

Getting Dressed: An Intellectual Biography



By Michael Carter

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Introduction

Numerous things, known and unknown guided my decision to write this intellectual biography. It began with a less than sympathetic review that greeted my book *Being Prepared*; in particular it was the dismissive manner the reviewer adopted towards my ideas as to what happens to us when we get dressed. Rather than sitting in front of my computer feeling hurt – which is what I did for a while – I thought it would be more profitable to have a look at how my ideas about dress had evolved over the years. Surely it was there that the answer to what had been so distasteful to the reviewer could be found.

I felt an even greater urgency when the review collided with my personal circumstances – I am 76 and my health is not good. My age gave me a vantage point from where I would be able to make out the patterns my intellectual concerns had laid down over the years. As well time (But not age) had expanded for me as I no longer felt the breath of career publishing on my neck. Even so any realistic assessment of my situation would probably conclude that the opportunities allowing me to write a review such as this were dwindling.

This biography is of course an artificial, but necessary, construct. For the most part it remains separated from the life that gave it sustenance but at the same time it draws upon that life in a multitude of unpredictable ways. Given this the reader needs to become familiar with a number of exclusions the author considered necessary for the biography to gain a degree of narrative coherence.

What follows is an account that lies somewhere between an ‘objective’, impersonal description of the intellectual choices I have made over the years and, where appropriate, a more confessional approach as to *why* particular ideas appealed to me in ways other than the purely rational. As far as possible I have excluded ‘stuff’ that was a consequence of the author’s temperament. But there is just one character trait that deserves mentioning. Since childhood I have always had a very curious nature but it was a curiosity that had a restless quality attached to it. It moved me from discovery to discovery, each time carefully exploring the new landscape. But my interest would always decline as a fresh topic came into view. This pattern persisted into adulthood. I was never an ‘expert’ in anything and so never a scholar, that is someone who dedicates their life to the study of a single topic, theme, or discipline. Always it was these movements of my curiosity that propelled my intellectual concerns.

Other exclusions were those areas of my life that must surely have had a great influence on both my intellect and my feelings and therefore on my conceptions of dress. Most of my life I have read all kinds of literature. I have listened to music seriously, had an interest in the visual arts and above all a love of film. As these were for the most part made up of places and moments of pleasure I had no desire to unify these two aspects of my life but there must have been a not inconsiderable influence flowing from my life

lived within art and culture to the ways I have approached dress. Notable exceptions to these 'quiet' texts were the 'felt' ones such as Thomas Pynchon's novel *Gravity's Rainbow*, Georges Franju's film *Judex* and Visconti's film *The Leopard*. Each, in their way, left me with a lasting sense of what dress was and could be.

We can imagine more than we can have.

Mediaeval Feet

I must have been about seven years old when my father gave me a copy of the Quennell's *A History of Everyday Things in England*. (Third Edition, 1938) It was the volume that covered the mediaeval period 1066 – 1499 and whilst I loved following the ways in which the items of daily life changed their shapes there was one thing in particular that made a lasting impression on me. The authors included dress as part the 'everyday things' and on one page there was a small diagram depicting a variety of mediaeval male shoes. In the right hand corner of this diagram was a very small line drawing of a 15th century male aristocrat's shoe. (See attached illustration.) The Quennells described the shoes so:

'Among the nobles of the fourteenth century the fashion arose of wearing pointed shoes. The fashion became more and more exaggerated, until in the fifteenth century shoes were so tapered and so ridiculously long that it became necessary to fasten the points with little jewelled chains up to the knee.'

They rounded off their discussion of these shoes by presenting a general explanation of the dynamics of dress.

'Watch any fashion, and you will find that it starts as something useful, is then beautified, and finally exaggerated until it is ridiculous, and is then swept clean away and another takes its place. So with shoes.'
(Page 181–183)

At my age I was in no position to judge whether any of this was true since all I had was a continual fascination for the shoes. I knew that there was something odd about the pictured shoes particularly when I glanced down to look at those that were on my own feet. What was it that I was sensing about the way these shoes seemed to be different to all the everyday things that surrounded them? (Note – however what I didn't know was that many of these 'everyday things' were likewise shaped according to the logic of the shoes. They were called ornaments.) I'm sure that my attention had been taken not simply by the material form of the shoes but also by the strange energy that was pushing this form into what the Quennells called the 'ridiculous'. So why were the shoes 'behaving' in such a peculiar manner and what was the nature of this peculiarity? Questions as fresh to me today as they were when I first saw them in *Everyday Things*.

Later in my thinking about dress, the 15th century shoes became the first instance where a fundamental attribute of dress became apparent. The items that made up dress were not uniform entities but resided in, at least, two orders of being. One order was that of usefulness that we might call clothes and the other was free from the grip of the useful and might be called dress. It is in the latter category where the shoes resided and where they were allowed such formal freedom.

In a subsequent paragraph the Quennells presented an answer as to why these non-useful fashions emerged, and persisted, in the places they did. It was the aristocratic classes who were more able to live lives of wealth and privilege, a condition that freed them from the limiting structures of usefulness. As will be seen this was similar to Quentin Bell's ideas (via Veblen) about the fashions of the wealthy who were able to dress in clothing that paid little, or no heed, to usefulness and to the form of the human body.

A lifetime later this fascination with the shoes collided with the quotation below taken from the French thinker Roger Caillois that I came across a lifetime later.

'It is obvious that the utilitarian role of an object never completely justifies its form, or to put it another way, that the object always exceeds its instrumentality. Thus it is possible to discover in each object an irrational residue...'

Roger Caillois, *The Necessity of Mind*, 1990.

Much of what is to follow is a journey from these shoes to Caillois's description of the 'irrational residue'.



Maps

I grew up a white, Anglo, middle class child whose grandfather took it upon himself to ensure that my reading was kept up to scratch. Comics were banned as were the stream of cheap paperbacks dealing with the exploits of the British military during the Second World War. I never quite understood why this war genre was regarded as unsuitable reading but it was.

It was only a matter of time before he gave me a copy of *Swallows and Amazons* by Arthur Ransome. I loved the story and straight away began reading the remaining books in the series. Whilst the plots were always engrossing it was the maps scattered throughout each book that drew me back to read and reread them. The maps were drawn by Ransome himself and were a long way from the rules of conventional mapmaking. Indeed it was their 'amateur' style that made them so attractive. The maps translated incidents, characters, and landscapes from the story into rudimentary depictions that he scattered across the area of the map. His maps depicted incidents from the story but without the narrative sequence. (They were maps after all.) The map transformed the story, plot or narrative into something resembling a musical chord. Together with the co-presence of mapped 'incidents' was the graphic compression the map worked on the story. The attraction of maps is often explained by the way they present 'tiny,' miniature worlds, pocket-sized yet complete. But the attraction of the maps in the *Swallows and Amazons* books lay in the way they translated the text of the plot into a 'conception' of symbolic equivalence. It could be some time before one could read Ransome's maps because much of their information bordered on abstract squiggles. It was as if the maps were a sort of note taking on the part of Ransome as he moved story forward and not just 'maps' of a geographical area. Proto-diagrams perhaps?

Much later, thinking about the *Swallows and Amazons* maps, a number of map-like qualities such as compression, the chord like co-presence of 'everything' and the aerial view that was an inevitable feature of maps were carried over into my later love of the British Ordnance Survey maps.

The 'conceptualisation' of these maps was far denser than was Ransome's. There were a large number of symbols denoting such things as churches, ancient monuments, etc. These symbols did two things. They enabled the reader visualise what the symbol stood for and place it geographically. However, once one moved away from these easily recognised symbols such as churches the markings of the map became a great deal more abstract. Indications of such features as elevation and land use could only be understood if one were familiar with the dense forest of markings that characterised the average Ordnance Survey map. What would happen, and which is one of the reasons there is a section dealing with maps so early on, is the way the imagination would 'fill in' those spaces that were illegible with alternative features. As my familiarity with maps grew they remained places where the imaginary could flourish and be enjoyed rather than places where their 'accurate' information could be accessed.

My love of maps, with their imaginary potential, has remained with me to the present day and has been supplemented by a personal map-making in the form of diagrams. When I began teaching, especially when I became responsible for post-graduate thesis supervision, I noticed that I would often draw diagrams as a session progressed. It was sometime before I realised I was using diagrams to represent ideas that I was struggling to understand or simply an escape from an embarrassing situation. These self-generated diagrams shared many features of maps. The diagrams, like maps, existed at a level of abstraction. Mapping was the abstract representation of something that was already abstract. In the case of diagrams they arose in order to 'suggest' more precisely what it was they were 'mapping'. Both were subject to forms of compression and used particular sorts of symbolic translation. Both relied on an aerial view as the *sine qua non* for their depiction. These encounters with maps and mapping remained a powerful, if buried, influence on the contours of my thought.

H.G. Wells and the Futuristic Imagination

I started to read H.G. Wells seriously in my early teens and like many boys of my age it was his 'scientific romances' that had such a powerful hold over my imagination. Later, my interest shifted to his social novels and short stories. These I have read and reread for the remainder of my life. More than anything else it was those glimpses of the future – sometimes utopian, sometimes nasty – that I found hard to put to one side. (Wells could do hatred better than most.) These depictions of the future can be found in *The Time Machine* (1895) where there is a race called the Eloi who lived in a world where they no longer had to labour. Food just dropped from the trees. Unfortunately they were susceptible to being eaten by a very nasty race of Eloi-vores, the Morlocks. In *Men like Gods* (1923) there is a depiction of what human perfection would be like. *A Modern Utopia* (1905) has a detailed description of daily life in a utopia. (The corners of rooms were to be curved so dust would be unable to settle thus making utopian house cleaning a perfunctory activity.) The last of Wells' utopian journeys' is the book and the film *Things to Come* (1936). Whilst not a great film it has a wonderful panoply of costumes worn by the characters who represented rational and irrational ways of life. (Wells had hand in designing them.) There are people dressed in the conventional manner before the catastrophe arrives. There are 'coverings' worn during the catastrophe where dress decays into a mixture of the cinematic tradition for depicting 'Stone Age' coverings coupled with a peculiar version of mediaeval peasants dress. Finally there is the dress worn by those from the victorious future making every possible effort to appear futuristic. This is the dress of reason and mechanical efficiency although it was only much later that I realised why their dress took the form it did.

Whilst I loved these stories it was the pictures they painted of the future that most intrigued me. These futures were so different to my here and now. The architecture, the advanced forms of transport, and most prescient of all, what the inhabitants of these places looked like. Why were they dressed in a manner so different to me? Looking back on my early encounters with Wells I must have sensed that these 'streamlined' futures were in some way related to us in our here and now. (I feel certain that calling these scenes 'streamlined' and 'utopian' was something I would never have done in my initial exposure to these people and places. It contained too many threads with the idea of modernism something that I was to begin to understand much later.)

My interest in Wells' stories receded somewhat. I became concerned with more general questions thrown up by the 'utopian moment' and, in particular, utopian dress. This quotation from Wells' *A Modern Utopia* that I particularly like contains many of the questions that presented themselves for consideration.

'A man had come up along the road on a machine like a small two-wheeled two seater with its in series, bicycle fashion; lighter and neater it was than any earthly automobile...'

The first question that occurred to me was why did the future look the way it did? What was it that we were contemplating? Why was the description of the machine above as 'lighter and neater' a sign of its more futuristic status? The comparison to 'any earthly automobile' situated it as more advanced than the forms of transport to be found in our here and now? 'Lighter and neater' became a place of progress. Later I discovered that this aesthetic of 'lighter and neater' was something that could also applied to dress. Why was the dress of the future the way it was? To answer these questions would mean travelling into the unconscious foundations of modernism?

This marks the end of my exploration of the first themes that would eventually flow into my ideas of dress – the 'ridiculous' shoe, the rich imaginary potential of maps and the strange and inviting worlds that were utopia. These were some of the points of interest that were to remain with me until the final years of my school education. From then on I must have gone into an intellectual hibernation that lasted well into my university years.

Interlude – Pre-University

The time between senior school and university had only one event that had significance for my future interest in dress and that was my parents finally allowed me to choose what clothes I could wear. My school uniform was now supplemented with ‘civilian’ dress of my own choosing. My parents were good enough not to burst into laughter at some of the garments that my fresh-faced taste chose.

I arrived at LSE in 1963 dressed in what might be described as timid provincial bohemian wear. Plenty of corduroy. Polo neck jumpers. Striped shirts and any sort of shoes that were not black leather. Months into university and two very important dress events took place. An alternative to conventional leather shoes appeared in the form of desert boots. I wore them for years until there was an even lower level of shoe informality, plimsolls. (For my younger readers plimsolls were shoes that had escaped from the tennis courts.)

The second dress event was the arrival of Levi Jeans about which I knew nothing until a friend from Keele University arrived wearing a pair. Not before long our bathroom was permanently occupied by one or other of us sitting in a bath filled with water so as to shrink the jeans down to a correct size. The rest is history.

Anthropology 1

My years at the London School of Economics (1963–1966) were spent studying Social and Physical Anthropology. I'm afraid it was not a subject that ever really sparked my interest. I could never understand what the significance the 'tribal peoples' we were studying held for my life in an increasingly exciting London. For me, there seemed to be no over-arching ideas that could elevate the empirical material into something other than mere description. Things got so bad that after two years of Anthropology I seriously considered changing degrees. What I didn't know until much later was that there was another school of anthropological thought in North America that placed *culture* and *style* at the centre of their ideas about social life. In retrospect it was the ways that those two ideas, *culture* and *style*, engaged with objects and things (In general stuff that had been made) that I found so interesting. The idea of style was to give me the 'over-arching idea' that I had missed in the years of my formal degree.

At the time I was finishing my degree something began to disturb the kind of anthropology that I had been taught. This was the arrival of the ideas of Claude Levi-Strauss and of Structuralism in general. But by then I had finished my degree and left the LSE and only learnt of these convulsions much later. As my three years of anthropology came to an end it felt as if little remained from my studies. But as it turned out a handful of general notions that I must have absorbed unknowingly remained with me. Many of the things I absorbed would have been common currency to anyone who steered their way through a social science degree, especially anyone who had studied Social Anthropology at the London School of Economics. These were *group*, *gift*, *social structure*, or better still *society*.

These, we were taught, were the bedrock upon which our lives as a species took place and which marked us off from the rest of nature. Living life as part of a collective was something common to all forms of human existence and the social order was all encompassing. It provided groups with their economic organization, with a universe that was meaningful as well as symbol systems such as language that enabled sophisticated types of communication. Our collective way of life enabled forms of art to exist, forms that gave material representations to the important points of social life. When I left high school I knew nothing of this primacy of the social that would gradually displace the patchy notions I had been able to gather of the world and its ways.

Towards the end of the degree I had become irritated with Anthropology and its never-ending explanation of religion, art and symbolic behaviour and the role they played in 'supporting', 'reinforcing', etc, the social order. Within this iron cage of functionalism religion and art were bereft of their transcendental aspirations. It was some time before I realised that, as a friend had put it, 'there were

states that are not pure fantasy nor solid states accessible to purely empirical verification' and that there was a place between a reductive materialism and a transcendental existence.

