

SUGGESTIONS FOR A DIFFERENT APPROACH TO THE HISTORY OF DRESS

Loincloth or business suit, *djellaba* or Chanel *tailleur*, blue jeans or leotard, evening gown or shorts, dress has always and everywhere been present as an object of material and symbolic investment. Why does a man belonging to a certain society dress as he does if not because a set of values and constraints such as custom, price, taste or decency prescribes or forbids certain usages, tolerates or encourages certain conduct? Dictating the use and assortment of various garments, this set of values is the expression of a veritable ethics of dress, protected by a series of sanctions that, from simple mockery to punitive measures (sumptuary laws or the present-day repression of transvestism and the illegal wearing of military, ecclesiastical or judiciary garb)¹ guarantees the easy recognition of certain signs that are vital to the social order.

Translated by Jeanne Ferguson.

¹ See Paul Daubert, *Due port illégal de costume et de décoration* (thesis in Law), Paris, A. Rousseau, 1905.

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Clothing one's self is thus freely to put together elements drawn from infinite possibilities but to combine the collected elements according to certain rules and from a limited supply. Clothing one's self is a personal act, but, in fact, what is more social than dress? This double nature of clothing refers to the dialectics of structure and event. On the one hand, all the ponderousness of a long duration, all the inertia of a society organized in its customs, proprieties and institutions; on the other, the group or individual who submits but who sometimes deviates, who innovates or changes, bringing about a decisive phenomenon or provoking harmless stories according to whether or not the tendency is crystallized or leads to a change in the dress code.

The fact that during the 19th century the technique of firing a gun gradually led soldiers to alter the axis of their *bicornie* from a position that was parallel to the body to one that was perpendicular is of fundamental interest to the history of the hat. On the other hand, the fact that Louis XI hid his prominent ears with a characteristic bonnet is an important detail for his biography but inconsequential for this same history of the hat.

This distinction enables us to establish dependable points of reference for the two aspects of clothing: one is concerned with generalities that require a certain conceptualization, the other concerns particular meanderings that call for a narrative history, unless they suggest psychological investigation.² However, it is understood that the social and legal dimension, in the broadest sense, of a given system of dress must be made clear before a "science of dress" can be gone into. This may be done by defining and explaining this sociality and legality, the way this legality works, the ideological justifications for its founding, the conditions and factors of its evolution, the tensions and conflicts which brought it about or that it reflects. Clothing, like language, always comes from some geographical and social area. In its form, color, material, fashioning, its function or through the behavior and usage it implies, it bears flagrantly obvious signs,

² For a psychoanalytic approach to behavior in dress, see J.C. Flügel, *The Psychology of Clothes*, London, Hogarth, 1950 (1930).

attenuated distinguishing marks or the residual traces of struggle,³ penetration, contacts, borrowings or exchanges between economic regions or cultural areas⁴ as well as between groups of the same society. Thus the ancient world can be divided into two broad systems of human dress: the sewn and the draped. The first group wore fitted clothing, for example the Mongols or the Gauls (breeches); the second wore ample draperies, such as the toga and the peplum, like all the peoples of the Mediterranean as far as India. Little by little, the sewn, shaped, barbarian garments took over in Europe. In the same way, the triumph of the middle class in the 19th century led to the triumph of its way of dressing, across classes and oceans, progressively imposing, along with its economic, social and moral order, its dress code with all its commercial and ideological implications.

Because of its symbolic weight, the adoption or rejection of this Western way of dress could become a decisive stake in the search for power. When Mustapha Kemal was elected president of Turkey in 1923 he abolished the *yashmak* (the penalty for disobeying was death by hanging) in an effort to modernize the country, whereas today the required wearing of the *tchador* contributes to the restoration of the Islamic identity of Iran.⁵ If some fossilized vestiges of ancient pomp still exist in Europe (the robes of royal courts, judges, academicians or Swiss Guards)

³ André Leroi-Gourhan, *Milieux et techniques*, Paris, A. Michel, Coll. "Sciences d'aujourd'hui" 1973, p. 203. In a chapter devoted to the different processes used in the manufacture of clothing in time and space, Leroi-Gourhan notes that "technical inertia allows in a certain measure to make of costume a historical witness that often marks a real movement of men, a true invasion, because if material has always been imported, the effective presence of a conqueror has always been needed for fashions in dress to abdicate traditional forms."

⁴ In fact, there are no real "national costumes" but rather local, regional or international ones that it would be fruitless to confine within political frontiers.

