

# Surrealistic Characteristics Expressed in Fashion Ads

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## ABSTRACT

*In contemporary advertising market, one of main trends is to speak surrealistic visual language which provides 'enjoyable spectacles'. Specially, in the beginning of 21st century, there discovered more and more exhibitions and discourses about surrealism reinterpreted from the viewpoint of postmodernism.*

*Surrealism as a creative style of expression based upon free association, has been a great inspiration for fashion ads for commercial communication as well as fashion design since its origin. However, there has been ignored the idea of analyzing surrealistic image expressed in fashion ads in spite of their flood. Accordingly, the purpose of this study is to grasp its cultural meaning through analyzing aesthetic characteristics of surrealistic image expressed in fashion ads. It will provide a better understanding of surrealistic image in fashion ads reflecting popular taste and preference directly as popular visual culture, focusing on post modern context. A case study of surrealistic fashion ads limits to TV or print commercials and digital ads as image ads stimulating visual expressions.*

*The Results can be summarized as follows. Surrealism is an avant garde style which deconstructs the established meaning system as well as the existing formalistic order and then put them together in the frame of 'dream' and 'unconsciousness'. Defamiliarization questioning the whole edifice of representation can be adapted to. By means of paradox and metaphor, unfamiliar new visual world can be represented. The plastic characteristics of surrealistic image in fashion ads are founded as surrealistic styling of time and space, distortion of object by methods of automatism, depaysement, parody and trompe-l'oeil which bring about the deconstruction of gestalt. Aesthetic values of surrealistic fashion ads appear as dualistic representation, allegoric symbolism, fantastic romanticism. Ultimately they lead to marvelous, mysterious, humorous visual effects. Foster reinterpreted these effects of surrealism from Freud's 'Uncanny Concept'. 'Uncanny' means the phenomenon recurring to familiar being defamiliarized by repression. Surrealistic fashion ads strengthen this shocking effect more and more dramatically in company with our post modern needs for fantastic adventure and thrilling spectacle. It can be thought that surrealistic fashion ads reflects uncanny as an alternative which can relieve us of our stress and anxiety and which realize our potential desire in contemporary post industrial stage.*

**Key Words :** *Surrealistic characteristics, Fashion Ads, Uncanny, Dualistic representation, Allegoric symbolism, Fantastic romanticism*

## I . Introduction

Advertisement is an interactive marketing com-

munication to promote product or service to the publics. Recently consumers expect new advertisement types providing 'enjoyable spectacles'. One of main trends of contemporary advertisement is to speak surrealistic visual language. Surrealism has

made a long-lasting impact on fields as diverse as literature, fine art, photograph, fashion, film. Especially, in the beginning of 21st century, Surrealism exhibitions prevail again in England, Brazil, and Paris. Also there discovered more and more discourses about Surrealism, reinterpreted from the viewpoint of postmodernism.

Surrealism as a creative style of expression based upon free imagination has been a great inspiration for fashion ads for commercial communication as well as fashion design since its origin. There has been a lot of preceding researches on surrealist fashion design. However, there has been ignored the idea of analyzing surrealist image expressed in fashion ads in spite of their flood. Accordingly, the purpose of this study is to grasp its cultural meaning through analyzing aesthetic characteristics of surrealist image expressed in fashion ads.

According to McCracken(1997), today material goods can function as sources reproducing and manipulating our culture, as they increasingly filled with our lives. In capitalistic system, advertisements, as visual popular culture, reflect the most popular taste and preference directly.

Therefore, this study will provide a better understanding both of surrealist image in fashion ads from the aesthetic view point and of our cultural meaning, focusing on post modern context. A case study of surrealist fashion ads limits to TV or print commercials and digital ads as image ads stimulating visual expressions.

## II. Surrealist characteristics in Fine Art

### 1. The definition of surrealism

Surrealism is one of avant-garde art movements

which arose from resistance against rationality which had dominated human's society in the beginning of 20th century, and which tried to express the truth through unconsciousness in search for the initiative creativity of human. Surrealists acknowledged the predominance of imagination, emphasizing human's freedom from reason and social limitation, and sought to combine reality with dream in the frame of sur-reality.

In 'the Manifesto of Surrealism' published in the journal 'La Revolution Surrealiste' in 1924, Surrealism was defined as follows.

Surrealism : Noun, as an automatic phenomenon of mind, to express truthful movement, a statement of one's thinking by means of the verbal or the visual without the control of rationality, or aesthetic and ethical prejudice

Surrealism made much of potential world of fantasy without control of rationality, based upon aesthetic attitude which release the unbridled imagination of the subconscious. Surrealists had somewhat interest in such hallucinatory visions as dream, insanity, hypnosis, and toxication and sought to express the mysterious, the irrational, the accidental, using the method of free association.

