

**THE CORSET AND THE HIJAB:
THE DISCURSIVISATION OF IDENTITY
BETWEEN THE WEST AND THE ORIENT**

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DECLARATION

I declare that all the material contained in this thesis is my own work.

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300 YEARS OF BODIES AND CORSETS IN THEIR RHYTHMIC
MANIFESTATIONS: FOR A FASHION SEMIOTICS

Marilia Jardim

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**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 actualisations 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 material 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

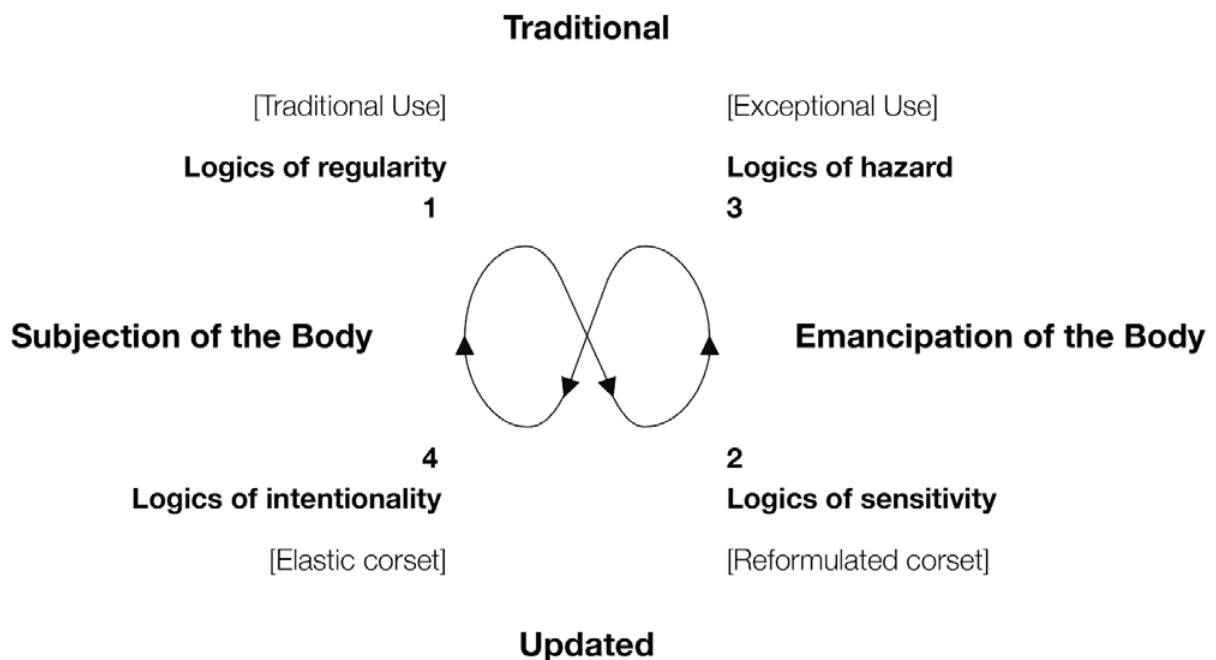
are equally invested with subjectivity, constituting a regime of manipulation: an interaction in which the passions of the other are scrutinised and utilised as motivations for *making do* [*faire faire*] the other (LANDOWSKI, 2005).

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.

