

Critically Analysing Responses to the Work of Andrej Pejic

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While androgyny is not a new trend in the high fashion industry, the model Andrej Pejic has received a lot of attention recently for his ability to model for both men's and women's clothing lines. The reaction to Pejic's work and appearance in British newspapers is especially interesting as it reveals how the British media is struggling to come to terms with the need to interact with transgender figures. While Pejic's appearance may be androgynous, the work which brought him to the attention of the mainstream press has not been his unisex modelling (which highlights his potential to visually reference both traditional genders) but his cross-dressing work (which focuses on his feminine potential). In light of this it seems odd that the term 'cross-dressing' is rarely used in tabloid media reports surrounding Pejic which instead seem to employ a vocabulary that suggests transsexuality. This interest is confirmed in an interview with *The Telegraph*, where Pejic circumnavigates a direct question concerning transsexuality by laughing and commenting that he would only consider a sex change for a Victoria's Secret contract. This comment was subsequently widely disseminated (often as the title of an article) in both the tabloids and the broadsheets, confirming the media tendency to fixate on the subject of the model's sexuality and to assume (or invent) a homosexual or transsexual identity (see Alexander). This is an assumption that is not endorsed by the model himself who repeatedly expresses surprise at the media interest in his sexuality and refusing to confirm rumours (Iannacci), an action that seems to have further heightened his association with sexual ambiguity. Taking this into account, this paper will not presume to examine Pejic as transsexual or psychologically androgynous but will examine the media reactions to a model that appears to aesthetically transcend gender.

The language used in British newspapers to designate and describe Pejic reveals a number of contradictions and reflects a number of key issues (objectification, generalisations, insensitivity) for which it criticises the fashion industry. This essay will use an analysis of the linguistics of reporting as a strand to connect several trends apparent in the representation of Pejic. The first issue is the foregrounding of Pejic's appearance either as a novelty or within the framework of the 'Size 0' debate where commentators adopt an ostensibly feminist framework to argue that the trend towards a thin, androgynous body neuters the gender of models in a negative manner. The second issue is commentators who use this stance as a platform to suggest that the cross-dressed gendered male is committing an act of violence by appropriating traditional female forms and trappings. This subtext of transphobia is closely connected to homophobic claims that gay designers are deliberately perpetuating an image that is detrimental to women as a direct result of their sexual preferences.

As Amanda Platell's article for the *Daily Mail* (entitled "Fashion's ultimate insult to women: the latest way of demeaning real women is a male model dressed as a girl") is one of the most blunt and controversial works on Andrej Pejic to date, I will focus my attention on this piece. This is not because it represents the most sensationalist or vitriolic spectrum of the debate but because its candidness reveals attitudes towards Pejic that are expressed more subtly in a range of other sources. This is not a quantitative survey of the press reaction to transgender models but rather an examination of some key trends in the reporting that highlight interesting issues. An analysis of the representation of Pejic in the mainstream British newspapers allows a number of wider issues to manifest such as anxieties concerning transgender individuals, gender essentialism and the power of the

fashion industry.

As previously noted, the attention Andrej Pejic has attracted in the mainstream British press tends to be framed in one of two distinct ways. Some articles seem simply to note how convincingly Pejic presents as a woman. The bluntly titled Dulcie Pearce article “Tran or Woman?” from the tabloid paper *The Sun* is an interesting example of this. While the paper is not noted either for its political correctness or its sensitivity to its subjects, the neologism “tran” (presumably because it helpfully rhymes with “man” and is reminiscent of the offensive but widely circulated term “tranny” used to describe cross-dressers) as an umbrella term to describe transgender individuals seems particularly excessive as it is so close to the more acceptable term “trans” (*Trans Media Watch*). The accompanying quiz where readers are invited to guess the “real” gender of the models reveals an essentialist attitude that fixates on the original biological sex of the sitter as proof of their identity. It also posits the reader as a default subject who is in a position to judge the ‘correct’ (original) gender of the individuals’ pictures. This presumption is highlighted by the wide range of individuals who are categorised using the unqualified term “tran” which include a male performer in drag and a male to female transsexual. Despite the fact that the quiz was presumably designed for entertainment value, there is a sense of pedantry in the way it is linked from the main article on Pejic. Through this detection quiz the *Sun* almost appears to be arming its readers against the possibility of accidentally being aroused by a non-genetic female by presenting them with images of scantily-clad, hyper-feminine people.

