

**300 years of bodies and corsets
in their rhythmic manifestations:
for a fashion semiotics**

*300 anos de corpos e corsets em suas manifestações rítmicas:
por uma semiótica da moda*

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[abstract] The article reflects on a research project analysing 300 years of the practice of constraining the feminine torso, aiming at presenting the theories supporting the investigation to expose how their intersection and articulation could become a method for analysing fashion objects. Stemming from the semiotics works concerned with the plastic of objects, mainly the theories proposed by Greimas and further developed by Floch and Oliveira, we present an address of Fashion beyond its visual dimension, exploring the manners in which the relations between the body and its dress are problems of discourse and narrative interactions, returning to Greimas' Standard Semiotics and Landowski's Socio-semiotics. The combination of theories presented in this piece was used to examine a corpus of feminine apparatuses utilised to reshape a woman's silhouette throughout history, from the 18th century to the present, such as corsets and crinolines, as well as various other types of shapewear, in combination with the analysis of supporting texts, such as Artworks, literary works, pieces of popular culture and advertisement. The work presents the steps of the investigation taking place between 2012 and 2014 – the selection of the corpus and its analysis – and the future developments stemming from that first exam, bringing about a reconstruction of the work and its results as a methodologic proposition that can serve the analysis of sartorial objects but is equally pertinent to the analysis of any other manifestation that is subjected to rhythmic changes.

[keywords] **Corset. Feminine body. Western fashion. Visual semiotics. Socio-semiotics.**

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[**resumo**] O presente artigo parte do projeto de pesquisa que analisou 300 anos da prática de constrição do torso feminino, com o objetivo de apresentar as teorias que ofereceram o suporte teórico à investigação, explorando em que medida sua intersecção e articulação pode ser postulada como um método de análise de objetos da moda. Partindo dos trabalhos semióticos preocupados com a plástica dos objetos, particularmente as teorias propostas por Greimas e subsequentemente desenvolvidas por Floch e Oliveira, propomos um exame da moda além de sua plástica, explorando as maneiras como as relações entre corpo e vestimenta se traduzem em problemas do discurso e das interações narrativas, retornando à semiótica de Greimas e à sociosemiótica de Landowski. A combinação de teorias apresentadas neste artigo foi utilizada na investigação de um corpus de dispositivos femininos utilizados para re-modelar a silhueta da mulher pela História, tais como corsets e crinolinas, e também os vários tipos de shapers, em conjunto com a análise de textos de suporte, como obras de arte, trabalhos literários, peças da cultura popular e anúncios publicitários. O trabalho apresenta os passos da investigação que ocorreram entre 2012 e 2014 – a seleção do corpus e seu estudo – bem como os desenvolvimentos futuros que partem desse primeiro exame, promovendo a reconstrução do trabalho que resulta em uma proposição metodológica que serve não apenas à análise de objetos vestimentares, mas que é pertinente a quaisquer outras manifestações que sejam sujeitas a mudanças rítmicas.

[**palavras-chave**] Corset. Corpo feminino. Moda ocidental. Semiótica visual. Sociosemiótica.

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Introduction

Concluded in 2014, *O corset na moda ocidental* [*The Corset in Western Fashion*] was a semiotic analysis of 300 years of the practice of constraining the feminine torso, containing no methodology section. Far from being a “fashion choice”, that particularity of the work denounced its experimental character, with a method being created as the research progressed. Thus, the method presented in this article starts from a challenge: the one of reconstructing an address of Fashion Semiotics, stemming from the study of three centuries of Western corsetry and shapewear, that questions the prevalent discourse of Fashion Theory, in which the changes in society appear as the “cause” of Fashion; in our understanding (JARDIM, 2014; OLIVEIRA, 2008), it is not the society who “shapes” Fashion, but Fashion itself is a manifestation of the social, or what gives presence to the rhythms of society and culture (LANDOWSKI, 1997).

However, and before anything, Fashion is not simply dictated or constructed through clothes and other apparatuses covering the body’s surface, but the result of a dynamic relationship between clothing and the body. Through this primary interaction, the one established between a body and a garment, other interactions develop – the ones established between clothed-bodies and other bodies, which results in the broader scope of society and culture. The herald of this way of seeing the bond between Fashion and the “obsessions of an era” can be found in Baudelaire (1964), as he states that the regard of each period’s costume side by side with its prevalent ideas should cause no shock or surprise.

In our work, rather than working from *looks*, we opted for working with *torsos*. Initially, that choice stemmed from the object selection – the corset in Western Fashion from the 18th to the 21st century – but is likewise linked to the role of *foundation wear* (the corset though, also, any type of underwear altering the material dimension of the body) as the starting point of a look. To a large extent, the alternations of styles gauged in Western Fashion in the past 300 years are chiefly the alternations of silhouettes, that can be initially classified as “constrained” or “free”, while also producing different visual forms through the constraint of the waist, with some vogues privileging rounder or hourglass shapes, while other periods pursued a rectangular shape and, finally, also alternations of visual configurations that are exaggerations of a stereotypically feminine shape, and periods in which a more muscular torso was idealised.

The method departs from the criteria of corpus selection established by Greimas in *Sémantique structurale* (1986). The section must correspond to three conditions: to be *representative*, *exhaustive*, and *homogeneous*. The latter is perhaps the most important criteria for the method presented in this article because it determined the reimagination of a History of Fashion not governed by periodisations, but by the changes in prevalent isotopies of dress – or, to evoke the dichotomy discussed by Landowski (1992), an approach that examines “slices of lived life” permitting us to recategorise our corpus from a perspective of significant ruptures. In our work, the selected situation parameter (or homogeneity) is the

relation body-dress and its variations: although it could be challenged whether a Victorian corset can be analysed side by side with contemporary shapewear, our problem focused on the interaction between bodies and foundation wear (or its absence), and the extent to which those interactions are relevant to the role of dress in bringing social relations into manifestation.

