Can plastic be a muse for future feminist innovation?

As an art student at the RCA, while my colleagues were making clothes out of fabric, I spent most of my time playing with plastic: this ‘miraculous substance’, as Roland Barthes called it, was, and is, a perfect material for translating ideas into reality. Over years of designing I have developed an idea of the kind of woman I design for; streamlined, cool, minimalistic and intelligent.

This paper will explore the way that plastic can be considered a muse for future feminist innovation and rebellion. I will reference my own archive of hats and accessories as well as including influences in fashion design and art. I think plastic is inspiring as a material because of the infinite possibilities of form that can be created and repositioned, mass-produced as art project or wearable.

First of all I want to show you a sculpture by Moholy Nagy, called ‘Leda the Swan’. The plastic sculpture has many inspirational characteristics for me as a designer: impenetrable, hard, smooth, transparent, it reflects the light, can be heated and made soft, and reformed to become hard again. It demonstrates the many possibilities for adapting its shape. The common dictionary definition of plastics is ‘a material “capable of being moulded”, but Roland Barthes, who we will come to later, also described it as in ‘essence, the stuff of alchemy.’

Plastic is a vehicle for both the creation of the mundane and the extraordinary, to quote Barthes, ‘this is because the quick change artistry of plastic is absolute: it can become buckets as well as jewels.’ It is a material of artifice, of synthetic chemistry, plastics are suffused with meanings of modernity and urbanity, of manufacture and industry and is an anti-naturalist aesthetic.

Poly Styrene

I reference Poly Styrene; the punk singer from X-ray Spex, herself a strong female image who has certainly influenced my way of thinking and designing. She was unconventional, rebellious, willful and independent, with the ability to influence fashion without sexualising the female form, wearing PVC tabards and plastic shift dresses with Dr Martens. Nils Stevenson said her songs were ‘full of irony about the fakery of commodified culture.’

I argue that my piece the black PVC beret, (now exhibited in the Modip museum), is an icon and a celebration of the artist as a mode of being that is a real significance for the 21st Century post-punk feminist movement. In the image displayed, Agnyss Deyn models the beret for Italian Vogue, in an androgynous, angular portrayal of gender-redefining aesthetic. As opposed to the image on the next slide, the model is buttoned-up, there is no overt sexual overtones, whereas this image by Miles Alrdridge almost plasticizes the model

as oiled and Barbi-fied, she stares out from behind my Plexi-visor with dead eyes, the perfect incarnation of male fantasy.

When I am performing as a DJ, (only playing vinyl, of course), I always wear a plastic hat and perform under the name Spex on the Dex.

\*BARBARELLA: The reference to Barbarella is one that straddles this concept of male fantasy with futuristic uber-female. This dichotomy of a very male conception of the plastic fantastic female (Kim Kardashian super-inflated curves) versus edgy minimalist boyish intelligent beauty which I prefer as a designer is problematic, but plastic solves the whole equation, because it can be used to represent both the pneumatic and the petite female silhouettes. (ADD SLIDE OF ISSEY MIYAKE ’81 BODY SERIES PLASTIC CORSET)

This image reminds me of Donna Haraway’s famous essay on the Cyborg Manifesto, where she uses the metaphor of a cyborg to urge feminists to move beyond the limitations of traditional gender. The Perspex visor functions to almost eradicate the model’s gaze, as well as the male gaze, this almost warrior-like stance is supplanted by the fact that the model is engaging with a machine rather than a human. Yet in Aldiridge’s image it is as if a human model has been plasticized by a machine for a man’s approval. ‘Marisa Olson summarized Haraway’s thoughts as a belief that there is no distinction between natural life and artificial man-made machines.’ – Olson, Marisa: Viva Cyborg Theory (Nov 2008).

Bjork is a radical, both sartorially and musically; she is pictured here in a Maiko Takeda headpiece on her album cover of 2014. The candy-coloured translucent plastic spines generated from the headpiece give Bjork almost a celestial radiance, as if she were a goddess from the distant future; which accords beautifully with her pure and truthful distinctive sound. Here plastic is not utilitarian but atmospheric, creating form suspended in space, emitting light and suggesting traces of movement around the wearer. This echoes the spirit of the Leda Swan sculpture mentioned earlier.

Roland Barthes compared the names of plastic compounds to the names of Greek shepherds (Polystyrene, Polyvinyl, Polyethylene) in his analysis of the contradictions of the meanings of plastics in the book Mythologies (date). The image on the left is a Schiaparelli Rhodophane (a form of early cellophane) cape (1935). The translucent rhodophane cape gives an ethereal majesty to the model, as if to elevate the model from mere human to otherworldly being. The image on the right depicts a hat by Stephen Jones made of translucent plastic entitled Wash ‘n’ Go, from his 1993 collection, *Souvenirs*. This hat captures the very nature of plasticity in that it appears liquid, moulding itself to the wearer’s head, but is in actuality is fixed in form.

Pierre Cardin’s designs from the 1960’s deviates from the earlier slides which show how plastic can give almost an supernatural silhouette to the wearer; these outfits suggest plastic as a unifier; transforming the wearers into a kind of troupe or army; donning protective plastic hats, boots and gloves. The image on the right is more fetishistic and armoured; wipe-clean, with a hygienic protective quality; utilitarian and homogenous.

Plastics assist in creating structures that resemble urban environments in my work; in the image above, the model strides through the urban metropolis clad in protective plastic armour with the Tatlin Tower hat, which almost serves to blend her into the concrete structures which surround her. Plastic could be the perfect vehicle for achieving a powerful and sensual incarnation of the female psyche that rejects traditional values of womanhood in favour of strength and self-actualisation. This image brings to mind a quote from Jonathan Raban’s *Soft City*: Cities…are plastic by nature. We mould them in our images: they, in their turn shape us by the resistance they offer when we try to impose our own personal forms on them.’

Fakeness as a concept is central to this design: inspired by synthetic hair extensions, these graphic tango Marcel-waves can be repositioned according to the wearer’s inclination with Velcro.

Using plastic as the primary material in the designs is simultaneously a rejection of traditional materials and techniques in millinery and fashion practice. This image refers to a 1995 ready-to-wear collection of pneumatic clothes; developed with designer Nick Crosby. To quote the book ‘Air Structures’ (Will McLean and Pete Silver): “The inflated elements give structure to the hoop of a skirt. Using a process of high frequency welding, the tailoring and seaming of these garments is re-imagined to embrace new fabrication technologies and material developments.”

Plastic is perceived as being removed from the natural world, yet at its most basic elements it can be formed from commodities such as cotton and wood pulp. This points to a paradox between our imagining of plastic as a foreign body and its original provenance.

These Testino images from Vogue Paris 2005, exhibit a strident, powerful and athletic version of womanhood; as Angela Carter suggested in Sadeian Woman, (1978) that the writings of de Sade enable a more interesting concept of nee feminity to become articulated in images of parody, artifice, modernity and contradiction.