International Journal for Multidisciplinary Research (IJFMR)
E-ISSN: 2582-2160 ● Website: www.ijfmr.com ● Email: editor@ijfmr.com

The Formal Mutability of Avant-Gardist Costumes in Contemporary Theatre

Imen Samet Arous

Head of the Department of Theater and performing Arts, the Higher Institute of Music and Theater of Kef- University of Jendouba- Tunisia

Abstract

The avant-garde movement has greatly influenced many artistic varieties. These evolved with revolutionary and critical thought to create a new perspective. This difference comes from creative experiences across many fields, theatre which helped to set a new trend that supports the avant-garde path of modern and contemporary theatre. The avant-gardist theatre costumes sparked a revolution in form and thought, through shifting the stage from accepted norms to new ideas and perceptions that broke with classical and familiar rules. This article explores the contribution of avant-gardist costumes in modern theatre and their role in constructing extraordinary characters that go beyond formal content to achieve semantic and kinetic liberation, whether referring to international experiences or through our personal theatrical costume designs. The leading methods of researching this problem are methods of analysis, deduction, induction and comparison of approaches.

Keywords: Avant-garde; Costume; Fashion; Theatre; Formal mutability.

Introduction

The uniqueness of theatre lies in the specificity of its visual language, particularly through costume design, which serves as a living field of experimentation and aesthetic revolution. Within the avant-garde context, theatrical costumes transcend their traditional function as decorative or narrative elements to become autonomous aesthetic agents capable of questioning, deconstructing, and reinventing the theatrical image. This study focuses on avant-garde costumes in theatre as a creative and intellectual force that redefines the relationship between body, space, and visual representation. It builds on the principles of rebellion, innovation, and redefinition that have characterized avant-garde movements since the early twentieth century, principles that continue to influence contemporary design thinking.

In this framework, design schools, technologies, and performance methodologies intersect in the search for new, inventive forms of theatrical costuming and new ways of employing them, thus challenging the very foundations of collective aesthetic taste. The avant-garde, therefore, represents an expansive field of knowledge and aesthetics, constituting both the foundation and the continuous renewal of thought and art. To construct a visual discourse that carries the performance's symbolic and aesthetic codes, theatrical costumes rely on processes and techniques of innovation. This has motivated us to explore the concept of costume and its shaping based on aesthetic references rooted in the accumulation of modern and contemporary theatrical experiences, ideas, and perceptions. The creativity is considered as an essential condition for developing knowledge and engaging with transformative, revolutionary artistic data.

Accordingly, this research examines the semantic, aesthetic, and structural transformations that have characterized avant-garde costume practices, from early Futurist and Constructivist experiments to today's hybrid expressions. The purpose is to analyze how avant-garde theatrical costumes construct a visual discourse grounded in revolt and hybridity, embodying the ongoing evolution of avant-garde thought and art. Ultimately, the study aims to explore the changing relationship of form in avant-garde theatre costumes as an aesthetic phenomenon that encapsulates the essence of revolutionary theatre and manifests its enduring transformative energy.

Method and Context

The methodological approach of this study combines analytical, comparative, and interpretative methods within an interdisciplinary framework linking theatre studies[1], visual semiotics[2], and costume design theory[3]. The research relies on both qualitative and aesthetic analysis, aiming to interpret the formal mutability of avant-gardist costumes as a dynamic phenomenon that transforms visual perception and dramaturgical function in contemporary theatre[4].

The analytical method is used to deconstruct the formal and symbolic structures of avant-garde costumes by examining their visual codes, materials, and kinetic properties[3]. This involves analyzing selected international avant-garde expériences, such as those of the Bauhaus school, Futurism, Dada, and Surrealism, alongside personal and experimental theatrical costume designs that embody similar principles of disruption and innovation[5].

The comparative approach serves to identify convergences and divergences between historical avant-garde costume design and its contemporary reinterpretations[6]. This method allows the study to trace how conceptual and aesthetic revolutions of the early twentieth century persist in today's performative practices, whether in visual composition, technology integration, or spatial dialogue on stage.

The deductive and inductive reasoning applied in the research enables a two-way movement: from theoretical frameworks of the avant-garde towards their practical manifestations in costume[3], and conversely, from specific case studies and examples towards broader aesthetic and philosophical interpretations[7]. This dialectical method reflects the avant-garde spirit itself, a continuous oscillation between form and meaning, tradition and rupture.

Contextually, the study is situated within the broader discourse of modern and contemporary theatre[8], where costume design is seen as a structural and semantic component of the performance. The avant-garde context, shaped by movements such as Constructivism, Futurism, and Bauhaus, has transformed costume into a site of experimentation, abstraction, and technological mediation[9]. The research thus considers costume as both a visual language and a performative act that engages with social, ideological, and aesthetic transformations.

By examining the formal mutability of avant-garde costumes[6], this study aims to highlight how these artistic forms continue to challenge the boundaries between body and object. The methodological framework, therefore, studies costume as a material form and a philosophical inquiry into change, transformation, and the perpetual reinvention of theatrical identity.

Avant-garde movement: semantic and intellectual dimensions

The avant-garde movement is associated with experimentation and is fundamentally based on the principle of breaking with what exists. This movement is characterized by renewal and deviation from what is conventional. The avant-garde movement was initially influenced by rebellious political thought, followed

by literature, sociology, and art, which required addressing the concept of renewal and development through the tendency of most writers and thinkers to experiment with new mechanisms, techniques, and methods that transcend tradition and establish different creative perceptions. “The Idea of the Avant-Garde is premised on the assumption that the concept of the avant-garde has a particular impact on our thinking in these times of global political crisis.”[4]

The avant-garde movement is considered a doctrine oriented towards the future. Pierre Bourdieu describes the avant-garde movements as transcending the spatial and temporal framework in the process of artistic creations, through presenting art that does not belong to their time or age. the avant-garde movements emphasize also the maturity of avant-garde artists, their ethics and principles, and their liberation from any manifestation of pragmatism and opportunism, that Bourdieu considers as a form of artistic decadence, opposed to avant-garde artists who reject money and any form of social and material grandeur.

