

Point and Line Over the Body

Social Imaginaries Underlying the Logic of Fashion¹

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...as a substitute for the body, clothing by its weight participates of the fundamental dreams of man, of the sky and the cave, of sublime life and of embalming, of flight and dream: by its weight, clothing can become wing or coffin..." Roland Barthes (114)

***1. Introduction**

Fashion has often been accused of tyranny (Barthes, Rivière) because it imposes its whims as a fatal, albeit temporary, law. Tyrants, however, are totally oblivious of the desires and hardships of those oppressed under their rule. Fashion appears to be, on the contrary, minutely aware and insistently solicitous of the wishes, realities, ambitions and fantasies of the people it targets. Instead of a despot such as Louis XVI or Homeini, fashion should be more fairly compared to a Casanova or a Don Juan. Equally unfaithful, volatile and neomaniac, fashion is interested in seduction and charm rather than in coercion. Its main weapon is not an army or a sword, but like Don Juan, nice words and good looks. Fashion opens up the curtains of social imaginaries to a stage where each and everyone is invited,

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like Cinderellas at the castle of Prince Charming, to the world of glamour and masquerade. It is all a matter of an adequate attire.

Fashion has been studied from a variety of points of view: Flügel and Hurlock for a psychological approach; Kohler, Krober & Richardson, Contini, Klepper, Morales and countless others for an historical view, Barthes for a semiological systematization, Simmel and König for sociological study among many other works. The approach taken here is pragmatic in Morris's term (1938, 6) for the triad of syntactics, semantics and pragmatics of a theory of signs. He defines semantics as the relation of signs with the objects they are applied to, syntactics as the relation of signs among themselves, and pragmatics as the relation of signs to interpreters. Barthes' *System of Fashion* is, in fact, a powerful work on syntactics. Flügel draws near to a semantic point of view. By a pragmatic approach I intend to examine fashion precisely where other specialists have stopped: the relation of fashion and clothing to actual people, particularly women, and the ideas or beliefs that appear to guide their decisions on what to wear.

While Barthes limits his study to clothes described by women's magazines during a one year period (June 1958 to June 1959), and restricts his examination to the way fashion is created by verbal descriptions, from a pragmatic point of view the main impact of fashion operates more strongly in the iconic and kinesic registers or visual and body language. In contemporary magazines, fashion is often displayed visually with no words except for the name of the trademark: Armani, Gucci, Versace. These images are fabricated to produce and evoke kinesthetic sensations, almost physical effects. Lines, colors, materials, forms, textures are usually presented in an evocative scene that is almost a theatricalization of garments. What appeals to potential consumers is the aesthetic representation of particular attitudes, personal beauty and ideal situations of the models more than the dress advertised. In this sense, it is less the content or explicit denotation of clothes than the connotations generated by these images what pulls women to linger over these magazines and purchase particular items. Not merely a source of information, nor mere description of clothes and styles,

fashion magazines are personal invitations to visit and dwell in social and individual imaginaries.

*2. Social Imaginaries

Lefebvre (1991) writes that sociologists and philosophers like Bachelard, Baudrillard, Barthes, Duvignaud among others, have discovered something different from individual imagination which he has called *social imaginaries*. The best illustration of these imaginaries is, according to Lefebvre, in feminine press, where a woman "dreams in what she sees and sees what she dreams". Like fiction in literature, social imaginaries transcribe the quotidian into the imaginary and make the uninteresting appear exciting. These imaginaries are, for Lefebvre, subsystems that organize everyday life. Unfortunately, this fertile idea of the imaginaries wasn't fully developed and examined by Lefebvre, but we can reckon them as mental projections we are aware of their being imaginary but that are nonetheless rendered and applied into reality. Social imaginaries can be compared to a drop of ink in a bowl of water: it does not significantly alter its composition but radically modifies its appearance.

Social imaginaries are equally personal as they are collective; they create a simulacra of situations, sensations and associations that project us toward a range that extends between the probable and the improbable yet possible. This thin, blurred margin between the improbable and the possible is one of the principles that trigger social imaginaries. In other words, social imaginaries differ from ideology in that the latter is absorbed integrally and elaborated collectively, often officially, as an objective version of reality whereas social imaginaries are known to be fictional and yet, like fiction in literature, theater or movies, we lend ourselves as willing accomplices to the worlds they offer hoping they can somehow transform the real through a utopic inversion. Imaginaries are like a game of "as if" that ends losing the "if".

