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Outskirt: The skirt as a queer object

ABSTRACT

The queer thought supports identities that blur the boundaries between social categories, blending them through different hybrids. In this article, the queer involvement with the subject world is projected on the world of objects, focusing on clothing objects. Unlike the tight, western wardrobe organized in an upright logic, the skirt is an object with diverse, free and hybrid possibilities for cultural definition, calling upon a discussion for identity aspects. These are embodied in the possibilities for identity performance while presenting protection and concealment or as self-expression and exposure. In this article, the view on the skirt is paused, creating de-automatization in its regard; the article examines the skirt's material qualities using 'anthropology of the object', in which the material aspects are examined while considering its history understanding its sociological and cultural role. The article claims that the skirt's changing, contradictory and fluid characterizations mark it as a different, unusual dress in the modern wardrobe array. Therefore, it is a free and 'other' factor, the wardrobe's queer. The article states that it is an object containing diverse, free and hybrid possibilities for cultural definition, gender fluidity and the ability to undermine the binary division of wearable objects.

KEYWORDS

wardrobe
gender identity
object–subject
relationships
queer garment
androgynous object
masculinity

1. Many examples of a masculine skirt worn in the East and Asia were found, such as the Indian Dhoti, a sheet of fabric around the waist, and more.

INTRODUCTION

Queer: From a person to an object

The fundamental argument in queer theory is that subjects are all subordinated to queer instability, yet the dominant ideology forces them to submit to distinctive, tight and closed categories of masculinity and femininity. However, the existence of queer reveals that binary thinking is a forceful and arbitrary fiction. The queer does not stand as an inverse contrast to 'normal', heterosexual; in its stead, it presents a third option regarding the gendering work. This gendering work, seeking to define and sort the subjects, takes place for and through objects. Miller (2005) claims that objects are taken for granted, and it is easy to forget they were designed during history; hence they are powerful actors in the social field; they dictate behaviour, create an identity and are responsible for many aspects of human life. Latour (1993) seeks to restore the view to the objects. According to him, objects removal from the research discourse directly results from western culture's 'cleansing work', seeking to create order through division into distinct disciplines and clean acknowledgement areas of society and culture. The fundamental distinction created by the cleansing work is the division between 'human' and 'inhuman'. This division, argues Latour, ranks and creates a hierarchy. Thus, observing the world through separate binary categories and interpretive preoccupation with them placed the person (the White, western, male) at the top of the hierarchy and the object (the tangible, primitive, foreign and feminine) at the bottom.

The current study is part of a research movement reverting to the objects; it sees their actual and symbolic power, studies them and examines their role in society. Such a starting point for research complements queer thinking, allowing a broad picture of social and cultural space, eliminating hierarchies, including various actors. Queer thought supports identities based on blurring social categories and blending them. The different, unusual is a representation of a dynamic otherness undermining the centre's existence exposing the problematics of fundamental social concepts. Latour proposes the translation model to undermine these rigid social categories, underlying the understanding that the division of reality into distinct categories is not applicable or possible. The translation work allows observing the social field as a network, in which various types of creatures operate in a jumble and cannot fit in the dichotomous and binary categories offered by western culture.

Butler, one of the most significant thinkers of queer theory, calls for a reflexive conception of identity categories, which will be open to challengers and rewrites (1990). This concept takes into account identity hierarchies and historicity. Incorporating queer thought with the anthropological translation method is requested regarding the wardrobe and wearable objects, as fashion and the conventional clothing sectors formed since the Middle Ages force us to choose between strict masculinity and femininity categories. In western wardrobe logic, the skirt is found as a clothing item exclusively associated with the feminine. In western premodern and modern fashion,¹ no suggestion of a male skirt was found except for ethnic and folkloric displays such as the Scottish skirt. In historical gendering processes, which will be presented thereafter elaborately, the skirt's material qualities had become contradictory, elusive, of multi-meaning. Thereafter, this article will introduce how the skirt is formulated as a liminal, 'other' and queer object within a tight, clear and regulated garments logic. Postmodern fashion, as of the end of the last century, formulated several proposals for a male skirt, although they have not

yet become broad and acceptable, having the skirt to remain identified with femininity until it becomes metonymic to femininity. Thus, the skirt presents a challenging option for the existing order, points to queer instability and a third and hybrid option for clothing and the dressed body.

METHODOLOGY

This study commences with a brief overview of the object's history, desiring to bind material research with the queer approach to research. Therefore, the article introduces the object's historicity observing it with integrated tools; from the historical, the study moves to the skirt's ethnographic performing a close reading of it, as a text reading.