“The dichotomy between art and monetary value... saves as the fundamental principle underlying numerous judgments that purport to delineate the boundary between artistic and non-artistic works, between bourgeois art and intellectual art, and between traditional art and avant-garde art.”[10] Conversely, Bourdieu emphasizes the avant-garde's focus on art for art's sake and the significance of artistic endeavours in achieving societal benefits. The avant-garde frequently offers no assurance of its doctrine beyond its disregard for monetary gain and its commitment to creation, research, and artistic competition, as financial considerations are deemed inconsequential outside the realm of public service. This analysis reveals the foundational principles upon which the avant-garde movement is predicated and the extent to which it is influenced by communist and socialist ideologies, wherein the prevalence of progressive and modernist concepts appears evident. “Any novel developments pertaining to the avant-garde are inherently inscribed within an artistic genealogy dating back to the preceding two centuries. Regardless of the observed ruptures and continuities, their inscription within an avant-garde configuration renders the cultural practices and artworks in question representative of a finitude that exhibits its own organizing principles within an infinitely multiple truth.”[4]

The distinctive nature of the avant-garde movement in comparison to its predecessors also contributed to the emergence of futurist ideas, as these concepts were only comprehended subsequent to the conclusion of the era in which they originated. Avant-gardists generally find their audience in future generations. The avant-garde movement further contributed to the transformation and subversion of dominant artistic and intellectual foundations, establishing a revolt against the bourgeoisie, and thereby becoming a source of strength and stability. It aims to overturn the prevailing representation in the artistic domain and demonstrate that docility resides with the avant-garde and its denunciation of bourgeois docility. "In contrast, the sole possibility for a truly progressive association of political and aesthetic avant-gardes would emanate from the intellectual elite, constituted as it is through elective affinity rather than class interests."[4]

Conversely, the avant-garde movement has been associated with political and social crises that precipitated revolutionary popular movements and critical intellectuals who advocated for rejection and rebellion against the prevailing authority, particularly in America following the 1930s crisis and preceding the outbreak of World War II. "The concept of the Avant-Garde negotiates the implications for a contemporary intelligentsia that is not only aware of the distinct temporalities of radical art and politics, but also moderates revolutionary negativity with a degree of detachment from even the avant-garde itself."[4]

Influence of avant-garde on theatrical art

The intellectual maturity of the avant-garde movement exerted influence on theatrical art, leading to the emergence of socially conscious theatres which focus on community issues, responding to common needs, and imposing a significant awareness discourse. Theatre underwent a transformative evolution through its avant-garde works which endeavoured to establish a profound connection between theatrical performance and societal life. Avant-garde theatre "is often invoked as the bellwether for a society fragmented, alienated, and critical of efforts to create collectively shared meanings. A theatre whose sequenced actions have no narrative mirrors a social world where the most conflictual situations no longer appear as drama but merely as spectacle."[7]

The art of theatre has significantly contributed to the dissemination of collective awareness due to the close association of theatre artists with the societal issues, which serve as the inspiring themes that they explored in theatrical works. The avant-garde movement has produced numerous significant developments in the history of theatre, as these innovations are primarily based on revolutionary values. They are characterized by their departure from classical experiences and traditional stereotypical methods, as well as their transcendence of accepted approaches and dominant themes. Furthermore, they seek to propagate an ideology that enables the theatre artist to elevate his perceptions and ideas to a level of necessary consciousness to confront fanaticism and decadence. And despite this, the philosopher Gabriel Marcel emphasizes the lack of roots or heritage of avant-garde artists: It is, in my opinion, a very significant fact that the main representatives of this avant-garde are uprooted foreigners, whose thought, one could say, moves in a no man's land. A Beckett, an Adamov, an Ionesco live on the margins of any national life.[11]. Thus, the theatre artists must be cognizant of their societal value, as they represent the voice of their community. The avant-garde, in this context, is engaged in the interests and rights of the populace and is also imbued with their human essence and freedom, **"**like the 'pure' perception of pictorial works, the 'pure' reading that the most advanced works of the avant-garde necessarily demand, and that critics and other professional readers tend to apply to all legitimate works, is a social institution,"[12] that encompasses social commitments. The maturity of an artist, is thus manifested in his commitment to address the exigencies of their era, maintain contemporaneity, and remain receptive to diverse, objective perspectives in the representation of contemporary issues.

The rebellion of the avant-garde movement pertains to the text, the theatrical space and the aesthetic conventions[8]. Consequently, the avant-garde is based predicated on a rupture with established and dominant paradigms, which is perceived as a form of artistic courage. Several artistic collectives that adhered to this revolutionary approach emerged in America during the previous century, notably the Living Theatre in New York[13]: a movement with a leftist political ideology, whose most prominent pioneers were Judith Malina and Julian Beck in 1968, and the experimental endeavour of the Open Theatre founded by the Russian Joseph Shkin.

It is also pertinent to discuss the Bread and Puppet Theatre[14], which originated in America and subsequently expanded to Europe. Peter Schumann is considered the founder of this influential movement, which primarily focuses on exploring public conscience through the distribution of bread, as bread carries symbolic significance that can impact both cognitive and emotional faculties. This approach of confronting the audience with their concerns and inquiries can be characterized as revolutionary, diverging from classical Aristotelian theatre and distinguishing itself from Brechtian's one[15]. It represents one of the movements that introduced innovation and differentiation, setting it apart from other theatrical currents.

Building upon the foundations of educational theatre, epic theatre, and alienation, Bertolt Brecht endeavoured to differentiate his approach from Aristotelian theatre, which he posited primarily relied on inducing passivity and a lack of critical thought and reasoning in the audience. Brecht contended that Aristotelian theatre deprived individuals of their intellectual and spiritual faculties and necessitated a counterbalance through a rational and contemplative approach. "Brecht's theatre, which is known as epic theatre, was unequivocally an avant-garde. Indeed, it has been regarded as one of the most significant and influential modern avant-garde theatres. His aesthetic principles have continued to exert influence on theatre up to the present day, as the prevailing paradigm has shifted from modernism to postmodernism."[16]