While ideology reflects reality or attempts to impose upon it a certain direction based upon particular ideas and goals, imaginaries are more playful and tolerant of difference, incongruity, diversity and change. They operate by fascination which, for Curt Ducasse, has nothing to do with reason and everything to do with imagination. Ideologies are programmatic and elaborated through discursive, particularly verbal, practices; they appeal to the mental and emotional judgement and persist longer than the conditions in which they were founded. Imaginaries are ephemeral, non systematic but relatively coherent, appeal to the sensibility and strongly entice the senses. It could be said that ideologies are solid, with rigid conventional references whereas imaginaries are vaporous surrounding the individual with a particular mood. While ideologies appear to function mainly by denotation, imaginaries operate by a fabric of connotations and associations. They are essentially metaphorical and metonymic constructions with the consistency Lakoff and Johnson ascertained about metaphorical mappings. This character underlies fashion, a matrix oscillating between and merging the real with the imaginary. We may trace at least 13 types of imaginaries underlying fashion and *pret a porter* (See table 1).

Given the economic standard of readers in women's magazines, social imaginaries offer a wide range of both possible and impossible clothing, furniture and houses . Magazines can equally give advice for hiding a horrible wall that blocks the whole view of a humble apartment at the same time that they show lavish residences of the rich and famous and their private landscapes. Middle class women devour these pictures and almost touch every object and detail. A little plastic vase that remotely resembles a Sevres porcelain vase in these magazines may have the power of transforming a corner of a modest apartment into a luxurious castle like the pumpkin into a carriage. Imaginaries, by their vaporous quality, have the power of unfolding their meaning and radiating an atmosphere. The plastic vase may look like porcelain and thus spread centrifugally a regal atmosphere around it at least for a couple of days, until it is absorbed by habit and reality that surrounds it. It is, in Barthes' words (210) , this capacity of irradiating meaning from inert materials.

Imaginarities work not only by evocation but through an alchemic power of transformation typical of amulets. Transformation is the process by which a certain meaning or signified, say success or youth, is presented as corresponding to a certain dress; we then transform the signifier dress and by wearing it we become successful and young. The formula is: if S → D then -D → S (if the successful wear this dress, then wearing this dress will make me successful) which is an obvious fallacy for strict logic but nonetheless a perfectly legitimate syllogism for social imaginaries.

*3. The aesthetic impact of fashion photography

The process of seduction and promotion of clothes has changed significantly during this present, almost past century. Two centuries ago, fashion was advertised by means of dressed dolls sent from Paris to Moscow and other cities that minutely illustrated every model. During the 18th century, Esnault and Rapiilly published etchings and engravings of hairdos to let women see and choose. The *Galerie des Modes et Costumes Français* published dresses until 1790. Eisen and Moreau The Young illustrated *Le Monument du Costume* which partly pioneered modern fashion photography by depicting whole scenes of everyday life among elegant families. In the first half of this century the promotion of fashion depended upon the publication in special magazines of sketches and drawings made by well known artists: George Baribier, Gerda Wegener or Pierre Legrain, Paul Iribe, Georges Lepape among others. Models wearing Art Nouveau or Art Deco garments were nicely engraved and drawn in matching decorated backgrounds, much like Matisse's paintings. Fashion photography began as early as 1911, with Baron Adolph de Meyer, Edward Steichen and Cecil Beaton during the 1920s for magazines like *Art et Décoration*, and later for *Vogue*, *Vanity Fair* and *Harper's Bazaar*. It is now an art in itself with famous photographers like Richard Avedon, Irving Penn and Greene Eula for the fashion of the fifties and sixties and countless other recent artists like Bruce Weber, Herb Ritt, Annie Liebovitz, Helmut Newton and Robert Mapplethorpe.

It is interesting to note that fashion photography was first shot in front of an empty background that removed the distinction between floor and wall, creating a sense of irreality. Only after the sixties it was shot on location, thus opening fashion to a new dimension: evocation. Since then, fashion photographers can shoot as far and as near, as focused or out of focus as they wish. What they intend to capture and convey is a particular atmosphere, an imaginary, rather than a mere dress. These images do not signify clothes as much as they propose them as signifiers of a kinesthetic, semiotic and imaginary event.

Applying Jakobson's model of the functions of language (209-248) to fashion magazines, one realizes that the display of the conative or apelative function is dominant (x, y and z "...should be part of the garments of every woman" "One must buy: a good gray suit, a tie with solid colors, a good leather purse, a Swiss watch, shirts of solid colors") and ("the dictate of fashion...") but disguised as expressive (if you are romantic, express yourself with a white muslin floral dress), metalinguistic ("Main trend for spring 1999, sport clothes with a touch of luxury") referential ("Hugo Boss proposes for this season: three colors: black, white and beige..."), aesthetic ("Today, a silk scarf pays homage to Grace Kelly"). The phatic function, conceived as the establishment of contact, is the result of wearing these items and thus blending with the group. In short, fashion commands, but appears to notify, foster self expression, assist blending, and paraphrase exemplars, all with a poetic touch.

