

# THE FOUR ELEMENTS OF FASHION

Edited by  
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The *Four Elements of Fashion* brings together international scholars to rethink fashion through the prism of the archetypal elements of earth, water, air, and fire. Emerging from a conference held at the Università Iuav di Venezia and curated by Anneke Smelik and Alessandra Vaccari, the volume offers a new perspective on fashion studies at a time of profound ecological and cultural change. The Book aims to investigate new paradigms of fashion cultures through those elements of matter as they are intertwined in the clothes we wear. The research papers shift the attention towards the material and sensory aspects of fashion. This approach fits in with the 'material turn', inspired by a re-centring of matter and the materiality of things, objects, technologies, and bodies. In readdressing fashion and its histories through the lens of new materialism, the authors envision possible future fashions in multiple ways: from contributing to an environmentally and socially aware fashion to disseminating good practices in the field of fashion design.

## 6 · 2 PERFORMATIVE PROVOCATEUR

*BJÖRK'S ECO-FEMINIST FANTASTICAL WORLDS AS SPECULATIVE SPACES OF FASHION*

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## I. INTRODUCTION

Björk's live performance *Cornucopia* (2019-) presents a utopian sci-fi world, creating a performative conversation between human and machine, science and technology, body and space within a speculative eco-feminist world. This paper offers a visual analysis examining the 2019 version as a slice of the ongoing world tour and questions the boundaries of body, space, and technology within the fantastic world of *Cornucopia*. This analysis is through the lens of interior design practice, therefore, the interpretations and connections support a particular spatio-visual perspective on Björk's performance. The research also probes how traditional paradigms between humans and nature represent gender, post-human and multi-species propositions.

During her artistic career, Björk has sought to refute traditional and misogynistic parading of the female body through dress, gaze, and performance. When she broke into mainstream popular culture in the early 1990s with *Big Time Sensuality* (Fig. 1), her body is centred in the narrative, a solo character dancing on a lorry moving through a New York streetscape. By 2017, in the video for *Utopia* (Fig. 2), Björk has de-centred herself in the narrative of and she is unrecognisable as Björk. Here, the performative body becomes one with the landscape, like an alternative universe version of the painting *Ophelia* (Everett-Millais, 1851-1952). *Cornucopia* embodies the four elements of sun, air, water and soil, which Björk creatively composes within her storytelling through music, speculative fashion, and performative space to provide a compelling and thought-provoking audience experience.

## 2. METHODOLOGY AND PROPOSITION

Björk is a performative *provocateur* of our time who embeds nature and technology within a new visual language.

*Cornucopia* conceives a vision of a utopia that inserts into our present reality. This analysis explores how design and storytelling are employed as future-making through propositional and prospective ideas (Blauvelt, 2019). The speculative worlding is configured through the lens of eco-feminism (D'Eaubonne, 1974) and the proximity of virtual-digital to the physical body-space (Braidotti, 2013; Haraway, 2016).

In *Cornucopia*, this is expressed through spatio-visual storytelling (Bruno, 2002). The spatial mapping of a conceptual framework and methodology draws parallels between a practice of organising and interrogating using body, space, and technology interweaves with narrative and disruption to underpin a theoretical approach (Tab. 1).

The sci-fi pop proposition of *Cornucopia* is the result of multi-modal endeavours of music, fashion, scenography, and digital art. Björk is referred to as a polymath (Björk Unravelled, 2022) in her adventures of creative practice which embrace collaboration and interdisciplinarity. In *Cornucopia*, Björk's performative body inhabits a spatial narrative incorporating multiple technologies, from the intimate body to the spatio-visual immersive audience experience. As a performer, she inhabits a series of sculptural costumes, which express ornamentation, technology, and form to serve as disruptors of established Western and gender norms. The scenography presents an immersive experience that interweaves physical and digital space to offer technological speculation of future hybrid species.

