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# The plastic of clothing and the construction of visual communication and interaction: a semiotic examination of the eighteenth-century French dress

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**Abstract:** The article presents an account of the visual relations created by garments through their plastic formants, examining the role played by form, material, and composition in creating body hierarchies that produce prescribed behaviors between different subjects. The work dissects the concept of thematic role from Greimasian theory, investigating the manners in which an eighteenth-century wedding dress presents the chaining of programs governing materials, garments, and the body in the production of narrative interactions between subjects. The work utilizes a combination of Greimas' method with the Visual Semiotics continued by Floch and Oliveira, as well as Hammad's Semiotics of Space which permit the exam of optical relations created in the body through its clothing – relations that can be read as manifesting values that are both historically and socially determined, or in the act of apprehension of an object. The eighteenth century provides a type of “original” case, whose results are pertinent to a broader study of the relations between body and dress: the work concludes with the understanding that Fashion changes through the transit of values and roles invested in the body and dress – a set of changes closely linked to the construction of social roles.

**Keywords:** clothed body; eighteenth-century; Fashion Semiotics; program; thematic role

## 1 Introduction

When it comes to the matter of fashion and many others, the eighteenth century is probably one of the most important moments in modern human history, at least for

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the West: an era that shaped the manner in which we understand our sciences, philosophies, and most emblematic cultural customs – a foundation to our conception of the present. Besides, that period contains the cornerstone of our idea of fashion as a system – or, to use Hjelmslev's definition, a mode of existence marked by correlational hierarchies (Hjelmslev 1966: 165) – which is subjected to constant changes that, in their turn, construct the rhythms of culture and society. Fashion is a system, or a collection of paradigms forming a language (Barthes 1967; Greimas and Courtés 1993: 384–385), whose trends and individual manifestations of dress form semiotic processes corresponding to the syntagmatic axis (Greimas and Courtés 1993: 293, 377) which are for the fashion system what “words” are for language. The articulation system/process is at the root of Barthes' idea of a “vocabulary” of fashion (Barthes 1967, 2006) – a notion that started to be formed among the royalty and upper classes of the 1700s, particularly in France and England, and persists to our times.

Fashion – the periodic succession of different manners – is not only a phenomenon affecting dress – or individual sartorial objects that may or may not constitute fashions – although the eighteenth century was probably the time in which the fate of clothes was sealed, consolidating their part as signifiers of social roles in the molds we understand them today. The fashion historian François Boucher observes that the era was marked by rapid social transformations which included the spread of costume no longer exclusively within the aristocracy, but among what people were beginning to call “society” (Boucher 1967), which included the mingling of aristocrats with the middle-class circles of merchants and high finance. The eighteenth century was notorious for fashions of all sorts, such as in foods and interior design, and even in accents – that is particularly emblematic in France, but echoed in England throughout the nineteenth century – and those fashions seem to converge in the matter of dress: within this broader system that regulates the alternation of different *manners* that are read as manifestations of what is good and what is bad for a given society at a given time (Barthes 2006: 68), dress seems to be the culminating point where history and culture are manifest as a totality.

Beyond the aesthetic dimension of dress, the manners in which fabrics cover the body transforming its silhouettes reshapes the totality of our beings: in the words of Virginia Woolf, “. . . there is much to support the view that it is clothes that wear us and not we them; we may make them take the mold of arm or breast, but they mold our hearts, our brains, our tongues to their liking” (Woolf 1977: 177). Hence, the transformation of the body through dress promotes a complete transformation in manners, both the ones of the body who wears and the bodies of the ones who gaze. The amalgamation “clothed-body” (Oliveira 2008: 93) is more than an effort to follow a fashion or what is considered proper or beautiful in a given

society and culture: it is a list of prescriptions that dictate what is permitted and what is interdicted, as well as what is to be looked at and what is to remain unseen. The very series of relations determining the production and the wearing of cloth, or the *programs* governing the construction of such relations found in this dress seem somehow universal and generalizable: although fashion changes, the need for interlinked programs corroborating its production remains. Finally, through the construction of relations of visibility (and invisibility), dress constructs, through its plastic dimension, relations of distance and proximity that not only determine *how* a subject should gaze at but *from where*.

A problem of communication, the apparatus of dress and the relations it constructs can be analyzed from the point of view of enunciation as it is theorized by Greimas: a situation of communication performed by persons projected in the utterance and marked by relations of time and space, or an instance of mediation that ensures the virtualities of language generate the production of discourse (Greimas and Courtés 1993: 126). In the same manner that words, spoken or written, construct utterances resulting from those situations of communication, dress uses its plastic apparatus and the relations of visibility and distance in the same manner, which we hope to demonstrate through the analysis. Equally, the theories of spatial semiotics presented by Hammad (1986) will assist our investigation, by transposing the idea of a topo-hierarchy in space to the topo-hierarchies of the body that are produced and reproduced in the link between body, dress, and its culturally constructed meanings. Finally, the contribution is grounded in notions from Greimasian Semiotics, such as the thematic role (Greimas 1983; Greimas and Courtés 1993: 393), which are further developed in contemporary French Socio-semiotics, particularly in the works of Landowski (2005: 17; 2009) into both regimes of interaction governed by different roles and competences, and the possibility of imagining objects beyond their use (Landowski 2010) – a theory in correspondence with the forms of design experimentation that create the rhythms of Fashion.

