

THE ART OF THE GARMENT IN THE COMMUNICATION PROCESS

THE CASE OF HIERARCHICAL SOCIETIES

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Abstract: *Just after gaining awareness of his social existence, the human being created through the garment his own representation either in search of an identity or in search of a model to imitate. In the evolution of the human society, the garment metamorphosed from a necessary item into an art one, thus becoming a clear sign of inter-human communication, a social sign vital for satisfying the need for representation in the societies strongly hierarchical. The analysis of the representation models gives information regarding the historical and social context in which the garments evolved, regarding the intrinsic and extrinsic motives which motivated its avatars.*

Keywords: *garment, non-verbal communication, social sign, imitative model*

1. INTRODUCTION

The theory of communication starts from the premise that everything existing around us, communicates. Any sign can be a vehicle of communication. Several people who have access to the same sign establish inter-human connections and share a common experience.

In contrast with the classical communication cycle, as it is approached by sociology, the communication through art is presenting one, extra element between the transmitter and the receiver, the art product. And so, the communication through art belongs to the indirect communication. Whether we are referring to verbal or non-verbal communication, to direct or indirect communication, the message may have different effects on society or its members, depending on the means of communication insuring the transmission. The content of the message loses its importance in favor to the ways of its transmission and especially by the means of communication chosen to transmit it.

Along the social history of the human civilization and the history of art, the human body has always been, and still is, a challenging theme to explore in different representations, the raw material for different means of cultural interventions. I was mentioning the social history and the history of art as the last one was clearly, in a way or another, influenced, temporally and socially, by the first one.

In the context of human representation, the garment appears in the history of societies as a personal means of artistically representing the human body. The human body is present in the art of civilization in relation to daily life; it belongs to the matrix human body – social body, where the garment has its own determinant role to emphasize on the social status or the individual's affiliation to a certain social group.

2. THE FUNCTIONS OF THE GARMENT

The garment has a millennia old history, at its origin being the necessity for protection and isolation of the human body against different weather conditions – wind, rain, sun, and low temperatures. This first necessity defines the utility function of the garment, a function which refers to both its materiality and its constructive components. Therefore, the garment has the duty to present the covered human body with the comfort it needs while recumbent or while performing different activities. During the evolution of human societies the garment

developed another function, the social function, determined by shyness, by the social transformations of the individual, to which we add the role of a non-verbal communication element. Expressing the status of the wearer within the society, the garment becomes a sign of communication, an indicator of the identity of the individual within the society, defining its position and membership to a social, religious, ethnic, etc group, completed by its moral, psychological and communication motivation (the human being is a social being).

Last but not least, the garment itself has an aesthetic function because it is through the garment that the human being becomes an apparition that generates a performance, a performance that is integrated in what we call the art of the costume [1]. The covered body is capable to bring out “aesthetical satisfactions... to express complex feelings that can reach the value of art” [2]. Each individual creates its own body spatiality by investing in the art of the garment, thus fitting in in the social space he belongs to or would like to belong to. Through garment someone can re size both its body’s spatiality as well as its social’s spatiality; the human body becomes a space for aesthetic transmission shaped through the art of the garment.

3. THE GARMENT AS A SOCIAL SIGN

The garment constitutes a particular domain of the non-verbal communication, a communication based on images, on the act of personal perception. Differentiating itself through its novelty character, this type of communication assumes the existence of a mediator between the transmitter and the receiver. In the transmission of the creation intention, of a plastic artist towards the viewer – consumer of art, the mediator of the communication is the piece of art; the garment has the same mediating role between the inter-personal relations among the individuals while being at the same time an important cultural element for each nation or people. Pantelimon Golu talks about the image as the “incontestable proof... its connotative power with repercussions on the growth of the impact on non-verbal communication”. I wonder why they say that our civilization is a civilization of the image. Implicitly in the inter-personal communication, the garment receives the mediation role of the interaction and the co-influence. Non-verbal message that... “accompanies, supplements or substitutes verbal messages”, the dress code enters the area of paralinguistic signals [3]. When the visual message (in this case the costume) accompanies the verbal message, in the sense of their convergence, the communication is amplified, the intelligibility of the message rises; whereas when the sense of the two categories of messages is divergent, the significance of the message is jammed, the communication is affected in a negative way. The garment accompanies the word, the gestures, and the mimicry, as a form of communication and of inter-personal knowledge. The transmitter exposes himself to the perception of the others providing them with information about his personality in interference with his feelings, his intelligence etc. Throughout the centuries, it looks like “fashion has become a strong transmitter... skillful in producing and manipulating signals”[4].