From this distance it is hard to tell which of these intellectual assumptions came from Anthropology and which were 'in the air' of University life. The majority of my peers at LSE had a growing scepticism towards how the world was ordered. I became dissatisfied with the mechanical application of the 'social' to those 'ornaments' that I mentioned earlier. To support myself I had followed on from my father and started to teach at the numerous small Art Schools in the London area. It was there that I quickly came to the conclusion that the staff and students were engaged in something more than working to 'reinforce' the social order. All the worked materials that lay around in the studios and all the emotional investments that both staff and students placed in what they were making put paid to the social functionalism of my earlier studies.

Perhaps it is unfair to dismiss my encounter with Anthropology so abruptly but the acceleration in what I was reading and the widening of my friendships meant I was craving ideas far more exciting than social functionalism.

Anthropology 2

There was one thing that happened whilst I was studying Anthropology, something whose presence was to persist over the years. It occurred one afternoon when I was working in the LSE library.

(Anthropology shelves) I had lost interest in the article I was supposed to be reading. As it was a book of essays I flipped through to see if there was anything else worth reading. There was a short essay by the Australian anthropologist W.E.H. Stanner. (Even that description could be wrong given the state of my memory.) It was a discussion of Aboriginal dance and what remained with me about his account was the way the dancers formed into an approximation of a circle only to disperse when the dance was over. Forming and scattering. Like my fascination with the mediaeval shoe the dance would occasionally act as a spur to my imagination in areas far removed from the dancers. Like the medieval shoe, the Aboriginal dancers and the impulse to dress will be taken up at the very end of the intellectual biography.

(At this point an apology is in order. My lack of recognition of, and respect for the aboriginal people from whom I drew this example was probably due to the effects of distance, my geographical naiveté and the result of living in a decaying Imperial order.)

Marx and Marxism

When I left the LSE in 1966 I had no overriding intellectual commitments and for two years enjoyed not having to read anything that had the taste of formal education. This was a time of novel reading – especially contemporary American fiction, theatre going, music and spending afternoons in the Everyman cinema in Hampstead. The exception to this ‘yo-yoing’ was the arrival of Marxism. This was a lingua franca amongst my friends and acquaintances and it became imperative that I acquire some familiarity with it so that I could take part in the social life that always accompanied it. (Note – the pub was the salon where political ideas were exchanged and disputed.) Up until Marx my sole political activity was attendance at the regular London demonstrations organised by the anti-apartheid movement.

I can’t remember what the first piece of Marx I read – probably The Communist Manifesto. At the time I never even realised that it was a joint effort with his friend Friedrich Engels. I think my initial enthusiasm for this directed reading was because it was the first piece of committed intellectual activity I had begun that wasn’t to do with the LSE and Anthropology. It felt as if a purpose had been found for all my intellectual training in the here and now rather than with those obscure tribes in exotic locations. Regular attendance at demonstrations was complemented by study, discussion and drinking. It wasn’t long before I realised that reading Marx was a rite of passage for all of us wanting to participate in the radical politics emerging in the UK. However, there was a problem. I not only found it difficult to understand what was on the page in front of me but I also couldn’t see what its relevance was to my here and now. I was back in a place similar to the one I had occupied in my anthropology days.

Looking back what surprises me the most is that despite the amount of Marx I read and reread – and it was considerable – almost none of it found its way into my writing. Again, in retrospect, I’m sure this was because I found his work so difficult to understand. His prose had no adhesion and so after an hour had passed all was forgotten. I never understood Das Capital apart from the first chapter on commodity fetishism and even here Simmel’s account of the consequences of living in a money economy is clarity plus compared to Marx. My understanding of the great man’s work was restricted to a rather superficial agreement with certain of his phrases, paragraphs and sentences: for instance:

‘The Philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways: the point is to change it’.

As I became more and more impatient with my stumbling over Marx, I was less and less convinced he was – or even should be – the centre of all political philosophies. More anarchistic ideas were in the air and under their influence I became suspicious of the whole political and intellectual superstructure of the numerous ‘Marxist’ parties that were dominating radical politics at the time. I was wary of the socio-political abstractions that traded with names like ‘bourgeois’, ‘petit bourgeois’, ‘class enemy’, ‘lumpen’ and most chilling of all ‘comrade’. By then I had familiarised myself with the events that had taken place in

the Soviet Union under Stalin, especially how the Soviet avant-garde was crushed and in many instances disappeared into the labour camps.

Apart from one small fragment, which I shall examine shortly, I never bothered with Marx again. But he continued to haunt me in the form of a political super-ego, eager to pass judgement on my later libertarian antics.

The small fragment that I retained from my reading of Marx resembled the mediaeval shoe and the circular dance. No matter how many times I read it, it would always open up onto a dense mixture of text and pictures.

'Men make their own history but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under circumstances of their choosing but under circumstances already given and transmitted from the past.'

18th Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte: 1852

I'm still not sure that I fully understand what it is about this quotation that so easily tips me over into my pictorial imaginary. Marx's conception of history is structured around a present, a place where the past has come to rest. But this past is not something that is dormant and fixed. It is the place where it enters into and restrains the actions and desires of those living within that present. No matter how much the actors in the present feel themselves to be free they will always be acting within those constraints that originate from the past. The imagined future is one of the places where the inhabitants of the present act as if they are able to circumvent the 'circumstances already given and transmitted from the past.'

The future and its contents, for instance dress, is a place where it feels as if there has been a 'going beyond'. This 'beyond' would eventually take on a political dimension, becoming somewhere beyond – and utterly different – to the bourgeois world order.

The way that Marx aligned his temporal categories suggested to me that they could be used to throw some light on dress. For instance, dress is not, despite the conventional wisdom, something that results from a field of complete creative freedom either as wearing or as making. Always there is that inertia that comes from 'the circumstances already given and transmitted from the past'.

Aside from these sociological and economic consequences there are matters of form and aesthetics buried within Marx's construal of history. The arena of action was neither a place of silence or stillness but a place of individual and collective struggle and creation. The quote by Marx is one of refusal and denial. His 'cancellations' are deflationary orders aimed at a species ignorant of the limits imposed on them by their historical situation. It was where these attempts to 'go beyond', in stories, pictures, architecture, film and dress that those worlds constructed according to such strange laws could be seen. It was at this point

that my interest in the utopias of H.G. Wells was rekindled, in particular why utopian dress took the form it did.

Another Marxist, Antonio Gramsci, advanced the politics of the future even further. In two rather overused quotations he states the following:

'The crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born.'

And

'The old world is dying, and the new world struggles to be born: now is the time of monsters.'

(Both quotations are from his Prison Notebooks.)

Both quotations have similarities to that of Marx. There is a construal of history similar to Marx although Gramsci is more assured in the way he names the 'new world' as the destination pulling the old world towards it. The interruption, or perhaps delaying is better, of this historical progression creates a world filled with 'monsters'. Gramsci here uses 'monsters' primarily as a political category but it also contains aesthetic and formal elements. A monster is a creature that can physically violate the world around it as well as having a form that violates the ideals of beauty and harmony. It is misshapen. These monsters are definitely not the 'new' parts of Gramsci's 'New World'.

Elsewhere he provides an answer as to what it is that the historical propulsion is driving towards. The new world, that is the modern world, will be a world lived without illusion.

'The point of modernity is to live a life without illusions while not becoming disillusioned.'

— Antonio Gramsci

The future will be both a place and a time where the monsters of the old world will vanish and the lives of its inhabitants, including their dress, will be ordered according to reason. Surely what we have here is another replay of the many utopian visions that the proximity of modernity drew out of the western imaginary. The inhabitants of the future will be dressed in reason, dress that is no longer a bearer of illusions. It was the dress that would be worn by the inhabitants, male and female, of the utopias that Marx and Gramsci had helped me unearth.

Later I came to the conclusion that what I disliked about Marxism was the severity of the historical judgements it encouraged its followers to hand out to one another. Dialectical Materialism became an ethical guide trying to fit economical determinism.

Freud

Just as I was uneasy about being named a Marxist I was just as uneasy when it came to being called a Freudian. But the times were different then and reading Freud always seemed to be the natural stop after Marx. As Jean-Paul Sartre had said somewhere or other Marx and Freud constituted the 'horizons of western existence'. There were a number of attempts to mesh Marx with Freud but as I had no intention of becoming a psychoanalyst and as my knowledge of the literature of psychoanalysis was limited, calling myself a Freudian would have been something of a misrepresentation. However, there are some ideas of Freud's that have remained with me, albeit changed and developed and it is these that I will deal with here.

Of all the sections in this biography this one on Freud's influence on my thoughts about dress and fashion was easily the most difficult to write. Why this was the case I'm still not sure. Perhaps it was because I was attempting to chart the influence that Freud had on my thinking without approaching it as a Freudian. Even if the fundamental foundations of Freudianism are removed, as I've done here, what remains can still illuminate what is happening with dress and fashion but not by adhering to Freudian methods. The approach I've chosen is via a personal selection of those topics I found relevant rather than trying to place dress and fashion within a comprehensive sweep of Freud's writings and ideas.

Sublimation

At its simplest Freud's notion of sublimation is concerned with transformation. It is an account of how disruptive and unacceptable primitive, instinctual urges are changed into socially acceptable forms and behaviours. Whilst not following Freud's explanation of sublimation step by step it seemed to me that this notion of transformation could usefully be applied to dress. It added an important verb to the dimension of dress, namely dressing. What happened when one got dressed was at the heart of this sartorial transformation? It directed attention to how dress differed from being simply covered and what happened when coverings become dress. Sublimation was a force capable of pulling together 'raw materials' and then transforming them into 'stuff' destined for the human body. The final stage of sublimation is the production of a socially acceptable garment devoid of 'rawness' and where sublimation can transform both wearer and garment into something extraordinary, a place where both are lost in one another.

(Note – 'Rawness' in dress can be exploited by those wishing to appear 'unfinished'. The process of sublimation is halted before it has completed its full transformation.)

(Note – there is an account of the many stages of sublimation involved in dress and dressing in chapter 6 of my *Being Prepared*.)

Death Drive

Some years ago I went to see David Cronenberg's film *Crash*. I left well before the finish overcome with boredom as the repetitive collisions between cars and their drivers all of whom were destined for inevitable deaths. Years later I was discussing the film with a friend. When I told her that I'd found the film boring she replied 'What do you expect of the death drive'?

Of all the elements with which Freud described the life of the mind perhaps the most eccentric was the *death drive*. It is described in the definitive dictionary of psychoanalysis of Laplanche and Pontalis so.

'The death instincts strive towards the reduction of tensions to zero-point. In other words, their goal is to bring the living being back to the inorganic state'.

So perverse was it that, apart from Melanie Klein, no major psychoanalyst has taken it up. Even worse has been its dismissal by the psychoanalytic profession as having 'no biological existence', or 'It just doesn't exist'. But if we remove the death drive from a therapeutic context and place it into the domain of culture, that is mythology, folklore, art, film, literature, even dress, there can be little doubt that something remarkably similar to Freud's death drive is frequently in play. These areas of human existence are littered with instances where living beings will themselves into inanimate materials such as stone, or some form of inert plastic to use a more contemporary example. Culture and art are places where the death drive can expend itself without jeopardising the integrity of the individuals who are handling death. It is a drive to become inanimate, to banish all life from it's being. Culture and art provide the death drive with places where these existential transformations, the 'letting go' – as Caillois describes it. can be enacted symbolically on both an individual and collective level. It should be remembered that Freud's idea of the death drive is not a matter of corpses and decay rather it is a desire to have one's being utterly transformed into an inanimate condition so that nothing can or will eventuate.

The death drive is at work both upon, and within, dress and happens where the body of the wearer is 'overcome', and so vanishes into the form of the garment. Ceremonial dress often displays this total replacement of the wearer's body with unyielding, inorganic materials. When in this condition there can be little sign of what lies beneath. The ideal is a form of dress that no longer seems under the control of its wearer. It imposes a way of 'aliveness' in the world very different to an 'undressed' form where the body overrides its garments. The death drive is at work where the body is drawn into, and transformed by, what is being worn and so flesh becomes 'inhuman' material. This does not result in permanent annihilation; it may be present only when a particular sort of dress is worn only to cease when the dress is removed. Remember that it is the dress and not the its wearer that is the carrier of the drive. The reader should note that my notion of the death drive is not something located within the will of the individual. It is the garments that absorb the body into the territory of the inanimate. Anyone reading *Beyond the*

Pleasure Principle will see that Freud regards the death drive as a quality common to all living creatures. A universal desire to go back to where one came from. Charles Rycroft cites Freud

'We ...have been led to distinguish two kinds of instincts; those which seek to lead what is living to Death...and others attempting the perpetual renewal of life.' 1920.

The Unconscious

In the *Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy* there are 233 lengthy entries under the heading of Unconscious not all of which are derived from Freud. When I started to write with a degree of seriousness (Late 1970's) any use I might have made of *unconscious* was almost certain to have had many different meanings that were drawing on specialised discourses of which I had little awareness. Freud by default. Together with these specialised meanings the idea of the unconscious developed a vernacular presence that originated with the popularisation of Freud's ideas. As W.H. Auden observed:

*'In Memory of Sigmund Freud
To us he is no more a person
Now but a whole climate of opinion'.*

There's no doubt that Freud entered into my ideas about dress and fashion but it was never a comprehensive, nor even an accurate version of the complex map of his idea of the unconscious. The entry for the Unconscious in Charles Rycroft's *A Critical Dictionary of Psychoanalysis* has been the definition that I have used ever since its publication in 1972.

UNCONCIOUS Adj. referring to mental processes of which the subject is not aware...it assumes that mental processes can differ in quality, some being conscious, and others unconscious. It also assumes that unconscious processes are of two kinds: those that become conscious easily, and those that are subject to Repression. The former are... preconscious the latter are dynamically unconscious. (Memories, information, skills, etc. elements that can be recalled are preconscious. All elements that can only be inferred and are not available for direct access are dynamically unconscious.' P. 172-173.

One of the problems with Freud's idea of the unconscious and its relation to dress is that it is difficult to assign it any shape. It exists only in scattered fragments. An individual's dress may be expressing many things that the wearer is both aware and unaware. Dress and fashion have the appearance of something that is the outcome of a set of conscious choices and in one sense this is true. Shopping. However, beneath the level of these 'aware' choices are levels where dress and fashion unfold without the presence of human intention, levels where the unconscious is at work. At its most fundamental the dress unconscious is where the elemental will-to-form creates the building blocks out of which the elements of dress are made available to the forces of sublimation. Permission and censorship are key components in

the work of the unconscious and dress. Maybe it is here that the universal edict that we must be dressed originates. Also, maybe it is in the unconscious that the primal forms of dress are drawn upon to undergo 'reshaping' into higher forms. No matter how we are dressed our awareness of why we wear a particular form of dress may never be more profound than a matter of individual taste. It is repression and permission that make up the unconscious of dress.