Following Greimas criteria presented in *Sémantique Structurale* (1986) and his proposition of Plastic Semiotics (Greimas 1984), we will analyze one garment from 1775 (Figure 1), which is in conformity with the three conditions established in the Greimasian method: to be representative, exhaustive, and homogeneous (Greimas 1986: 142–145). In general lines, our choice is attentive to the selected dress being in correspondence with the key attributes of the eighteenth-century costume that are “recognizable” (representative), meaning that the particular item selected and the analyses developed around it are relevant to other dresses from the same period (exhaustive). The homogeneity criteria, finally, relates to the need for ensuring that the different items selected are responding to the same aspect of the phenomenon: the selection of dress *and* underwear respond to that need, as well as

our addressing of related problems – such as the matter of hierarchy, distance and proximity, and so forth – as it is our understanding that all those attributes of dress are linked to the same phenomenon: the plastic of dress as an intersection of multifarious roles played by different interacting subjects.

Similarly to the fine arts of the period, the Baroque and Rococo, the dress recaps the principles that govern the aesthetic of the era – such as the use of the diagonal line and the open shape (Floch 1995: 124; Oliveira 1992: 123) – while also being a very flat, almost two-dimensional piece of dress, an attribute facilitating its analysis and, at the same time, making it a remarkably informative example. The selected image not only emblemizes the style of the period we aim at discussing, but is a privileged example of the phenomenon we aim at presenting: the manner in which dress constructs different situations of communication through visual relations, while also containing in itself the necessary instructions for its reading. The analysis will be performed using tools from visual semiotics, examining the four *plastic formants* of dress – the shapes, colors, topology, and materials (Floch 1985; Greimas 1984; Oliveira 2004) – which form its manifestation and construct its reading grid, articulating those attributes with deeper categories belonging to the plane of content (Hjelmslev 1966: 65–79).

It is our understanding that this analysis can be pertinent to other manifestations of dress from the same period, or to any other manifestation of dress, as we have demonstrated in our work about the corset (Jardim 2014). Hence, this contribution analyzes dress as a central actant in the situations of communication, aiming at understanding what we consider to be the origins of our present relations with clothes. Part of a larger research project, the present contribution showcases one of the key analyses that inaugurated a semiotic method to examine dress and the rhythms of fashion, interlinked with other contributions making use of this methodology and further extending its grasp to manifestations belonging to other eras, as well as different cultural systems (Jardim 2019, 2020).

## 2 The thematic role of dress

Greimas defines the thematic role as an isotopic manifestation (Greimas and Courtés 1993: 393): a recurrence of actions from the same subject throughout their narrative trajectory; similarly, the idea of thematic role appears as a “nominal figure,” at the same time a *name* and an *agent*: the thematic role designates a limited competence of an actant, presenting a double reduction to one single figurative trajectory, as well as to the competent agent subsuming it (Greimas 1983: 64). Finally, the notion refers to a “stock of themes and motives” (1983: 61) which imposes a certain discipline by interdicting the realization of all narrative trajectories but one (1983: 63).

The idea of “behavior algorithm,” or “. . . the totality of behaviors that one can expect from actors (human or not) . . .” (Landowski 2005: 17), continues the notion of thematic role as a blueprint of actions and conducts that are not emerging from the subject, but pre-determined – by culture or society but, equally, by attributes that are inherent to subjects and objects. In the case of dress, the thematic roles invested in garments are dictated by multiple factors, including the material attributes of fabrics, structures, and embellishments, and also by its socio-cultural dimension, comprising both the thematic roles of gender, related to the techniques of femininity the dress both creates and supports, as well as the socio-cultural ideas invested in the concept of dress as a fashionable object.

Greimas’ notion of *program*, which is interlocked with the idea of *function* behind thematic roles, appears in his analysis of a soup recipe: the multiple ingredients and agents must be *operated* by a series of programs, or sequences of implications logically needed for the realization of a base program (1983: 162). The production of an item of dress (the cutting, stitching, and piecing of materials, the finishings, the decorations), as well as its wearing (the orders in which each item must be applied to the body, and the chaining of the function of one item in the next item), are not different: they equally respond to elaborated sequences that are both reliant on aspectual structures – from “materials” to “finished garment,” as well as from a “natural/undressed” to an “accomplished” body. Such programs constitute transformations from the order of *becoming* – from the body as an object, to the subject in society.

Landowski’s proposition of *programming* as a regime of interaction (Landowski 2005: 18, 72) continues from the scope of the thematic role discussed so far: a mode of co-incidences of independent narrative programs which are placed in relation by a third instance, an *operator* (Landowski 2014). Hence, the actions of different materials over one another – the different parts of dress holding one another together, or the ensemble of dress which, literally, holds the body together – take place in utterances governed by the significant repetitions which produce *expected outcomes*: a confluence of multiple programs which are connected to pre-established actions and functions of multiple subjects. In the case examined, it is possible to state that it is *expected* that the corset will shape the body to an extent, that fabrics and embellishments will behave in a certain way, and that the body will assume a certain attitude when dressed: all these “expectations,” when fulfilled, are nothing more than the fulfilment of subjects’ and objects’ single “permitted” trajectories.