According to Pierre Guiraud [5], there are three types of signals in the culture of a nation: logical signals, aesthetical signals and social signals. While the logical and aesthetical signals reflect relations between the individual and nature, the social signals mark the relations between the individuals in the process of communication. As a sign of identity within the social signs, the garment serves to the recognition of the individual’s or group’s identity, marks the affiliation of an individual to a group. The social function of the garment assists in identifying the individuals of a society and the relationship between them. The dress code constitutes part of the rules the members of a society need to obey as structured entities where each individual has a place in report to others while fashion is the manner of dressing proper to a group. The semiotician and writer Roland Barthes is the one who

brought fashion under the scoop, together with the society and its signs, in his masterpiece “Systeme de la mode”, in a double articulation, signified/ signifier. According to Barthes, fashion, approached from a semiotical perspective, draws itself nearer and nearer to sociology becoming a study instrument of the mechanisms of competition and spreading the models, a frame within which we can identify two different processes: one of imitation and one of differentiating; the engine for the changing in fashion is the imitation of the one who wants to differentiate himself from the ones that do not want to be different. “In the ending we need to add one last trend... which, trying to make fashion look like a symbolical way of thinking belonging to the society, develops a sociology of fashion images and an anthropology of the imaginary of fashion” [6].

A diachronic view leaves us to ascertain that in all historical societies, in all civilizations, the human being took advantage, more or less, of the garment being a carrier of signs, for communication from a social position to a psychological state: as a mirror of himself, marking the separation of social classes, or as a symbol that influences the interactions with others. As any other element of the social life, fashion evolves together with the society, the dress code especially, mostly reflecting the social and ideological change. The dress code of the individuals has been, in all historical periods, the society’s mirror [7], combining a different social content [8]. George Duby, reporting himself to the Middle Ages, says that “the peace of art is always governed by the dominant social forces” [9]. Duby was obviously referring to major arts; nevertheless the previous affirmation may refer to the art of the costume as well. The situation changes at the same time with the democratization of the garment in Europe, a phenomenon that timidly starts to appear during the 18th century and continues in the forthcoming centuries. Starting with the 19th century, the role of the garment of emphasizing on the social status starts to decrease but without completely disappearing till today.

The garment institutes itself as a sign in the non-verbal communication, a sign formed by syntax of elements [10]. From a morphological point of view, the garments’ signs are articulated through juxtaposition or overlapping of elements, through the association of colors and lines, through the addition of decorative elements, elements found in a spatial concentration of the garment. From a semantic point of view, there is an articulation at the significations level. The garments’ signs, in order to gain a meaning, need to follow certain signification rules, rules regarding its shape, chronic, accessories. The signs of the garments include several fragments of signifiers and signifieds. In what concerns the signifiers, the garment is composed of several matrix elements: a dress, a sack coat, etc. Each element takes part in the composition of the matrixes, important minimal units of the garment. As an example, the Romanian feudal society garment was highly hierarchical and it served as a means of identifying to which group a person belongs to. In what concerns the signifieds, these matrixes take part directly to the meaning. Each matrix is an important unit, the linking of the matrixes form the element syntax Barthes was telling us about.

The garment, as an object and a sign, easy to spot in the social micro-universe, becomes a significant interface for the wearer’s ego-identity. Through the garment, the individual – wearer intends to introduce his body in the social space; this body language where the individual’s body becomes a space for experiment. The garment appears as a prominent, corporal, material self in search of its identity, between the corporal and social spaces as a necessity for reinvention. Focillon used to say “the space is the place for the work of art... it treats it according to its existences, it defines and creates it to fit the work of art” [11]. The garment, seen as a work of art – being a spectacle generator – finds its place in the social space that defines it and which it can define.

As any other social life element, the garment evolves together with the society and, particularly, fashion often reflects social and ideological change. Garments dress the society

to resemble itself, mirroring itself as it is, any garment bearing significant social data [12]; becoming the expression of a civilization. The garment is the bearer of a particular historical context when certain events took place. As an example, in the Middle Ages, hierarchical, Romanian society, the garment is defined as a sign established by the ruling class and so becoming a means of social acknowledgement.