It may seem odd that having spent so much time discussing Freud's ideas I am about to conclude that he was never that important a figure on my thinking, something that is only partly true. I was only ever an amateur reader of Freud, someone who appropriated a few of his ideas whilst paying little attention to the foundations they rested on. But I was always uneasy about these foundations. His assertion that it was libidinal forces that were the engine driving, not just our mental life but our practical lives as well. Nor was I ever fond of the prominence Freud gave to dreams. To me their interpretations have always sounded just as preposterous as the dreams themselves. But the ideas I took from Freud never left me, or rather the developments I made of them proved to be ever active. Freud was never a constant, direct presence in my work but he was someone who I would occasionally raid for inspiration rather than search for truth.

Afterthought

Something that has puzzled me for years – and by 'puzzled' I mean something that I have been unable to resolve – is the final, and hardly ever discussed, section of the dreamwork, the part Freud calls the 'conditions of representability'. I have always assumed this to mean the frame, the vessel, or better still the stage within, or upon, which imaginary 'events' can happen. Dress too, emerges onto this arena, this place where 'the conditions of representability' enables all things marvellous to appear. At some point in my thinking the dancing ground of the Aborigines joined the Freudian model. The frame was now the perimeter marked out by the activity of the dancers. There was, I'm sure, a connection between dress and the circular dance but this will be taken towards the final sections.

Interlude 1

The encounters with Marx and Freud marked the end of my undirected intellectual activity. Marx I read because everyone else was but I was never really able to understand him satisfactorily and so he remained an isolated figure cut off from those other characters I would engage with. Freud was a different case. My introduction to his ideas came about through a friend who was thoroughly well versed in the philosophical dimensions of Freud's work and was able to make the architecture of the Freudian universe clear and understandable. (Note – it was later that I learnt he was translating a French dictionary of psychoanalysis.) I'm sure it was the conversations about Freud and my discovery of Herbert Marcuse's book *Eros and Civilization* that increased the longevity of his ideas.

Looking back on my introduction to Marx and Freud their importance lay as much in the 'things' they had to say as was their providing a gateway into pre-war European radical thought and culture. The Western Marxists who had returned to Marx to look at the letter of his thought so as to undermine the hegemony of Stalinism. Those thinkers who rejected the communist condemnation of Freud and attempted weave Freud and Marx into a less punitive politics. Just following their bibliographies would open up an intensity of thinking unknown to my provincial worldview.

It was at this time that I began my first full time teaching position and at the same time I signed up for an MA. The teaching drew upon all these scattered fragments of my intellectual piggy bank. In a way my lack of any kind of specialisation meant that I could hold classes on anything from the Industrial Revolution to contemporary male dress. (The first time that my ideas on dress made an appearance.) The teaching meant I had to organise and catalogue my storehouse of information otherwise I would have drowned in the cascade of classes that I had to run every week.

I've forgotten how the idea that I should enrol for an MA (1976) came about. It was certainly the most definitive sign that my untutored intellectual activity was coming to an end. The MA thesis was an investigation of Nazi Art and Architecture something that I soon discovered had a very limited number of fellow researchers. I was accepted into the Birmingham Centre Cultural Studies even though my thesis topic bore no resemblance to the dominant concerns of the other post grads. I owe Stuart Hall a debt of gratitude, first for accepting me into the Centre and secondly for putting me in touch with one of the few scholars, Tim Mason, who was an expert in Nazi culture.

The MA had taught me how to edit my ideas and so keep them from constantly wandering off into the undergrowth. The MA was an early piece of work and it had no lasting influence on my later endeavours. It always felt – and still does – as if I had 'completed' the topic, 'sealed' it off.

Finally, my interest in dress and fashion had begun and this provided me with a topic that would hold my attention, on and off, until the present day.

The Beginnings of Dress

Living in London in the late 1960's and mid-1970's one couldn't but be struck by the diversity of dress being worn mainly by young people. There was purposefulness about the way that the many style groups carried their clothes that suggested something more than ordinary dressing was taking place. The author also participated in this sartorial merry go round as a kind of neo-bohemian but as someone who was only partially aware of what my own style of dress was trying to achieve other than a few 'anti-bourgeois' rejections combined with a refusal to wear a tie. It was into my very limited understanding of dress and fashion that a friend gave me a copy of Nik Cohn's book *Today There are no Gentlemen: The Changes in Englishmen's Clothes since the War* 1971. * My friend Jock Young gave me the book many years ago. He also showed me that clothes – it wasn't dress yet – could be both fun and at the same time something worthy of intellectual consideration. Later, my wife Jenni, showed me the importance of aesthetics to understanding of dress.

As its title suggests it was a book concerned with male dress, in itself something of a rarity, but it also took on contemporary male dress that is with dress that was happening on the 'street' an even scarcer topic for consideration other than the sneering that issued from the mainstream media.

I've already mentioned how important the contemporary focus of Cohn's observations was to the book. (There was little doubt that he was an enthusiastic participant observer in the clash of dress styles.) He wanted to make some kind of sense, beyond just description, of the different styles of dress worn by the different groups that brushed up against one another in London sometimes with violent results. Cohn's strength lay in the way he was able to show how the various styles of dressing used 'cloth' as vehicles of assertion. Unusual for male dressing each style of dress had a sense of 'completion', that is something requiring a degree of maintenance (grooming), for instance the length of male hair as an important marker of group allegiance. The act of dressing could consist of a series of unimportant choices for their wearer but Cohn showed that dress and dressing were conducted within a set of meaningful intentions.

The significance of *Today there are no Gentlemen* was that it showed that if dress (and fashion) were given close scrutiny to what was being worn, and how it was worn, then it could be opened up to reveal the 'philosophy' of the individual as well as that of the dressed group of which they were a part. Of course it was not 'high' philosophy but nonetheless it was a philosophy that, like all human artefacts, carried orientations with respect to the wider world. But a philosophy required a philosopher and this was to be found in Quentin Bell's book.

Veblen and Dress: The Arrival of a Philosophy

Cohn's book had given me enormous pleasure but had left me with a feeling that there was more to dress and fashion than had been revealed by his engagement with contemporary male clothing. It was some years after I had read *Today there are no Gentlemen*, and my interest in dress had receded, that I picked up a copy of *On Human Finery* (1976) by Quentin Bell, a book that brought to life my dormant fascination with dress. In *On Human Finery* Bell set out to describe aristocratic wealth together with the manner of its expenditure. Dress was always an important way that wealth could be channelled so as to affirm, and maintain, the social standing of those dressed in opulent clothing. Bell's analysis, which is amazingly adroit in the way he pulls together all manner of aristocratic life from dress to stately homes.

In one example he describes the huge amounts of money needed to drain a swamp so as to build a summer residence but also to show the 'drainers' that they could afford it. In all of this Bell draws overtly on the sociology of Thorstein Veblen and his book *Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899). In particular Bell was fascinated with Veblen's theory of the way that social class was maintained through the ways in which wealth was spent. Like Veblen, Bell understands that the repercussions of how wealth is used up reverberate through the lives of the beneficiaries of this wealth. Following on from Veblen, Bell draws together dress and aristocratic lifestyles much closer than had been done before and showed how it was that these patterns of expenditure impinged directly on the forms and styles of the dress worn by the aristocracy. I have to admit that it was not the empirical details of aristocratic life that Bell discussed which intrigued me, rather it was the general ideas of Veblen and the way they were able to open up dress in ways that were completely original. He filled the space of 'philosophy' that had been so important in my initial understanding of style. Both Veblen and Bell were the first to show me how the material 'evidence' of cloth could be, indeed had to be, informed by general ideas. His ideas were the first example of the 'philosophy' that I had been seeking since first reading Cohn's book.

Veblen was, and still is, a serious influence on my ideas about dress. For that reason I have decided to supplement the above discussion with an extract from an entry I wrote for the *Berg Companion to Fashion* (2010) for a closer look at Veblen's ideas about Dress. It shows more clearly how the need for a 'philosophical' accompaniment to my study of dress grew as it was growing in importance.

Veblen, Thorstein and Dress (1857–1929)

A North American economist and sociologist, Veblen was an unrelenting critic of late 19th-century industrial society and in particular of the hierarchy of values associated with its dominant group, named by Veblen, the 'Leisure Class'. Clothing and fashion, he argued, were important as a way in which this group competed among themselves for prestige and social status.

Veblen seeks to understand the aims and ambitions of the Leisure Class by uncovering the economic motives that were at the centre of their actions and values. In his classic text, *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899) he concludes that the economic activity of the Leisure Class is driven by a way of life given over to the maintenance, or acquisition, of 'honourable repute'. The key to gaining status, argues Veblen, is for the households within the Leisure Class to dispose publicly of their wealth according to the principles of conspicuous consumption and conspicuous leisure. Adherence to these principles shows that a household and its members are able to consume without participating in the 'demeaning and unworthy' activities attached to the 'the industrial process'. Although Veblen scrutinises a wide range of expenditures, for instance houses, food, gardens, and household pets, it is clothing that he singles out for special consideration. As he observes, 'no line of consumption affords a more apt illustration than expenditure on dress' (Veblen, p. 123). This is because clothing is a social necessity and to be in public is, by necessity, to be clothed.

By being on show, clothing becomes a prime indicator of their wearer's 'pecuniary repute' and since, in modern industrial society, clothing is a universal item of consumption it is difficult for anyone to ignore the pressures of competitive emulation. Dress, therefore, is ideally placed as a vehicle with which to assert superior status in relation to one's peers within the Leisure Class, as well as collectively displaying the superiority of this class over all others. Veblen concludes that dress has only a tentative connection to protection and bodily comfort, observing that 'It is by no means an uncommon occurrence, in an inclement climate, for people to go ill clad in order to appear well dressed'. (Veblen, p. 124)

Dress and Conspicuous Consumption

Veblen argues that a prime function of dress within the Leisure Class is to display the wearer's ability to pay by their consumption 'of valuable goods in excess of what is required for physical comfort'. (Veblen, p. 125) The most immediate form of conspicuous consumption would be that of *quantity*, that is the possession of items of clothing, for instance shoes or suits, far beyond the requirements of reasonable daily wear. However, dress in the Leisure Class, is also subject to considerations of *quality*. Ability to pay can also be demonstrated by the ownership of garments distinguished by the expensiveness of their materials, for instance the goat hair used to weave *pashmina* shawls. Time-consuming methods of garment construction, and therefore expense can, argues Veblen, insinuate itself into the esteem in which its

wearer will be held. The comparison between a 'hand-made' garment and 'machine-made' one is almost always in favour of the former. Finally, the *scarcity* of a garment can also be a factor in adding to the repute of its wearer. An 'original' item from the studio of a famous designer, or a garment bearing the label of prestigious fashion house will carry more prestige than an undistinguished item of clothing.

One final way to exhibit 'pecuniary strength' is to always appear in clothing that is up-to-date, that is, fashionable. Veblen observes that *'If each garment is permitted to serve for but a brief term, and if none of last season's apparel is carried over and made further use of during the present season, the wasteful expenditure on dress is greatly increased.'* (Veblen, p. 127)

Conspicuous Leisure

Veblen's exploration of the dress of the Leisure Class extends beyond the ways in which individuals use up items of clothing and engages with the very forms and styles assumed by these garments. As he says, 'Dress must not only be conspicuously expensive it must also be "inconvenient"' (Veblen, p. 127) This is because, within the competitive logic of the Leisure Class, overt displays of wealth can be supplemented by wearing clothes that show the person in question 'is not engaged in any kind of productive labour' (Veblen, p. 125) Veblen uses this idea of conspicuous leisure to great effect in explaining the enormous differences in the form taken by men and women's clothing at the end of the 19th century.

In scrutinising contemporary men's clothing for evidence of the principle of conspicuous leisure, Veblen argues that there should be an absence on the male garments of any evidence of manual labour such as stains, shiny elbows, or creasing. Against this, 'elegant' men's dress must exhibit signs that the wearer is 'a man of leisure'. As he says *'Much of the charm that invests the patent-leather shoe, the stainless linen, the lustrous cylindrical hat, and the walking stick...comes of their pointedly suggesting that the wearer cannot when so attired bear a hand in any employment that is directly and immediately of any human use.'* (Veblen, p. 126)

The dress of the women of the Leisure Class while embodying the principles of conspicuous consumption and conspicuous leisure is also influenced by the inferior social position they occupy within the Leisure Class household. It is the job of the woman, argues Veblen, *'to consume for the (male) head of the household; and her apparel is contrived with this object in view.'* (Veblen, p. 132) By wearing garments that are both expensive and inconvenient, such as ornate dresses, corsets, and complicated hats, women show that they do not need to work and so increase the 'pecuniary repute' in which the head of the family is held. On this Veblen is one of the first modern thinkers to relate the appearance of women to their weak social and economic position.

Although his analysis of dress and fashion has proved fruitful in social and historical contexts other than he originally envisaged, Veblen always considers it to be an explanation applicable primarily to what took place *within* the Leisure Class, not as a universal theory of dress. Strongly influenced by Charles Darwin's

theory of evolution Veblen believed that in the future men and women would progress beyond the restless changes of dress styles encouraged by 'pecuniary culture'. In their place would emerge a set of relatively stable functional costumes similar to those Veblen imagined had existed in Ancient Greece and Rome, China and Japan.

Dress: Elasticity and Rudofsky

The last book to influence these early explorations of dress and fashion was *The Unfashionable Human Body* (1971) by Bernard Rudofsky. This must be one of the most eccentric books ever written about the human body and its coverings. Rudofsky presents the reader with example after example of anarchic violations of the body and its 'attachments'. What becomes clear by the end of the book is that, for Rudofsky, the human body and its casings were neither fixed, nor 'natural' entities to be kept separate from one another. Flesh and its coverings flowed into one another other driven by forces whose aim was to create bodily forms and shapes a long way from what might be called *natural*. Animate and inanimate, body and clothing become indistinguishable.

It was clear that the bodily 'eccentricities' that make up the bulk of the book's illustrations show attempts, real or imaginary, to complete an aesthetic aspiration that is only partially achieved by 'real' dress. Rudofsky revealed that inside the smooth flow, and ideal forms, of worn dress lay a world of grotesque hybrids that made their misshapen appearances with the move into the order of visual representation. Images had a more labile surface than the resilience offered by clothing and so were more able to depict the completion – 'go further' – of dress.

The most important lesson that I learned from Rudofsky's book was that dress could not be understood by way of a sartorial realism. It is a fable that dress must remain in touch with the body. There was no universal body present beneath its dressed forms.

Fernand Braudel and History

I had always recognised the presence of history, and later knew of its inevitability, but as a child I only occasionally read books with a historical theme and, as an adult, was never attracted to historical fiction. Even my fascination with the mediaeval shoe drew nothing of consequence from its chronological location. That it was a mediaeval shoe meant little to me. History, as an adult concern, had never been part of either my intellectual life or the scope of my imagination. When later, I had begun to sort out my ideas about dress, history still seemed unsuited for grasping its forms and styles and this seemed to be especially true with regard to the rhythms of fashion. History seemed to be concerned with establishing *facts* of an ever-pinpoint accuracy. These '*facts*' formed mosaics of truth and were laid down in shallow, horizontal bands.

There seemed to be two versions of history. The first saw history as the accumulation of narratives of increasing accuracy whilst the second was an almost nihilistic position summed up in the assertion that history was 'one damn thing after another'. Whilst history was repeatedly named and referred to little attention seem to be given to what it might be.