Most of the 30 *variants* classified by Barthes involve aesthetic connotations. Among the most obvious ones are: *Volume XIV* relates to authority and respectability, *Artifice III* to sophistication, *Tightness VI* to provocation, *Transparency XI* to sensuality, *balance* (symmetry or asymmetry) to conventionality or audacity, *Weight VIII* to power and credibility, *Closure XVIII* to accessibility, *Form V* (straight, rounded) to flexibility or stiffness, *Association XXIX* to conformity or dissent. These connotations and associations are the stuff which social imaginaries weave a distinctive dimension to clothing.

Barthes found in his analysis of the discourse on fashion a double inventory which he calls *group A* and *group B*. The former *Group A* explicitly relates clothing to the world while

group B only implicitly points to particular clothes, colors or details as an illustration of fashion. In the magazines consulted by Barthes this relation is prescriptive and normative establishing what should one wear for particular situations or seasons, times of the day or activities. Forty years later, however, this prescriptive character of fashion has disappeared as the code of etiquette has loosened. We don't look at fashion magazines as a source of necessary information, as was the case of the 50's and 60's, to protect us from the danger of looking *passé* or *déclassé*. We look at them as a source of fascination and guided imagination. Clothes always operate as signifiers whose signifieds are the world, the occasion, the world of fashion, the personality and the social or professional function performed by the wearer. As Barthes (215) has stated, fashion proposes a definite answer to at least one of these questions: who? what? when? where?

While verbal descriptions such as those analyzed by Barthes structure a model and explain its organization and particular traits, visual transcription opens up towards a manifold of possible substitutions. The image of a teenage blond, absorbed into herself at the sea with her hair caressed by the breeze wearing a Piazza Sempione gray jacket with a zipper, democratically allows us to buy at our nearest k-mart any gray zipper jacket and magically purchase the same feeling of youth, breeze, sea and self absorption during our menopause, if we have enough imagination. This is a well known mechanism used and abused by advertisement. We are not so naive as to believe we can become the model or look the same merely by wearing the jacket, but imaginaries allow us to associate the feeling with the jacket by contagion. We purchase clothes associated to sensations and imaginary settings. This is why a gray zippered jacket effectively conveys by irradiation the sense of youth, daydreaming, leisure, beauty and the sea.

*4. The three levels of clothing: vernacular, fashion and pret a porter

In Lipovetsky's view, fashion is no less than the cornerstone of collective life in modern democratic societies. With remarkable optimism, this author finds in fashion both an

index and a catalyst of democratization as it enables a process of personalization necessary for democracy. Against Baudrillard and Bourdieu's interpretation of fashion as a phenomenon of class distinction and social differentiation, he argues that people follow fashion less as a statement of social status than as an expression of individuality. He contends that the logic of distinction has become an epistemological obstacle for understanding what is most significant about fashion: the logic of variability and of change, of aesthetic and organizational mutations. He argues that fashion is not a sign of class ambitions as much as an exit from the world of tradition, a sign of the modern fever for novelty and the celebration of the present (11). Fashion has, for Lipovetsky, a globally positive power as an agent in the spiral of individualization and the consolidation of liberal societies. Begging the question, he holds that the display of seduction reduces delusion, that the artificial favors access to the real, that superficiality allows for better use of reason and that it harmonizes the various forces within society.

Unfortunately, Lipovetsky's optimism and arguments are hardly convincing against actual practices in clothing and fashion when examined more closely. Fashion has always been a wholly elitist manifestation that has more in common with the artworld than with the social modes and behaviors in clothing. When we ordinary people buy clothes, it is not fashion what we have in mind as much as very practical considerations: what is supplied and permitted, how adequate it is for certain occasion or environment, how comfortable, how reasonable the price, how easy to wash, how well it fits or makes us look. The reasons why we select one style instead of another is less a result of free choice or novelty than of quite specific social requirements, availability and conformity to a code.

