

DRESSING, SEDUCING AND SIGNIFYING: FROM THE SYMBOLIC DIMENSION OF FASHION TO THE CONTEMPORARY EROTIC IMAGERY

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ABSTRACT

As a relatively recent social and cultural phenomenon, fashion currently embodies a certain erotic imagery that seems to organise collective life. According to Lipovetsky, it governs our societies. Fashion, being ephemeral by nature, actually expresses the sovereignty of appearance and the power of aesthetic fantasy. It is, in fact, the most significant representation of the triumph of seduction and spectacle. Consequently, fashion is, somehow, a way of understanding the social. This essay builds upon the reasoning of fashion as a mechanism, on the one hand, and as a sign of our times, on the other, to explore how it is the harbinger of a sociality based on the sensitive, unstable and effervescent side of our interpersonal relations with each other and our relationship with the world and things.

KEYWORDS

Fashion, communication, semiotics, seduction

1. INTRODUCTION

When in the early twentieth century Saussure founded semiology as a general science of signs, of which language was only a part, he was far from imagining the developments that this discipline would undergo, especially in the second half of the 1900s. In fact, by suggesting that one could “conceive of a science that studies the life of signs within social life” (Saussure, 1999: 33), the Swiss linguist legitimated the application of the laws unveiled by semiology to all the processes built upon a signifier-signified relationship. Although the semiotic thinking about language is as old as the first references of the Ancient Greek philosophy, only after this founding idea of a science was it fully assumed that the discipline could have as its object not only language, the signs of nature (which Saint Augustine distinguished from conventional signs) or the symptoms of illness (which Galen of Pergamum took as part of medical semiology), but also anything that is subject to interpretation.

Semiotics, thus possessing applications that span far beyond the study of the linguistic code, extends to the fields of music, theatre, advertising, cinema, photography, visual arts and fashion itself. The latter is, since Roland Barthes’ work, understood as a communication system. The attention paid to the semantic component of clothing owes, in fact, to this semiologist since he published, in 1967, *The Fashion System* (1999). This work, despite its overly structuralist matrix, opens a line of research that has sought to reflect on the expressive dimension of the act of dressing, on the one hand, and on fashion

as a social phenomenon, on the other. Although in his book Roland Barthes treats clothing as a language, thereby adopting the method used by linguistics (which is a clear Saussurean influence), to a certain extent it is as a result of this work¹ that the relevance started gaining shape of a reflection on the anthropological, cultural and symbolic value of clothing, props and fashion as the organising system of these elements.

This is the reflection that Baudrillard offers, from a semiotic point of view, under the sign of a theory of simulacra and simulation, as an extension of the concept of clothing fashion to all mass culture objects. When, in *The Consumer Society* (1970), the author challenges the “absolute dictatorship of fashion” and the impact of advertising and of the media in the regulation of instances of taste and trend setting, his reasoning is ultimately motivated by the notion of fashion. Thus understood as the driving force behind the entire capitalist system of production and consumption, fashion comes to name the phenomenon that turns consumers into beings hypnotised by the objects.

As much energetic as fickle, fashion — a term that, according to Massimo Baldini (2006), started being used in Italy in the seventeenth century — is not ultimately unique to the clothing universe. It encompasses the entire universe of consumption and behaviour, which is to say that it became the managing phenomenon of social life. It is currently, as Gilles Lipovetsky (1989) sustains, the expression of a time that is defined by the transitory, the temporary, the ephemeral. In addition to the significant actions that it embodies in each daily *outfit* or in each season *collection*, fashion has established itself as the process by which contemporary culture is expressed as spectacle, waste and frivolity.

2. THE MEANING OF WEARING

In *Unpublished Letters of Fradique Mendes*, Eça de Queirós wrote that “nothing influences the man’s feeling more deeply than the outfit that covers him up”. This statement could be the writer’s attempt to explain why females, perhaps more than the learned men whom he described in his writings, possess a certain instinct for buying, an instinct that is associated with states of mind and mood, which some intellectuals at the turn of the nineteenth to the twentieth century classified as specific attributes of women. However, being nowhere near gender studies, what Eça de Queirós discusses in his letter addressed to the tailor E. Sturmm (published posthumously with unpublished letters and other forgotten pages) is that which he calls himself a “philosophy of garment”. As he claims that “the coat stands to man as the word stands to the idea,” the writer explains that “the coat should be the visible expression of the character or type that each purports to represent among his countrymen”. Severely reprimanding the tailor (whose work he seems not to have appreciated), Eça de Queirós explained to Sturmm that dressing up everyone in the same fashion leads everyone into “having the same feeling and having the same reasoning”. And discussing the influence of clothing on thinking, he ends the letter by bringing to the tailor’s attention the fact that, in a “trivialising and flattening clothing factory”, “the poet loses his fantasy, the dandy loses his vividness, the military loses his courage, the