(These crude ideas about history were ones that I held at the time (1972–1977) and are not those that I hold to today.)

Without fully realising it my time in anthropology had shaped how I thought about social life in general. Studying the kind of Anthropology – or rather Social Anthropology as our tutors insisted we call it – that I had encountered meant the emphasis was almost wholly on structure. Little or no evidence of the passage of time was ever discussed. It wasn't that structure was timeless in the sense of ancient but more that it was *atemporal*, without time. By then my conception of dress was much closer to one influenced by structure than one influenced by the dynamics of history. Dress, as I had come to understand it, did not consist of clearly defined 'factual' events. On the surface, where dress forms made their appearance it rarely took the form of a neat event. Something like style seldom had an identifiable beginning let alone a clear ending. It required a conceptual depth for its understanding rather than a lateral layer of facts. Enter Fernand Braudel and the Annales School of History and their liberating model of history.

My introduction to Braudel came about when a friend gave me the three volumes of *The Structures of Everyday Life* (in translation). In it Braudel tackles the reasons why costume can remain the same for generation after generation and why, as happened in Europe, it was subject to the constant change typical of fashion.

His initial move is to anchor costume within a set of deeper processes such as 'raw materials, production processes, cultural stability and social hierarchy'. If this is done carefully, says Braudel, the study of

costume will become 'less anecdotal'. With this fundamental structure in place '*We can now approach the Europe of the rich and of changing fashions without risk of losing ourselves in its caprices.*' At the heart of Braudel's ideas about Costume are two levels over which dress and fashion are to be distributed. There is the level occupied by fashion – the upper level – and the more fundamental, deeper, level where are to be found the social structures listed above. In his extraordinary essay 'History and the Social Sciences: The *Longue Durée*' he elaborates in a more profound way the differences between the horizontal and vertical conceptions of history and how they differ but at the same time need one another.

Braudel divides history into two dimensions that he describes so:

'Social time, the multifarious, contradictory times of the life of men, which not only make up the past, but also the social life of the present.'

At the heart of these 'contradictory times' are two poles. There was an uppermost one for which he borrowed the title *'evenementielle*, or the place of events, of short time spans and the *longue durée* which is the place of 'the history of the cyclical, the long, even the very long'.

Historical time was no longer homogenous. The clothes that landed on one's back in the form of dress may have wildly different pedigrees. This establishment of a vertical dimension, depth, with cycles and rhythms distinct from those 'events' on the surface opened up, for me, ideas about dress that could more adequately approximate to the forms taken by dress. Despite my admiration for Braudel's recasting of history it never transformed me into an historian. I can read it and enjoy it and still be influenced by him but never write as him. To write history still seems to be too easy to write and too difficult.

Barthes and Method

I often wonder that if Roland Barthes hadn't written about dress and fashion it's doubtful, apart from *Mythologies*, that I would have paid much attention to him but he did write about dress and fashion and the last chapter of my *Fashion Classics* book was devoted to an explication of the first twenty pages of his book *The Fashion System*. What had attracted me to the book was the careful and coherent way he laid out the various stages essential for the life of Fashion (Note – Whilst Barthes speaks mainly about Fashion much of what he says is also applicable to dress and on occasion to clothing.) His lucid description of the fundamental stages to the life of fashion, namely production-distribution-representation and consumption and the way they knitted together into a complex system introduced some much needed order to the vague, disorganised formulations of earlier 'Anglo-Saxon' dress scholars. Barthes lays out the scope of these stages as well as discussing the relations that hold between them. Together they add up to a comprehensive methodological tool for understanding dress and fashion. Ironically these opening pages of *The Fashion System* and their clear delineation of the structure into which dress and fashion are embedded runs counter to the importance Barthes normally attached to dissolving forms of all kinds. The clarity he shows in bringing together the different aspects of dress and fashion in an orderly manner has been part of my construal of dress ever since.

Barthes and Dress

The essay below is a preliminary critique of Barthes semiotic 'militancy'. In overcoming what he called the 'muddled' ideas entertained by the 'Anglo-Saxon' dress scholars Barthes mobilised the arsenals of semiotics and structuralism. Before all else dress and fashion became signifying objects. (In truth that was all they could be.) They were a place of signs whose *raison d'être* was to communicate messages to the group they were part of. This essay was the start of my attempt to go beyond communication and its assumption that dress and fashion are systems for transmitting collective messages. One objection I had with Barthes's semiotic notion of dress and fashion was how it stifled all other approaches and imposed a narrow semiotic object on all aspects of dress and fashion. This was a time when I started to be influenced by the idea that dress and fashion could be understood as straddling two modes of being – the utilitarian and the functional against the non-utilitarian and the useless. It was the many and varied dimensions taken by dress and the dimension of the non-utilitarian that began to interest me and started my criticism of Barthes' semiotic functionalism.

Barthes' Semiotic Functionalism

The question 'Are clothes useful?' doesn't get asked much these days. Perhaps this is because the answer appears to us as self-evident or maybe usefulness is a handy alibi, obscuring other, more elusive dimensions of our clothing. Who could argue against the utilitarian value of raincoats or underpants? So it may come as a surprise to learn that up until the 1950s many authorities on dress were of the opinion that clothing originated with a desire to decorate and ornament the human body. Thomas Carlyle set the tone when in 1833, in his book *Sartor Resartus*, he stated that 'The first purpose of Clothes... was not warmth or decency, but ornament' and for Carlyle, 'ornament' and 'decoration' were elementary pathways to the spiritual.

While there was considerable disagreement as to what exactly was meant by decoration and ornament all were agreed that dress was far removed from utilitarian functions such as protection. Since the early 1960s a different conception of dress gradually displaced the earlier and rather tired triumvirate of causes, protection, modesty and decoration. This is the communication, or linguistic model of clothing, most fully articulated by the cultural critic Roland Barthes. Although Barthes effected a transformation in the way in which dress was understood, *usefulness, in the guise of communication, remained at the heart of his reconstruction of human appearance.*

The usefulness of dress in the linguistic model resides in two areas. First, is its ability to create and transmit information and meaning using the many objects and practices that shape human appearance. Communication is seen as, quite evidently, a useful process, something integral to social life. Secondly,

there is the utility value carried by these social messages to the functioning of the collective as a whole. Barthes, following Durkheim, summarizes dressing and its messages as a way of enhancing what he called social solidarity.

Dress straddles both of the dimensions designated as useful and non-useful. However much our clothing may struggle, it is never able to become an absolute semiotic entity, a pure unit of information, nor is it able, with a few exceptions, one being women's hats, to fully transcend its utilitarian duties. In three short essays published in the late 1950s, Roland Barthes undertook to bring about a revolution in how dress was to be studied and perhaps, even, how it was to be worn. Drawing heavily on the methods of structural linguistics he argued that clothing behaved in a manner similar to language; it was something the essence of which lay in the creation and transmission of meaning, that is, communication. Clothes were coded units that circulated within a group according to the rules of a collective and formalised system. But if clothes were units of meaning there also had to be a means of 'reading' them amongst the members of the group in question. This social dress code, together with its 'dressers' and 'readers', constituted what he called the clothing system. Clothing and body decorations in general were thought of as signs meant to be read. In Barthes' view everything vestimentary is now subsumed beneath the semiotic gold standard of meaning. Barthes' model of dress-as-language was not just the result of a mechanical application of the principles of structural linguistics to the phenomena of dress. His critical encounters with what he called the 'Anglo-Saxon psychologies' were crucial to the formation of his notion of dress.

As was mentioned at the commencement of this essay, these 'Anglo-Saxons' were a lineage of thinkers stretching from Thomas Carlyle in the nineteenth century through to the psychoanalyst John Flügel and the dress historian James Laver in the 1950s. Note – see my account of this lineage in *Fashion Classics from Carlyle to Barthes*.) Barthes' first target in his critical engagement with the 'Anglo-Saxons' was their long-standing desire to locate the origins of dress. Drawing on his familiarity with structural linguistics he dismissed this search for an origin, observing that, before dress, linguistics had been marred by 'so much fruitless discussion on the origin of language'. The new way of studying dress proposed by him will save itself a great deal of time by staying clear of all concern with origins. If, despite all these warnings, one still wanted to talk about these origins then it will be found in the emergence of a collective, formal, system whereby substance and meaning are conjoined to produce meaningful signs.

Barthes was not only dismissive of the search for the origins of dress; he also brushed aside the rather vague psychological notion of 'motive' held by the 'Anglo-Saxons'. A 'motive' was a kind of universal psychological disposition, urge or drive, lodged within each human being. Collective entities derived their 'collectiveness' from the fact that they were the mathematical sum of individual wills, a kind of synchronised time-piece whose operations were guaranteed by the presence of an identical will-to-dress lodged within each individual. Barthes was arguing that dress is not just the material presence of the

techniques of bodily transformation but also the organization of these material elements into a collective and ordered system. This is because of 'the tendency of every bodily covering to insert itself into an organised, formal, and normative system that is recognised by society.' For Barthes, dress cannot be explained by the psychological disposition (motive) of the individuals who make and/or wear it. Garments must be described in terms of their relation to other garments within the formalized, collective dress system. This tracery of internal relations consists of positive assertions such as 'I am', and negations such as 'I am not that'. Clothing and appearance are a system of threaded elements. For instance, the wearing of clothes that are coded for male and female, where each set of garments gains part of its meaning by the contrast it has with its opposite number. The full meaning of clothing cannot be accounted for simply by enumerating their physical properties. Dress must now 'Be explained, not in terms of aesthetic forms or psychological motivation, but in terms of institution.'

Barthes claimed that by recasting clothing as a form of communication, all previous attempts to understand dress would have been rendered redundant. The fundamental semantic unit, the garment, or part thereof, undergoes a profound change as it shifts from being a material object with a distinctive set of physical characteristics to a unit of meanings (a sign) to be read. As Barthes says, clothes must now be described by their functions within the formal system rather than by their material substance or mechanical function. Garments, and parts of clothing, make up messages to be read in relation to other vestimentary units rather than as symbols to be experienced, or forms to be encountered. For Barthes, it is pointless scrutinising the individual for something like a clothing gene. In place of individual 'motivations' he posits the existence of a collective, primary, formal system, which constitutes an all-embracing field upon which meaning and clothes (signified and signifier) are brought together.

Looking back on what I've written here what strikes me is the way I've been able to describe Barthes semiotic approach to dress and fashion and yet I never undertook any empirical analysis of dress using Barthes' principles and to be honest I always found the prospect of enumerating each and every dress sign along with their meaning an extremely tedious exercise. The wonders of dress and fashion were levelled into identical sets of information. I preferred rather more excitement in my intellectual life. Barthes' reliance on a general explanation for all forms of social life, namely that they were 'reinforcing the social structure' took me back to my years studying anthropology with all the problems I had encountered with that kind of explanation.

Australian Interlude

It was about this time that we moved from the UK to Australia where I took up a position at the Tasmanian School of Art. I have often wondered how much this move altered my way of thinking about dress. Certainly the most important thing was the disappearance of class as a way of understanding the subtle, and not so subtle, variations in fashions and dress. Although I didn't notice it at the time class gradually ceased to play an important role in most of my 'Australian' writing. However, during visits to see my parents it had become clear that the country where my ideas about class and dress had matured was fast vanishing. It was becoming a different place. So now I was caught between a place that I had only a superficial knowledge of – Australia – and an England that was rapidly becoming unfamiliar and where my knowledge of its ways of life was becoming redundant. My solution to this awkward situation was abstraction. To write without drawing upon a past set of circumstances that were out of date and write without attempting to be too specific and get things wrong – Australia.

There were some humorous dress encounters I had on the way to what was being worn became familiar. In the first few days in Tasmania I could not help notice how the men-at-work all wore boots, tight shorts and T-shirts despite there being a gale blowing up from Antarctica. Friends reassured me that as far as they knew there was no homoerotic intent to their appearance.

When I arrived at the Art School the students were dressed in a combination of the final days of punk mixed with the New Romantic style. This was the sort of dress they wore on a daily basis. Come the summer Jenni, Sam and I headed for the beach all the time praying it wouldn't rain. After a while a group of young people approached us. They were dressed in conservative bathers and had towels around their shoulders. They said 'Hello'. It was a few moments before I recognised who they were. Of course, they were without the dress they normally wore to my class. This meeting provided me with the only iron law of dress I've ever come across. It's very difficult to be a punk on a beach.

Two years on and we moved to Sydney and I started teaching at the University. The first impression we had on arrival was that everyone was on a never-ending holiday. Bright colours, lightweight fabrics, shorts and no apparent response on the part of dress to the seasonal changes. All this reminded me of how English travellers would be dressed as they waited to board their holiday flights to Spain.

Introduction

Thomas Carlyle, Georg Simmel and John Flugel

This next section is a chance for me to recognise three thinkers whose description and analysis of dress and fashion influenced me, albeit in different ways.

I encountered the work of Thomas Carlyle, Georg Simmel and John Flugel as part of the investigation I undertook for my book *Fashion Classics from Carlyle to Barthes*. It would be hard to find a trio of thinkers who were more unlike to one another. Thomas Carlyle with his wildly eccentric 'novel' *Sartor Resartus*, Georg Simmel's exploration of fashion, so perceptive that the sounds of the street can still be heard and finally John Flugel's pioneering work in drawing together psychoanalysis, dress and fashion in a distinctively English way.

Whilst I have only drawn on limited aspects of their writing I still retain a great affection for their work.

Thomas Carlyle (1795–1881)

When I put the examination of *Sartor Resartus* (1833) by Thomas Carlyle at the commencement of those thinkers who had written ‘seriously’ about dress and fashion in the 19th and 20th centuries it was somewhat of an unusual departure. These later scholars occasionally mentioned *Sartor Resartus* but for the most part it was to dismiss it as a text that was drowning in nineteenth century verbosity. His booming Victorian prose proved too much for these later writers and so it was never integrated into that tradition of thinkers that at another time I’ve called *Fashion Classics*. When I returned to *Sartor* nearly twenty years later I was struck by how close Carlyle’s imagination was to the expressionism of German silent cinema. Figures trapped in menacing situations. Harsh illumination and dress and clothing only able to find peace in death.

What makes *Sartor Resartus* a legitimate member of the later tradition is the way it encompasses the complete life cycle of clothes and dress. It begins with the way raw materials are ripped from nature to provide us with our ‘vestural tissue’. Carlyle unveils the true origin of these materials by pointing out what they were before they were transformed into materials to be worn. He draws attention to how we walk around unaware that we are wearing the skins of beasts.

‘While I – Good heaven! – have thatched myself over with the dead fleeces of dead sheep, the bark of vegetables, the entrails of worms, the hides of oxen or seals, the felt of furred beasts; and walk abroad a moving Rag-screen, overheaped with shreds and tatters raked from the Charnel house of nature, where they would have rotted, to rot on me more slowly.’

Our clothes and therefore our dress emerge out of the mass slaughter of animals for their skins along with threads able to hold together the products of this industrial flaying.

