"I Have a Suitcase Just Full of Legs Because I Need Options for Different Clothing": Accessorizing Bodyscapes

Abstract

How can we conceptualize the moveable margins and extended bodyscapes formed by body parts, accessories, and dress? What is the function of accessories in structuring corporeal interspaces? How does fashion negotiate issues around disability? How do we address the missing limbs and prosthetic devices? Drawing on methodologies from fashion studies, body studies, the history of emotions, and visual studies, this article aims to examine these questions from an interdisciplinary perspective, analyzing the new trend of “prosthetics with aesthetics,” experimental jewelry, and fashion shows featuring models with disabilities.
The article argues that fashion as cultural production successfully generates new visual languages, breaking the barriers of invisibility traditionally associated with disabled bodies and contributing to human well-being. The main case study is about the American actress, model, and athlete Aimee Mullins, who had both legs amputated below the knee in childhood.

KEYWORDS: fashion, disability, prosthetics, Aimee Mullins, accessory, design, uncanny valley, bodyscapes, emotion

Accessorizing Bodyscapes

The etymology of the word “accessory” goes back to Latin *accessus*, “a coming to, an approach.”¹ By marking the body edges, accessories symbolically regulate “access”; the right to enter or make use of. In traditional Western cultures the accessories not only decorate, but also magically protect the vulnerable body against evil forces and close imaginary gaps, such as “embroidered symbols placed at strategic locations on clothing. Such locations include hems, necklines, sleeves” (Welters 1999: 7). The symmetrical crucial importance of location can be traced in the idea of “the narrow” body part, which needs reinforcement by accessory or decoration. Even a treatise on accessories published in 1940 states that “The parts of the body destined to carry ornaments are those contracted or narrower portions above large bony or muscular structure”—the neck and shoulders, the waist, the wrist, and the ankle (Lester and Oerke 1940: v).

In modern culture the implicit magical protective value of accessories is still relevant. As the physical extension of the body, traditional jewelry accessories often emerge as metonymic representations of a person: rings, bracelets or piercing decorations continue, reinforce and complete the frame of the body, thus creating and re-creating an identity and particular presentation of self (Durschei and Neri-Belkaid 2005). Hence in the case of loss many people tend to panic and feel as if the intimate and emotionally invested part of oneself is gone: the favorite accessory becomes the symbol of corporeal integrity and psychological security, also involving the memory or nostalgic associations invested in the acquisition of the particular object.

Some accessories substitute or modify body parts: different prosthetic devices, such as hearing aids, glasses, wigs, detachable nails, noticeable makeup. Such items transgress the boundary function, emphasizing and revealing the specific areas of the body. We shall further use the notion of bodyscapes to describe the shifting zone of interaction between body and the adherent objects, including both “dress-equipment” and
“body-equipment,” implying “all items that provide some functional or communicative extension while being in close association to the body” (Farren and Hutchison 2004: 464).

Farren and Hutchison also distinguish as a separate group information devices “allowing selective access to particular spaces and resources.” They refer to cell phones, portable players, cameras, keys, and credit cards (Farren and Hutchison 2004: 465). In contemporary society fashionable accessories represent access to the latest technical innovations such as palm computers, iPads, iPods, iPhones, BlackBerries, and other advanced electronic devices. Such lifestyle accessories become closely intertwined with our bodies, gestures, and daily routines. One of my correspondents replied to my night message: “I’m not at work, but I’m addicted to my BB.” High-tech accessories signify not only openness to technical progress, but also the newest “virtue” which is availability (“access”) for business contacts even in private time, while the brand names serve as the marks of status.

Each period in fashion history develops a specific set and corresponding cultural message of privileged accessories. Normally they are grouped around a particular body part. For instance, in the paintings of European Romanticism hands are very important and people within the portraits normally keep a small object in their hands, it could be a book, a letter or a lorgnette. During this period these accessories symbolized the idea of having “access” to cultural news and the latest fashions, being “branché,” or “switched” to valuable social connections. Thus we see that historical meanings of accessories as bodily “add-ons” or supplements gradually evolve across time.

The main functions of accessories—communicative, functional, protective, and decorative—seem to undergo serious changes in contemporary culture. Elizabeth Fischer (2009) has argued that the production of body equipment merges the boundaries between accessories and garments. Being placed on the body, accessories often correlate with one another, producing cross-references and interplay (prosthetic legs complete with shoes). Conventional accessories can merge with high-tech supplements or mimic them (like earrings in the form of small cell phones). Modern bodyscapes are wide and multi-dimensional, integrating both traditional and high-tech accessories.

“Establishing the body as the founding and unifying element for body equipment makes it clear that not only the exterior of the body—skin and articulations—is at stake, but also the inner workings—the nervous and blood systems, the skeleton, the inner organs, etc.” (Fischer 2009). Examples of such transgressing fusion of design and body anatomy could be traced already in surrealist fashion accessories—Elsa Schiaparelli’s exemplary black gloves (1938) are decorated with red nails made of snakeskin. The Swiss artist Meret Oppenheim, who was closely involved with surrealists in Paris in 1930s, made a similar glove...
with veins on the surface of a gray skin. Pierre Cardin was inspired by the drawing of René Magritte, producing men’s shoes with toes (1986); this idea was further developed by Martin Margiela’s split-toe shoes.