While *The Sun's* approach bears an uncomfortable resemblance to a right-wing freak show, more socially liberal papers show a similar trend. Carola Long's article for *The*

Independent entitled “And over to Paris for the menswear. Yes, really...” deviates from this trend by examining Pejic and Jean-Paul Gaultier's work in the James Bond themed menswear section of the Paris show and comments on the unconventional decision to associate an androgynous model with the hyper-masculine fictional spy. However, the title of the article capitalises on the same incredulous reaction to a non-heteronormative presentation of gender as the *Sun* article. Long focuses her attention on Pejic's most feminine costume, conjuring a decadent image of gold and fur which (combined with a somewhat romantic description of Pejic's Balkan background) exoticizes the model. Androgynous celebrities who rose to prominence in early 20th century America often bore signs of otherness that separated them from their intended audience. This can be seen in the highlighting of the 'exotic' European accents of Marlene Dietrich and Greta Garbo or the outlandish costuming of Louise Brooks. However, it should be noted that this focus on the otherness of Pejic (in this case racial as well as visual) achieves the same effect as the focus on gendered deviance in the Pearce article; it alienates and feminises the androgynous figure.

The second debate that tends to frame articles on Pejic is that concerning 'Size 0' models. The majority of newspaper articles that mention Andrej Pejic either do so in the context of weight issues in the fashion industry or choose to mention his weight. While the body mass of models and the trickle-down impact this has on public body image is a matter for concern, I would assert that this is not the primary issue that Pejic's appearance in the industry has raised. Pejic's figure is not exceptional in the context of high couture fashion where a tall, thin silhouette is considered most complimentary to artistic designs that are not necessarily intended for street wear. It is incredibly rare for larger or older models to appear on the high fashion catwalks, though Gaultier (who employed Pejic in Paris) has

shown models who fit both these categories. In the context of fashion shows that are segregated according to the gender binary, it could be unreasonable to expect one of the first men to model in the women's section of a show to simultaneously deviate from accepted standards of height and weight.

Amanda Platell's *Daily Mail* article "Fashion's ultimate insult to women: The latest way of demeaning real women is a male model dressed as a girl" does not consider Pejic's appearance on the female catwalk as transgressive or progressive but as an inevitable conclusion to the trend for designers to exhibit clothes on women who don't display traditionally feminine attributes such as pronounced breasts and hips. This is an interesting (and damaging) cultural phenomenon in itself but Platell's analysis of the situation is flawed in several ways. The most obvious is the assumption that the "perfect hourglass" (Platell) figures of the 1950's stars she cites throughout the piece are somehow more naturally (or appropriately) feminine than the androgynous female form. As Debra Ferreday points out, the nostalgia for previous ideals of femininity can be equally restrictive, particularly considering the mid-century fashions which promoted high-maintenance hair and make-up, high heels and a small waisted figure which was often created using girdles or corsetry which could result in lasting physical damage (52). The anger Platell channels towards the more androgynous female form (via Pejic's body) is perhaps displaced as she is conflating a boyish figure with an anorexic form while presenting a voluptuous alternative which is both labour-intensive and unobtainable for many women. This reveals an attitude to gender that suggests there is a correct version of femininity which is embodied in a physical feminine body, a position that is echoed in other articles on London Fashion Week by Liz Jones (*The Daily Mail*), columnist team Richard and Judy (Finnegan, *The Daily Express*) and other commentators.

Richard Mandeley and Judy Finnegan's rallying cry of "Girls, let's leave them to it" as a response to Pejic's donning of womenswear encapsulates this position, suggesting that since a male body can be imbued with the characteristics of the female high fashion model, women have no place in fashion. Essentially this position neuters the gender identity of the female model not only denying her agency (by employing a narrative of victimisation so extreme that all three articles not only employ numerous synonyms for cadaverous, but also the analogy of the Holocaust victim), but also access to the limiting alternative female form which is prescribed as more natural. While criticising the thin body type both of Pejic and of other (predominantly unnamed) female models, none of the articles examined here consider female models who actively cultivate an androgynous image. Though the bulk of their criticism is reserved for the shape of the body, the articles which examine Pejic from within the Size 0 debate use images of female models wearing traditionally feminine clothing (predominantly dresses in floral prints or pastel colours) to illustrate their points. This exclusion of female models in androgynous clothing (of whom there are currently many in the high fashion world) serves to illustrate their idea that extreme thinness is unnatural for women by juxtaposing 'masculine' body types with 'feminine' clothing; however, it fails to recognise the transgressive potential of female androgyny. Individual female models (such as Freja Beha Erichsen who posed with a codpiece as the Greek god Apollo) have asserted their agency in the industry by visually ascribing to androgyny (with devices such as cropped hair, tattoos and thinness) in a manner which limits their work to their own preferences and not those of their firms.