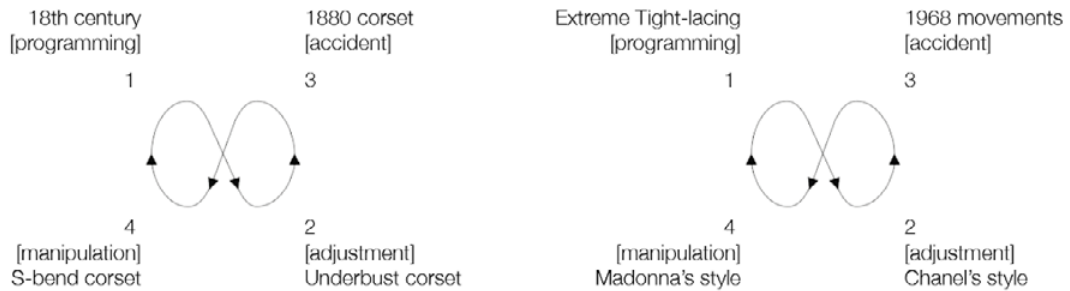
FIGURE 1 – FROM *O CORSET NA MODA OCIDENTAL [THE CORSET IN WESTERN FASHION]*: AN ARTICULATION OF THE SYNTAXES GOVERNING THE PASSAGES OF FASHION THROUGH THE DIFFERENT USES (AND PRACTICES) OF THE CORSET: TRADITIONAL USE (PROGRAMMING); EXCEPTIONAL USE (ACCIDENT); THE ELASTIC CORSET (MANIPULATION); AND THE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

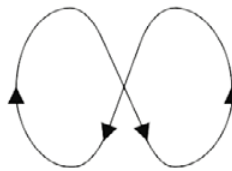
Logics of hazard

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

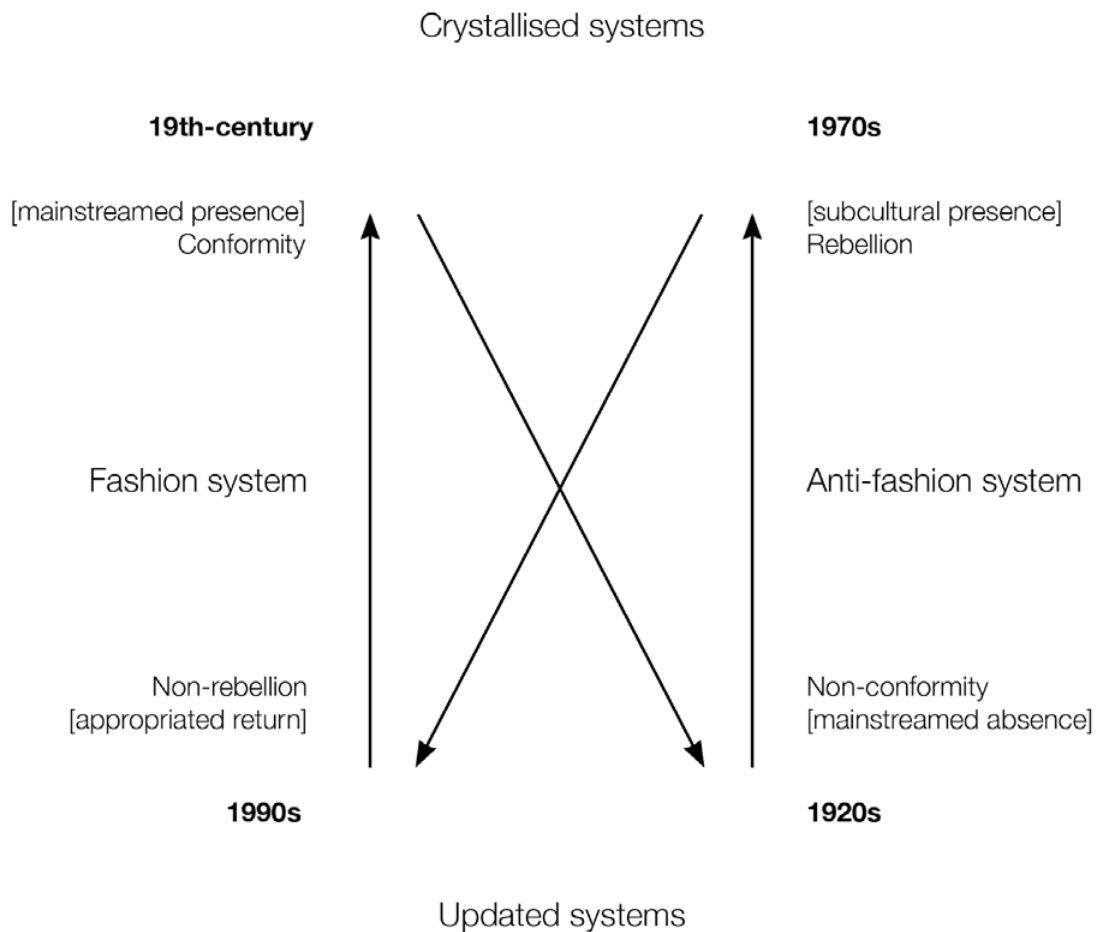
As the roles of body and dress change, the dynamics between them as interacting partners produce changes in the plastic of dress or in its discursive level. Those transformations can be described as the surfacing of narrative utterances to a visible (as well as audible, olfactory, and tactile) level: 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 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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Section 2