Designer Naomi Filmer (2010) takes the human body as a starting point creating three-dimensional pieces between art and jewelry: “The body behaves as both site and informant” (Filmer 2010). Thus the whole body and the adherent zone around it becomes a signifying space, including the lacunae and body margins. Her first jewelry pieces were made to fill the “negative spaces” between toes and between fingers, which were a development from drawings of the body. “Working with negative spaces lead me to look at the body with a means to exploring space, rather than a location to decorate,” stated Filmer. The meaning of negative space in her Hidden on the Body collection could be interpreted as transgressional: corporeal boundaries may not point to the threshold where something ends, but rather indicate the place where something begins. Delicate metal frames that repeat the curves between fingers and compliment the natural line of the body function as memorabilia of movement and body extension (see Figure 1).

Figure 1
Thus Filmer’s works suggest a new understanding of bodyscapes; celebrating body parts as experimental interface between the body and space around. This process implies an active interaction with materials. Using fine metals and such innovative materials as chocolate and ice, in her A Focus on Flesh collection, Filmer explores the sensual reaction of the human body.

The actual experience of wearing ice is cold, uncomfortable, wet and, after some time, painful...goose bumps and red marks are a physical reaction, which in themselves pose as a form of decoration. The temperature of live flesh breaks down the state of ice to water, which evaporates, so the reaction is temporary, but the memory remains. Is the memory of experience precious? (2010)

As water is integral to human existence, the ephemeral materiality of ice jewelry acquires additional symbolic value. Such wearable art metaphorically mimics the natural texture of the body, organically incorporating signs of pain and trauma.

Filmer’s conceptual thinking explores previously underestimated body parts: “There are spaces in and around us that are evocative of sensuality and privacy. Under the arm and behind the knee, for example, are both beautiful in form, sensitive in touch and extremely private” (2010). By isolating an elbow or the back of a knee, and magnifying and placing them inside glass lenses, she makes an aesthetic spectacle of the body part (see Figure 2). Filmer placed objects and illumination inside the mouth and behind the earlobe of a model for Hussein Chalayan in his Spring/Summer 1996 collection. For Shelley Fox she constructed chin supporting pieces. She also collaborated with Alexander McQueen and Julien Macdonald in the 1990s (Graphic Impression series). Another work, Re-membering Bodies, was performed through placing wax-like necks onto traditional Stockman mannequins (Clark 2004: 119). Sometimes, as in her Simonetta series, separate body parts functioned as a living memory and metonymy of an individual person—such as the style icon Simonetta’s characteristic long neck and hands, her fetishistic passion for gloves. The body parts here become signs of personal identity and merge with corresponding accessories, hence creating new emblematic meanings.

**Fashionable Prosthetics: New Developments in Ethical Design**

One of the aims of this article is to analyze prosthetics as body-equipment and the new fashion object. Prostheses are usually designed to substitute the absent body part, but they can also function as fashionable accessories, the distinctive additions to a person’s identity and looks.
A new tendency—“prosthetics with aesthetics”—is currently becoming significant and has already attracted critical attention (Pullin 2009).

A Norwegian designer, Hans Alexander Huseklepp, has recently constructed the model of a new technological arm. The conceptual prosthetic arm called “Immaculate” by Huseklepp was designed to link to the nervous system of the user. The joints of the device are supposed to allow a wider range of movement than a normal healthy arm! (see Figure 3).

The traditional prostheses are supposed to blend with the human body without being conspicuous, yet the discourse of fashion places the contemporary prosthetic devices in the field of vision. The Immaculate arm is visual—it does not imitate the look of a natural arm. It is styled as techno aesthetic—Huseklepp wanted to get away from...
traditional designs “which conceal their technological skeleton under silicon rubber.”

*Immaculate* is presented as an accessory for people who do not want to conceal their disability. Demonstrating a similar evolution, glasses were until recently seen as a medical device indicative of a physical shortcoming. Now optical glasses can be easily classed as fashion accessories produced by famous brands whose design depends on the trends of the season. The same happened to colored contact lenses, that became a fashion item and come in a variety of extraordinary hues. Once
the medical device becomes an accessory, fashion imposes its own visual regime; the accessories should attract attention and this is precisely what is happening to aesthetic prosthesis. A hearing aid could look, for instance, like an earring. A hearing appliance called Delta produced by the Danish company Oticon has a triangular shape and comes in bright colors like orange, green or cabernet red and leopard skin patterns. Both functional and trendy, Delta was designed to be the object of desire in its own right.