⁵ On the problems of vestimentary acculturation, see Patrick O'Reilly and Jean Poirier, "L'Évolution du Costume" in *Journal de la société des océanistes*, No. 9, Vol. IX, Dec. 1953, pp. 151-169. (Modifications in Neo-Caledonian dress under the Influence of Colonization); Ali A. Muzrui, "The Robes of Rebellion: Sex, Dress and Politics in Africa," in *Encounter*, No. 2, Vol. XXXIV, Feb. 1970, pp. 19-30; Alain Tchon, "Acculturation et abandon du costume traditionnel" in *L'Homme, hier et aujourd'hui*, coll. of studies in homage to André Leroi-Gourhan, Paris, Cujas, 1973, pp. 695-704. (Ethnographic inquiry on the Indians of Mexico.)

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everywhere else the subjection to bourgeois norms of dress seems inevitable.

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Discussions on the origin of clothing are reminiscent of those about the origin of language. The same unknowns, the same perplexity when faced with two of the most absolutely human phenomena: speech and dress.

The history of the different functions of dress is no better established. Generally, we invoke protection of the body as the first and universal end, to which are added modesty and ornamentation. However, one danger of this elementary functionalism is to understand clothing only in terms of “natural” needs, to confer an initial “utilitarian” status on it that is simultaneously determined by other “secondary” functions. This approach arises from a substantialist concept of needs and obliges us to stay on the surface of the subject under discussion. Now, to extract the history of clothing from its narrative rut is first to follow the landmarks placed by a conceptualization, allowing us to go to the social discourse (more or less unconscious or unconfessed) hidden beneath rationalizations of practicality and aesthetic alibis; it is to try to see what conditions in depth the form of dress and the behavior it brings about.

The difficulty in determining the physiological minimum in dress—the natives of Tierra del Fuego, for example, are completely nude when they hunt the *guanaco* in the now⁶—poses the question of the utility of being covered. It remains, however, that within every group there is a minimal body covering that is historically and culturally determined, below which the social and, indeed, the biological existence of the individual is destroyed. Thus, for women in our societies the coquettish use of cosmetics or hair styles may be a sign of identity that is an irreplaceable element in psychic survival. How many deported women died on entering a concentration camp because their heads were shaved, and they felt this operation as an ultimate and fatal dispossession?

⁶ Cf. Charles Darwin, *The Voyage of the 'Beagle'*, (1831-1836), Geneva, Edito-service 1968, pp. 204-234.

The lacks, needs, hopes or satisfactions of dress are, of course, expressions of a logic of the value of usage, but less than any other manufactured object, dress does not reduce itself to its traditionally accepted functions of protection, modesty and ornament. This is because, basically, it is first of all through dress that a meaning appeared for groups and individuals. Omnipresent, this function of mutual recognition through which one group exists for another inclines us to think as Maurice Leenhardt did that “it is neither cold nor nudity that led man to put on clothing but the desire to be invested with everything that would help him to affirm himself and be himself in the world.”⁷

An act of differentiation, clothing oneself thus is essentially, at the same time or separately, an essence, a seniority, a tradition, a natural attribute, a heritage, a caste, a lineage, an ethnic attribute, a generation, a religion, a geographical provenance, a matrimonial status, a social position, an economic role, a political or ideological affiliation. In short, as sign or as symbol, clothing sanctions and makes visible separations, hierarchies and solidarities according to a code that is guaranteed and perpetuated by society and its institutions.

In its elaboration of the appearance of its dress the middle class of the 19th century shows us the importance it gave to the signifying role with regard to the functional role. Even the most deprived elements of that society felt it was essential for them to distinguish themselves from the working class, to which, in truth, they were so close. While an ideology of income and comfort was imbuing bourgeois society, we note how much its conception of splendid clothing (inherited in part from the *Ancien Régime*) was opposed to the idea of functionality and what discomforts it endured, what efforts it made, what risks it took with illness and death, bundled up in its stiff collars, tormented by its starched shirt-fronts, tortured in its corsets, to create a meaning and justify its existence in the world.

With the speeding up of material progress and social mobility, with the advent of a new consumption by new social classes of consumers, we also see that a strict social mechanism regulated

⁷ Maurice Leenhardt, “Pourquoi se vêtir?”, in *L’amour de l’art*, 1st trim., 1952, p. 14.

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the relationship between classes and dress, the latter assuming an order as significant differences inside a code and as a status value inside a hierarchy. However, the emergence of this mechanism in consciousnesses that were more or less alienated, "intention," "motivation" in the matter of choice and behavior in dress, was a problem that was further complicated by the universal semanticization of any "utilitarian" object, by the fatal intricacy of the value of usage and the value of sign. This was first pointed out by Veblen in his analyses of ostentatious consumerism; it was emphasized by R.K. Merton in his idea of latent function,⁸ and by Roland Barthes in his idea of the function-sign.⁹ If the obvious end of an automobile is to transport or that of food to nourish, we know that in addition and simultaneously these items attain a meaning through their functions. We cannot protect ourselves against the cold or the rain by an overcoat without the entrance of this overcoat, whether we are aware of it or not, whether we wish it or not, into a system of meanings. The overcoat integrates into its practical function, and by means of this, a function-sign: it protects and has significance as it protects. Thus everywhere, underneath the practical rationalization of consumption and behavior in dress, are hidden meaning and social value. Through its massive inertia, this semantic weight takes part in the phenomena of survival in which the sign of an obsolete function survives as a remainder of prestige. Many items of clothing functioning originally as apparel for war, hunting or work degenerated during their evolution to tend toward pure signification. Today, for example, a "sports" costume no longer has a "sports" function, while it continues to show the qualities and signs of "sports." In the same way, the martingale that served the horseman as a means to tuck up the flaps of his greatcoat, or to gather them in, lost its original use and now connotes only a vague aristocratic prestige. The original function of certain items of clothing is sometimes found in the etymology of the word that designates them: the term *redingote* (1725)