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THE PLASTIC OF CLOTHING AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF VISUAL
COMMUNICATION AND INTERACTION: A SEMIOTIC EXAMINATION OF THE
18TH-CENTURY FRENCH DRESS

Marilia Jardim

Publishing date: in press (2021)

The plastic of clothing and the construction of visual communication and interaction: A semiotic examination of the 18th-century French Dress

Marilia Jardim

Abstract: The article presents an account of the visual relations created by garments through their plastic formants (Greimas 1984), examining the role played by form, material, and composition in creating body hierarchies that produce prescribed behaviours between different subjects. The work dissects the concept of thematic role from the Greimasian theory, investigating the manners in which an 18th-century wedding dress presents the chaining of programmes governing materials, garments, and the body in the production of narrative interactions between subjects. The work utilises a combination of Greimas' (1984, 1986; Greimas & Courtés 1993) method with the visual semiotics continued by Floch (1985) and Oliveira (2004), as well as Hammad's (1986) Semiotics of Space which permit the exam of optical relations created in the body through its clothing—relations that can be read both as manifesting values that are historically and socially determined, or in the act of apprehension of an object. The 18th century provides a type of “original” case, whose results are pertinent to a broader study of the relations in-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: 18th-century; Thematic role; Programme; Fashion semiotics; Clothed Body

Introduction

When it comes to the matter of Fashion and many others, the 18th century is probably one of the most important moments in modern human history, at least for 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, on 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: 384-5), 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 18th century was probably the time in which the fate of clothes was sealed, consolidating their part as signifiers of social roles in the moulds 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 18th 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 19th 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 mould of arm or breast, but they mould 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 *programmes* governing the construction of such relations found in this dress seem somehow universal and generalisable: although Fashion changes, the need for interlinked programmes 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 analysed from the point of view of enunciation as it is theorised 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 analyse 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 18th-century costume that are “recognisable” (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 emblematises 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, colours, topology, and materials (Greimas 1984; Floch 1985; 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 (Author 2014). Hence, this contribution analyses 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 (Author 2019, 2020).

1 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 realisation of all narrative trajectories but one (1983: 63).

The idea of “behaviour algorithm,” or “...the totality of behaviours 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 *programme*, 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 programmes, or sequences of implications logically needed for the realisation of a base programme (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 programmes 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 programmes 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 programmes 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 18th-century French dress, the possibility of a repetitive outcome in the relation between body and dress happens in the combination of three programmes—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-be [*faire-être*] the subject: 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 analysing: 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 programmes, 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 behaviours constructed for them. As such, each one of the actors—body and garment—are, through sticking to their programmes, 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 dress¹: 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.

2 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

¹ 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.

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 2013).

Furthermore, and to an extent, the visual relations resulting from and happening in the interactions in-between body and dress possess the potential for producing different relations, as well as for investing the multiple actors—the 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 behavioural 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 programme 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 minimising those unflattering details, while creating volumes and emphasising 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 homologated² to a semantic investment of different parts of the body—an issue 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 analysed 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

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 & Courtés 1993: 174).

refers to. The concept of *topohierarchical organisation*—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, analysing 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 analysed using the same apparatus belonging to Semiotics of Text. Through the creation of euphorisations (and dysphorisations) 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 euphorisations 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 valorisation 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 organisations, 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.