In 2003 the designer Damian O’Sullivan coined the term ‘proAesthetics,” thus giving the name to a new trend. Experimenting with medical prosthetics, he made a porcelain cast for broken arms decorated with floral designs (see Figure 4). The idea was to modify the material: “The exploration lay not so much in the chosen forms, as they are largely dictated by the human body, but rather in a change of material such as porcelain. This is a fragile yet strong material, hygienic whilst elegant, in other words with all the right paradoxical sought after qualities.” The fragility of porcelain mirrors the fragility of human bones. O’Sullivan’s
conceptual approach changes the status of this prosthetic device. It becomes the aesthetic artifact to be treasured. “The result, perhaps more poetic than practical, does however reflect the inherent beauty of recovery and mirrors the healing process of our mending bones. Upon recovery, disposing of these trustworthy companions is simply not an option. Instead, they can be kept and treasured, and exhibited amongst our finest (bone) china.” Celebrating the body also means arriving at a more dignified solution for sufferers with broken limbs: “Pity them who have broken their leg, not for the inconvenience of their condition, but for the sheer ugliness of the prosthetic devices they have to contend with. Why can’t we offer more solace in such moments of need, be exalted to latter-day-dandies instead of having to traipse around with such plastic contraptions?” asks O’Sullivan. In a similar way his Delft porcelain eyepatch and crutches provide the example of the new proAesthetic approach (see Figure 5). Redesigning the medical device reinscribes the emotional context of post-injury trauma: prosthesis transformed into fashionable accessory helps to preserve human dignity. This is the point

Figure 5
at which human well-being is at stake and ethical design acquires the new dimension.

The Italian designer Francesca Lanzavecchia has produced the whole series of new aesthetic prostheses. Her works include canes and crutches, neck braces, and back braces. The designer interprets them as extensions of the body aimed at achieving comfort in different situations. One of the canes in this series is combined with a coffee table (echoing the famous coffee table dress by Hussein Chalayan). Another device, a plastic back brace, has been designed in the style of a corset to help wearers “recover the pleasure of getting dressed,” says Lanzavecchia. The corset is perforated, like piercing. In this way, the corset represents the second skin. Other proAesthetic devices explore the idea of similarity between body and prostheses. Externalizing the bodily process, the designs of Lanzavecchia ironically mimic the medical problems: a cane with a pitted surface references a bone with osteoporosis. The handle of another cane in this series has the shape of a hip joint. Neck braces are designed in a variety of styles: as a scarf with a hood or as a Victorian lace collar. Blending form and function, they provide comfortable inner space for holding personal belongings such as a pack of cigarettes or a cell phone. Such smart designs might serve as convenient conversation pieces creating a possibility for an easy and nonjudgmental discussion of disability.

The aesthetic prosthesis often plays on the dual idea of visibility/ invisibility. Carli Pierce designed the feather cuff, which gives the wearer a choice, if they don’t want to mask their missing limb completely with prosthesis (see Figure 6). The stump could either be hidden in the feathers or out in the open. A feather wing arm can be also used to decorate a conventional prosthetic device. This accessory encourages the amputee to wear something fanciful and delicate, rather than utilitarian and industrial. A similar feathered wing was made by Tonya Douraghy: “It is meant to be worn over the residual limb, slipped on over the stump. In one sense, it is aesthetic adornment but also an alternative to being forced to complete the amputated limb in a life-like way.” Both poetic “wings” imply the idea of flight and emphasize the concept of lightness, by contrast to the heavy, standard prostheses. The porcelain cast by Damian O’Sullivan was constructed by a similar principle. Banning the life-like aesthetics and changing the traditional materials are creative design decisions common for these prosthetic devices. All these artistic prostheses mark the birth of a new type of accessory, serving as fashionable extension of the body and blurring the conventional corporeal boundaries. Modern bodyscapes successfully incorporate “dangerous” jewelry and prostheses, accordingly preparing the ground for a new constructing of “normality.” These changes also signify the new function of prosthetics within contemporary fashion.
Aimee Mullins: Challenging the Canons

The American actress, model, and athlete Aimee Mullins had both legs amputated below the knee in childhood because of the rare illness fibular hemimelia. *People* magazine named her one of the fifty most beautiful people in the world. Aimee Mullins set Paralympic records in 1996 running on her sprinting cheetah legs designed by Van Phillips.16

The most original and provocative pictures of Aimee Mullins appeared in the September 1998 issue of *Dazed and Confused*, guest edited by Alexander McQueen. The photographer Nick Knight presented Aimee in the style of a fragile abandoned Victorian doll, a lived automaton. She is dressed in a crinoline, a suede T-shirt by Alexander McQueen and a wooden fan jacket by Givenchy. Mullins is wearing prosthetic legs that look old and stained, with dark flaked nail varnish. Tussled hair and stains of dirt indicate that the doll has been loved and...
played with. The genealogy of this picture can be traced in the European romantic tradition: the images of the mechanical doll Olympia from the *Sandman* by the German romantic writer E.T.A. Hoffmann or the woman-android Hadaly from the novel *Tomorrow’s Eve* by Villiers de l’Isle-Adam. The beauty of these automatic dolls correlates with the cult of nineteenth century heroines who hover between death and life; decadent dying beauties and pre-Raphaelite artistic depictions of drowned women (Bronfen 1992). This is a well-researched topic in cultural and literary studies (Dijkstra 1982; Kuppers 2006), but this interpretation needs to be put in the context of fashion history.