### 2. The Plastic Characteristics of Surrealism

#### 1) The Expressive Characteristics of Surrealism

Surrealists deconstruct the established meaning system as well as the existing formalistic order and then put them together in the frame of 'dream' and 'unconsciousness'. They were influenced by the psychological theories and dream studies of Freud, because they sought to express habitually repressed unconsciousness truthfully as possible as they could. Surrealist visual world is the unified one

where inharmonious things coexist in terms of the new order of representation.

### **(1) Surrealistic styling of time and space**

There exists disturbing notion of time and space in Surrealist artwork, because it was not explicit to fix the boundary between dream and reality. For example, de Chirico's painting "Piazza d'Italia" showed dreamlike surrounding dramatically with mysterious lighting, long shadows, deep receding space.

Overall, surrealist setting of time and space could be considered as dramatic styling in exaggerated chiaroscuro and perspective, contemplative atmosphere of standstill and as ambiguous styling by integration of diverse time and space. They showed irrational dualism of dream imagery which is emotionally shocking.

### **(2) Distortive Expression of object**

'Found object', just as in dream was a leading feature of Surrealist artwork. Alexandrian(1990) explained it as sculptural, monumental creature. Surrealist distorted their inward natures by bestowing common objects on special qualities. Surrealist object featured as a scale up or down, metamorphosis, the bizarre juxtaposition of irrelevant objects and the reinterpretation of their hierarchy. Owing to the character of surrealist object, Surrealist artwork could be analyzed as paranoid representation psychologically. Paranoid tends to combine real realm which is located in reasonable thinking with imaginary realm or to close up a certain phenomenon. In other words, Surrealist work was supposed to reflect affective qualities of dream. Subsequently, such a subversion against the established order of representation could be explained as the deconstruction of gestalt.

In terms of the theories of gestalt psychology, all of visual perception can be explained by the fact that the sum of parts make a whole through organization, rather than each part exists independently. But if there happens the disorganization of visual perception, it can be called as 'the deconstruction of gestalt'(Hakojaki, Soichi. 1995). Most Surrealist often 'de-familiarized' the order of established representation, using the deconstruction of gestalt.

## **2) The Mode of Expression in Surrealism**

### **(1) Automatism**

Automatism is a conceptual technique involving spontaneous writing, drawing practiced without the conscious aesthetic or moral self-censorship. Because automatic writing or drawing was uninhibited expression of the unconsciousness, even a painter himself accepted his work as mysterious and unfamiliar. Surrealists experimented with two unpredictable processes like frottage and decalcomania for their introspection. Frottage was the improvisational process of scraping pigment across a canvas that is laid on top of a textured surface, while decalcomania was the accidental technique of pressing a sheet of paper onto a painted surface and peeling it off again.

### **(2) Depaysement**

Depaysement was the most frequent technique, although automatism was more like Surrealist in its origin. It could be defined that reconstruct pictorial scene by means of displacing object or image to unexpected location and of producing dream imagery.

### **(3) Parody**

Meanwhile, Surrealist sought to restore hack-

neyed history as well as world of mind traditionally restricted by reason (Foster, 2004). Therefore they employed parody technique coexisting past and present. Parody is to borrow preceding texts from tradition, history or art. Such texts can be forced to be more mythical by Surrealistic parody.

#### (4) Trompe-l'oeil

Surrealism could provoke visual bewilderment through illusion between reality and dream. Also it had made us question about authenticity through trompe l'oeil technique. Dali's painting 'enchanted beach with three fluid graces' <Fig. 1> made us experience illusionary imagery through unidentifiable relationship between transparent space and object.



<Fig. 1> Dali, 'enchanted beach with three fluid graces'  
<http://www.artcyclopedia.com>

In conclusion, Surrealism leads us to make creative interpretation of free association, to make a philosophical question about our existence, using unsettled obscure lines, abnormal forms, symbolically charged figures, mysterious blue tones, the coexistence with light and shadow tones, etc.

### 3. The Aesthetic Value of Surrealism

Defamiliarization by the language of 'paradox' and 'metaphor', questioning the whole edifice of

representation can be adapted to Surrealism. It is a Surrealist mode of creation that awakes conventional daily experience and makes it unfamiliar. Ultimately it results in marvelous, mysterious, and humorous visual effects. The most significant aesthetic value can be considered as the marvelous, which is experienced through unexpected combination, like encounter of sewing machine and umbrella on a major operation. Foster (2004) reinterpreted the marvelous of Surrealism, using Freudian 'Uncanny Concept' from the viewpoint of postmodernism.