3 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 which was considered the most representative of both the style of the period and the particular configuration of a silhouette 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 17th-century gown and that, although some minor transformations in colours 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 recognised as belonging to the 18th 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 topo-hierarchy of the bottom—where the silhouette is enlarged—over the top; and of the front—where the decorations are concentrated—over the back.

The hierarchisation of the front, where we find a larger concentration of decorations in the longitudinal centre, 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 programmes governing the construction of the body as an object, while also producing a programme 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 analysed (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 centre of the dress and that, from that point, our eye follows a trajectory from bottom to top, always through the centre, 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 18th 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 its 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 centimetres, 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 *realised body* (the naked body) and the *non-body*, which is actualised 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 centre, 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 analysed 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 in 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 centre 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 18th-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 jewellery—and the head; at the bottom, the suspension of the dress invites the interaction through dancing; and, finally, in the centre, 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 presentifies the most important role a woman would play in the 18th-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 behaviours.

3.1 The 18th-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 recognisable 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 18th-century technologies of pattern cutting and fastenings were limited, although rapidly developing (Boucher 1967; Hart & 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 analysed 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 decorations³. 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 centre 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

³ It is a consensus among Fashion Historians studying the period that the concept of decorated underwear didn’t appear until the 19th century. For support of this argument (Cf Lynn 2010; Kunzle 2004; Steele 1996, 2001).

appears as almost universally spread among multiple cultures, both Western and non-Western. The 18th-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, utilising 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 programmes supporting multiple thematic roles that are interdependent. Equally, we identified several plastic opposing pairs 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) materials⁴ 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, competentialise 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 programmes, remits back to the notion of thematic role presented at the start of this work. Not only the behaviours presented by all the actors—the body included—can be read as isotopic, but the interaction in-between those agents happens according to a predictable, expected programme. 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 programmed action of the garment, the corset, and the crinoline, a programmed configuration of silhouette can be established, conciliating the shape and topology expected of

⁴ Although no images could be included, the analysis refers to two objects also belonging to the V&A 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 & North 1998; Lynn 2010; Steele 2001), which justifies the selection of those two particular objects.

the feminine body (with increased hips, constrained waist, and the dress that manifests calculated instructions to the interactions with this body). From the apprehension of those behavioural and interactional programmes, 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 programmed. The ensemble corset-crinoline-dress communicates a syntax of absence, presentified 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 fulfilment of its thematic role—the filling of the uterus. As such, the garment appears as a silhouette enhancer, communicating the adherence to a narrative programme 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 18th-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 analysing 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.

4 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 programmed 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 constraint 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 in between the roles of body and the roles of dress (Author 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 18th century, or the perfect complementarity of all the roles we presented so far. Not by chance, the corpus analysed then permitted the association of the persistence of a sartorial trend—as was the case of the body configuration analysed in this investigation which persisted for around two centuries in Western Fashion (Boucher 1967; Hart & North 1998; Kunzle 2004; Steele 1996, 2001)—with the persistence of other contextual factors: for example, ideas of femininity (Author 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 programme—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 programme 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 finalised.” (Stevenson 2010: 616) When we 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 programme, 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 18th 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 19th-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), while 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) (Author 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, destabilise the totality of relations in a socio-cultural milieu, producing rhythms of visual changes that are, at their core, communications of destabilised values that can be read as alternations of mainstream and subcultural values, or of Fashion and Anti-Fashion systems which mutually appropriate one another (Author 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 (Baudelaire 1964: 3; Barthes 2006: 68).