Significantly, the motif of dolls was a popular artistic device in the 1990s fashion shows of Alexander McQueen, Martin Margiela, Viktor & Rolf, and Hussein Chalayan. Likewise Naomi Filmer has covered models’ hands with wax to depict them as living dolls. Caroline Evans appropriately noticed that Mullins’ prosthetic legs reminded us about the historical predecessor, the shop-window dummy (Evans 2003: 188). It could be added here that the perception of a mannequin contains an element of alienation, a barrier to touch (Melnikova-Grigorieva 2007: 112).

On the cover of *Dazed and Confused* magazine, in another photograph by Nick Knight, Aimee Mullins is seductively half-dressed, in running shorts, wearing blades and looking sporty, active, and vivacious. This image was accompanied by the special issue caption “Fashion-able?”: fashion was facing disability. The word “ABLE” severed from “FASHION” was supposed to question whether the fashion industry might accommodate deviant body images. However, the experiment of representing disability in fashion immediately raised many questions. Marquard Smith (2006) analyzed techno-fetishism and the erotic fantasies that are being played out across medical, commercial, and later avant-garde images of the body of the female amputee in Western visual culture. He argued that such images of Aimee Mullins could trigger sexual fetishist fantasies, replaying the techno-fetishism, and that such photos transform her into an “eroticized Cyborgian sex kitten” (Smith 2006: 47). However, it is obvious that the public presence of differently abled bodies in the context of fashion challenges the traditional canons of beauty and promotes the idea of diversity. These problems are extensively discussed on the Web: many bloggers feel that public visibility of Mullins sometimes takes place at the expense of her identity as an amputee. Disability activists track the “So courageous!” attitude in the media coverage of Aimee Mullins, rooted in low expectations and pity.

Part of the problem is the use of terms such as “Disability”—they are often substituted now by the more neutral terms such as “Differently abled bodies,” “Unique bodies” or “Non-normative.” In her lecture at Technology, Entertainment, and Design (TED) conference Aimee Mullins discussed the traditional negative meaning of the word “Disability”
in contemporary society, taking the definition of “Disability” from a thesaurus as a starting point. She suggested an alternative idea—the ability to take the challenge of adversity and develop one’s potential (Mullins 2009c). A question of language also arises in the terms “cyborg,” “posthumanism” (Hayles 1999), and “transhumanism” when applied to disabled people with high-tech prostheses. While researchers often indulge in overusing the concepts (Haraway 1985; O’Mahony 2002), disability activists refrain from these metaphors: “Please please please tell me Ms. Cyborg is one of us. I HATE the cyborg thing when it comes from fascinated academics.” Researchers, like Vivian Sobchack, who has an amputated leg, try to take the unbiased position in this discussion (2006). Thus the image of Aimee Mullins displays the rich potential for being interpreted in completely different paradigms of erotic pictures, sports, fashion, films, and advertising (Figure 7).

In 1999, Aimee made her runway debut in London at the invitation of Alexander McQueen. She opened the show walking on a pair of
intricately carved wooden legs made from solid ash that were designed by McQueen. The prosthetic limbs that she wore had been made by Dorset Orthopaedic and had been hand-carved over five weeks.

The Spring/Summer 1999 collection of Alexander McQueen was based on a counterpoint between the nineteenth-century Arts and Crafts movement and “the hard edge of the technology of textiles,” hence the prosthetic legs were decorated with an ornament with clusters of grape motifs, referencing William Morris. The collection also contained leather body corsets juxtaposed with a cream lace ruffled skirt, a punched wooden fan skirt, and Regency striped silk (Evans 2003: 177). The dark color and heavy weight of the wooden prosthetic legs contrasted with a white lace skirt; the molded leather corset further developed the implied opposition of artificial/natural, hard/soft. The obvious cultural play with artificial body parts and accessories like the corset (molded leather equivalent to artificial skin) further referred to the themes of a fashion doll and dummy already elaborated in Nick Knight’s photos of Aimee.

In 2002, Aimee Mullins starred in Matthew Barney’s avant-garde film *Cremaster 3* where she played a number of roles. In the film she wears legs fitted with shoes that slice potatoes, cheetah legs, and also non-functional jellyfish prostheses. Starring as Entered Novitiate, she appears partially naked, wearing a nurse’s cap, surgical gown, and long white gloves. She is standing on transparent polyurethane legs with high heels. This powerful image combines the associations of a striptease nurse and Cinderella wearing glass shoes. For one of the scenes Barney wanted to shoot her without any prostheses, but it was impossible for her because it was too intimate, so they finally achieved a compromise with a purely decorative prosthetic device in the form of transparent jellyfish tentacles: “It worked for me because I don’t feel so bare where there’s something between me and the ground” (quoted by Smith 2006: 64). It is highly emblematic that even an ornamental jellyfish prosthesis impossible to stand on functions for Mullins as a symbolic protection. The traditional protective and magic value of accessories emerges here in its original meaning: regulating the access to the vulnerable body.