Björk describes *Cornucopia* as digital theatre (Sonic Symbolism, 2022). The performance is like a play with Acts represented with evolving backdrops, costumes, and ensembles. *Cornucopia* does not adhere to a formulaic narrative. It is dreamlike and unstructured, offering a narrative that

orchestrates an affecting space, physically and emotionally, which is unsettling, soothing, magical, and truthful. The design of the staged interior emphasises the hybrid performance as music meets theatre meets art installation. This uniquely designed environment creates a transitory journey within a specific space and time that moves us beyond the present (Bruno, 2002). The spatio-visual narrative confounds the limitations of the traditional stage perspective, creating both a detached and immersive frame and gaze (Friedberg, 2002); thus, the audience moves between passive voyeurs and active occupants. Historically, we understand theatre as public art, a place to express social and topical problems. The importance of storytelling as a means by which we understand the complexity of our lives is defined in Susan Sontag's (1964, p. 41) essay *Going to the Theatre*: "Self-exposure is commendable in art only when it is of a quality and complexity that allows other people to learn about themselves from it".

Björk's work does not lapse into a self-indulgent music performance. As a *performative provocateur*, the body on stage is one of collaborative construction that creates a beguiling presence beyond the human. The performance considers re-imagined relations between human and non-human, care and kinship (Haraway, 2016). We could interpret *Cornucopia* as a feminist strategy of de-centring and the (wo)manifestation of a future where traditional patriarchal and Western infrastructures are de-commissioned, as argued in The Xenofeminist Manifesto (2018): "[we] urge feminists to equip themselves with the skills to redeploy existing technologies and invent novel cognitive and material tools in the service of common ends" (Laboria Cuboniks, 2018, p. 33).

### 3. SPATIAL GEOGRAPHIES

*Cornucopia* is a spatio-visual experience where the physical and conceptual merge in what Björk describes in the podcast *Björk Unravelled* (2022) as a place where digital and analogue will shake hands. The spectacle begins awakening our senses through birdsong and melodic soundscapes, acting as the first invitation to cross the threshold into her sci-fi universe. A fringed curtain acts as a veil, concealing and teasing with surface projections which dance across the digital proscenium arch. The face of an ethereal Mother Earth entices us forward into this new world. Her face morphing into a human-butterfly hybrid, echoing a world transformed beyond the human. The unveiling indicates the revealing of Björk as she emerges from the digital backdrop like an apparition, resplendent in white. Her costume is an amalgamation of human-nature-insect introducing the audience to a metamorphosis where humankind has evolved within a multi-species utopian future.

Throughout Björk's artistic practice, she has explored themes of matriarchal social structures, environmentalism, and post-Humanism. In correspondence with artist and philosopher Maggie Nelson, who commented on the connection to nature, eco-feminism, and the ongoing destruction of Mother Earth in her letter to Björk: "... not to get all 1970s eco-feminist, but part of what we are grieving, it seems to me, is the large-scale effects of killing 'mother earth'... all that individuation and dominance reaching its apotheosis in a suicidal/geocidal madness" (Another, Björk Guest Edit, 2019, para 14).

Björk's twentyfirst-century imaginings sit adjacent to twentieth-century visions of the future by designers such as Superstudio, Ettore Sottsass, and Bernard Tschumi, who similarly created political and societal provocations to instigate radical concepts as interpretations of a near-future world. In a similar speculative approach, *Cornucopia* utilises

conceptual storytelling to convey a spatial depiction of a utopian island, a terrain distinct in time and space. Björk orchestrates an atmosphere that is surreal and poetic, yet quietly unnerving. There is a sense the aim of *Cornucopia* is to take us on a journey, "a psychic voyage in and through space" (Bruno, 2002, p. 117), rather than to any earthly destination. This theatrical spectacle is underpinned with a message of hope despite the current collective dystopian fear of the threat to the world as we know it: "[it] has a proper stage and a catwalk, so it is aiming to entertain; to serve perhaps a disillusioned post-climate-changer" (Dazed, 2019).

Scenographer Ciara Stephenson describes the spatio-visual performance as an *exploration of perspective* (Architectural Digest, 2019) captured in the choreography of projections that enshroud the stage landscape and performers. The relationship between performer and audience negates conventional boundaries as the audience is transformed from passive to active. There is a delicacy and sculptural quality of the organic digital compositions. The framing and relationship of body and scenography create a visceral arrangement which enhances the narrative and performative body. The audience becomes immersed within the telling of the tale, the tension of the immaterial and material, mobile and latent (Friedberg, 2006). Architect Nigel Coates implies spatial experiences are enhanced through storytelling, whether these are speculative, queer, supernatural, or otherworldly, stating, "Narrative fictionalises our surroundings in an accentuation of explicit reality" (Coates, 2012, p. 15).

