Hiroshima's Bag Lady

Increasing the Parameters of the Real

Luciana Nunes Nacif

What is considered ugly, grotesque or unpleasant by the fashion world? The first collection presented by Rei Kawakubo in Paris was classified as offensive to Western aesthetic standards, for it questioned the French ideal of beauty and elegance. Through silhouettes covered in frayed, perforated and monochromatic fabrics, Kawakubo disrupted the established notion of the beautiful body, stripping it of the clichés of femininity, explicit sexuality and glamour. Under the lens of Vilém Flusser's philosophy, the Japanese fashion designer created the new, the beautiful, that which is capable of expanding the parameters of the real. | *Keywords: Fashion, Beauty, Deconstruction, Vilém Flusser, Rei Kawakubo*

1981. Paris was the world's fashion stage. For the first time, fashion designer Rei Kawakubo presented her collection outside Japan. The reactions from the specialized press were extreme:

> The terror and desperation that ooze from so many of the latest Japanese fashions, including those by Rei Kawakubo, are wholly absent from Saint Laurent's collections. In its most extreme forms, Japanese fashion heralds a world nobody wants to know. The woman who wears *Comme des Garçons* has money but is not proud of it; she doesn't want to dress in such a way as to present something pleasing to the eye, and she sags under the weight of the information she reads in the newspaper every day (Brubach, 1984, p. 94).

At that time, several journalists came to the conclusion that Kawakubo's collection reflected a kind of anger, perhaps an anger characteristic of survivors of the nuclear holocaust, which would explain why her style was called '*le look clochard d'Hiroshima*'.[1] But it seems that her intention was to question one of the axioms of Western culture: the French monopoly of elegance and the expertise of French couturiers (Vinken, 2023, p. 20). Her focus was the western woman's ideal of beauty.

[1] Hiroshima's bag lady look.

Fig. 1: *Lace Collection*, Comme des Garçons.
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1981.

Kawakubo's aesthetics were not simply the aesthetics of poverty, as the term '*la clochard d'Hiroshima*' may suggest. It was actually a negative aesthetic,[2] an examination of our own idea of beauty and fashion. It was a recognition of what is different, what is strange, and the deconstruction of an idea of a symmetrical, perfect, beautiful world. Her deconstruction was about the distortion and rupture of the traditional code of fashion, with its completed perfection and hidden internal structures.

But who is Rei Kawakubo and how did her brand come about? Born in 1942, Kawakubo grew up in a time marked by the stigma of war in Japan, where fear and austerity dominated. The country was destroyed, a fact that probably profoundly influenced Kawakubo's aesthetics. The daughter of a university professor, Kawakubo studied literature and philosophy at Keio University in Tokyo. In the 1960s, she was close to intellectual debates related to the status and positioning of women in society. In a rare interview, Kawakubo explains that: "when I was young, it was unusual for a female college student to do the same job as a man. And, of course, women didn't earn the same. I rebel against it [...] I never lose my ability to rebel, I get angry and that anger becomes my energy" (Kawamura, 2004, p. 137). This ability to rebel has remained alive throughout her trajectory, until the present day.

[2] Features such as ugliness, grotesqueness and disgust are considered negative aesthetics, as they become justified as a necessary means to facilitating an ultimately positive aesthetic experience. Negative aesthetics may lead to an activist dimension, because when confronted with negative aesthetic qualities, one generally doesn't remain a mere spectator but rather spring into action to eliminate or transform them (Saito, 2023).

In 1969, dissatisfied with the aesthetic standards of fashion at the time, Kawakubo decided to create her own brand: *Comme des Garçons*.[3] In the early 1980s, she already had a community of faithful followers in Japan, known as the 'crow tribe,' inspired by the English punk movement. At a time when fashion was obsessed with tight-fitting dresses, Kawakubo's oversized pieces were designed to intentionally drape the body. In 1981 Kawakubo made her appearance on the French fashion scene, transforming it profoundly. And what made Kawakubo's arrival particularly challenging was the fact that the other designers, such as Gianni Versace, Azzedine Alaïa, Christian Lacroix and Thierry Mugler, were beginning to engage in a hyperbolization of glamour, in contrast to the traditional understated elegance of haute couture. Designers in the 1980s were seen as celebrities and fashion shows became spectacular events that received wide publicity in the mass media (Negrin, 2023, p. 49).

