

Across the Borders of Fashion and Music

The clothed body and the senses

The “clothed body” is a semiotic category which epitomizes the ways in which the subject establishes its being in the world through the style of its appearance.¹ Clothing is a non-verbal language: it is a device for modelling the world, a form of projection and simulation, valid for both the individual and society. As a transformation of the body dictated by an ideal image of the self, the semiotics of the clothed body emphasises, in various forms, the relation between signs and the senses. Through clothing, the body ‘feels’ the surrounding world.

The body’s relation with the world can be conceived in terms of Lévi-Strauss’s notion of bricolage.² In anthropological terms, bricolage is the art of linking together objects and signs seemingly devoid of any reciprocal connection. Nonetheless their sequence, or collection, constitutes a system, which is felt as homologous to the so-called natural world. This sense-producing art gives rise to what we might define as a network – a system of correlations among different levels of signifying realities, each provided with its own specific relevance to the senses. The clothed body articulates what the world still doesn’t know, feel or possess, or what it already feels in a more exciting, tense and – to use musical jargon – ‘hip’ form. This ‘world’ is pervaded by aesthesia, a form of sensorial receptivity, which is above all synaesthesia: the ability of the senses to interact, combine with, or even substitute one another.³

Within the context of the ritual function of clothing in ‘traditional’ societies, dressing, masquerading, tattooing, adorning, in other words ‘covering’ the body, are ritual activities regulated by a socio-cultural syntax that we call ‘costume’. In the context of modern society, and even more so in our age of mass reproduction, it is fashion which constitutes this socio-cultural system. Since fashion is not solemn, institutional, reassuring or elitist, but felt, lived, ‘beaten out’ within everyday contexts permeated by aesthetic tension, fashion anticipates moments of transition and marks transformations in taste. Today, fashion is a system of signs that fully manifests itself as a form of mass communication, an everyday activity, a form of popular culture, of worldliness and “mass fashion” that constantly reinvents and reproduces itself by interacting with other languages as well.⁴ Among these, the language of music plays a fundamental role, as it articulates, through sound and rhythm, how human beings perceive and experience the world as time, space and corporeality. What the language

¹ Patrizia Calefato, *The Clothed Body* (Oxford: Berg, 2004).

² Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Structural Anthropology* (New York: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1967).

³ We are referring here to the notion of ‘world’ in the anthropological sense of ‘surrounding’ or ‘self-centered’ world: the *Umwelt*.

⁴ This expression derives from a pun based on the relation between “mass media” and the Italian word “moda” (fashion). See Patrizia Calefato, *Mass moda* (Rome: Meltemi, 2007).

of the clothed body and the language of music have in common is first and foremost a sensory element: dress and music are forms through which the body feels the surrounding world as both whole and amplified.

Dressing, feeling

In the introduction to his 1994 essay collection *L'aria si fa tesa*, the Italian philosopher Mario Perniola borrows his title from a song by the American pop group Primus, *The Air Is Getting Slippery*, taking it as both illustrative and symptomatic of our contemporary state of feeling, which is represented in music, the visual arts and the mass-media as tense, slippery, ambiguous and unstable.⁵ Some languages – above all fashion and music, but also cinema, design and the visual arts – take on board this tension, this adventure of the senses, which has such an impact on social life today, especially because the grand narratives, and particularly political narratives, seem to be over and done with. Through their way of dressing as well as dancing, listening to, and performing music, human beings develop forms of feeling with their bodies and ways of constructing their identities well before such activities crystallise into ideologies or great social projects. This phenomenon is certainly not new; it does not belong to the last few decades, nor (by any means) to the postmodern age. The novelty lies, perhaps, in the fact that today there is a widespread perception and awareness of the plurality of available languages, registers and signs, and also of the need to ‘listen’ to sensorial experience.

⁵ Mario Perniola, *L'aria si fa tesa* (Genova: Costa & Nolan, 1994), 5.