*4.1 Vernacular style

Clothing, as furniture, architecture and painting, is generated and displayed through common sets of standards and styles inherently related to their context. In other words, there is more in common between vernacular clothing and vernacular architecture and

painting than with elite or mass produced clothing. The most salient of these genres can be defined as a vernacular style, high fashion and industrial or prêt à porter system (Table 2). Vernacular or traditional clothing remains relatively constant through various generations. It is typical of traditionalist societies such as Islamic, indigenous and rural communities. This type of clothes are handmade or produced at a domestic level and may pass from one generation to another. Vernacular garments are strictly codified according to gender, age, rank, regional and marital status and ritual or religious celebrations. Traditional clothes such as the Indian Sari, the Tehuana embroidered dress, the Sioux leather clothes, the Moroccan caftan or Hungarian embroidered vests and aprons belong to the same pattern and style of other local handicrafts such as pottery, hand-woven textiles, baskets, woodwork or furniture and vernacular architecture. The code of colors is in most cases (except in Moslem fundamentalist societies) much more open, playful and bold than typical Western garments and may be heavily ornamented. Vernacular clothes are regional, communal and exhibit the quality of its making and its symbolism, rather than its shape. They represent time as permanent.

*4.2 Fashion design: the depreciated genre of the artworld

Lipovetsky mistakenly believes that fashion and the artistic are antipodes (61). On the contrary, the world of fashion is an underestimated, yet eloquent sector of the artworld. Fashion designers are often equally or more creative, inspired and revolutionary than most artists. Fashion pageants are usually far more successful than most art exhibitions, even at the night of the opening. Fashion-works obey to almost identical requirements to artworks: they are signed by a prestigious author, they are unique, original, often handmade, limited in quantity, made for contemplation and for conveying pleasure to the senses; they belong to a collection, are expensive and produced for an exclusive market. Fashion is always a breakthrough, an innovation or a sudden revival of past styles. As the critics for the artworld, the world of fashion hosts specialized critics. Certain periodic events and special

occasions, (the Oscar, Emy, Tony, Grammy awards) have become the main opportunity for fashion to be displayed, admired, censured, ridiculed and minutely described as the Venice or Paris Biennials for the artworld. Both art and fashion crave for novelty, are anti-traditional and individualistic, they both require authors to have a personal style and some degree of charisma, cosmopolitanism and sophistication. Outfits of Haute Couture presented in fashion pageants are made for contemplation alone as most contemporary artworks.

Both art in the modern sense and fashion emerge during the late 13th century, and both are manifestations of aristocratic societies and early capitalism. Periods of great visual outgrowth have been rich in both visual arts and fashion. Gothic architecture with its peaks and spires was echoed in women's steeped headdresses and men's pointed shoes. The crenellation of sleeves and hoods suggested the crenellation of castle walls. The variety of colors and textures, of velvets and brocades, as well as the jewel-studded girdles and pendants in vogue, recreated the brilliance of stained glass and illuminated manuscripts. Fashion, like art from the Renaissance on, invariably has an author or creator: wigs were originated by Louis XIII (who was getting bald), and acquired a monumentality during each of the following Louises. Madame de Berry, Madame Vigée Le Brun and Mademoiselle Bertin defined fashion in 18th century France, as well as Madame Pompadour, who protected both art and fashion. Baroque and Rococo, Naturalism and Romanticism attacked both art and fashion. Fashion designer Victorine was admired by both Balzac and Stendhal, while Art Nouveau and Art Deco defined styles in both art and fashion. Sonia Delaunay, the artist of orphism, was associated with fashion designer Jacques Heim and together created orphic clothes. The house of Worth in Paris, Redfern's suits, Doucet's heavy laced dresses, the house of Revillon (famous for its work on softened leather) all deserve a place in history of art.

Poiret was the Picasso of fashion. He was influenced by orientalism as Picasso by africanism. The painter Raoul Dufy designed special printed fabric for Poiret's brilliant

oriental dresses, with colors as bold as Picasso's synthetic cubist paintings. He invented the skirt pants as Picasso invented synthetic cubism. While Picasso distorted women's faces, Poiret relieved women from the distortion of corsets. Both were daring and original. Fashion perfumes we also an idea of Poiret, later imitated by Schiaparelli and Chanel.