In the eighteenth-century French dress, the possibility of a repetitive outcome in the relation between body and dress happens in the combination of three programs – the corset, the crinoline, and the dress – a primal condition for the achievement of the performance of the constructed, dressed and decorated body that makes the subject be (*faire-être*): the woman. The ensemble body, corset, crinoline and dress, in its turn, is what constructs yet another thematic role: the one imposed upon the feminine subject, determining the unfolding of social

interactions in the encounter with other subjects or social actors, equally governed by thematic roles, forming the context in which clothed-bodies are inscribed.

The notion of *role* seems to complement the alleged historical origins of the style we are analyzing: the *panier* or hoop skirt is believed to have arisen from Parisian theatrical costume, the excessive lateral enlargement of the skirt serving the purpose of making waists appear smaller on stage (Boucher 1967: 295). Such use of dress in conjunction with foundation garments, on stage or in society, can be read as a multilayered interlocking of programs, resulting in a body that abides by the hierarchies constructed by the garment in the body, while also producing bodies that conform to the roles and behaviors constructed for them. As such, each one of the actors – body and garment – are, through sticking to their programs, constructing relations in which the security of a given context is sustained, a mode of collective entanglement Landowski associated with the *social fabric* (Landowski 2010).

It is possible to see a parallel formed between the heavily constructed social roles belonging to the interactions by programming, the heavily constructed body that is created with the use of corsets and crinolines, and the evident transformations in the silhouette promoted by those objects. The corset and crinoline, hence, do not need to be “hidden” by the dress<sup>1</sup>: on the contrary, their presence is made evident through the outer dress, not only echoing the hardness of stratified social thematic roles but reinforcing the expectation that the feminine actor will abide by conventions which include the need for silhouette-shaping objects.

### 3 Hierarchies of the gaze

One of the central arguments concerning this investigation is the idea that the design of a dress, besides covering the body and transforming its shapes, plays a role in determining how a body should be gazed at. To gaze at something or someone is not a “passive” or “involuntary” operation, but one that emerges from negotiated relations between the subjects involved: the different manners of looking at and the apprehension of significance taking place in the act of looking are linked to different manners of gazing at others and at the world (Landowski 2014).

Furthermore, and to an extent, the visual relations resulting from and happening in the interactions between body and dress possess the potential for producing different relations, as well as for investing the multiple actors – the

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<sup>1</sup> Valerie Steele (2001: 19–20) remarks that not only it was common for women to get dressed in front of male friends: the scene of women getting dressed appeared as a common theme in painting and illustration of the period, almost constituting a genre of its own.

body, the dress, and others who participate in the act of looking at clothed-bodies – with multiple roles and competences. Not rarely, the habitual conception that the body belongs to a “subject” and that material things are “objects” is reversed, or at least dramatically modified: does not dress *act* over the body, transforming its shapes, and constructing new visual relations that were not possible in the naked body? When the roles of body and dress are well aligned or invested with perfect conformity, it is possible to see the body becoming the object of dress instead or, in other cases, body and dress can become interacting partners, mutually invested with subjectal roles.

The transformation of the silhouette is the most evident manner in which such interactions take place: when garments such as corsets and crinolines, as well as very heavy, multilayered sartorial objects such as the French dress come into contact with the body, their overpowering actions require the body to stay passive – to abide by the shapes and postures the garments are imposing. There is no “negotiating” with corsets and crinolines and heavy gowns: they, literally, *dress* the body, bending, constraining, reshaping, creating volumes, imposing postures, as well as limiting what actions the body is allowed to perform. In such dresses, commonplace daily tasks can become a challenge, proving that the subjectal role of dress is prevalent.

Besides the production of physical impediments and prescriptions that become ingrained behavioral constraints – a body that cannot eat or sit down and moves with difficulty is closely linked to an idea of “woman” that persists to our days – dress is also responsible for the production of prescriptions of visual interactions, delimiting *how* and *to what extent* a body should be seen or gazed at. The body constructed by dress, hence, determines how this semiotic object constructed for the gaze of the other will be visually consumed – and, as a consequence, the action of dress is extended to the construction of a program for the other as well, the one who gazes, whose actions are, to a large extent, determined by what dress permits (or forces) to see. This construction of the appearance occasions the unfolding of many different operations: on the one hand, we have the well-known matters of disguising bits of the body that were deemed unfashionable at a given time, aiming at minimizing those unflattering details, while creating volumes and emphasizing areas that are exalted by particular vogues.

Dress, however, can do more than that. It can, rather than construct (or deconstruct) the body, create relations of “framing” particular areas, directing the gaze to such places. What is exalted and what is dismissed by a vogue can be homologated<sup>2</sup> to a semantic investment of different parts of the body – an issue

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2 The semantic operation defined as *homologation* is part of the general procedures of the structural analysis, assisting the establishment of rules of conversion between the different levels, determining the correlations in a comparative methodology (Greimas and Courtés 1993: 174).

central to our analysis. In other words, for each society and historical moment, some bits of the body have more “value” than others, and this “value of the values” is culturally constructed. A similar matter was analyzed by Hammad, who examined the architecture of the tea ceremony – from the building where the ritual takes place to the objects used in it, such as the sake pot and a serving plate – and the manners through which the ceremony is constructed to manifest the hierarchies belonging to the various systems of values it refers to. The concept of *topohierarchical organization* – the ensemble of phenomena emerging from the same logic, where the placement of things serves the making of their mutual hierarchical relations (Hammad 1986: 54) – although appearing in a work of Semiotics of Space, has served our investigations of the body, analyzing the extent to which dress, as much as architecture does, can use systems of value as references, while also functioning as a tool for the construction and reproduction of the same systems of value.

