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Women's Invisible Labor in Dress Practices: Care

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Fashion consumption hides a great deal of invisible labor; changes in this labor have influenced and silently but effectively reoriented the fashion world. This invisible labor is the work done in everyday life to buy, clean, iron, and mend clothes. These supplementary but ongoing tasks keep clothes in good condition. To what extent is this labor still performed at a mass level? Who does it in the early twenty-first century? A survey carried out in Italy by sociologist of culture and fashion scholar Leopoldina Fortunati, with a sample of four hundred respondents, has tried to answer these questions. The results show that this work has been largely simplified and outsourced. When it is still done, it is largely the task of women. The implications regarding women's work apply not only to Italy but also to other countries.

The mutual influence of society and fashion on one another has been thoroughly studied and analyzed. To describe this two-way relation, it is useful (borrowing an expression used in science and technology studies) to speak of a process of co-construction between fashion and society, in which the two entities contribute equally to their reciprocal construction. However, two features of this process have been neglected: the lack of awareness of the entire cycle of clothing items and women's resistance to this co-construction process.

Woman sewing, attaching a button to a shirt. Photograph by Mercedes Burgos.

With regard to the first feature, for the apparel industry, clothes are the final result of the cycle of production and are also commodities to be sold. The apparel industry's interest in garments has always stopped at the front door of the house. That is, the industry is not concerned about what happens to the items once they enter the domestic sphere. The domestic sphere is perceived as belonging to another dimension of society, one that industry is not involved in. Clothing producers are thus interested in this sphere only for its purchasing power, that is, as potential buyers. Obviously, because purchasing clothes is connected to using them, industry cares about the use of clothing, but only as a background issue. Although many studies have stressed that fashion and society co-construct each other, the apparel industry seems to consider itself an entity quite apart.

The True Process of Apparel Production

In reality, from the user's point of view, garments are commodities that can be used in the same condition as they were purchased for only a short period of time. In the domestic sphere, garments are part of a complex process that includes at least three sets of overlapping tasks: purchasing, wearing, and maintaining. While everyone

(except young children, the disabled, the ill, and the elderly) is engaged in the tasks associated with wearing, purchasing is frequently delegated to women within the family. Mothers buy clothing and accessories for young children, and women also often buy garments for their husbands or partners, who may not have time, or may not feel able, to do so themselves. The maintenance of garments—including a variety of tasks such as washing clothes, drying them or laying them out in the sun, ironing, putting clothes away, removing stains, airing clothes out, taking clothes to the dry cleaner, repairing hems, attaching buttons, mending tears and rips, altering them, and so on—seems to be centralized; in many houses, women perform these tasks for all the family members. All these tasks are part of a production process that takes place in the domestic sphere and that has little or no visibility. However, it is important to reconstruct this process in order to understand the entire life cycle of apparel items and also the role of users as well as, more broadly, the role of society (which is not only cultural or social but also productive).

Purchasing a fashion item is not a simple act but requires gathering information, planning, making decisions, and spending income; it is governed by rituals and procedures. It essentially includes two stages: The first stage is exploratory and informative. In this stage people, especially women, talk about fashion, buy and read magazines and newspapers conveying fashion information, read and write about the new fashion proposals on the Internet, watch television programs on fashion, window-shop, and observe how the people on the street are dressed. The last activity is most important, since the street serves as a permanent catwalk that offers fashion shows for free. On the street people can observe, be inspired, and be led to imitate another's clothing, all without any effort and with great return. The street is the litmus test of one's own self-representation and thus of one's own emotional security: People can check whether others beyond the circle of their personal relationships share their tastes. Clothing stores decorate cities with their windows, in the sense that the urban space of fashion finds its apotheosis in the open window, which is the street.

This first stage requires further empirical research, and hence the understanding of it remains sketchy. The research conducted in Italy focused only on some aspects of the first stage of purchasing. One of these is looking at the windows of clothing stores. Behaviors fall into two main categories: The first is when people go out to walk with the specific purpose of window-shopping, and the second is when people need to buy a garment. In the first case, the majority of respondents did window-shop, with variable frequency, when walking through the shopping district. This activity is practiced much more by women, especially adolescents and young adults (twenty to twenty-nine years old), while men between the ages of thirty and thirty-nine claim that they never do so. In the second case, women tend to window-shop quite often, while men make up the majority of those who never do so. For women, window-shopping often becomes an excuse to go out with friends. The second stage of purchasing activity is more operative: People pass from window-shopping with the purpose of exploring and acquiring information to window-shopping in order to make decisions and try on and purchase garments. In this stage, window-shopping is a more targeted activity. The study thus confirmed that women more often perform the operations that prepare them to purchase garments, for the simple reason that purchasing clothes for some family members still seems to be perceived as part of women's domestic work.

