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Fashion as a Sign and Statement against the Traditional Female Gender Role:

“The Brides” by Jean Paul Gaultier

Bachelor Thesis

Arts and Culture Studies / Pre-Master Creative Industries

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e.g.	= for example
i.e.	= Latin <i>id est</i> , or namely
no.	= number

1. Introduction

1.1 Theoretical Framework, Method and Research Question

[The bride's] existence is defined, interpretable only by the clothing she wears and the flowers she carries. She is never allowed, or perhaps never chooses [...] to escape the confines of the image's edge. She is thus defined, reduced even, to the story of her wedding day. (Anderson 106)

The identity of a bride, shaped by her wedding dress, is associated with several stereotypes created through different institutions in society throughout history, such as church, wedding law, and popular media. Her identity is reproduced to support the traditional ideology of the female gender role physically and socially (Walsh 256). As Walsh states, "the dress is highly symbolic and is a predominant text in the examination of femininity, sexuality, and artifact in ritual when analyzing the wedding ceremony" (Walsh 245). Due to the exaggeration of the female form, "the wedding dress can be seen as the epitome of femininity" (Walsh 245-246). Therefore, it reinforces the traditional gender role.

A crucial work for gender studies and feminism is the book *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990) by Judith Butler, in which she opens genuine ways for critique of the culturally constructed terms of sex and gender. One effect and problem of the attribution and reproduction of gender relations is that hegemonic patriarchy sits atop the gendered social hierarchy by embodying the culturally idealized definition of masculinity, which is constructed as both oppositional and superior to femininity (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 3; 14). "Although the claim of universal patriarchy no longer enjoys the credibility it once did," the women's identity as "the Other" leads to her oppression and

subordination (Butler, *Gender Trouble* xii; 6). Butler's theory challenges the essentialist position of the sexual difference of women and men by offering a conception of gender that focuses on the "accidents" of performativity rather than on its essences.

Moreover, as Wissinger argues, "Butler's work has become foundational for any account of fashion that seeks to go further than merely skin deep" (297). Butler's concept of gender performativity will be vital to my theoretical framework to look "at the wedding itself as a performance" and to analyze the wedding dress as a material component of that ritual, "participating as a character within the spectacle" (Walsh 255). Elements of style, femininity, personal expressiveness, convention and conflict contribute various readings towards an understanding of this performative text (Walsh 253).

"The idea of the white dress harkens back to Queen Victoria, but it is only since World War II that the white wedding gown has become *de rigueur* for almost all brides" (Walsh 245).¹ Interestingly, today the gap between the garment of the wedding day and the garments of everyday life is greater than ever. Contemporary white wedding gowns mostly still follow traditional fabrics, silhouette, cuts and the color white, as society takes this ideology of the white bride as normative.

However, contemporary feminism must be urgently innovated, and should e.g. utilize "the playful world of fashion" to aim for a "transformative political vision" (Dicker and Piepmeier 4-5). In this context, the wedding dresses of fashion designer Jean Paul Gaultier is seen as an innovative attempt. At his exhibition *From the Sidewalk to the Catwalk* in Munich's *Kunsthalle* between autumn 2015 and spring 2016, four wedding dresses from different contemporary haute couture collections between 2002 and 2015 were presented as

¹ *De rigueur* is an outdated synonym for indispensable

“The Brides”. Munich was the eleventh location of this exhibition at which 140 haute couture creations from the years 1971 to 2015 were shown. Gaultier’s gowns are very unconventional and ambiguous. As the dresses are influenced by the traditional wedding dress, the viewer can feel the tensions between tradition and innovative transformation. Elements of the dresses, such as “wedding trousers,” a pope’s crown, an Indian feather head-dress, or an African mask, refer to different male wardrobes. Even though playfully concealed, each of the dresses can be clearly understood as a fashion statement about the traditional female gender role: it seems that some of the brides are rather entering a battle instead of walking down the aisle (attachment B). To find out how Gaultier’s designs respond to the female gender role, I have developed the following research question: How do Jean Paul Gaultier’s “Brides,” presented at the *From the Sidewalk to the Catwalk* exhibition, constitute a fashion statement against traditional female gender roles?

As Roland Barthes argues in his essay “Myth Today” (*Mythologies*, 1957), “any material can be arbitrarily endowed by meaning” (110). Based on Barthes’ theory, Patricia Cal-fato argues, “a garment is a sign” (15). As such, the wedding dress signifies several things and feelings (Walsh 253). Gaultier’s wedding dresses are the primary sources and signs that decontextualize and deconstruct the “sign” of the bride. Barthes’ theory on cultural myths provides insight into the “myth” of fashion, which serves the ideological function of *naturalization* of the distinctive gender roles (Barthes, “Rhetoric” 45-46). Barthes’ analysis can help to study the myth of the dresses in the way of how discourse “does” or “undoes” gender (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 145). I will use Barthes’ semiotic method to analyze the structures as signs and in the context of power relations. As the masculine elements have no fixed relations or meanings, the postmodern concept of “floating signifier” (Mehlman

25), although not explicitly used by Barthes, will be crucial to analyze them. Additionally, academic texts will be used to describe the current ideology and identity of the bride and her wedding dress. Finally, I will critically discuss the results of the analysis in order answer the research question.

1.2 Academic and Personal Objective

My motivation for doing this research is that I believe that fashion designers can make a powerful statement through their works – not only in terms of fashion, but also in socio-cultural debates. Fashion art is mostly perceived subconsciously or considered as superficial. Thus, it is often not considered worth being analyzed academically (see Kawamura 1). More research in fashion is welcome, as fashion by famous designers like Gaultier can reach and invite a broader and a different target group to change perspective. As there is still a lack of methodological inquiry in Fashion and Dress studies (Kawamura 12; Riello 2), I chose to analyze fashion objects in my thesis to contribute to the development of strategies for academic research in fashion. My personal motivation for studying Gaultier's wedding dresses in detail was the visit to the exhibition *From the Sidewalk to the Catwalk in Munich* in 2016. Although there were 140 fashion pieces presented, the four wedding dresses made a long-lasting impression on me. It made me think about this strong fashion statement, which responds to the problem of gender roles in history but also to the ongoing debate society still faces today.