The material investigation asks why an object is a merit with value at a historical moment, observing the broad set of objects it relates to (El Or 2014). Latour (1993) states the object has an agency, desire, motive, generator and therefore there is a constant transformation between the object and the subject.² The object's agency undermines the accepted identification of active – person/passive – object, and thus, the social field is perceived as a hybrid space in which various types of complex beings coexist. Thus, western conception hierarchically distinguishes between spirit and material is challenged, objecting only to semiotic reference to the material (Miller 2005; Hicks 2010).

Fashion study examines the relationship between form and material and the broad social context. The garment is materiality attached to the body and is therefore linked to identity. Still, the garment holds dual qualities; on the one hand, it is external and separated from the person, and on the other hand, it holds a unifying intimate relationship with the body. Therefore, the garment-related research should commence with the material itself and proceed to what is external to its simple definition (Miller 2005). Therefore, it allows for a holistic and contextual understanding of the garment's intrinsic value, alongside the effect objects and shapes have on society (Conkey 2006). As a result, the ethnography on the skirt, seeking to explore its queer qualities, should appropriately begin with the object's history and material, cultural and fashion development.

The historicity of the skirt

The skirt is one of the oldest, most varied and prolonged forms of clothing. Throughout its existence, the skirt was and still is a gendered object. From ancient times to the end of the Middle Ages, the skirt was a simple male clothing item, generally characterized by a wide and short cut (between the knee line and the loin area). Thus, although intended for genitalia protection and concealment, and reproduction, the skirt also dealt with exposure and highlight of the male leg, marking and symbolizing male strength and valour as a form of hyper-masculinity. Warriors' dress choice was usually practical for the ultimate execution of the fighting action (Windrow 2015). And thus, the skirt's primary³ use was found documented as worn mainly by various warriors. The warrior male body was designed as a high-endurant forged body that can cope with dangers and harsh natural conditions and face the fear of death (Du Picq [1920] 2005). Thus, the skirt's upper line separated and marked the border between the warrior body's rational part and its animalistic one. Therefore, throughout history, the skirt status has been maintained as a clothing item validating increased masculinity.

2. When a person holds a gun, for example, a hybrid is created consisting of both, so it cannot be said that a gun does not kill.
3. In non-western cultures, the skirt was also worn by women but usually as an under garment, mainly for the purposes of modesty and warming.

4. The oldest trouser-shaped garment is found on mummies in western China and dates back to the tenth- to thirteenth-centuries BC, made of wool, with straight legs and wide crotches (Payne 1965).
5. Scythians, Sarmatians, Suggians, Bactrians and Armenians.
6. Two types of trousers have become common in Rome: *Feminalia*, which closed in the middle of the shin, and the loose *Braccae*, which closed at the ankles.
7. Erectility, and the standing on both legs, led to the development of brain structure and intellectual abilities, thus creating a distinction between the human and the inhuman. Western man, according to Ingold, sees himself as marching on his own two feet towards progress, with the waistline marking the boundary between the lower half of nature and the upper half that exists above it. According to him, as mankind ceases to perceive itself as superior and controlling the animal kingdom, it will be able to obscure the complete separation between culture and nature that is also expressed in the body itself.

In Europe's early Middle Ages, the skirt was a permanent and necessary clothing item for soldiers from the entire combat array. Fighters wore skirts made of leather, iron, tin, cotton and linen. Knights' armour had a metal skirt covering the straps connecting the iron legs to the chest area (Tortora 2014: 11). The skirt was a clothing item marking status and a role in the male dress repertoire existing alongside other common clothing items in this wardrobe. One of them, which eventually became the standard male attire in the West and a symbol of modern masculinity, is the trousers. The first trousers⁴ were found documented in rock carvings in the works of the Persepolis from the sixth century BC (Payne 1965). During this period, eastern peoples⁵ were known for wearing pants on a standard basis and by both sexes (Nelson 2004). In ancient Greece, trousers were perceived as a ridiculously poor clothing item associated with eastern cultures; hence, they were not worn.

The Roman Republic similarly distinguished East and West, distinguishing the Greek and Minoan culture clothes as a symbol of progress and trousers as a sign of lack of culture (Laver [1995] 2010). Nevertheless, as the Roman Empire expanded beyond the Mediterranean basin, trousers entered the Roman clothing repertoire,⁶ gradually becoming popular and common, usually worn as undergarments under a skirt or tunic. The earth's cooling, beginning the fourteenth century reaching its peak in the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries (Mann et al. 2009), known as the 'Little Ice Age', contributed to establishing the trousers as a necessary clothing item for men and warriors.