**Twelve Pairs of Legs**

Aimee Mullins owns twelve pairs of prosthctic legs. They include a pair of Cheetah legs used for sports, designed by Van Phillips; an everyday pair of Robocop legs with springs and shock absorbers, a shapely silicone pair, and decorative pairs that are used for the catwalk and photoshoots. She also has a pair of “natural-looking” legs in her collection with hair follicles and freckles. At present her collection of prosthetic legs has become her distinctive personal symbol, and she uses it not only as a set of fashionable accessories, but to challenge the normative
perceptions of beauty. “A prosthetic limb doesn’t represent the need to replace loss anymore,” says Aimee Mullins. “It can stand as a symbol where the wearer has the power to create whatever it is they want to create in that space, so people that society once considered to be disabled can now become the architects of their own identities—and indeed continue to change those identities—by designing their bodies from a place of empowerment” (Figure 8).²¹

Most of the legs in her collection were designed by Bob Watts, a British prosthetist. Her special pride is the pair of “pretty legs,” which Mullins likes to compare to Barbie’s legs. Even though Barbie’s figure is anatomically impossible, Mullins thinks the “the doll’s ideal is liberating rather than limiting,” the arch of these legs demands two-inch heels (Sobchack 2006: 34). Bob Watts is proud of his creation, because for him it was a chance to be twice creative, as he did not have to imitate the healthy leg. He was free to produce a pair of absolutely identical and ideal legs.

Accessorizing prosthetic legs creates new problems, as fashionable legs demand fashionable shoes. “Each pair of fake legs is designed to be worn with a different heel height. I take the shoes to Bob and he makes me legs to go with them” (Mullins 2009a). Thus when Prada sends her

Figure 8
new shoes with five-inch heels, Mullins has to order a new pair of legs. That is why she needs four pairs of cosmetic legs made of silicone: they are made for different heel heights. The prosthetic legs, substituting the absent body parts, are used by Mullins both as a functional device, and also as a fashion accessory and body equipment. “I have a suitcase just full of legs because I need options for different clothing” (Mullins 2009a): this phrase of Aimee Mullins signals a new way of understanding the concept of prostheses as changeable accessories, introducing the idea of fashion, design, and the importance of individual aesthetic taste. “How many colours do iPods come in? Apple doesn’t presuppose everyone wants a white one, and any prosthetic is like that,” says Mullins (2009a). The difference is that these accessories allow her to be the architect of her own body. Mullins is able to change her height between 5ft 8 in and 6ft 1 in by changing her prosthetic legs. In the future she hopes to be able to get the prostheses constructed by the principle of targeted muscle reinnervation that is now used for artificial arms.

The assertive body image and public performances of Aimee Mullins as motivational speaker give a new dimension to the idea of “bodyscapes”: fashion and technology as access to the new body, not only expanding human limits but also signaling the expanding realm of fashion and challenging popular stereotypes about disabled people (Figure 9).

The Uncanny Valley

“I don’t have any issue wearing legs that aren’t human-like, but I want the option to have human-looking legs,” said Aimee Mullins (2009a).
The avant-garde style of *Cremaster* 3 gave Mullins the freedom to move away from the need to replicate humanness as an aesthetic ideal. Some sophisticated legs from her collection are wearable sculptures and are perceived differently than realistic prostheses. What is at stake is the law of perception: the precise mimicking of human appearance seems “creepier” than more stylized artifacts. Hence the creative prosthetic devices seem to be more aesthetically attractive and secure. This principle is called “the uncanny valley”—the region of negative emotional response towards robots and fantastic characters that seem “almost human.” The concept of “the uncanny valley” was suggested by the Japanese roboticist Masahiro Mori in 1970. Mori proposed a graph (Figure 10) describing the range of emotional reaction to the robots and specifically discussed the response to prosthetic hands.

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**Figure 10**
Some prosthetic hands attempt to simulate veins, muscles, tendons, finger nails, and finger prints, and their color resembles human pigmentation. So maybe the prosthetic arm has achieved a degree of human verisimilitude on par with false teeth. But this kind of prosthetic hand is too real and when we notice it is prosthetic, we have a sense of strangeness. So if we shake the hand, we are surprised by the lack of soft tissue and cold temperature. In this case, there is no longer a sense of familiarity. It is uncanny. In mathematical terms, strangeness can be represented by negative familiarity, so the prosthetic hand is at the bottom of the valley. So in this case, the appearance is quite human like, but the familiarity is negative. This is the uncanny valley. (Mori 1970)

According to Mori, prostheses should be clearly artificial and preferably stylish—this is the challenge answered by the trend of aesthetic prosthetics, otherwise it risks getting into “the uncanny valley.” Adding movement increases the possibility of the uncanny effect. “If we add movement to a prosthetic hand, which is at the bottom of the uncanny valley, our sensation of strangeness grows quite large” (Mori 1970). The theory of Masahiro Mori goes back to the famous definition of the “uncanny” by Sigmund Freud, who connected the feeling of the “uncannyness” to the feeling of intellectual uncertainty, whether an object is alive or not, when an inanimate object becomes too much like the animate object. Freud quoted several corporeal examples:

Dismembered limbs, a severed head, a hand cut off at the wrist, as in a fairy tale of Hauff’s, feet which dance by themselves...—all these have something peculiarly uncanny about them, especially when, as in the last instance, they prove capable of independent activity in addition. (1985: 366)

