

Carrier, field, homogeneity: the construction of contemporary narrative fashion silhouettes

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Abstract. Based on Merleau-Ponty's body phenomenology and drawing on Bifei Cao's three-dimensional framework of "carrier, field, homogeneity", this paper systematically explores the narrative construction of contemporary fashion silhouettes. The research shows that: in the carrier dimension, fashion silhouettes become media of bodily perception and carriers of spiritual extension through perceptual intervention and cognitive reconstruction, realizing the narrative sublimation from individual perception to the spirit of the times; in the field dimension, silhouettes coexist dynamically in the fields of brand, exhibition and socio-culture, intertwining to form a temporal-spatial narrative system; in the homogeneity dimension, relying on embodied design and digital media, silhouettes break the boundary between clothing and body, and realize the symbiotic shift from external attachment to bodily extension. As a composite visual medium of bodily perception, spatial narrative and cultural spirit, contemporary narrative silhouettes provide theoretical perspectives and practical paths for the contemporary translation of traditional aesthetics and the construction of local design culture.

Keywords: fashion silhouette, body phenomenology, fashion design

1. Introduction

Fashion silhouette is the first visual language that defines the overall form and style of clothing, and its evolution has always been influenced by the aesthetics of the times, social trends, traditional culture and so on. Traditional fashion silhouettes mostly follow the laws of formal beauty, focusing on the distinction of basic outer silhouettes such as H-line, A-line, X-line, O-line, T-line and so on, which changes are mainly reflected in the expansion or contraction of key parts such as shoulders, waist, hips and hem, and the core focuses on body shaping, proportion optimization and style shaping [1]. At this stage, silhouette is regarded as an external modification attached to the human body, and its active functions of intervening in bodily perception, reconstructing the spatial relationship of clothing and carrying cultural narratives have not received sufficient attention.

Driven by postmodern trends of thought and body philosophy, fashion design has gradually broken through the inherent cognition that "clothing is attached to the body", and turned to the exploration of the expanded space of clothing. The French philosopher Merleau-Ponty's theory of body phenomenology emphasizes that the body is not a passive object of perception, but a subject that actively constructs the world and expresses

consciousness, which completely subverts the traditional mind-body dualism [2]. Translating this philosophical thought into the context of fashion, the fashion silhouette is not only a medium for the body's outward display, but also an expression of spiritual externalization. Rei Kawakubo has repeatedly broken the inherent contour of the human body with deconstructive silhouettes to reconstruct bodily cognition; Issey Miyake focuses on the exploration of the space between clothing and the body, emphasizing the freedom of bodily perception; Iris van Herpen realizes the embedded symbiosis between the body and structural silhouettes with bionic silhouettes. Digital virtual silhouettes dissolve the boundaries of the garment body, among other innovations. These designs take silhouette as a narrative medium, carrying individual consciousness, contemporary issues and cultural spirit. In addition, as the most intuitive carrier of brand DNA and a creative visual symbol, fashion silhouette has become a key carrier connecting design, cultural expression and business strategy, promoting the in-depth expression of silhouette towards narration and cultural translation.

To sum up, silhouette is the first visual language that defines the form of clothing, and a comprehensive narrative medium connecting the body, design, spirit, culture and business. However, most existing theoretical studies on fashion silhouettes regard them as wrappings of the body or constituent elements of visual forms, and seldom analyze how silhouettes participate in the reconstruction of the human-clothing-space relationship from the dimension of body phenomenology. Based on this, this paper attempts to analyze the following core issues: From the perspective of body phenomenology, how do contemporary narrative fashion silhouettes reconstruct the human clothing space relationship across the three dimensions of carrier, field, and homogeneity? How can silhouette transcend simple material wrapping and become an external extension of the body and a medium of spiritual expression? How can silhouette achieve multidimensional expansion in physical exhibition spaces, socio-cultural contexts and perceptual experience fields, thereby reconstructing viewing relationships and theatrical narratives? Under the design trend of digital and virtual integration, how does silhouette shift from "people wearing clothes" to "clothes recognizing people", and realize the interactive construction of embodied design and virtual identity?