The 1981 *Lace collection* seemed to 'hack' the fashion system, changing the functioning of weaving machines and establishing a new aesthetic, building a new relationship between beauty and fashion. To hack, from Old English *hæccan*, means 'to cut into pieces,' to shred. In the field of information technology, to hack means to solve a problem in an inelegant way, to improvise, to make a kludge. This is where the meaning of the word 'hack' comes from: that of an action that is capable of breaking a system or program. The hacker is not only able to access the data of restricted systems, but he/she can also change the functioning of the program, making it work in his benefit. The hacker creates bugs that break the predictability of the system (Reis, 2023). But, as Citton (2015) argues, the hacker's true challenge is to strike a difficult balance between respect for the code, without which the system will not work, and a subversive drive, without which the transgression will not occur. In this regard, Kawakubo seemed to subvert the functioning of the fashion system – and its established concept of beauty – by playing with its codes.

Kawakubo practiced a kind of deconstruction through silhouettes covered in frayed, perforated and monochromatic fabrics. But before analysing the deconstruction proposed by Kawakubo, it is important to clarify the philosophical meaning of the term. It originated with philosopher Jacques Derrida in the late 1960s and was at first understood more as an attitude than a defined methodology. According to him,

> [Deconstruction] enables us to interrogate the covert philosophical and political presuppositions of institutionalized critical methods which generally govern our reading of a text. There is in deconstruction something which challenges every teaching institution. It is not a question of calling for the destruction of such institutions, but rather of making us aware of what we are in fact doing when we subscribe to this or that institutional way of reading [...] (Kearney, 2004, p. 155).

Displacing the term from its philosophical origins, designers and artists have established an aesthetic of questioning through fragmentation, rupture and displacement. One of the first manifestations of deconstruction began on

[3] A french expression meaning 'like boys.'

the streets of London, with the punk movement in the 1970s. The punks' ragged black clothes were a manifestation of their indignation with society. The punk look became associated with clothes that were worn unfinished, inside out and destroyed. Therefore, in fashion, the term 'deconstruct' came to mean 'dismantling the form.'

Unlike English designers of the punk movement, such as Vivienne Westwood, who destroyed unexpensive clothing as a form of political expression, Kawakubo respected craftsmanship and commissioned special fabrics to look degraded. One of the iconic pieces of this period is a sweater full of holes, as shown in figure 2, intentionally knitted with empty spaces, obtained by loosening the screws in the knitting machinery – a process that subverted the standardized construction of knitting, which she called '*Lace*':

> Machines that manufacture fabrics are increasingly producing uniform and flawless materials. I like eccentric and imperfect things. Hand weaving is the best way to achieve this. As this isn't always possible, we've loosened a few screws on the machines here and there so they can't do exactly what they're supposed to do (Steele, 2000, p. 17).

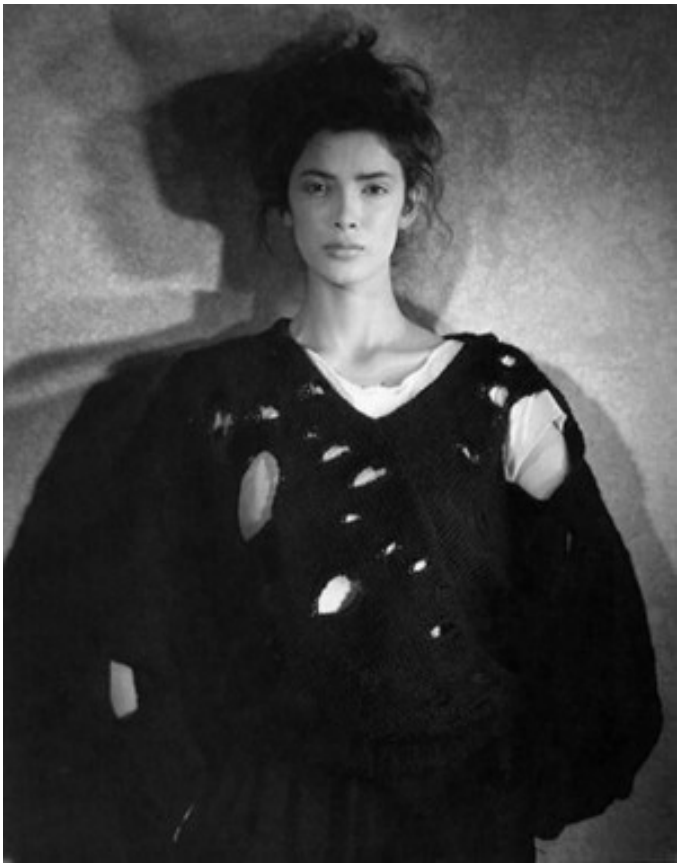

Fig. 2: Comme des Garçons, *Lace sweater*, fall/winter 1982-83.
Photograph by Peter Lindberg.