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 18th-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 behaviours 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 behaviours 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 18th century, Fashion has utilised 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 20th century to our times, the many transformations in the visual manifestations of Fashion construct a perhaps 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 analysing 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 21st 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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Section 3

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HUMILITY AND IDENTITY: FIRST IMPRESSIONS OF THE HIJAB PRESENCE IN LONDON

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HUMILITY AND IDENTITY: FIRST IMPRESSIONS OF THE HIJAB PRESENCE IN LONDON

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Abstract: *In global cities, where the flow of immigrations and migrations increases year after year, fashion is possibly the first place where the marks of hybridisation and miscegenation can be apprehended. In the given context, and resorting to the scope of Socio-semiotics, this paper purposes a first regard of the matter of "modest wear" in London and other European capitals, where the use of the hijab - the head veiling worn by some Muslim women - awakens mixed feelings that vary from relative acceptance to the banning, by law, of such dress codes. All those manners of "dealing" with the hijab, though, fail to consider it, simply and yet not evidently, as a manifestation of fashion and personal style, based not exclusively on religion, but on individual choice likewise. That will be the purpose of this work: an attempt to address the hijab through the lenses of feminine identity, rather than religious convention.*

Keywords: *Muslim fashion; modest wear; feminine identity; niqab; hijab; Socio-semiotics.*

1. Introduction

When the word "Muslim" comes to one's mind, it's not difficult to imagine that the correspondent image representation of it will be a veiled woman. Perhaps consequence of the liberationist waves that started to rise after the 9/11 events, but that existed since the 19th-century colonialist movements, when the entire Western world seemed concerned about "freeing Middle-Eastern women" from their *burqas*, the exhaustive exposition of the image of women in veils was enough, over the last 15 years, to establish the role of the *niqab* as a sort of metonymic representative of the Middle Eastern world, and especially of the Islamic religion.

It was not, though, until I was 29 years old that I saw my first veiled woman: it was in London, in 2014, as I left my first English train, exiting at Edgware Road Station, in the West End. The profusion of women in *hijab* and *niqab* in that city, though, was not the main surprise: from the newspaper articles I had read, I was well aware of the large Muslim population in the UK, both from Asian, African, and Middle Eastern Origin, some of them immigrants arising from the conflicts in the Middle-East, but also an entire generation of British-born Muslims that have always lived here, though without abandoning the allegedly Muslim dress code. What caused me to fall into great and grave thought, however, was the fact that those women didn't seem to represent at all the narratives of oppression and sexism the media insistently displayed, when addressing the subject of "Muslim Women". To my eyes, the very first veiled women I saw didn't seem humble, oppressed, or victimised: they appeared to me, on the contrary, as dressy, elegant, glamorous... beautiful.

As I permanently moved my residence to London by the end of the same year, my life in the East End - first in Stratford, then in the Isle of Dogs, areas with a dense concentration of "Muslim communities" - comprised a daily, constant coexistence with veiled women. Some Middle Eastern looking, speaking languages still incomprehensible to me, but some clearly British born, and some even European converts, what unites them all is the sense of fashion, despite the modesty preached by their religion: their wonderfully draped and folded veils, always decorated, sometimes printed and colourful, sometimes black

and embroidered, always framing their beautiful faces carefully painted (even the *niqab* wearers always have their eyes densely outlined), accessorised with glasses, jewellery, and bags.

Many explain such dress code, the veiling of the hair, head, neck and, sometimes, the face, as *part of their religion*, something commanded by the Qur'an. This simplistic justification seems enough in most cases, to both explain the reasons for the veil, and to immediately classify those women as belonging to some sort of *fundamentalist/terrorist* background: it is assumed that they are *forced* into covering their heads like that, which places them in the category of radicals, backward, oppressed women. Which means one thing, and one thing alone: this lifestyle, represented mainly by the veil, doesn't belong *here*; more than that: it's not just unfamiliar, but a *threat* to the worshiped Western-European way of life, that preaches *freedom* among all things. And that is a threat that must be fought, as Saint-Just's timeless quote goes: "there's no freedom for the enemies of freedom."