A contemporary spectator might feel a similar sensation of the uncanny viewing Victorian mourning jewelry, like brooches, bracelets, and other keepsakes, woven from human hair. The ambivalent perception of non-normative bodies could be also traced back to “fascination with the horrible,” as Punch magazine put it in 1847: the popularity of circus sideshows with human freak spectacles (see Bogdan 1988; O’Connor 2000; Thomson 1996), which was based in Victorian “deformomania” (Karpenko 2003). Likewise automatic dolls and mannequins might produce the uncanny effect—this could partially explain the ambivalent reaction to the pictures of Aimee Mullins by Nick Knight styled as an abandoned Victorian doll. In fact, modern design often successfully accommodates the uncanny effect, including it in the range of predictable reactions. For instance, the “dangerous” jewelry of Shaun Leane for Alexander McQueen’s 1997 Spring/Summer collection that
are “lethal-looking pieces that wrap a single, long, silver spike round the model’s heads in a range of ways” (Arnold 2001: 80; Evans 2003: 233) or a brass and human hair necklace by Lars Sture that reconfigures traditional Victorian mourning jewelry.

As we saw, the uncanny valley effect is rooted in the deep emotional complexes like the Freudian Subconscious or the fear of the spectacle of trauma. Yet we should not forget about the cultural construction of emotions. The feeling of anxiety is also culturally and socially conditioned. In her TED lecture, Aimee Mullins spoke about children’s reaction to her prostheses and how kids perceived her prosthetic legs without any prejudice and even suggested new fantastic variants of walking devices, like kangaroo legs or artificial wings (Mullins 2009b). The conclusion prompted by her presentation is that the atmosphere of fear and curiosity around prostheses is mostly created by learned upbringing, but when society opens to diversity and disability issues, cultural conditioning becomes a powerful instrument and might change the perception of disability.

**Controversy around Models with a Disability**

At the time when Aimee Mullins made her debut at the catwalk in 1999, disabled models were rarely seen in the world of fashion. After the show Mullins suddenly found herself on the front pages, being labeled as the new, disabled supermodel. She detested the label, insisting on the positive term “super-ability.” But in spite of the optimistic beginning, it took a long time for the next public attempt to push the boundaries of how we see “beautiful.” In 2008 the BBC3 program *Britain’s Missing Top Model* (BMTM) ignited debate around the theme. The reality show followed eight women with different disabilities battling for the chance to win a photo spread by Rankin in *Marie Claire* magazine (UK edition). Marie O’Riordan, editor of *Marie Claire*, said: “To get disability discussed on the sofas throughout the land is no mean feat and using a popular format of a reality show was a clever way of seducing viewers into a more complex world. We hope this does pave the way for girls with disabilities to get into modelling in the future.” Among the original eight were two deaf women, three with missing limbs, one in a wheelchair, one with ataxia, and one with a nervous system disorder. The winner of the competition was Kelly Knox born without a left hand and lower arm. In the interviews she said that since her school years she refused to wear prosthetic hand and made no attempt to hide her missing limb: “Mostly it’s a mindset, I don’t try to hide it. I’m cool with it. So people are always telling me they don’t see it.”

This policy of challenging visual stereotypes regarding disability has recently become popular. In September 2010, Tanja Kiewitz appeared in the advertisement that was part of a fundraising campaign by a
REGARDEZ-MOI DANS LES YEUX…
…J’AI DIT LES YEUX.

Figure 11
non-profit organization, CAP48, that promotes the rights of people living with disabilities in Belgium (Figure 11). The attractive woman wearing a black bra smiled to the viewers exposing her left arm that ended, just like in the case of Kelly Knox, handless, just below the elbow. Unlike Kelly Knox, Tanja admitted that her arm has always been something very intimate for her. The inscription read, “Look me in the eyes...I said the eyes”; a direct allusion to Eva Herzigova’s famous 1990’s Wonderbra advertisement both in the image and the slogan. “The idea was to try to change the way so-called normal people view the handicapped,” said Johan Stockmann, the speaker for CAP48. “They look at the handicap, not at the person. We want to change that.” After the advertisement was placed in Belgian newspapers, Kiewitz became a celebrity and her image was actively discussed on the Net. The main focus of the discussion was the politics of the gaze. The majority of viewers applauded to Tanja’s message: “They have to see that I’m a woman above all and that I can be beautiful and sexy, and the handicap is secondary.” The purposeful objectification of the female body is used here as the argument against being classed as disabled person—in much the same way as Aimee Mullins liked to be compared to Barbie. However, there were also sexist remarks and some commentators explicitly resisted forcing the direction of the gaze: “I look where I please. Telling me where I can and can’t look tells me that you are ashamed or uncomfortable. I am not uncomfortable with you, why are you?”