2. Methodology

2.1 Judith Butler: Performativity of Marriage and the Wedding Dress

From a cultural-anthropological view, marriage is a transitional situation that is started off by one of society's most important rituals: old ties are capped and new ones are started by placing a man and a woman within a legal and sometimes religious institution that sanctions the couple's actions (Keller-Drescher 37; Walsh 256). It is a performative transition from bachelorhood to a married status (Keller-Drescher 38). The performativity of the wedding is emphasized in John L. Austin's Speech Act Theory: to explain that he considers performative utterances rather as sort of action than a medium to express and describe reality, he utilized the example of the linguistic utterance "I do [take this woman/man to be my lawful wedded wife/husband]" or "I now pronounce you husband and wife" used in the course of a marriage ceremony (Austin 5). Not only the linguistic utterances, but also the "wedding itself as a performance or spectacle can shed light on the role of the dress as art" (Walsh 254). As the wedding dress is one of the primary characteristics in this performance, it can say as much about the custom of the wedding as the words and gestures of themselves (Walsh 239). "Displaying yourself through clothes is especially showcasing during a wedding because of the special role of the bride [wearing a wedding dress] . . ." (Keller-Drescher 38).

In gender studies, Judith Butler adapts Austin's concept of the performative in her book *Gender Trouble* (1990) to redefine gender as an action humans are compelled to perform by society rather than a state of being or bodily condition. Like the linguistic utterances "man" and "woman" perform and reinforce the distinct gender roles, the traditional

gender role is performed by the wedding dress. This is what Butler calls gender performativity or “corporeal stylization (“Gender as Performance” 33; *Gender Trouble* 139-40). For Butler, the fact “that the gendered body is performative suggests that it has no ontological status apart from the various acts which constitute its reality” (*Gender Trouble* 136). On the specific example of cross-dressing, Butler shows the imitative structure of gender itself (12). While affording a key set of ideas for thinking about the role of fashion in producing and stylizing gendered bodies, Butler’s notion of gender performativity describes far more “than just the act of putting on a dress” (Wissinger 287). Butler argues that acts and gestures – just like the performativity of a traditional wedding or putting on a (white) wedding dress – create “the illusion of an interior and organizing gender core, an illusion discursively maintained for the purposes of the regulation of sexuality within the obligatory frame of reproductive heterosexuality” (*Gender Trouble* 136). The wedding dress on a female body is a “product type with clear female attributes and aesthetics” (Lin 344). It is a highly-stylized version of the feminine body as a discursive formation. As, Wissinger writes:

From some passages in Butler’s writing, it seems that discourse is all there is, matter only becomes real in the form of utterance, and culture is all that matters (pun intended). From this point of view, fashion is a discourse that confers reality on bodies. (295-296)

The wedding dress, as a fashion element, constitutes a discourse that “confers” this reality, the association we have with a bride, onto her body. The tradition of Western wedding ceremonies, including the white wedding dress as center piece, proves that the “stylized repetition” of this specific gendered act, makes it with every other white wedding dress more the standard (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 140).

2.2 Roland Barthes: Semiotic and Discourse Analysis of the Clothed Body – The Bride as a Sign

To seek a deeper understanding of performativity, it is demanded to explore the role that fashion plays in bringing forth the sexed body (Wissinger 291). I will use a Barthesian semiotic analysis, first, to understand the myth of the traditional wedding dress, and second, to analyze the performative role that Gaultier's wedding dresses play in deconstructing the female sexed body of the bride.

In his essay "Myth Today" in the book *Mythologies* (1957), Barthes argues that myth is a type of speech that is not limited to an oral state. The material of mythical speech can be any object if provided it is conveyed by a discourse (109). The form of mythology is a part both of semiology as formal science and of ideology inasmuch, as it is historical science that studies ideas-in-form (112): the signifier (the form) expresses the signified (the ideas-in-form) (113). However, when analyzing myth according to the semiological system, it is important to distinguish between three different terms, as myth consists of a tri-dimensional pattern (114): the *signifier* (the form, representation or literal meaning), the *signified* (the meaning or concept expressed through the signifier) and the *sign* or *signification*, which is the associative total of the first two terms (111). Denotation describes the primary, the literal and explicit meaning of the signifier, whereas connotation describes secondary meaning, the socio-cultural associations of the signifier.

Myth, according to Barthes, does not reside in a simple denotational meaning of signs. In the first order system, the representation is the language-object, and in the second system, it is myth itself (metalanguage) because it speaks about the first (Barthes, "Myth

Today” 115). With myth being a secondary system of signification in which the sign becomes a signifier, that process of signification takes meanings of symbolism in the myth to the realm of association (114-115). “Myth wants to see only a sum of signs, a global sign. It is the final term of a semiological chain” (114).

As, according to Barthes, dress, like language, functions as a kind of “syntax” according to a set of more or less constant rules, these rules allow a garment, and body coverings in general, to acquire meaning (Barnard 5). Therefore, based on Barthes, Patricia Calefato argues that “a garment is a sign of the clothed body” (15). In the case of a bride, the dress signifies several things (Walsh 253). It is the sign of the bridal identity. For instance, the white color will indicate the bride’s attitude towards contemporary tradition or the style of dress can show how she feels about herself (Walsh 253). More specifically, the signs of the bridal gown are the silhouette of the dress, the color white, traditional fabrics, the veil or other similar accessories. The form is the wedding dress and its accessories (the signifier) which bear certain messages (signifieds). The signifier of the bride in turn signifies the socio-cultural associations society has with the bride or – as she is mostly signified by her clothing – the wedding dress. This sum of signs results in the myth or ideology of the traditional western bride and its female identity associated with the “princess image,” romantic love, femininity, fertility and innocence, just to name a few.

