LEOPOLDINA FORTUNATI

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The Rituals and Metaphors of Dressing

Author: Leopoldina Fortunati

Dressing is a daily task of self-care, in which individuals express preferences as well as tastes and sentiment, and this includes specific rituals. Dressing, along with washing, is one of the domestic activities that each individual does by himself or herself, except for infants, toddlers, and the infirm. Morning plays a fundamental role in domestic rituality, since during this time of the day several gestures and tasks have to be performed. How is this activity embodied in daily routines? Investigating three important habits can aid an understanding of the structure of the daily ritualization of fashion and dressing. These habits are when people dress, how many times they change their clothes, and whether they dress differently at home compared to when they go out. A study carried out in Italy with a sample of four hundred respondents examined ritual habits connected to dressing, the gestures of fashion, and the main metaphors of dressing in the early twenty-first century.

Rituals of Dressing

The beginning act of dressing competes in the structure of daily rituals with another task: eating. In the Italian study, almost half of the respondents preferred to dress before breakfast; a little more than a third, after breakfast; and a fifth, sometimes before and sometimes after. From these answers it is apparent that the majority of respondents tend to follow a fixed ritual in their everyday life, even if there is no uniformity in the time of dressing. In this succession of morning gestures and actions it is above all the person's age that determines the different behaviors. Compared to other age groups, adolescents more often dress before breakfast, whereas adults more often dress afterward. This reveals that adolescents and adults experience different personal disciplines in the domestic sphere. Boys and girls have to go to school early every day, and this imposes a rigid sequence in everyday rituals. In contrast, adults usually have breakfast first, as if they need to eat to replenish their energy in order to get dressed and get going. The only exception is the thirty-somethings, who, like the adolescents, more frequently dressed before having breakfast. Evidently, this stage of life is crucial for men with respect to their career and requires daily discipline to support their professional needs. In contrast, women, some of whom have small children for whom they have to prepare breakfast at this stage in life, tend to postpone the operation of dressing until after eating.

The second habit concerns the frequency with which a person changes clothes. Until the 1950s and 1960s, men and, especially, women of the middle and upper classes were in the habit of changing their clothes several times a day (women wore a type of morning coat to start the day; another, more elegant garment for the afternoon; and yet different clothing in the evening, when items were very pretty and the most formal). In the study, fewer than a third of the respondents stated that they changed clothes several times a day, while almost a third did so only once a day; more than a third changed three or four times per week. The frequency of changing clothes still depends on gender: whereas more men claimed to change clothes three or four times a week, more women said they changed clothes every day. Also, this habit suggests the greater importance women put on dressing, compared to men, but the propensity to change clothes also relates to age. In fact, people in their twenties, more than any other age group, change daily. Generally, this is a life-cycle stage in which individuals are active socially and sexually and experience dating and love relationships intensively; consequently, in this stage, individuals

want to offer the most positive image of themselves, and frequent changes of clothes help with this.

Man having breakfast already dressed for work.
Photograph by Mercedes Burgos.

In general, changing clothes is related to the desire to articulate one's own image appropriately according to the social contexts in which one decides to be present. Changing clothes is also connected to the degree of rigidity and distinction with which a society organizes its different social events and establishes the specific etiquette that regulates each of them. Western society is becoming less prescriptive and more fluid. Those fences that rigidly separated the various social dimensions have disappeared. In the twenty-first century finding a lady in fur at the supermarket does not provoke any reaction, but this would have been judged inappropriate in the 1950s.

The third habit investigated in the study—whether people dress differently at home—regards the home as a place where the social world stops at the door. This question is of particular importance as people in less affluent periods dressed in old clothes at home in order to "save" their new clothes or wore comfortable clothes for ease of movement and work. At home, one experiences a sense of mastery and control over the environment, which is of fundamental importance for the security and stability of each individual. The house represents an extension of the self, and its importance, at a deep level, is linked to images of blessed space and the heavenly center, within the constellation of identity, as Gilbert Durand has argued. In other research on Italian wardrobes, most worn-out garments or items that turned out not to be very wearable were then recycled for wear at home. The house emerges as the place of antifashion; because the social, public dimension is lacking, the self can be what it is without the need to display and present itself. The house is thus the site where garments that are considered "terminal" are consumed. Wearing a housecoat is part of that dimension of de-labeling that the members of a family allow each other, shedding their public identity.
Unsurprisingly, the majority of the respondents in the study stated that at home they dressed in a different way compared to when they went out. The reasons are connected mainly to the tasks involved in domestic labor and the strategy of protecting clothes from possible stains, tears, and soil. The results show that women more than men chose to wear "work clothes" at home, because they do more housework. Furthermore, it is common for many people to wear casual slippers at home for hygienic and other practical reasons, such as not wanting to dirty the floor. Examining each gender's behavior reveals an expected difference: women put on slippers more frequently than men, probably because they do most of the cleaning, cooking, washing, ironing, and other household tasks, and so are more aware of not getting the floor dirty by wearing shoes that have been outside.