This accentuation can be interpreted as a deliberate strategy of transformation and imaginative materialisation of a future. Storytelling allows Björk to narrate an accentuation through the combination of body, space, and technologies to situate the audience within an imagined geography. In place of the traditional theatrical intermission, the tale is interrupted with the projection of Greta Thunberg's *Call to*

*Action*, recalling the Mother Earth projection in the opening sequence. The monologue drags the audience back to the present-day perils of the disquieting reality unfolding out with a fantastical world beyond the venue's walls.

The physical geography of Björk's imagined world is defined through a series of tiered islands, which appear like a hybrid of lotus leaf and magical mushroom. These islands float side by side, hosting the performers, framed by a series of digital landscapes with spectacular evolving patterns evocative of the *Aurora Borealis* often seen in Iceland (Fig. 5). The scenography acts as a spatial geometry through the arrangement of performers, sculptural geography, imagery, and soundscape. It embraces the choreography of performers who inhabit the fantastical islands, like a twenty-first-century phantasmagoria as we are mesmerised and transported beyond our body and present world through this curious interior-exterior spectacle. The digital-analogue boundaries become increasingly nebulous through the interchanging digital *mise-en-scenes* of Björk's fantastical world. We move seamlessly on this journey through a sequence of dioramas, where exterior landscapes are reshaped as metaphorical interiors (Bruno, 2002). As designed spaces, the floating islands are interpreted as a metaphor for disconnect, fragmentation, isolation, or optimism of a future world(s). Drawing on her personal experience, Björk often refers to Iceland's holistic cultural adjacency of landscape, weather and isolation as a palpable connection. This Arctic affinity evokes a deeper embodiment, which she describes as a submarine passion (Walker, 2003). The island's form is emphasised, with the ribbed edges like an oyster mushroom, whose organic lines are defiant of the Cartesian. When illuminated red, the islands evoke the molten lava of Iceland's volcanic land – an energy pulsating and breathing life beneath the surface demonstrating the enduring power of nature, which outstrips that of human power. By extension, the landscape, like

*performative provocateur*, seeks to disrupt the world as we understand it.

*Cornucopia* conveys a visual concept of *worlding* – transforming the world we know it – that seeks to interrogate or provoke through disruption of all that is, and that has passed in a future built upon kinship with nature and non-human (Braidotti, 2013; Haraway, 2016). This non-hierarchical utopian vision represents the balance of power between genders, humans and nature, and planet Earth and the Universe. As Björk prophesied,

"In order to survive as a species, we need to define our utopia." (Flood, 2022, para 9).

#### 4. BODY AND SPACE: PERFORMATIVE PROVOCATEUR

*Cornucopia* manifests an immersive experience, and the performance shifts in scale between the dreamlike to orchestrate the macro and micro-narrative via the scenography. The Chamber sits at the side of the stage, morphing into different guises; is it a sci-fi object which has landed on the Island, a shell-like abode for a creature, or a subterranean womb? The Chamber as an interior extends from visual to acoustic and the physiological reverberation of sound to the body.

The cave-like form allows the purity of Björk's vocals to transcend the womb-like enclosure, projecting her voice as if she were singing at home unguarded and intimate. The Chamber is delicate yet powerful, a place of introversion and extroversion, a whisper and an echo. This closeness of body, space, and technology allows the Chamber to become an additional costume. A de-localisation of fashion beyond an enveloping boundary between body and space shifts our understanding of how fashion is inhabited as an object (Gerrie, 2023). Such ambiguous boundaries question where the body, interiority and spatial form collide and merge. It is a wearable Chamber where Björk is both within and is the

space and one in which body-fashion-interior intersect to become avant-garde-techno wearables.

This interpretation seeks to reconceive femininity and to reassess the self concerning the body and others (Granata, 2017). The interstice of the wearable as a membrane which both permeates and shrouds the body as deliberated by designer-academic Neri Oxman: "Structural, corporeal, environmental, and spatial performance of such artefacts, and complex because of self-similar in the sense that both wearables and buildings act – at once – as barriers and as filters" (Dermit-Domus, 2017, p. 19).