At first, Kawakubo's deconstructive practice was used against the dominance of finely crafted patterns for fitting and defining the human body. But, over the years, her deconstructivist aesthetics has been directed against oppressive discourses. What the concept of deconstruction in fashion tends to show is how absence and displacement affect the relationship between the individual body and a frozen idealization of it. Deconstruction seems to work like an x-ray of the fashion system, which reveals its charms (glamour, spectacle, fantasy, creativity, luxury) and its materiality (shape, material, modelling, manufacturing, sewing, finishing). According to Alison Gill (1998), designers such as Kawakubo represent a 'new thought' in fashion, which is concerned with the 'ontology of structure' of clothing. That is, the creator simultaneously deforms and forms, destroys and builds clothes. This bidirectional work disfigures and figures the body, decomposing it and composing it in new ways. Deconstructing and reconstructing crystallized concepts, such as beauty. Practicing the two terms together in one: de(construction).

The literal deconstruction of the fabric and finishing techniques presented in the *Lace* collection seemed to reflect the disturbance, or the upheaval, of the values established by western fashion. The disruptive force of Kawakubo's collection resided not only in undoing the structure of a given piece, through subtractions and displacements, but mainly, in rethinking the meaning of clothing itself. By deconstructing the history of western fashion, the concept of beauty and female body shape, she revealed that both are just cultural conventions.

The creation of a clothing via deconstruction points to new possibilities that have not yet been realized. More than a method, deconstruction is an activity, that is, a reading of the text, which shows that the text has more than one possible interpretation, and often contradictory ones (Loscialpo, 2011, p. 13). The unsystematic character of deconstructive reading emerges in its questioning of a series of opposites (binary models), such as beauty/ugliness, nature/culture, essence/appearance, subject/object, fashion/anti-fashion, body/clothes, female/male, negative/positive, inside/outside, noble/vulgar, form/emptiness. By exposing this binary, the creator operates what Derrida would define as "an openness towards the other" (Kearney, 2004, p. 155).

Kawakubo operates within the Western fashion system and, simultaneously, against it, questioning it and provoking a kind of critical dismantling. Kawakubo shows in Paris, the fashion capital, and depends on the approval of journalists and the entire system. In this sense, she does not deny it, but seeks to denounce the arbitrariness of its foundations from the inside. Even though she breaks rules and provokes extreme reactions, it doesn't take long for the fashion system to absorb her criticism, turning it into another commercial product. After all, every complaint ends up being incorporated by the system, preventing any form of lasting dissent. Perhaps, it is exactly for this reason that Kawakubo is always looking to create never-before-seen collections. She places herself neither inside nor outside the fashion system, but at its limit (Zborowska, 2015) or, in Derrida's words, '*au bord*.'[4]

[4] A french expression meaning 'on the edge.'

The aesthetics of Kawakubo's first collection presented in Paris was interpreted by critics as ugly, grotesque and offensive. But, from another point of view, the *Lace collection* is the perfect example of what Vilém Flusser would call '*beautiful*'. For the philosopher, '*beauty*' is the new, that which is capable of enriching our reality and proposing new possibilities for future experiences. Flusser (1975/76, p. 11) argues that "a model of an experience [...] is beautiful insofar as it is different from any preceding model. For it is the measure of the new domain of reality that this model opens up to experience. Beauty is the increase of the parameter of the real." As Kawakubo disrupts the established notion of the beautiful body, stripping it of the clichés of femininity, explicit sexuality and glamour, she creates possibilities for the construction of new parameters of beauty. Her collections present new realities, which do not yet exist. Her genius lies in the fact that she presents a communicable, understandable model, firmly walking the narrow path between the redundant aesthetics of the pleasant – mainstream fashion – and the madness of the incomprehensible. As Flusser asserts, beauty needs to communicate. To communicate new, non-redundant information, as stated by Kawakubo:

> What is important to me is information (in the journalistic sense of relating News). Through my collections [...] I like to tell a story. Without News, nothing is alive [...] Information deepens the work. So, if anything, I am maybe more of a journalist than an artist (Bolton, 2017, p. 188).