Apart from being just a sign for the material culture of the society, the garment may also become a more precise sign in identifying an individual or a group of individuals than morphological characters, as it integrates in the visible world of conventions. The garment's ethic refers to the conduct of the person who, by choosing a garment tries to express himself and to send individual and social messages. In the medieval period, as well as in societies historically dated between medieval and modern, the ethics of the garments has generated social messages determined by the strong hierarchy, the textile materiality of the garment, its chromatics and constructive shape, all of these factors marking the social status of the wearer.

4. THE GARMENT BETWEEN INFLUENCES , IMITATION AND A DISTINCTIVE SIGN

Using the garments as a sign of social affiliation dated back to the primitive people through the ornaments that defined their status. Firstly, the garments of the princes were made of superior quality materials, brocades heavily embroidered and adorned with precious stones. In the Middle Ages the fashion for silk was influenced by the commercial traffic. The more difficult the raw material was to obtain, the bigger was the mirage it created. Taking this into consideration, the silk garment was an expression of power, a social material with an extreme power for extra-physical expression.

Maybe the garment is less important in itself than the situation it is worn in. In his preoccupation for the image, the wearer belonging to the high society, incapable to change the garments' fundamental type emphasizes on its details. Thus the detail becomes an aesthetical category which involves all the distinctive functions of the garment: the quality of the canvas, the ornamental embroidery and any other detail related to decorations of the garment. Throughout the centuries there were as many categories of garments as social classes. Each social class had its own garment, characterized by construction, materiality and decorative elements. And so, the garment becomes a veritable sign for the social class. The changing of the garments is a change of the social status as well, which either is a natural ascend on the social ladder or it is merely an imitation of those with a better status and becomes an intent to be like them. Tarde says that the social individual has an instinctive imitation and any individual action becomes social as soon as it is imitated by others.[13]. The proceeding of an individual from a social group to another determines changes in the canvas used for his garments first.

Natural silk, as a textile materiality in the garments, is seen as a sign of distinction, power and wealth in all hierarchical societies, Oriental and European alike; it is the function that dictates its shape and its material contents. "It is enough for the contents to be identifiable with the material it is constructed or molded any visually perceptible physical presence, with its function, with its significance... because any sign spreads... another information besides the one revealed at first glance by the analysis of its own materiality"[14]. In the Antiquity, as well as in the Middle Ages, the silk canvas were so precious that only highly important people afforded silk garments. In the Occidental Europe, during the Middle Ages, silk garments were worn only by royalty and only during ceremonies [15].

"Rank and wealth differences were marked throughout time by size, color and material contrasts... as for the servants to feel small and insignificant"[16]. In the Middle Ages' European societies "the king had to adorn himself... precious objects expressed his power.

They were the obvious image of his power... the clergy and the monks also emphasized on adorning, striking elements, on anything that shined and was made of precious materials.”[17]

In the 6th century, in the Byzantium, the silk business was under imperial monopole. Ordinary colored silk was sold with 6 “goldies” the ounce, while royal colored silk valued over 84 coins the same quantity [18]. Byzantium silk – imperialis [19] – received the attributes of a magical garment which permitted image and personality changes; the Mosaic from Ravenna representing Teodora, the empress of Byzantium in her shiny, draped silk, royal cloak comes as a proof. The draping of the cloak is a plastic transposition by bringing together cold, rigid, elements – mosaic – with the fluidity of the garment. The game of lights and shadows accentuates the shine of the silk thus amplifying the art of the garment in the composition of a human figure. Later on, in France and the Low Countries, “each social class, each order, each profession can be recognized based on the garments.” The important people would never present themselves in a public place without a shiny display of arms and livery, which would impose respect but also cause envy... The life of nobles and sovereigns was bedizened to the maximum... The court was the perfect space for the aesthetic of life forms to develop... the strict hierarchy of the canvas, colors and furs gave the different statuses an exterior frame which rose and kept the dignity feeling” [20].