2. Carrier: bodily externalization and spiritual extension of fashion silhouettes

In the "carrier" dimension, fashion silhouettes first shape the body and regulate bodily senses in a materialized form, becoming a visual interface for individual inner perception and self-consciousness to output outward. Secondly, silhouette can define and reshape the perceptual boundary of the body, thereby changing the public's cognitive perspective on body form. Therefore, fashion silhouette is by no means an external shape that simply wraps the body; it is not only the most intuitive visual externalization of the human body, but also an important medium that carries personal temperament, ideological concepts and the cultural spirit of the times, and realizes the expression of inner emotional sustenance and spiritual connotation extension.

Fashion silhouette is not an external decoration attached to the body, but an active medium that intervenes in perception and reconstructs cognition. In the Spring/Summer 1997 collection *Body Meets Dress, Dress Meets Body*, Rei Kawakubo became a model of fashion reconstructing bodily cognition with subversive silhouette design, as shown in Figure 1. Different from traditional silhouettes that shape a standardized perfect figure by cinching the waist, she uses design techniques such as exaggeration, distortion, deconstruction and filling to fill irregular bulges inside the garment body, deliberately creating alienated and unconventional abnormal body forms, so that the wearer's body presents a visual effect of being reshaped and twisted by the internal structure. This design is not the modification and beautification of the ideal body type, but the questioning, breaking and reconstruction of the standardized body paradigm under secular aesthetics. From the

perspective of body phenomenology, this unconventional silhouette acts as a "mirror medium" for bodily cognition—what the wearer sees in the mirror is no longer a familiar and regular self-body, but a strange and alternative body form that truly belongs to the self. This double defamiliarization of vision and body sensation breaks people's solidified bodily cognition and forces individuals to re-perceive the existence boundary and real state of their own bodies [1]. As Rei Kawakubo said: "What I am interested in is how clothing becomes a part of the body, rather than letting the body adapt to clothing".

As the visual carrier and expression medium of clothing, fashion silhouette carries the specific spiritual core and cultural meaning of the wearer or creator. Viktor & Rolf's Spring/Summer 2023 Haute Couture collection breaks the usual connection between clothing and the body with "anti-gravity dresses": the hems float outside the body, cross the torso, and are even worn in a completely inverted way. These abnormal dressing forms cut off the synchronization of vision and body sensation, disintegrate the complete body sensation brought by "putting on clothes", and force people to realize that the boundary of the body is not naturally fixed, but continuously constructed in the interaction with clothing (Figure 2); in Rei Kawakubo's Spring/Summer 2025 collection *Uncertain Future* (Figure 3), silhouette becomes a narrative visual medium for designers to reflect on the times, convey spirits and express attitudes. With air, ruins and refugee camps as the core visual symbols, the collection adopts light, transparent and highly sculptural silhouettes, breaking the conventional human body adaptation form, and metaphorizing the current situation of the turbulent world, unknown future and survival struggle. Silhouette is no longer limited to individual perception, but carries the anxiety of the times, conveys the hope of seeking, and expresses the resilience of survival, extending individual spirit to public issues and realizing the narrative of the times. Through deconstructive silhouettes, the designer reshapes the perceptual relationship between the human body and space, and conveys the pursuit of the future, the adherence to hope and the reverence for survival in the chaotic contemporary context. Just like its creative concept: "I am not only making clothes, but also creating a world", silhouette thus becomes an important visual carrier for reflecting on the times, outputting spirits and conveying attitudes.



Figure 1. Comme des Garçons Spring/Summer 1997 runway



Figure 2. Viktor & Rolf "anti-gravity dresses"



Figure 3. Comme des Garçons Spring/Summer 2025 collection *Uncertain Future*

Cultural bearing is another core dimension of the spiritual extension of silhouette. The morphological difference between Chinese and Western traditional silhouettes is essentially the externalization of the core of cultural spirit: ancient Western costumes highlight gender characteristics with shaping silhouettes, which is in line with humanist thought; ancient Chinese traditional costumes are mainly characterized by wide robes and large sleeves and loose silhouettes, which are restrained and inclusive without deliberate body shaping, conforming to the cultural concepts of Confucianism and Taoism such as the golden mean, nature and the unity of man and nature. Contemporary narrative silhouettes continue this cultural narrative logic, carrying cultural spirits, conveying cultural connotations and realizing cultural translation with silhouettes. For example, Uma Wang's Chinese deconstructive silhouettes extract elements such as wide robes, cross collars and oblique plackets from Hanfu, and integrate modern deconstruction techniques to convey the Chinese cultural spirit of restraint, implication and tolerance; ZHUCHONGYUN insists on taking the Oriental spiritual core as creative inspiration, presenting the natural beauty of women, establishing ideological art with minimalist silhouettes integrated with Oriental blank aesthetics, sharing life philosophy and conveying contemporary aesthetic attitudes. Silhouette thus becomes a cultural symbol, narrative medium and translation carrier, realizing the contemporary expression of cultural spirit.