Brecht's approach was predicated on revolutionary principles that aimed to stimulate the audience's critical thinking, analysis and interpretation of performative symbols without eliciting emotional engagement or identification with the depicted events and characters[15]. Consequently, Brecht's theatrical methodology necessitated a rational approach, while still maintaining elements of pleasure and enjoyment. Brecht initiated a paradigm shift in human cognition and endeavoured to develop this shift in relation to theatrical practice. He posited that the creative artist must intervene in nature, effecting change rather than mere imitation, thereby, advocating for an intellectual revolution. This stance was particularly significant given that Brecht's aesthetic revolution was inextricably linked to his revolutionary objectives. "The avant-garde artists were denounced as 'breeders' of the proletarian world revolution. Brecht was supposedly one of them."[16]

At the beginning of the 1990s, new forms of theatrical training emerged, with theatre practitioners rehabilitating previously adopted theatrical laws and trying to find modern ways of creating theatrical effects. The world witnessed several attempts, including those of Jacques Cobo, who founded his own theatre (Vieux Colombier)[17], and Louis Jouvet, who is considered the founder of a school of theatrical representation which formed a methodology adopted by Stranzburg in the Actor's Workshop and which he also founded (Theatre des Champs Elysées)[18]. As for Stanislavski, who founded the Actors Studio in Moscow, he attached great importance to the actor, using dramatic expressions such as dance, movement, improvisation, and pantomime[19]. The confrontation and courage that characterized the pioneers of the avant-garde movement in the theatre and the revolutionary path that led them to create, innovate, and break with familiar dramatic rules can thus be traced.

The avant-garde movement is without doubt responsible for the development of various cultural, literary, and artistic movements, emerging from different disciplines, that rejected modern artistic tradition while proposing a break with the historical line of faithful representation of reality and the search for ideal beauty. This period saw the emergence of various schools of thought and institutions which emerged in the late 19th century and 20th century in Europe. These pioneers were among the first to propose revolutionary changes in their respective societies. "The triumphant narrative of the avant-gardes was not just a way for the avant-gardes to distinguish themselves from the movements that preceded them."[20]

In the spirit of embracing modernity, avant-gardism found expression in German Expressionism as a genuine form of avant-garde, as along with Fauvism, Cubism, Futurism, and the Russian Avant-Gardes (Suprematism, Constructivism, Russian Futurism)[11]. The second phase also includes schools that sought to connect artistic activity to the concrete life of people, such as the Bauhaus and architectural functionalism, in opposition to the irrationality of the unrealistic and metaphysical movements that rejected reality as hypocritical and destructive, such as Dadaism and Surrealism. The third phase

encompasses Abstract Expressionism, Pop Art, Minimalism, and Conceptual Art, as movements that find inspiration in concrete art and perceptivism[19].

It is interesting to consider that the psychological and social difficulties faced by avant-garde artists during the periods of world wars may have been a motivating factor for artistic development and creativity. It could be also said that the suffering and emotions of the artist serve as a source of inspiration and a new method that breaks with dominant methods. This could established the inherent intersection between all the arts and intellectual movements, as any attempt at innovation and breaking with the familiar could be considered a form of the avant-garde. "If there had been no modern arts and avant-garde movements, if there had never been Matisse and Picasso, Kandinsky and Mondrian, Pollock and Newman, Beuys and Pistoletto, Cindy Sherman and Jeff Wall; if we did not know Proust and Joyce, Kafka and Musil, Pynchon and DeLillo... could we say how modernized societies, current societies, would be different, and how we would be different people."[21]

It could be said that visual art plays a significant role in the expression of rebellion towards colours, shapes, and themes. The complementary relationship between the visual arts and theatre has provided a valuable foundation for research on the influences of the avant-garde movement on theatrical form, particularly in costume design as an important visual element of the theatrical stage.

Influence of Early Avant-Garde Art Movements on Fashion Design

Early avant-garde art movements, such as Futurism, Dadaism, and Surrealism, played a crucial role in redefining the concept of clothing and fashion[22]. The Futurist movement emphasized movement, speed, and the rejection of tradition, focusing on embodying the technological and mechanical spirit of the modern era, as exemplified in the works of the Italian artist Giacomo Balla, which later inspired fashion designers[23]. Meanwhile, Dadaism embraced the idea of revolution against artistic and conventional norms through satire, chaos, and experimental randomness, led by figures such as Tristan Tzara, aiming to dismantle established patterns and traditions. Surrealism concentrated on imagination, the unconscious, and exaggerated or unusual symbols, drawing inspiration from the works of Salvador Dalí, allowing designers to introduce unexpected and innovative elements into clothing. These movements, together with the contributions of Oskar Schlemmer at the Bauhaus, encouraged artists and designers to break away from traditional molds and create new shapes and colors that transcend classical models, reflecting a vision of clothing as a liberated artistic expression[24].

The Bauhaus school absorbed these avant-garde experiences and integrated their principles into its educational curriculum and design practices. Artists such as Oskar Schlemmer combined geometric abstraction, simplicity of form, and bold colors in theatrical costume design and everyday clothing. Bauhaus also emphasized the structural and functional aspects of clothing, while preserving the element of artistic experimentation and innovation inspired by earlier avant-garde movements. This approach became a bridge between artistic experimentation and applied art in fashion design, establishing Bauhaus as a key reference in the evolution of avant-garde fashion during the 20th century[25].

Table 1. Semantic and Aesthetic Dimensions of Avant-Garde Movements

Avant-garde Movement	Conceptual Basis	Aesthetic Principles	Representative Artists	Influence on Costume
Futurism	Dynamism, speed, industrial modernity	Geometric abstraction, metallic fabrics	Giacomo Balla	Mechanized, kinetic costumes
Dadaism	Rebellion against logic	Collage, absurdity, fragmentation	Tristan Tzara	Deconstruction of form
Bauhaus	Unity of arts and technology	Functionality, abstraction	Oskar Schlemmer	Constructivist and geometric designs
Surrealism	Dream, unconscious, symbolism	Organic shapes, metaphoric materials	Salvador Dalí	Symbolic and metamorphic costumes

A fundamental principal of the Bauhaus school was the integration of visual arts with science, particularly engineering and industry, it ‘s is an art school that encourages the reconciliation between “creative artists and the industrial world”[5]. It establishes the concept of rebellion against previous experiences, with the institution’s origins can be traced back to abstract art, a style that was subsequently followed by expressionism. The Bauhaus school is widely recognised for its role in the development of functionalist constructivism. The Bauhaus school encouraged its pioneers to challenge conventional forms and materials, perceiving each as a potential source of inspiration that could be adapted to create an artistic effect. “It reflected that artists did not concentrate on commodity design during that period, which made the contradiction between art and technology obvious. The stereotyped industrial products without a design sense and handicrafts cannot meet the social needs.”[26]

The liberty in terms of style, form, material, and colour enabled the Bauhaus to open up to a new world of different perceptions and helped its pioneers move away from imitation to follow their own approach and address new self-referential themes. Consequently, the conceptual framework of Bauhaus artists underwent a transformation, acquiring new dimensions and characteristics that were subjective in nature and originated from the artists themselves.