The skirt gradually became a feminine complex clothing item from the mid-Middle Ages, versatile and varied. The female skirts were very long, loaded with fabric and heavy, with multiple layers and underwear structures. In its female incarnation, the skirt is an open clothing item that prevents the female body from activities and body presentations that may expose it and therefore causes physical restriction and movement narrowing. In its male incarnation, this material fact contributed precisely to an increased movement and emphasized the male body's animalistic element and his being part of nature in the service of its kind.

The person in western culture, states Ingold (2004), is perceived as a divided creature; his upper body being cultural and developed and the lower part being material, natural and primitive. The evolutionary upright posture⁷ marks the waist as the area dividing the body in two: top and bottom. The top carries the human abilities distinguishing between man and the other creatures in nature, allowing him to control them. In contrast, the lower body, where the genitals, excrement organs and legs are located, functions rawly and underdeveloped and is perceived to be bound by animalistic sides, instincts and dirt. Thus, the loins area's availability characterized the skirt-wearing man as animalistic, natural and instinctive. With modernity development, towards the end of the Middle Ages and early modern times, animalism disappeared from western culture as a cultural characteristic holding power and class values. Thus, the skirt's affiliation to the feminine reinforces the qualities of naturalness and materiality assimilated into the female body and femininity as an underdeveloped form of the human subject compared to the male, and it is distinctive and hierarchic.

THE GARMENT AND GENDER IDENTITY

The gender division in clothing is an inherent part of the modern fashion system; the garment is the gender itself. We activate gender through what we

wear (Bide 2017). Emanating from fashion being about shaping the body's figure, wrapping and packaging it, creating a buffer between the body and its exterior (Taragan 2010), claims that the figure allegedly deals with the issue of adapting the garment to the body through a series of quantitative data (length, perimeter, boundaries and dimensions). However, exploring the pattern details reveals complex attitudes of the cut towards the body, regarding areas that must be emphasized and concealed and the type of presence the body must present. The garment, therefore, is an orderly system expressing a defined attitude towards the body according to changing cultural parameters. Thus, it can be concluded that fashion deals with body definition and its cultural significance: body eroticization, gendering, disciplining, regulating and more (Celant 1997).

Various feminist and queer theorists (such as Kosofsky-Sedgwick 1990; Butler 1990, 1993; Alexander 1993; Irigaray [1977] 1985, [1990] 1993; Halberstam 2005, and others) identify the body as organized according to gender categories that are perceived as natural, essential and determined. The body, in their view, is an arena on which social power is exerted. Butler (1990) argues that the body is shaped via a discourse based on forced repetitiveness of disciplined norms governing body representation; thus, the subject identity is the consequence. She relies on Foucault's (1997) work, where social law merges with the body, making it a subject holding an essence.

The clothing system is a given cultural sign system creating a branched network (Barthes [1967] 1983), containing emotional, imaginary, sexual and other signs, in which we mark ourselves, settle into space, thus building our identity. The skirt, as many clothing items, defines the body, shapes and marks it. It is a garment that deals with halving, cutting, separating, dividing and reunifying physical categories. The word 'skirt' – as a verb and a noun originates from creating a border or edge as the dictionary definition: 'The border, rim, boundary or outlying part of anything' (*Oxford Dictionary of English* 2015: n.pag.). The skirt's location on the waist hence dividing the body, transforms it into a borderline garment that preserves physical boundaries and cultural taboos.

An open garment, the skirt calls upon boundaries examination and challenges them. In its female incarnation, the skirt's opening is a part of the body's objectification mechanism, a tool for suppressing it and narrowing its movement range. The availability of genitalia regulates the entire body as available and marks the body itself as open. Bourdieu ([1998] 2002) argues that the patterns structuring the sexual organs perception also apply to the body itself; the belt indicates the boundary between them. In the feminine case, he states that the belt is a symbolic boundary between the pure and the impure as it symbolizes the 'holy barrier', which protects the vagina (which is established in culture as a fetish and taboo) that is perceived as a sacred object and is subject to the rules of avoidance or access. The skirt's belt, which refers to the waist area, marks and symbolizes the border. The skirt's length perpetuates its lower opening, which symbolizes the female genitalia and vaginal opening. Thus, although the skirt divides the male and female body similarly, cultural regulation reasons the body parts to be deciphered in terms of pure, impure, breached, modest and sacred.