Once our Fashion History was reorganised keeping in view the variations of isotopies – significant iterative units or planes of homogeneous signification which enable the uniform reading of discourses (GREIMAS, 1986; GREIMAS & COURTÉS, 1993) – the works by Floch (1985) and Oliveira (2004) on Visual Semiotics supported an address of the plastics of bodies and garments, which were understood in terms of homologations between a plane of expression and a plane of content. The articulation of abstract values and visual manifestations, then, was expanded into analyses of the narrative level of Fashion, resorting to the theories developed by Landowski (2004, 2005, 2009) to map the manners in which the interactions between body and garment are governed by different regimes of interactions, exploring different configurations, admitting that it is also possible to analyse the body-dress dynamic from the point of view of the body, while also exploring the possibilities of analysis emerging from the examination of each level of the generative trajectory.

Located in an interdisciplinary space, the method blends a rigorous semiotic approach to the visual (FLOCH, 1985; OLIVEIRA, 2004), narrative (LANDOWSKI, 2005, 2009), and fundamental levels (GREIMAS, 1970, 1983) of a corpus to an equally rigorous study of the History of the corset from a Fashion theory perspective (BOUCHER, 2010; HART & NORTH, 1998; JOHNSTON, 2005; KUNZLE, 2004; LYNN, 2010; STEELE, 1997, 2001). The present work will also include the developments in the method taking shape subsequently, presenting a more mature address of the discursive level of manifestations while also reflecting on the transformation in the enunciative mechanisms of dress through the different aspectualisations of Fashion trends. Far from being a method pertinent only to the examination of sartorial objects, the results of this investigation and the methodology described in the following sections addresses “fashion” in a broader scope, consolidating a manner of investigating any research object that is governed by rhythmic changes.

The selection of the corpus

The project started from a chronological, historical approach, mapping key the moments in underwear history from the late Middle Ages – the period when the corset migrates from outerwear to underwear – to the 2010s, working from images of historical objects in museums or products available to be sold online, and images from catalogues and advertisement. Hence, the selection of the corpus starts backwards, departing from the third criteria established by Greimas: the homogeneity (GREIMAS, 1986), which is bound to his concept of isotopy: a complex notion surrounded by many definitions. In this article, we follow the conceptualisation of isotopy as a reading grid permitting the surface of a text to be homogeneous, or the place in the plane of expression where variations or alternations can be gauged (GREIMAS & COURTÉS, 1993, p. 199). Our first criteria for the selection of our

corpus, thus, concerned the delimitation of the object's function – to constraint the torso with the aim of changing its shape – and its location in the look – covering the human torso but being covered by outer clothing or, perhaps, a mediator between the body and its dress.

The second step to the selection of the corpus was clipping the larger collection of images, categorising the selected objects according to a second isotopy: one that forms the “style” of a period. Although the dictionary will define style simply as a “manner”, a “way” or, yet, a “distinctive appearance” (STEVENSON, 2010, p. 1.771), our investigation builds on the linguistic meaning of *style*, stretching the definition to accommodate the idea of permanence or rupture of a visual isotopy. For example: even though different objects were produced between the 1600s and 1800s, the differences of material, shape, and final silhouette created were neglectable, meaning that no rupture of the isotopy of style was identified during that period, substantiating that little variations in the semantics of those objects would be observed. The reclassification of the corpus, thus, was guided by the criteria of rupture of isotopy to reorganise our History of Fashion, following the moments in which the silhouette changed dramatically (and not the “Historical periods”), relating to Greima's criteria of representativity (GREIMAS, 1986): rather than working with the fluid, gradual change that forms the rhythm of Fashion, the work started pursuing the most emblematic silhouette of each isotopic style, with the aim of mapping the silhouettes (and the objects constructing them) that manifested the peak of development and dissemination of a certain vogue.

Synchrony and diachrony

One of the challenges of the research linked to the volume of the corpus versus the importance of analysing the cycle of values in a large slice of chronological time – from the 18th to the 21st centuries. Initially, it was clear that the analysis in the Historical model was not possible, but at a glance, it was also evident that moments in which a significant change occurred in dress were not as many initially accounted for. The project worked with a notion of “significant rupture”, meaning, to follow Landowski, a search for discontinuities (LANDOWSKI, 1992, p. 46): rather than creating a panorama following the Fashion of our 4-century section allocating equal portions of time to each sub-section, the categorisation of the corpus looked for the break of isotopy in the silhouettes, regardless of the gaps separating them; that meant some isotopies would have a longer vogue than others, but that was not considered an obstacle for the analysis: the criterium for dividing our corpus was not temporal, but the transformations of states suffered by body and dress.

The possibility of such an analysis is supported by the notions of synchrony and diachrony, which find their origins in Saussurean linguistics. Saussure presents two axes for the study of language: the *simultaneities*, or the axis concerned with relations between things coexisting; and the *successivities*, where one thing is considered at the time, in their changes and developments (SAUSSURE, 1922, p. 88). Synchrony and diachrony, thus, are two temporal dimensions: the first appearing as an operational concept in which “language states” appear as a reunion criterium (SAUSSURE, 1922, p. 89; GREIMAS & COURTÉS, 1993,

p. 374); the second, the level where the ensemble of transformations is taken globally (GREIMAS & COURTÉS, 1993, p. 97-98), or where the developments within the system are addressed (SAUSSURE, 1922, p. 89 e p. 92). The transposition of a linguistic concept to the study of Fashion recognises that, as much as language, Fashion too is a *system*, according to Hjelmslev definition: a mode of existence marked by correlational hierarchies (HJELMSLEV, 1966). Fashion, then, can be read and analysed using the same parameters from the study of language: with the transformations within the system and process of Fashion that can be mapped from a synchronic or diachronic perspective – both simultaneously present in the analysis of the corpus.

Starting with the search for discontinuities, the work established the parameters of what would be considered a “change of isotopy”: not minor alterations in the style, colour, or materials – “variations of the same theme” – but a complete renovation of a silhouette, meaning an overhaul of all the plastic formants (FLOCH, 1985; GREIMAS, 1984; OLIVEIRA, 2004): form, colour, matter, and topology – particularly the last, which governs the distribution of the body matter in the silhouette and, consequently, the directions of the gaze prescribed by a silhouette which dictates, perhaps, the “sense” (direction) of a garment. The result of this first categorisation permitted the organisation of the “well-divided borders” between the periods or generations: positional differences in the order of temporality or the slices of lived life, organised in a significant manner (LANDOWSKI, 1992, p. 49). However, as our analysis progressed from the stratified societies of the 18th and 19th centuries, with Fashion picking up a faster pace and the developments in the industry occurring during the 20th and early-21st centuries, it became evident that to divide “clear ruptures” within the same period was at times hard, which imposed the need for an analysis of synchronies as well: the concomitance of conflicting isotopies existing in the same period.