⁸ Robert K. Merton *Eléments de théorie et de méthode sociologiques*, Paris, Plon, 1966, pp. 112-113, 122-124.

⁹ Roland Barthes, "Eléments de sémiologie" in *Communications*, No. 4, 1964, p. 106.

coming from the English “riding coat,” a coat to be worn on horseback; *chandail* (end of the 19th century) from the popular abbreviation “(mar)chand d’ail”; or cravat (1651) for the band of cloth that Croatian horsemen wore around their necks.¹⁰ In a short article, George Darwin, the son of Charles Darwin, gave an analogy between the development of human life and that of dress, seeing its evolution in terms of genetic heritage, natural selection and the unnoticeable deterioration of forms of vital organs.¹¹ This perspective well illustrates the passage from pure function-sign, from the significant “useful” to the ornamental “useless”; the cravat, the notch on coat collars, sleeve buttons or the rivets on jeans appear as elements of dress homologous to the appendix or tonsils, with no real utilitarian value.

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The interdependence, like the plurality, of functions assigned to clothing, manifest or latent, real or imaginary, allows its advantageous use by commerce. The practical function of clothing being inseparable from its aesthetic function, itself inseparable from its sexual function (modesty or enticement) or social function (prestige and distinction) this commercialism may overstress some of them for the better dissimulation of others that are not as admissible, opportune or persuasive.

Under the *Ancien Régime*, on the other hand, in societies that were strongly hierarchical, the invariability and control of distribution of the different vestimentary signs were guaranteed by law and social order. For example, the primary function of aristocratic dress was explicitly to signify in its magnificence a heredity, an essence, without fictional justifications, without embarrassing rationalizations. Dress was clearly invested with a precise socio-political role of self-confirmation for some and subordination for others, fixing each in his place by signalling the position of each.¹²

¹⁰ See the Oxford Dictionary for etymology of “cravat”.

¹¹ George H. Darwin, “Development in Dress,” in *MacMillan’s Magazine*, Sept. 1872, quoted by W.M. Webb in *The Heritage of Dress*, London, Grant Richards, 1907, p. 3.

¹² The role and transparency of the sign is widespread with uniformed people and their relation with civilian society. A vital signalling means for the functioning

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With the advent of democracy and a puritanical and utilitarian orientation of consumption, one of the special characteristics of the dress code of the middle class, freed from juridical constraints, was to confirm its legitimacy by dressing it up with practical alibis, innumerable moral and aesthetic pretexts, as if to clear it of a guilty gratuitousness. Still valid in the 19th century, signs of pure prestige, heavy with aristocratic connotations, are today confused in the world of fashion that employs all its ingenuity to persuade that a hat, a scarf or a fur serve to protect or embellish, no longer openly admitting that they function as a distinguishing difference or status symbol, in imitation of the wigs or red heels of other days.

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So as not to impose norms, reasons are given. Thus is established, essentially through the medium of fashion, a social aesthetic that is commercial as well as a guarantee and symbolic tool of a class that through its tailors and designers creates and recreates a distinctive product, through systematic rejection devaluating the preceding “beautiful” (out of style) so as to better praise the “beautiful” of the day (in style). Values are created, and thus scarcity, but never a definite “beautiful” that would put an end to this procedure and its profitable benefits. Everyone thus admires, desires and judges beautiful (elegant, chic or distinguished) what he thinks will be admired, desired and considered beautiful by those he recognizes as having power and competence to name the new canons of beauty however tirelessly, but profitably, disowned they may later be.

Going back in history we nevertheless find—especially in rural societies in which ceremonies are the occasion for manifestations of dress free from mercantile parasitism—combinations, tendencies and styles uniting this precipitous and versatile rhythm of fashion and arising from a deeper esthetics, less frivolous and studied, that are sometimes seen in the histories of

of a hierarchized group but also an instrument and expression of power, the uniform may act as instigator or discloser of conflicts. See for example Nathan Joseph and Nicholas Alex, “The Uniform: A Sociological Perspective,” in *American Journal of Sociology*, No. 4, Vol. 77, Jan. 1972, pp. 719-730.

costume,¹³ often closer to the history of art than to that of techniques.