Tracking the origins of such conceptions is not the objective of this paper - although we can imagine that the efforts of the media in selling such images of the Islamic religion are paying off, after almost twenty years hitting the same notes. Nonetheless, I will not have as my main concern the production of any statement pro or con the head or face veiling. Nor will I try to navigate the stormy waters of the debate pro or con religion in society. The purpose here is to expose that such judgements are not only uninformed assumptions that purpose to take the less than 2% of radicals as the whole of the Islamic World and Religion but mostly, they leave no room to handle the exceptional diversity of "Muslim dress code" that one can apprehend in a city like London.

I will, thus, prioritise the discussing of this topic from authors, such as Emma Tarlo and Shabana Ebrahim, who prefer to understand the *hijab* and *niqab* "phenomenon" as a manifestation of fashion, and not exclusively as a *religious garment*. And fashion is identity: the manner one chooses to dress, that is capable of revealing "who I am," my appearance to the world. This subtle, but essential transfer of scope, though, is not enough to eliminate all the prejudice and fear of certain concepts that the *hijab* and the *niqab* are still capable of evoking - some of those values, according to researcher and professor Leila Ahmed, invested in the object by Western culture, more than by the Qu'ran or the Islamic religion themselves (Ahmed, 2011). In the West, the veil is the garment of the Other - with the capital O, to evoke the ideas of Jacques Lacan (*passim*) - *par excellence*, and an undesirable other, even if a UK or EU citizen. The veil is perceived almost as a synonym of oppression, radicalism, sexism, and Oriental male cruelty, not to mention the commonplace lack of agency attributed to Muslim women; but also, nowadays, the mark of the refugee and the terrorist, the ones that had to run away from totalitarian societies, but also a manifestation of those societies and the danger they represent, as a source of conflict and violence, and in their reluctance to accept the *Western secular values*.

Unquestionably a mark of personal identity, more than the identity of a nation or religion, the *hijab* and the *niqab* are also a flag that signals a person as *the Other*, the *non-us*. But if transposed to its roots, the original, pre-Islamic dress code from countries like Saudi Arabia, Iraq or Syria, the *hijab* and *niqab* worn in London is also a sign of Otherness. The *hijab* and *niqab* wearers in the West, thus, are doomed to eternal alterity: their identity is neither the one of their place of origin, or their parent's place of origin; nor the one in the European cities where they chose to live.

Bringing the subject to the light of Socio-semiotics, our purpose is to conduct a brief analysis of those first, and somehow informal and exploratory observations, transposing the limits of pro or con the use of the *hijab*, or the simplistic addressing of the topic as a *religious matter*. This paper purposes to discuss the *hijab* and the *niqab* in London from the point of view of feminine identity: to what extent the almost emotional attachment to the use of the *hijab*, especially in environments where its use is not encouraged (or even restricted, banned), is connected to the construction of a personal, feminine identity, rather than a national or religious one?

This first approach is a perhaps shy attempt to cast a unique regard to such a complex problem of an identity that is essentially alterity, hoping to begin a discussion in which Muslim women will finally be perceived as subjects of volition (Greimas, 1983), or, to use the trending word, subjects invested with *agency*. Despite the will of the men or God, throughout this paper, the wearing of a *hijab* will be addressed as a religious, perhaps, but equally personal and, why not, political *choice*.

2. Challenging definitions: the *Hijab* and The Qur'an

hijab ► **noun** a head covering worn in public by some Muslim women. the religious code which governs the wearing of such clothing. Origin from Persian, from Arabic *hajaba* 'to veil'. (Stevenson, 2010)

HIDJAB ► **n.m.** - 1989; *hijab* 1984 - mot arabe, de *hajaba*, "cacher, voiler". Voile qui couvre les cheveux, les oreilles et le cou, porté par de nombreuses musulmanes. - On écrit aussi *hijab*.¹ (Robert, 2015)

Though acknowledgedly a synonym of "veil," *hijab* is defined, since the dictionaries, as a *religious garment*. Both in English and French – the languages of the two European Countries with the strongest Muslim presence today – the meaning of *hijab* is attached to the word *Muslim* [*Musulmane*].

