sexuality only makes an appearance in the Oxford Dictionary after 1800, with the notions of groups of people being defined by their sexuality, homosexuals, heterosexuals, making their appearances even later, close to the end of the nineteenth century. (Laquer, 1990) Historians suggest that before then, there had been reference to a range of differing sexual acts and sexualisation of different parts of the body, but the idea of sexuality being an inner force or essence with which our identity, who we are, was fixed and defined, did not exist. Perhaps it was the modern yearning for an absolute knowledge of, and explanation of everything in our daily lives which led society away from this more fluid way of living, and what a wonderful thing it is to see these individuals, crossdressers, bringing it back.

The more concise explanation of sexual polarity is much like the science that explains magnets; opposites attract. Qualities seen as masculine, the alpha male stereotype – deep voice, broad and tall and dominant, attract qualities seen as feminine, quiet, small, submissive and vice versa. The end result here is high sexual attraction, two forces pulled towards each other much like the opposite sides of a magnet. When two individuals possessing the same qualities meet, it is to be presumed that the opposite reaction will occur, no sexual attraction, much like the same sides of magnets repel each other.

Freud says that sexual polarity is uncertain, yet sexual opposition is inevitable. His 1920s case study centering around homosexuality in women sees him examine an eighteen year old female patient who when taking a woman as the object of her desires ‘changes herself into a man’. Freud seems here to be assuming some form of fixed polarity in sexual difference. Does he then insinuate that homosexuality is thus

fundamentally a mixed up form of heterosexuality? If true, does this in turn insinuate that everyone is capable of donning the traits they presume a possible romantic interest would desire? Perhaps this presents itself as one reason people start to cross dress, but it is far from true to say that this notion of changing yourself to fulfil a partners desires is new.

Can this then be said to imply that not everyone who cross dresses sees it as a full time thing. Can it be classed as being in the same realm as fancy dress, performance art etc.

Glamour of course is nothing more than an outward, primarily sartorial expression of wealth and achievement. Drag seems to have an obsession with glamour and the notions of anything or anyone glamorous. Perhaps this is why so many drag queens and artists model themselves off ideals; the supermodels, the Hollywood actresses, the good girl gone so bad she's been on the tabloids front page for seven weeks. We are consumers, we want what we have and what we see to be perfect. We absorb and mimic that in which we see daily. The perfect woman consists of many things, perky breasts, long legs, sun kissed skin and generally, enough cash to look glamorous at all times. This is said to be perfection. Is this a realistic representation of womanhood though? There is a notable gap between how women exist and live in the real world and the novelty, or rather glorification of how they are presented in the media. The femme fatale, seductive, dangerous and drop dead gorgeous, yet rarely makes it to the end of the film. This may also apply to part-time crossdressers. Perhaps it is not the day to day life of a female which they desire, but rather the best bits, the parts we post online, the pictures we hang in our hallways. The highlights. Maybe the age old

saying, the grass may in fact be greener on the other side. Yet how can we not commend individuals for taking the leap and living for themselves, rather than in accordance with the limitations society has built.

We must pose the question here of, if gender was put aside, what the difference between an actress or socialite getting breast augmentations and a person from the street who absolutely cannot find comfort within their soul getting the same procedure is. They are both changing themselves, physically and mentally. It can absolutely be said that there will be differences in these changes. Mentally the socialite may gain a new sense of confidence built by their peers in reaction to the surgery, whereas the 'nobody' who gets this surgery to feel more like who they believe themselves to truly be, will undertake an entirely different mental journey, a confidence which initially may come from within rather than from exterior influences. Both parties here undoubtedly will experience positive effects of this surgery, yet one will be far more accepted. This is surely a direct reflection of the fact that society is uncomfortable with anything or anyone who dares to think outside of the box the general population have built over decades.

All in all, it is true to say that crossdressing is not a new phenomenon. The devil that sits on the side of all this and sparks the influence for this even to be spoken of as a phenomenon is our cultural inability to recognise difference as a positive rather than something to be shunned. Desire is a web we all find ourselves trapped in often. We must however recognise that these desires are not the same for all of us. Gender can pose itself as a desire, perhaps in the regards of wanting the opposite gender as a

sexual preference, or the want to in fact be that other gender or present oneself as it for a period of time. The radicality that needs to be seen in relation to crossdressing now is not it as a topic in itself, but the understanding of our society towards it.

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