"the experience that to desire is surprisingly realized, the mysterious phenomenon that similar experiences repeat in certain time and place, unbelievable scene, unidentifiable noise, Surrealists called them as the marvelous. And this is Freudian Uncanny."

Freudian 'Uncanny' means the phenomenon recurring to familiar things de-familiarized by repression, which makes a subject anxious because it is too obscure for him to understand. Uncanny is a direct result from this anxious obscurity. Surrealistic Uncanny can be experienced when (1) reality isn't divided with imagination, (2) we cannot make certain the relation between the animated and the inanimated, (3) signifiant deprive of the position of signifie, or psychological reality deprive of the position of physical reality.

### III. Surrealistic Image Expressed in Fashion Ads

In this chapter, on the basis of the character of Surrealism art, surrealistic image expressed in fashion ads will be analyzed from the aesthetic viewpoint using some cases.

## 1. The Plastic Characteristics of Surrealist Fashion Ads

### 1) The Expressive Characteristics of Surrealist Image

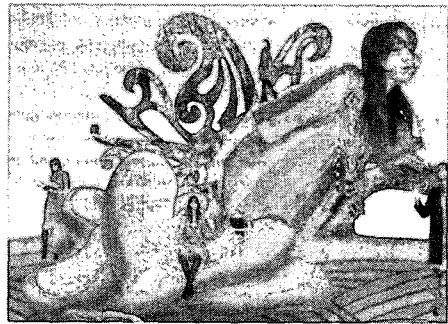
#### (1) Surrealistic styling in time and space

Surrealistic time and space in fashion ads presents a mysterious visual world which reality coincides with imagination, just as Surrealist painting. Dreamlike vision makes everything possible, so surrealistic fashion ads shows paradox and irony by the methods of expansion or derivation of time and space.

Surrealistic settings in fashion ads which show dramatic chiaroscuro such as day time coinciding with night time, daylight in a cloudy sky recall the ominous theme of Surrealist paintings. The ad for Krizia <Fig. 2> also seems to be inauspicious and mysterious by dramatic styling like exaggerated chiaroscuro, unidentifiable shadow of background, bombastic texture, the strong gaze of model. Besides imaginary spaces like myth, fairy tale, or virtual space by computer graphic <Fig. 3> often tend to appear in surrealistic space. In <Fig. 4>, there showed dualistic space connecting the inner(show window) with the outer(street).

In addition, surrealistic time often unifies diverse times and makes them concurrent ones, like in dream. There appeared human clones coincided in one certain place because of magically unified time and space<Fig. 5>. Like Diesel<Fig. 6> there are unified expression of incompatible histories. It seems to be more mysterious, using whole blue tones, vague edges. In occasion, there happens contemplative time and space styling of omitted detail, floating slowness.<Fig. 14>

Surrealistic time and space styling in fashion ads could be featured as ① dramatic setting ②imaginary space styling ③expansion of visible space ④ integration of time ⑤contemplative space & time styling without movement.



<Fig. 5> Coincidence effect in Isabel Marent Ads <http://guillaumewolf.free.fr>



<Fig. 2> Krizia Ad. *Vogue Italia*, 2005. 12, p.151.

<Fig. 3> Virtual space. *Vogue Italia*, 2006. 3, p.294.

<Fig. 4> The Dualistic space styling. *Vogue Italia*, 2005. 3, p.198.



<Fig. 6> JPG's parody, ID, 2006. 3, p.117.

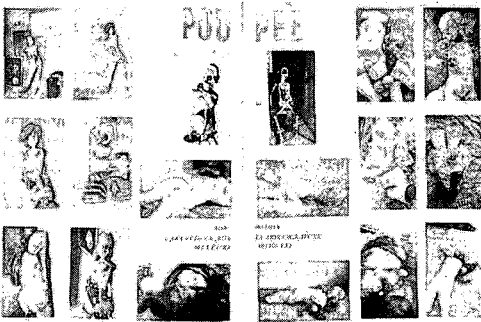
**(2) Distortive interpretation of object**

Distortive interpretation of object features the monumental object by a scale up or down or close up in detail<Fig. 9> and various bizarre transformation, similar to Surrealist art.

In surrealistic fashion ads, ironical metamorphoses in relation with human are more frequently

found, such as anthropomorphic figure combined human with any other organic object or inanimated object and impersonated object. Just as Man Ray substituted a female body for erotically charged object in 'Le Violin d'Ingres' in 1924, there are a large number of surrealistic approaches that combine human with object of erotic symbolism. Meanwhile, Puppet, Mannequin, ball-jointed doll exemplifies the ambiguous divisions between the animated and the inanimated. They are recurring motives in the Surrealist repertory. Contemporary mannequin<Fig. 7> is a surrealistic object embodied not only to make a real human being artificial but also to reflect capitalist reification uninhibitedly, because a human figure become transferred as a commercial product.