Even if the discourse of fashion constantly revolves around the 'new', what is seen, with rare exceptions, are expressions of the 'pleasant,' of what we already know. Flusser (1975/76, p. 12) claims that beauty "is not pleasant at all. If we wish to live pleasantly, we must content ourselves with old, traditional models of experience. They are pleasant because we are programmed by them." Pleasant is what we see in mainstream fashion, whose changes are but superficial, just creating the feeling of 'newness'. Kawakubo's beauty concept is not pleasant at all, as it jeopardizes established standards, expanding the parameters of the real.

References

Bolton, A. (2017) *Rei Kawakubo Comme des Garçons. The Art of the In-Between*. New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Citton, Y. (2015) 'Learning to Read in the Digital Age: From Reading Texts to Hacking Codes', *Theories and Methodologies*. PMLA, 2015, pp. 743–749. Available at: https://www.yvescitton.net/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/Citton-LearningToReadDigitalContext-PMLA-2015.pdf (Accessed: 30 December 2023).

Flusser, V. (1975/1976) *A arte: o belo e o agradável*. Unpublished lecture, originally written in French 'L'art: le beau et joli', to be used in a course entitled 'Les phénomènes de la communication' (Théâtre du Centre, Aix-en-Provence). Translated by: Rachel Cecília de Oliveira Costa.

Brubach, H. (1984) 'The truth in Fiction', *The Atlantic Monthly*, 1984(5), pp. 94–96.

Gill, A. (1998) 'Deconstruction Fashion: The Making of Unfinished, Decomposing and Re-assembled Clothes', *Fashion Theory*. United Kingdom: Berg, 2(1), pp. 25–50.

Kawamura, Y. (2004) *The Japanese Revolution in Paris Fashion*. Oxford, New York: Berg.

Kearney, R. (2004) *Debates in Continental Philosophy: Conversations with Contemporary Thinkers*. New York: Fordham University Press, pp. 139–156.

Loscialpo, F. (2011) 'Fashion and Philosophical Deconstruction: A Fashion In-Deconstruction', in: Witt-Paul, A. and Crouch, M. (Eds) *Fashion Forward.* Oxford: Inter-Disciplinary Press, pp. 15–21. Available at: https://www.academia.edu/20383085/ (Accessed: 30 December 2023).

Negrin, L. (2023) 'Rei Kawakubo: Agent Provocateur in a Hyper-glamourized World', in: Butler, R. (Ed.) *Rei Kawakubo: For and Against Fashion.* London: Bloomsbury Visual Arts.

Reis, T. (2014) 'É possível hackear a existência?', *Flusser Studies*, 17, pp. 1–7. Available at: https://www.flusserstudies.net/sites/www.flusserstudies.net/files/media/attachments/thiago-reis-hackear-a-existencia.pdf (Accessed: 30 December 2023).

Saito, Y. (2023) 'Aesthetics of the Everyday', in: Zalta, E. N. and Nodelman, U. (Eds) *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy.* Available at: https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2023/entries/aesthetics-of-everyday/ (Accessed: 30 December 2023).

Steele, V. (2000) 'Fashion: Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow', in: White, N. and Griffiths, I. (Eds) *The Fashion Business.* Oxford, New York: Berg, pp. 7–20.

Vinken, B. (2023) 'The empire designs back', in: Butler, R. (ed.) *Rei Kawakubo: For and Against Fashion.* London: Bloomsbury Visual Arts, pp. 19–26.

Zborowska, A. (2015) 'Deconstruction in contemporary fashion design: Analysis and critique', *International Journal of Fashion Studies*, 2(2), pp. 185–201. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1386/infs.2.2.185_1 (Accessed: 30 December 2023).

Luciana Nunes Nacif
Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais
Av. Pres. Antônio Carlos, 6627 - Pampulha
Belo Horizonte - MG, 31270-901
Brazil
nacif.lu@gmail.com

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.10501361