3. Field: multidimensional expansion and temporal-spatial reconstruction of fashion silhouettes

Field is the integration of body, silhouette, time and space. In *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty proposed that the body is the subject of perception and the only medium for people to establish contact with

time, space and the world [2]. French sociologist Bourdieu further put forward the field theory, holding that field is a dynamic space composed of social relations, with its own rules, aesthetics and cultural logic.

3.1. Brand field

Silhouette narrative is the cultural core of the brand field. As the most intuitive visual carrier of brand DNA, silhouette is the translation of brand culture, design language and aesthetic concepts. Contemporary avant-garde brands establish brand identity, convey brand spirit and construct brand narrative through iconic silhouettes, and silhouette becomes the carrier of brand identity, cultural symbol and narrative. Traditional brands adapt to the rules, aesthetics and culture of different social fields at present through the morphological innovation of silhouettes and the expression of temporal-spatial narrative. The iteration and innovation of brand silhouettes need to inherit the brand core, adapt to the contemporary context, and continue the narrative logic, so as to realize the dynamic symbiosis of brand culture. For example, Cristóbal Balenciaga, the founder of Balenciaga, took architectural, sculptural and minimalist silhouettes as the core, breaking the soft curves of the human body, shaping a tough, straight and minimalist female image, and conveying the independent, tenacious and avant-garde brand spirit. The new creative director Pierpaolo Piccioli continues the brand core, reshapes the classic Ballon dress silhouette with the upgraded "Neo Gazar" fabric, retains the architectural contour, softens the tough lines, balances avant-garde and softness, and realizes the contemporary translation of brand DNA. The silhouette not only continues the brand's iconic architectural aesthetics, but also adapts to the aesthetics of contemporary women, becoming the visual continuation of the brand spirit and the contemporary extension of the narrative logic; Dior's classic Bar Jacket takes the hourglass silhouette, waist-cinching design and soft elements as the core, reshaping the feminine temperament of post-war women and conveying the elegant, romantic and luxurious brand spirit. After Jonathan Anderson became the creative director, he softened the silhouette of the Bar Jacket, weakened the waist cinching, integrated minimalist elements, and reshaped the hourglass waistline with Donegal tweed and bow shapes, retaining the elegant core, integrating modern simplicity, adapting to the contemporary context, and realizing the dynamic iteration of brand culture. Silhouette becomes the contemporary translation of brand aesthetics and the continuous innovation of narrative logic. While inheriting the brand core, it adapts to the aesthetics of the times and realizes the dynamic symbiosis of the brand field. Many other designers use silhouette narrative to complete the modern translation of brand DNA: for example, Alaïa's Pictor Mulier creates a "cocoon"-like wrapping feeling through Chinese-style jackets, elastic jumpsuits and T-shaped umbrella skirts; Nicolas DiFelice of Courrèges starts from the actual demand of "being dazzled by sunlight" and creates a futuristic silhouette with a high covering face; Duran Lantink revived Jean Paul Gaultier's cone bra with padded shaping methods. In addition, Thom Browne, Rei Kawakubo and the new generation designer Daniel del Valle are all extending the boundaries of silhouettes in their own ways. Silhouette is the most intuitive carrier of brand DNA; it also reflects a deeper cultural turn.

3.2. Exhibition field

The exhibition field is the spatial extension field and viewing relationship field of silhouettes, covering diverse scenes such as runways, exhibitions, window displays and public spaces. Borrowing Merleau-Ponty's concept of "body schema": when a person holds a blind cane, the cane is no longer an external object, but becomes part of the body schema, extending the tactile radius [3]. Similarly, once a fashion silhouette is put on, it forms a complex with the body: the silhouette changes the way the body occupies space, moves, views and interacts with the environment, the body's dynamic perception of its own boundaries is fully mobilized, and the wearer

needs to determine the final form of the silhouette in real time according to movements, occasions and even emotions.