5. ASPECTS REGARDING THE AULIC GARMENT IN THE ROMANIAN COUNTRIES

On this European set of gaudery and shine, at the congruence with the strong influence of the Ottoman Empire and with the remembrance of the Byzantine legacy, the pomp at the royal courts in the Romanian Countries had the same aulic garment trends. The successive avatars of the garment not only did they uncover the rivalry between the classes but also the rivalry between nations. In the 16th century, Turkish merchandise and Oriental fashion prevailed in the hospodars’ garments at their courts, competing with the canvas and garments in the East. The travelers who came into contact with the Romanian society, especially the ones visiting the hospodars’ courts in the Romanian Countries, wrote about the luxury at the courts and thus completing the image with the vision of the outsider which describes other aspects than the chronicler. The receipt of the foreign envoys to court, the hospodars’ walks in the countryside, the religious holidays or the participation to the religious masses were all opportunities for fashion displays; garments with rich materiality, excessively accessorized and adorned, ample cuts with constructive, supersized elements, all in need for reconfirming their status and wealth. “When the gentleman goes to a celebration, any celebration, or for a walk, he usually goes with a big procession... dressed according to the Turkish fashion, only in silk with no gold embroidery and wearing on his head a Turkish hat” [21]. In 1640, the secretary of the Woicieh Miaskowski envoy passes through Moldavia on his way to Constantinople. “I saw the hospodar himself while he was coming out of church... he was wearing a sable and brocade fur coat embroidered in the upper part” [22].

The increase of the social prestige of the characters was acquired through the exhibition of velvets and satins, of heavy brocades, dysfunctional in other epochs – the Middle Ages for instance. Silk and other textiles with threads, rare canvas, difficult to procure, added to the value and importance of the wearer. The only function of interest was the one for display, a social-communicative function to protect. The appearance of the lord in society – whether in a small society, like the throne hall, or in the middle of the people, wearing rich garments, were an occasion for generating astonishment and admiration. The message perceiver by the onlookers – receivers meant the confirmation of the wearer’s social stats. The garments’ composition of the hospodars’ – founders of Romanian churches and monasteries was represented inside them, in paintings, to complete the image of the

hierarchical society of those times. The compositional course of a garment provides information regarding the wearer, the social context of the time and, at the same time, the volumetric shape, chromatic, adornment details and materiality. The information on the garment is completed by the composition of the painting itself. In the case of the painting representing the Ieremia Movila family, in the Sucevita monastery, the composition is obviously demonstrative, ostentatiously accentuating the repetitiveness of the characters and, additionally, the attitude and garments so full of grandeur, express “the immeasurable appetite for shining” [23]. The agglomerate composition of the group forces the viewer to take his time in admiring the characters. We can find similar representations for the Alexandru Lapusneanu family at the Slatina monastery and of Constantin Brancoveanu at the Hurez monastery. The repetition of the matrix, as a plastic procedure, has the communicative role of helping the viewer to better understand and remember the message transmitted by the characters for which the garments have a distinctive meaning.

The diffusion process of fashion can develop in a pyramidal conception of the society when we are referring to the social-economical elite or in a transversal conception when referring to the fashion influences spread between nations. This aspect may be looked at from the direction of the two orthogonal axes of the garment development, because it is here where silk expressed itself the most in a garment. On the horizontal axe, a limitation of the Oriental garment and later on of the Occidental one – as an expression of submission – and on the vertical axe, an imitation of the sovereign and his family by the ones who want to climb the social ladder, the enriched noblemen and merchants from the rare canvas trade that facilitated their economic prosperity. Nevertheless, the distinction, as a phenomenon, only manifests itself on the vertical. Of course, a difference must be made between imitating and accepting influences. The more powerful the influence, the more it becomes visible through display and risks to be interpreted as an imitating phenomenon. The garments from the Movilesti epoch, strongly influenced by Polish trends, both in the costume as well as through the attraction towards the type of the nobility portrait [24], makes evident the imitation process. The grave covers of the Ieremia and Simion Movila brothers, with the artistic embroideries made of silk canvas and threads, bring into light the fashion and attitudinal characteristics of the ones present, typical for the Polish nobility of the time. The question is, referring to these garments, when are we talking about influence and when are when about imitation? In an analysis of the phenomenon, I allow myself to assert that any imitation starts with influence. An imitation on the horizontal axe, of course, taking into consideration the historical conditions and the relationships Movilestis had with their North-Eastern neighbors.