Analysis of the corpus

Once the selection of the key emblematic “ruptures of isotopies” was completed, the work focused on analysing the corpus following the generative trajectory (GREIMAS & COURTÉS, 1993, p. 157-160): a method of analysis in which the three levels of a text are isolated, so that the procedures articulating the surfacing of meaning can be examined. The most superficial layer of objects, the discursive level, is the space where the gaugeable attributes of the objects are located – and that can mean both the plastic formants we utilised in the analysis and the apparatus of enunciation, which is equally relevant to an analysis of dress. Secondly, the narrative level is the space where utterances of making and being are developed, articulating relation-functions between at least two actants. Our work has utilised the regimes of interaction proposed by Landowski as the foundation for our narrative analysis, focusing on the multiple interactional dynamics created between body and dress. Finally, the fundamental level is formed by abstract (undressed?) value, which can be articulated in categories projected in the semiotic square.

Alongside providing a grounding starting point to the project, each one of the levels in the generative trajectory presented the investigation with different analytical problems. From the discursive level, we extracted not only the plastic variations that permitted the selection of periods forming our history of the corset but also the substantiation of body and dress in their plastic, working on the manifestations – plastic and textual – of those actors with the aim of identifying and analysing their contrasts, as well as their approximations. The main typology contained in the article, however, derives from the analysis of the narrative level and the overlapping of different uses and functions of the corset (and the body) with Landowski’s regimes of interaction, which also leads to the problem of use and practice, and the different narrative roles assumed by body and dress in those utterances. As for the fundamental level, it was addressed, firstly, in the homologations of expression and content pertaining to Visual Semiotics but also as the inventory of categories which, when articulated as values which can transit through the different operations of the semiotic square, appear linked to the determining of the changes in Fashion.

The discursive level: body and dress

The first examination – and perhaps a *distinction* – our work addresses is the one of body and dress. Although in Fashion those two instances often appear as a composed syntagma, the amalgamation clothed-body (OLIVEIRA, 2008, p. 94), part of our analysis was dedicated to the understanding of the different attributes – which, at the narrative level, can be unfolded in different functions, as well as the multifarious roles each actant can assume in the interaction – and the points of distancing and approximations of those two actors, starting with their plastic qualities. Those shared qualities can be gauged both at the plastic formants of the actors, but seem to originate at the written word, with the linguistic fusion of *corset* and *corpus* – from Latin, “body” – which marks that the fusion between the body and its dress reaches beyond the visual manifestations of Fashion, being anchored in their linguistic manifestations likewise.

In the plastic realm, body and dress can be understood as two separate entities – perhaps the dress starts where the body begins, and vice versa – but the manners in which they are presented, as materials objects, contain a set of shared attributes. That is mostly observed in the case of the corset, but applicable to all forms of dress: our analysis identified that body and dress possess “corporeal” features that are observable at the plastic, as well as linguistic levels: the body and the corset possess “tissues”, “structures” and “ligaments” performing similar functions and being plastically represented in similar manners. The body covered by a corset – and for that effect, *which* corset (or from which period) is irrelevant – is, as predicted by Oliveira, an amalgamation in which the borders between one and the other are blurred: the plastic attributes of one and the other are merged, fused, creating a situation in which the discursive manifestations of one and the other become interchangeable: is it possible to separate, in the apprehension of a perfectly corseted silhouette, what is the “natural” aptitude of that body to be slim and curvy at the right points, from the action of an external object, applying pressure at the correct spots?

Beyond the written word, the body and dress can also be examined as a discursive level producing manifestations similar to written text, which can be analysed utilising the same markers of categories of person, time and space, which, in our understanding, are closely linked to the plastic relations constructed by dress. Building from what we called “sartorial enunciations” in our analysis of the overlapping Fashion systems created by the use of corsets and veils in England and Egypt (JARDIM, 2020), our initial address focused on the manner in which clothed-bodies construct *situations* of communication which place dressed-bodies in specific time-and-space constructs, while also determining whether the wearer is presented as the “I” or the “He” of the discourse (actorialisation). Hence, the manner in which the clothed-body installs itself in a person-time-space apparatus is also significant, in which different silhouettes, resulting in different relations of the body, construct different modes of visual apprehension which can be translated into relations of proximity and distance between subjects.

Different silhouettes can install different relations of the categories of person, time and space, producing discourses that shift in [*embrayage*] or shift out [*debrayage*] (GREIMAS & COURTÉS, 1993, p. 79-82, p. 119-121). Both mechanisms are extremely relevant to an analysis of dress, in which they communicate two modes of the presentation of self: one in which the subject constitutes itself as “image”, the other in which the subject embodies the artifice of “presence.” Similarly, the matter of engagement and disengagement is in correspondence with the movements of the corset in and out of fashion which, consequently, produces a type of aspectualisation of an item of dress, which is parallel to the aspectualisation of configurations of silhouettes (JARDIM, 2020). Although the dance of bodies that are constituted as effects of “constraint” or “freedom” is often understood in their plastic traits, our analysis was equally attentive to the matter of this alternation as discourse practices, which emerge both in the discourses *about* the body – such as in the press or in popular culture – and in the clothed-body as discourse, in which the interchange between body and dress, as well as between dressed-bodies, is a situation of communication that can be apprehended as acts of enunciation, as well as finished utterances.

Seen as the discursive level of the canonic theory, then, our corpus can be observed utilising the same apparatus, expanding the analysis of dress to a broader understanding of Fashion, in which we can utilise the different categories of person, time and space to analyse what type of discourse is constructed by each manifestation of the corset and the silhouette it produces. While certain body configurations require the viewer (enunciatee) to take the “proper distance” so that the look can be properly apprehended, some other fashions may construct the opposite effect, inviting the other to approximate, narrowing the distance between clothed-bodies and bodies that gaze. Similarly to verbal text, in which the choice of words, person, and verbal tense can create the effects of distance – “elsewhere”, “then” – or proximity – the simulacrum of a “here” and “now” – clothes too can construct a body in which the visibility of dress acts as what projects or suspends the same markers in an utterance that is not verbal, but sartorial.