The arguments put forward in these articles equally deny Pejic the right to own his gender identity. The lack of validity granted to the body of the female androgynous model is

equally applicable to him. Pejic's gender identity, however, is compromised to an even greater degree as not only is his presentation of femininity androgynous (and therefore invalid in their polemic) but his masculinity is also called into question. Jones dismisses non-muscular male models as “nerdy, weedy boys” which not only employs derogatory terms with connotations of an 'incorrect', feminised version of masculinity but also infantilizes them. Platell further restricts his gender, rendering him inhuman through the use of terms such as “creature” and analogies like the “bride of Frankenstein”. The particular strand of argument examined here may be primarily expressed in the tabloid papers but language which suggests parallel attitudes also manifests in the broadsheets through the use of the word “it” to avoid the choice of gendered pronouns (which may indicate an anxiety concerning writing about a transgender subject but serves to alienate Pejic) and terms such as “freak of nature” which clearly both exploit his novelty value and denote him as a dehumanised subject (Williamson).

This extreme trend of objectification culminated in a poll for *FHM*, the popular men's magazine which specialises in full-colour spreads of nearly nude women, where Pejic was voted the 98th sexiest woman of 2011 by the magazine's readers. The article accompanying the poll simply referred to Pejic as a “thing” who induced nausea (see Swann for a screen-shot of the now unavailable article). Perhaps surprisingly, considering the slightly hysterical representations of the model in British papers, a number of high profile papers criticised *FHM* for its choice of words. The *Guardian* (Sweney) and the *Telegraph* (Whitworth) criticised the tone of the article. Even the *Daily Mail* lamented (slightly hypocritically considering it was the site of Platell's diatribe) that the inclusion of Pejic in the poll was sadly not in a progressive spirit (Paxman). The *FHM* entry on Pejic has since been removed and replaced by an apology (*FHM*). While this step was taken

ostensibly due to media and social networking pressure, the wording of the 'apology' remains ambiguous. While originally the FHM website showed a list of the "100 Sexiest Women in the World" which linked an offensive article on Pejic, now his link leads to a vague apology "for any offence caused" (FHM). While in context this apology seems to be a response to the criticism of the original article, the visual effect of clicking Pejic's entry and finding an apology (which appears without a replacement article or picture) suggests that the removal of his entry could also signify an apology for including an androgynous male in a list of desirable females.

The image of the androgynous body is a site of paradox which holds multiple possible, and often conflicting, signs: sexual liberation and oppression, confidence and vulnerability, attraction and repulsion. Perhaps most importantly the androgynous body signifies the potential for the subject to perform their gender as male, female, both, or neither, and to be able to achieve this without the dominant gaze (for example the heterosexual male *Sun* reader) necessarily having knowledge of this deception. Like cinema, high fashion deals in desire. Laura Mulvey's assessment of film actors is equally applicable to high fashion models: "the glamorous impersonates the ordinary" (271). The two frameworks from which Pejic tends to be considered in the British press highlight this sense of likeness (he resembles a woman) and difference (he is not biologically female). These responses to his work both embody the fear that heteronormative desire will be displaced onto a sexually ambiguous body. This simultaneous reaction of fascination (attraction to the likeness) and fear (repulsion to the difference) to the androgynous body can be seen in films such as *Metropolis* and *Blade Runner* where the hero or viewer is initially attracted to the androgynous heroine but alienated from her when it is revealed that she is not wholly human. While Brigitte Helm (*Metropolis*) and Sean Young (*Blade Runner*) portray

characters that are more transhuman than transgender, Constance Penley argues that there is a precedent for using the feminised androgynous body to signify the ultimately inhuman nature of a character who embodies the physical attributes of more than one gender (36).

While authors such as Platell and Jones who criticise Pejic from the perspective that his thin figure reinforces an ideal of beauty that seems unhealthy and unobtainable do make necessary points about the damage perpetuating an emaciated ideal can have (both on models and the public who are exposed to these images), these points are already part of well established criticisms. The feminist framework they seek to adopt to support their arguments seems designed to mask several disquieting transphobic and homophobic strands which need to be unpacked. A degree of female transvestitism is now normalised and considered socially acceptable but male androgyny and cross-dressing is highly stigmatized, perhaps as a result of staged male cross-dressing and androgyny being strongly associated with the perceived social decadence and sexual deviance of the turn of the century cabarets. Previous fashion trends which used androgyny or blurred the gendered divide with clothes (in the 1920s or 1960's for example) attempted to use aesthetics to imbue the female body with masculine powers and freedoms (Arnold 122).