These certain myths of the dress are not natural (Barthes, “Myth Today” 112), but exist, because, according to Barthes, the wedding dress is not any fashion piece, but a costume, and thus has “a general epistemological value” (qtd. in Calefato 9). It tends to be static and to display an exact correspondence between signs and their social significance in relation to the person who wears them (Calefato 1-2). Moreover, it acts as an articulate

language through which it is possible to analyze a culture as system and process, institution and individual act, expressive reserve and significant order (Barthes, *The Fashion System* 73). “The bride, as the wearer of the artifact, dons the dress and is the subject to its object” (Walsh 253-254). Her very presence in the spectacle of the wedding performance illustrates this, as she (and the dress) becomes the focus of the gaze – she becomes a sign (Walsh 255). Gaultier’s dresses, however, contain, typically for postmodern art, “floating signifiers”. These are signifiers without (a) specific signified(s) (Mehlman 25). These floating signifiers play a significant role in the deconstruction of the sign “bride”. They are crucial for the discourse analysis, as they unveil the hidden relations of power which lie within the dresses and especially in the masculine wardrobe elements.

3. Performativity and “Sign” of the Bride in the Historical Context

3.1 Origin and Development of the Traditional Wedding Dress

“A Dream in White” or “Here comes the bride, all dressed in white” – that is what we read in a glossy wedding magazine nowadays: these phrases immediately connote images of a beautiful satin or lace wedding gown (Ingraham 90-91). The color white, the use of fabrics, and the silhouette of contemporary wedding gowns have not always been the norm. Since the first records of Western wedding garments in the fifteenth century, wedding dresses ranged from black to every conceivable color to white, from short to long dresses with or without train and accessories, and from plume hats to crowns to veils (see Zimmermann, 1985). The same range existed for the dresses’ fabrics and other elements or adornments. Additionally, wedding clothing traditions varied throughout history and location (Kessler-Aurisch 319). Nevertheless, what all wedding garments had in common was that they mirrored social patterns with respect to marriage (Kessler-Aurisch 320). It must be noted, however, that in former times a specific and typical wedding dress was far from being a custom among the less wealthy because they could not afford to buy a special dress for a one-time occasion. Instead, women would use their best dress and garlands of fresh flowers and grasses to decorate their hair (Kessler-Aurisch 322).

The white wedding dress, as known nowadays, came into fashion only in the nineteenth century. Trend-setting for the wedding fashion was the dress of Queen Victoria’s wedding in 1840 (Ingraham 34). The gown consisted of white Spitalfields satin, decorated with Honiton lace, from which also the veil was crafted (Kessler-Aurisch 326). Following this grand event, many white Western middle-class brides imitated Victoria and adopted the

white wedding gown (Ingraham 34). Nevertheless, the "dream in white" became the standard for almost all brides only since World War II (Walsh 245). Further, this wedding fashion was consistently shaped by prominent figures in the twentieth century like Grace Kelly (1956) and Princess Diana (1981), or lately by Queen Máxima at her wedding in 2013 (Ingraham 34-39; Seidl et al. 7).

3.2 Associations with the bride, her dress and status in marriage

Besides the "princess" connotation of the sign "bride," which is further reproduced by the media, suggesting the bride dreamt of her wedding since she was a little girl, the wedding dress signifies countless other ideological meanings (Ingraham 39; Walsh 247). These ideologies are constantly influenced and reproduced over long periods of history and different cultures through TV, through wedding books, bridal magazines, the wedding industry, popular film and culture, arts, advertising and commercials, children's television and films, toys, newspaper wedding pages and music (Ingraham 79).

One of the central organizing concepts of the wedding-ideological complex is the notion of romantic love signified by the wedding dress (Ingraham 85). Romance signifies a "private or personal emotion that mysteriously manifests as 'chemistry,' 'a crush,' or 'falling in love'" (Ingraham 85). It creates a belief in a social relation which makes any other form of love than monogamous and heterosexual coupling unimaginable or unacceptable (Ingraham 85).

By turn of the nineteenth century, white had not only become the standard, but it had also become associated with various signs like purity, virginity, innocence, promise as well as power and privilege (Ingraham 34). Many of these stereotypical signs were shaped by the church as it strictly demanded the virginity of the bride. Soon, the white color of the

wedding dress – and the veil as later bridal innovation – became the sign of innocence for the bourgeois society, and thus was long forbidden for pregnant brides, widows and divorcees (Hörander 330).² Although the factors like purity and virginity are no longer integral to the worthiness of the bride or wife, those held over Victorian connotations are still apparent when the woman chooses to wear a white dress (Walsh 243). Even though the appearance of a bride (in particular her dress) is often described as stunning or breath-taking, the bride mostly connotes "[...] smallness, smoothness, fragility or delicacy and light" (qtd. Burke in Leitner 24). These connotations can be instrumental in keeping women invisible and confined: "The field in which the bride can move is narrow and closely observed: the bride, on the one hand, is expected to look spectacular (i.e. conforming to the ideal of hetero-normative conventions of female beauty), without making a spectacle of herself" (Leitner 25). A big pressure is on the bride, as she is forced to perform according to all the roles and expectations that society bestows on the bride. "She accepts and displays these societal notions of marriage, the wedding ceremony, and of women and wives" (Walsh 246). As the bride becomes the focus of the gaze, she becomes objectified in terms of her look (Walsh 255).

