

Some Adjectives and Dress: A First Version

Like all studies interested in the relation between language and fashion this essay places itself within the field opened up by Roland Barthes in *The Fashion System*. (1983) I want to explore how certain adjectives insinuate themselves into our dress and so become inseparable not only from what is new but also from dress that is old and the aging.

The first part of the essay deals with the consequences for dress of being described by what I have called 'elevated' adjectives. The adjectives examined here are smart, elegant and graceful and they are 'elevated' because in each instance they refer to a condition of dress considered to lie above the average. These 'elevated' dress states are not just superior examples of tailoring and dressmaking. Smart, elegant and graceful also carry 'elevated' moral judgements. Together with a close examination of these 'elevated' adjectives there will be an investigation as to how and why such judgements come into being.

The second part of the essay deals with those adjectives I have called 'depressive' and are concerned with those states of dress that fall below the average.

Smart indicates both the 'cut' of one's clothes and the manner in which they are worn. Smart is a kind of dress that is rule bound. Because of this flirting with rules smart has an inclination towards uniform. This is not simply rules about what sort of garments must be worn but an expectation as to the condition they should be in. Smart means clean, pressed and properly placed on the body of their wearer.

Elegant arises from the point where movement and stillness are brought into balance. Elegant is a way of wearing. It is free from awkwardness and moves in an effortless manner. Elegant is pleasing to the eye and is a quality that may be displayed by both men and women.

Graceful has both a physical and a spiritual aspect. The material aspect of graceful is fluid, flowing and smooth. The spiritual aspect of graceful inclines to aerial movement rather than the earthly. Graceful is always pleasing to behold. Graceful is the place where the spiritual enters material forms. The presence of spirit banishes all imperfections dress.

Depressive Adjectives

For each of the 'elevated' adjectives applied to our dress there are number adjectives that describe what we wear in disparaging terms. These depressive adjectives correspond to the antonyms of smart, elegant and graceful. These are shabby and dishevelled. Awkward and clumsy. Ugly and secular.

Shabby is a state of wear and/or soiling located at the mid-point between the sartorial perfection of smart and a state of ruination where it is rendered unwearable.

Dishevelled refers to a state of dress where traces of use can be eliminated by a quick iron or brush.

The most frequently word to describe dishevelled is crumpled.

Dishevelled and shabby, like most of the depressive adjectives, are moral judgements as well as descriptions.

Awkward, and clumsy, are to do with how dress is worn not with the effect this has on the material being worn. Awkward can refer to a form of dress that has failed to achieve a proper 'fit' between its various components. Awkward is best described as *off-balance*. Clumsy results from a mismatch between the body and what is worn. Clumsy suggests heaviness, something unable to achieve the lightness of 'elevation'.

Ugly is a transformation of the physical characteristics of graceful. It is not pleasing to behold. Ugly has a powerful, negative, 'spiritual' dimension that is able to destroy the presence of the spiritual in the wearer and so turn graceful into ugly.

Secular can act in a manner similar to atheism. It is seductive and acts as a promise that a plain, no nonsense form of dress exists somewhere. Secular dress would be devoid of all traces of 'elevation'.

Conclusion

In the final section the two orders of adjectives are brought together. The 'elevated' and the 'depressive' adjectives form a network of relationships. Each of the 'depressive' adjectives are

degradations that derive from 'elevated' adjectives. It is the loss of the 'newness' of a garment and the emergence of the strange morally that will be examined in the final part of this essay.