¹ Despite the fact that the book *The Fashion System is a landmark*, in *Mythologies* (1957) Roland Barthes had already paved the way to that which could be recognised as a “science of frivolous” (Erner, 2008: 47).

journalist loses his vein, the critic loses his wit, the priest loses his faith”. The author’s statements demonstrate his conviction that there is a relationship between feeling and dressing up that allows clothing to be inscribed in the symbolic system.

Indeed, clothing adds an expressive function to the utilitarian function of protecting the body, since its most primitive form. As a mechanism of ‘management’ of body temperature, clothing (which is anything but neutral) has been a means of social definition of the individual. Although the term fashion is currently more associated with urban life, governed by that authority that is “as powerful as it is whimsical” (Erner, 2008: 6), the truth is that, since the oldest tribes, clothing and accessories have meanings that absolutely transcend the mere practical utility — either out of shame, as suggested by the book of Genesis, or due to the physical need to cover the body. From flagging the social status of the individual to marking their family condition, in the history of civilizations clothes and decorative objects are associated with the interpretation of the roles played by individuals in the communities to which they belong.

Being an “extension of the skin”, as McLuhan argued, clothing has thus always had the accompanying function of expressing a way of being, a form of hierarchical organization (which would later become an organisation into classes) and a pattern of individual choices managed in the context of socially shared instances of taste. This means that clothing, just like props, also plays a set of significant and communicative functions that are far beyond the moral-religious or pragmatic issues inherent to the atmospheric variations that demanded covering the body. Thus seen, they are to a certain extent a key to reading the times. This is why the French poet and novelist Anatole France once said:

“If I were able to choose one book from among the many that will be published during the 100 years after my death, do you know which one I would choose? No, I would not select a novel from this library of the future, nor a history book — which, when interesting, is also a novel. No, my friends, I would select a fashion magazine to see how women will dress a century after my demise. And those masks shall tell me more about the future humanity than all the philosophers, writers, commentators, and sages” (*cited by Baldini, 2006: 29*).

Roland Barthes, a mandatory reference in any semiotic approach to clothing – and the main signifier of contemporary fashion (although not the only one) – classifies clothing as a communication object, in the same way that Balzac, in *A Daughter of Eve*, admitted that clothing was for all women “a constant expression of inner thought, a language, a symbol”. Notwithstanding this persistent association of fashion with the feminine (that flourished as a consequence of an understanding that exempted the women’s interest from public affairs, despised their intellectual capacities and reserved minor and trivial activities for them), the cultural character of clothing fashion prevails over a gender specific circumstance. The social function of clothing, extending to the regulation of interpersonal relations and to the assertion of one’s own sexuality, falls within the context of a kind of relational language that is not only spoken by men and women, but is also

recognised as part of a coexistence protocol that, encompassing all the public socialisation space, does not exclude either the intimate space of experience of affection.

As part of a wider operating system that includes, for example, fashion props as decorative objects, as a kind of adjectives pertaining to the very language of clothes², clothing has, as Alison Lurie (2002) suggested, vocabulary and grammar that are equivalent to the vocabulary and grammar of verbal language. By establishing a perfect analogy between the language of clothing and verbal language, the author considers that each clothing element, each garment, each adornment or tattoo corresponds to a type of “word”, so that dressing can be recognised as the action of giving life to a proposition. However, without the almost unchanging character of verbal language, the language of clothing is absolutely permeable to fluctuating trends and to the instability of the ways of feeling. This is why, in Patricia Cunningham and Susan Voso Lab’s words, “clothing is the measure of our existence”, in the sense that it can be seen “as a symbol that reflects the political climate, technological standards and economic conditions” (1991: 1).