Gestures of Dressing

The rituals of dressing in everyday life include not only macro dimensions but also micro dimensions like those related to the simple gestures of dressing and undressing. Do people prefer to dress or to undress? Do they prefer to dress by drawing clothes on over their heads or by pulling them up from the bottom? More than half of the respondents preferred to dress with clothes that have to be put on from the bottom, while the preference is reversed for a third. There are no significant differences between men and women in this regard. The act of beginning to dress the lower body first reveals a certain resemblance to the processes of architecture. Since dressing is like building a temporary home (the famous
Canadian sociologist Marshall McLuhan speaks of the "castle of our skin"), it is arguable that people prefer to dress from the bottom, just as a house is built from the ground up.

Dressing implies making a movement from the human body's periphery to the center, while undressing requires the opposite. Dressing corresponds to a process of materialization, while undressing corresponds to a process of
dematerialization. Both gestures are embedded in a dense network of historically sedimented meanings. It is interesting to note that most people prefer to dress rather than undress, not only because one prefers to add clothes rather than take them off, but also because the often-problematic relationship with the naked body makes the task of undressing less exciting for most people. This is also why the striptease is so successful: it makes an act that people do not like to engage in at a mass level elegant and provoking. While gender differences did not emerge in this regard, age, instead, turned out to be significant. The majority of adolescents preferred to dress, while those who preferred to undress were mostly people in their thirties and up.

Clear purse. Photograph by Mercedes Burgos.

In dressing, various types of activities are involved: a physical activity, a planning activity, and a decision-making process. This complex task also involves a combinatorial art in choosing among the various clothing items in closets. In the end the rituals related to dressing are important procedures of how fashion is experienced in everyday life. In an interview, the fashion designer Micol Fontana stated that people are often dressed poorly because they do not have time to devote to planning. In fact, few can dedicate time in either the evening or the morning to review their wardrobes and decide how to combine various items to wear. If lack of time partly explains the common aesthetic limits of working-class dressing style, at the same time it clarifies why a new profession arose to solve this problem for the affluent who do not have time to do it themselves but have social obligations that cannot be neglected. Such professional wardrobe consultants go to the homes of managers, executives, and so on and plan suitable clothing and accessories for various occasions, based on their clients' weekly agendas and wardrobes.

The importance of the combinatorial strategy at a vestimentary level is also confirmed by the respondents' preferences regarding the type of dress to wear: a one-piece outfit, a two-piece outfit, or different pieces that can be combined. The majority of respondents preferred garments that can be combined, while about one-fifth preferred two-piece outfits and only one-tenth a

one-piece outfit. The one-piece dress's low appeal is perhaps explainable by the greater rigidity it imposes on the vestimentary order. In response to this variation in users' tastes, in the early twenty-first century fashion is being pushed less than in the past to develop the vertical dimension of the human body as a key feature of dressing. Thus, the cut at the waist introduced by a shirt-and-skirt combination is more acceptable than in the past, compared to the one-piece dress, which respects and stresses the verticality of the human body.

The Metaphors of Dressing

Other than the daily macro and micro rituals that surround the dressing process, the metaphorical structure that governs the world of fashion is also important in orienting behaviors and practices related to the use of fashion products. The experience of fashion makes it evident that it is necessary to reconstruct the vestimentary order and its symbolic meaning; some of these metaphors have lost their original, functional meaning, but they continue to be used due to inertia. They have been largely inspired by the sociopolitical geography of the human body and recall the metaphors of orientation at a linguistic level.
These metaphors are spatial: over and under, right and left, above and below, inside and outside, front and back, central and peripheral.