According to Ingraham, the bride as a sign for the societal female role represents the ideal of patriarchal society which makes use of the ideology of romantic love in the interests of male dominance and capitalism (81). The Western wedding aims to produce "a clean, mannered and closed bridal body that docilely seeks to stay within the boundaries of identity, body and dress" (Leitner 26). Romancing marriage keeps on naturalizing love

² Before the veil-tradition, the essential accessory was the crown or hair circlet or garland – depending on social status. Until the 1960s, pure white and a veil was only reserved for non-pregnant brides (Hörander 330). Widows, who were the exception for a second wedding, were forbidden the use of white, just as were those known not to be virgins (Zimmermann 48).

with ownership and incorporates property relations. This creates a pervasive belief about romance, commitment and marriage (Leitner 85). It reinforces and justifies subordination of women's needs to men's desires and sexual objectification of the woman (Ingraham 81; 39). From a feminist perspective, a wedding dress can "cage" the bride's body; the bride symbolically locks herself into patriarchy (Calefato 2). The wedding promise: "It's the perfect ending to your fairy tale romance!" mostly addressed to women should be questioned (Ingraham 79) as all these far reaching – negative and positive – associations with the bride and her role and status in marriage are signified by her wedding gown: "It is the material culmination to which everything else relates" (Keller-Drescher 38). As Keller-Drescher further states:

Marriage is a promise that points to the future, and the clothes are as well. We usually assume that a wedding gown only symbolizes the situation of the bride, her background and the festiveness of the occasion. But that is not all. The wedding gown can be used to express the aspirations for the future. As with other clothes that can be consciously selected, the wedding gown seeks to express who you want to be, how you want to be acknowledged and which surface of yourself you would like to show to the world. (38)

Traditional wedding dresses not only glamourize the wedding as an event, but also problematize the emancipation and liberation of women. Understanding the wedding dress as performative utterance and sign in a gendered discourse is crucial to outlining which meanings are conveyed by a traditional wedding dress and further, to analyze specifically which meanings Gaultier's wedding dresses set out to deconstruct.

4. Semiotic and Discourse Analysis of "The Brides"

After having described the ideology or variety of associations created by the sign "bride" now Gaultier's wedding dresses presented at the exhibition *From the Sidewalk to the Catwalk* will be analyzed to see how they deconstruct these associations. I will analyze the fashion pieces based on photographs taken by me at the exhibition. Additional to the visual elements, the verbal element description board of the garment group (see attachment B) is used to support the interpretation of the exhibits. The description board, fixed on one of the black walls, introduced the four garments on the mannequins as *The Brides* and gave a short hint of the symbolical meaning and context of the garment group (attachment A).

4.1 Jean Paul Gaultier, Cross-Dressing and "The Brides"

In general, Gaultier likes to present himself as a "translator" of his time. In contrast to more compliant translators, it seems as if his translations do not originate from a censored book (Chenoune 11). He is known for collecting, transforming and mixing. He undermines the borders between the gentle and the usual, the delicate and the vulgar, the beautiful and the ugly without paying attention to taste and style (Chenoune 7). Among other design techniques, Gaultier is especially known for the mixture of masculine and feminine elements, and thus makes statements against heterosexism (Werle and Neumann 115). Gaultier's aim to determine the identity of the garments leads directly to a sensitive point in contemporary fashion: the tension between gendered styles (Chenoune 10). By generating hybrids, which he repeatedly applies in the wedding dresses, named "The Brides," in the *From the Sidewalk to the Catwalk* exhibition in Munich in 2015/2016.

Gaultier expressed and translated the repercussions of the significant societal feminist movement of the 1960s into fashion (see attachment B). "The Brides" show how he establishes a new perception of the strong woman – in general and when it comes to marriage (qtd. Stephane, in Chenoune 172). For Gaultier, a woman is not labeled by skirts or nylon tights; for him, these are obsolete categories. This perception can also be recognized in his wedding dresses (Werle and Neumann 115).

4.2 Dress 1: "Bride in Trousers" – *Ashes to Ashes* Collection (2013)

With his "bride in trousers" (illustration 1) of the autumn/winter haute couture collection *Ashes to Ashes* (2013) Gaultier questions the view that a woman is only a bride if she wears a traditional wedding dress. By using white and subtle fabrics for the wedding outfit, Gaultier mixes tradition with innovation and presents both trousers and bridal dress in a whole new way.



Illustration 1: "Bride in Trousers" (Ashes to Ashes, 2013); Reichl, 2016

On a denotative level, the wedding garment presented is not a traditional one, as it looks more like a glamourized overall. The trousers as crucial signifying elements deconstruct the ideology that a woman is only a bride if she wears a traditional wedding dress, and thus immediately catches the attention of the viewer. The upper part is made of white satin or silk and the cut is similar to a blouse. The puffy trousers denote a transparent fabric, which enables to see the shape of the body of the mannequin, signifying femininity. Additionally, a broad waistband or belt draws attention to the feminine curves. To complete the look, the mannequin wears net gloves that are richly adorned with jewelry.

The white colored and gentle fabrics chosen for all elements the outfit signify the familiar associations with the sign "bride" like innocence, purity, lightness or delicacy. Nevertheless, this signification is disrupted, as the performativity of putting the bride in trousers turns around all the ideological associations that normally come along with a bridal

dress and its signification of the female gender role. The first connotation regarding the woman's role in marriage coming to mind is: "the woman who wears this wedding jumpsuit at her wedding literally wears the trousers in this marriage." This is interesting, as according to the Cambridge Dictionary the term "to wear the trousers" relates to a woman in a relation who is in control and makes decisions for both people in a relationship ("wear the trousers"). Moreover, the transparent trousers connote liberation.