The Chamber becomes a symbolic reminder of the body. It is our cocoon, lungs, and voice as we orchestrate the micro and macro worlds we inhabit through the ecosystem and space of kinship. In this, Björk demonstrates fashion beyond the body to the performative body. The sense of cocooning and intimacy of body and space is evident in the collaboration with Olivier Rousteing of Balmain with a series of amorphous sculptural garments which are part-armour-part-interior. The garments by Rousteing are reminiscent of the works of Rei Kawakubo (1948-), Georgina Godley (1955-), Leigh Bowery (1961-1994) and Bernard Rudofsky (1905-88), whose experimental forms sought to distort the idealised Western feminine form. For example, Kawakubo's *Body Meets Dress* (1997) and Godley's *Lumps and Bumps* (1986) delineate material spaces mediating the body and environment, which, as body interiors, re-emphasise the idea of metamorphosis. These disrupt the anticipated female outline, serving as a refusal or confounding of the male gaze and its expectations through these *grotesque* proportions of the silhouette (Granata, 2017; Stewart, 1993). Similarly, with the use of asymmetry, strangeness, or otherworldliness, Björk and Rousteing challenge the gaze by denouncing traditional proportions of femininity and altering the relationship between body and space. As Berger (1972, p. 40) observes in *Ways of Seeing*, the

female form shaped by social and cultural constructs: "... to be born a woman has been to be born, within an allotted and confined space, into the keeping of men". Björk's performative body refutes the misogynistic parading of the female as femininity, as defying the contained and disciplined form. She is not a subject of Western patriarchy; she does not perform to be desired. She takes up space. The body that performed is now the performative body of the provocateur.

The traditional boundary between nature and humans dissolves in these speculative sci-fi fashions. The garments evoke non-human bodily forms, suggesting sea urchins, molluscs, or similar forms of the land, sea, or universe. Moreover, like a mollusc, Björk's garments allow a measured, autonomous reveal of the body defined by the wearer to disrupt the female silhouette. Historically, the wearing of animal skin affirmed man's dominance in nature, but what we observe in Björk's costumes is a re-ordering of the human versus nature superiority, and what one might infer as a metaphor for the dismantling of dominant patriarchal and violent systems of order. These fantastical forms demonstrate an animate affinity with nature and non-humans to transform our relationship with nature through simulation or symbiosis (Bari, 2019).

The *performative provocateur* furthers the disruption and transformation of the dressing of the body. In one Act, the body is concealed within an amoeba-coral structure that floats around her being. In reference to *Vespertine* (2001), Björk described her work as an interior world, as a locked universe in which she says: "What happens inside of me, inside of my skin, my interior, travels outside of my body" (quoted in Walker, 2003), indicating that her performing body disrupts the boundaries of the physical, and through these speculative fashions, she manifests the *Performative Provocateur*.

The disruptive occupation of the fashion interior is articulated in Iris van Herpen's headpiece. The spiky mane enshrouds her head and shoulders like a fibre-optic aura or sea anemone. It resembles an amalgamation of a blowfish, a bird of paradise and a porcupine – a techno-wearable materialisation of defence and attraction. It locates the body of the *performative provocateur* at the transformed intersection of body-nature-interior-exterior, organism and environment. In *Cornucopia*, the human is no longer fashioning itself the image of God, but of the Earth (Bari, 2019, p. 212), and it is in this strangeness of the familiar and unfamiliar these are fantastical alluring costumes interweave the narrative on stage.

The creative synergy between Björk and van Herpen manifests in the Sphaera dress which oscillates the skin's boundary as an interstitial or liminal space of the body, and not of the body. This curious garment morphs between part bird, part flower, and part human without clearly defining where one contour begins and another ends: "a post-human style of in-between-ness" (Smelik, 2022, p. 14). It has an otherworldly quality, transforming the wearer into a bioluminescent sculpture synthesising body, space, and technology. Sphaera is a delicate metal skeleton; the intricate structure provides stability yet is malleable. A barely visible interior layer compliments the shimmering organza leaves, which delicately encircle the body and extend to form a floating protective chamber. The Sphaera dress provides another performative space for the body to sing, masquerade and take up space with authority. Van Herpen exemplifies a borderless fashion practice (Gerrie, 2023, p.115). Moreover, like Björk, she works with experimental concepts that seek to innovate beyond the pre-conceived boundaries of their associated disciplines. They utilise technology, science, and conceptual narratives to frame their creative concepts, which initially appear alien yet are tangible sculptures of the body. Both Van Herpen and Björk counter the

notion of their practice and are in a continual state of innovation that challenges how fashion performs an alternate female form and body interior.