The other two areas of clothing-related tasks are wearing and maintaining clothes. Each of these areas is complex and requires a series of subtasks to be performed every day. Wearing implies the work of dressing and undressing. These activities involve planning and decision-making processes as well as the foresight to hang clothes in a closet or put them on a chair (or elsewhere), without creasing them, in the evening before going to bed. Also, using clothes demands attention to and awareness of the relationship between the body, its movements, and garments. When there is no harmony in this relation, the life of clothes and accessories is short, and some people thus ruin their clothing very quickly. Also, wearing garments is clearly an activity that implies true work. In this case the work is carried out by each individual and is part of the person's daily self-care.

Man ironing at home.
Photography by Mercedes Burgos

The third area—the maintenance of the wardrobe—requires a large amount of work that seems to be consistently done by women in Italy even in the twenty-first century. Managing a wardrobe means deciding which items need to be washed, ironed, refreshed or refurbished, stored in closets, altered, or dry-cleaned. It also means deciding which garments require stain removal, repairs, or reattachment of buttons. The study investigated the work involved in wardrobe upkeep in two ways, asking (1) whether respondents, when buying garments, took into account the difficulty of washing and ironing them; and (2) what their motivations were in considering this. Not surprisingly, on the whole, women tended to consider the difficulty of care, whereas men were less likely to do so. The respondents' behavior differed depending on their age. The majority of adolescents, as well as young adults from twenty to twenty-nine years of age, did not take clothing care needs into account. In contrast, those in their thirties and above did pay attention to the ease or difficulty of care. However, when gender and age differences are considered together, male young adults (ages twenty to twenty-nine) tended to consider clothing care needs when making purchases more than their female peers did, whereas women between forty and fifty-five years old paid more attention to this than their male peers did.

Respondents explained their decisions in a variety of ways. The majority of those who did not take the difficulty of washing and ironing into account when buying a garment responded to the next question, regarding their motivations, by saying, "I do not wash or iron," whereas a fifth of them replied, "I take the garment to the dry cleaners." Very few claimed that they were "good at washing and ironing." In terms of gender, the majority of those who said they did not wash, or iron were male. Women were twice as likely as men to say that they were good at washing and ironing. With regard to age, adolescents explained that they do not wash or iron at all. However, surprisingly, among those in their twenties, males more often stated that they were good at washing and

ironing, whereas females replied that they took their clothes to the dry cleaner. The opposite held for the age group between forty and fifty-five years of age.

The process of figuring out tomorrow's outfit. Photograph by Mercedes Burgos.

In conclusion, these answers show that the gendered division of housework at the household level is changing among the younger generations. Attention to the maintenance of clothing is decreasing in the female world and increasing in the male world, where a perception of the value and importance of housework seems to be slowly growing. Many choose to outsource this form of housework by resorting to dry cleaning.

Thus, clothes that enter the domestic sphere, that is, the cycle of domestic labor, should not be seen as end products that can be used directly but as half-processed items. To become really usable, items of clothing require further work. Only domestic work makes the garments really wearable. The cycle of production of these commodities is half located in the domestic sphere, and the domestic aspect includes a process of valorization, which produces added value and social control. It is apparent that although individuals use clothes on a personal level, the system they are subject to in the domestic sphere is necessarily social and productive in Marxian terms. Each individual is directly implicated in this kind of work at least in part, but mainly women do this work, although young men are becoming more involved in this task. The fashion world and the apparel industry have never taken into account the entire process of garment production, which has limited their capacity to understand clothes' life cycle and hence to produce effective strategies for good design. For example, several technologies can reduce the work involved in garment maintenance by creating fabrics that are stain resistant, do not need ironing, or do not retain odors, and so on, but they are rarely used, because the needs of the domestic sphere are not considered. Thus, although the design of clothes at the origin continues not to include consideration of these needs, users have the same desire to succeed to redesign the garments at many levels in the process of consuming.