In French, the definition is limited to the function of the object – to cover the hair, ears and neck – while, in English, a broader understanding is displayed, by including in the definition that *hijab* can also be the religious code that requires the wearing of a veil. From this simple difference between two definitions, we can extract a larger significance, relating to the degree of acceptance of the garment in England and France: while in the UK, more specifically in London, the veiled women seem to blend more with the Westerns, in France the *niqab* was banned in public spaces, and it is harder to see women wearing a *hijab* in the central areas of Paris. The degree of elaboration of the definitions can be read as a higher (UK) or lower (France) concern about the understanding of the traditions and beliefs of *the Other*.

The persistence of the attachment between *hijab* and the Islam took me to search straight in the source, The Qur'an, for the particular parts concerning the wearing of the veil. In the sacred book, there are four rules of women's dress code (Abdel Haleem, 2001; Ali, 2001), and surprisingly or not, none of them clearly states that a veil must be worn to cover the hair, ears and neck. The four rules are: to cover the intimate parts ("your nakedness") (7:26); to cover the bosom (or the cleavage) (24:31); not to reveal the beauty (24:31); and to lengthen the garment (33:59) (Abdel Haleem, 2011; Ali, 2001).

It goes without saying that those rules leave more room for interpretation than absolute certainties – one of the many possible explanations for the multifarious degrees of veiling one can observe among Muslim women, from no veiling at all to the *burqa* – the black garment that covers the body completely, head, face, and even the eyes, normally identified with the dressing tradition in Afghanistan.

In the website *True Islam* – a project dedicated to expose extremism by seeking information in the original versions of the Qur'an – it is brought to our attention that the *surahs* 24:31 and 33:59 are the ones normally used to justify the feminine veiling as a Quranic commandment, and thus, the ones who are more subject to corruption and manipulation. The website's interpretation of both *surahs* focuses on the absence of a clear statement that commands women to cover their heads with a veil, or simply the mere mention of the words *hair*, *ears*, and *face*. For the authors – though no names are cited, throughout the text it is clear that it was written by believers – the vagueness of God's word should be taken as God understanding that women should decide for themselves what is acceptable to reveal (when it comes to 24:31), and that God knew believers would live in different places and communities, making it difficult to state an absolute standard of length to the garments (addressing 33:59)².

In my research, resorting only to translations of the Qur'an to English, I came to realise it's hard to make different variations of the text agree. I will expose two versions of each of the *surahs*, and rather than accepting common sense or the ideas exposed at *True Islam*, I will conduct my own analysis of the text:

¹ "Arabic word, from *hajaba*, "to hide, to veil". Veil that covers the hair, the ears, and the neck, worn by numerous Muslim [females]. Also written *hijab*." [our translation]

² <http://www.quran-islam.org/> last access in 21 December 2015.

And tell believing women that they should lower their eyes, guard their private parts, and not display their charms beyond what [it is acceptable] to reveal; they should draw their coverings over their necklines and not reveal their charms except to their husbands, their fathers, their husbands' fathers, their sons, their husband's sons, their brothers, their brothers' sons, their sisters' sons, their womenfolk, their slaves, such men as attend them who have no desire, or children who are not yet aware of women's nakedness; they should not stamp their feet so as to draw attention to any hidden charms. Believers, all of you, turn to God so that you may prosper. (24:31 Abdel Haleem, 2011, p.222)

And say to the believing women that they should lower their gaze and guard their modesty; that they should not display their beauty and ornaments except what (but ordinarily) appear thereof; that they should draw their veils over their bosoms and not display their beauty except to their husbands, their fathers, their husbands's [sic] father, their sons, their husband's sons, their brothers or their brothers' sons, or their sisters' sons, or their women, or the slaves whom their right hands possess, or male servants free of physical needs, or small children who have no sense of the shame of sex; and that they should not strike their feet in order to draw attention to their hidden ornaments. And O you Believers! you turn all together toward Allah, that you may attain Bliss. (24:31 Ali, 2001)