It is with his discussion of the ‘historical’ origin of clothes that Carlyle engages with the then current explanation of how they began. He dismisses the bible story that clothing originated with the fall of Adam and Eve and the shame they felt when confronted with each other’s nakedness. Carlyle will have none of this ‘Adamitism’ and its attendant belief that our nakedness is the more pure state than when we are clothed. He dismisses any idea of pre-lapsarian perfection or that the origin of clothes derives from shame, modesty, or any of the other sexual anxieties thought to have arisen as a consequence of the Fall. Carlyle makes two extraordinary assertions concerning the origin of clothes:

‘The first purpose of clothes...was not warmth or decency, but ornament.’

And

‘Decoration is the first spiritual want of a barbarous man’.

Clothes and dress are places where human spiritual needs may be fulfilled, or at least may commence their search for fulfilment. It is what Carlyle calls Spirit that elevates dress from being a collection of 'mere externalities', objects that carry nothing more than their material qualities. It is Carlyle's placing of clothing and dress under the sign of the ornamental as a proto-form of the spiritual that has had a huge influence on my thinking.

The life of clothes between their beginning and their end is governed by what Carlyle calls the architectural idea. He has of necessity to explain the variations in dress, always the most obvious feature confronting the dress scholar. It should be understood that Carlyle was fully versed in contemporary German philosophy. (He was fluent in German.) He was familiar with the notions of Spirit current in German Idealism, and used it throughout his life as a way of criticising Anglo-Saxon reliance on materialism and utilitarianism. For Carlyle clothes were animated by constantly moving forms of spirit and it was this that was responsible for the diversity of clothing styles.

'Whether he flow gracefully out in folded mantles, based on light sandals; tower up in high headgear, from amid peaks, spangles and bell-girdles; swell out in starched ruffs, buckram stuffing's monstrous tuberosities; or girth himself into separate sections, and front the world an agglomeration of four limbs – will depend on the nature of such Architectural Idea.'

But animation by an Architectural Idea was not an automatic guarantee that the outer aspect of dress is in an 'authentic' relation with the inner spirit of the wearer. Things could go wrong when clothes and spirit become separated from one another and a consequent fading away of the Architectural Idea that had at first enthused the wearer. Carlyle gives many examples where the representatives of decrepit institutions no longer wear authentic forms of dress. Dress may appear to still be animated by an Architectural Idea but in reality they are empty vestments. He gives as one example the clergy of the established national church who's Spirituality has evaporated leaving behind a terrifying picture of a decrepit, rotting institution.

'Many of them have become mere hollow shapes, or Masks, under which no living figure or Spirit any longer dwells; but only spiders and unclean beetles, in horrid accumulation, drive their trade.'

Despite being vehicles for Spirit clothes were still made out of material stuff and obeyed the laws governing their life cycle. Carlyle's conception of the end of clothes was one that pre-dated our contemporary habit of discarding garments after being worn only a few times. His notion of their end is a gradual, but never ending, process of abrasion, not throw-away disposal.

'Day after day, I must thatch myself anew; day after day; this despicable thatch must lose some film of its thickness; some film of it, frayed away by tear and wear, must be brushed off into the Ashpit into

the laystall; till by degrees the whole has been brushed thither, and I, the dust-making, patent Rag-grinder, get new material to grind down.'

Ashpit: a hole into which ashes and household refuse is thrown

Laystall: Public refuse heap

Georg Simmel (1858–1918)

Simmel's most important work about fashion is his 1905 essay *Philosophie der Mode*. It is in this essay that he places fashion within the life of the modern metropolis. This remains an extraordinary exploration of the ways in which his contemporaries dressed and is something that can be read with profit by all those studying fashion today.

Whilst I was, and still am, a great admirer of the 1905 essay, I chose not to follow the journey he took into modernity and fashion. I was beginning to move away from a concern with fashion, or rather I was starting to look for ways of understanding clothes that weren't inevitably to do with fashion. However, I was much taken with his general philosophical position, in particular how he placed the aesthetic at the heart of his engagement with how we are dressed. It was the distinction he made between clothes and fashion, a separation that was to prove important in suggesting that clothes, fashion and dress were not a unified field and that it was possible for them to have separate lives.

It would be difficult to over emphasise the importance that the notion of the aesthetic had for Simmel. Its scope lay far beyond being a comfortable adjunct to art appreciation. In the structure of the artwork, and our experience of it, Simmel finds a template that can guide us through the social order in general. So aesthetics pervades the whole of human life, indeed it is life. It – aesthetics – has an especial relevance for how our activities and our possessions can be understood. As Simmel puts it:

'For us the essence of aesthetic observation and interpretation lies in the fact that the typical is to be found in what is unique, the law-like in what is fortuitous, the essence and significance in the superficial and transitory.'

The handle of a jug, an earring, the pattern that food can assume on a plate, and importantly for me, the forms assumed by clothing and dress, are all places where the generalities of social life are equally as present as the summits of our collective life, for instance the economic, political and religious dimensions of the social order. The whole can be present in the fragment. Simmel regarded human artefacts as unique in the ways in which their material dimension (their particular) and spiritual (their universal) dimensions are joined within the internal economy of the object. It was his idea of the co-presence of the material and the spiritual in human artefacts that proved such an important way through to my understanding of dress.

This conception of the aesthetic began to suggest a foundation for my rather tentative, and scattered, findings about dress. Everything that is made has to 'take shape' and that taking shape entails the emergence of the aesthetic dimension. Simmel's insistence on the presence of this aesthetic dimension confirmed a longstanding worry I had about the way that the material nature of things – and so their

aesthetic dimension – was so often ‘jumped over’ by those in a hurry to get to the ‘important’ parts of their interpretation. Simmel refuses to erase, overlook or ignore the fact that clothing is material that has been ‘worked’ for the benefit of our senses. Understanding must at all times pass through the aesthetic.

Simmel’s notion of the aesthetic reassured me that it was a legitimate area of inquiry and allowed me to bring together the material nature of dress with its more ‘elevated’ dimensions. I had always sensed that there was more to dress, and being dressed, than shuffling around inanimate materials on and off the wearer.

Of great importance to where I was heading with my ideas about dress was Simmel’s distinction between clothes and fashion. It is a sharp distinction that sees no intrinsic link between those objects nominated as clothing and the broad social phenomena that is fashion. Clothing and fashion are uncoupled from each other and lead separate lives. (This is because Simmel has a very broad view of fashion as something that extends beyond clothing and out into the world beyond.) Even if Simmel’s initial grounding of clothing is rather weak – shaky 19th century anthropological sources in which primitive men and women indulge in activities that originate from ‘reported’ sources was never his strong point – he sticks to his argument that clothing derives from a ‘decorative impulse’.

Simmel further discusses clothes by arguing that they are located midway between those bodily adornments that inhabit close to the wearer’s body – that is tattoos and cosmetics – from those things that are most ‘distant’ and ‘independent’ from the wearer’s body, such as jewellery. The latter items can be distinguished from bodily adjustments such as cosmetics because they can stand apart from their wearer. The manner of ‘wearing’ adornments such as tattoos and cosmetics necessarily requires them to be inscribed directly onto the body of the wearer. What Simmel calls ‘personal distinctiveness’ will neither disrupt the formal coherence of jewellery nor jeopardise its independence as a freestanding object. Clothing is capable of inclining in both directions. As he says:

‘Between these two stands dress, which is not so inexchangeable and personal as tattooing, but neither so unindividual and separable as jewellery.’

Clothing can create a sphere of significance around the body where the general may appear without being utterly divorced from, and indifferent to, the personal qualities of their wearer.

Simmel’s separation of clothes from fashion suggested that there might be another separate, and distinct, clothes based order namely dress that too was different to fashion. It was around these notions of how the separations between body, clothes, fashion and dress began to play out that suggested a way into dress.

John Carl Flugel (1874–1955)

John Flugel's work on clothes, dress and fashion, *The Psychology of Clothes*, appeared in 1930 and was the first Freudian inspired analysis of dress and fashion in the English language. Its publisher was the Hogarth Press, which meant its preferred readers were in all likelihood members of the reformist circles prominent in Britain between the wars. Flugel was a committed participant in these movements and his *Psychology of Clothes* presents a case for the reform of both male and female dress.

Flugel's theory of clothing attempted to answer two questions. First, why do human beings wear clothes at all? Second, why do the ways in which human beings dress varies so greatly? In answering both these questions he draws upon the psychoanalytical notion of a 'compromise-formation' defined by Charles Rycroft as:

'Any mental phenomenon which is the product of CONFLICT and which partially expresses both parties to the conflict.'

Flugel advances the idea that clothing, as a body, is a 'compromise-formation' that brings together the desire of children to exhibit their naked bodies and the later arrival of a social prohibition that the body be covered for the sake of modesty. For Flugel, the story of clothing is the story of the relative strengths of these two psychic forces. His argument is that clothing comes into being so as to *reconcile* the demands that these opposing forces place upon the human body and the psyche.

It is Flugel's notion of a 'compromise-formation' that has stayed with me ever since I first came across it in *The Psychology of Clothes*. I moved it out of its psychoanalytic context – something that will come as no surprise to those who have read my entry on Freud. Having reformulated the idea of a compromise-formation I reintroduced it to my understanding of dress. It seemed that dress was not made up of a straightforward expression of autonomous units. Dress comes into being in an already 'dressed' world. It may take the form it does because it is part of a field of compromise-formations with other parts of dress and so partially expresses aspects of both parties within a field of reconciliation.

I have attached a small extract from my essay *Hair Piece* to show how the idea of 'compromise-formation' may help in unravelling the layers of a particular example of dress. This is not a 'Freudian' explanation of male facial hair but an appropriation I made of the idea of a 'compromise-formation.' In place of Flugel's conflicting psychological forces I have used the ides of a compromise-formation as the place where two, or more, ideals of style achieve a mutual compromise.

Hair Piece

The style taken by their facial hair is longer than that used to be called 'designer stubble' but it never attains (and never wants to) the length and coverage of a full beard. Occupying this midway point between lots of hair and no hair at all is fundamental to what is happening on the faces of these young men. The style (As I shall call it) has a number of features that ensure its occupancy of this mid-way position. Facial hair is kept at a length where the skin can be glimpsed through the facial thatch but stops short of vanishing altogether into being clean-shaven. In the other direction, hair length is not allowed to become a full beard that obscures all traces of the contours and surfaces of the skull. This means that the two poles of skin and beard can coexist without cancelling one another out. The maintenance of the 'natural' outline of the hair growth is important as a way of distinguishing the style from the other sorts of shapes that may be given to facial hair, for instance the moustache, the chinstrap, and mutton chops. The work of the style is to maintain a place somewhere between the poles of clean-shaven and full beard. Too close to either of these would mean that the style would lose its identity...Because of this the style needs careful maintenance to ensure it doesn't lose its position, and therefore its identity between clean-shaven faces and those with a full-beard.

Flügel's notion of the compromise-formation stretched from the personal dress worn by an individual through to speculations concerning the future of clothing. His answer was that as we become more proficient in controlling our physical environment and as we were less likely to be ruled by the forces of modesty – often aligned by Flügel with irrational authoritarian societies – our dependence, indeed our need for the 'compromise-formation' that are clothes, would disappear. Dress would either vanish altogether as the social order became less punitive or it would be limited to a number of stable 'rational' costumes. Flügel had seen the future and it was nude.

Interlude 3

I've reached a point where my understanding of dress stopped being something that relied upon scattered encounters with interesting 'dress material'. At some point I must have made a commitment that dress, and to a lesser degree fashion, would be the areas that occupied most of my attention.

These final readings formed themselves into two streams that eventually meet (Hopefully) in the final section called *Dress*. One stream is concerned with the aesthetics of dress, getting dressed, etc and deals with *Style*. The second stream deals with what kind of object dress is. It begins with *Ornament* followed by the section *Caillois*.

Style

Remembering the frequency with which I have used the word style over the years is to understand that it has been a close companion ever since I started to write about dress and fashion. Although what follows may stray from an immediate concern with dress, nevertheless I think that my description of style will reveal it to be closely related to the aesthetics of dress, getting dressed, etc. Nor should the power of style be underestimated. When we get dressed much more than a covering of our bodies takes place. Style can bring about a transformation of our physical form and is something that can transform both the wearer and what is worn.

The notion of Style has brought me back to my first encounters with dress and the desire I had for a 'philosophy' that would propel my understanding beyond simple description. What follows is a discussion of the notion of style to be found in Susan Sontag's essay *On Style* together with an imaginary pre-historical scene to test the presence or absence of style in dress.

Prehistoric Style?



Susan Sontag has offered one of the better answers to the question 'What is Style?' At the very end of her essay 'On Style' in *Against Interpretation* (Sontag: 1961: 36) she says:

'Whenever speech or movement, or objects exhibit a certain deviation from the most useful, insensible mode of expression or being in the world, we may look at them as having style...'

Sontag's definition makes a clear distinction between the 'deviations' that are style and what they are deviating from. The dimension that is *non-deviation* is similar to the categories of the utilitarian and the

functional that I've used elsewhere. It is a world with its creases ironed out and where the shortest distance between A and B is always a straight line. Style then, is something that exceeds, or eludes, the determinisms of use and function.

I want to introduce this idea of style to the illustration of an imaginary Stone Age family in the illustration above. An initial question is what is the status of the furs the family have draped over themselves? Are they a form of dress or something else and if they are 'something else' then how may we describe them?

Following on from Sontag's definition it would mean that dress has style whilst it is absent from non-dress. If style is absent from the furs then they could be something that approximates to the 'straight line' of Sontag's condition of stylelessness. The furs could then be a form intended to provide protection against the cold and, of course, modesty but nothing else. The scene certainly implies that what they are wearing is protection against the elements and there are no indications of any non-functional activity such as shaping of the furs, or decoration and ornament. The family group are depicted as if they are living in a 'styleless' world where there is nothing to spare for, to use Sontag's phrase, those 'certain deviations'. They are 'dressed in utility. An echo here of the inhabitants of the utopias we saw in H.G. Wells' stories and Gramsci's imaginings of the future whilst in prison. It would seem that pure utility could be found at both the start of 'civilisation' and in its future.

Human beings have found it impossible to respond to their world in a 'styleless' manner. Style signals the presence of an elementary form of freedom. It both allows and guides the creation of 'stuff', for instance dress, beyond the powerful insistence of nature and use. Style is one of the first parts of human life devoted to ends that lie beyond survival. What comes into being with the emergence of style, is a parallel world where the given can make way for the desired.

Ornament

My interest in ornament began independently of style and it was not until some time later that I realised Sontag's 'a certain deviation' was the way she was able to mark off the 'artistic' uses of language from its communicative function. I realised that this broad separation of function from the 'poetic' had implications for what I was starting to understand about ornament. I set out to explore ornament from three distinct empirical places, women's hat decorations, and ornamental pigeons – yes pigeons! – and ornamented objects in general. I will finish by looking at the implications that these examples of ornament had for dress.

All the synonyms of ornament – ornamental, ornamentation, ornate and decoration – have two dimensions. There is a 'superficial' dimension that is added to a host object thought to be both prior and fundamental to this 'superficial' dimension. The most common explanation of ornament is that it exists to improve the aesthetic quality of the host object. Ornament often exists to cover up signs of making as well as evidence of function; it is used to make something beautiful. The attractiveness of ornamentation lies in the degree that it encroaches upon the useful part of the host object, transforming the utilitarian dimension into the ornamental. Decoration is the most temporary form of beautification whose task is to transform a space, or an object, for a limited amount of time. With the evidence of making and function covered by the work of the ornamental the object may be elevated above the realm of the mundane becoming something that is closer to an art object.