As much as Hammad aims at presenting an address of enunciation and utterance grounded on its spatial manifestations, our work is similarly anchored in the notion that the dress and the body itself constitute both utterances and acts of enunciation, which can be analyzed using the same apparatus belonging to Semiotics of Text. Through the creation of euphorizations (and dysphorizations) of places of the body, using its own language to point to the viewer where to look at and which places hold a higher importance than the others, those constructed euphorizations at the same time refer to a system of values – for example, the cultural and social “obsessions” of a given era – and provide the means for the continuation of the system.

Besides constructing the valorization of the body, dress prescribes the orders in which the body should be visually consumed, and the appropriate distance the viewer should take from the body. Those too are matters of topohierarchical organizations, in which the distance in-between bodies is constructed from euphoric/dysphoric oppositions. Besides the evident overlapping or mutual construction of the cultural reference system, it is also important to question the extent to which dress echoes or constructs (or both) the meanings associated with the body, particularly the female body – although our method would be equally relevant to an analysis of menswear.

Our use of a theory of topohierarchical systems aims at exposing that the construction of positions determined by dress is invested with semantics, in which the hierarchies of roles – the gazer and the gazed – are marked. Through the orientations of viewers and the ones who are seen, the body becomes an object to be manipulated by dress, including its plastic/material dimension, and the social exchanges that take place once clothed-bodies are placed in interactions with others. Those manipulations happen in the actions of dress which determines the



actions of multiple subjects through the prescriptions of situations that are permitted and interdicted.

## 4 The construction of body hierarchies in the French dress

The object we selected was a 1775 sackback gown, manufactured in silk and decorated with self-appliqué relief and fringes, part of the Victoria & Albert collection. That item belongs to a larger corpus of dresses and was considered the most representative of both the style of the period and the particular silhouette configuration the analysis refers to. Equally, the dress represents the culmination of a style: Boucher remarks that this particular type of court dress retained traits of the seventeenth-century gown and that, although some minor transformations in colors and details took place, the costume was a continuation of the Louis XIV vogue (Boucher 1967). As the fashion of stays and side hoops lasted for nearly two centuries (Hart and North 1998: 200; Lynn 2010: 73), it makes sense to focus on the period approaching the end of a vogue, as it gives us the chance of gauging the moment in which the craftsmanship and technology involved in the manufacturing of those dresses and undergarments peaked, which also makes this particular object one of inspiring aesthetic value.



**Figure 1:** *Wedding gown*, manufactured in silk with fringe and self-appliqué work, English, circa 1775, V&A Images.

Starting with the shape, which is well known and immediately recognized as belonging to the eighteenth century, it is possible to perceive the opposition between the constraint of the waist and the increase of the hip area, which are produced by two objects whose uses aim at transforming the silhouette: the stays and the crinoline. The lines forming the garment are straight, hard, and easily identified as simple solids: the triangular torso, the trapeze in the inferior half of the dress, the cylinders in the sleeves. The same solids are reiterated in the back of the dress which, unlike the front, is completely void of adornments. The first description of the form indicates key points that permit the reconstruction of meaning in the dress: firstly, it is possible to gauge a topohierarchy of the bottom – where the silhouette is enlarged – over the top; and of the front – where the decorations are concentrated – over the back.

The hierarchization of the front, where we find a larger concentration of decorations in the longitudinal center, allows us to interpret that the best angle for apprehending this dress in direct frontality, taking a certain distance from the “object,” which would permit the contemplation of its totality, but not so distant, allowing the eye to capture the richness of the embroidery and relief work. By constructing a distance that is prescribed, the dress uses the series of programs governing the construction of the body as an object, while also producing a program of apprehension: if a measured distance is required to the proper visual perception of the dress, it is possible to see how the action of the dress is not contained in the body wearing it, expanding to the determination of other bodies’ actions as well.

Another important opposition is observed at the level of topology, or the articulation of the significant space inscribed in the enclosed perimeter of the object being analyzed (Floch 1985: 173): it relates to contrasting the top and the bottom of the dress, particularly in its frontal section. The hip line can be read as the division between two areas of the garment – the passage from the domain of *constraint*, marked by the presence of the stays, to the space of *construction*, the area dressed by the crinoline. From that point of the garment, it is evident that increased importance was attributed to the inferior half, where the eye finds a profusion of adornments. It is possible to test our own gaze by returning to Figure 1, noticing that the eye is immediately attracted to the inferior center of the dress and that, from that point, our eye follows a trajectory from bottom to top, always through the center, until it approaches the neckline, where the same embroidery work marks the end of the dress and the beginning of the undressed body. The argument of a profusion of adornments signifying a more important investment of value can be supported by the optical relations just described, but is also in correspondence with the general aesthetic mentality in the eighteenth century: the

hierarchy of the different sections, thus, can be “captured” both from the cultural and artistic vogues of the time, but is likewise constructed in the act of seeing.