Since the development of dressmaking and premodern fashion, from the fourteenth century (Marzel 2016) to the present day, very few men wore skirts in the West, and trousers have become identified with masculinity. It should be noted that women (and men) for a long time and, very regularly, wore

8. For example, the jeans that also became feminine only after about forty years of their birth.
9. According to MacQueen Douglas (1914), the English attributed cultural arrears to Scots because of the use of kilt.

trousers under the skirts, which were characterized as basic-cut underwear (this form of clothing still exists in many cultures). It was Coco Chanel who formalized trousers as a feminine clothing item. Until then, women wore trousers, yet without a fashion stamp and cultural regulation. Women wearing trousers were perceived as masculine and suspected of homosexuality. Today, trousers are customary in the female wardrobe. Women in trousers do not obscure the visual distinction between the genders, and many female trousers cuts are fundamentally different from male trousers.⁸ Nevertheless, this is not the idea of men in skirts; wearing a skirt (by a man) obscures the visual distinction between the genders, contradicts the way men are expected to look and mainly opposes the ideal social attributes for male behaviour. Over the past four decades, the various suggestions of postmodern fashion for a male skirt have not become acceptable and remain esoteric and marginalized.

The differences resulting from the skirt gendering as feminine have transformed it into an object that produces a meaning multiplicity: it is modest but also tempting, hides yet inviting, blurs but makes present, restricts movement but also allows it. This multiplicity of meanings and contradictions marks the skirt as an ambiguous and anomalous object. Douglas (1966) states that society tends to attribute danger to double and anomalous situations. Therefore, the skirt's contradictory conceptualizations transform the body wearing it mysterious and threatening, characterizing the skirt as an object of danger and threat. On the one hand, the body is associated with the prohibited, sacred and exalted, while on the other hand, with adventure, mystery, the scary and unknown. Thus, the skirt makes the body's appearance uncanny, characterizing the wearer herself with duplicity and anomaly.

QUEER: SKIRT: ANTHROPOLOGY OF THE OBJECT

The skirt is exceptional, amorphous and fluid in the array of clothing items, establishing the modern wardrobe such as trousers, jacket and shirt. It is an object challenging physical regulation as it hangs on the body's centre, but unlike trousers, which also divide the body, the skirt is open, producing a space where the body movement occurs in a concealed way. Trousers are formulated in the upright logic organizing the binary and hierarchical division between rational and animalistic and nature and culture.⁹ Unlike the skirt, they cannot swing, shake, spread out and fly upwards, discovering the organs they cover and causing unclear physical movements. Trousers are a clear, closed and vertical clothing object; therefore, they are identified with rationality, stability and efficiency that have become the fundamental qualities of the heterosexual masculinity ideal (Bolton 2003). Indeed, since the end of the nineteenth century, trousers have become a symbol and metonymy of masculinity. Thus, the male body's image became impenetrable via the trousers that became vertical, tight and closed. Additionally, trousers emphasized the loin area, thus organizing the sexual and animalistic area into a clear shape, marking the wearer above the natural and governing it.

Although having amorphous characteristics, tunic and dress are regulated according to the body line, wrapping it wholly and continuously corresponding to the contour logic, sometimes as a logical continuation of a shirt. Additionally, the top of the dress constitutes the regulated foundation for the lower skirt part (which is what it is called in the cut's structure) hang and is held on to it.

The term 'queer' functioned as a linguistic practice involving disgracing (Butler 1990), placing the subject with a perpetual hegemonic cultural

accusation. Starting in the late Middle Ages, the skirt, the queer object, has also been associated with dishonouring taboos. However, the skirt quote requires us (and, as Butler argues, towards the term 'queer') to return to its constituent historicity. Thus, the skirt exposes the performance dimension revealing the array of cultural practices by its very existence. The skirt history clarifies that its forced quote as 'feminine', as a motion limiter, and a modest or seductive garment, is transient. Its politics reflect the Butlerian assumption that performative utterance success is always transient because it echoes the previous action and gains its power from citing a previous set of authoritarian practices. Just as the term queer presents a new, intermediate cultural option for the subject, the skirt presents a fluid, and liminal option for the object. The biography of this particular garment allows for a new cultural reading intended for the act of dressing, wardrobe, the dressed body and subjects.