Here, we can remind of Bellmer's mechanical poupee<Fig. 8> that presented surrealistic body. Bellmer stated "the essence of my work is reorganizing alphabets to make a new word. I fall into temptation to reorganize human's body akin to the sentence structure."(Foster, 2004) It stands for undecided identity, at the same time, reminds Sadism, in terms of the panic experienced in front of dismembered body. Surrealistic body seems to dematerialize as Bellmer's mechanical girl with anatomical possibilities. Each part-specially lips, eyes,



<Fig. 8> Bellmer, Poupee, Foster, *op. cit.*, pp.164-165.



<Fig. 7> Diesel ads for 1999, Evans, C, *Fashion at the Edge*, p.180.

<Fig. 9> Mcginn ad. <http://www.mcginn.co.kr/2005fw/>

<Fig. 10> Automatism in Saphier Ad <http://guillaumewolf.free.fr/>

hands, feet-symbolizes their explicit sexual implications as a fetish. Also there happens sometimes collapse of hierarchy between figures, as surrealistic object of psychological split. <Fig. 9>

## 2) The Mode of Expression

### (1) Automatism

Today surrealistic fashion ads employ automatic expression of spontaneous scribble using computer graphics. <Fig. 10> emphasizes a manipulated body whose figure and ground mix together at random.

### (2) Depayment

Distortive expression and unpredictable encounter of surrealistic objects provoke Freudian Uncanny which is both magical mystery and uncertain disorder. Esdar defamiliarize classic Chanel image by the surrealistic expression of anthropomorphic model, tremendous basketball headdress. <Fig. 11>

### (3) Parody

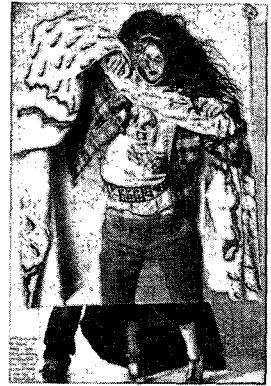
There exist surreal fashion and fashion ads whose expression is similar to Surrealist painting. The parody of <Fig. 12> recalls the trompe l'oeil, double exposure of Dali's painting 'enchanted beach with three fluid graces'<Fig. 1>. As surrealist parody is codified, it becomes pastiche deprived of its original quality.

### (4) Trompe l'oeil

Trompe l'oeil is an effective technique for surreal dualistic vision, as proved through fashion designs of Schiaparelli in 1930's. Diesel ads for 06 SS which has been famous for their innovative expression<Fig. 13> was titled as 'Camouflage Tale'. It mixed up figure and ground humorously with the pun 'camouflage'. Also it parodies medieval sacred scene.



<Fig. 11> Chanel's Surrealism  
<http://www.luerzersarchive.us/>



<Fig. 12> Parody for Tommy  
Jeans, *W*, 2005. 9, p.507.



<Fig. 13> Camouflage tales, *Dazed & Confused*, 2006, #35,  
pp.12~13.

## 2. The Aesthetic Values of Surreal Fashion Ads

The aesthetic values of surrealistic editorial story telling in fashion ads can be examined on the basis of Freudian Uncanny.

### 1) Dualistic Representation

Surrealistic image gives out paradox, which is the representation without denotation, the copy without the original. Moreover surrealistic mimesis is to subvert representational paradigm, so it renders both fantastically disturbing reality and dualistic representation featuring simulacre.(Foster, 2004)

To convulse reality with simulacre is a Surrealist experiment. Simulacre is to question the hierarchy between the original and the copy, and between idea and representation, so to speak, to challenge the principle of identity.

To drive familiar things into illogicality of dream vision makes surrealistic image resonant opulently and stimulates our visual sensation. In addition, by agitating the whole mechanism of our perception, it reveals the superficiality of conventional reality, and pose a question about the authenticity of the image. Surrealistic simulacre is so indeterminate as to be interpret from the various viewpoint. Also it has a number of potential answers, due to comprising of innumerable signs and symbols in spite of artists' invention. Consequently, to understand surrealistic ads, consumers can both acquire the autonomy of interpretation and become concentrate on them. That is why surreal ads can be very effective for noticing.

## 2) Allegoric Symbolism

Surreal image gives allegoric narratives which various symbols come on the one scene in which divergent figures and surroundings coincide, because it endows banal image with new vigor by self-styled imagination.