Combining the two oppositions gauged from the analysis of the form and composition of the garment, we can divide the dress into four quadrants – top–back, bottom–back; top–frontal, bottom–frontal – and conclude that, based on the plastic and optical relations constructed through it, the most hierarchical section of the dress is the bottom–frontal quadrant. In the second place, the top–frontal section, followed by the top–back – where pleats adorn the back of the wearer – and, finally, the bottom–back appears as the least hierarchical quadrant of the garment. That last area, in fact, is where we find a physical barrier to the interaction with another: the cape, running to the floor and delimiting a personal space of a few dozen centimeters, becomes a material impediment to other subjects’ approximation. In contrast, in the central–bottom–front, the dress is slightly suspended from the floor, creating a small slit, a void inviting its filling – perhaps where the feet of the partner should go during a dance? – also marking the beginning of the trajectory of the garment’s visual contemplation. That void, on its turn, is in correspondence with the neckline: both lines slightly concave, creating a faint tension in the garment, pairing with the central diagonal lines of the skirt in delimiting a central space, shaped like an hourglass, where the naked body of the wearer is contained. Beyond the skirt diagonals, the dress contains the constructed body made of artificial volumes created by the crinoline – a “false” body. Both voids, the hem and the neckline take on the role of guiding the observer through the separation of the *realized body* (the naked body) and the *non-body*, which is actualized by the objects constraining/constructing the silhouette.

All the delimitations described above are marked by spatial hierarchies: examining the frontal quadrant of the dress permits to apprehend a higher concentration of embroidery in the center, which starts to decrease, fading to the plain fabric in the frontal borders of the skirt. The hierarchy of centrality is reiterated by the design of the cape on the back quadrant, where the fabric pleats cover the regions of the dress occupied by the naked body, leaving the constructed body covered only by a layer of flat fabric, with no adornments or constructed volumes. Besides pointing towards the hierarchical semantic investments in the “real/naked” and “constructed” bodies, the distribution of adornments can also be read as an attempt at balancing the two bodies with the distribution of materials: the “real/naked” body area received adornments, while the “constructed” body was kept flat, creating a double pair of contrarities: body in the natural state/artificial matter; artificial body/matter in the natural state – as if the dress was acting both as what constructs this new body, and what mediates an equilibrium between the forces of nature and culture, becoming a point of conjunction of those two realms.

Overlapping the different directions analyzed so far, we can conclude that the most hierarchical quadrant of the dress is the bottom–central–front. However, this area is half-filled by the silk relief (the inferior half) and half-empty (the upper half). This “void” inscribed between two other voids – the neckline and the suspended hem – frames the genital area inscribed in the anatomical hip line. Far from manifesting hierarchical inferiority, the centrality of the female sex, empty of adornments, is placed in an area of privileged visibility, completely surrounded – or *framed* – by the self-appliqué work. Occupying the most hierarchical quadrant of the garment the region is still assisted by diagonal lines – the skirt lines at the bottom, and the shape of the silhouette at the top – locating this area in a big central “X,” from shoulders to feet, concentrating the movement of the gaze over this central point where the tip of the bodice meets the skirt’s central lines at the diagonal, and the horizontal line of the hips. Those lines are then joined by vertical vectors – the closure of the bodice at the top, and the shadow cast by the center of the embroidery at the bottom – a line that, like all the others, is interrupted at the central void.

As a wedding dress, the complex work manifested in this ensemble seems to contain the complete sense of the heteronormative social interactions taking place in the situation of the ball: to promote a frontal relation, face-to-face, between individuals of the opposite sex, exalting the attributes of a woman as a potential suitor. In the logic of the eighteenth-century society, when the borders of rank started to dissolve – what Boucher defines as the aristocracy of *wealth* supplanting hereditary nobility (Boucher 1967: 294) – the importance of this dress and what it utters on behalf of the subjects are highlighted. Through the flaunting of *feminine* attributes, the actions of the dress continue that movement. By placing emphasis on gender, rather than class, the garment levels the field by blurring the lines between the aristocrats “of blood” and the affluent bourgeois women, making their attributes as females more relevant than nobility.

At the top, the limit of the neckline frames the décolleté area – which would probably be adorned by jewelry – and the head; at the bottom, the suspension of the dress invites the interaction through dancing; and, finally, in the center, the most important area of the dress, a void – the sex, the uterus – claims to be filled, in the union through marriage and, subsequently, in the conception of heirs. More than a detail of design, the central void of the dress produces topological investments of value that repeat hierarchical relations of the female body, in which the uterus represents the most important role a woman would play in the eighteenth-century society, while also projecting the expectations concerning the union between the sexes. Covering and reshaping a body that is about to be *given in marriage*, the dress becomes a visual statement of the qualities and attributes of the body displaying those adornments: a clothed-woman who *wants to be seen* in her

frontality, manifesting the competence to fill the thematic role of a fertile partner that is manifested, mainly, in the topology of decorations combined with the construction of the silhouette. The dress, thus, becomes both what showcases those values, but also what grants the body the conditions of showcasing those values, making no distinction between wealth that is inherited and wealth that is earned: a double role of producing a hierarchy in the feminine figure, while also providing it with the tools for reproducing those hierarchies through the adoption of a vogue of dress, which is paired with a vogue of behaviors.

#### **4.1 The eighteenth-century ensemble: undergarment, dress, and the body**

Until the moment, the analysis focused on the outer garment and the visual relations constructed through its plastic dimension. However, the construction of that emblematic silhouette is only made possible through the performance of the undergarment, the stays and hoopskirt, which leads the examination to an important dichotomy: the outside versus inside of the dress, and what mediates the interaction between the body and the part of the dress that is visible to others. The recognizable exterior silhouette, hence, is almost completely determined by the underwear: horizontally, the enlargement of the hip line; vertically, the reduction and the shaping of the waist area. Without those two sartorial objects, the outer dress of the period is practically destitute of form: it appears as an ensemble of woven matter that falls over the foundation wear, assimilating the constructed form of the undergarments as its own – as much as the body assimilates the same constructed forms as if it were theirs.