The proliferation of avangard artists during the second and third decades of our century (Kandinsky, Malevich, Pevsner, Gabo, Kline, Leger, Delaunay, Magritte, Mondrian) was simultaneous to those in the world of fashion: Chanel in 1911, Jeanne Lanvin, Poiret and Madeleine Vionnet in 1912, Patou in 1914, Lelong and Molyneux in 1918, Schiaparelli in 1928, Balenciaga in 1930, Dior in 1947. Vionnet was as geometrically rigorous as Mondrian. She was called the architect of couture. Cocó Chanel, like Malevitch, looked for ultimate simplicity, essential lines and neutral hues. As with Malevitch's "white square over a white background", Chanel initiated the fashion of black clothes, women's use of sweaters, tweed tailored suits for office work and almost identical colors as used by analytical cubism. Jeanne Lanvin shocked the fashion world in 1912 with a chemise dress to be worn without a corset as the Dadaists shocked the artworld with their artistic performances at the Cafe Voltaire. Haute couture designer Elsa Schiaparelli designed surrealist clothes like bottle dresses and hats that resembled lamb chops or aspirin tablets, toys as buttons and jewelry in the thirties as a result of her friendship with Salvador Dali, Jean Cocteau, and other surrealists. Hers is the *Shocking Pink* perfume bottle in the shape of a torso and decorated sweaters with cubist motifs. Dior's "New Look" of lengthened skirts, narrowed waists, padded hips and softened shoulders during the late forties was contemporary to Abstract Expressionism of Motherwell, de Kooning, Pollock, Baziotes. Cristobal Balenciaga softened dresses, coats, and suits by loosening the fit, removing lapels, rounding collars, and adding three-quarter-length sleeves similar to the way Rothko softened geometrical abstractionism. During the sixties and seventies, other designers like Andre Courreges, Pierre Cardin and Hubert de Givenchy, Mary Quant, Yves Saint Laurent dominated the field of fashion in what became the final transition of fashion to pret a porter, from elite to mass consumption. It was

the time of Pop art whose leading artists Lichtenstein, Oldenburg, Warhol, Segal, Wesselmann, Rosenquist and Escobar integrated mass consumption motifs and icons to art. Op art certainly had its impact on fashion and its colorful optical combinations.

Even this delusion of exaggerated self importance is common to artists and fashion designers: many avangard artists of the first half of the century believed they were changing the world as was expressed in Manifests of various avangard movements such as the Surrealists, of Cubists, the Constructivists etc. Fashion designers also believe they are the leaders of good taste and pathfinders of the image of the future. As the parallels between art and fashion increase, the theses held by Lipovetsky weaken. Fashion is a neglected genre in the artworld not as much for what it signifies but, as in abstract paintings, as a play of signifiers, a source of pleasure and entertainment among members of high society and the jet set. It may be frivolous, superficial, semantically empty, trivial and flimsy; it nonetheless materializes urban values of fantasy, originality, novelty, and creativity.

*4.3 Ready to wear or pret a porter clothing

Those were fashion's, and art's, greatest times. In 1970 the French government built the Salon du Pret-a-Porter, a large glass exhibition hall on the edge of Paris. This marked the beginning of a third stage of clothing wholly different from the tradition of the vernacular and the sophistication of fashion: a combinatory system defined by lifestyles. Fashion is now confined to an anti-embarrassment insurance policy that protects members of the jet set against encountering someone with the same outfit on a public event. Fashion in the strict sense, today almost requires a certificate of exclusivity and originality equal to that of authenticity in art.

Pret a porter production corresponds to the mass society of contemporary megacities populated by the anonymous proletarian bourgeoisie. It obeys to similar styles and patterns than those of cultural industrial production proper to rock music, comic books, spectacular advertisements, printed posters, musical comedies, video games and best sellers

like Stephen King's novels among others. We may find Ralph Lauren, Versace, Gucci and Dior trademarks mainly in accessories designed for this airport duty-free social class in a similar sense to buying a signed Vasarely silk screen print.

The flood of *pret a porter* throughout department stores all over the world appeared to promise a complete democratization of fashion. One could buy a relatively inexpensive version of Chanel's "little black dress" and look chic during the whole day. Nowadays, the artistic is mainly displayed in commercial ads; it is digitalized, conceptualized and combined in a manner that allows almost anyone to practice it without any inferiority complex. While fashion is inventive and paradigmatic, *pret a porter* is syntagmatic and a purely combinatory system defined by lifestyles.

What is actually practiced via *pret a porter* is the command over codes or what Chomsky would have called, iconic competence. It is not a matter of combining colors adequately but of strictly obeying to styles. One may have 10 white T-shirts, but each one is designed to function in a different set: casual, sport, formal, youthful, classic, middle-aged, for the beach, for the city, with a sweater, with a jacket and so on. Distinction is always at work in the command of codes. The higher one goes on the social pyramid, the more subtle the differentiation of signifiers often unnoticed by lower levels.