These spatial metaphors, organized in axes with two opposite poles, are a prominent part of the grammar of the vestimentary order. Because they are influenced by the human body, its symbolic meaning and that of its parts are relevant for fashion. In different historical periods, different parts of the body, especially for females, have assumed specific connotations, according to the strategies of biopower and social and political control perpetrated against women. In fact, the human body, as the terrain of self-presentation and representation and as the biotechnological terminal of industrial, cultural, and political apparatuses, is subject to profound metamorphoses. For example, Western societies in the early twenty-first century appreciate a thin and tall body, but this was not always the case. Since the late twentieth century the grammar of fashion's language or codes has undergone deep changes.

Over-under. The metaphor over/under was rewritten in the last decades of the twentieth century. Slip dresses, bras worn on top of outside garments, elastic underwear in full view, and tank tops that have been re-semanticized as shirts have been proposed in many collections since the end of the twentieth century. The history of fashion already contains an element belonging to this axis: the double-faced dress, which could be worn with the inside out, too. Thus, the traditional boundaries between underwear and clothes have blurred. This overthrow occurred as the sense of shame changed at the social level, as well the sensitivity about hiding the body's private parts. The structure of clothing in underwear and outerwear recalls bourgeois morality and its double regime: the wife and the mistress, who had to stay in different spheres. All people knew about the existence of this double regime, but the reigning hypocrisy led to an official silence. Groups inspired by social movements such as hippies, the 1968ers, and feminists have contributed greatly to inject libertarian ideas into society, but the creative industries and the media have also played a significant role, showing that it was possible, at least in the imagination, to create a less rigid and more open society. In the early twenty-first century, there is more openness related to sexual relationships, with the consequence that the separation of garments related to over and under in the fashion world has become more fluid.

Woman deciding which jacket to buy.
Photograph by Mercedes Burgos.

Right-left. This metaphoric axis is one that more strongly resists changing times; the inertia of tradition continues to weigh heavily. For example, buttons are fastened from the right for women and from the left for men because women once held a child in their left arm to keep the right hand free to work, whereas men used their right hands to draw weapons, and thus buttoned from the left. In the modern world, this order has less apparent relevance but is still maintained.

Above-below. A greater amount of vestimentary activity is concentrated on the upper part of the body (in particular, on the upper trunk) than on the lower part. This is connected to the fact that in the presentation of the self, the head, and especially the face, plays the most important role, because the head is the site of hearing and seeing and is also greatly involved in face-to-face interaction. Objects that surround the face acquire centrality and attract maximum attention. Changing a shirt or a blouse will often change a person's image more than changing a skirt or pants. The further development of hearing and seeing related to advanced technology has had the effect of enhancing the focus of attention on the upper part of the body.

In vestimentary activity taking place on the trunk, economic factors are involved: changing a shirt, for example, is usually less expensive than changing a pair of pants or a skirt. Psychosocial factors are involved as well, connected to the elaboration of the feminine image and to a construction of femininity in society and the media that is mainly based on seduction. Arguably the lower part of the body (turning to the genitals and buttocks) is considered peripheral. Treating it as peripheral not only diverts attention and shifts the gaze away from it but, above all, assigns a role to the corresponding clothes. This also relates to social factors such as modesty and sexual repression, among others. When the birth rate is low, it is not necessary to focus on the lower part of the feminine body. Breasts, for example, may be considered more appropriate tools of seduction, being less controversial than the pelvis and vagina. Women's breasts lend themselves to a strong symbolic disguise: they can easily be made erotically attractive, pulled away from the more challenging grounds of reproduction and lactation.
Earlier historical periods placed greater emphasis on the lower part of the body; for example, the crinoline emphasized the hips, while the cul-de-Paris emphasized the back. The part of the body that receives the focus in a given historical moment depends on many factors. Among the most crucial is the social construction of femininity and masculinity. For example, when the attention of fashion focused on the lower part of the body—the hips and pelvis—this mirrored society's emphasis on women's activity as mothers and the appreciation of their fertility. The vestimentary activity that concentrated on the hips and pelvis was addressed to a fertile woman who may have wanted to hide her pregnancy.