Androgyny for women has connotations of sexual liberation (the rejection of the corset by the 1920's socialites) or the acquisition of power (the 1980's business suits). However, a potential radical feminist interpretation of Platell's claims that "the latest way of demeaning real women is a male model dressed as a girl" is that a cross-dressed white male is an individual who seeks to appropriate the appearance of a woman and is committing an act of symbolic violence from a position of privilege. This negative interpretation is not unique

as feminist theorists such as Sheila Jeffreys, who links male cross-dressing with misogyny and transvestic fetishism, also display an aversion to the challenging of gender roles in this manner (57). These positions often display antipathy towards forms of transvestitism, personal or performative, seeing it as a humiliatingly malicious satire of femininity. However, this argument assumes not only that a feminine identity is alien to non-genetic women but also that there is an essential, natural original for impersonators to imitate. By applying this interpretation to Pejic as an individual, Platell not only directly attacks his labour as a female clothes model but also his right to express his gender identity in day to day life. While Platell's position on cross-dressing represents a more extreme attitude to Pejic's appearance, similar attitudes are hinted at through the language used to describe his actions and appearance in other articles. Even traditionally left-wing broadsheets such as *The Independent* employ an excessive amount of inverted commas around female-associated nouns and language, such as "teetered" and "peroxide" (Fury), which highlights the conceit that Pejic's femininity does not come 'naturally' to him.

The images of a convincingly feminine male in the mainstream media also provide an interesting juxtaposition to the language of the articles which attempts to suggest that femininity is alien to men generally. The most circulated image in news reports and articles (particularly those that appear in British papers) concerning Pejic is one of him modelling Jean-Paul Gaultier's wedding dress for his Paris womenswear collection. Though the sensationalist, partially sheer, gown is far from traditional wedding-wear, it is still decidedly bridal in cut and character; the train trails dramatically behind the model and the lines of ruffles allude to the frills so heavily associated with the bridal gown. The juxtaposition of the bridal dress with the accoutrements (black opera gloves and a black veil) of another feminine stereotype, the femme fatale, makes this an image which is highly charged with

feminine associations. While Pejic's work to date has revealed a versatile model who can adapt to female, male or unisex clothing, the promotion of this particular image associates him with the connotations of two distinct (decidedly female and revealingly contradictory) fashion archetypes.

This merging of two female-associated stereotypes in a male model could well be considered a satire of feminine gender roles. However, it does not necessarily follow that this satire is either malicious or misogynistic as the blushing bride and the femme fatale are stock character types which are not embodied wholly in any individual woman. They represent two very specific incompatible ideals: the hyper-sexualised, dangerous temptress and the pure, virginal bride. That these two types of femininity can be convincingly presented simultaneously by a male model unveils them as social constructions of gender that can be performed equally well by biological males.

The attitudes to femininity apparent in the articles by Jones and Platell, among others, rely on gender being based in biology and not in studied performance. Pejic's adoption of Gaultier's wedding dress challenge these assumptions so it is not surprising that it is this particular image which has been so widely disseminated and has provoked such a visceral response from critics. Judith Butler argues that it is the repetition of the performance of gender roles that reveals their fundamentally constructed nature (137). The repetition of these forms of femininity by Pejic could be seen as revolutionary in this light.

Specifically focusing on Platell's stance, it is interesting to note that one of the Paris catwalk photographs used to illustrate her article on Pejic was taken during the menswear section of the show. As only six images of Pejic are shown, dedicating a significant portion

of these images to a man wearing clothing designed for a male body seems to contradict one of Platell's main issues with his work; namely, his adoption of female clothing. While Gaultier's 'Bond' range of menswear is unconventional, it is not designed specifically for women. The adoption of this image therefore suggests that it is not Pejic's appearance in particular that irks the reporter but the general trend in fashion to blur the boundaries of acceptable gendered dress. The idea that the weakening of traditional gender barriers is the most controversial aspect of Pejic's work is underlined in the treatment of his topless cover image for the fashion magazine *Dossier* when American shops requested the magazine be bagged (Moss). Employing a practice normally reserved for pornographic material when confronted with a magazine featuring a topless man seems confusingly excessive. Considering copies of *Dossier* are placed in shops with (non-bagged) magazines featuring heteronormative topless males (such as those on the cover of *Men's Health*), it can be seen that a male body (or torso) is treated as obscene when it is overtly presented as feminine.