The Bauhaus is widely regarded as one of the most distinguished art schools, with a specialism in design across a range of disciplines. It has made significant contributions to the realm of artistic and theatrical costume design. During the modernist period, the school gained international renown for its originality and innovative methods and techniques, most notably the integration of scientific and artistic elements. This approach, which was to become a major reference point in the realm of avant-garde fashion design during the modernist period, represented a significant departure from traditional methods and radical rethinking of the relationship between science and art. “Bauhaus revolutionized the idea of ‘pure art’ and ‘applied art’ as two mutually exclusive educational concepts, subsequently proposed the idealism of ‘group innovation’. Gropius believes that ‘group innovation’ is the core of design and this method benefits design and the development of industrial production.”[26]

The pedagogical approach of the Bauhaus school was predicated on the study of geometric forms, with a concomitant exploration of their origins and semantic dimensions. This pedagogical approach was employed to address critical subjects that served the requirements of the artwork, with a view to achieving a unification of the modern and the traditional. The endeavour was undertaken to achieve a unity that

would embody the value of the artistic effect, thus ensuring its immortality and its status as a necessary subject of research. These forms were regarded as a wellspring of inspiration and a foundational element in the design process. This distinction, among others, set the Bauhaus school apart from its peers, exerting a distinctive influence on avant-garde and exceptional fashion design.

Oskar Schlemmer, a German painter, set designer, photographer, sculptor, and writer, is considered one of the most prominent pioneers of the Bauhaus school, whose contributions to theatre are widely acknowledged. His work is valued for its innovative approach to combine visual art and theatre, particularly in the realm of constructing theatrical spaces. “Bauhaus Theater obtained its most complete form through Oskar Schlemmer’s artistic, pedagogical and theoretical work. The key problem for Schlemmer was the law of motion of the human body in space.”[27]

Schlemmer’s interest in theatrical activity at the Bauhaus was fulled by his belief in the depth and semantic dimensions of the human body, a perspective shaped by his studies of the human form in relation to space. “Schlemmer was made an exclusive member of the Bauhaus exactly by his intensive interest in the human being in relation with the modern society and over all modernization of the human life”[27]. This theoretical framework informed his designs for theatrical costumes and the conceptualisation of theatrical space. Schlemmer’s approach to theatre compassed as a relational perspective wherein the theatrical environment was regarded as an abstract space as an abstract artistic medium, where human forms are metamorphosed through the medium of masks and costumes, thereby expressing shapes, colours, and movements.

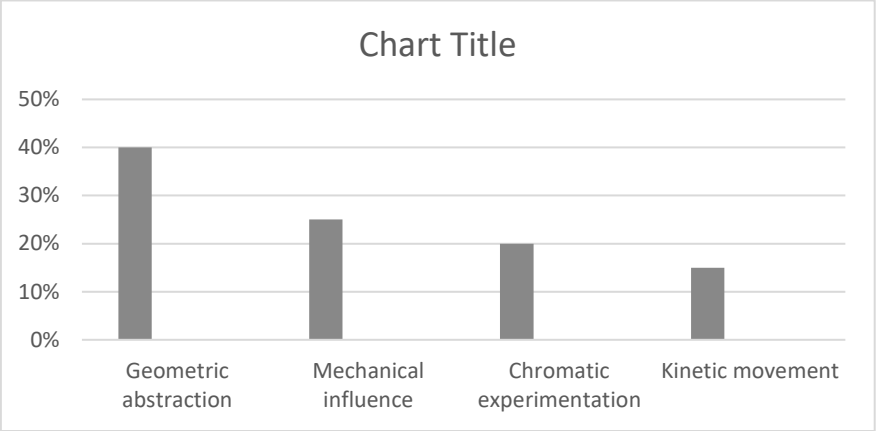
The development of materials utilised in the creative process constitutes one of the foundational principles of the Bauhaus, wherein fashion creation transcends the conventional boundaries of fabrics. Designers employ a diverse array of materials that appear alien to the fashion industry, employing them in an innovative and practical manner that serves the creation of a structural, formal, and functional point of view, "as well as the movements of mechanical and organic bodies within a limited space.”[27] This approach was regarded as a pivotal gateway for the flourishing of creativity and innovation.

This revolutionary trend was embraced by Oskar Schlemmer in his theatrical costume creations, that he presented as part of a theatrical performance imbued with a series of meanings and symbols. Schlemmer also introduced the theatre workshop within the Bauhaus and became interested in the relationship between the body of the actor or dancer, the costumes, and the space. For Oscar Schlemmer, dance is an independent stage art in itself . “Thus, the dance, according to its origin, becomes Dionysian and pure feeling, symbol for the balancing of polarities.”[28]

Schlemmer’s oeuvre is characterised by a novel conception of the human body and the concept of movement, with a view to achieving a certain level of research and depth in space and its relationship with moving forms. This is exemplified in his dance performance Ballet Tardique, created in Germany in 1922. There are three main characteristics of ballet as defined by Schlemmer, the costumes which are of a colored, three-dimensional design, the human figure which is an environment of basic mathematical shapes, and the corresponding movements of that figure in space. [29]

Based on visual analysis of Triadic Ballet costume designs and related stage experiments[25, 28, 29], we can identify four predominant formal tendencies: geometric abstraction (≈40%), mechanical influence (≈25%), chromatic experimentation (≈20%), and kinetic movement (≈15%). These proportions, while indicative rather than statistical, reflect the relative dominance of each formal component in Bauhaus performative aesthetics.