The tool utilised to gauge those variations was the Visual Semiotics presented in Greimas' (1984) article "Sémiotique figurative et sémiotique plastique" ["Figurative semiotics and plastic semiotics"], which announces Floch's (1985) developments and, subsequently, Oliveira's (2004) propositions: a broadly utilised theory in the examination of Fashion in Semiotics, it concerns the *plastic formants* – form, colour, topology, and material – in their homologations of expression and content. When addressing the matter of the plastic signifier, Greimas substantiates the topology as a formant that can simultaneously signify a content and install a form of "reading grid", or the orientation of trajectories in the apprehension of the different elements on a surface (GREIMAS, 1984). That account is fundamental for our analysis, in which it verifies our claim that the garment covering the body creates a significant ensemble which contains in itself its "reading instructions": the clothed-body, transformed in its form and colour but chiefly in its visual organisation, creates new trajectories of visual apprehension that are significant and can be interpreted but, at the same time, prescribe manners of gazing which can be understood from a generative point of view.

Those manners of analysis, considering both the clothed-body as a global utterance that can be interpreted and the clothed-body as it is uttered (by an enunciator), point out the possibility of studying the body as *space*. For Greimas, spatial language is a language through which a society signifies itself (GREIMAS, 1976, p. 117): isn't that a central matter concerning Fashion and Dress? In fact, a number of our analyses, which address the corset in a Western context, and the veil, apprehended both in Western and Islamic settings, seem to confirm that dress as a practice can be even more evocative of other social customs (JARDIM, 2014, 2019, 2020) than the material objects we often consider as "space" – such as constructions or the areas of the city – in which it not only dress delimits "spaces" between subjects, but also the subject's relations with their surrounding spaces, or the spaces of the body.

The manner in which corsets transform the shape of the body, imprinting visual relations that are constructed and not "naturally occurring", points out towards a Semiotics of Space, particularly Hammad's proposition of a topo-hierarchical space (HAMMAD, 1986). Growing from his analysis of the space of the tea ceremony, we understand that the body too is a type of "territory" and that different parts of the body carry not only different meanings, which are culturally constructed, but that the importance of those places is hierarchised. In that sense, dress not only constructs a hierarchical "map" of the body, creating emphasis and obliteration of its different parts, but also creates visual prescriptions of how, in which order, and from where the body should be seen. In covering the body and altering its shape, the corset redefines the form of the body, recreating relations of increase and decrease of different areas, which, in their turn, prescribe paths of apprehension from one point to the next. The emphasis on the waist – significant in itself – can be reinterpreted as a shifting of the focal point in the body, recreating a centre of attention that, in different periods, communicated a different set of values, almost always linking to one form or another of sexuality – and that can mean both "normative" sexuality, centred in values of reproduction in accordance with religion; or "rebellious" sexuality, focused on the cultivation of eroticism and fetish.

To conclude, the central themes of a discursive level of Fashion can be split into two: the contrasts in the plastics of body and dress; and the contrasts in the orientation of discourses, which link to the apparatus of enunciation belonging to the analysis of the discursive level of written texts. However, both sections of the analysis share the matter of the body and dress as a structure of two actors, which, descending to the narrative level, form a structure of two actants inter-acting to construct the rhythms of fashion.

The interactions of body and dress

In the narrative level, the discursive actors are replaced by *actants* – the ones who perform or suffer the action (GREIMAS & COURTÉS, 1993, p. 3) – involved in multiple utterances of state and being, in which objects of value can be exchanged. The first necessary examination of a narrative level of dress and Fashion starts with identifying the body and dress no longer as plastic manifestations or as enunciators and enunciatees but as actants invested with specific narrative roles.

The analysis of the material formant was crucial in the understanding of how both body and dress are invested with narrative roles, the first examination revealing that body and corset, besides the linguistic bond through the Latin root *corpus*, also share material attributes in their constitution as objects: the material construction of the corset follows the material constitution of the body, appropriating its structure in multilayered *tissues*, held in place by connective matter and supported by a structure of *bones* (JARDIM, 2014). That similarity in the objectal dimension of both body and corset presented a hypothesis: if both actants can share material attributes, that means that their uses and functions are also possibly approximated – the manner in which the corset reshapes the body is a mimesis of the body’s action, each material of the corset in correspondence with the body’s bones, muscles, ligaments, and even the skin.

From this first observation, a second problem becomes evident: that the corset, far from being an inanimate “object”, encounters the body through *action*. The corset *reshapes* a silhouette by constraining it, redefining the torso form while also constructing the new visual relations explored in the previous item. As such, its role is also one of an *actant*, not only because it performs an action but, at times, it is capable of conferring the body with a role of object.

“The cutting of dresses is limited, consequently, to the form of the corset...” (GREIMAS, 2000, p. 57): in those words from Greimas’ doctorate thesis, we find support to our claim of the corset as an actant subject in its interchanges with the body but, likewise, an important clue to which role the corset may play as a subject in a narrative structure. As a subject holding the destiny of the dress and the body in its making and acting, the traditional corset appears invested with the addresser role, marking that, in its genesis, it was always meant to be the “leader” in a unilateral communication agreement with the body.

As the topology of the corset – and, consequently, the body’s – seemed more significant to the analysis of the discursive level, the analysis of the material formant seemed, in our work, more closely entangled with the narrative level: like, in painting, the matters, materials and procedures give body to the work of art (OLIVEIRA, 2004, p. 119), the materials of body and dress are primal to their becoming as actants, determining the type of interactions they are able to produce. One of the paths followed leading to this conclusion was the relationship between material and esthesis: the contact of the body matter and the dress matter appeared not only as what indicates the uses and functions of each object, permitting the extraction of utterances of use (GREIMAS, 1983; LANDOWSKI, 2009), but also allowing an in-depth understanding of what kind of meaning was constructed – or what kind of regime governed the different encounters of the corset and the body throughout their history in Western Fashion.