In the 16th century, an Italian at the court of Ioan Sigismund Zapolya made a description of Sibiu, “the capital of the Saxons” where “both men and women follow, in what concerns the code of dress among other things, Dutch customs. The same is happening in the other Saxon cities” [25]. Another aspect important to discuss is the strong Turkish influence. Between 1632 and 1639 an Italian monk, passing through Moldavia, states that “the Moldavian people are dressed as the Turkish” [26]. The phenomenon manifests itself more obviously during the Phanariot epoch. The imitation of the Turkish garment may be interpreted as a sign of submission. The garment of the conqueror inspires the one of the conquered, as if by accepting the new garment, the conquered raises its prestige, contributes to its superiority. On the other hand, the influence, even when reaching a maximum level, the one of imitation, may be interpreted as a source of distinction. We are referring to distinction at the level of an internal society, generated by external imitations; a generally true fact when mentioning the overtake of the Byzantine fashion trends – through materiality, chromatic and decorations – or the Movilesti’s Polish ones or the Turkish, inspired by the Persian pomp, as well as the later Occidental trends from Vienna, Paris or London. There is a contradiction in social history, a contradiction between the social significance of the garment and its ordinary

use. Through the imitation of the pattern, the social signification loses its value and so, through an ascending perpetual mobile, the pattern recreates its distinction through the garment, which is, in the end, an imitative cycle. This fact aims at the interior of the matrix of a hierarchical society without taking into consideration the external effects regarding influences. Through the bié desire for distinction, in the aristocratic societies the requested trend of being different had an important significance. The garment worn by the ones at the top of the social ladder provides information regarding the social class they belonged to and they were never to be mistaken with the others. The social class, as a form of stratification, marked the affiliation of an individual to a social group within which the relationships were firstly determined by the economical status. Established by wealth and wage differences, the social classes manifested themselves in all hierarchical societies through garments.

Beyond the adorning character, the expressing character of the adornment and garment develops as a sign of recognition of the social belonging and a distinctive sign of social status. Fashion norms imposed in several epochs and societies often generated tensions. From this point onwards, between distinction and imitation appear the sumptuous laws regarding the garment, all as a consequence of social mobility manifestation in their intent of stopping the exterior manifestations of this mobility. For centuries, the absolute model was the one of the court; the court establishing from high up everything that can or cannot be worn. Sumptuous laws regarding the garment were issued in both Occidental and Oriental societies, urging towards sobriety in the dress code. Constantin Mavrocordat issued such a law during an epoch when the garment was still to remain a strong social sign. The democratic manifestation of the garment on a European level, as a consequence of the social mobility in the 18th century, a century when the contacts of the Romanian Countries with the Occident were more and more frequent, this could have been a risk for the Romanian society; therefore Mavrocordat's sumptuous law were meant to stop the imitation of the garment worn by the small society at the top of the ladder. Liberty and equality in the dress code may have led to a neutralization of the garment politics, an opposition of an instituted order, comfortable only to the peak of the society. Sumptuous laws were opposing the imitative trends. Another law was issued in 1794 by Alexandru Moruzi which prohibited the import of expensive canvas, kerchiefs and other luxury items. But this act did nothing but to increase the desire for these products, the foreign merchants finding here a profitable clientele. Another ordinance was given in 1827 by Grigore Voda Ghica as a consequence of the accentuated manifestation of the adoption of the Eastern garment. All those who adopted this garment in Valahia were warned to renounce to it in the following 3 days, otherwise they would all suffer repercussions. The purpose of the ordinance was to reestablish the prestige of the peak of the social hierarchy, prestige endangered by the exorbitant luxury of the noblemen. The democratization of the garment was not yet accepted even though it was manifesting in Europe for decades already. The social status was still desired to be read from the quality of the canvas, and furs, from the richness and variety of the accessories.

6. CONCLUSION

In all the epochs, the inferior classes of society, in their wish for rise on the social ladder, firstly through appearances, manifested the tendency of imitation of the superior class, through garments, manners, language, even vices. In this context we can refer to the manifestation of the social mobility phenomenon, of the individuals moving in the social space [27]. The imitation and desire for distinction tendency become fundamental elements that structure fashion. The dialectic imitation / distinction create the dynamisms of fashion which, in the hierarchical societies, the superior class is the vanguard, the model. Inside the "fashion phenomenon" comes into light two movements; one represented by those who crave

for the success of others as individuals with novelty garments, which are very few, and another one represented by those who wear the novelty garments but who are forced to share their success with the ones imitating them. Therefore, the last category need to always find “line” solutions for their garments [28]; but this way of approaching the fashion phenomenon may be the object of another research regarding the garment.

In a diachronic course between the imitative model and the distinctive sign, the individual’s garment suffered metamorphoses dictated by the political, the social and the geographical context they evolved in. The Romanian garment had its different avatars that completed the image of the Romanian society through the role it had as a communication element and that becomes today a rich documentation source.

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