But there is more to the process of ornamentation than the simple addition of host + ornament. There are rules governing what can, and can't be part of the 'superficial' addition that secures the presence of ornamentation. Whatever the content of this additive dimension it must not be too obviously functional, for instance it would not be acceptable to place a pair of scissors on the side of a vase and claim it as an ornament. It has to be something that is of a non-functional nature. It might, however, be permissible to decorate a vase with a scissors motif arranged into a pleasing pattern. Often the ornamental will appear to be consuming the functional core of the host object. In this case ornament is not just a passive addition to the object but is something that repeatedly enacts the reckless expenditure of material and wealth that has been used up as it overcomes function.

And so to pigeons. As an admirer of Charles Darwin it was probably inevitable that I would retrace the steps he took exploring the world of breeding pigeons, both plain and fancy. The birds most prized by the breeders were those that departed furthest from the birds considered to be of a standard form and colouring. It was crucial that there be a consensus amongst breeders as to the proportions of this standard bird so as to be able to judge the extent and quality of any 'deviation' measured against an equivalent part of the body of a standard bird. (Sontag's straight line again.)

The breeders of these fancy pigeons rarely enhanced the ‘natural’ attributes of the standard birds –for instance increasing the speed of a bird that was so important in homing races – rather they would breed for traits that violated the standard form and would, in all probability, render a bird unfit for any of the more strenuous activities engaged in by the standard birds. In this sense they were conforming to the rules of ornamentation already discussed. There is a fundamental object – in this case the standard bird – and ‘fancy’ breeds that incorporate elements that ‘deviate’ from these ‘standard’ birds. These ‘ornamental’ features created by the breeders are aesthetic elaborations that have no relation to the functional forms produced by ‘nature’. Indeed, it is the distance from what is given by nature that makes them so prized.

The most important thing I took away from the ornamental pigeons was the requirement that there be a consensus as to the existence of a standard against which ornamental features could be compared, measured and appreciated. Comparison is an essential part of understanding the distance between the standard and deviation and so what it is that the ‘ornament’ has done to what it has ornamented.

Ornament is made up of the relationship between A+B but it is also an event and a place where what is distinctively ornamental may be found. In *Being Prepared* I pursued what was going on in this ornamental domain and I did this by investigating the decorations on Edwardian women’s hats. The question I put to the hats was ‘What is happening amongst the lush ornamentation to be found on the hats?’ This was the dimension of the *ornamental event* mentioned earlier. The first thing to strike me reinforced what I had already pointed to and this was that these ornamental features were devoid of any functional purpose. Most would afford little protection against the rain and would be vulnerable to any strong wind. But theories as to what is happening within these ornamental scenes revealed much more than a general, non-specific conclusion of non-functionality. My favourite exploration of ornament is that put forward by Henri Focillon. He described the ornamental so:

‘The strange realm of ornament (the chosen home of metamorphoses) has given birth to an entire flora and fauna of hybrids that are subject to the laws of a world distinctly not our own.’

If we follow Focillon then the first thing to register about ornament is that it does not draw upon a realistic aesthetic. As he says, ornament can reveal another world ‘distinctly not our own.’

These ideas around ornament eventually fed into my ideas about dress. The fundamental division contained within ornament, that of a separation between an initial register, thing, or process to which an ornamental dimension is added seemed to ‘fit’ with a notion of dress being something that is added to the body. This space, or distance between these two elements, opens up the question as to what dress is and why do we wear it? Dress now becomes something that has a dimension freed from usefulness and where constant ornamental variations seem to never end.

These thoughts on ornament gave me a much clearer idea as to the kind of object dress was. Were they functional objects, which attended to the needs and requirements of the body wearing them, or are they non-functional objects governed by the rules of ornament? If the latter then they are ways individual, and collective wearers are able to present the many, and various positions they occupy within the world and the skies above. Are they the conclusion of Carlyle's explanation for clothes?

'The first purpose of clothes...was not warmth or decency, but ornament'.

Roger Caillois (1913–1978)

These final sections have been greatly influenced by the work of Roger Caillois. His ideas engage with themes that stretch right the way back to the mediaeval shoe and into those areas of human life we can call unproductive use. It is a stream of life that dress is a part.

The French intellectual Roger Caillois set out to explore those realms of nature he called ‘the land beyond survival’. Wherever he looked, be it at insects, birds, or human behaviour, he detected the presence of a multitude of forces such as intoxication, ‘aesthetic’ activity, an instinct for ‘letting go’, ornament and play, all of which lay outside of the determinisms of usefulness. The reason I found Caillois’s inventory of non-utilitarian forces so interesting was a feeling that they could be found at work in dress. In particular, ornament is named by Caillois as one of the prime manifestations of the non-utilitarian. (Other examples of ‘useless’ phenomenon provided by Caillois are luxury, mourning rites, wars, cults, games, sacrifices and certain aspects of the arts.) He is able to absorb our previous thoughts on the basic structure of ornament (see section on Ornament) and supplement them with a description of the ornamental dynamic, places where the non-utilitarian unfolds. Caillois never ‘does without’ the utilitarian dimension to life nor does he desert the materiality of life. The continued presence of the non-utilitarian has implications for dress. My feeling is that garments can have varying degrees of non-usefulness as well as varying degrees of usefulness. Dress may obey the body or completely ignore it. All this will be discussed in the Dress section.)

Caillois’ vision of nature was complex and varied, but one theme remained with him for his whole life and that was the contrast and interplay between the ‘utilitarian’ and the ‘non-utilitarian’. In *The Necessity of Mind*, written soon after leaving the Surrealists (1934), he put forward a philosophical grounding that would both support and organise his studies, not just of animals, insects and plants, but also human life. At the heart of this lay his theory of the object.

‘It is obvious that the utilitarian role of an object never completely justifies its form, or to put it another way, that the object always exceeds its instrumentality. Thus it is possible to discover in each object an irrational residue...’

He rejects the idea that there can ever be a ‘perfect fit’ between an object and its use, or as he puts it ‘the perfect coincidence that rational thinking assumes them to have’. (I will discuss the question of whether this ‘perfect coincidence’ is a possibility in the final section, Dress.) There is always an excess to use, or function, that Caillois calls the ‘irrational residue’. This portion of the object could be devoted to ‘futile’ ends such as ornament. At this point he begins to suggest what it is that lies outside the utilitarian aspects of the object. For Caillois, the non-utilitarian consisted of a dazzling set of forces whose aims are quite distinct from the forces of survival and conservation. Human dress, because of its physical independence

from the body of its wearer, can play a surrogacy role as a field across which the ripples of the non-utilitarian play. Dress is something both safe and dangerous.

It is difficult to compile a complete inventory of the non-utilitarian forces explored by Caillois. Putting together a total picture of the non-utilitarian was never his aim. However, in an essay written in 1970, *A New Plea for Diagonal Science*, Caillois provides two brief summaries of the non-functional both of which have implications for dress:

'This attitude prompts one to greatly vary the principles of biological explanation and to assert that nature (which is no miser) pursues pleasure, luxury, exuberance, and vertigo just as much as survival and natural selection.'

Later in the same essay he expands on his list:

'The time has come to invoke 'motives' that are just as pressing on a universal scale, such as profusion, play, intoxication and even aesthetics, or at least the need for ornament and decoration.'

This list of non-utilitarian drives suggests many pathways for the study of dress. A single example will have to suffice. One axis of dress across which it can be distributed is a kind of spectrum of substantiality. Movement across this spectrum sees a variation in the wearer's 'weight'. At both ends is something Caillois would immediately recognise, a loss of self. A good example of the 'heavy' can be found in a photograph Annie Liebowitz took of the performance artist, Leigh Bowery, dressed in a hyper fetish ensemble. (No flesh was visible.) All signs of animation seem to have drained away as the heavy figure moves into the darkness and death of a shadowy corner. This mimics one of Caillois' favourite figures, the insect which, with its desire to avoid danger will merge with its immediate environment and so become inanimate. (Surely something echoing Freud's death drive.) While many of the forces listed by Caillois are relevant to an understanding of dress, the most pertinent for the present discussion are aesthetics, ornament and decoration and in particular ornament which he seems to think is one of the most fundamental of these 'useless' motives.

'The time has come to invoke 'motives' that are just as pressing on a universal scale, such as profusion, play, ivresse, and even aesthetics, or at least the need for ornament and decoration.'

and

'The development of nature is predicated not on the principle of the survival of the fittest but on something like ornament and the pleasure, exuberance and vertigo it can cause'.

What is important is that ornament encompasses everyday environments as well as the weight of the architectural. Ornament, if Caillois is to be believed, is a universal component of nature that includes us with our need to be dressed. For Caillois, the 'need' for ornament by all living creatures is, perhaps, one of the most fundamental manifestations of the non-utilitarian there is.

'The development of nature is predicated not on the principle of the survival of the fittest but on something like ornament and the pleasure, exuberance and vertigo it can cause.'

As we have seen, dress is not merely a useful, or communicative, entity but has a dimension that engages in 'pure and simple dissipation'. Within dress of all kinds one can find 'stuff' being diverted to ornament, decoration and aesthetic considerations. It is these small destructions of utility that are so often the source of a garment's attraction.

Notes

By 'dressed' I mean the universal human condition of 'stuff' or 'marks' being added to the body to both 'elevate' and 'complete' it.

Dress/Introduction

+

Redress

Archaeologist Ian Gilligan has observed that ‘The meanings of dress, clothing and fashion are so intermingled these days that it is hard to speak about one without inferring the others’. There is much truth in this observation, something that could be further complicated by the addition of *body* to that list. For instance, of particular relevance here is whether dress can be differentiated from fashion? I think it can but what will emerge is, and never will be, an autonomous object with a set of clear boundaries. Despite this mutual saturation, I still think it’s possible to disentangle enough threads to provide a sufficient distinctiveness to each of the two fields, dress and fashion. In the midst of this empirical confusion there is, as Gilligan has pointed out, a swirling nomenclature that can easily lead the dress detective astray.

We know that dress, dressing and being dressed are all central to who and what we are. We spend the majority of our waking and sleeping lives, dressed in some way or another. What is it that impels us to have our bodies perpetually sheathed in what Carlyle called, ‘vestural tissues’?

One difficulty in answering this question lies in the state of the current nomenclature. All aspects of the clothed figure have been subject to an almost total colonisation by the word fashion. Using fashion in such a promiscuous way has blurred many of the significant differences between dress and fashion. Dress is something dragged along behind fashion with little meaning of its own. At times dress and fashion do lie close to one another whilst at other times they are quite different.

All dressings require something to dress. What it is that is to be dressed can vary from salads, Christmas trees, through to physical wounds to the human body and beyond. Everything that gets dressed is thought to undergo an improvement of some kind but the nature of these improvements may differ widely from one another. Dressing can add a fresh quality to something it originally lacks. For instance, the use of festive decorations for an office party helps to transform utilitarian spaces into places fit for a convivial gathering. It can be something that fills an absence such as covering baldness by wearing a toupee. When these absences are filled the wearer can be thought of as being in a state of *completion*. Being complete is an important feature that differentiates dress from fashion. Wearing the Jewish yarmulke is an addition that brings the wearer into a readiness for prayer. This quality of dress completion has little of the restlessness so characteristic of fashion. Dress is compliance whilst fashion has aspiration. The full application of dressing to the human figure brings about a transformation that will be looked at in the section Dress /Transformation.

The dressing of the human body is organised around four coordinates none of which are straightforwardly present or empirically identifiable. These coordinates are *body, clothes, dress and/or fashion*. There can be no clothes, dress or fashion without a body but the body does not present itself as a given form that precedes the subsequent 'work' undertaken by dress. Dress reaches down into the 'natural' body and interprets it according to the aesthetic demands of what is being worn. This primacy of the aesthetic means that the wearer will be dressed in such a way that the 'natural body' will have vanished into the folds of whatever is being worn. Dress reworks the body given to us by nature into forms that are profoundly unnatural. It delivers a body crafted by humans.

It is difficult to know where clothing begins and where the transformation into dress takes place. Where draping ceases and dressing begins. Apart from being something that is attached to the body what we may call clothing can move a long way away from what are regarded as 'normal' garments. As we shall see there are forms of dressing that do not deal in clothing, or at least they involve bodily additions that no longer have any of the appearance of clothing.

Traditionally clothes have been discussed in terms of their origins rather than what it is they do. However, if we follow the route of what it is that clothes do, *clothes-as-function*, it is clear that an additional dimension, a non-functional dimension needs to be recognised. The functional dimension of clothing is concerned with making an efficient contribution to the tasks of covering and protecting the body. The non-functional dimension of clothing refers to all those dimensions that are not part of clothing's efficient 'running'. This covers all those aspects that stray away from Sontag's straight line of style, for instance form, shape, pattern, colour and most importantly how the body and clothing engage with one another. It is this that is dress.

Dress is a fundamental condition. It is a necessary state for all forms of clothing. It precedes and 'lies beneath' fashion. But it is not a featureless stratum whose task is to support fashion. It partakes equally in an aesthetic but in a different way.

One final Anthropological point should be made before starting on my examination of dress in greater detail. Clothes mediate the transformation of the body by being dressed to both their wearer and the group they belong to. Clothing, in its broadest sense, are embodiments of this 'dressed' body and act as a mediation of this 'dressed' form to the place where socially organized patterns of wearing are located.

What follows are some preliminary examinations of three areas of dress that are:

Dress as transformation.

Dress and aesthetics.

Dress as a non-functional object

These sections are not as I would like them to be. They are unfinished and so more work has been done. At the end of each of the following sections I have indicated where this additional work needs to be directed.

Dress Again

(This is an extension of the section *Dress/Introduction*.)

I've returned to the consideration of dress because, although much ground was covered in the *Introduction*, I was left with a feeling that something was awry with how I had construed the three categories of clothes, dress and fashion. As I hope to make clear my error lay in how I was trying to separate, and so define, each of the categories into distinctive, empirical entities. By the finish of this exercise there should rather be three, interwoven parts of the spectrum of wearing, one of which would be dress.

I want to begin by returning to sGilligan's observation made at the beginning of the *Introduction to Dress*.

'The meanings of dress, clothing and fashion are so intermingled these days that it is hard to speak about one without inferring the other.'

If he is right, and I think he is, then what we are presented with is a puzzling set of semantic overlaps where fashion and dress are often 'accurate (truthful) synonyms' for one another. The question I'm left with is, is there anything at work beneath this semantic surface and do the nominations clothes, dress and fashion add up to anything more than a handful of slippery meanings?

The aim of this re-examination is the same as it was in the *Introduction*, that is to understand, and establish, dress as a legitimate part of the spectrum of wearing. My thinking changed from searching for dress as an isolated 'thing' and instead making the categories of clothes/dress/fashion part of a structure of interrelated parts. The distinctiveness of clothes/dress/fashion became a matter of position rather than of distinctive styles.