Fashion and music are two intimately connected forms of worldliness, two social practices that go hand in hand, sustaining each other in the context of mass communication and drawing on a common sensibility which translates into taste. This aspect is immediately recognizable in the careful choice of clothes, hairstyles, settings and gestures which characterises every public performance, video clip or record cover in the music business. How can taste be generated and conveyed through musical experience as both worldly and non-conformist? How is the relation between taste and style established within fashion and music? How is one sensibility grafted onto the other?

Let's turn to the spaces which have shaped image and sound experiences in the last decades, above all for the younger generations. The rock concert was a place of bodily ‘pluri-presences’, a place which helped expanding relational and sensory experience, as the momentous gatherings of the 1960s and 1970s testify. This can still be said of the mega-concerts organised by music corporations, and especially of humanitarian or politically inspired music events, such as Live Aid. The raves of the early 1990s (which were above all bodily, rather than – or only incidentally – musical performances) were the heretical, technological descendants of the early rock concerts

and punk happenings. Both were places where conflict and rebellion found their expressive channel in 'feeling the beat' and were performed by means of signs on the body. Indeed, these two types of public event celebrate presence, bodily experience and physical contiguity. Dancing, pogoing, taking drugs, having sex, constructing one's own style – through hair and dress, piercing, tattooing – may be read in the light of the grotesque. Lack of diversification (the dance), annihilation in the crowd (the pogo), writing on and incising one's skin, the loss or amplification of one's own sensorial perception, a mutual swallowing of bodies, as in the Tarot image of the Wheel of Fortune, are all experiences in which space and time are always in flux.

⁶ Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (London: Methuen, 1979).

⁷ Ibid., 104.

A whole series of social discourses from film to music, new media and advertising, are the places where fashion becomes a syncretic, intertextual system, a network of references among the signs of the clothed body. In other words fashion is a constant process of construction and deconstruction of the subjects who negotiate, interpret or receive its meaning. Dick Hebdige's 1979 analysis of subcultures fits in with this perfectly.⁶ Moving away from the classic positions of British cultural studies, Hebdige defines style as a form of aesthetic and ethical group membership in a mass society characterized by emerging in-crowd cultures (the influence of Gramsci is fundamental here) made up of fixed combinations including ways of dressing, music, literature, film and everyday habits – a pop universe expressed in 'street styles' ranging from rock to punk, which Hebdige reads as a form of opposition to fashion as one of the "prominent forms of discourse".⁷ He believes that punk, in particular, was a strategy for denaturalising style, rather like surrealism, which had the effect of reading paradoxical meanings into objects. For example a safety pin stuck into the skin, or hair dyed in unnatural colours, transgressively reveal the constructed character of any discourse.

Mediascapes

Fashion and music are languages that construct spaces and identities. In our age, dominated by the use of electronic synthesis and other technical simulacra for the creation, reproduction and execution of the musical trace, fashion and music have become new media. Not only in the strictly technical sense that musical production, stylistic creation, photography, and so on, *happen*, but above all in the sense that both fashion and music have become imbued with the social practices through which discourses and identities are produced by the new media. Both like and unlike bodily experiences lived in the flesh, today's digital computer and mass media cultures offer spaces and forms for the transmission and reproduction of musical and sartorial experiences that are no longer limited to the live

performance or to its record copy. The use of electronics, which in rock music goes back to the 1960s, of video clips, CDs or DVDs, Internet sites, or a TV channel like MTV which allows viewers from all over the world to experience the latest sounds and dress styles, the possibility of listening to and ‘feeling’ music through mp3 players: all this shows to what extent the production and enjoyment of music is ‘wired’, hooked up to a machine, which is part of an interface that uses the human body as an adjunct to a wider nervous system, made up of cables, optical fibres, satellites, micro chips, digital files. The function of the media is that of producing sense, establishing norms of communicative exchange and creating typologies of spectators, or of social subjects. Today we are facing a radical change in the epistemological paradigm: representation has been substituted by simulation. The binary relation between a thing and the sign that represents it – for example, between a musical score and the live performance or analogous recording – has been substituted by the synthesized reconstruction of the thing, the serial reproduction of the event, or its direct creation through the impulses and infinitesimal units of digital information. Yet simulation still has to do with the body, and it has not become immaterial only because of the *virtual* nature of today’s communication. Rather, it is made up of the semiotic material populating social imagery and taste.