Yoshiki Hishinuma's 1986 "kite garments" use wind power to create light and transparent silhouettes, compressing the human body into the visual center, while the silhouette extends into the spatial subject, subverting the master-slave relationship between the body and clothing—the silhouette no longer attaches to or disciplines the body, but becomes the dominant element in space, and the human body becomes a "mounted accessory" (Figure 4). Silhouette is no longer a wrapping of the body, but actively "invites" the body to explore, activates the wearer's dynamic perception, and reconstructs the relationship between the body and space. Just as Issey Miyake said: "What I pursue is not the shape of clothing, but the gap between clothing and the body" [3]. Undercover's Spring/Summer 2024 *Deep Mist* collection transforms silhouette itself into a narrative medium: the dress composed of luminous ecological bottles contains fresh flowers and live butterflies, making clothing a wearable exhibition field and viewing focus, thus strengthening the theatrical narrative tension (Figure 5). In Viktor & Rolf's Autumn/Winter 2015 Haute Couture collection (Figure 6) "wearable paintings", models wear huge flat picture frame silhouettes, eliminating the three-dimensional sense of the human body and replacing it with two-dimensional painting forms, forcing the audience to view the body in the way of gazing at paintings. Viktor & Rolf once stated: "We want to question the boundary between clothing and art" [4].



Figure 4. 1986 Yoshiki Hishinuma "kite garments"



Figure 5. Undercover Spring/Summer 2024 *Deep Mist*



Figure 6. Viktor & Rolf "wearable paintings"

3.3. Socio-cultural field

Silhouette narrative needs to take root in culture, respond to the times, convey spirits, and realize cultural translation and spiritual transmission. The core of Bauhaus spirit is to reconstruct the boundary between art and life with geometric order. In the *Triadic Ballet* series, artist Oskar Schlemmer abandoned the soft silhouette of traditional ballet, reconstructed the human body with cylinders, discs and other geometries, and created expanded silhouettes with spheres and dots, weakening gender characteristics. Dancers wear three-dimensional geometric costumes and masks, and their movements are limited within the mechanical silhouette. The silhouette no longer emphasizes the curves of the human body, but a spatial form extending outward, so as to explore the existence state of people in the mechanical order and reflect Bauhaus's thinking on rationality and mechanical order in the industrial age.



Figure 7. Oskar Schlemmer's *Triadic Ballet* (front) / Ursula Sax's *Geometric Ballet* (back)

In contemporary times, Ursula Sax's "*Geometric Ballet*" pays tribute to Schlemmer. Its "dance sculpture" silhouette uses flexible materials such as felt and light fabrics to shape rounded cones, geometric blocks and expandable "air silhouettes", combining clothing with sculpture, movement, dance, drama and music. Silhouette is no longer a cage that restricts the body, but an extended carrier for dancers' movements: the fabric flows with movements, and the inflatable silhouette rises and falls with breathing, forming a dynamic symbiosis between geometric forms and human body movements. This work continues the Bauhaus spirit of "art intervening in life", while abandoning the mechanical coldness of the industrial age, injecting humanistic temperature with flexible materials and dynamic silhouettes, realizing the dialogue between Bauhaus

"rationalism" and contemporary "humanistic care", and completing the contemporary translation of Bauhaus spirit (Figure 7).

4. Homogeneity: embodied design and virtual integration of fashion silhouettes

Embodied design advocates that silhouettes deeply fit the body and adapt to the dynamics of the body, and clothing actively participates in the construction of body form, becoming the extension and native symbiont of the body [5]. In the runway show of Coperni's Spring/Summer 2023 collection (Figure 8), the show abandoned conventional processes such as pre-made patterns and cutting and sewing, and relied on Fabrican spray-on fabric technology to directly spray and form on the naked body of models. The liquid fabric naturally adheres and solidifies with the human body posture, completely replicating the body texture, fitting the dynamics and generating natively. The silhouette has no pre-made pattern and no cutting trace, and "grows" naturally from the body, integrating with the body seamlessly, breaking the boundary between clothing and body, and realizing the same origin and native symbiosis of clothing and body. As the designer said: "Clothing is no longer made, but born from the body". In addition, silhouette design relying on technological implants such as native human materials and bionic bone structures is a further exploration of embodied design. Iris van Herpen's Autumn/Winter 2011 Haute Couture *Skeleton* collection (Figure 9) uses 3D printing technology to replicate the texture and mechanical structure of human bones, and is spliced with 208 bionic bone components to create a rigid silhouette that fits the human torso, spine and limbs. The silhouette simulates the native support structure of the human body, just like the external bone armor of the human body, which fully adapts to the biomechanical form of the body, realizes the embedded symbiosis between silhouette and the body at the structural level, and transforms clothing from external fabric into the extension of body structure.