The outer dress and its decorations are manufactured in silk, a material that is heavy and resistant but, at the same time, relatively fluid. Considering those attributes, the role played by the undergarments becomes evident: it requires strength and resistance, responding to the need of supporting the weight of the bottom portion of the dress, with its immense hips and profusion of voluminous decorations, while also sustaining the contention of the torso and waist which are compressed into shape: a function of sustaining pressure coming simultaneously from the outside (the weight of the garment) and from within (the compressed body matter). Equally, considering that the eighteenth-century technologies of pattern cutting and fastenings were limited, although rapidly developing (Boucher 1967; Hart and North 1998), the role of the undergarment is even more pronounced: a foundation over which different parts are hung (such as the skirts) and sewn (the stomacher and jacket; Hart and North 1998: 36, 38, 50, 200).

In this particular dress, as analyzed in the previous item, the composition of fabric layers and the path formed by the embroidery work create a subtle direction for the apprehension of the values manifested in the garment, which can be enjoyed in an almost poetic manner, revealing each section slowly and gradually. In the undergarment ensemble, however, that trajectory appears more instructively, simplified by the absence of decorations<sup>3</sup>. The eye is more immediately captured by the “prosthetic” hip, creating a disproportionate lateral volume, and the stays, “attached” on the top and through the outside of the crinoline, creating and reiterating the triangular shape conferred to the torso. The combination of a triangular torso and the enlarged line of the hip possess the same visual attributes as the dress, acting as “guides” for the observer’s gaze, directing the visibility of the garment towards its center in the genital area. In combination, the two pieces of the underwear create an enunciative unit, in which the form created for the body aims at enhancing the visibility of this area in the female body, by framing it with shapes that are almost implausible.

The analysis presented so far focused on a semi-symbolic reading exploring, in the act of semiosis, the articulation of expression and content outside of their complete conformity (Floch 1985: 79, 113, 115, 207), although it is not our intention to discredit the possibility of a symbolic reading – that is, one in which the planes of expression and content appear in complete conformity (Floch 1985: 207). In fact, the relationship between the hips and the idea of fertility appears as almost universally spread among multiple cultures, both Western and non-Western. The eighteenth-century silhouette, thus, permits and almost intersects both readings: the symbolic meaning of the hips, which we encapsulated in the fundamental value “fertility,” is apprehended through the reading of the garment in act, which appears as an act of enunciation, utilizing its plastic dimension to direct the gaze of the viewer to the sex through the composition of lines, shapes and topology – or, to reiterate Greimas’ (1984) proposition, the plastic composition of the dress, particularly its topology, contains the reading grid in itself.

After the examination of the dress and the undergarment, it is possible to interpret that those sartorial objects cannot exist unless they are an ensemble: the action of one complements and enhances the action of the other and, in the absence of any of those pieces, the intended configuration of the body cannot be achieved. In other words: the actions of each garment over the body and over one another constitutes a series of interlocked programs supporting multiple thematic roles that are interdependent. Equally, we identified several plastic opposing pairs

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3 It is a consensus among fashion historians studying the period that the concept of decorated underwear didn’t appear until the nineteenth century. For support of this argument (cf. Kunzle 2004; Lynn 2010; Steele 1996, 2001).

marking the relation between the *inside* and *outside* of dress: the exterior garment was fluid, heavy, shapeless and decorated with noble materials, whereas the inside was rigid, light, with a pronounced shape and not decorated, made of rougher materials – an ensemble of pairs that can be homologated to a theme of clear borders between the inside and out, through the display of contrary plastic attributes, which also communicate different gradations of “tension” (both physical and visual) in the garment and body.

Although both objects forming the underwear ensemble are, in their turn, opposed in directions and actions, the materials and anatomies they possess justify their union: both are constructed with a combination of rigid fabric (pasted linen or horsehair), strengthened with structures that correspond to the structures of the human body, alternating pliable (fabric) and rigid (boning) materials<sup>4</sup> to promote the construction of a “body over the body,” conferring a new shape to the silhouette, which is provided with reductions and extensions. That new formation is what grants the body the configuration that is expected by the dress, complementing the ensemble of objects which will, as a team, competencialize the woman in the achievement of her social performance.

The cascade of interlocked performances of each object, marking the status of those objects as interdependent actors that rely on each other for the achievement of their programs, remits back to the notion of thematic role presented at the start of this work. Not only the behaviors presented by all the actors – the body included – can be read as isotopic, but the interaction between those agents happens according to a predictable, expected program. One of the images evoked by Landowski when presenting the programming regime as a *fabric* is the idea of the movement in a clock (Landowski 2010): each piece depends on the action of the other to function and, should one of the pieces fail, the entire system collapses. In the system of dress described until now, such couldn't be truer: each part of the ensemble is dependent on the next for the completion of a flawless *toilette*, a precondition to the achievement of a flawless social performance.

