

Dress as Transformation

Imagine you are standing in front of your wardrobe. The door is open and you are removing a few garments and laying them out on the bed. [For this exercise to be successful try to include a pair of shoes and a hat in your mental picture.] Only a small amount of re-arranging is needed to produce a ‘body’ from the clothing on the bed. Looking down on the garments it is not hard to see how they confirm what the most common explanations have to say about dress and clothing. They offer protection from elements such as heat, cold, wet, dry and wind. Dress is also an essential part of modesty. Its task is to ‘domesticate’ taboo areas of the body, areas accompanied by shifting thresholds of anxiety. All the garments on the bed will have a style, something that is a consequence of being made by human beings. But if we scrutinise our clothing more closely most of us should be able to detect our past and present style allegiances. Clothing styles are shared and so always have a social dimension that can indicate where the wearer is (was) placed in the social order, what sort of dressed being they are (were) and what other sorts of dressed beings they are likely to associate with. The presence of style is an essential part of communicating our place within the social milieu.

There is one further aspect to dress, one that will concern the remainder of this essay and that is the manner in which all forms of dress result from fundamental transformations. It is a transformation that embraces both the prospective wearer and the material ‘stuff’ that is attached, hung, wrapped, etc, to this wearer’s body. Of all the dimensions of dress, it is this alchemical-like power of transformation that is easily its most distinctive, and yet most elusive, characteristic.

This transformation starts by bringing together the body of the wearer and the ‘stuff’ that is to be applied to that body. Dress, or better to become dressed, is born as these two achieve an accommodation with one another. Look at the clothes laid out on the bed. Although they are inert, they are not at rest. Their ‘ghosting’ of the human form suggests they are waiting for a living body to arrive. The body of the wearer matches this expectancy of the garments. It is a body in need of dressing if it is to participate in life beyond the bathroom door. The flesh and bone of the body finds itself translated (dressed) through the action of the garments.

What results is a play between flesh and ‘fabric’, where there is an exchange of qualities between the two. This may be thought of as a state of *completion*, of *preparedness*, or being *dressed*. If, then, these completed forms of dress are placed in a social context, as they always are, they will attract quite different degrees of attention. Out of the seemingly infinite number of ‘dressings’, the majority will be mundane, with little significance other than to declare ‘I am dressed’. But there are certain sorts of dress where the wearer is elevated way above the inconsequential patterns of ordinary life. No matter whether one is discussing the highest levels of *haute couture*, or a pair of pyjamas purchased from Target, they all come into being via the transformative power of dress. (1)

Like the four fundamentals discussed earlier, transformation is essential to any notion of dress. Take it away and it would cease to exist and instead descend into a sort of arbitrary draping. Each of the principles of protection, modesty, style and communication, along with transformation, contain explanatory maps lying somewhere between myth and evidence based speculation. Their aim is to account for how and why these fundamentals came into existence. Protection requires there to be the ability, and desire, for *Homo sapiens* to modify the environment to the advantage of the ‘adjusters’. Modesty divides the body into the distinct regions of taboo and, for want of a better word, the ‘secular’. George Bataille described life

before the arrival of history as lacking any kind of internal difference. It was, he said, ‘a world like water in water’. (2) The emergence of dress, with its ability to create more than is given to us by nature, could only come into being if the homogeneity of life, as described by Bataille, underwent differentiation. Existential difference, for that is what it is, is born out of the new personae the transformative powers of dress allows.

To leave the idea of ‘transformation’ in this raw, undeveloped state does little to acknowledge the intimate identifications we make with our dress. The reader will recall I earlier referred to the journey taken by this transformation as *alchemical*. I did this because the sorts of changes produced by dress seemed to match the elusive transformations sought by the alchemical ‘work’. Just as the alchemist, and the materials destined for sublimation, are transformed into more elevated states, so too are the wearer and the worn.

Our ability to transform who, and what, we are through dress is surely one of the most effective avenues we have for altering our identity. It is a process where the frontiers between the material ‘stuff’ of dress and the body of the wearer are dissolved, and then rearranged, into something quite different to the base ingredients present at the start. The dressed, and so transformed, body is released to take its place within a field of seemingly infinite possibilities.

This much we know of what is happening within dress. We can make many general statements about it but when it comes to a detailed engagement with what is happening, explanatory precision falters. There is the practical knowledge belonging to the professional makers of dress. (What Roland Barthes calls ‘the technological’, or the ‘language of manufacture’. (3)) The knowledge, and skills, so essential for making has little, or no, relevance to the experiences of wearing. These are quite different understandings and remain untouched by ‘technological’

discourse. Even when the process of manufacture is a familiar one- for instance someone involved in the manufacture of garments- the more ‘magical’ aspects of dress and dressing are still present, still active. Surely a case here of *known but not known*. There are explanations, comments, and observations often made by those who have been, or are being, transformed by dress. These vernacular ‘explanations’ are often judgements on the quality of the changes transformation has been able to bring about. ‘This makes me look twenty years younger’. ‘That really suits me’. ‘I feel like a new woman in this dress’. However, not all the transformations are welcome. They can be rejected with comments such as ‘I’m not wearing that!’ ‘You are not going out dressed like that’. ‘I’m not going out wearing something like that.’

If we now introduce the quality of transformation to our earlier fundamentals of dress then such qualities as wonder, astonishment, or the deeply felt satisfaction we can catch a glimpse of in the comments of the wearers, surely these are all qualities we can sense with our dress. As we get dressed we are all touched by something magical.

Notes and References:

- (1) For non-Australian readers Target is a chain of stores well known for their inexpensive clothing.
- (2) Georges Bataille, *Theory of Religion*, Zone Books, 1992, p. 23.
- (3) Roland Barthes, *The Fashion System*, p. 8.