Similarly to what Pierre Bourdieu did in his work *Ce que parler veut dire*, published in 1982, in the context of the assumptions set out above we are expected to discuss *the meaning of wearing*. Although clothing is shaped by a code in which the signifier-signified relationship is much more unstable and temporary than that underlying linguistic signs, as mentioned, it has the ability to say something, or rather, as Umberto Eco suggested, to “convey a message in an open letter addressed to passers-by and to those it shall meet during the day” (1979: 71). Possessing this additional original purpose, clothing is the language that “can be used in order to convey one’s own world view, sexuality (and, why not, one’s own sexual ambivalence), pain for family grief, conformism, rebellion, religiosity, humility, virginity...” (Baldini, 2006: 101). Either as text or work of art, clothing is therefore a language that conveys moods, social status and levels, affective conditions and relations of authority.

Clothing, being inscribed in a code full of ambiguities, corresponds in fact to a code of low semanticity that claims, almost more than any other, very close attention to the context – which requires, in Bourdieu’s terms, not only a linguistic competence, but also a social competence. It is under these circumstances that it is entitled to *say* something (about bereavement or elegance, for example), while being an instrument to *do* something (to draw attention, for instance). With this clearly instrumental character, the outfit indicates a state of mind while seducing or promoting social distinction. Animating, moreover, the creative circle of designers and stylists, the permanent recreation of clothing and its display (of which the body is the most privileged exhibitor) *say* the aesthetic sense of a time, while simultaneously *doing* a persistent debate about the body as communication surface and as a connection to the other³.

² In the book *El lenguaje de la moda: una interpretación de las formas de vestir* (2002: 10), Alison Lurie suggests that clothing accessories and apparel are matching equivalents of the functions played by adjectives and adverbs in the verbal language.

³ A match is established, in this respect, with John Austin’s speech act theory, borrowing the idea that things can be done with words. This approach is not aimed, however, at reducing the clothing performativity to a kind of illocutionary, or intrinsic, force, to each piece of clothing or prop; rather, it aims to describe the power exerted by clothing in the market of symbolic relations that, according to Bourdieu, determined the social magic of these acts.

Therefore, being an object of aesthetic expression and an object of social relationship and differentiation, clothing becomes, in this duality of *saying* and *doing*, what Fabio de la Rocca and Anna Maria Peçanha identified, in an edition of the *Sociétés* journal dedicated precisely to fashion and sociability, as an “expression of being” that is, additionally, commanded by the desire to “be trendy” (2008: 6). However, before applying this expressive function, clothing first plays an emphatic function. It establishes communication even before we start talking. The message that it enunciates consists, firstly, of formalising a contact, of giving visibility to voices in interaction, of anticipating the perceptions that we have of each other in the moments preceding any dialogue.

In addition to playing this role in activating the contact, the act of dressing reflects a voluntary act to cover the nakedness that is, at the same time, an expressive act to develop one’s own aesthetic language, building upon the paradigm established by the fashion of a season, i.e., a style adjusted to a way of being in the set, of *being-together*. Corresponding to a logic of identification with a group (i.e. to the affiliation to a specific style), clothes and props also promote the definition of an identity — personal, on the one hand, and cultural, on the other. Clothing, being the driving force behind vanity and sensuality, thus meets not only a physical, but also a sensitive need. It is in this respect that Grant McCracken, cited by Baldini (2006: 98), refers to clothing as a means of expression of the human race par excellence. This is a means that reveals an ability to showcase the inner self of each and every one and furthermore to construct a kind of ideal being, an object of desire and seduction.

3. FASHION SHOWS AND THE TRANSITORY CHARACTER OF FASHION

As an economic, artistic, anthropological and social phenomenon, fashion is the process by which the insignificant is rendered significant. It is this process of suggestion of meanings, which materialise in textures, colour associations and specific shapes, that realises the purpose of fashion shows on the catwalk. Marked by a search for ‘extravagance’ and ‘oddities’ where everything is exaggerated, the shows are precisely the ultimate fashion event. They are the quintessential moment of the show, the time of display, presentation and performance. As public event, they have the peculiar function of periodically celebrating the death of the clothing or props code, and their renewal or reinvention (Baldini, 2006: 131).