Historically, controversial fashion changes such as women adopting trousers could only take place after women's roles in society have altered. Trousers have been a sign for women and girls enjoying more options in education, sports, and work in the late twentieth century (Paoletti and Brush Kidwell 203). Gaultier brings this symbolism a step further to the wedding: whereas trousers and other fashion experiments are already considered as a standard fashion piece in everyday life, Gaultier's garment finally empowers the bride to more freedom – not only in terms of fashion on her wedding day but also to signify her aspiration for the future.

Additionally, the syntagmatic relation to the posture and hair of the mannequin makes a difference: the posture signifies confidence and strength, whereas the doll's wig signifies unconventionality and rebellion. In this context, it is interesting to note that the title of the collection refers to the no. 1 hit *Ashes to Ashes* by David Bowie in 1980. This link transmits connotations of the *New Wave* movement in 1980s of which David Bowie was part of. The movement attracted attention because of its rebellions against classification, creation of space for non-heterosexuals and play with gender roles.

Although there have been a lot of experiments in female wedding fashion, wearing pants is still usually reserved for the groom or since the permission of same-sex weddings,

associated with lesbian weddings where both or one bride wears a suit (Faith Oswald 117). These very parallels drawn between a groom and a lesbian bride represent often a problem for lesbian brides, as Faith Oswald argues: they do not want to "look or act like heterosexual men" wearing for example a tuxedo like all groomsmen. Gaultier's creation of a feminine style of the jumpsuit, however, could empower "a lesbian to break gender rules and not play into stereotypes" (Faith Oswald 117).

Although incorporating a masculine element in this outfit, the overall appearance still signifies femininity. On the other hand, the sign "wedding pants" signify the idea that "masculine" elements deprive the bride of her femininity, and thus deconstruct the myth of the traditional bride (Paoletti and Brush Kidwell 202). To dress the mannequin in wedding trousers instead of a conventional wedding dress is a relatively simple idea, but a strong and unconventional sign.

4.3 Dress 2: "The Popess Bride" – *61 Ways to Say Yes* Collection (2015)

With the haute couture spring/summer collection *61 Façons de Se Dire Oui, or 61 Ways to Say Yes*, Gaultier dedicated an entire collection to the topic of marriage in 2015. The title of the collection already betrays that there is no right and wrong in wedding fashion: the show for this collection was opened by a bride in an ethereal white gown worn with high-waisted briefs, and a crown of piled-high hair rollers and spoons securing her veil (illustration 2). This famous dress was again represented at the exhibition as one of the four bride dresses.



Illustration 2: "The Popess Bride" (61 *Façons de Se Dire Oui*, 2015); Reichl, 2016

From a denotative viewpoint, the mannequin is clothed in a rather simple, but traditional white dress and veil. Nevertheless, the dress is slightly open in the front, which makes her underpants visible, and thus signifies sexual liberation and provocation. The bridal hair style is pivotal to the whole bridal outfit: at first glance and observed distantly, the headdress denotes a crown. Looking at the headdress more accurately, it denotes nothing else than a simple "house wife hair dress" created by piled-high curl-holders and spoons fixing the dark hair and veil in the shape of a crown. To complete the hair style, a small bridal couple, as it is known as wedding cake topper, is placed on top of the "crown" as a detail.

Obviously, the hair dress does not unintentionally take the shape of a crown. After a brief research of different types of crowns, it turns out that the shape does not signify any crown, but a typical pope's crown. This sign in turn signifies a critical statement towards

the gendered power distinction in church. It also connotes a link to the legend of Pope Joan, contemporarily recalled by the same-titled movie in 2009, because of the fact that a woman is wearing a pope's crown – whereas in Catholicism this is strongly forbidden and only intended for a man. The legend tells of a woman who became Pope John VIII in 1099, because she "disguised herself as man" and reigned two years until the truth came to light because of her pregnancy (qtd. De Mailly, in Boreau 107-110). Parallels between the appearance of Gaultier's bride and Pope Joan can also be found by comparing Elizabethan paintings or engravings of Popess Joan (see attachments E and F). It becomes quite clear that Gaultier's dress was designed to criticize Catholic corruption. This is even reinforced by knowing that Pope Joan was often compared to the Whore of Babylon which was regarded as feminine embodiment of Catholic corruption by protestants (Rustici 69). The deep cut neckline of the dress flattering the mannequin's breasts and curves of the female body plus the babydoll cut of her dress signifies femininity and fertility. Moreover, it is not obvious whether the bride hides a pregnant body under her wide flowing dress, which can be again considered as a link to the legend of Popess Joan.

Regarding the research question, the overall sign of this dress constitutes a sign against the myth and bridal identity shaped by all the regulations and moralities by the church, including innocence and virginity. The pope's crown is the primary sign of provocation and parody of the church, its leader, and the sacrament of matrimony. The cake topper wedding couple signifies literally "the cherry on top".

4.4 Dress 3: "The African Mask Bride" – *Homage to Africa* Collection (2005)

Africa seems to be the *muse du jour* for a wide array of designers; also including Jean Paul Gaultier (Rovine 135). Africa was an inspiration for his third wedding dress (illustration 3) which was shown to the public for the first time in 2005 as a part of the haute couture summer/spring collection *Hommage à l'Afrique* (Homage to Africa).



Illustration 3: "African Mask Bride" (*Hommage à l'Afrique*, 2005); Reichl, 2016

The wedding garment basically denotes a big 3-D African mask formed as oval shield-like shape of a stable material connected to a floor-length veil which is worn over the mannequin's head. The entire fabric of the dress denotes light and flowing white net-like fabric or chiffon which is placed over the mask in drapes and falling in rows from the mask. This sets off the actual strong statement and the clumsy oval form of the mask. That

the dress could be merely reduced to the mask, is also reinforced by the picture of Emil Larsson for the French wedding magazine *La Mariée* (2013), in which the dress is photographed in such a way that only the mask emerges from the dark (see attachment C). Without knowing the exact function of an African mask, this construction of the mask as a shield signifies the function of protecting the body. Besides the function of protection, the veil's function is to hide the bride's face from the viewer. It decenters the person of the bride and draws the viewer's attention to the face of the mask, which is a sign for her as a passive object.