We see, therefore, that the aesthetic function of dress is also inscribed in a relative duration, one that is closely tied to the mean time that marks in the West the variation of place, posture and preferred form of the body. As is proved by the ostentatious prominence of the female abdomen in the Middle Ages, the flat and muscled stomachs of today's cover girls, the legendary low necklines of the court of Louis XV, the flattened bosom of the girls of 1925, the fullbreasted and full-hipped stars of Hollywood, the exaggerated posterior of the middle-class woman of the 19th century or the appearance of bare legs and hands after World War I, there is a periodicity of place and appearance of the erogenous zones or those that are sexually stimulating,¹⁴ in which clothing is necessarily and profoundly involved.

In less mobile societies, this aesthetic-erotic topology undergoes very slight variation. Geographically, on the other hand, the disparities are extreme: from the Moslem woman, totally concealed under ample draperies, to certain Indian women in Brazil or Australian aborigines, entirely nude but with decorated skins.¹⁵

In the West, in the midst of relatively stable ethnic or national specificities,¹⁶ this shifting of attitudes and corporal regions

¹³ Comparing the evolution of a garment with that of the arts between 1350 and 1475, Paul Post concludes that dress during this period was subjected to the same stylistic laws as art, of which it was a manifestation. *Die französisch-niederländische Männertracht einschliesslich der Ritterrüstung im Zeitalter der Spätgotik 1350-1475. Ein Rekonstruktionversuch auf Grund der Zeitgenössischen Darstellungen*, Halle, 1910.

¹⁴ The masculine silhouette also offers some changing details with erotic function, such as the broadness of shoulder, the fullness of chest, the smallness of waist or the prominence of the pudenda. Facial hair is also subject to great variation.

¹⁵ On the variations in importance in time and space of corporal regions of modesty and desire, see W.G. Sumner, *Folkways. A Study of the Sociological Importance of Usages, Manners, Customs, Mores and Morals*, New York, Ginn & Co., 1906, pp. 429-435 and 453-459; see also Havelock Ellis, *Etudes de psychologie sexuelle*, trans. A. Van Gennep, Vol. I, Paris, Mercure de France, 1908, pp. 25-62.

¹⁶ Georges d'Avenel writes in this regard: "Everyone knows—but corset manufacturers know it best—that the women of the various European countries have different builds. Different models are necessary for each nation. Spanish women have wide hips and small abdomens; their short and shapely figure allows freedom to the natural protruberances of the bust. English women on the contrary stand erect and prefer that attitude. They need a laced and

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of desire seems to arise from a strategy of enticement that alternatively and for varying lengths of time gives value to shoulders, chest, waist, thighs, hips, legs, arms, the height and build of the entire body, in a procedure that is slower than fashion but analogous to it, aiming, like fashion, to renew the identity of the person through new forms.¹⁷ Calling upon all sorts of techniques and artifices, this work of the body and on the body multiplies in time its real of fictitious aspects, each time keeping in reserve the global effect in order to give force to the limited effects, concealing what had been revealed and revealing what had been hidden. In the 19th century when the female chest and hips were generously emphasized, the legs were hidden from view in a radical manner, thus accumulating in the frothy secrets of undergarments another erotic capital whose profitable exploitation was measured by the intensity of the cult of the leg and the emotion aroused by its fugitive vision. To the centuries-old imprisonment of the leg (except for a short intermission during the French Revolution) succeeded a period, beginning around 1920, of the enthusiastic discovery of and overt fetishism for those parts of the body that were finally visible, an interest reactivated after 1965 by the mini-skirt but which seems today to be blunted, just as the shorter prestige of the post-war overblown breasts idealized on the screen by Jayne Mansfield, Sophia Loren and Elizabeth Taylor has been toned down. Perhaps the stomach, so long held in by the corset and then stiffened by muscle development, may reappear in feminine morphology, unless the pelvis becomes broader for hips that are once again majestic.

tightly-drawn corset from shoulder to hip. Russian and Scandinavian women have long waists with little indentation. German and Dutch women are massive and need confining and reinforced corsets.

"These differences from one country to another, well known to the clothing industry, extend to all the parts of the body; from the calf, higher up on British women, to the breast, usually lower across the Chanel than on this side of the Ocean." *Le Mécanisme de la vie moderne*, series 4, Paris, A. Colin, 1898-1900, pp. 64-65.

¹⁷ Fashion is a means for renewing "sexual information," according to the expression of André Martinet in his article on the sexual function of fashion in *Linguistique*, No. 10, 1974, pp. 5-19. For the psychoanalyst Edmund Bergler (*Fashion and the Unconscious*, New York, Brunner 1953) the evolution of all fashion is determined by this shifting in the erogenous zones.