Perhaps the most alarming assertions made by Platell (and echoed by Richard and Judy among other commentators) involve her linking of the homosexuality of some designers with the trend for female models to look androgynous. She argues that an elite group of gay male designers have been: "creating catwalk designs for pre-pubescent teenagers, and each year wanting models who looked less and less like women" (Platell). Here the author is not only implying the invalidity of an interpretation of femininity embodied in fashion models and making broad generalisations about the sexual and gendered divisions in the fashion industry, but also bluntly accuses gay designers of misogynistic practices against women for their own aesthetic satisfaction. As these authors clearly draw a link between the designers' sexuality and their visual preferences, it could be suggested

these practices also fulfil an assumed sexual satisfaction. Throughout their articles, Jones and Platell in continuously link the cult of youth in the fashion industry to the androgynous trend instigated, they claim, by gay designers. This is openly playing on severely damaging homophobic assumptions which link male homosexuality with pederasty or paedophilia (Arnold 122).

It should be noted that a number of the designers Pejic works with could be criticised for misogynistic representations of women. Marc Jacobs, for example, has run several campaigns which could be seen as sexualizing victimisation whether through photographing models in demeaning contexts (such as standing in toilets) or positioning them in poses which are reminiscent of corpses. If Platell's assertions that openly homosexual designers tailor their fashion campaigns to their private sexual fantasies were true, would this not also indicate an inclination towards scatology and necrophilia on the part of Jacobs? Images of symbolic and staged violence against the female body are unfortunately common in the fashion industry. However, to fixate on a small number of gay designers as the source both of these tendencies and of society's obsession with thinness neither recognises the ingrained nature of misogynistic attitudes or the complex nature of their effects.

While the tabloid articles hail gay designers as powerful and demonize them for their control of women's bodies, they also portray them as weak by alluding to deviant pederastic desires. The description of an all-powerful gay male elite controlling the fashion industry given by these tabloid articles (and delineated again by Sheila Jeffreys in *Beauty and Misogyny*) is reminiscent of Umberto Eco's outlining of the fascist mindset where he claims that the (invented) enemy must be rich, linked in a manner that is not necessarily

visible, and simultaneously very powerful and very weak (13). The claims that evoke this mindset are so immoderate in nature that, while Barbara Ellen briefly challenges this position in her article for *The Guardian*, it is surprising that this has not attracted more criticism from the left-wing broadsheets.

In conclusion it is important to consider the impact that the media reports on Pejic will have, not only on the career of the model in question, but on public attitudes to gender in general and transgenderism in particular. The trends evident in the tabloids use emotive issues such as anorexia and body image (in fashion sections aimed at a female audience) or the ability of genetic men to 'pass' as genetic women (in mainstream news reports that assume a default heterosexual male reader) to create an ambiance of hostility both towards transgender individuals and homosexual men working within the fashion industry. While less overtly stated, it can be seen that the broadsheets often assume language that fails to challenge or even actively reinforces this trend. A manifestation of this hostility can be seen by comparing the already discussed victimisation narrative used to represent young female models with the lack of exploitation content linked to Andrej Pejic. As a young, working class individual entering a notoriously exploitative industry, it seems odd that Pejic's vulnerability has not been mentioned; he is cast as an offender who is helping perpetuate body image problems. This is revealing as it suggests that the British media has a tendency to reserve victim narratives for female celebrities.

Although Pejic is widely rumoured as expressing an interest in working with brands such as Playboy and photographers like Terry Richardson, both of which have attracted widespread criticism for taking sexual advantage of teenage models (Harding), the danger of sexual exploitation only seems to interest the press (or titillate the public) when the

narrative concerns women. I would suggest that this is the result of a deliberate attempt, by the authors who engage with the 'Size 0' debate, to employ a feminist rhetoric in order to justify blaming female body issues on gendered and sexual minority groups who are easier to target and identify than the patriarchal value system.

The transsexual American commentator, Amanda Lepore, suggests that the transgender model is the ultimate vehicle for advertising aspirational fashions: "Who better than us to show others how the right make-up, clothes and hairstyle can transform you into something you are not born with?" (Iannacci 57). However, the tendency towards biological essentialism and the calls for the reinstatement of a clear gender binary on the catwalks that can be observed (in varying degrees) in the literature examined here suggests that the blurring of gendered fashions will not be adopted into an acceptable mainstream aesthetic yet. As Givenchy quietly drops the transsexual model Lea T. from his books after attracting a considerable amount of publicity for signing her, it remains to be seen whether models, such as Andrej Pejic, who evoke transgender issues will continue to be hired to fluidly model clothes designed for any gender after the initial public interest dies down.

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