Observed without any context like description and other dresses, the viewer would possibly not come up with the idea of a wedding dress. Nevertheless, signifiers for the wedding dress are the color and kind of the fabric plus the veil. Due to reinforcement of stereotypical images of Africa by mainstream media, Western people connote African culture with "brutal," "savage," "tribal," "fight[ing] all the time," and "exotic" (Fair 5). The creation of this "bride hybrid" connotes a material, but also symbolic merging of this associations with African culture (signified by the mask) with Western culture (signified by the wedding dress elements). The typical salient colors are not used for the African mask; but instead the element of the mask is incorporated in the dress in a way which aims to tame and civilize the "wild" and weaken the "exotic".

Besides the functions of entertainment and decoration of African masks, this kind of African art has mostly a deeper function and a vital purpose for every African tribe (Fraser, Douglas and Cole 3). As far as I found out in my research, African masks are only strictly worn by men in every tribe, and often used for rituals and celebrations as e.g. the initiation of young men into manhood (Fraser, Douglas and Cole 74-76). Additionally, variations of

wealth and political competition are signified by some masks. Therefore, these insignia serve visibly to distinguish the authority person from the others, and thus a tribe member who puts on a mask obtains also a power transmission (Fraser, Douglas and Cole 74-76). In this context, the mask shield signifies rather the function of protection, transmission of power, and authority than decoration. The "African Mask Bride" can be understood as a sign against the typical bridal identity, as the invasion into male affairs makes the bride break the rules and demonstrate against male hegemony and power structures.

4.5 Dress 4: "The Indian-Pirate-Hussar Bride" – *The Hussars* (2002/03)

The last fashion piece is arguably the most elaborate and the one with the most information displayed and is from the haute couture collection *Les Hussardes* (*The Hussars*) autumn/winter in 2002/03 (illustration 4). As the name of the collection already betrays, this wedding dress is inspired by the Hungarian hussars, a term that derives historically from the cavalry of late medieval Hungary.



Illustration 4: "The Hussar-Native Indian-Pirate Bride" (Les Hussardes, 2002/03); Reichl, 2016

We see a splendid champagne-colored gown with various details, which makes it difficult to make out all the fabrics, elements and their relations between each other at first view. However, a clear sign for the traditional bridal identity is the traditional silhouette. Starting with the upper part of the dress, the mannequin is portrayed almost topless. The only thing which covers her upper body are the long and ruffled tube sleeves made of a white, light and transparent net-like fabric. Moreover, she wears a feminized epaulette placed on top of her left shoulder. Her shoulders, arms and upper body are laden with long silver necklaces and bracelets and a shash-like band over her right shoulder hardly covers up her breasts. The idea that the bride would show her upper body and breasts during marriage creates a scandalous connotation; especially to viewers with high moral or religious beliefs towards marriage.

The capacious and floor-length skirt with train is made of draped silk and features silk cord applique on the waistline, on the stomach and on the hem of the skirt. Additionally, the waistline and the hem of the skirt are decorated with feathers and ruffled braids. Instead of choosing a traditional headdress, Gaultier selected an eye-catching feather head-dress that signifies the well-known accessory of Native American chiefs. A smaller detail is an eyepatch the mannequin wears over her left eye, richly adorned with pearls, connoting the cult of pirates. With respect to gender discourse, it is important to pay special attention to the signifying elements of the male wardrobe.

First, the accumulations of signifiers consisting of the epaulettes on shoulder and dress, the chains known from uniforms, and the golden cordon or twine braid decorations all over the dress signify a link to the cult of the Hussar soldier with that characteristic uniform. Although these elements are clearly of a masculine tradition, they were all feminized to take a little bit out of the severity and to go with the delicate style of the wedding dress. Although many weakened versions of this military style can be already found in contemporary (women) fashion, most viewers lack in-depth knowledge of hussars and their specific tasks and role, and might not directly associate these uniform's characteristics with a Hussar, but generally with that of a soldier. In any case, they put forth a sign for the masculine ideal and a closed system of correspondence between external appearance and social order (Locke 4; Calefato 2).³

The intertextual link to the figure of the Native American chief is signified by the feather headdress and the feather details on the skirt. In aboriginal times, the role of chiefs

³ Military jackets have been already used in Haute Couture collections of famous designers like Alexander McQueen (*Highland Rape*, Autumn 1995), where his clothes were interpreted to create an effect of cruelty and victimization of women (Evans 141).

in North America was to rule over several hundred people. Their position was a full-time, life-long one, which commanded much respect (Miller 448). As chiefs were mostly male, the role of the leader and authority person is again associated with a function of men (Miller 448). Like in the example of the Hussar elements, the powerful and male discourse of the Native Indian chief is symbolically transmitted on the bride and signifies by the feather headdress. Moreover, the Native Indian accessories turn the bride into a wild and untamed sign; to a "warrioress" who does not stick to the rules given by society or men.

The third element, the pirate's eyepatch, connotes a link to the cult of pirates both in history and their stereotypical representation in popular culture. The leading stereotype of a pirate is his way of living without fixed standards (qtd. Douglas, in Hernandez 2). By becoming a pirate, an individual does not only agree to break the laws of the land, but also to break free from the barriers of their economic and social class (Hernandez 2). According to Hernandez, gender particularly plays a poignant role in the record of piracy (1). Strikingly the glamorous eyepatch connotes a link to the historic stories and legends of female pirates such as Ann Bonny and Mary Read. They cross-dressed as men to live a life as pirates (Hernandez 1). These women exemplify a case of crossing sexual borders in search of social and economic liberation (Hernandez 2). As Hernandez states, "By doing so, they effectively introduced the concept of sexual equality three hundred years ahead of their time" (2).