Subsequently, the material formant was the guide for the sectioning of the corpus in its narrative level, following Landowski’s four regimes of interaction – programming, manipulation, adjustment, and accident (LANDOWSKI, 2005). Continuing from the distinction of body and dress and the functions extracted from the plastic analysis described previously, we concluded that what was identified with the most traditional forms of corsets – the older pieces, closer to the beginnings of the practice in Western costume – could be understood as the thematic role of the corset: “...the reduction to a *discursive configuration* of a single *figurative trajectory* realised or realisable in the discourse ... [and] the reduction of this trajectory to a competent agent which virtually subsumes it” (GREIMAS, 1983, p. 64, our translation, author’s emphasis). The traditional arrangements of materials and pattern cutting, as well as the traditional shapes of each epoch, constructed a narrative programme in which the roles of body and dress are determined in a rigid structure in which the garment appears as the addresser and agent, and the body “submits”, while also showing that, for such an interaction to take place, each material and piece of a garment must abide and perform its presupposed programme – an organisation very close to the image Landowski uses in “Régimes d’espace” [Regimes of Space] to describe the programming: the different pieces in a clock’s movement (LANDOWSKI, 2010).

However, a relation of thematic roles didn’t exhaust other manifestations of the corset outside of the 18th and 19th-century Fashion. What is often named “the abandon of the corset” in Fashion History could be interpreted, in the scope of our analysis, as a transformation in the corset’s role. Rather than continuing its Fashion trajectory in an eternal repetition of a programme, the corset appears in different shapes but, more importantly, in different materials: the shapewear we know today, constructed with elastic fabrics, although responding to the same uses and functions as the “traditional corset” – that is, to cover the body, transforming its shape – produces interactions with the body that are very distant from the traditional rigid structure of an addresser acting over a submissive addressee. The elastic matter remitted to the idea of *negotiation*: the pliable, stretchy attribute is still capable of imposing its shape (or its “will”), but it allows space for the body to speak. From a unilateral communication agreement, we seem to move to an inter-action *de facto*, in which body and garment

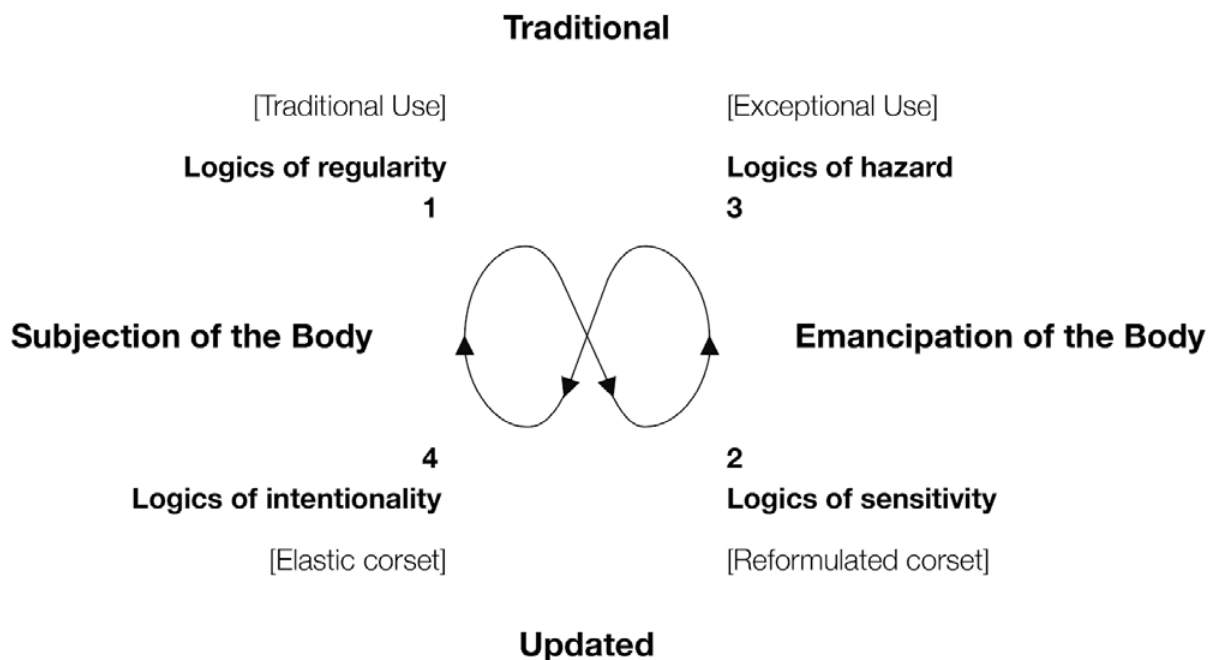
are equally invested with subjectivity, constituting a regime of manipulation: an interaction in which the passions of the other are scrutinised and utilised as motivations for *making do* [*faire faire*] the other (LANDOWSKI, 2005).

What would happen, however, if the body and the corset were in a situation of interaction in which both actants participated with equality? Although the regime of manipulation recognises the body as an actant, somehow reinstating its subject status, the interaction taking place is an exchange of values, in a structure of addresser and addressee: the corset is utilised with the aim of creating an ideal shape, an agreement that encompasses a promise. In a section of the corpus, formed by what we named “transition objects”, belonging to historical periods in which a new silhouette was emerging but not yet completed or installed in the mainstream Fashion system, we identified a second type of interaction, corresponding to Landowski’s regime of *adjustment* (LANDOWSKI, 2005). Marked by a sensitive role, this mode of interaction is identified by the suspension of economic transactions, meaning that no objects of value are being exchanged. If anything, the contact between body and dress happens through direct interaction, without mediations: the subjects become interacting partners, not only equal but each one “feeling the feelings of the other” (LANDOWSKI, 2010). This regime of interaction was marked by the presence of *comfort* in the material – which could also mean, besides elasticity, any matter that was attentive to the “needs” of the body, such as breathable, see-through fabrics, light structures, or literal “adjustments” in the construction accommodating the body in its natural shapes. Again, our analysis identified the adjustment with a “mutual effort” – from the body to receive the constraint, which, in return, doesn’t take place as a one-sided force, but as a gentle touch that makes space for the body’s accomplishment. If the manipulated bodies are marked by a sort of bargain of freedom in exchange for value, the bodies and corsets in adjustment appear as a pair, in which the contact taking place is more important than any result when it comes to the shape of a silhouette.