According to Freudian psychology theories, surrealistic representation reflects human's subconscious desire. Human's desire to fly like Icarus which can be never realized is expressed allegorically, laying the floating scene of mysterious 'Atlantis'.<Fig. 14>

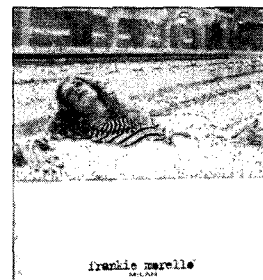
Freud dived into the mystery of the human's introspection by analyzing dreams, because he believed that dreams projected suppressed unconsciousness. Predominantly, there appeared surrealistic images which has erotic allegory, developed from Freudian symbol. 'Female body' as the sexual

sign, becomes 'material' akin to mannequin.<Fig. 7> It can be explained that fetishistic attitude about body penetrate into the whole area of consumption due to increasing logic of product in capitalist society.

Meanwhile, the association of death in surreal image evoke uncanny. The water stands for death, relevant with insanity. The following ad <Fig.15> reminds the death of Ophelia, making experience both sadism and masochism.



<Fig. 14> Atlantis for Levi's TV Commercial  
www.levis.co.kr



<Fig. 15> The death drive, *Dazed & Confused*, 2006, #35, p.49.

## 3) Fantastic Romanticism

Surrealism was influenced by the romanticism which highly valued of imagination and emotion rather than reason, revolted against the classicism which made much of the force of the rational. Surrealists admired magic and archeology to challenge rational causationism. Surrealist involved in the project to cast a spell again to capitalist society, the magic of which was dispelled by the ex-



cessive rationality, taking the advantage of the uncanny.

Surrealist pursuit of magical fantasy results in grotesque expression, as they occasionally include dark passion such as the longing for eternity, the uncertainty of the origin of existence. Image and its fragments displaced in surrealist landscape lose their original function altogether, ignored the logic of daily occurrence. Surrealism make us to gaze at the point that image forfeit its conventional function. Subsequently, surrealist artificial circumstances get to fill the contemporary sense of alienation with the illusion on euphoria.

These aesthetic values of surrealist image produce visually shocking effect such as the disturbed, the mysterious, the weird through double reality. On occasion, there happen black humor, grotesque effect against conventional aesthetics and ethics by strange juxtaposition. It might be thought that owing to the increase of social suppression, surrealist image prevails in fashion ads and that stands for the expectation on its healing effect.

Today Surrealism which had been ignored as transitory art movement in art history gets into the spotlight. According to the curator of Pompidou who laid out 'Surrealist Exhibition', it is estimated that Surrealist fantasy can play a role in consoling contemporary panic through the transcendency of absurd reality, the play with unrealistic world of dream.

According to Popcorn report in which trend forecaster and futurist Popcorn predict 21th century, people tend to welcome to fantasy that can satisfy the need to find emotional escapes to offset daily routine and stress, as one of the distinguishing trends throughout beginning of the new millenium.

It can be thought that surrealist fashion ads provide an alternative which can relieve us of our

stress and anxiety and which realize our potential desire about fantasy adventure, dramatic spectacle in contemporary post industrial lifestyle.

#### IV. Conclusion

In our visual image stage, people, as unstable subjects, are not only exposed to too much information but also tend to experience disturbing reality, taking part in the virtuality which is simulated in digital media. Virtual reality is the three dimensional visual world in which the participants interact virtually with digitally represented image. By means of interacting with this virtual reality, people often get to experience surrealist uncanny occurring through estrangement between reality and virtuality.

With this current of times, surrealist expression which featured as reinterpretation on reality in the frame of 'dream' and 'unconsciousness' can be one of main trends in fashion ads recently. Moreover the facility of digital edition embodied it more easily.

By accepting the world of unconsciousness and fantasy and making it possible to overcome our uncertain reality temporarily, it is thought that surrealist characteristics in fashion ads play an alternative role which both can relieve us of our stress and anxiety and realize our potential desire in contemporary post industrial stage.

As an avant-garde art, Surrealism has expanded the realm of expression since early 20th century. Especially, Surrealism has interacted with fashion, as we know through artist Dali's show window work. Surrealist tendency in fashion design and styling such as Schiaparelli's fashion designs, Man Ray's photo works still goes on since 1930's. Accordingly, it is thought that surrealist fashion

design remarkably expressed by avant-garde fashion designers such as Comme des Garçon, Martin Magiela should be also examined in post-modern context as further studies.

- 21) <http://www.levis.co.kr>
- 22) <http://www.luerzersarchive.us/>
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