The discomfort of the viewers could tentatively be explained through the underlying connection between vision and touch. The French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty argued that “vision is a palpitation with the look...every vision takes place somewhere in the tactile space. There is a double and crossed situating of the visible in the tangible and the tangible in the visible” (1968: 134). He developed the concept of the embodied nature of subjectivity, explaining that human experience comes out of a corporeal position. So perceiving the spectacle of disability could be in fact a traumatic experience for the viewers, subconsciously identifying themselves with the model through the visual/tangible aspects and thus facing the sensation of the missed body part. “The body, far from being a fairly standardized and self-contained entity, is highly plastic and rich in the possibilities of intercorporeality” notes Margrit Shildrick (2010: 12). This adds a new layer of meaning to the previously discussed notion of bodyscapes: our body integrity implies the necessity of facing the Other, interacting with the Others, experiencing identification and difference. “Whatever the context, the body...is never self-complete and bounded against otherness, but is irreducibly caught up in a web of constitutive connections that disturb the very idea of human being” (Shildrick 2010: 13).

A more recent event in this series is Debenhams’ Fall 2010 window campaign (Figure 12) featuring disabled model Shannon Murray who has been in a wheelchair since she broke her neck at fourteen
(Figure 13). Shannon previously appeared in the Debenhams’ advertising for the relaunched Principles range designed by Ben de Lisi, the first disabled model to feature in an advertising campaign for a high street fashion brand. Shannon estimated it as “another small step towards inclusion and representation,” yet again this campaign caused a range of contradictory responses from “What took them so long?” to “Is it progress or publicity stunt?” “Is this finally an acceptance of disabled people? Or another kick in the teeth?” wrote one blogger. “Good for her,” wrote another, “but I don’t like it when companies announce it and hold themselves up as paragons of acceptance. Perhaps it’s just me being cynical, but I believe that this world will only be truly tolerant when stuff like this can happen and we don’t have to report it.” It should be noted that of all the companies Debenhams has in this regard the most consistent politics: it has also done an airbrush-free swimwear campaign and used size 16 mannequins, and plus size and petite models.

Debenhams’ campaign was followed by the special event during London Fashion Week (Fall 2010) when HAFAD (Hammersmith and Fulham Action on Disability), an independent organization in London that promotes disability awareness, organized the show with disabled models “Fashion with Passion.” The participants included Asos.com, John Smedley, and Full Circle, and as a result the sold-out event raised over £5,000. Another fashion show with disabled models—“Disabled and Sexy”—was organized in at London’s Notting Hill in October 2010.
These shows also provoked a range of responses. “I approach disability-fashion hybrid endeavours with slight trepidation because I’m not one to put a positive spin on things because they happen to have disabled people involved. Disability is no excuse for mediocrity, and when it comes to modelling—blind, deaf, one leg or two heads—you’ve either got it, or you haven’t,” commented Lora Masters, one of the organizers.37

In spite of all these recent developments, even now the appearance of a disabled model on a catwalk is still likely to create a sensation, as demonstrated by the recent case of Mario Galla.38 The twenty-four-year-old model Mario Galla, born with PFFD,39 participated in Michael Michalsky’s show during Berlin Fashion Week in Summer 2010. Galla walked on a prosthetic leg, dressed in shorts, so that his prosthesis was clearly visible (Figure 14). His prosthetic leg attracted everybody’s attention and as a result Michalsky’s collection became the hit of the fashion week.40 Galla, possessing a classical face, started his modeling career for beauty companies. He had already worked for brands like Hugo Boss and the French designer Alexis Mabille. But he always appeared at the catwalk wearing long trousers covering his prosthetic leg.41 Images of Mario Galla with a prosthesis had previously appeared in a fashion editorial by Franck Glenisson, “Beyond my eyes, my muscles’ll survive.” By demonstrating his prosthetic leg, Mario Galla’s character performs a symbolic “coming out,” a gesture that is emboldened by images of him literally coming out of the sea. Franck Glenisson received the French Talent Award 2009 for this work.
So what was supposedly happening in the audience of the fashion show when Galla appeared on the catwalk revealing his “Beinprothese?” The initial affective reaction—shock and curiosity—was provoked by the violation of the unwritten rules of the game: “beautiful” people wearing “beautiful” outfits. The audience suddenly saw “something which ought to have remained hidden but has come to light”: this is one of the definitions of the uncanny according to Freud. At this stage the perception predictably risks falling into the uncanny valley, yet the glamour of the catwalk makes it possible to change the emotional frames before the spectators even realize their views have been challenged. The unsettling quality diminishes as they become increasingly involved. The splitting of the corporeal image of the model in

Figure 14
this example mirrors the splitting of emotional reception. This oscillation between fascination and shock is typical for postmodern sensibility.

The context of the fashion show legitimizes prosthetic body parts as new accessories, making them visible and publicly acceptable. It helps to overcome intellectual uncertainty of viewers by switching emotional frames. This is clearly a new phase in the history of how fashion dealt with disability issues. One could take as a starting point of comparison Helmut Newton’s (1995) editorial for *Vogue* “High and Mighty.” Nadja Auermann starred as a woman disabled by wearing stiletto shoes. “A woman who wears these kinds of shoes has a tough time walking by herself,” explained Helmut Newton in his preface (Newton 1995). And indeed, Nadja Auermann was portrayed in the role of a disabled woman, with one leg visibly shorter than the other; sitting in a wheelchair, wearing a fixator—the medical device used for limb lengthening—and she was even pictured walking on crutches supported by two men.