Syntagmatically, these various single floating signifiers are not clearly relation to each other, but Gaultier takes advantage of the popular associations with these signs in his gown to create a statement against civilization and the rules and given norms by society and patriarchy. Moreover, the elements combined with her bare upper body parody the conventions of marriage. This visual text is a fabric from different cultural texts, which enter

a dialogue with each other, parody and question each other (Barthes, *"The Death of the Author"* 146). Because of the male discourses taking place on the bride's body, it seems as if she turns the tables: all hegemony and power, which is culture-bound with men, is projected onto the woman. By picking elements from different ethnographic and cross-functional male backgrounds, Gaultier's dress is a sign that questions the fact that different cultures pigeonhole the female gender role and shows that a combination of cultures is not impossible.

4.6 Discussion: Gaultier's Deconstruction of the Bridal Identity

The wedding dress as a costume is normally "subordinated to the mutability of fashion" (Calefato 9). However, Gaultier's wedding dresses are informal fashion pieces which deconstruct the ideology of the traditional wedding costume by "matching up precisely those things that [do] not match" (Chenoune 6). As Chenoune states, "Eclectic mixes of this sort were to become his trademark" (6). Therefore, the various floating signifiers of the dresses and the syntagmatic relations between them facilitate a lot of not fixed interpretations. "The objects generated by the discourses of fashion are no longer therefore, products of a collective expressiveness – myths in the traditional sense – but are rather signs of a style" – they become myths in the contemporary sense (Calefato 9-10). For instance, masculine symbols in clothing are likely to be valued (at least in part) more highly, and thus the masculine elements signify an important readjustment of the definition of femininity (Paoletti and Brush Kidwell 203). By "masquerading" the traditional bride, Gaultier's signs are a parody of the artificial modification of the traditional bride (Calefato 1-2).

However, instead of completely revolutionizing the wedding gown, Gaultier keeps

its typical fabrics, colors and (partially) silhouettes to some extent. From a material perspective, thus, one question arises: why did he not follow his typical pattern and use neon or black colored or "crazy" patterned fabrics for his wedding collections to create an effect of total alienation? Gaultier's brides still look graceful and feminine as he sticks to some traditional bridal characteristics. By incorporating male attire and modifying the garments only to some degree, he gives them a unique look which still follows the female silhouette of the mannequin's body. By the creation of bridal hybrids, he shows that customs can be reversed and that the female gender role is not stable (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 134-136). As performativity rather depends on corporeal signs which manufactures and sustains essence or identity, it can be perceived as criticism against gender as an action humans are compelled to perform by society rather than a state of being or bodily condition (Butler 136).

Another factor of his designs might be the immediate recognition of the signification "bride". The syntagmatic contrasts between the sign "bride" and the deconstructing elements is bigger. For example, the statement against the traditional female gender role is much stronger perceived on the "Popess Bride" because of the syntagmatic relations between the elements signifying the conventional association with a bride and the signifiers like the pope crown which deconstruct it. Like a real postmodern artist, Gaultier's destroy morality and traditions with his superficial artifacts. The extremes between the signifiers in the dresses have two different effects, depending on the viewers: to provoke and to emancipate. This invites the viewer to explore, play with, enjoy and rethink essentialisms and masculine hegemony (Butler 136).

The fact that the garment group is not named "The Wedding Dresses" but "The

Brides" reduces the garments not to their materiality, but personify (signify) a link to the female bride. This makes sense, as the wedding dress does, to a large extent, define the bride. The correlation of each of Gaultier's brides as "signs" (created through fabric, color, and partially silhouette and veil) makes an "associative total of them" (Barthes, "Myth Today" 113). To me, the overall appearance of the brides signifies an "army of brides". It seems as if some of his brides would rather enter a battle than walk down the aisle (attachment B). Visualizing a groom beside one of the brides would make him look relatively small.

From the perspective of gender performativity (Butler 136-137), "Breaking gendered dress codes limits heterosexual power by presenting other options for identities and relationships" (Faith Oswald 117). Thus, Gaultier's wedding garments constitute signs in various ways against the traditional female gender role and for a counter model of traditional marriage (see attachment B). With this aim, Gaultier presents "Fashion for all forms of marriage, for each age, as often as you please" (attachment B).

5. Conclusion

My posed research question for this thesis is: How do Jean Paul Gaultier's "Brides," presented at the *From the Sidewalk to the Catwalk* exhibition at Munich's *Kunsthalle*, constitute a fashion statement against traditional female gender roles?

Feminism is a highly important and often treated topic because gender inequality is matter of fact. The traditional wedding dress from the view of gender studies as a garment is performatively charged with female discourses. The institution of heterosexuality as it is currently organized functions as a form of social control and depends upon the heterosexual imaginary to conceal its regulatory function and effects (Ingraham 81). The bride is mostly defined by her wedding dress. As a type of femininity constructed by this order, she must align herself to one particular, evidently the patriarchally approved and consensually validated side, of given dichotomies. However, Gaultier's wedding dresses are signs that put forth a fashion statement against the bridal identity, ideology of marriage and traditional female gender role. The traditional wedding costume that displays "an exact correspondence between sign and [its] social significance to the person who wears them" is turned into a fashion piece without any determined signification (Calefato 2-3). By using fashion playfully, the artifacts liberate and empower the bride to take a subject position that does not only work along the lines of exclusion.

By seeing the wedding dress as a signifier with its certain signifieds, Barthes' semi-otic analysis enabled me to interpret the identity of the (traditional) bride mainly defined by her wedding dress. I could demonstrate how unstable the sign of the "costume wedding dress" is as the analysis brought into focus how Gaultier's fashion pieces sabotage the ideology of marriage. Gaultier's wedding dresses consisted of all sorts of "floating signifiers".