In the programed action of the garment, the corset, and the crinoline, a programed configuration of silhouette can be established, conciliating the shape and topology expected of the feminine body (with increased hips, constrained waist, and the dress that manifests calculated instructions to the interactions with this

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4 Although no images could be included, the analysis refers to two objects also belonging to the Victoria & Albert Collection and in permanent exhibition at their Fashion Gallery: a pair of stays dated from the 1780s Britain, and a side hoop dated from 1778, also British, both manufactured in ecru linen and boned with whalebones (the stays), and cane and horsehair (the side hoops). Although variations occurred in the period, the materials of those two pieces are emblematic of the era and style (Hart and North 1998; Lynn 2010; Steele 2001), which justifies the selection of those two particular objects.

body). From the apprehension of those behavioral and interactional programs, it is possible to extract that the relation predicted between this body and other subjects remits back to the investment of a thematic role in the feminine subject, which is equally predictable or programed. The ensemble corset-crinoline-dress communicates a syntax of absence, represented mainly by the central void located in a position of privileged visibility in the dress. This lacking – the virgin, uninhabited uterus – relates to the feminine in search of the fulfillment of its thematic role – the filling of the uterus. As such, the garment appears as a silhouette enhancer, communicating the adherence to a narrative program of procreation, which happens through the “conquest” of a suitor and the union through marriage.

To sum it, the thematic role of the ensemble (dress and undergarment) can be uttered as the one of “creating a silhouette that is euphoric to the opposite sex.” In the eighteenth-century court logic, it is expected that the actor “garment” will act in the manner described so far: to make see (or not see) determined regions of the body with the aim of making do (or not do) other subjects. It is a role of the garment that concentrates in the creation of a silhouette that is attractive to the opposite sex – and this euphoric value of attraction is closely linked, in the plane of content, to the value “fertility” – and to encourage the prescribed interactions with this clothed-body. Equally, the body too must abide by a thematic role: the one of “submitting to dress” (and, by extension, to society). That means following the rules established by dress codes, including the wearing of hip-enlarging and waist-constraining underwear, to communicate the willingness to follow the broader social norms manifested by the garment – to be given in marriage, to produce heirs. Finally, even that performance is interlocked with other performances, this time the thematic roles of presupposed others, particularly the prospective suitors who must also abide by social and cultural norms that would ensure the continuity of this system. Although analyzing masculine dress was not the objective of the present investigation, not only the method used so far would permit such an exam, but it seems of interest to repeat the effort in the future, looking at the attire of men, and the extent to which it communicates a complementarity to the thematic roles of women.

## 5 From use to practice: the rhythm of fashion

Until this point, the work exposed the manner in which clothing can embody a thematic role and the extent to which the actions governed by a thematic role produce programed interactions between garments and the body, as well as clothed-bodies and others. However, the thematic role is only one possible role within the theory of interactions and, as much as any interacting actor can assume



different roles – thematic, corresponding to continuity; or catastrophic, governed by discontinuity – or be invested with different competences – modal, or directed at ‘making do’ (*faire faire*) other subjects; or esthetic, a sensitive competence of *making feel* – so can dress.

In my work about the corset, the analysis of a corpus comprising of three centuries of objects used to constrain the waist concluded that the different rhythms of fashion could be attributed to the transits in the roles played by dress and the body in the interaction, as well as in the different relations established between the roles of body and the roles of dress (Jardim 2014) – in other words, in the complementarity or not between those roles, the changes in Fashion aligned with transits through conformities, contradictions and contrarities of roles, can be interpreted as a search for restoring that perfect “equilibrium” that existed in the eighteenth century, or the perfect complementarity of all the roles we presented so far. Not by chance, the corpus analyzed then permitted the association of the persistence of a sartorial trend – as was the case of the body configuration analyzed in this investigation which persisted for around two centuries in Western fashion (Boucher 1967; Hart and North 1998; Kunzle 2004; Steele 1996, 2001) – with the persistence of other contextual factors: for example, ideas of femininity (Jardim 2014).

That conclusion goes hand in hand with the theory of interactions in which the purpose of the other three regimes of interaction – manipulation, adjustment and accident – appears, to an extent, as the one of returning things to a program – that is, at least, one of the many possible readings of Landowski’s schema (Landowski 2005). As the journey throughout the four regimes appears as a trajectory to restore continuity, in Fashion it doesn’t seem to be different and, perhaps, we could associate the hectic changes in the wardrobe to an effort to recover a social program likewise: since the emergence of the Industrial Revolution, constant innovations in fashion meant constant changes in the conditions of women and their relations with other actors and, consequently, radical transformations in and of the social fabric.

However, the experimentation with different roles (or different facets of the feminine role) is not the only matter connected to the different roles of dress. From a plastic perspective, the problem of roles assumed by materials, dress, and the body is also linked to the matter of experimental practices in fashion design – not only the so-called “experimental fashion,” meaning the deconstructionist and conceptual work appearing from the 1930s onwards and gaining strength in the 1980s but “experimental” in the pure sense of the word, of what is “. . . based on untested ideas or techniques and not yet established or finalized.”<sup>5</sup> When we

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5 *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “experimental.”

exposed a thematic role and how it was fully consolidated – for the dress and for the body – in a vogue where the *savoir-faire* of the tailors had reached a peak, we are necessarily discussing the matter of an established program, that includes the complete knowledge of materials and techniques permitting the production of results repeatedly, with the same outcome. This *use* – of materials and techniques, and equally of the body – is only one possibility in the interaction with fabrics, pattern cutting, and even of the body as a “support” of fashion. From the eighteenth century onwards, then, it is not only an alternation of different visual manifestations but an alteration of the *use* of garments and bodies, as well as their *practice* that confers rhythmic changes to the fashion system.