'Is not the most erotic place in the body where the garment opens?' asks Barthes (1973: n.pag.), turning the gaze to the openings of the clothes. The opening is the organizing structural and design component in the skirt's technical specifications. Its upper entrance positions the belt attached to the waist area, above or below it. In the skirt's technical layout, the belt marks and symbolizes the border. Douglas (1966) states that the body's boundaries are established via the culture, loading them with meanings of purity and danger; it is achieved through movement discipline within the body's boundaries using definitions, taboo assertions and prohibitions. Furthermore, Butler (1990) states that the body's boundaries are based on rigid definitions of penetrable and impenetrable physical sites created by erotically marking certain parts of the body and not marking other parts. This marking is the product of taboo prints that control the body's openings and discipline the movement within them. The skirt is a clothing item validated through its technical properties, the potential of penetration and high physical availability. Thus, it appears to examine real, symbolic and conscious boundaries within society and culture.

The queer body marks the lack of supervision within the body's boundaries and unlimited physical openness. It is a dynamic body in constant metamorphosis, rising out of itself and breaking its boundaries. In the face of the hegemonic closed body, the queer body stands on its own¹⁰ as an open and unfinished body blurring differences and boundaries. Meanwhile, it represents a free world, devoid of defined boundaries, rigid and dichotomic hierarchies and acceptable binary distinctions. Law and order are transformed into an eclectic, heterogeneous and disorganized reality. The skirt, the queer of objects, emphasizes the openings and thus is characterized as an unfinished object. In the array of closed and culturally arranged garments based on well-organized materiality, the skirt constitutes a dynamic, blurry, odd and unusual object based on the opening, maintaining it as a leading principle. It challenges rigid and orderly distinctions and is a new, free and dynamic option for the object world.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

The queer thought seeks to enable a hybrid space devoid of hierarchies through an identity existence that is not absolute, involved and open. Similarly, material research aims to eliminate the built-in hierarchy between subjects and objects and establish a decentralized and entirely mixed space while emphasizing mutual and egalitarian relationships. Using the experience of connection between human and object, the gap between emotion and intellect,

10. As Elias ([1939] 2000) describes the historical process by which the human body was closed and Homo Clausus was created.

abstract and concrete, and thought and matter, is eliminated. The garment's intimacy with the human and its experience as a 'second skin' undermines the old diagnosis of object–subject relationships. The skirt case, within the repertoire of dress objects in the western wardrobe, is a unique case study; the skirt divides the body in two, marks the lower part from the waist down, obscures the legs' division, thus uniting it. This determination is essential for observing the skirt as a borderline object producing, defining and maintaining physical boundaries. As it is an amorphous and vague clothing object, the skirt constantly claims the existence of an open and hybrid cultural space. On the one hand, it is perceived as an object challenging physical regulation; it is open and allows freedom of movement, creating a space within which the body's movement occurs in a concealed manner. On the other hand, being an open clothing item helps regulate the genitals as available and possible, as present in an accessible manner. Consequently, it is characterized as an object that destabilizes and evokes otherness.

Queer identity retains its critical power by highlighting its casual, occasional nature, subjected to a constant historicization. The skirt's changing characterizations throughout human history are contradictory and fluid, and as such, they mark it as a liminal and inter-gender object. The skirt has been distinctly feminine for many centuries, but its repeated quote as feminine relies on its historicity as masculine. Therefore, being non-essentialistic, the skirt undercuts the gender distinction in clothing, exposing the cultural infrastructure that organizes gender.

The skirt is still formulated as an object proclaiming acceptance from the social judgement of 'normative femininity' by wearing it. Worn by men, it declares the wearer as nonconformist, opposing to social law and nonnormative. Thus, it is possible to identify the skirt's ability to challenge the separation and binary division of wearable objects, enable gender fluidity, thus make a new and different gender proposal. The link between fashion and society enables the dichotomies of insights relating to society and materiality to be eliminated, deepening the understanding that social relationships are built and formed through their use of materials and objects. Discussing a skirt as a queer object contributes to expanding the discussion of an object within thematic and semantic fields of gender, such as sexuality, sensuality, seduction, representation, power and discipline. This clarification, underlying the understanding that the human process is based within the material, closely bound in it, reveals the skirt's act as a cultural, social agent and an artefact defined in this study as a queer object, hence free. Human queer – the queer subject – is the next human stage; it presents a new possibility for human culture. Respectively, the queer object – the skirt – presents a chance for a new alternative cultural reading for the world of objects, changing human culture itself.

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