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Fashion as Resistance

In his TED Talk on the political power of clothing, fashion revolutionary and lead marketing specialist for Tommy Hilfiger, Kustav Dey challenges the widespread belief that fashion is merely aesthetic. Delivered on the stage amidst ongoing global conversations regarding identity, gender expression, and cultural policing, Dey's talk responds to social environments where appearance can determine safety, belonging, and legitimacy. Speaking from both professional and personal experience, Dey situates clothing within broader systems of institutional control, marginalization, and resistance. Throughout his speech, Dey argues that fashion is never neutral; instead, it operates as a site where power is enforced and contested. As a result, he encourages his listeners to embrace their authentic selves and express their individuality through the voice that fashion provides us with when we become silenced. Through the rhetorical lens of cluster criticism, Dey's language builds a worldview in which fashion can function either as a mechanism of enforced conformity or as a tool of resistance. Ultimately, the cluster criticism of his speech demonstrates that fashion is inseparable from power, and that visible difference, though often policed, becomes the very condition that makes political resistance possible.

Throughout this speech, many clusters of key terms including *uniform*, *invisible*, *survive*, *death*, *threat*, *armor*, and *swagger* function as terministic screens that organize how we interpret identity and power. The first key term, *uniform*, operates as an anecdote for institutional conformity. When thinking of uniforms, we think of work or school uniforms—plaid skirts or khaki pants and polo shirts. In this case, it is not merely school attire. It symbolizes sameness, forced identity, and institutional control over our bodies. Associated with this term is the word

invisibility, which is significant in the sense that uniforms can make us feel invisible. That is what they are supposed to do. We are not allowed to stand out, they are supposed to act as a shield excluding diversity. The rhetor allows this term to reveal invisibility as a survival tactic. The cluster word *survive* further intensifies this meaning. Oftentimes, social environments can be hostile to difference. To *survive* is not synonymous with living. Surviving is when someone continues existing within conditions that threaten safety, legitimacy, or belonging. The word assumes a scene in which difference can become dangerous. *Survive* carries urgency, it implies that conformity can operate as a shield against punishment. Dress codes and norms become mechanisms that determine who moves safely through space and who becomes exposed. In this sense, the term underscores that individuals who conform are not necessarily complicit, but they may be navigating systems that penalize visible differences. If clothing can determine one's ability to survive socially or physically, than it is inseparable from power. Dey forces the audience to confront the reality that fashion operates within systems of exclusion and harm. When appearance determines safety, clothing becomes a matter of life or death.

On the other hand, the cluster word *different* signals that something is deviant from an assumed norm. *Different* is inherently subjective, it only has meaning against a dominant standard that remains unnamed. These standards are unspoken and assumed, but if you fit outside of them you are immediately seen as *different*, and therefore not equal. Difference becomes the formula by which people are singled out, whether through institutional policing, violence, or bullying. This term makes some identities visible and therefore more vulnerable. What counts as different is socially constructed; a keffiyeh on campus, a widow wearing color, a gender neutral person rejecting gendered dress codes are not inherently disruptive acts, like the rhetor explains. These acts only become disruptive within scenes structured to privilege certain aesthetics over

others. By labeling these expressions as *different*, they are automatically seen outside of the “norm.” The suggestion that a garment might make others “uncomfortable” exemplifies these dynamics. Discomfort is attributed to the minority rather than to the rigidity of the norm itself. Thus, the term *different* helps explain why survival strategies such as wearing a *uniform* feel necessary. The fear that enforces conformity originates in the social contexts that are attached to difference. In this sense, marginalization invites discipline, discipline produces fear, fear produces conformity, and conformity presents itself as neutrality yet it is sustained by pressure and the threat of consequence. Difference becomes the point through which systems enforce order. The policing of fashion is ultimately the policing of identity. To call someone *different* is to situate them outside legitimacy. To refuse this is to challenge the hierarchy that produced the category in the first place.

At the same time, the term *different* could function as a good term. If difference is what exposes individuals to harm, it is also what makes resistance and reformation possible. When the rhetor later invokes terms such as *swagger* and *armor*, difference shifts from vulnerability to assertion. *Swagger* reframes visibility as deliberate confidence that refuses apology for who you are or what you look like. Unlike self esteem, *swagger* is public. It requires an audience. With *swagger*, hiding gives way to intentional visibility. The body is no longer situated in a way to escape attention, it is instead presented in a way that directs and controls it. This reversal challenges the idea that safety depends on shrinking one’s *difference*. *Swagger* works to challenge shame, it gives individuals a way to resist norms. Rather than adjusting appearance to satisfy a certain image, individuals can use clothing to signal pride, *swagger*, and confidence which quietly challenges the authority of the standards that once limited them.

In contrast, the key term *armor* emphasizes protection. If *survive* suggests that the environment is hostile, *armor* makes that hostility clear and prepares for it. *Armor* assumes risk but refuses to retreat. Instead of blending in to avoid danger, the individual dresses with the understanding that visibility may attract scrutiny, yet chooses it anyway. The term *armor* also suggests collective strength. When thinking of people who wear armor, one may think of soldiers in battle. In history, armor is rarely worn alone; it is associated with a shared struggle. Together, *armor* and *swagger* work to establish the idea that the combination of visible confidence and purposeful defense demonstrate that safety does not have to depend on conformity, but can emerge through bold, collective resistance.

The rhetors speech ultimately shows that fashion is not just about individual style, it is about power. By placing clothing within the history of violence, control, exclusion, and marginalization, the rhetor makes it clear that what we wear is often shaped by political forces that decide who belongs and who does not. In spaces where difference is punished, clothing can become a space where safety and identity are established. However, through the use of key terms and clusters, the rhetor argues that fashion can also be a form of resistance. Choosing to stand out and reject the norms turn fashion into a political statement. Resistance and reformation do not only happen in large protests, it also happens in the everyday act of self-expression. Through this lens, fashion becomes a way to challenge systems that demand conformity. What we wear can assert presence, defend identity, and push back institutions that attempt to control it. Like Dey perfectly explains, “So wear it. Wear it like armor. Wear it because it matters. And wear it because you matter.”