Landowski separates those two operations in consideration of the production of meaning emerging from each. While the *use*, for the author, is defined as a presupposed employment of an object, the *practice* relates to the production of a *surplus of meaning*, through exercising applications of an object that transcend its presupposed use (Landowski 2009). Deconstructionism is a radical example, in which not only the presupposed use of materials is questioned, but even the body itself is exceeded, a lively example being Yohji Yamamoto’s sleeves one cannot put the arms through. However, not all practice needs to be so blatantly conceptual: the mere idea of “misappropriating” a material and employing it elsewhere can be a form of practice, constituting experimental approaches in fashion: from the nineteenth-century employment of metal in place of whalebone in the manufacturing of corsets to McQueen’s use of bin liners for dressmaking. In fact, while the “correct application” of materials and techniques is often associated with the great masters of Parisian haute couture, particularly the ones from the past (De Marly 1980), the almost accidental *bricolage* and unfinished roughness of looks are the indisputable marks of subcultures and street styles (Hebdige 1979). Rather than oscillating through those two extreme poles – from thematic to catastrophic – the rhythm of fashion is more subtle, including careful passages which ensure a cycle of appropriations (of subcultural rebellion) and rejections (of the *status quo* of dress and manners) (Jardim 2020).

The importance of such cycles is not only the aesthetic advancements of fashion that we became so used to witnessing periodically but something relating to the intertwining of the roles of garments and the roles of the body: if garments become experimental and push the boundaries of the use, that means that the body too is freed, to an extent, to *practice* itself, challenging its own *use* in the social contexts we seem to be trapped in. Thus, the changes in Fashion we see throughout History can then be understood as a transformation of roles, in body or dress or both, that emerge from this “pushing of boundaries” that Landowski associates with the practice. Such forms of experimentation, on their turn, destabilize the totality of relations in a socio-cultural milieu, producing rhythms of

visual changes that are, at their core, communications of destabilized values that can be read as alternations of mainstream and subcultural values, or of fashion and anti-fashion systems which mutually appropriate one another (Jardim 2019: 70, 2020), while giving rhythm to the social times (Landowski 1997: 115) or recreating our notions of what is good and what is beautiful (Barthes 2006: 68; Baudelaire 1964: 3).

## 6 Conclusion

The work starts at the aim of promoting a semiotic analysis of historical dress that surpasses the examination of a history of fashion, while also reaching beyond the common practice of “looking for the meaning”: throughout the text, the objective was to present the reader with a structural study which recovers, through the semiotics of objects and practices, the histories of objects and practices which are captured from a different angle, revealed in their construction as a correlation of hierarchies. By examining an eighteenth-century dress and the foundation wear necessary for its accomplishment, the investigation reflected on the manner in which dress is linked to the construction of “functions” for different actors – human or not – and the extent to which such functions constructed thematic roles or isotopic behaviors that determine the actions and outcomes of different subjects, comprising, in our case, the fabrics and materials, the body, and their consequent social roles. More than homologations of values and manifestations, the case of dress was fundamental in the substantiation of such relations as communication praxes – rather than simple decoding of socially and culturally embedded sense.

An important part of our investigation links to the optical relations established between dress, the body, and different social actors, exploring the different modalities of seeing created in the dress. Our analysis has shown that the traditional type of dress uses visual relations to direct the gaze of the observer, creating narratives and communicating prescriptive behaviors about what to look at and the appropriate distances constructed between observer and observed. Moreover, the optical relations seem to guide the observer through the different hierarchical values invested in the body, constructing visual narratives that overlapped with the social narratives, creating the base from which social roles are constructed. Not only can we conclude the part played by dress was a central one but our work has presented the manners in which the system comprising the body, dress and society is formed by numerous processes that are interlocked and interdependent, governed by a regime of programming in which multiple thematic roles touch one another, promoting a logic in which each performance is dependent on one another, and the success of one actor relies on the success of the other.

However, the thematic role was shown to be only one of the many roles the body and dress can embody: since the eighteenth century, fashion has utilized different roles and competences of dress and the body to recreate itself, constructing rhythmic changes in which the body and dress show different degrees of conformity with established norms or with the roles invested in its interacting partners. By assuming different roles or being invested with different competences, Fashion has become experimental, both in a plastic-visual sense – that is, experimenting with newer configurations, materials, and silhouettes – but also in the socio-cultural level, by challenging the roles invested in the body, and the roles fashion itself can play in society.

Throughout the hectic pace of alternations in sartorial manners, from the early twentieth century to our times, the many transformations in the visual manifestations of fashion construct a conceivably false sense of “change.” It isn’t only the feeling, perhaps “postmodern,” that fashion (and history) are dead: in these rhythmic alterations of vogues, fashion itself – that is, the *system* – remains unchanged. Our case presented a deep analysis of the alternation of roles that we identify as the engine of rhythmic changes, inviting the questioning about the importance of analyzing how other roles – of *designer*, as well as *consumer* – are of critical importance to the understanding of our current social dynamics. The philosophies of the twenty-first century seem to be united in questioning the many broader systems that form our world order, such as “capitalism,” to which I add: isn’t it time we question the role played not by different “fashions,” but by *fashion*, as a system, either the ultimate addresser of our social order or at least the most important delegate subject of our economic system?

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