Playing with the imagery of disability, Helmut Newton has in fact made the most of ironic fetishism, creating the aura of dangerous desire around not only Chanel stilettos, but also a wheelchair, crutches, and a fixator. He did all but one thing: he did not risk using a real disabled model. Instead, he used the perfect body of Nadja Auermann, making clear that in this case disability was just a conventional game. By contrast, the contemporary shows with disabled models concentrate the spectator’s attention on disabled bodies, directly influencing the emotional state of the audience.

Recent studies have shown that emotions are largely constructed by specific cultural context (Wulff 2007: 199). William O. Beeman demonstrated that performance aims to change the cognitive and emotional state of participants: “Performance facilitates the social transformation of individuals in a protected environment” (2007: 275, 287). In the field of emotions, fashion as performance possesses a vast transformative potential that can create new emotional communities. The fashion system has always made the body of the model a place for projecting collective desire, and in this case the mechanisms of transference work in favor of the disabled model. Fashion shows with disabled models could contribute to widening the range of the normative emotional response of the audience, and at the same time function as an exercise in empowerment for disabled people. Yet making the cultural spectacles of the non-normative bodies, as we see it, is a double-edged practice: the darker side of this glamorization is that fashion houses, brands, and media publications gain income from the commodification of disabled models; however, at the same time it is breaking down conventional stereotypes of beauty in advertising and fashion shows, widening the frame of public tolerance. Also the models clearly benefit from their jobs: in fact, the latest personal achievement of Aimee Mullins is the important modeling contract—in 2011 she became the brand ambassador and spokesperson of L’Oréal Paris.
Fashion is driven by novelty and this is one of the reasons why fashion dream spaces can easily change the system of perception and representation of disabled bodies. The role of fashion as cultural institution in this process can be salient. Aimee Mullins often repeated that her achievements in the realm of fashion and the arts have done “as much if not more” than her sporting successes to challenge the notion that wearing a prosthetic limits what a person can do. This special accent on the role of fashion leads us to a new understanding of its social function. Fashion emerges as the permanent experiment with our corporeal sensibility and a vehicle of retuning our emotions in the face of otherness. This is the point where fashion meets diversity, helping to set a more globally aware and accepting environment.

Notes
1. Meaning “an entrance” is from c. 1600. Meaning “habit or power of getting into the presence of (someone or something)” is from late fourteenth century. The word “Accessories” as “woman's smaller articles of dress” is attested from 1896 (online etymology dictionary, http://www.etymonline.com/, accessed March 11, 2011).
2. A separate problem is how accessories influence etiquette and manners, the system of gestures: in the nineteenth century it was considered inappropriate for a gentleman to use his cane for writing idly in the dust or to carry it under his arm. Canes, popular among dandies, had tops fitted with many accessories: some contained perfume bottles, others were fitted with eyeglasses, which could be opened and closed, and still others with miniature telescopes. The art of skillful performance with a favorite accessory was held in high esteem: Beau Brummell used to open his snuffbox with a quick elegant gesture, highlighting his perfect cuffs.
3. Some of the contemporary researchers use the term “prosthesis” in the wide metaphorical sense (Wills 1995) to mean any technological body extension. Vivian Sobchack justly points out that as a result this term became “tired” and inflated (Sobchack 2006: 19). In this article the author prefers to use the term “prosthesis” in the direct physical sense.
4. This article does not touch upon the subject of special clothes for disabled people. This is a separate field with an increasing number of interesting designers working in it: see, for instance, the adaptive clothing of Izzy Camilleri—http://www.izadapitive.com/about2.aspx (accessed October 10, 2011). See also Hopper (2010).

8. Decorating the cast is typical in children’s orthopedic hospitals: young patients frequently draw on the plaster casts with markers and decorate them with stickers.


12. The porcelain eyepatch and crutches were shown at the exhibition *The Power of Making* at Victoria and Albert Museum, September 6, 2011–January 2, 2012.


20. Van Phillips lost part of his leg in a water-skiing accident at the age of twenty-one. Being motivated by the limitations of then-existing artificial limbs, he invented a prosthetic foot, the Flex-Foot Cheetah, a breakthrough design that simulated the spring action of the human foot. It was used by Aimee Mullins and Paralympics gold-medalist Oscar Pistorius.


22. Targeted reinnervation is a method developed by Dr Todd Kuiken at Northwestern University and Rehabilitation Institute of Chicago and Dr Gregory Dumanian at Northwestern University Division of Plastic Surgery for an amputee to control motorized prosthetic devices and to regain sensory feedback.

23. A good analysis of stereotypes about disabled people can be found in Beuf (1995).

25. For instance, the character Gollum from the film *The Lord of the Rings* has animal-like hands and feet combined with human body shape—this creates the effect of the Uncanny Valley.


39. PFFD—proximal femoral focal deficiency, a rare birth defect that affects the pelvis, particularly the hip bone, and the proximal femur.


**References and Further Reading**


