

Supplementarity, Embellishment and The Decorated Body

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Abstract

Thread; Luxury as Craftsmanship and Tradition

Embellishment, in terms of fashion and textiles, is the application or addition of components or materials to the surface of an existing fabric creating a three-dimensional relief or pattern. An embellishment augments or supplements the fabric. It can also *complete* the fabric.

In this paper I will be focusing upon two key themes: embellishment as supplementation and embellishment as completion of the adorned body, both of which come together on the surface of the fabric in my practice.

According to Derrida “The supplement adds itself, it is a surplus, a plenitude enriching another plenitude, the fullest measure of presence” (Derrida, 1998). Derrida suggests that there is an essential lack that the supplement fulfills. The notion of supplementarity is useful here when applied to embellishment, in that the embellishment itself becomes an ‘exterior addition’ that extends that fabric and has the potential to make it complete. My practice is concerned with the physical and conceptual ability of such embellishment, the application of components to the fabric surface, to *complete* that fabric ground.

Embellishment is time consuming to apply, a process that is thus readily associated with notions of luxury and decadence. Traditionally, components are applied to the surface of the fabric using needle and thread, either by hand, machine or tool. Such time-consuming processes, when considered together with Roland Barthes’ concern with the semiotic meaning associated with gemstones, both real and imitations, when applied to dress, sets up an important interplay between embellishment as a signifier of luxury and wealth, and the associated power.

In this paper I will be taking these two themes as underpinning principles for my own practice of embellishment within the field of fashion. Where Joanna Entwistle suggests that “...no culture leaves the body unadorned but adds to, embellishes, enhances or decorates the body.” (Entwistle, J., in Barnard, 2007: 273), I will explore such embellishment in terms of its ability to extend the decorated body. If, as Malcolm Barnard proposes, clothing makes the body possible, then embellishment makes that decorated body possible. In this sense, then, embellishment becomes a prosthesis of the prosthesis: it makes *complete* the materials that form the garments and makes the (decorated) body possible.

Keywords

Fashion; embellishment

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