By working as promoters of the symbolic valorisation of fashion productions, fashion shows operate at the highest level of the fashion system. In fact, their role is similar to the one played by art galleries and exhibitions in the context of art. Under these circumstances, they therefore determine not only the consecration of the designers, who are, like artists, the origin of the phenomenon, but also the recognition of social meanings of a collection. This means that fashion shows are a source and an instrument of transfer of cultural meanings that provide, as Massimo Baldini states in the book *The Invention of Fashion* (2006: 131), “the coordinates for a new route of signification, not only of the clothes, but also of the bodies”.

As they are structured by the concept of the collection, the social status of the designer or the company, the season trends, the season and the socio-historical context of the collection launch, the market and the economic and cultural context of a particular historical period, fashion shows shape, moreover, the prestige of the designer, the social and economic status of a brand, the public criticism and the meanings of a collection. To that extent, fashion shows are decisive in regulating the codes within which clothing, fashion props and all the actors involved (designers, sellers, promoters and consumers) are inscribed.

As they are the supreme events of fashion collections, fashion shows have the strategic role of promoting adherence to the 'dressable' codes of each season, to the extent that they represent the announcement of what *is to come*. But as media realisation, they also play an inspiring role of individual expression in the collective to which they belong. Indeed, by setting the aesthetic boundaries of a given season, the shows represent public realisations of taste regulation, determination of patterns of consumption, a certain discipline of social relations themselves. Albeit defined by exaggeration, the catwalks play a key role in managing the boundaries of individual choices and placing them in the arena of the collectively *acceptable*.

Fashion shows, being ephemeral, are actually the visible face of a phenomenon that, according to Lipovetsky, "governs our societies". They mainly express the transient, temporary, fleeting nature of fashion, which is indeed one of the most important systems of organisation of modern collective life; or, in other words, one of the hypotheses of understanding contemporaneity. By arranging appearances, fashion is then the mechanism that standardises the aesthetic preferences and the pace of social change, to a point that it forces us, as Gustav Le Bon claimed, "into admitting things with no interest". By being the exponent of logic of the *laws of imitation*, fashion as it is presented in the context of the fashion shows frees us from the responsibility of choices disjointed from the set, while providing the possibilities of social distinction. It is in this framework that the catwalks simultaneously stimulate the "instinct of equalisation and individualisation" (Baldini, 2006).

Under the sign of urgency that marks the move from one cycle to the other, fashion is, moreover, a mechanism of consumption regulation. Obeying a logic of theatricality (to borrow Lipovetsky's terms), fashion does not represent solely social class divisions or a distinction between femininity and masculinity. It is also the device that allows for the understanding of the symptoms of dissatisfaction and fragmentation that define the human character. It is a permanent recreation of the forms of presentation, as well as the reinterpretation of our relationship with the body and the body's place in the expression of the inner self. It is in this respect that fashion shows are, not only a display of creativity, but also an exercise of "philosophy of the body".

As part of a logic of identity representation, in that it encourages individual expression, as previously stated, fashion presented in fashion shows is also a phenomenon that appears to move from this logic to a logic of identification – very much in line with

the thinking of Michel Maffesoli, as noted above. Because this is, first and foremost, the desire exploited by fashion shows: the desire for gregariousness and *being-together*. It is also at this stage that the ambiguous character of the language *spoken* by clothing and props reveals itself. Being, indeed, a type of language, clothing fashion has a social dimension that leads the individuals into sharing a set of principles and a grammar in order to avoid being 'out of fashion'. Under these circumstances, fashion serves as a call for identification with what is temporarily 'in force', on the one hand, and with the distinctive array of a particular social group⁴ or class, on the other. However, like all languages, fashion also has this element of personal expression of an identity, an expression of a way of being and feeling, which may or may not coincide with those of the collective.

Reflecting on the relationship between fashion and power, Dominique Waquet and Marion Laporte (1999) discuss the issue of social distinction as a substitute for the need to assert an identity. Being the driving force behind the economy of symbolic goods, according to Bourdieu, the distinction is one of the principal animators of the creativity underlying fashion goods. Even in the context of the *prêt-à-porter* production, fashion caters for a commercial and affective relationship with the brands that denote a particular social position.

Although it could be stated that fashion is somewhat standardising, it also possesses a potential to express our multiple identities. In parallel with the communion, the unity of what *is in fashion*, a diversity is patent in the irreverence that manifests itself beyond the catwalk models. Clothes and props, like tattoos and *piercings*, may hold for each and every one of us an expression of the desire to be recognised as part of a group (or a tribe, in Maffesoli's words). But this is also where the multiple identities that inhabit each and every one of us and share the same relational body are revealed.