Figure 1. Predominant Formal Elements in Bauhaus Theatrical Designs



Schlemmer's creations are distinguished by the abolition of the human body and its complete absence, with the body assuming the form and movement of a machine. The dancers are trained to work in a repetitive rhythm similar to the movement of a machine, and the forms used in costume design are flat, composite shapes with metallic characteristics, whether through the paint used or the materials employed, so that the machine seems embodied on stage, while hiding all elements of the human body and focusing on the rhythm of the music employed[25].

The core features of avant-garde fashion design lie in its capacity to break with tradition and reject classical, familiar patterns, aiming to create an innovative experience that transcends established aesthetic norms. Avant-garde expression also manifests through the use of geometric and abstract shapes, as well as the interaction of color, line, and form to communicate visual ideas and emotions beyond mere decoration[3]. The approach combines aesthetic and functional considerations, ensuring mobility and comfort while preserving artistic expression. Moreover, avant-garde design emphasizes experimentation with materials and techniques, employing unconventional fabrics and methods to achieve distinctive visual effects, often inspired by modern art movements such as Cubism and Futurism, thereby expanding design horizons and connecting fashion with artistic modernity[24]. Finally, this approach contributes to enhancing the awareness of both designers and audiences, fostering critical reflection and aesthetic appreciation.

Table2: Features of Avant-Garde Fashion Design

Feature	Description	Artistic/Functional Objective
Breaking with Tradition	Rejecting classical and familiar patterns	Create a new, innovative experience beyond traditional models
Geometric and Abstract Shapes	Use of simple and abstract lines and forms	Convey a specific visual idea or emotion, beyond traditional decoration
Interaction of Color, Line, and Shape	Balanced combination of visual elements	Enhance aesthetic message and expressive power of the garment

Aesthetic and Functionality Combined	Ensuring practical wearability	Maintain comfort and mobility while preserving artistic expression
Experimentation with Materials and Techniques	Using unconventional fabrics and methods	Produce innovative visual effects and achieve artistic distinction
Avant-Garde Inspirations	Drawing from modern art movements like Cubism and Futurism	Expand design horizons and connect fashion with artistic modernity
Impact on Designer and Audience Awareness	Designs that provoke thought and reflection	Enhance artistic and aesthetic awareness among designers and viewers

These characteristics are directly linked to the principles of the Bauhaus school and early avant-garde art, which laid the foundation for critical and creative thinking in theatrical costume design. By integrating functionality with aesthetics, experimenting with materials, and exploring the interplay between body, space, and form, these schools paved the way for the evolution of avant-garde towards contemporary and hybrid experimentation in modern theatre.

The uses of avant-garde costumes in contemporary theatre: from the ordinary to the unordinary

The emancipation and experimentation that underpin avant-garde theatre have contributed to the renewal of the components of theatrical representation, thus rendering contemporary theatrical works are therefore part of movements of renewal. These works serve as a kind of break from the aesthetic of the typical theatrical image, in order to establish the construction of a different image characterised by strangeness and uniqueness. Avant-garde theatre works on the theatre of the image, paying close attention to all visual elements to present a visual text full of symbols and figures through experimentation and the development of the inherent relationship between decor, costumes, accessories, space, methods, and techniques[30].

The evolution of costume design techniques and approaches constitutes a pivotal aspect in the transformation of their utilisation and semantic function[2]. This is primarily due to the predominance of staging schools that prioritise the actor's physical presentation. This is because it serves to delineate the characteristics of the character portrayed played by the actor and contributes to the establishment of the theatrical performance's identity. Moreover, the audience's reception process necessitates the interpretation of the formal aesthetic elements of theatrical costumes and their content . It is evident that costumes have garnered significant attention from the director during the initial conception and formulation of staging ideas, from the designer throughout the planning, design, and implementation process, and from the actor during the performance itself. The director seeks, through the forms, a space in which to evoke the different ideas and ideologies he wishes to use and address[1].

The impact of costumes on actors is twofold: firstly, they help actors to imitate their characters and, secondly, they impose certain movements that align with the nature of the clothing, thus insuring that actors are able to move freely[3]. As Stanislavski emphasises , in his book Building a Character, the role of theatrical costumes is also important in enabling actors to access the character they are portraying. The theatrical costume, therefore, imposes the necessity of harmony with the character played by the actor, shaping their inner world and determining their movement and acting style. "The most important lesson

offered by Stanislavsky is that an actor, in order to become a credible character, has to experience every posture, every sensation, every affection necessary in the metamorphosis of the character"[31].

Theatre costumes are instrumental in creating a compelling presence on stage, contributing to the development of the character's dimensions and components, and bringing them to life. These costumes serve to reveal the psychological, social, historical, intellectual, and political context of the character being portrayed, thereby facilitating the transformation process between the actor and the character[11]. This transformation is one of the most challenging steps for an actor during the rehearsal period. This transformation encompasses a shift in the actor's physiological structure, thereby metamorphosing them into the essence of their character.

"The transformation of the human body, its metamorphosis, is made possible by the costume."[25](32) It can thus be concluded that the wearing of costumes has the capacity to modify an actor's bodily composition, with the result that it adapts said composition to that of the character the actor is endeavouring to embody.

The psychological state of a character in a theatrical performance can be identified through various elements including interpretation, the text, lighting, and other components of the performance. However, it is the costumes that enables the actor to embody the character's psychological state by donning the character's attire, metaphorically "putting on a second skin",[1] which facilitates recognition of all sensory experiences, thereby facilitating the process of transformation. Consequently theatrical costumes serve as carriers of numerous meanings and symbols inherent to the theatrical performance. It is imperative for the theatre practitioner to utilise costumes objectively, just as they utilise the other elements of the performance. Theatre costumes serve a dual purpose: they are an aesthetic device and also serve to draw attention and exert a transformative effect on the actor.

The evolution of the theatre costume design has had a profound impact on the methodologies employed in their utilisation during performances. It is imperative to acknowledge the integrated nature of theatre costumes, as their rebellion contributes, to that of the actor in terms of form and movement, and to the creation of unconventional and avant-garde theatrical characters.