Clothes and fashion form the two borders marking out dress. Beyond clothing are the raw (unformed) materials that are drawn upon to make the garments we wear. An expanded meaning of dress can encompass the many and various stuff that may be placed on the body to create a dressed wearer. These raw materials are as varied as body paint, a simple shawl or the complex product of *haute couture*. Whilst acknowledging the expanded meaning of what it means to be dressed I will generally remain within the dressing practices of the West.

The initial task of clothing is to cover the body and at the same time begin to dress the wearer.

The comingling of cover and dressing surely means that clothes and dress are not separate domains.

Dress reaches into the clothing reserve to draw out those garments suitable for *getting dressed* whilst other garments present themselves as suitable to become part of the wearer's dressing. One move brings clothes to life whilst the other will carry within them restraints and limits on how one maybe dressed. Dress does not have distinctive style. It is not easily identifiable.

To be clothed is different to being dressed. Both adjectives refer to some kind of material placed on the body of the wearer-to-be, but there the similarities end. To be clothed primarily means a covering of the body whilst being dressed carries an idea of cover, but it also refers to transforming the body of the wearer into an aesthetic entity. To be dressed is to wear bodily 'attachments' that are always more than functional garments. This distinction between covered and dressed occurs in *Paradise Lost* when the two miscreants, on realising for the first time what it means to be naked, cover themselves with leaves. God takes pity on them and gives them animal skins that are a much more efficient way of covering their bodies. Surely this is where the European trope of dressing 'early humans' in furs and animal skins began.

A subtle exchange happens when clothes are placed on the body and the wearer becomes a dressed person. Body and clothes undergo a mutual exchange where the distinction between them is lost to both the wearer and the viewer. This comingling lies at the heart of dress and is responsible for clothes appearing to have human qualities and the human wearer having qualities of clothing. Textile can displace skin. The dressed surface can become a secondary bodily exterior. (See my *Dress and Adjectives* and *Dressed in Adjectives Part 2* on the website.)

Dress occupies a position between clothes and fashion and is the place where the initial aesthetic transformations happen. No matter how extravagant a fashion outfit is, it will always have certain elements of dress in its make up. It will have to obey the fundamental rules of modesty. It may have to mark out deep gender differences, of age, etc. This means that the border between dress and fashion is a porous one. Elements of dress will always be found beneath the vagaries of fashion. The border between dress and fashion is neither clean, nor sharp; fashion does not have exclusive ownership of what are regarded as its most distinctive features. There is change in dress albeit of a muted kind but it is not the kind of change characteristic of fashion.

Simmel argued that what lay at the heart of fashion was an inner articulation of two forces; one was a force of distinction, the other a force of imitation both of these were yoked together in a dialectic, each striving to achieve complete fulfilment. It is the constant readjustments of this dialectic that is responsible for fashion's restlessness. Dress does not have this inner dialectic. However, remembering that dress and fashion share a porous border it could be that fashion has drawn into itself, and elaborated, certain features found in dress.

Fashion and dress are regarded as different according to how useful they are as against how 'ornamental' each of them may be. Fashion is regarded as a way of dressing that is overwhelmingly 'ornamental' in its make up? Recall, that the border between dress and fashion is porous. It would be misleading to make dress the only place where function may be found. Recall that dress is the first place where the aesthetic manifests itself. Very little that gets made ever takes the form of absolute utility. It is hard for anything made by humans to escape from having style. It is the variable relation of useful to ornamental that distinguishes fashion from dress.

Fashion displays a restless desire for the new, or for the next. Dress can, and does undergo change but it is not the kind of change that is so organised as fashion. Dress may be subject to wear and tear, and so replacement happens. Styles in clothing can appear but they are not subject to the fierce turnover of fashion. Finally, dress may offer the wearer more personal styles of dress because they are dressing outside of the demands made by fashion. (Note – See my *Respectability and Dress* for a discussion of styles of dressing outside of fashion.)

By having fashion appropriate to itself all the available 'ornamental' aspects of what is being worn means that dress is thought of as a remainder consisting solely of the functional dimensions of dress. The wider the scope of fashion the more the sort of dress I have discussed here are obscured, or are made into the poor relation of fashion. But we have seen the error of isolating function solely to dress and the 'ornamental' to fashion. From the very first encounter between clothes and body, dress is doing more than just covering the body.

Conclusions

Dress occupies a position between clothes and fashion.

Dress is the first 'shaper' of what is to be worn. It is also the point when dressing acquires an aesthetic dimension.

The initial aesthetic of dress allows for a limited amount of change but it does not have the open dialectic of Imitation and Differentiation characteristic of fashion.

Fashion needs dress but dress does not need fashion.

Whilst it is true that dress may have a greater part that is function, fashion may be more weighted to the ornamental. They are not completely separate. Each partakes of the other.

Dress does not have a common style. It is not something that can be recognised just by its appearance.

At the start of this Re-Dress I set myself the task of exploring whether there was anything at work beneath Gilligan's confusing semantic surface, in particular whether something I've called dress has a distinct presence. In pursuing the nature of dress I hope to have imparted, not just dress, but clothes and fashion, with more substance 'than a handful of slippery meanings'.

Dress as Transformation

Perhaps the most visible aspect of dress is bound up with transformations. How it gathers together materials from the world around it and transforms them into clothing. This surely is one of the fundamentals of dress. But there is another transformation that happens when these clothes are placed on the human body and so becomes a person who is now dressed. To be dressed is to have one's being re-worked by the aesthetic forces discussed in the section *Dress and Aesthetics*. Being dressed erases the natural form of the body and transforms it into an 'unnatural' form. In short, being dressed is to be placed firmly within culture rather than nature. What follows is a short piece I wrote some years ago where I put down my thoughts on dress and transformation.

Dress and Transformation

Imagine you are standing in front of your wardrobe. Its door is open and you are removing a few garments and laying them out on the bed. 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's not hard to see how they confirm what the most common explanations have to say about dress and clothing. They offer protection from the 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. 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 will have a social dimension that may indicate where the wearer is placed in the social order and what sort of dressed being they aspire to. Style is an inevitable part of life within any social order.

There is a further aspect to dress, one that will take up the remainder of this essay, and that is the way that all forms of dress are the product of a cluster of fundamental transformations. It is a transformation that embraces both the prospective wearer and the material 'stuff' that is attached, hung, wrapped, etc, to the wearer's body. Of all the dimensions of dress, it is surely this alchemical-like power of transformation that is easily its most distinctive, and yet most elusive, aspect of dress.

This transformation starts by bringing together the body of the wearer and the 'stuff' that is to be applied to that body. Look at the clothes laid out on the bed. Although they are still, they are not at rest.

The manner in which they 'ghost' the human form suggests they are waiting for a 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. An arm gets an armhole. 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 above the inconsequential patterns of ordinary life. (The costume of the whirling dervishes will take up of the form of a sacred elevation.) But no matter whether one is discussing the highest levels of haute couture, or a pair of pyjamas, they all have the transformative power that is dress.

Transformation is essential to any idea of dress. Take it away and dress would cease to exist and in its place there would be a sort of arbitrary draping. Each of the principles of protection, modesty, style and communication have all attracted speculations as to how and why these four fundamentals came into existence. Protection requires both an ability, and a desire, 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'. The coming into being 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 underwent differentiation. Existential difference, for that is what it is, emerges from the new personae that the transformative power 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 is 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 number aesthetic possibilities. It is here that such qualities as wonder, astonishment, or a deep feeling of physical and mental satisfaction, may await us as we get dressed.

Dress as Impractical Activity

The reader who has managed to make it to these final sections of the Biography will have noticed a thread running from the mediaeval shoe through to this section I've called *Dress as Impractical Activity*. There is a fascination with those areas of life that break with what I have variously called the useful, the functional and the instrumental. My aim is to both trace and give weight to those non-functional dimensions of human life that existed alongside the greater prominence given over to a functionalist universe. They were significant in how they escaped the power of what Thomas Pynchon has called 'the indexed world'. Why are the areas listed by Caillois, such as art, intoxication, 'letting go', ornament and numerous other examples of impractical activity so important? My feeling was that it is in these places that *forms without limit* could flourish and '*elevated states*' could be experienced. From a very early stage it seemed to me that dress was characterised as a place where such *impractical activities* were happening. An absence, or a diminution of function, enables a flowering of form.

I have already examined the ways in which the idea of the useless (and the useful) were extended by Roger Caillois, particularly the way he pursued those aspects of nature that broke with the imperative of survival right up to an embracing of death. One thinker to have also studied the impractical was Georges Bataille, for many years a close friend of Caillois. He examined the impractical, in particular the role played by *excess* from an economic and social viewpoint. What drew him were the different ways that the expenditures of wealth and labour could be channelled into something, someone, or some activity that threw off the strictures of usefulness. Bataille's notion of excess was often a wide social movement where these expenditures would climax as a bloody finale. Whilst not an example that ends in bloodshed a recent example of dress and excess happened at the 2021 Oscars ceremony. The actress Carey Mulligan wore a gold lame dress that seemed to perfectly fit with the notion of the impracticality. Apart from her shoulders, her head and arms the remainder of her body vanished into the folds of her huge gold lame dress. It was the choice of a golden textile and the relentless way that the dress spread out to occupy all the nearby space that elevated the whole ensemble into spectacular, but useless, excess. (See illustration). The dress is in every way useless. The only possible activity whilst wearing it is to pause in front of the paparazzi for a photo-op.



Oscar Ceremonies 2021 Carey Mulligan and husband

But in what way is it excessive? Is there something that is a 'more than' or a 'less than'? If we want to measure the quantity of excess displayed by a dress we would need an initial measuring point, but such an initial measuring point is difficult to find. One way might be to pedal backwards gradually discarding all the excessive elements of the dress until we arrived at something completely devoid of ornamental elements, something that is utterly practical. Of course, it is possible for dress to be both 'useful' as well as having non-functional elements but it can never completely have done with the essential dimensions of dress. I'm reminded here of an apron that hangs on a hook in my kitchen. Its protective function is clear to see but how to describe it as whole is not so easy. Every aspect of the apron speaks of something that is worn and so is a thing in use. (Perhaps the apron might be called a detachable garment.) But on the face the apron is a printed design of a church that I visited whilst in the UK. The picture soaks right through the apron material so that cloth and design cannot be separated. Does this make the apron a form of dress? I think it does. It is something that is worn and something that has an 'ornamental' design of a church printed on it. What makes dress is the presence of some form of the impractical and it is this that ensures the seemingly infinite shapes dress is able to take. (The example discussed above shows that the notion of the impractical/ornamental is some distance from Bataille's idea of excess.)

My use of the apron was a way of clarifying my relationship with Caillois and Bataille's notion of the impractical and how they intersect with my ideas about dress. Perhaps it was a childhood spent in the Home Counties, together with several readings of *Wind in the Willows* that made it difficult for me follow Bataille into his imaginary abattoir. It is difficult for an apron to be apocalyptic but the very banality of it as an object was a perfect test of my ideas about dress. I always felt that what I was searching for in dress was not something convulsive and covered in blood. Dress was something that occupied a place in our daily lives and was 'at home' with us. As I mentioned earlier it – dress – is where the reformation of the body happens without limit and where '*elevated, alternative and affirmative states*' are inextricably bound up with the wearing of dress. What I was searching for was to be found in a simple wearing of dress, something capable of transforming our bodies into any one of the multitude of sartorial adjectives. There's been a Western tradition of dress reformers who proposed systems of dress that were strictly utilitarian. These 'utopian' styles of clothing were regarded as 'rational' in that they were stripped of all those dimensions to dress I've called ornamental. This simplification of dress would put an end to the reckless squandering of raw materials. A uniformity and utilitarian form of dress was favoured as a way to bring about the abolition of the many ways that the 'ornamental' dimensions of dress are able to reinforce social inequalities.

Supplementary Notes

- (1) Be more critical of the division between the utilitarian and the non-useful. They are not dimensions of dress that necessarily occupy distinct material parts of garments. Use and non-use intermingling dress.

- (2) Utility fundamental to the/existence of dress. Remember that dress is about dress + use.
This makes dress a kind of canvas upon which the 'ornamental' dimensions unfold.
- (3) Go back to Fashion Classics to see more closely what the way that 'utopian' utilitarian dress was imagined. It is a form of dress (supposedly) completely devoid of the non-functional. A question suggests itself – is this a kind of object, located in the future, where utility and the non-functional fuse into a kind of transcendental unity.
- (4) There are many instances where the utilitarian dimension of an object (dress) can cross the line between useful and non-functional and so become something 'other' to the two dimensions.
For instance, certain favourite garments, or forms of dress, when worn can produce such an intense feeling of comfort that the separation between dress and wearer vanishes. So close is this unity that when garment, or dress, removed there is often a feeling that a part of one's self is also being removed.
- (5) The utilitarian dimension of dress can, at the same time, become something that is ornamental.
There is a tradition in military uniforms of elaborating their decorative elements and re-shaping their wearers so as to create a uniformity in the militias.
- (6) Check use of 'elevated'. Not all dress displacements are 'elevated'. Some are horizontal – that is dressing to become allied with those around one. All dressing moves the wearer into a condition of some sort.

Dress and Aesthetics

No one would deny that the aesthetics of dress are of great importance to what we wear. Very few areas of modern life can match the scrutiny, discussion and judgement given to what is called fashion. We live within a heightened sense of what we look like as well as what we could look like. The incalculable number of times we, and the rest of the population, make changes to what we are wearing might suggest that the aesthetics of dress lay in the summation of these changes, a task that is surely impossible to achieve. Some attempt is made to order this dizzying infinity using garment genres. High fashion's matching of dress with the seasons. Casual and formal wear. Jeans or cords, etc. But the use of these genres does not add up to a particularly profound aesthetic. Many of the garment categories are descriptions of the material being named rather than an account of what it does. (Note – there are exceptions to this, for instance *formal* and *informal*.)

The attention given to dress is largely a matter of what something looks like. We look to see what can be seen. It rests on a 'thin aesthetic' made up of 'curtains' upon which colour, pattern and texture are placed and so dress the wearer. The problem with this is that it makes dress into a form of decoration, a place where it has an ornamental relation to the body of the wearer. But as I want show, the aesthetics of dress are about much more than display. It is not just a matter of wearing painted drapes, it is a 'deep' aesthetic that engages with both the core of the wearer's being as well as with their collective sentiments.

The following extract from a poem by W.H. Auden has always been important to me as a way of organizing my ideas about dress. It has helped me to imagine the journey that dress makes from rudimentary object to aesthetic object.

First the excerpt from Auden's poem.

*No world
wears as well as it should but, mortal or not, a world has still to be built
because of what we can see from our windows,
the Immortal Commonwealth
which is there regardless:
it's in perfect taste
and it's never boring but
it won't quite do.*

W.H. Auden

'its in perfect taste
and it's never boring but
it won't quite do.'

Of importance to me is the judgement contained in the last three lines (see above) with the implication that there is something not quite satisfactory in our relation to nature, even with nature itself. Despite its apparent perfection – *'it's in perfect taste'* – and remembering the importance of idea nature to the European imagination, Auden points to something that is missing in this relationship. Other than hinting at a deficiency in nature, or in us, the only indication Auden gives of what could be done to rectify, or improve matters is *'a world still has to be built'* and presumably bring it closer to completion (once more). I have always used the *'won't quite do'* in the last line as a way of thinking through the relation between dress and aesthetics.