There are a number of reasons why fashion has ceased to be prescriptive as it used to be during its golden age: heterotopy (different spaces) and heterochrony (different times) of the public, the heterogeneous parameters simultaneously used by fashion designers, the increasing competition and struggle for the market, the multiplication of brands and, most of all, the death of fashion, an extremely well kept secret by the virtuosos of fashion design. Fashion has been dead for at least a quarter of a century, a death that appears to have passed unnoticed among what seems to have been an epidemic in Western culture: the death of God, of the author, of art, of utopia, of modernity, of rationality among others. It's strange that no one has ever heard of this so obvious demise, concealed perhaps under the noise of

its trumpets still bombastically proclaiming every season's new creations. Fashion is dead because it came too close to art, and got fatally infected by the same virus.

*5 The law of entropy in fashion

The main indicator of the death of art, originally predicted by Hegel but for totally different reasons, was the process that took place from objectual art to conceptual art. The former had a sensuous, aesthetic quality, a subversive potential and radical, stalwart changes. It was still capable of shocking, representing, challenging and changing the world. Contemporary conceptual and digital art, one the other hand, are aggregates of miscellaneous, arbitrary elements; they have yielded their stamina and power of provocation. It has been a process that developed from semantically imploded messages (religious, historical, mythical, political) to the semantic void and pure play of signifiers characteristic of most MTV video clips and contemporary digital art.

Fashion has undergone a parallel process. The passing on of fashion occurred through the erasure of time, novelty and self display in clothing. The main trend today is entropical and tends to uniformity and sameness. It's main illustration is the generalization and universality of blue jeans. Clothes have become standardized unisex uniforms that persist during long periods of time: suits for business and office work, stretch pants for sports, jeans for students, informal workers and weekends. As conceptual art has become purely abstract, the codes for dressing have equally abandoned their original symbolic meaning of skilled, professional labor, precious materials, ingenious design, keen appreciation of forms and composition, delicacy of tactile qualities, metaphorical richness and refinement in the combination of elements. It has become a purely semiotic, combinatory system according to Saussure's definition. In other words, contemporary clothing has become purely a differentiation and opposition scheme of elements typical of semiotic systems.

Marcuse dreamed for a society where everyone could be an artist. His dream came true where he least expected it :with digital art, pret a porter, personal homepages and rock music that needs practice but no training. Pity it came to late, after art had already been defunct. Visual arts are at the service of the advertisement industry that has monopolized the best talents and most creative people in the visual arts. Marcuse's dream of the democratization of art when art was still alive would have meant in fashion a complete freedom of creation and combination for everyone, an almost quotidian carnivalization of clothing. We could have decided each day whether to dress with feathers or lace, combine our grandmother's hat with an astronaut outfit, wear several of our husband's ties to decorate an austere skirt. It would have involved inventing unusual combinations and garments and being able to wear them any time or any place, at the metro or the office. Instead, our present puritanical codes impose a strict conformity to conventions of lifestyle uniforms offered by pret a porter. These uniforms are determined and limited by the context in which a few variations are permitted. Like some insects and reptiles, we dress to merge into our environment. Unlike animals, the environment we blend into is not natural but cultural.

Simmel realized that fashion fulfills a double, contradictory purpose for consumers: to be both the same and different from everyone else. The market of pret a porter offers a variety of uniforms according to well calculated demands and categories of lifestyles: the sloppy, the chubby, the eclectic, the junior, the minimalist, the casual, the formal, the athletic, the professional, the chic, the businesslike, the nerd, the cute, the classic, the sexy, the ethnic, the hippie, the yuppie, the preppy, the snob, the folksy, the standard, the romantic, the frumpy, the vamp, the dashing, the eccentric and as many categories one may track down.

Women's journals often entice their readers by selling stereotyped "looks" for women to choose and play with, as in a February 1999 *Vogue* cover asking "What's your Fashion

Aesthetic? Classic, Romantic Eccentric, Sporty" . Is this the freedom and individuation Lipovetsky finds in fashion?

Contrary to the right of remaining silent that the indicted may enjoy, we do not have an equal right of silence as far as our clothes are concerned. Clothes not only speak for themselves but they speak on our behalf, they describe us, commit and betray us. We try to monitor and control our clothes to have them to say only what we intend to say, not always successfully. Fashion speaks and conveys information about our personality, profession, hierarchy, lifestyle, gender, age, even political, ideological and sexual preferences. Our clothing is a real blabbermouth; says more about ourselves than we would like to be said. This involuntary gossiping of clothes partly explains the immense success of blue jeans. By being standard and widespread, jeans allow for disindividuation, blending and reticence as used by children and adults alike, by men and women, by white and blue collar workers, in Eastern and Western countries. They are our contemporary version of *liberté, égalité, fraternité*: the uniform of universality, androgyny and modernity. Princess Diana wore Levi's, and so do I.