An exploration will be undertaken of one of the more innovative experiences in the construction of a theatrical character that is distinct from the norm, through the use of costumes based on grotesque techniques, "which is one of the most complex and multifaceted phenomena in art"[32]. These techniques formally rely on oscillating between the beautiful and the ugly, distortion, amplification, irony, contrast and all kinds of bodily mutilations.

Semantically, the characteristics of the grotesque in theatre are based on a break with the dominant theatrical style, all ideologies, themes, and inherited real-world problems, in an attempt to establish the illogical and imaginary, as part of a renewal and rebellion against classical theatrical movements. The aesthetic particularity of the grotesque is thus defined by its subversion of accepted rules, culminating in the production of a miraculous imaginary image that exceeds the limits of plausibility, both in terms of surface form and at an intellectual level.

This grotesque strangeness appeared frequently in contemporary avant-garde works, perhaps most notably in the works of Bob Wilson. He developed a contemporary version of symbolic opera whilst working on an innovative style in his 2008 production of "Shakespeare Sonnets." Avant-garde aesthetic techniques and sophisticated lighting effects were employed, and these are evident in his ironic visual discourse. Wilson is recognised for his stylised formalism and minimalist sets, besides he adopted amplification and formal provocation in all components of his performance, thereby creating a homogeneous visual

discourse. “Wilson's attitude towards theater and, consequently, towards stage costume, 'gave new meaning to life itself, helping to illuminate 'the other side of the dream”[33].

The employment of these techniques is related to the selection of forms, colours, and materials of the costumes created by the American designer Jaques Reynaud, which influenced the actor's performance, whether in movement, sound, or sensation. Consequently, Bob Wilson's work has become a landmark in the 'Theatre of Image,' having succeeded in creating a visual symphony harmonized with all components of theatrical performance, blending the aesthetics of the image with technical hybridization. Through stage costumes, he seeks to generate new cognitive patterns that stimulate the audience's intellectual and sensory engagement, drawing on the interactive dimensions afforded by contemporary technologies. Avant-gardism today is an artistic experience that reconfigures beauty through the hybridization of human and technology. Wilson’s productions, which lean toward contemporary avant-gardism, often test the limits of bodies, fit, and the pacing of the performance, designing costumes in unconventional ways that employ sudden movements and interactions with lighting, set design, and actors’ performance, thereby creating a fully integrated and immersive theatrical experience.

“When speaking about the creative process with Wilson, the costume designer mentions the importance of forms for the director. The key to the success of his partnership with Wilson lies in the freedom Wilson gives him to create. However, he emphasizes that the creation is free as long as it presents precise shapes and lines in space, as well as using monochromatic fabrics. These are characteristics clearly observable in the costumes of the performance in question.”[34]

The theatrical image is a stage dimension that functions by establishing new relationships characterised by an insistence on forms, colours, sizes, and unusual references, thereby transporting the audience into an atmosphere of imagination and strangeness. This phenomenon was evident in the excerpts from the German show "Momix-Botanica," which was produced by the Mahaiwe Performing Arts Centre in 2012[11].

In the aforementioned performances, it is evident that the costumes function as the primary catalyst for the show, exerting control over all components and shaping the spatial environment. The costumes are designed by Michael Curry, They envelop the entire space, thereby forming an unconventional image that contributes to the audience's astonishment, thus rending the image the most pivotal element of the performance. Consequently, “the theatre costume, through the medium of spectacle, facilitates the dissolution of the ideological constraints that frequently encumber purely aesthetic interpretation of artistic works.”[30]

It is evident that these performances have also been instrumental in the development of a novel concept of fashion, with the actor's performance becoming predominantly reliant on the costumes. A discernible differentiation in the composition of the costume, becomes apparent, wherein it is integrated into the actor's body, thereby becoming an integral component of the performance. The actor then adapts their performance and movement based on the form and size of the costume, thereby imbuing it with meaning and facilitating the articulation of diverse expressions. In this context, the movements of the actor become inhuman, illogical, fluid, and harmonious with the costume, and its specificity lies in the fact that it is a movement specific to the costume, which can only be produced when the actor wears the theatre costume. “The costume, in these conditions, is above all the site of a bodily performance.”[30]

The evolution of the theatre costume has not been confined to the pursuit of enrichment in purely formal aspects, it has also encompassed the functional and semantic dimensions, resulting in a transformation of the techniques and methodologies employed in its utilisationg. Consequently, the theatre costume

transcends its role as an accessory, metamorphosing into a domain of representation and a catalyst for movement. The crux of the artist's ingenuity lies in the creation of performances that are predicated on costumes and the awe-inspiring effects they engender. “The deactivation of the costume would be the logical but paradoxical consequence of the emancipation of the artistic gesture. By designing a costume not defined by its usage, artists would have finally succeeded in truly revealing the spectacular dimension of the costume.”[30]

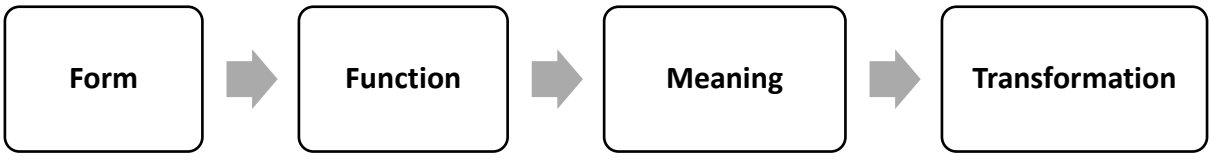
Table 3. From Conventional to Unordinary Costumes in Contemporary Theatre

Criterion	Conventional Costume	Avant-Gardist Costume
Function	Decorative or illustrative	Structural and performative
Material	Textile-based	Mixed media, synthetic, digital
Meaning	Symbolic reference	Autonomous semantic object
Actor–Costume Relation	External identity	Integrated or hybrid body
Perception	Realistic representation	Abstract or conceptual transformation

The distinctiveness of avant-gardism lies in its ability to build upon the experiences of its predecessors while preserving, enriching, and developing prevailing aesthetics. True creativity can only be achieved through a return to the original principles[35]. This return seeks to establish a different perspective and impose rebellious choices capable of persuading the audience through the presentation of formal and semantic aesthetics that construct the artistic effect. These ideas and concepts can be further supported by analysing various aesthetic phenomena based on the development of an exceptional image that ensures chromatic, material, and thematic harmony across all components of the performance.

