

## **The Cyborg Aesthetic of Dress: Examining Reactions to the Corporeal Evolution of the Cyborg from 1960 to 2018**

Sarah Perkins

**In a Tortoiseshell:** *In her paper, Sarah Perkins contrasts two fashion designers who have incorporated cyborg aesthetics in their designs. Comparing both their fashion and its reception, Sarah examines the interaction between the cyborg and the human in both designers' work. In this excerpt, her succinct introduction of the artists and the defining features of their work paves the way for a clear and well-supported **thesis**.*

### *Excerpt*

Severed heads, baby dragons, third eyes: unlikely accessories occupy the foreground of Gucci's vision for the future of fashion, an aesthetic centered on the cyborg subject. Alessandro Michele, the designer behind the decidedly disjointed collection, which was showcased in February of 2018, envisions his line as representative of the "hybrid" modern cyborg identity, dissociated from the fetters of human constructs like gender and religion to instead pursue the fluid "plurality" described in Donna Haraway's "A Cyborg Manifesto" (Moss and Bew). Michele's eclectic collection, as visible above, is resplendent with figure-obscuring fabrics, colorful prints, and diverse, often biologically-inspired accessories like severed heads that create complex maps of influence and meaning even on the scale of single outfits (Fig. 1). Michele's collection contrasts strikingly with past attempts at aesthetic representation of the cyborg, including the notable 1960s collections of André Courregès. A French designer, Courregès expanded the space age fascination with technology into the realm of fashion, a venture that resulted in interesting splices of the traditional human with the artificial. Compared with Michele's collection, Courregès's work highlighted and restructured the female body with synthetic fabrics and "avant-garde geometry" (Graham), operating in a creative space external to the body (Fig. 2). Courregès's attempt at this novel stylization of the female body was in fact well received and attracted the patronage of first ladies Nancy Reagan and Jacqueline Kennedy, among many others (Weil). In contrast, Michele's more recent line sparked "confusion" upon its release according to the *New York Times* and has since garnered hostility, coined the "Worst Fashion Show in 'Post-Human' History" by the *DailyWire* and met with a flurry of antagonistic online comments heralding the show as a predictor of the "final days" of mankind (DanielS) and calling the models "repulsive" (Lorraine).

The disparities between the reception of Courregès's and Michele's cyborg aesthetics can be understood by examining differences between contemporaneous notions of the cyborg that inform them. In particular, the characteristic cyborg technologies of Courregès and Michele interact with the body on distinctly different levels. While Courregès's work positions the body in close proximity with the artificial—tending toward that which is ostensibly not human, not animal, but invented, in alignment with space age technology—Michele's work has tended toward direct modification of the biological body and identity, a practice increasingly enabled by modern techniques in biotechnology. A similar transition to body modification observed by Xavier Reyes in the horror film genre connects the fear surrounding body modification, as evident in reactions to Michele's work, to fears of the destruction of the human individual; as corresponding negative perceptions of biotechnologies that “[tamper] with nature” (Sjöberg 382) suggest, this notion of the individual is believed to be coded in the body as an isolated, immutable outpost of nature. Such an illusion of the human body as what William Denevan coined a “pristine myth” relies on dualistic separations including those Haraway identifies between “culture/nature” and “mind/body” (Haraway 313). Anxieties surrounding Michele's aesthetic vision of the cyborg and the capabilities of the biotechnology it evokes are fueled by these pernicious dualistic separations, which Michele seeks to challenge through an understanding of the enduring and profound connectivity and continuity between the human and the non-human. As technology progresses and redefines the cyborg subject—with which we may all identify—at an unprecedented pace, the creative recombination of the cyborg denotes a fundamental shift in the power structures undergirding society.



Figure 3. Model showcasing jumpsuit by André Courregès in 1969 *Vogue*. Figure from Hyland, Veronique; “A Look Back at André Courregès’s Space-Age Style”; *The Cut*; 8 Jan. 2016, <https://www.thecut.com/2016/01/andre-courreges-obituary.html>.

Converging on a decidedly technological aesthetic, André Courregès's label restructured the human into the cyborg through invention. Hopeful that his line might compel men to "consider woman for what she really is" beyond the traditional female form, Courregès envisioned technology as a method of reframing and enhancing the aesthetic of the modern female body (Graham). Specifically, the designer relied heavily on synthetic materials like "PVC and plastic" (Hyland) and oblique geometries like those spattered across the jumpsuit above (Fig. 3), many of his outfits adorning the body with plasticity or metallicity, bold, synthetic hues, and contrived shapes. While the designer's line constructs a frame focused around the human body, the frame itself is very distinctly inhuman and separate from the biological body it surrounds, instead borrowed from a realm of artificial invention. This portrayal conceives a picture of the cyborg as a partnership between the human and the invented, defining technology as an externality to the body.

In contrast to the synthetic, form-tuning compositions of Courregès, Alessandro Michele's work breaches the certainty of the human form to create an uncanny entanglement of the cyborg not only with the external technology of the artificial but also with the internal technology of the animal and the human itself. Replicating and unmooring features as essential as the head and the eyes such that they become accessories (Fig. 1 and 4) along with other biological units like reptiles, Michele positions the biological body as a component of customizable expression in a constant state of recombination. Modelled off of Haraway's manifesto, Michele's cyborgs successfully "[take] irony for granted" (Haraway 315), juxtaposing religious garb with scant dresses and swapping androgynous and gendered apparel between models without discrimination (Fig. 5) to completely blur the traditional presentation of the body. While Courregès's geometries and cuts of fabric highlighted certain aspects of the human form—such as the legs, as highlighted in Figure 2—Michele arbitrarily obscures many parts of the body with fabric, furthermore obscuring the presentation of these body parts and any classifications they may have been associated with. Michele thus portrays the cyborg subject as a departure from the traditional bodily format into a continuous, inscrutable negotiation of the biological body with the technological, the latter often deriving from and modifying the former.