Instead of a dream of imagination, eloquence and creation, we strangely long for homogeneity and silence, a clear symptom that our world has become a boisterous melange of overchoice.

*6 Lines upon the body and the Barbie syndrome

Various imaginaries have been at work in defining fashion at the same time that they have imposed points and lines upon the body. While anatomical proportions have not changed significantly over long periods of time, accents and proportions, what is hidden and revealed, radically vary from one style to another. In different periods, women's breasts have been openly revealed, pumped up, flattened down (during the 20's) or silicon blown. The waist has been sadistically narrowed, hidden, pulled up next to the breasts or pulled down reaching the hips. The shoulders have been pulled down, rigidly hidden, made to appear

rounded or straight, massive or minute, bare or covered. The width of the skirt was extended to the sides, made as a cone, an oval, a sphere or pushed towards the back for no logical reason. Women's hips have been massively extended or compressed under a corset, their backs have been artificially curved to appear concave as a letter C or forced to remain as straight as a ruler. Heads have been made to appear as small as a grapefruit or as big as a pumpkin. Legs have been covered in black silk to make them thinner, white to make them thicker, concealed under a skirt or loose pants, exhibited bare with the miniskirt or lengthened spider like by tight pants.

In his earlier book, *L'ère du vide*, Lipovetsky insists upon the prevailing permissiveness of contemporary western societies. Such permissiveness is, however, more apparent than real and formally restricted to certain activities, particularly consumption. It is permissive concerning the previous ethics of thriftiness and frugality which for Weber was determined by Puritan ethics of capitalism, but we are not allowed to be inefficient, regardless of the degrees of stress and anxiety involved. There various targets of disciplinary practices today, but the object upon which greater discipline and vigilance are more rigorously exerted is the body. Bodies are kept in shape by quasi military discipline to deserve inclusion in the world of fashion which imposes itself not only in clothing but, more dangerously, upon the shape of our body. Clothes do not fit the body: it is the body that has to fit clothes. Tight jeans designed to exhibit flat tummies and desirably concave abdomens, patrol and immediately punish the smallest deviation from ideal weight by the simple act of closing the zipper. The ideal feminine torso has to adjust itself to prominent breasts and sunken back, with equally prominent buttocks and symmetrically opposed sunken abdomen emphasizing a hollow uterus and stomach. The perfect line of the contemporary feminine body is simply an S.

Fashion has been adamant in one, and only one, aspect: the taboo of pregnancy. Women's abdomen was forced look abnormally flat by the use of a stomacher or a corset during past centuries and by tight jeans and bare lower torsos of today's teenagers.

Fashionable swimming suits that rise the line up to the pelvis are designed not only to exhibit these perfectly fatless bodies but the absence of any pregnancy mark in the skin around the hips. A pregnant woman manifests everything ill-favored for success: emotionality, inefficiency, clumsiness, warmth, dependency, homeliness, clinginess, sentimentality, uncertainty of the future, softness, lack of glamour, incapability of dynamism and demographical incorrectness.

The body is penalized with severe diets, excruciating exercises and aggressive surgeries to conform to the rule. The contemporary ideal of eternal youth has become as equally unattainable as sanctity was during the Middle Ages. It is best represented by the Barbie doll, malignantly spread as a cherished gift for little girls to train them as early as possible for their future anorexia. This epitome of perfection is immune to the eighth capital sin: aging. She is already forty but looks young! This is the Barbie curse.

*7 Four modalities of analysis

In an earlier work (1994) I proposed a model for the analysis of quotidian aesthetics which can be applied to clothing according to four modalities. *Proxemics* is an establishment of distances: social, cultural, economic, political, ideological, sexual. Reformation imposed darker colors, heavier materials, and bulky garments padded to conceal the figure. A similar case of long proxemics are Moslem traditional women's clothes.

Cinetics is the modality displaying dynamism or statism, being conservative and conformist or innovative and marginal (solidity and ortogonality of men's suits, the complex language of men's ties revealing audacity, modesty, demure, neutrality). Respectability and solidity was represented by massive volume of clothes over a pannier and the crinoline which during the fifties took the form of a massive mink coat and is now represented by the ortogonality of a tailored suit.