The use of avant-garde costumes contributes to transforming both set design and theatrical performance, offering a rich visual and kinetic text that challenges conventional interpretations. It fosters a critical reading that drives contemporary avant-gardism to reinterpret reality, in both its present and past, with a critical awareness that draws on innovative tools to pose fundamental questions about the body, space, and identity in theatrical performance. In these productions, costumes regulate the movement of the body , sometimes constraining it and at other times liberating it, generating a profound tension between body and attire. The body thus becomes a platform for artistic experimentation, and the stage space a field for the interaction of movement, symbolism, and temporality, redefining the relationship between audience and performance within a renewed critical and aesthetic framework[22].

Figure 2. Conceptual Diagram of Formal Mutability in Avant-Gardist Costumes



Discussion :

Toward a Contemporary Avant-Gardism in Theatrical Costume Design: From Rebellion to Artistic Hybridization

The incorporation of avant-garde costume design in contemporary theatre reveals that the notion of "the avant-garde" has acquired a new form, that is more complex, plural, and open to multimedia expressions and intersecting visions[35]. We are now witnessing a *contemporary avant-gardism* that transcends the boundaries of historical schools, moving toward an interactive horizon where technology, aesthetics, and critical thought converge. Contemporary performance often borrows from the avant-garde its strategies of symbolic metaphor, deconstruction, and visual subversion, concepts that are increasingly manifested in today's theatrical costumes[6].

A close analysis of avant-garde costumes in current performances shows that the meaning of avant-gardism itself has evolved. It no longer signifies radical rebellion detached from time, but rather a critical engagement with the contemporary world, where aesthetics meet technology and hybridity intersects with multiple identities. This shift, from rupture to critical continuity, has enabled the new avant-garde to reread reality, both past and present, through an analytical awareness that mobilizes new tools to interrogate the body, space, and identity[9]. Costumes may dominate the body, constrain or liberate it, and even dictate its movements, producing a tension between body and attire. This tension is one of the defining features of contemporary avant-garde experimentation[26].

This new avant-gardism is distinguished by aesthetic, intellectual, and technological characteristics that set it apart from its classical counterpart, both in terms of conceptual thinking and design practice. The boundaries have dissolved between costume and scenography, between visual arts and theatre, and between the body and technology. Avant-garde costume today has become a field of artistic convergence, where disciplines interact and hybridize: garments may incorporate digital materials, audiovisual elements, or even robotic mechanisms integrated with stage movement, generating a hybrid spatial experience[3].

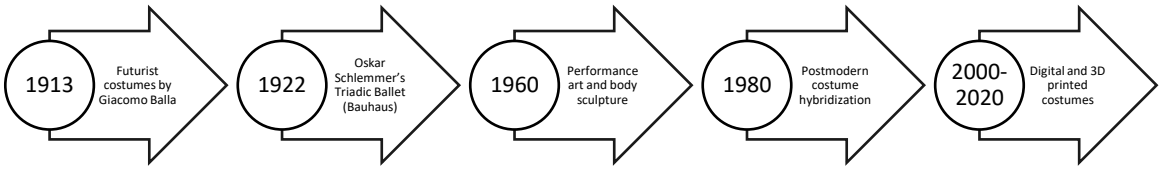
At the same time, these innovative tendencies are giving rise to a conceptual aesthetics, in which beauty is measured by the idea and by the critical stance embedded in the costume. The contemporary designer expresses through attire a set of social, ecological, and gender-related concerns, transforming the stage into a space for reflection and inquiry. This evolution has led to the multiplication of references and the dismantling of singular models. Unlike the early avant-garde, which aspired to construct a coherent school or aesthetic movement, the contemporary avant-garde seeks to deconstruct the very notion of the model, embracing plurality, divergence, and indeterminacy as its core aesthetic principles. It feeds on the creative chaos of our age, turning unpredictability into an artistic paradigm[26].

Thus, the contemporary direction in theatrical costume design aspires to generate new perceptual modes that engage the spectator intellectually, sensorially, and interactively, dimensions made possible by modern technologies[8]. Avant-gardism today is a movement within time, reconstructing beauty through the hybridization of human and machine. Performances that embrace this tendency often test the limits of the body, of adaptability, and of performance temporality. Costumes may be designed to transform during the show, incorporating kinetic or responsive materials that interact with light or sound, making the costume itself a mutable entity, reinforcing the notion of performance as a temporal and living event.

Contemporary productions increasingly integrate costumes within multimedia environments, video, interactive lighting, live sound, sensors, and even artificial intelligence. Within such frameworks, costumes may contain embedded sensors, LED lighting, or smart fabrics that react to movement and

sound, transforming the garment into an active component of the scenographic ecosystem, a living organism within the performative space.

Figure 3. Timeline of the Evolution of Avant-Garde Fashion



Conclusion

This research is dedicated to exploration of theatrical costumes as an integral component of the theatrical performance, encompassing their connotative and objective elements, in addition to the visual aesthetics they embody on stage. This methodological approach proved to be contentious, as it gave rise to a series of inquiries and concerns pertaining to the aesthetics dictates imposed by theatrical costumes through their dimensions, colour palettes, designs, materials, forms, approaches to the visual arts, and schools of theatrical direction.

It is evident that a significant number of theatrical representations have been instrumental in paving the way for novel aesthetic visions, wherein the performance is predominantly predicated on the image. Consequently, the theatrical image has the capacity to generate a plethora of symbols and connotations, thereby becoming the focal point of the theatrical performance, and establishing a distinct aesthetic phenomenon. The image thus assumes the role of the focal point of creative inquiries. The visual integration achieved through the weaving of a poetic image between the set, accessories, playing space, and costumes gives rise to a novel aesthetic expression and a new meaning within the apparent form.

In this study, an attempt has been made to establish a correlation between the avant-garde movement in theatre and the use of theatrical costumes. The avant-garde movement is characterised by a revolutionary and rebellious spirit in relation to classical theories, technical rules, and theatrical approaches. This movement served as a catalyst for the disruption of the prevailing theatrical principles, leading to a trend that emphasised repetition, negative rehashing, and an inability to establish a new research trajectory. Consequently, modern and contemporary movements are regarded as continuous, legitimate, and recurrent rebellions against the established and the mundane, capable of constructing new contemporary aesthetics that transform the avant-garde into a hybrid movement, that fuses diverse techniques, ideas, and temporalities into a fluid and ever-evolving artistic form.