## CONCLUSIONS

*Cornucopia* offers a myriad of meanings to decipher. This analysis supports the relationship between body, space and technology as crucial in providing a spatio-visual understanding of the fashioning of the performative body. The findings demonstrate that the roles of fashion costumes and scenography are interconnected and serve to embellish the narrative which unfolds through the performance.

The narrative reinforced in *Cornucopia*'s costuming alludes to provocations and possibilities where humans and non-humans transmute to become inhabitants of the sci-fi landscapes. Braidotti (2013) argues that we must deconstruct what we are familiar with to define alternative representations. Throughout *Cornucopia*, the audience are enchanted by the performative provocateur's portrayal of the inhabitants of this new world, it is uncertain where the boundaries of human and non-human forms begin to merge. Similarly, the scenography is also a landscape of the known and unknown. Therefore, *Cornucopia* encapsulates a world where spatial geometries, technology and the performative body are made material. Haraway (2016) posits that to move forward, we need to acknowledge the negative dominance of humans and reconsider our relationship with all living organisms on Earth. This assertion is evident in *Cornucopia* as an affirmation that performs an eco-feminist perspective of worlding.

Björk's *Cornucopia* occupies a space of tension and provocation. The vision of post-apocalyptic optimism is grounded in eco-feminism and a collective proposition that rejects Western patriarchal structures and systems. It uses fashion and scenography as storytelling to represent a speculative

future. The conception of this fantastical world draws from many creative explorations and seeks to re-imagine how humans might co-exist and destroy expectations of past and present to provoke and a speculative future that resides in hope, care, and kinship. This spectacle generates a poetic space and asks the question, is Björk, the *Performative Provocateur*, adorning her body in glorious imitation of the multi-species, or do the sci-fi fashions indicate a bio-evolution of a new species within this fantastical world of *Cornucopia*? Regardless, the fantastical world of *Cornucopia* is a beautiful example of speculative spaces for fashion.

## FIGURES

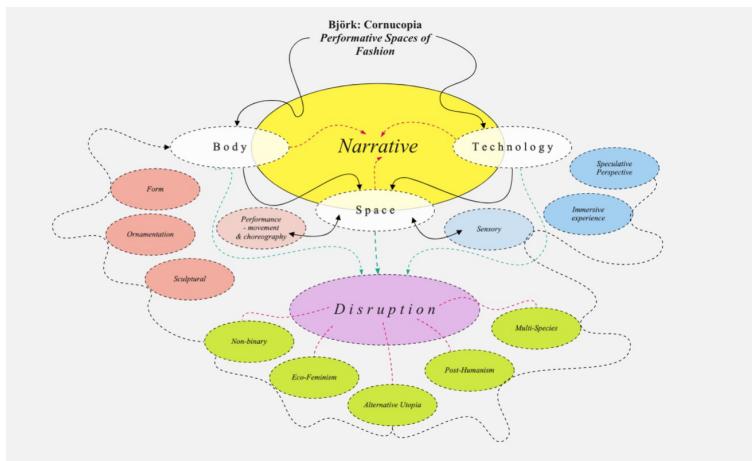


Fig. 1 Screenshot by author from *Big Time Sensuality*, Sednaoui (1993).



Fig. 2 Screenshot by author from *Utopia*, Kanda (2017).

## TABLES



Tab. 1. Methodology Diagram by P. Flanagan (2022).

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**Pamela Flanagan** is Programme Leader BA Hons Interior Design, The Glasgow School of Art, Glasgow, Scotland. Her current research focuses on the analysis of constructed spaces of performance, film, and TV to question how set design informs, imagines, and creates narratives through a spatial dialogue. observed a parallel between costume and set design as visual endorsements which interweave the body within the *mise-en-scène*.

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