In any case, clothing is inextricably bound, especially by fashion, to the construction of these morphologies that each time recalls and justifies the new definition of corporal excellence through the forms of dress that it involves and which are often veritable anatomical moulds.

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Because of its ambivalence, dress, that unveils as it veils, that designates by hiding them the parts of the body that are alternatively valued, is at the same time a decisive instrument and an ultimate opposition to enticement. Thus the modesty of which it is the indication reveals on the other hand the charms it evokes. As Montaigne wrote, "*Pourquoy les femmes couvrent-elles de tant d'empeschemens, les unes sur autres, les parties où logent principalement nostre désir et le leur? Et à quoy servent ces gros bastions de quoy les nostres viennent d'armer leurs flancs, qu'à leurrer nostre appétit et nous attirer à elles en nous les esloignant.*"¹⁸ To paraphrase: Montaigne asks why women cover themselves up so, layer by layer, hiding the parts that arouse the desire of themselves and of men, unless it is not to whet the appetite and draw men to them while seeming to keep them at a distance.

Just as blushing is a sign of an embarrassment one wants to hide, modesty increases the amorous desire it should attenuate. The adjustment of the intimate is related to the adjustment of intensity of emotions. In a passage in *Penguin Island* Anatole France maliciously recounts the way a saintly missionary who has decided to cover the nudity of the lady penguins he has baptized tries the idea out on one, who is subsequently pursued by the suddenly-enflamed male penguins, so much does "modesty communicate an invincible attraction to women."¹⁹ The more the areas and objects related to sex are removed from the field of vision and discussion, the more they people, invade and haunt the imagination. G. Bataille writes, "The attraction of a beautiful or handsome face or dress is effective to the degree to which

¹⁸ Montaigne, *Essais*, Book II, Paris, F. Roches, 1931, p. 21.

¹⁹ Anatole France, *L'île des Pingouins*, Paris, Calman-Lévy, 1909, pp. 55-56.

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this face announces what the garment hides.”²⁰ The prudery of the 19th century proves in this sense such an obsession with sex that it went so far as to put slippers on the feet of piano legs. Consequently, it is where the dress gapes, where it is tucked up, where it is a potential restriction, defence, obstacle or delay that it best fulfils erotic function, due to its function of modesty.

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In all cases, dress acts on the body and the body acts on dress. Its different functions condition the forms that involve behavior, stance, the way of moving, gestures (which in their turn sometimes modify these forms and their functions in a sort of circular causality). In short, one does not walk the same way in a kilt as one does in trousers, in high heels as in jackboots. One does not carry oneself or act in the same way with a corset as without, with a tie or without.²¹

Since dress functions and forms vary according to circumstances, sex, class or role, all that it determines in behaviour differs in the same way. Thus the opposition between the loose and the fitted, the long and the short, that respectively cause constraint or ease in movement, in the Middle Ages showed the rift separating the nobles from the middle class, the peasants from the humble people of the towns. The former attested to a legitimacy confirmed by the ceremonious slowness of the gait, the latter a lowliness further emphasized by the rapidity of the movements; the former manifested a statutory idleness or an esteemed activity, the latter a humiliating manual labor. We know that in spite of everything dress evolved toward a shortening and adjustment of forms to the point that the 20th century gave prestige to functionality. Fullness in dress still exists, however, in roles of

²⁰ G. Bataille, *L'Érotisme*, Paris, U.G.E., coll. 10-18, p. 159.

²¹ A study by André Handricourt establishes the relationship between unshaped clothing (tunic or poncho) and the way loads are carried, slung across the back or carried by a band across the forehead, and also the relationship between shaped clothing (the coat) and the way of carrying the same loads in a backpack or in a basket with two shoulder straps. “Relations entre gestes habituels, forme des vêtements et manière de porter les charges,” in *Revue de géographie humaine et d'ethnologie*, No. 3, July-Sept. 1948, pp. 58-67.

a solemn nature, since the physical encumbrance of ecclesiastical, medical, judicial or professorial robes, the resistance they oppose to rapid movement, the constraint they impose on posture, on carriage of the head, on walking, on the arms that must be held away from the body, still respond, symbolically, to the idea of calm and majesty, to the feeling of gravity and decorum.