References

1. David, M., *The Theatre*. 2007, Paris: The presses of Dupli-Print. 362.
2. Eco, U., *Semiotics and the philosophy of language.* . 1984: Indiana University Press.
3. Reddy-Best, K.B., Leslie Davis *Avant-Garde Fashion : A Case Study of Martin Margiela.* International Journal of Costume and Fashion, 2013. **13**(2): p. 1-13.
4. Léger, M.J., *The idea of the Avant Garde and what it means today*. 2014: Manchester University Press. 296.
5. Whitford, F., *The Bauhaus: Masters and Students by Themselves*. 1992, London: Conran Octopus. 328.

6. Lampaert, J., *The rise of the neo-avant-garde. A visual network analysis of Flemish literary magazines (1949–1959).* Int J Digit Humanities, 2024. **6**: p. 335-367.
7. Alexander, J.C., *The Fate of the Dramatic in Modern Society: Social Theory and the Theatrical Avant-Garde, Theory.* Culture & Society, 2014. **31**(1): p. 3-24.
8. Lehmann, H.-T., *Postdramatic Theatre*. 2006: Routledge. 244.
9. Bürger, P.B., Bettina ; Purdy, Daniel *Avant-Garde and Neo-Avant-Garde: An Attempt to Answer Certain Critics of Theory of the Avant-Garde.* New Literary History, 2010. **41**(4): p. 695-715.
10. Hesmondhalgh, D., *Bourdieu, the media and cultural production.* Media, Culture & Society, 2006. **28**(2): p. 211-231.
11. Bishop, P., *From The Drama of Atheist Humanism to the Apocalypse of the German Soul: Henri de Lubac, Gabriel Marcel, Emmanuel Mounier, Hans Urs von Balthasar*, in *Nietzsche's Writing Against Religion and the Crisis of Faith,*. 2024, Palgrave Macmillan Cham. p. 53-99.
12. Bourdieu, P., *Rules of Art*. 1992, Paris: Le Seuil 490.
13. Ardouin, E.A., José *The universe of the Living Theatre: the elements of the North American company*, in *University Academy of Christian Humanism*. 2021, Universidad Academia del Humanismo Cristiano.
14. Bell, J., *Something Beautiful and Powerful: Politics, Art, and Bread and Puppet Theater.* A Journal of Performance and Art, 2023. **45**(1): p. 34-47.
15. Koutsourakis, A., *The Brechtian directorial vision between theory and practice.* . 2020: Edinburgh University Press. 272.
16. Ribut, B., *Brecht's Epic Theatre as a Modern Avant-Garde and Its Influence on Postmodern Theatre/Drama.* K@TA, 2002. **4**(2): p. 135-147.
17. Thomas, F., *Vincent Chambarlhac, Un Vieux-Colombier bourguignon. Une expérience de décentralisation théâtrale (1925-1929)* 2021, Paris: Éditions de la Sorbonne. 210.
18. Rony, O.B., Jean-Louis *Redécouvrir Louis Jouvet.* Théâtre/Public, 2023. **248**(2): p. 129-132.
19. Chambers, D., *Analysis through Action for Actors and Directors From Stanislavsky to Contemporary Performance*. 2024, London: Routledge. 328.oyeux-Prunel, B., *The Artistic Avant-Gardes (1918-1945), A Transnational History*2017, Paris: Gallimard.
20. Buch, E.R., Denys & Roussin, Philippe, *Reevaluating Modern Art and the Avant-Gardes* 2020, Paris: Éditions de l'École des hautes études en sciences sociales. 244.
21. Falconer, M., *How to Be Avant-Garde: Modern Artists and the Quest to End Art*. 2025: W. W. Norton & Company. 288.
22. Berghaus, G., *International Yearbook of Futurism Studies*. 2025: dG Arts. 546.
23. Buch, E.R., Denys & Roussin, Philippe, *Reevaluating Modern Art and the Avant-Gardes*. 2020, Paris: Éditions de l'École des hautes études en sciences sociales. 244.
24. Schlemmer, O.H.-N., Lazszlo ; Molnar, Farkas *The theater of the BAUHAUS*. 1996: Johns Hopkins University Press. 109.
25. Wenwen, C.Z., He, *The Analysis of the Influence and Inspiration of the Bauhaus on Contemporary Design and Education.* Engineering, 2013. **5**: p. 323-328.
26. Nikolić, S., *The Bauhaus Theater –Oskar Schlemmer's design In Motion Concept, SAJ* - Serbian Architectural Journal, 2014. **6**(1): p. 43-66.
27. Schlemmer, O., *The Letters and Diaries of Oskar Schlemmer*. 1972, Middletown, Conn: Wesleyan University Press.

28. Salazar Sutil, N., *Mathematics in Motion: a Comparative Analysis of the Stage Works of Schlemmer and Kandinsky at the Bauhaus.* Dance Research, 2014. **32**(1): p. 23-42.
29. Verdier, A.G., Olivier ; Doumergue, Didier *Art and Uses of Stage Costumes*. 2007: Lampsaque. 515.
30. Cojan, D., *The Birth and Evolution of Stanislavsky's Method, .* Theatrical Colloquia, 2016. **7**(1): p. 299-305.
31. Ospanova, G.A., Altynai ; Agabekova,Balzhan ; Askarova, Saule ; Zhutayeva, Assel *The grotesque as a literary issue.* Semiotica. , 2024. **256**: p. 103-116.
32. Galizia, L.R., *Creative Processes of Robert Wilson, The Total Artworks for Contemporary American Theater*. 2011: Perspectiva.
33. Corrêa, A.F., *The aesthetics of Robert Wilson's costume design in Einstein on the Beach (1976) and Shakespeare's Sonnets (2009)*. 2021: University of São Paulo, USP Agency for Academic Information Management (ÁGUIA).
34. Ertl, T., *Towards a 'New Unrealism': A Situationist Exhibition Between Neo-Avant-Garde and Institutional Critique.* Marges [En ligne], 2021. **33**.