This leads to polysemic meanings which are meaningful in themselves. Butler's theory offered a suitable framework for analyzing the female gender as performative construct and myth, which, in the case of the bride, is established and defined through the white wedding dress and the female form represented by the figure of the mannequin. This understanding was important to be able to understand the wedding dress as a central component of a wedding.

To sum it up, Gaultier's fashion pieces address and empower women in any position towards marriage by encouraging his audience to play with his pieces and overthink theories of the female gender role. Gaultier's "Brides" unsettle the idea of an essential form of the sign "wedding dress" and push forward the idea of what fashion can accomplish as a form of critical discourse regarding gender. By creating signs without fixed relations, the wedding garments challenge the conceptual pairs that have become so ingrained in the fashion system in which masculinity equals one thing and femininity another. It is a typical postmodern fashion statement, not only against the traditional bridal, but also the feminine gender role in general.

Attachments

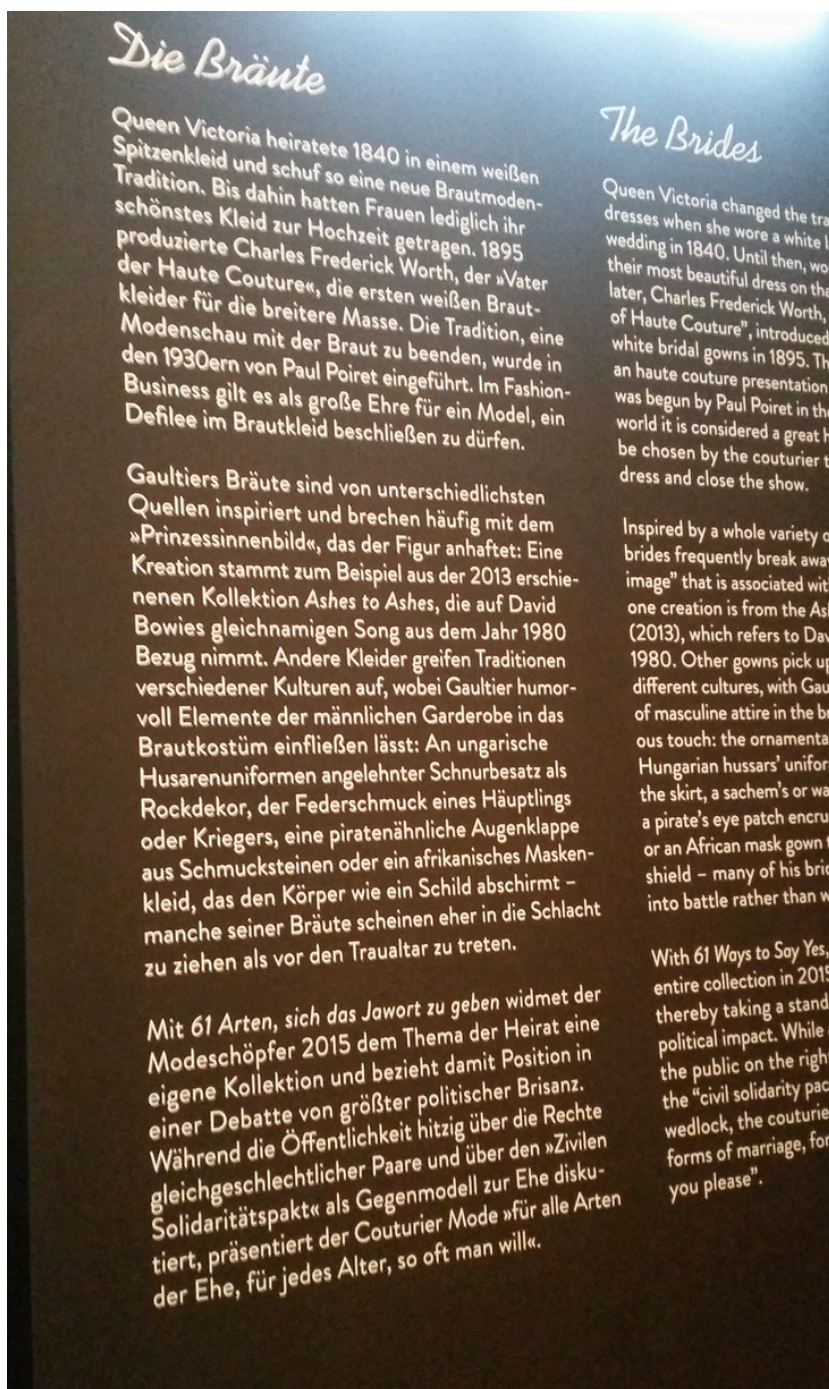
Attachment A) “The Brides” – From the Sidewalk to the Catwalk, <i>Kunsthalle</i> Munich	33
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Attachment A) “The Brides” – From the Sidewalk to the Catwalk, Kunsthalle Munich



Garment group “The Brides”; Reichl, 2016

Attachment B) Description Board of "The Brides" at the Exhibition (German/English)

Photograph of the description of the wedding dresses portrayed as *The Brides* at the exhibition From the

Sidewalk in Munich; Reichl, 2016

Attachment C) Photograph of Wedding Dress of collection *Homage to Africa* taken by
Emil Larsson



by Emil Larsson
La Mariée, 2013
Haute Couture Spring/Summer 2005
Collection *Hommage à l'Afrique*
Loriot, 202

Attachment D) Pope Joan Engraving by Jacopo Filippo Foresto



Pope Joan, engraving from Jacopo Filippo Foresti of Bergamo's *De claris mulieribus* (Ferrera, 1494); Rustici

Attachment E) Pope Joan Engraving by Hartman Schedel



Pope Joan, engraving from Hartmann Schedel's *Liber chronicarum* (Nuremberg, 1493); Rustici 28

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