Finally, the last section of our corpus splits into two possibilities: it refers either to the corset as an absence – the moments of Fashion History which privileged silhouettes that are “freed” – or the presence of the traditional corset in situations in which its role or function appears in reverse. In our understanding, those occurrences align with the catastrophic role described by Landowski (2005), not only because they seem to untangle the narrative trajectories of the body and corset (thus creating the possibility of *accidents*), but because those moments are connected to the destruction of values invested in the body and corset – sometimes via the literal destruction of the corset or the body – which seem to originate in the actions of a mythical addresser. In the situations of absence – such as the 1960s feminist revolution or the transformations in feminine dress occurring in the 1920s – the corset literally “leaves” Fashion, suspending its own role in the interaction with the body, as well as its part as addresser of the body, or interacting partner. In both trajectories, the body becomes something else, independent from the corset. However, there are moments marking a twisted return of the corset – among which we have the subcultural movements from the 1970s which appropriate the corset, or the non-fashionable practice of the tightlacer – in which both body and the garment are reinvested with values, constructing oppositions to its

thematic role. In the narrative level, we can analyse those historical moments as a transformation in the uses or functions of the objects – both the corset and the body – or a problem of “use” versus “practice” (LANDOWSKI, 2009): moving away from the presupposed use of corsets to create a particular body configuration, recognisable as “appropriate” forms of the body and its dress, the historical moments and cultural manifestations belonging to this section of the corpus seem to opt, instead, for *practising* the body and the corset, reimagining not only the form of those objects but which meanings they can articulate.

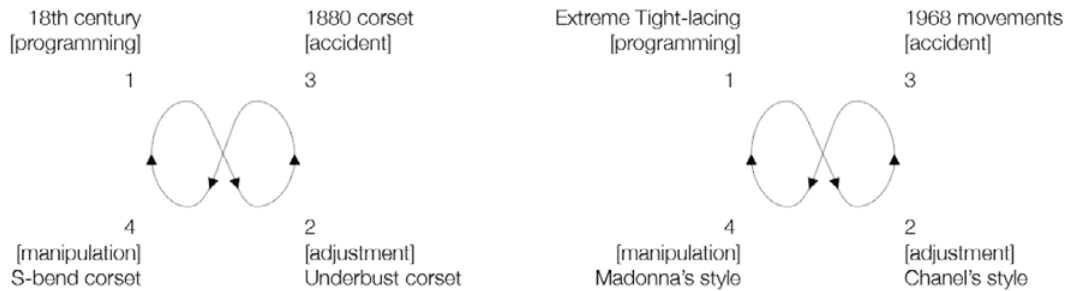
FIGURE 1 – FROM *O CORSET NA MODA OCIDENTAL [THE CORSET IN WESTERN FASHION]*: AN ARTICULATION OF THE SYNTAXES GOVERNING THE PASSAGES OF FASHION THROUGH THE DIFFERENT USES (AND PRACTICES) OF THE CORSET: TRADITIONAL USE (PROGRAMMING); EXCEPTIONAL USE (ACCIDENT); THE ELASTIC CORSET (MANIPULATION); AND THE REFORMULATED CORSET (ADJUSTMENT)



SOURCE: Elaborated by the author (2020).

FIGURE 2 – FROM *O CORSET NA MODA OCIDENTAL [THE CORSET IN WESTERN FASHION]*: AN ARTICULATION OF THE 16 POSITIONS AND THE TRANSITS THEY CREATE IN FASHION, FROM THE ITEMS OF THE CORPUS REPRESENTING THE EMBLEMATIC HISTORICAL MOMENTS AND OBJECTS CHOSEN FOR THE ANALYSIS: SEVEN TRADITIONAL CORSETS, FIVE PIECES OF SHAPEWEAR, AND SPECIFIC STYLES, MOVEMENTS, AND PRACTICES WHICH EMBLEMATISE THE INTERACTIONS DEBATED. EACH OF THE 16 POSITIONS IS GOVERNED BY RELATIONS OF CONFORMITIES, COMPLEMENTARITIES, CONTRARIETIES AND CONTRADICTIONS BETWEEN THE ROLES OF THE BODY AND THE CORSET THROUGHOUT THE PERIODS ANALYSED IN THE INVESTIGATION

Traditional



[Traditional Use]

[Exceptional Use]

Logics of regularity

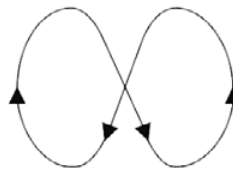
Logics of hazard

1

3

Subjection of the Body

Emancipation of the Body



4

2

Logics of intentionality

Logics of sensitivity

[Elastic corset]

[Reformulated corset]



Updated

SOURCE: Elaborated by the author (2020).

The exposition so far presented a method of analysis of the narrative level adopting the Greimasian perspective in which a structure of two actants considers S1 to be the corset and S2 the body: recapping our examination of the thematic role, we concluded that the action of the garment over the body invests the corset with the addresser role, thus the first subject in the narrative programme. However, each object analysed – seven traditional corsets, two crinolines, four dresses, and five pieces of shapewear – showed that both actants are not always in perfect harmony (or in a situation of complementarity) and that, as presented by Greimas in his

theory of the modalities (GREIMAS, 1983, p. 86-87), combinations can also result in conformities, contradictions, and contrarities. That possibility is equally predicted by Landowski, when he claims that each regime of interaction possesses its own syntax, functioning as positions of passage leading from one regime to the next, creating the transit (LANDOWSKI, 2005, p. 76).

In consideration of those two propositions, we formulated a “fractal” ellipsis of the narrative level, containing 16 (rather than 4) terms for each of the two actants, the body and the dress: besides the presence of four “pure” regimes of interactions, corresponding to the perfect complementarity of both actants’ actions, we identified how those “passages” from one regime to the other were articulated as passages through different roles, which seem to result in a chronological narrative of the history of Fashion (figure 2). Once the analysis of the dress as the addresser of the body was completed, we reversed the exercise, exploring the body’s point of view, accepting that the dictation of Fashion is not unilateral – from dress to the body – but a complex system in which body and dress are constantly interchanging their roles and competences.

Thus, a transit through different roles and competences seems to be the mechanism creating the story of Fashion, which contains passages through traditional roles, as well as heterodox uses (or practices?) of both the body and the corset. In other words, and as we had the chance to argue in our most recent works, a Fashion system is made both of paradigms that privilege the continuity of this system and of mechanisms that aim at its own destruction (JARDIM, 2019, 2020). The transit through different roles, henceforth, is bonded to transit through different fundamental values: those transformations in the values invested in the same object are at the core of the transitions from one moment of fashion to the next.