Ripped jeans for sale. Photograph by Mercedes Burgos.

Inside-outside. This set of metaphors has been turned upside down. For example, labels have migrated from the inside to the outside of clothing, stitching is exhibited, or hems are highlighted as decorative motifs. The clothes that once had to present themselves as a fashionable item, a dream of construction in which the traces of their material processing had to be hidden, exhibit these details to show off the workmanship of the garment in the early twenty-first century. This revision of the relationship between inside-outside has also involved bags and purses, which have been made transparent by the use of plastics. Fashion in this case has proposed a different vision of what can be shown and of what no longer has to be transported in a hidden way; that is, the contents of pockets and bags can be made visible.

However, the resurgence of the inside over the outside has encountered strong resistance from consumers. The display of the little essential objects that are carried has not become popular, because it collided with more powerful desires: the sense of privacy and the current separation between the public and the private spheres. This metaphoric axis has undergone radical restructuring. While fashion has reacted cautiously to revising the inside-outside relationship, other communication systems have blurred the boundaries even more, such as when the mobile phone began to allow private conversations to take place in public; likewise, reality shows on television have made public large portions of daily life that were formerly thought to be private.

Front-back. This metaphoric axis resembles the procedures of architecture. Just as a house has a front and also a back, so does a dress or a suit, corresponding to the front and the back of the human body, which are different. Generally, fashion focuses attention on the front. The front is more elaborate because it usually contains the openings and is also more articulated. There are variations, however: deep necklines, for example, can be utilized in the back instead of the front.

Center-periphery. Another upset of opposite metaphors relates to center and periphery. Accessories, traditionally considered secondary and peripheral in regard to the body and dress, have acquired a new centrality. Although they are marginal elements in the geography of the body, accessories have played an increasingly strong role in vestimentary habits and have acquired the important symbolic role of representing a brand of elegance within the vestimentary order, as they represent for many people the only possibility of displaying elegance at a limited cost. A Gucci bag or Hermes scarf can make a non-designer dress elegant.

There is a hidden metaphor that regulates the world of fashion imperiously: the symmetry of clothes, which corresponds to the symmetry of the human body. Dress, as a second skin, is in a certain sense forced to repeat the symmetry of the body.
Symmetry embodies a simple and economic order, appreciated in the geography of dressing in the twenty-first century. Other historical epochs, such as the Renaissance, have shown an appreciation of experimentation in the domain of symmetry, proposing shoes or dresses where the right side is in a different color from the left side. In a manifesto "Il vestito antineutrale" ("The Anti-neutral Dress"), published in 1914, Giacomo Balla, an Italian futurist, reproposed

shoes where the right and the left differed in shape and color, as an antidote to the unexpressive, representative style of the industrial bourgeoisie, based on personal self-mortification. Futurists criticized the bourgeoisie for liking the neutral colors such beige and gray. Nonetheless, Balla's efforts did not succeed in deconstructing the forms of symmetry, given that the color and shape of shoes, gloves, sleeves, socks, and pants have continued to be uniform and symmetric. The temptation to introduce asymmetric elements sometimes resurfaces in fashion collections, however: for example, irregular hems have been proposed in some collections in the 1990s and 2000s. Asymmetry has not become a dominant metaphor of the fashion world, however.

Conclusion

Fashion plays not only with time (with revivals, vintage styles, and so on) but also with the spatial structure of clothes, which provides an inexhaustible source of innovation. An analysis of daily rituals of dress reveals some of the habits and gestures that mediate and translate the fashion world into the domestic sphere. The practices of use and the domestication process of fashion items have been largely neglected in the past. However, these provide inspiration for rethinking fashion in another perspective. Gestures, in particular, are important in terms of understanding the usability and the affordances of fashion items in everyday life, not only the marketing strategies of fashion brands. For example, the Dior campaign to launch the Dior Touchphone described the traditional seven gestures representative of the Dior universe: to dress, undress, wear makeup, look, walk, sit, and descend a staircase. To these, an eighth gesture must be added: to call, using one's new Touchphone. Investigating the spatial metaphors that govern and regulate the fashion world is promising, because these metaphors make the relationships among the human body, society, and fashion intelligible and increase the awareness of the symbolic meaning of the vestimentary order and fashion shapes.

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