Dress takes part not only in the modelling of the body for a particular activity (it is a veritable tool) or a particular socio-somatic model (the atrophied foot of Chinese women or the wasp waist of the Europeans) or the elaboration of a particular kind of movement,²² but because of this fact it may influence attitudes, create dispositions, emphasize preferences and bear their imprint. The metaphorical expressions such as *faire jabot* (to pout) or "*être collet monté*" (to be stiff) well illustrate this. Buffon, legend says, assured himself of the nobleness of his style by wearing a court costume when he wrote. In fact, form is a standard that according to its function may act as a constant reminder of an aesthetic or ethical requirement or as a continuous invitation to a relaxation of norms. By the license it authorizes, by the impunity it guarantees, by the excitement it generates, masquerade shows *al contrario* the bondage of habitual dress, all the limitations implied to desire, to audacity, or to lack of constraint. According to G. Gorer and his studies on swaddling clothes in Russia²³ the forms of dress that envelop a nursing infant could go so far as to determine certain basic personality traits. As signs, in any case, their effect is patent in the socialization or acculturation process. The first long pants or the first formal evening dress mark the crucial stages in life, because these changes in appearance, like communion dress or a bridal veil, manifest passages, symbolize conditions sanctioned

²² The same article of clothing does not necessarily bring about the same gestures. B. Koechlin found a profound sexual differentiation in the technical operation of taking off a sweater: "A woman crosses her arms in front, grips the bottom of the sweater and raises her arms so as to free her head, then seizing the arms of the sweater, she turns it right-side out. A man puts his hands on his shoulders, takes the back of the neck of the sweater and pulls until his head is freed..." ("Techniques corporelles et leur notation symbolique," in *Langages*, No. 10, June 1968, p. 38); W.M. Webb has also noted ways that are specific to men and women for buttoning garments. *Op. cit.*, p. 21.

²³ G. Gorer, *The People of Great Russia. A Psychological Study*, London, Cresset Press, 1949.

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by society. Constantly inducing the individual to become part of the group, to participate in its rituals and ceremonies, to share its norms and values, to occupy an approved position and to correctly fulfil a role, accepted and legitimate clothing is a powerful element of political domination and social regulation. In the West, the middle class model (such as a shirt or trousers) is so sovereign that it requires no juridical protection. Only the interpretations differ, they themselves more or less severely codified according to the group belonged to. At a level that was still indulgent, these comments by Amiel already evoke the intensity of the malaise an individual may feel when he senses that he is not dressed properly: "My boots hurt my feet, my suit is puckered, my hat does not look good on me; in general, my clothes are a disgrace. And that bothers me. This outfit is so terrible that nobody would wear it on a bet. Besides, one does not like to be ill at ease or to cut a bad figure. There is a revolting oppression in ugliness or imposed discomfort. It is an offense to personal dignity that grossly angers one. One feels down on one's luck, duped or wronged, badly served while paying well, worse served than someone else without a valid reason. Rivalry is added to discontent and self-esteem mutters in the same way as taste. One is thus deceived in one's liberty, in one's sense of justice, in one's instinct for elegance, in one's sense of what is right, in one's vanity; one sees an entire season of renewed arguments, the annoyance of not being pleased with oneself and of being diminished in one's appearance and being."²⁴ Straining to break down and itemize the multiple missions assigned to clothing, functional analysis leads to a taking account of the immense domain of economics, aesthetics, signification, sexuality of politics, to establish a hierarchy for the respective weight of each for each society. Because of its finalism, however, it too often leads to explaining things by what they are. In seeking to define the function of cuff links Kluckhohn writes that their function is to "preserve usages and maintain tradition," because, he continues, "...people are more at ease if they have... the impression that they are following orthodox and socially-accepted usage!"²⁵

²⁴ Amiel, *Journal intime, année 1857*. Paris, U.G.E., coll. 10-18, 1965, p. 135.

²⁵ Quoted by Merton, *op. cit.*, p. 79.

This tautology or, at least, circular logic, based on the sole idea of continuity, is of course insufficient for an historical explanation. However, just as it is not always possible to assign a purpose—latent or manifest, extinct or deviated—to the form of an item of clothing or an accessory, it is difficult to connect systematically this form to history. From this fact comes the complexity of grasping another aspect of dress: the factors and modalities of its evolution.

Certainly, changes in regime, ideological upheavals or transformations in mores may influence the superficial variations in fashion (in its rhythm or content) but these variations are inscribed within slow oscillations analogous to the tendencies that the economists disengage in the accelerated movements of prices day by day and of which the profound regularity seems rarely disturbed by the general course of history: as in economic history, the history of cultural phenomena combines different rhythms. There are thus variations in the beard throughout the centuries. It disappeared with Louis XIV, reappeared with Romanticism to disappear again after World War I, Nevertheless, this interesting history remains to be explored.²⁶ As for forms of dress, a study by the anthropologists A.L. Kroeber and J. Richardson²⁷ has allowed the quantitative analysis (through measurements applied to a corpus of engravings of feminine fashion that extends from 1605 to 1936) of the three principal divisions that mark their evolution. Underneath, as a base, is found the fundamental system, the basic pattern, of forms and archetypal techniques: in the West, close-fitting garments, elsewhere the Mexican poncho, the Japanese kimono or the draperies of the ancients. This makes up the structural, almost immobile, time of F. Braudel²⁸ within which wide oscillations occur, regularly modi-

²⁶ On the quantitative study of the “how” if not the “why” of fluctuations in beard styles, see Dwight E. Robinson, “Fashions in Shaving and Trimming of the Beard: The Men of the ‘Illustrated London News’, 1842-1972,” in *American Journal of Sociology*, 81, (5), May 1976, pp. 1133-1141.