Figure 8. Coperni Spring/Summer 2023 collection



Figure 9. Iris van Herpen 2011 *Skeleton*

In *The Visible and the Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty put forward the concept of "flesh". He pointed out that flesh is neither matter, spirit nor entity, but "the element of the world", that is, the matrix of all beings [5]. In the digital virtual metaverse, clothing and the body no longer belong to independent entities, but are composed of the same "flesh". Silhouette and the body share the same matrix at the digital level, and technological intervention makes the two tend to symbiosis and integration. Digital virtual silhouettes have no physical material and no fixed form. They dynamically adapt, deform instantly and extend freely with the dynamics of the digital body, realizing the integration of clothing and body and the homogeneity of "flesh" [6]. ANNAKIKI's Autumn/Winter 2022 NFT cyborg virtual collection focuses on cyborg and human-machine symbiosis. The virtual silhouette dynamically adapts and extends freely with the skeletal movement and limb posture of the digital body, without pattern constraints and material barriers. The silhouette becomes an organic extension of the digital body, interpreting the homogeneous relationship of clothing-body integration in the post-human context (Figure 10). Geenee AR presents real-time generative AI video technology through its Magic Mirror system. This technology can reconstruct scenes, clothing and virtual elements in real time according to natural language instructions in live broadcast scenarios; its real-time generated virtual clothing system (Figure 11) built on full-body tracking and AI generation technology can calculate exclusive clothing in real time according to the real person's body posture and movement trajectory—the clothing silhouette deforms instantly with body movement and updates synchronously with the perception state, truly realizing "homogeneity". Virtual fitting technology breaks the time and space constraints of the real world, allowing people to change clothes freely anytime and anywhere. In the metaverse, designers can create avant-garde fashions that cannot be realized in reality with their imagination, breaking through physical limitations and releasing creativity. Virtual clothing is no longer a static visual decoration, but a digital life form with perception ability, which can accurately capture the wearer's characteristics and movements. Fashion AI can

help consumers quickly choose more suitable clothing, and realize the transformation from "people wearing clothes" to "clothes recognizing people" through real-time rendering and interactive experience.



Figure 10. ANNAKIKI Autumn/Winter 2022 virtual clothing collection



Figure 11. Geence AR real-time generated virtual clothing

5. Conclusion

Based on Merleau-Ponty's body phenomenology, this paper discusses the construction of contemporary fashion silhouettes from the three dimensions of "carrier, field and homogeneity", and draws the following conclusions: In the carrier dimension, fashion silhouettes break through the traditional shaping function, become the medium of bodily perception and the carrier of spiritual extension, and realize the narrative sublimation from individual perception to the spirit of the times; in the field dimension, silhouettes complete

reconstruction through the three fields of brand, exhibition and socio-culture—as the visual translation of brand DNA in the brand field, as the carrier of spatial relationship reconstruction in the exhibition field, and bearing the interweaving and continuation of cultural time and space in the socio-cultural field; in the homogeneity dimension, relying on embodied design and digital media, silhouettes break the boundary between clothing and body, realize the embedded symbiosis of "flesh" and even the dissolution of virtual boundaries, and complete the shift from external attachment to bodily extension. This study provides a new interpretation from the perspective of body phenomenology for contemporary fashion silhouette research at the theoretical level, and provides new ideas for the contemporary translation design of traditional fashion silhouettes from the three dimensions of carrier perception construction, field brand reconstruction and homogeneous technology symbiosis at the practical level. Looking forward to the future, the researchers should further promote the in-depth integration of virtual fashion and generative artificial intelligence technology, encourage interdisciplinary research and algorithm innovation, and introduce a dynamic generation mechanism based on body schema and real-time biological signals, that is, instantly customize unique clothing conforming to the current narrative according to the user's language, facial expressions, emotional fluctuations, real-time actions and other information, so that the fashion silhouette can instantly respond to the user's current emotions, movements and intentions in each virtual wearing. Users can also independently generate virtual clothing silhouettes and produce physical objects in conjunction with 3D printing technology to complete the design closed loop from virtual to reality. At the same time, at the institutional level, it is necessary to improve the digital identity and privacy protection mechanism, promote virtual fashion to move from "visual replication" to "intelligent co-creation", so as to achieve a more extreme "homogeneous" symbiosis.

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