4. EROTICISM AND SEDUCTION: A CULTURAL EXTENSION OF FASHION

Fashion — a theme that Pierre Bourdieu considered apparently frivolous — has, in the socio-semiotic tradition, a particular interest in establishing itself as a phenomenon appropriate to a double reflection. On the one hand, on the processes of signification that complement the verbal expression and define the body as a medium of communication; and, on the other hand, on the contemporary imaginary and on its character deeply marked by eroticism and a rationality that Perniola (1993) claims to be more sensological than ideological. Being able to mobilise more for affective principles than for critical thinking, fashion is combined with the impulsive nature of the media to arouse desire and feed the fascination with objects that are not lasting at all.

Fashion possesses the ability to be recognised as a kind of self-portrait of the society. It is, in fact, precisely in this conjunction with the media system, the root of two effects that define our post-technological age: that of the dizzying acceleration of the experience of time and that of the widespread sentimentalisation of society. It embodies, on the one

⁴ Reference is made here to the social groups that materialise their specific idiosyncrasies in their own dress code: the 'hippies', the 'metal fans', the 'goths', etc..

hand, an awareness of dissatisfaction that requires a constant monitoring of the flow of renewal and change and a rearrangement of the needs in devices and objects that never offer total security. In the field of clothing, as in that of the machines (from technological appliances to cars), that which we take for granted quickly becomes, once more, obsolete or far from the ideal. Like the horizon, which seems to become eternally distant every step we take towards it, so the way we follow towards the progressive update of what we have and what we are seems to be a hopelessly incomplete or always open way.

As it is a weak response to the crisis that defines contemporary societies in this framework of dissatisfaction and a sense of failure as the only possible constancy, fashion is based on a game in which we seem to be always 'in arrears' as to what is to come. This game, which is a support of markets and trade, dashing forward, calls the movement and is the opposite of the usual. It has no room for tradition, because the latter is itself defined as a requirement of innovation. The quest for the new, dictated by the trends dynamics, hastens the consumption routines in response to the expectations of economic transactions, inasmuch as it abbreviates the fate of things and individuals, and presents us with the challenge of eternal beginning.

If in the past fashion operated as an aesthetic luxury regime available uniquely to a chosen few, it has now ceased to be a class privilege to be more of an authority that is imposed on everyone, at all levels of community life. However, it exerts this domination in such a way that it looks more like an invitation than an imposition, because it builds upon a principle of endless seduction. It is in this sense that Baudelaire referred to this phenomenon, considering that "all fashions are seductive, but only relatively so, since each one represents a new effort, more or less happy, towards achieving the beautiful; they are rapprochements to an ideal whose desire permanently stimulates the unsatisfied human spirit" (cited by Baldini, 2006: 28).

We know since the Latin etymology of *seducere* that seduce means "taking aside", misleading, misleading, corrupting. But seduction is currently an inescapable watchword. Advertising has to be seductive, the presentation of food in a restaurant should seduce the look, research itself should be made public in a register that is seductive. Because seduction is the way in which, to an extent under the influence of the media, we are bound to operate.

From Bataille to Baudrillard, and including necessarily Francesco Alberoni and Mario Perniola, eroticism has been, to many modern philosophers, the mechanism that needs to be demystified so as to understand contemporary sociality. Unstable and whimsical — a 'deformed thief', in the words of Shakespeare — fashion is, since the industrial revolution, the process by which this erotic exercise of life in society is operated. In the clothing that we wear, as in the objects that command daily life, fashion works as a consumption management mechanism via the manipulation of affections. As a producer of tastes, it exerts the discrete power of determining, at the surface of appearances and in the frivolous consumption foam, how humanity itself progresses.

By representing the triumph of seduction and show, fashion thus takes a double scientific interest: on the one hand, in the case of clothing and props, it is a phenomenon

that Roland Barthes admitted calling upon linguistics; and, on the other hand, as a global system of social management, it is a phenomenon that Lipovetsky recognised as being “essential do human and social life (...), an exceptional process, inseparable from the birth and the development of the modern Western world” (1989: 31). //

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