²⁷ “Three Centuries of Women’s Dress Fashion: a Quantitative Analysis,” in *Anthropological Records*, University of California Press, No. 2, Vol. 5, 1940, pp. 111-154. Earlier, A.L. Kroeber had made a list covering the period 1844-1919: “On the Principle of Order in Civilization as Exemplified by Changes in Fashion,” in *American Anthropologist*, n.s., vol. XXI, 1919, pp. 235-263.

²⁸ F. Braudel, “Histoire des sciences sociales: la longue durée,” in *Annales*,

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fyng the silhouette in a movement that occurs roughly every 100 years, in which is inscribed the short duration of fashion *per se*. The inflections of fashion shift between two principal types: permanent, a mean cycle of several decades, relatively stable, and the aberrant opposing type, rarer and very unstable.

The object of all discussion and all interest, the short duration of fashion nevertheless only rarely affects the general model. The mythology of the spontaneity and creativity of fashion which fashion journalism perpetuates, persuading us that the annual abrupt changes in forms of dress are proof of the “freedom to renew” and the “inventiveness” of the designers collapses. The serialization of quantitative data thus corrects our short-sightedness and this deceptive duration that in fact is reabsorbed within secular tendencies and broad regular rhythms is seen in a new light. Veritable trends are revealed in the length and height of the waist, in the width and depth of the neckline, in the length and fullness of the skirt, similar to those that mark the evolution of anatomical forms, both, of course, influencing each other reciprocally.²⁹

A. Young polishes and enriches the analysis by observing in the development of types of dress from 1760 to 1937 not only changes in dimensions within the same fundamental system but changes in the arrangement of the forms of dress around the body (the contour).³⁰ The author catalogues three types of dresses that over a period of 178 years alternately reigned in cycles of several decades: the *tournure*, the *tube* and the *cloche*.

More difficult to measure but just as pertinent to determine would be the evolution of the movement that causes the disappearance and then the reappearance of certain items of dress that may be in view, establishing them at times as intimate lingerie, at times as outwardly visible (shifts, bodices, underskirts, stockings, vests or pantaloons).

ESC, No. 4, Oct-Dec. 1958, taken up again in *Écrits sur l'histoire*, Paris, Flammarion, Coll. “Champs,” 1977, pp. 41-83.

²⁹ Of course, all forms of clothing, like all forms of the body, do not evolve at the same speed. Hats, like hair styles, can change very quickly; footwear, like the figure, is more slowly modified. Age, status or civil state also influence the rhythm of these variations.

³⁰ A. Young, *Recurring Cycles of Fashion, 1760-1937*, New York, Cooper Square, 1966 (1937).

The insertion of this series within the basic Western pattern fulfils the function of a sort of programming that shows the danger of systematically equating a form and its historical context. This rotation or this alternation of a finite number of forms, in combinations that are further reduced by certain technical incompatibilities is proof that the crinoline or the mini skirt is not so much the genetic or analogous product of a state or a transformation in the course of history as that of a relatively autarchic evolution of which they represent, in terms of measurement, two extremes. What relationships (other than chronological) can be established between a long full-skirted dress and the Second Empire in France, between a short close-fitting dress and the 60's? Certainly one comes from a more rigid and prudish society than the other, but to show one's legs no longer indicates a sexual liberation for a woman and long hair on men no longer indicates a "feminization." In the matter of clothes as in the matter of hair styles, there is no natural trait that allows such inferences. Skirts became short because they had been long, hair grew long because it had been short. All the fashion values, all distinguishing values reside in this fugitive opposition to the past and to those who remain in the past. Nevertheless, sometimes the appearance of new representative forms (such as the child in the 18th century), new usages (such as the bicycle at the end of the 19th century) or new social conditions (such as working women in the 20th century) bring about new silhouettes, implying new forms whose emergence and evolution in history is evident.³¹ However, if the French Revolution profoundly modified masculine garments in the long run, it did not really affect feminine dress, whose evolution followed its course without registering significant shocks. Likewise, when in 1947 the "new look" emphasized the waistline, padded the hips, lengthened and puffed out the dress having a whale-boned bodice, with ruffles of stiff taffeta, it was just the throwback to the farthingale, pannier and crinoline of centuries before and had no particular correspondence to political or social temporality.

³¹ In traditional societies on the way to acculturation there is always a certain historicity of forms. See in this regard Jacques Bergue, *Le Maghreb entre deux guerres*, Paris, Seuil, 1962, pp. 90-92.