The senses of fashion

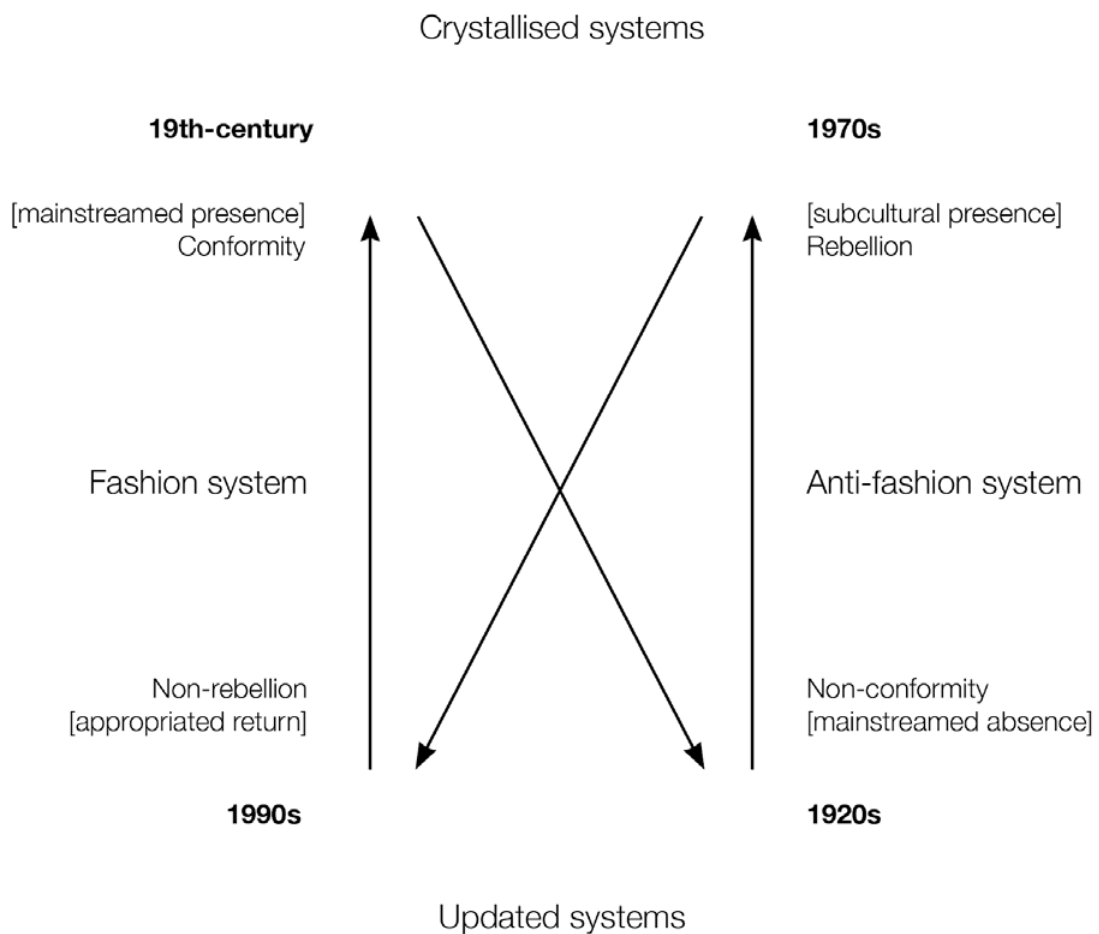
As the roles of body and dress change, the dynamics between them as interacting partners produce changes in the plastic of dress or in its discursive level. Those transformations can be described as the surfacing of narrative utterances to a visible (as well as audible, olfactory, and tactile) level: when dress changes, so do the manners we present ourselves and, consequently the ways we are seen and felt, but those changes also produce transformations in our interactions with one another. That form of interpreting Fashion changes goes against the grain of what is current in Fashion studies following Anthropological or Sociological schools of thought – namely, that Fashion changes “in response” or “as a consequence” of changes in society, acting as its “reflex.” Our work, on the other hand, defended a view that is contrary to that: the changes in Fashion don’t occur “because of” changes in society; not only they do sometimes precede the changes in society, as hypothesised by Greimas (2002, p. 78) but they can also be understood as part of the social changes – or, to evoke Landowski’s writings about Fashion and Politics, the changes in dress are a “presentification of the present” (LANDOWSKI, 1997, p. 127).

When regarded from that perspective, it is impossible to insist on the idea of Fashion as a reflex of social change: although the changes in Fashion are necessarily occurring from the changes at the fundamental level attached to the dynamic relations of body and dress, those values cannot be apprehended unless they are manifested. In other words: how can

society change, unless *we* change, and how can those changes be perceived if we don't adjust our way of presenting ourselves? Thus, the presentation of self plays a central part in those transformations, at times being the first place where a "trend" is manifested – such as the case of subcultural movements in the 1950s and 1960s, which stemmed from the complex intertwining of music and sartorial style, then expanding into other forms of culture which seemed to "follow" the changes in dress.

Descending to the fundamental level, we see the transit through visual sartorial appearances analysed in item 2.1. can be homologated to a transit from one value to another in the deep level of the generative trajectory (figure 3). Although each section of the corpus contained different fundamental categories, which are bonded to a certain *zeitgeist* that is also subjected to fashion cycles, we have identified an isotopic relation uniting the positive and negative axes and deixes of all semiotic squares resulting from our corpus: those relations could be presented as what guides the "rhythms of Fashion," determining the trajectory a trend must follow to produce a successful passage.

FIGURE 3 – ARTICULATION OF THE FUNDAMENTAL CATEGORY "CONFORMITY VS. REBELLION" AND RESULTING META OPPOSITIONS



SOURCE: Elaborated by the author (2020).

The positive axis, in which the thematic uses of the corset, as well as the “consolidated” forms of rebellion always appeared forming a complex value governing *traditional systems*, while the subcontrary axis (or neutral axis) was identified with *updated systems*. That first meta-opposition is extremely significant to our analysis, in which it shows that it is not possible to replace one tradition with another: to construct new tradition, Fashion needs to go through transition periods when new trends emerge, preparing the body, dress, and society to new rebellious ruptures, or to new forms of mainstream dress.