Tonics is the device for emphasizing a particular anatomical aspect over others: the waist by means of corset and stomacher, volume by padded shoulders, buttocks or hips, the breast by lowered décolleté and an extended neck in art deco designs, long legs by the miniskirt or tight jeans, under bodice with metal or whalebone strips in the seams to give a small waist and slender torso that flattened the whole body and pressed the breasts in or up, to exhibit or to conceal them. In Velazquez paintings, we can see the contrast between the comfortably dressed Virgin Mary or other peasants and the victimized, deformed, flat chested queen Mariana, the girdled Meninas and Infantas. Later, by 1660, the corset instead of concealing and flattening the breasts, lifted and accentuated them. Corsets were used until today and have become sexual fetishes.

Pulse is the device by which clothes seem to expand radially from the body, as the Spanish verdugado, a wide, bell shaped skirt or the French panniers with cone-shaped hoops, the crinoline and the farthingale. Pulse can also be centripetal as in clothes that adhere to the body like the fitted tunic of mid fourteenth century, or the silk and gauze dresses of Queen Marie-Antoinette's Neoclassical style and during the 19th century in France, the Empire style, by the use of plain white muslin and the natural figure or today's tight blue jeans. Naturalism has made women's body softer and more visible through the transparencies of muslin used during early 18th century, which became fashionable now by transparent shirts that make underwear visible.

*8 Pivots of fashion imaginaries: time and self

The logic that underlies not only fashion as the code of dressing for the rich and famous but the logic of clothing in general is the order of time. While vernacular clothes preserve time and represent its permanence, fashion signifies the exact opposite: the change of time. Fashion represents time as visual arts represent space. The inscription of time, the idea and relation of past and present, its rhythm and cadence, its duration and tempo is the key to the variations in clothing. Traditional societies and in general agrarian or rural

societies have in common a sense of time that is radically slower than Western urban modern societies. The stability of their institutions is echoed by the stability and uniformity in the clothing. Traditional hand-made garments are part of their vernacular arts and echo their work in ceramics, architecture, painting, music, oral legends and myths, theater and dance.

During its golden years, fashion prescribed the use of special clothing and fabrics for special times and events. Clothing for the afternoon or for the evening, for winter or summer, for a weekend. Fashion is perhaps the most eloquent inscription of time. The greater the sense of speed, the more fashion becomes ephemeral. Lipovetsky repeatedly insists upon the importance of time. He speaks of the increasing sense of fugacity of life during the XIV century, or a "radical rupture with the legitimate order of time" and of historical discontinuity (68) a new melancholic sensibility towards time.

Space (geographical, cultural) is also often used to define fashion, but it operates as a subsidiary of time: clothing appropriate for the mountain or the sea, for the city or the countryside, for the church and the cabaret are really presented less as adequate garments for a specific place than for a specific occasion of going to these places: clothes for Paris in the springtime, for a morning at the train station, for a sunset at the sea, for a night at the opera, for taking an afternoon airplane, for spending a day on boat, for strolling down the harbor of Calais at dusk, for a four o'clock coffee at Maxim's. Unfortunately fashion does not help us to dress adequately for a cold, a depression, a menstruation, menopause, chemotherapy, going to the supermarket or watching TV. These are activities and situations women often undergo and are thus condemned to remain alienated from fashion. There are only vacations at the beach, yacht or mountains, cocktails and ball dances, weddings and horse races, opera nights and castle invitations.

The order of time for pret a porter consists mainly in inaugurating each day with fresh clothes. We wear almost exactly the same style or type, but we must make a distinction between yesterday and today. The common practice of shopping therapy has become a way for relieving the irreversible duty of being oneself. Women who feel depressed or bored of

herselves like to buy clothes to purchase a different sense of self. We may and must be the same, but we may look different This economy of looks offers the ephemeral sensation of feeling someone else. We have, however, much less choices than it appears, and this is a misfortune of pret a porter. On one hand, we are flooded by over choice, too many clothes to choose from; on the other, we really only choose the same type of clothes that our lifestyle permits. As we know, lifestyles come in a package and define most of the decisions we make. Fashion magazines offer the feeling that all lifestyles are possible for everyone if only we buy different type of clothes, but we more often than not end up being reasonable and buying the same as usual.

Clothing is a privilege of humans, the only animal species capable of radically changing its appearance. Clothes make us appear languid, chic, solid, trivial or flamboyant ; we may look like astronauts, spiders, princesses, lions or diamonds. We choose some clothes for their power of denotation (uniforms and clothes that exhibit a profession, gender and lifestyle) and others for their connotation (the cute, the preppy, the snob, the folksy, the frumpy, the vamp). In both connotation and denotation, social imaginaries are at work. It is all a matter of an adequate attire.

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