Three strategies

We may consider the construction of simulacra as a contemporary myth-making, which deprives the sign of its direct representational quality and substitutes it with serial interchangeability. At the same time, simulacra leave room for sensory forms, especially in fashion and music, geared toward excessive modes, which can be created and reproduced serially. Three of these modes are particularly interesting: postcolonial identity, ‘surfing styles’, and revival.

Style is a particularly interesting element in the construction of postcolonial identity. A decentred gaze constructs the clothed postcolonial body as an open, grotesque body, exhibiting colours, signs, jewels and hairstyles of diverse origins. Postcolonial fashion brings the ‘surreal’ into everyday life; it exaggerates, juxtaposes unpredictably, and ‘quotes’, self-consciously and deliberately, from ‘the world’.

The expression “surfing styles” used by Ted Polhemus, together with the terms “sampling” and “mixing” taken from DJ jargon, are effective metaphors in relation to contemporary dress culture.⁸ They indicate the overthrow of stylistic and subcultural specificity, in a kind of surfing that recalls the homonymous hypertextual and intertextual ‘sport’ performed on computer networks. For example, everyday street styles recall the

⁸ Ted Polhemus, “Sampling and Mixing”, in Giuliana Ceriani and Roberto Grandi, eds., *Moda: Regole e Rappresentazioni* (Milano: Franco Angeli, 1995), 109.

‘bastardised’ languages of hip-hop and rap in their rhythmic construction of what we may think of as a bricolage identity.

The case of revival is particularly interesting. Fashion and music have always used quotations, experiences, influences and suggestions from the past. In the second half of the twentieth century, fashion steadily accelerated the rhythm at which one looks at the past. In this continual spiral, it has constructed forms of feeling which, though actually focused on the present, review and retrace the past, not so much through ‘historical memory’ as through a conscious *mélange* of time fragments and quasi-syncopated images, as in a jazz performance. The wear-and-tear of signs, or even their annihilation, gives as much pleasure as their creation, not only because such wear-and-tear sets up the expectation of new forms, where tension and desire will be generated, but also because ‘consuming’ something by wearing it, or using second-hand, already worn-out clothes, is itself a sensorial experience. Vintage items and second-hand clothes, which are today well within the sphere of institutionalised fashion, reveal a pleasure in wearing clothes which allow us to live and relive, as our own, the memories and emotions of others. Here we find an inversion of the traditional mechanisms of fashion: semiotic wear-and-tear becomes more important than physical wear-and-tear and beats the rhythms to which fashion consumption moves.

Fashion and music in the African-American experience

bell hooks maintains that, in African-American culture, dress and music have always played an important role in self-representation and have always had a political function, especially amongst women, who use style to express resistance or, conversely, conformity.⁹ hooks particularly criticises the exploitation of the image of the ‘black beauty’ through media figures such as Tina Turner, Iman and Naomi Campbell. Nevertheless, this is an ambivalent process, since the values at stake in the construction of aesthetic commonplaces are not merely prescriptive and objectifying. For example, black models, pop stars and athletes idealised by young whites have made it possible to construct cultural spaces for an interaction between bodies which excludes common stereotypes of the black body and sexuality. This is especially the case in the most independent modes of representation and communication of images of black culture, like jazz and blues.

In jazz, the relation between dress and music is particularly significant, since jazz represents much more than just a musical genre; it is a veritable universe where style *counts*. In the 1930s the zootie style included long, wide jackets, broad-brimmed hats and garish colours – all elements based on hyperbolic exaggeration. In the 1950s, on the other hand, the hipster style, created by musicians like Thelonius Monk, Charlie Parker and Dizzy

⁹ bell hooks, *Yearning. Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics* (Boston: South End Press, 1990), 217.

Gillespie, was more sober and essential. The clothing of female jazz singers, like Billie Holiday, was also crucially meaningful, as it alluded to typical dress styles of the Deep South: soft fabrics, sensual models, and floral designs.