The Apparel Industry and Women's Resistance to Housework

The second feature of the co-construction process between fashion and society is the resistance against and refusal to engage in nonpaid housework expressed by women in Italy, as well as elsewhere in the world, since the early 1970s. These behaviors have had important consequences in the apparel industry and the fashion world, although the industry has not been aware of who caused these social changes. In reality, women's behavior has been the flywheel of many

transformations in the apparel industry and has succeeded in silently but effectively reorienting the fashion world. Obviously, the dynamics of women's social behavior have historically evolved in different ways in various countries, as illustrated by some elements of the Italian case.

In Italy women's resistance against housework has played the role of an invisible engine that has driven the growth of the apparel industry. Neither the birth nor the development of Made in Italy, nor, in general, the strengthening of the apparel industry in this country, can be understood correctly if these phenomena are not viewed in connection with the dynamics of the domestic work performed in homes. The third area of the domestic process—the maintenance of garments—in the past was primarily women's work.

In Italy immediately after World War II, much of the clothing was produced at home, and knowing how to cut and sew was one of the prerogatives and obligations of the housewife. The housewife's role has been progressively elaborated at a social level as a key, albeit tacit, social role, and the housewife became a protagonist of the economic reconstruction of the entire country. The sewing machine was a fundamental instrument in the almost autarchic houses of that period. Not all items of clothing were produced at home in a self-sufficient way, but many were, at least basic garments such as shirts, skirts, simple dresses, sweaters, gloves, socks and caps, rompers for children, nightshirts, and pajamas. The manufacturing of these items (except those women knit from wool or cotton yarn) presupposed above all a good knowledge of fabrics, that is, the capability to recognize the different types of fabrics and their quality. It was also necessary to know how to use paper patterns, cut the fabric, sew the pieces by machine, hem the garments, attach buttons, make buttonholes, attach fasteners, make pleats if needed, and so on.

Garments that are more difficult to make, such as coats, overcoats, suits, or jackets, and accessories (shoes, ties, hats, and belts), were bought in stores or, more often, produced by seamstresses. Resorting to a seamstress for these garments was, however, a long and complicated process because it included waiting and fittings. The planning and management of the apparel-production process not only involved work and stress, because of the choices that had to be made at various stages of the process, but also left considerable uncertainty about what the final product would be. At the same time, women could exert a substantial amount of creativity and personal expression in their choice of colors, the shape of their dresses, the adaptation of garments to their bodies, and so on.

This situation has changed over time for several reasons: the gradual increase in people's average level of economic wellbeing, the lower prices of clothing produced by the apparel industry, the willingness of women to buy ready-made items (to reduce the burden of domestic work), and the advent of the feminist movement with the consequent distancing of women from the domestic production of fashion. Women's widespread refusal to perform the work of maintenance was especially effective; this sabotaged the domestic side of the work invested in garments. At some point, when the zipper was stuck, the hems were torn, or the button came off, the clothes were no longer repaired or altered but instead discarded. Purchasing new clothes to avoid having

to maintain them was in fact a strategy to limit domestic work. At the same time, this behavior by women accelerated the commercial production of fashion.

These forms of resistance at the end of the 1960s combined with Italian women's reaction to the international antifashion movement: The sewing machine was soon put in the attic. This movement affirmed a strong reappropriation of the body, which meant the rejection of the trappings and symbols of power over women (the garter and bra) and a radical critique of the values, content, and discourses that fashion had always conveyed. The feminist struggles meant a move away from fashion, and at home women resorted to outsourcing the work connected with the use of clothes. Made in Italy developed by employing (and paying) women to do what they had been doing for free at home, although in Italy, more so than in other industrialized countries, a high number of wives have remained at home. An enormous amount of feminine artistic capabilities, creative experiences, techniques, know-how, ancient knowledge, and craft traditions related to clothing poured into the industrial sector.
The massive expulsion of clothing production from the home sphere, however, has been mitigated by the persistence of some maintenance work on garments, although many competencies and a great deal of know-how have been lost, as a strategy of self-defense against housework. The act of dressing in Italy continues to be considered a kind of aura about the body that is maintained even at the cost of some domestic labor, although it has become simple labor. Italians consider it essential to maintain the high quality of the fashion products that are made and bought, but in the twenty-first century the distribution of work related to wardrobe upkeep in the home is less unequal than in the past. The Italian research study has raised probing questions about women's roles in many other countries in the world in regard to the invisible labor related to the care of clothing in the household.

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