Secondly, the meta-opposition of the two deixes of the square was also isotopic throughout the corpus and also showcasing insight into the articulation of the rhythm of fashion. While the positive deixis – the side of the square Landowski associates with the “constellation of prudence” in his schema of the interactions (LANDOWSKI, 2005) – was identified with moments in Fashion in which the body is subjected to dress, the negative deixis – or the “constellation of adventure” (LANDOWSKI, 2005) – emerged from manners of presentation of self in which the body is in search of emancipation (figure 1 and 2). Again, that shows that Fashion cannot insist on “more oppressive” or “more liberated” trends but, to construct a rhythm and successful alternations, we need to periodically replace the role of the body and dress – or to secure the interchangeability of the roles of addresser and addressee. Equally, the dance between the positive and negative deixes can be interpreted as the transit from values that are aligned with the Fashion system to values that oppose it, constructing practices that are subcultural or Anti-Fashion (JARDIM, 2019, 2020) – a possibility of the model presented which grasps beyond the problem of the corset, being relevant to the understanding of Fashion and trends in general, and the manners in which cycles of counter culture are incorporated into the Fashion system, becoming a new form of the mainstream.

Conclusion

Throughout the sections presented in this document, we aimed at responding to the need for organising a method that was not designed but emerging from the analyses contained in *O Corset na moda ocidental [The corset in western fashion]* (JARDIM, 2014). The study – grounded in an extremely intuitive and processual facet of the Arts, a result of my background in Costume Design and Performance Art – was built on the go, developing as my knowledge of the theory progressed, literally *experimenting* the and with the theory and its possibilities. Looking back six years after its conclusion, as well as through the lenses of subsequent investigations that build from its foundations, the present work provided the chance of revisiting the most significant points of the work, reconstructing the path of experimentation with the objective of constructing a method: a trajectory from catastrophic coincidences to a programme of analysis which, perhaps, can facilitate its repetition.

The first section, dedicated to describing how we used Greimas’ method to select the corpus, putting forward an alternative reading of Fashion History, not through chronological slices of time, but by adopting a perspective that derives from Landowski’s use of *synchrony* and *diachrony*: as a search for “significant ruptures” that are independent of periodisations but aim at understanding variations in the isotopies of our object. Although necessity emerg-

ing from the magnitude of the corpus, the service of such model reaches beyond the solution of an immediate problem, permitting a regard of Fashion that was striving for independence from the Anthropological and Sociological character of Fashion History and Theory studies, anchoring the analysis in a legitimately semiotic practice.

Part 2 revisited the analysis, reconstructing its steps around Greimas' generative trajectory. Although the described approach doesn't necessarily reflect how the analysis unfolded at the time, Greimas' schema appears as a structure standing the test of time as a tool of systematic observation of significant objects whose meaning is articulated in a generative manner. A second reason for selecting the generative trajectory as a "guide" is the manner in which it permitted us to describe how each of its levels offered specific problems of research and analysis, showcasing a number of matters that often escape those concerned with the study of Fashion.

Starting with the discursive level, we propose that the manifestations of Fashion can be observed from (at least) two points of view. On the one hand, we invested in the visual/plastic perspective, as it is often the case when it comes to the use of Semiotics in the study of dress; however, the analyses contained in the article presented a seed of another form of understanding the surface level of Fashion, one that utilises the apparatus of aspectualisation belonging to the Semiotics of Text to the analysis of the relations created by the corset in and with the body: dress, as much as written text does, also creates "effects of presence", or the instalment of categories of time, space, and person; equally, items of dress are aspectualised in different moments of a trend, as well as in alternations of absence and presence – themes we have explored more in-depth in subsequent works (JARDIM, 2020).

Moving forward, we utilised the homologations of expression and content prescribed by Visual Semiotics in combination with theories for the study of space, which permitted a study of the visual surface level, but also the substantiation of important contributions in the work that were born from the plastic analysis: namely, the idea of body and dress as *subjects*, interactants, and not merely visual and material objects. That concept emerged from the study of the material – of both the corset and the human, female body – and the utterances of use and function contained in them, which developed into the address of the interactions of body and dress in the regimes of interaction presented by Landowski. The most developed aspect from the original work, the study of the multiple interactions taking place between those two actants – as well as the manner in which dances of complementarities, conformities, contrarities, and contradictions of regimes we identified – results in a critical outcome: the idea of the rhythm of Fashion as the result of t body and dress transiting through different roles, which can surface in different plastic/visual manifestations. In other words: that the same role governing the interaction of body and dress can wear "a different look" at different times.

Finally, as we descend to the fundamental level, we encounter a series of meta-categories and meta-oppositions which are isotopic, indicating their universal value for a study of Fashion – and, perhaps, the fashions belonging to domains other than the sartorial realm? As much as transit through different roles, the visual changes of Fashion are also the result of the transit through different values. Although the specific values constituting base catego-

ries changed over periods and will change from culture to culture, we found a formula that points towards the investment of “traditional values” as a base category and “updated values” in the neutral axis, which is useful to the analysis of Fashion trends, and the cycles they go through. Equally, we identified that the positive and negative deïxes of our schema relate to the positions invested in the body and dress, conveying that Fashion alternates the values of subjection and emancipation, periodically reversing that meta-opposition in a dance of Fashion and Anti-fashion systems. Perhaps not surprisingly at all, that solution stood the test of chronology, showing a periodical History of Fashion has sustained that cycle, from the 18th century to date.

Aiming at moving away from two current problems in Fashion theory – firstly, the use of semiotics exclusively as a theory of “interpretation” and, secondly, the sociological perspective that insists on Fashion as “a result” of social change – our attempt of a method purposed to present a manner of understanding the different levels of Fashion from a generative point of view, as well as its central role in “social change” and the manners in which clothed-bodies interact with others. Still and all, the concepts developed in this document don’t seem to be exhausted in the problem of the body and its corset but are equally pertinent to the examination of other systems of dress and, we believe, to the study of dress in general, as well as other forms of alternations of paradigms that constitute “fashion systems” – sartorial or not. From the study of the multilayered dynamic of body and dress, and their successive, cyclical passages from different positions of a category, as well as different actantial roles, we constructed a method that doesn’t belong to this or that form of dress but is, perhaps, a seed for a Fashion Semiotics.

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