If the world proposed by Auden, the world *'we can see from our windows'*, is one that is *'never boring but it won't quite do'* could dress be the human additions we place on our bodies to rectify, or improve them? With dress something human intervenes in the space opened up by *'it won't quite do'*. The importance of this sartorial addition is that it provides us with a means of overcoming our given form and so opens up a multitude of different ways that we can appear in our dressed state. In the poem, Auden presents us with a portal through which those who are intent on making new bodies are able to pass.

The fundamental transformation enacted by the aesthetic is to change the flesh of the body into something other than its corporeality. What ensues is the creation of an elasticity of form. This is a 'deep aesthetic', which is more akin to a chisel carving wood than a pen marking a sheet of paper. Its power – its 'depth' – lies in the way that dress reorganises who, or what, a person is, they are, or who they are not. (Note – add what they are and what they are not.) The relation between the wearer and what is worn is one of the most intimate we can experience such that when we change we change.

Supplementary Notes

If we once more pass through the portal of *'it won't quite do'* we enter the realm of the dressed that is those states of completion mentioned earlier. (Completion here means that a particular instance of dressed cannot be added to.) These states can vary from mundane dress that simply announces 'I am dressed' through to a dressed condition that can elevate the wearer far above the clothes of the everyday. Dress can be used to differentiate, in the sense of appearing different and so of *being* different (the opposite) to other social groups (sub-cultures). (For instance bohemian dress.)

More notes for Dress and Aesthetics

Dress as overcoming boring nature (Auden)

Human intervention improves on nature.

Suggestion for last part of the section.

Bohemian dress and Whirling Dervishes.

Two sorts of displacement.

Dervishes = sacred elevation.

Bohemian dress = secular displacement.

Smart and Smarten Up

This is an extension of the ground covered in the aesthetics and dress section. I have drawn on an earlier piece of work I wrote on the effects that the application of adjectives could have on a style of dress. I remembered that dress became dress within a network of adjectives that could impart a set of quasi-material qualities, a social standing and even a moral worth. These characteristics were not just semantic labels; an adjective could penetrate the very being of the dress to which it referred. In short it was a crucial component of the aesthetics of dress.

Adjective smart: well-dressed, fashionable, stylish, elegant, chic, neat, spruce.

Smart is a sartorial condition not a specific set of clothes. It tends to be a judgement made upon dress as a whole but can, on occasion, be brought to bear on a single garment. As is clear from the list above, to be smart is to be dressed in a manner able to gain wide spread approval. However, smart is not a universal sartorial principle. There are some types of dress that seem to deliberately court an 'anti-smart' appearance. They seem to have avoided that crucial instrument for imparting smart to one's dress, the iron. An aesthetic decision – to iron or not to iron – can quickly mutate into an assertion of identity.

Of the many meanings of smart two are most relevant here. The first refers to an abstract quality denoting a particular condition of dress. The second meaning refers to the set of manual actions – often miniature in scale – by which a wearer can adjust their dress so as to bring it into line with the general principles of smart. A common example of the latter is the way that suit-wearing men will often unbutton their jackets when sitting down but will button up when they stand. The slightest fluctuations in the

pattern of formality can have consequences for how we inhabit our dress. Nathaniel West in *Day of the Locust* captures perfectly this micro-management of dress to ensure the continuity of smart.

'He tried to kiss his mother, but she fended him off and pulled at his clothes, straightening and arranging them with savage little tugs.'

(*Day of the Locust*: Nathanael West.)

As well as smart being a *condition* of dress, it is also an aesthetic *aspiration*. The physical movements of the wearer will straightaway begin to disturb the look of 'smartness' our clothes can have at the start of their cycle of use. Wearing, inevitably, leaves its imprint on our dress in the form of creases and stains. It's not surprising therefore that the two most commonly used ways to 'restore' garments are washing and ironing?

Smart is a form of dress that is preoccupied with the creation and maintenance of a particular sort of sartorial order. For instance, it is difficult to imagine smart dress without at the same time calling up some notion of cleanliness. Although the 'official' reasons given for keeping one's dress clean are hygienic, cleaning here means rendering dress blemish free.

Blemish here is not just a physical mark, or discoloration; it can have an almost metaphysical significance so that to wash one's clothes is to restore them to a state of ritual cleanliness. It is very hard to be smart if one is not clean.

Being smart requires the elimination – usually by way of ironing – of the creases that result from the action of washing. Creases disrupt the evenness and the smoothness of the surfaces of dress, qualities that are an essential part of being smart. Here the activity of ironing is similar to the elimination of blemishes in cleaning, and like blemishes, creases have to be eliminated if smart is to be achieved. With creases gone, the form of dress is reinvigorated and to some extent restored to an earlier condition. Being creased makes being smart difficult.

What is it that all this cleaning and ironing are trying to achieve? At first glance it might appear that they are aiming to restore dress to a condition of 'newness' and so save money. But in the case of smart its relation to sartorial newness needs a degree of qualification. Wearing clothes that are 'brand new', or clothes that are possessed of a 'look' of having never been worn, is not smart. (Of course, there are places and situations, for instance occasions of high formality, where the new is *de rigueur*. Of the two, it is women who feel greater social pressure to wear the new. Men can exhibit the 'look' and hire a dinner suit.) Smart is about conspicuous renewal rather than purchasing the new. As such it implies a degree of

effort must be expended so as to bring smart into being. Smart doesn't point towards the new. It points towards the creation of a particular order and at the same time the elimination of those elements that threaten the integrity of the order of smart. Smart is about the *maintenance* of a certain level of formality of dress.

Smart is a form of dress that lies somewhere between casual and uniformity. If smart is compared with casual, then smart has a degree of order as to what is being worn and how the elements of dress are arranged on the body. In short smart dress has a degree of predictability. Casual on the other hand has no idea what garment will move in next to it. Whilst there are similarities between smart and uniform the degree of freedom that is present in smart is wholly absent from uniformity. With uniform there is an enforceable similarity as to how, and what, the wearers' are to wear. But what one is wearing, when one is wearing smart, is a principle rather than a fixed code of dress.

Dress and Aesthetics 2

This final section follows on from the earlier section on Dress and Aesthetics where I began to examine how the aesthetic dimension of dress drives the multitude of existing dress forms.

Aesthetic Depth. Dress can be structured by way of a deep aesthetic, something that is more than a 'thin' decorated surface. A deep aesthetic is able to organize the dress material, the dress spirit and its collective sentiments into a unity of being. All dress wearing is subject to a process of forming but some of these forms of dress display this deep aesthetic more readily than do others. The clothing worn by top athletes is so firmly attached to their bodies it is as if the action of dress is simply a skimming over the surface with little or no differentiation to be made between their bodies and what they are wearing. The more the athlete's body appears to be visible the more it's absorbed by their clothing. But in the case of the Whirling Dervishes, who at the peak of their circling, their bodies seem to vanish into an independent form with no attachment to the human body located somewhere inside the circling motion of the dress. In both instances the deep aesthetic is more like a process of forming than it is cake decoration.

Aesthetic depth is also evident in the way language is able to 'penetrate' dress and so impart it with aesthetic qualities. Adjectives can play a role in 'fixing' the material components of dress with an aesthetic value. Beneath the primary depth of 'aestheticisation' lies a deeper layer of synthetic meaning, which encompasses more than the material attributes of dress. Adjectives can draw dress into themselves and so are able to transform their material stuff into something that becomes a quality rather than a material presence.

The application of 'dress adjectives' such as *Smart, Elegant and Graceful*, to items of dress gives them an elevated aesthetic status just as the adjectives *shabby, threadbare and dishevelled* will consign dress to a lowly, unattractive fate. When these adjectives- high or low- are applied to dress it becomes more than a physical object, it becomes a quality. When the reverse occurs and the adjectival quality is withdrawn then the object that was dress will become something that loses the forming qualities that the deep aesthetic had imparted to it. Roland Barthes, in his book *The Empire of Signs*, provides an example of Bunraku puppets that have been left in a heap having lost all their animation when the performance is finished. Barthes refers to them as rags.

An Aesthetic of Networks

Dress emerges, and has its life, within contexts made up of other sorts of dress. The aesthetic we are dealing with here is an aesthetic of relations rather than one that sees dress as made up of isolated, inherent qualities.

I'll begin the discussion of this aesthetic of 'betweenness' with a quote by Thomas Mann.

'Thomas saw how beautiful he was. He almost understood why Klaus did not frequent the cafes. He would have been singled out and stared at. His politeness, the understatement in his tone, the neatness of his dress, would have stood apart from the abrasiveness and shabbiness then in vogue.'

Page 62, Colm Toibin. *The Magician*

This is a wonderful summary of the difference between the dress and look of the bourgeois male and that to be found in the 'artistic' colonies of the 20th century cities of Western Europe. The 'times' of the Bohemian appearance- male and female- varied from country to country and was recognisable as a style of dress from the beginning of the 20th century until its fading away in the 1960's. Male bourgeois neatness and the dishevelled clothes of the male bohemian are not just the opposite of one another. They also negate and unsettle one another. Each dress appearance carries a *not-that* towards the other. Mutual negation meant mutual distaste towards one another's clothing as well as bestowing a feeling of superiority on the agents of negation. The relationship was one of an unrelenting moral judgement about what sort of people would wear those sorts of clothes.

This relation of negation is precisely that, a relationship where the two parties derive their identities by not being the other. As Mann implies in the quotation, bohemian male dress was subject to a degree of change... 'then in vogue'... despite the belief of its wearers that it was above fashion. On the other hand the dress of the bourgeois male was ruled by qualities such as neatness, being smart and an appearance of cleanliness. What was to be worn and when was governed by a stricter set of rules than the looser set of dress principles of the male bohemian dress. What is extraordinary about the dress of the two groups is the importance that dress was to their identity. One principle running beneath both Bourgeois and Bohemian male dress was to differentiate what they wore from female dress. Stray too close to any of the feminine dress principles was to put your masculinity in danger.

I want to place the bohemian and bourgeois dress along side each other so as to highlight how much the aesthetic of their dressed appearance can be understood as a relation between a *this* and a *not that*. (1)

Starting with the head:

Bohemian hairstyle is 'unkempt'. Longer than the 'normal', moving towards disorder. To keep one's hair in an undomesticated state was a cheap and easy way of unsettling bourgeois sensibilities.

Bourgeois hair is short. It is well tended and must be kept under control. Clean cut is the condition aspired to for one's hair.

Bohemian/Bourgeois: Facial hair has had a varied history in the Bohemian camp. Even when beards become acceptable with bourgeois males it was still a sign of difference within 'artistic circles'. Nature, or the natural, was invoked as the reason for wearing a beard whilst the bourgeois male often derived their facial hair (If any) from the demands of the social order. The bohemian male could be dressed with, and without, a beard according to what was in fashion with the bourgeois male.

Bohemian/Bourgeois How to dress the male neck, if at all, has always been a source of uncertainty and controversy. How, when and where have all been sources of dispute and disapproval. Bohemian men often regarded the collar and tie as restrictive, not just of the wearer's neck, but also of one's whole being. The loosening of one's tie, or jettonising it altogether, could be both a sign of bodily relaxation as well as a degree of contempt for collar and tie wearers. For the bourgeois male the collar and tie was required dress for any entry he might want to make into the public realm. The tie has been a prime indicator of the wearer's social standing and of his trustworthiness as a man. In bohemian milieu shirts could sometimes be abandoned altogether in favour of polo neck sweaters. Fishermen had originally worn these garments and its class origins ensured that the bourgeois male would never wear it. The sweaters were just one of many garments that made the journey from practical work wear to bohemian appropriation. Footwear, for instance, could vary from folkloric sandals to practical work wear that were a clear *not-that* to the conventional black leather shoes of the bourgeois male.

Bohemian/Bourgeois: the colours favoured by bohemian male dress were often a kind of non-colour made up of rust, khaki and black whilst the bourgeois male was a strict grey, white shirt with a brightly coloured tie.

Female bohemia

Bohemia/Bourgeois: The 'tradition' of female bohemian dress had many of the aims present in male bohemian dress the most important of which was to differentiate their appearance from the female bourgeois. It did this in ways similar to that of the male bohemian-negation. The female bohemian dress is thought to have begun with the dresses designed and worn by Dorelia John. (Early 20th century) It was a style of wearing that quickly gained in popularity within 'artistic circles'.

Bohemian: Female bohemian dress not only differentiated itself from the dress of the bourgeois female it also distinguished itself from the male bohemian. In her dresses Dorelia 'criticised' the excessive marks of femininity on female bourgeois dress but was also able to avoid appropriating any items of male dress. (This tradition of female garments that occupy a radical space beyond mainstream femininity is to be found alive and well in the garments available produced by the Sydney designer Sark.) The manner in which mainstream female dress was worn meant that the patterns of negation (*not-that*) were not the same as male *not-thats*. For instance, there was a desire to 'unhook' dress wearing from the rapid cycles of fashion and wear clothes that were long lasting materially and stylistic, something that hardly bothered the

prosperous fashion elites. Bohemian women could wear clothes that were far removed from the bodily advertising of mainstream dress. Dorelia designed, and wore, some extraordinary sculptural shaped dresses that were still having an influence in the 21st century. She abandoned corsets, in the name of 'wearing' a natural body with its natural shape. Corsets were one of the most pernicious elements bearing down on women of all classes. To discard them emboldened bohemian women to clean dress of its ornamental surfaces, with the exception of perhaps a simple piece of folk inspired jewellery. Like male bohemians, pre-industrial ways of life were romanticised and considered more authentic than the ways of modern society. Hence the prized items of folk labour such as sandals, peasant blouses and folk jewellery, favoured by Dorelia. What was worn was a kind of anti-jewellery, a place where a different aesthetic could be displayed. Hair was worn straight and long so as to contrast with the 'unnatural' shapes produced by a professional stylist. Only a very limited amount of make up was used and sandals were worn rather than heeled shoes. The body should not display any intrusive treatments that were thought to deflect dress from its authentic form.

The general appearance being aimed for was one where dress appeared to be both simple and natural.

The wearers of bohemian dress, both male and female, were in pursuit of an authenticity that was thought to lie in a way of dressing that differed from that of mainstream clothing. It was a wish to find, and so wear, clothes that truthfully matched their desire for freedom. Part of this sartorial politic was to wear clothes that were not only different to those worn by bourgeois men and women but to dress in a way that cancelled out the legitimacy of as many items of bourgeois dress as possible. The socially sanctioned satisfactions of bourgeois dress, both male and female, were judged according to the collective expectations of 'respectable' appearance. It was precisely this respectable dress that the Bohemians-both male and female- had rejected as unnatural.

In the Sydney Morning Herald April 12 2022 An article appeared remembering Chris Bailey, a member of the Australian punk band The Saints.

The author described Bailey so: "*But the galvanising thing was what he wasn't*".

(1) Negation wasn't the only kind of aesthetic at work. There is an aesthetic of imitation and of absorption where forms of dress are engaged in games of copy and evasion also known as the dynamics of fashion.

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