Figure 4. Model in Gucci A/W18 lineup by Alessandro Michele. Figure from Mower, Sarah; "Fall 2018 Ready-To-Wear: Gucci"; *Vogue*; 21 Feb. 2018, <https://www.vogue.com/fashion-shows/fall-2018-ready-to-wear/gucci/slideshow/collection#90>.



Figure 5. Model in Gucci A/W18 lineup by Alessandro Michele. Figure from Mower, Sarah; "Fall 2018 Ready-To-Wear: Gucci"; *Vogue*; 21 Feb. 2018, <https://www.vogue.com/fashion-shows/fall-2018-ready-to-wear/gucci/slideshow/collection#46>.

*Author Commentary*

Sarah Perkins

This paper represents the culmination of months of development as a writer under the incredible instruction and guidance of Marina Fedosik in the writing seminar “The Posthuman.” The seminar explored posthuman phenomena by searching for societal shifts in the conceptualization and manifestation of the relationship between the human and the non-human. Early in my research process, I was struck by Gucci’s Fall 2018 posthuman cyborg fashion show. The novel disarray of body parts, among other unlikely accessories included in the avant-garde show, elicited a range of extreme reactions from the public and drew me in. Its macabre tone made the collection controversial, quite unlike the well-received cyborg fashion shows of the mid-twentieth century. It is the implications of these complex social and societal tensions which I found most perplexing. However, packaging them into a concise, clearly-defined thesis proved a considerable challenge.

Thankfully, I found a starting point for analysis in the work of Donna Haraway, which Professor Fedosik first introduced during the seminar. In particular, Haraway’s “Cyborg Manifesto” posits a framework for understanding the cyborg not as a foreign, mechanical figment of the technological, but instead as the intimate interconnection of the human with the ‘other,’ an image of an incorporative mode of existence which the human race already embodies. This newly defined picture of the cyborg led to key insights about the difference between Gucci’s cyborg and the cyborgs of decades past. Understanding Gucci’s cyborg through the lens of Haraway’s work, I was better able to delineate the way in which this cyborg affronted traditional distinctions between the human and the ‘other’: by challenging the notion of the human itself.

Once the conceptual aspects of Gucci’s cyborg became tangible, I was able to deconstruct them and begin formulating a thesis to underscore why, for many modern viewers, they elicited so much anxiety. Perhaps most notably, I was able to uncover a parallel between the body modification on display in Gucci’s show and the modification often observed in the horror genre. This was a crucial step in understanding how fear arises from societal conceptions of humanity and individuality. Empowered by an extensive network of scholarly sources and innovative intellectual frameworks, I ultimately converged on a thesis that coupled the fear surrounding Gucci’s vision of the cyborg with the strong resistance of this vision to socially constructed separations between the human and the other, which for many render the human body and the human individual impermeable to the modification Gucci’s show so fearlessly celebrates.

The extensive process of research and thought leading up to this thesis taught me that, despite their concise and sleek appearances, thesis statements are perhaps among the most complex components of scholarly works. The moment they are born from countless layers of complexity, they become the central workhorse of a piece, driving it ultimately towards its conclusion.

*Editor Commentary*  
Rosamond van Wingerden

The thesis may be at the core of an academic paper, but it can be one of the most elusive lexicon items: it might not be easy to write twenty pages of good ideas, but summing up their point in one sentence is almost always the hardest part. Even once an author has articulated a strong thesis statement, knowing when and how to introduce it in the paper can be a challenge. Waiting until late in the paper to introduce the thesis can leave the reader confused, but stating it too early means that the reader might not yet have the contextual knowledge to understand it or to judge its convincingness. In this excerpt, Sarah strikes a neat balance between the two, first introducing her sources and making her motive clear before stating her thesis and then providing evidence in its support.

In the first paragraph of this excerpt (and of her essay), Sarah introduces the two designers whose work she will contrast. She loses no time in introducing her motive, making the contrast between her two primary sources so clear that there is no need to state it explicitly. Her introduction prompts readers to ask the question themselves: why were two seemingly similar ideas received so differently?

The opening sentence of the second paragraph provides an answer to this question. To understand the reception of each artist's designs, they must not only be considered in their historical context, but the subtle differences between their approaches must also be appreciated. In this paragraph, Sarah looks beyond fashion to film, technology, and philosophy to support her argument. In the third and fourth paragraphs, she returns to the two designers in greater depth. She connects detailed descriptions to the scholarly sources she has just introduced to make her point. The reader is now able to appreciate the context in which Sarah makes her argument and is ready to evaluate the points she will make in the rest of the paper.

*Professor Commentary*

Marina Fedosik, Princeton Writing Program

In this excerpt—the essay's introduction—Sarah establishes a compelling motive that begins with two layers. The first layer is the discrepancy between the aesthetics of two fashion shows, both informed by the concept of the cyborg. To establish this layer of motive, Sarah provides a compelling close reading of primary evidence. The second layer is the striking difference in the audience responses to the fashion shows. The essay enters the conversation about cyborg-informed fashion aesthetic in order to explain this motivating tension. Sarah's thesis explains it by historicizing the audiences' reactions to the fashion shows. The essay argues that contemporaneous audiences were influenced by historically specific cultural ideas about the cyborg. In order to develop her thesis and argument, Sarah effectively cross-breeds sources from horror film studies, historical ecology, and posthuman studies. The larger significance layers of both the motive and the thesis reveal that by observing seemingly trivial cultural phenomena we can understand a culture's reaction to technological innovation that tests the boundaries of what has been previously considered a “natural” human identity.



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## **Bios**

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