Music has always acted as a bridge between black styles and their wider social reception and circulation, even in hybrid forms. Along with jazz, reggae has also played an important role in this connection; its icon, Bob Marley, chose Rastafarian culture as his style, marked by long dreadlocks and parti-coloured clothes. In North American black urban communities hip hop proposes open and irreverent forms in a 'street-and-sports' style. Just as anyone can make hip hop and rap music, so can anybody play basketball, climb walls or bungee jump. Amateur sports imagery, especially that of extreme sports, has invaded the world of fashion with trainers, baggy tracksuits and hooded sweatshirts in the style of black rappers. Black *haute couture* fashion, on the other hand, was successfully launched in the 1990s by African and African American designers.

Grotesque bodies

According to Lotman, fashion introduces the dynamic principle into seemingly inert spheres of the everyday.¹⁰ In a world dominated by a constant tension between the tendency towards stability and the impulse towards novelty and extravagance, 'traditional' dress tends to maintain such spheres unchanged, while fashion endows them with qualities which are the very antithesis of the everyday: capriciousness, volubility, quaintness, and arbitrariness. Fashion, therefore, helps to create the image of a 'topsy-turvy' and unstable world, that reflects the constant tension between the tendency towards the stability of everyday life on the one hand and the impulse towards novelty and extravagance on the other.

The unexpected potential of fashion and music to overturn received meaning is directly linked to their collocation within what Lotman calls the "sphere of the unpredictable".¹¹ As a system of images, fashion is transmitted through series and stereotypes, filters which have grown to be so clogged that the image has become totally pervasive and has absorbed the body into the repetition of stereotypes. Conversely, in a musical perspective, fashion can be perceived as an 'imperfect' system, where imperfection is semiotically conceived as the unexpected, that which does not necessarily lead to pleasure, nor indeed to harmony, and which, in causing a rupture with the everyday, transforms and reshapes its subject. Imperfection concerns that element which does not stay in place, according to the paradoxical, disconcerting imperative "If a thing works, throw it away", or to the punk sentence, "If the cap doesn't fit, wear it".

This logic of imperfection has governed many generations in their experience of rock music and dress style – a cultural *koine* of 'mutiny',

¹⁰ JSee urij Lotman, *La cultura e l'esplosione* (Milano: Feltrinelli, 1993), 103.

¹¹ Ibid.

where each generation consciously lives anew the state of perceptual and sensory doubt and displacement of the previous one. An ideal time graph would start with the origins of rock, considered as a hymn of rebellion, of political, cultural and aesthetic subversion. This would be followed by punk and hip-hop, the former trend seeking to demonstrate the death of the concept of subculture and the anthropological-semiotic mutation of the idea of style; the latter open to listening and reproducing various languages (musical and verbal) coming from the world, the street and technology, by means of a constant use of sampling and mixing.

The notion of the clothed body as grotesque is the focal point for an inverted and disconcerting aesthetic search for imperfection, expressed through a polyphony of bodies. An example of such polyphony is recognizable in Michael Jackson's now classic *Thriller* video clip (1982) that has become the emblem of an age and constitutes a defining moment in the history of this mode of music and fashion: directed by John Landis and featuring a still dark-skinned Michael Jackson, the clip famously shows horribly ugly and deformed bodies. In a carnivalesque inversion of 'modern' and 'primitive', ugly and beautiful, funny and frightening, the screams and dance moves generate a kind of fashion that is above all confusion and inversion of sense, the call of the street at night as a place where the haphazard is transformed into excess.

Conclusions

Fashion is a complex and contradictory phenomenon. It conveys stories, constitutes spaces, produces myths, and expresses meanings and conflicts. It is a semiotic field which belongs to the composite scenario of the contemporary world, with which the different styles of clothing enter into dialogue and to which they offer a translation. The street is the physical and metaphorical place which allows for the emergence of styles, tastes and habits linking fashions in a diffuse, popular in-crowd culture. Music as a great store and origin of social imagination, acts in extremely close synergy with fashion. Nowadays, new communication techniques are altering the very definitions of corporeality in the social context, and there is a new theoretical awareness of what it means to read clothing as a 'disguise' which allows people to abandon social or sexual stereotypes, break the rules with deliberate ambiguity, and produce performances that give pleasure.