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In the same way, the rotation required by the reduced number of forms and the limited possibilities of combinations does not lead to this kind of cyclic monosemy that the mystics of “unending vestimentary recurrence” track down,³² trying to find a meaning common to the “two-piece” of Pompeiian frescos and the bikinis of Miami Beach. This is because, resembling the spiral of Vico rather than the wheel of Spengler, the same form returns taking on meanings that are never identical, influenced by social formation and a process of oppositions that are different each time.

The diachronic study of the rhythm of forms of dress from one period to the following, from one society to another, must be completed by the synchronic study of the relationship and function of these forms within the system of concrete social relationships that exists in each of these periods and in each of these societies. Then, through their differentiating nuances and in the opposition of their distinguishing characteristics, their social significance will appear. During the Second Empire in France, the more or less ample fullness of the crinolines just as surely placed a woman in a certain class as did her way of speaking: the exaggerated and showy crinolines of parvenues and cocottes; the moderate and distinguished ones of the *comme-il-faut* world; and the modest and inexpensive ones of the working girl in her Sunday best.³³

* * *

The evolution of the materials of these forms in dress is largely bound to technical evolution and to the geo-commercial variations in textiles and dyes. In the *Ancien Régime* restrictions in the use of fabric was as determinant as the sumptuary laws in fixing meaning and use over long periods. Materials that were precious, because rare, bright colors and because expensive (like purple, that remained for ages the exclusive attribute of cardinals or princes of the blood), necessarily accrued to the nobility, while the bourgeoisie was vested for centuries in more som-

³² See Bernard Rudofsky, *Are Clothes Modern?*, Chicago, P. Theobald, 1947.

³³ P. Perrot, *Les Dessus et Les dessous de la bourgeoisie*, Paris, Fayard, 1981.

ber colors and simple cloths. This tradition of sober demeanor is still seen in masculine garments, but the textile industry and the progress in artificial dyes have since the 19th century considerably increased availability on the feminine market (in a world in which how things appear to the eye continues to grow in importance). Let us note, however, that in these domains the supply does not always meet the demand, even less does it predict or create it. Undoubtedly, the invention and commercialization of some new color or material may play a decisive role in the determination of new aesthetic canons, but a protectionist policy may have an inverse effect, such as the Anglomania during the Empire or Westernization in Russia today, that make some products all the more sought after because they are not to be found.

* * *

Thus fashion is only one aspect of the phenomenon of dress, a transitory modality of a mean time that we can liken to style, which it may inflect or change at times. On this multi-level history, within which are lodged more or less internal and systematic histories of variable velocity and interwoven like a braid, a material, social or political conjunction is nevertheless not without influence. At various levels, one or the other of these may disturb the movement by slowing down or speeding up a rhythm that is otherwise regular. Thus without opulence, without change, fashion would be impossible: the fundamental Chinese peasant costume has undergone practically no fluctuation, while that of the French peasant acquired some new elements, such as the use of body linen that spread in Europe in the 13th century or the woollen cloth that became generalized in the 18th century. A comparative examination of certain pictorial representations of country scenes of the same region shows us secular movements in clothing, imperceptible in the short run but participating in the slow rhythm that marks ecclesiastical garments or those of certain corporations. However, when we use the millenary stability of the forms of the robes of mandarins as an example, we see that opulence does not automatically break this immobility. It is rather the distribution and circulation of

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this opulence within moving social structures that makes a modification in the rhythm of evolution of these forms possible and at times brings about the subversion of the ordering of signs of prestige and power in clothing. Through its vital symbolic significance, fashion is in truth a field of continuous battle throughout all the history of societies in which there is some mobility or possibility of desiring an object that is desired by others.

In the West, from the 12th to the 20th century and through a system of relay and retroaction, the diffusion of more accelerated changes in form, color and material gradually reached the strata of society that had become economically, socially and culturally available, through material progress, the evolution of social relationships and acculturation. With industrial society, the already rapid but disorderly rhythm of fashion became regulated as it became rationalized, largely taken over and relayed by commerce. The acceleration of production, bringing about a wide and rapid circulation of goods, requires two methods: increasing the demand and limiting the physical life (built-in peremption of the usage-value) and social life (built-in peremption of the meaning-value) of clothing. The marking of time in fashion thus becomes institutionalized and officially annual and seasonal. The continued operation of breaking with preceding canons, the constant praise of "novelties," the tireless manufacture of the fine and the good follow their courses and are amplified, relayed by a formidable system of transmission: fashion journalism. First with engravings, then with photography, it plays a role that now has a decisive effect on this movement that creates fashion and kills it, making it go from renewal to imitation, from distinction to conformism, from difference to identity. In short, from the Other to the Same, to the domain coveted by each, soon being divulged to all.

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