Prophet, tell your wives, your daughters, and women believers to make their outer garments hang low over them so as to be recognized and not insulted: God is most forgiving, most merciful. (33:59 Abdel Haleem, 2011, p.271)

O Prophet! Tell your wives and daughters, and the believing women, that they should cast their outer garments over their persons (when abroad): that is most convenient, that they should be known (as such) and not molested. And Allah is Oft-Forgiving, Most Merciful. (33:59 Ali, 2001)

As acknowledged at *True Islam*, none of the two *surahs*, consulted in two different translations, mentions the words *hair*, *ears* and *face*, but rather vague words that may, or may not be interpreted as covering the head and the face: *charms*, *beauty*, *person* – this is probably the one that allows the most to justify the use of the *niqab* or the *burqa*. It is also surprising, in 24:31, the amount of exceptions to the rule of dress code, clearly stating that all the family circle – the parents, brothers, in laws, sons and daughters, nephews and nieces – and all the people in a woman's service – the *womenfolk*, the *slaves* (men included) – are allowed to see a woman outside her dress code. It is revealed, thus, that the dress code, whatever it is (not clear to be comprehended taking into account those two translations), is intended to protect women from strangers (i.e. outsiders from the family circle and those at their service, on 24:31) and non-believers (33:59).

But it starts to come closer to the topic we are willing to discuss in this paper – the Alterity as the main trait of an Identity – when it comes to 33:59, and the statement that believers should use their garments to be recognised as such (believers) and not molested/insulted. Though with subtle differences in the translation – in Abdel Haleem the chosen word is *recognised*, while in Ali is *known* – both translations agree that the function of a garment can be, as well as the one of an adornment or coverage, to *signal difference* – or, in the words of Landowski, to *make sign* of something (Landowski, 2004), in that case, their *faith*. This would agree with Ahmed's statement that the *hijab* and *niqab* wearers make themselves the most visible Muslims (Ahmed, 2011), which is discussed, in the documentary *Islam in Women* (2015), as the responsibility that comes with wearing a *hijab*, leading many women to postpone that step throughout their religious path.

This brief reflection allows us to return to the problem in analysis, the one of the wearing of the *hijab*, *niqab* and *burqa* in Western cities. Rather than accepting that the wearing of a veil is mere following a code (not clearly) commanded by the Qur'an, I will prefer to understand the *hijab* as a *sign* of something: despite any religious meaning the garment may contain, the *hijab* is the *expression of an identity*, which is partially related to the political statement of a *faith*.

Ahmed (2011), Ebrahem (2015), and Tarlo (2010) agree that the "resurgence" of the veil has a lot to do with the backlash against Muslims and the Islam after the events of 9/11: nowadays, the number of women in hijab and niqab is growing – and not diminishing, as it would be expected in a scenario of intense migration to the West, where no fundamentalist state has the jurisdiction to impose restrictive dress codes – as well as the number of converts to the Islam, even among European women. Thereof, the choice to wear a hijab appears as the will to signal something more than the religion, but the belonging to a minority and, as much as the Afro/Black Power movement in the 1970's, the hijab is also a form of activism and pride (Ahmed, 2011). For Ebrahem, the need of reaffirming a Muslim identity is essential in a scenario where hostility and prejudice against any person from Middle Eastern origins are abundant (Ebrahem, 2015): the hijab shifts, thus, from oppression to protest against oppression – not the one inflicted by "brown men against brown women" (Ahmed, 2011), but the one inflicted by the West against everything that contradicts their idea of what freedom should look like. To choose to follow a dress code viewed as radical and backward, when women are being judged and even antagonised by doing so, is the strongest manifestation of a desire to maintain one's identity, despite all the opposition such action may arouse.



Figure 1: Amur V Ruma is a famous USA based Bangladeshi blogger that constantly posts photos displaying her looks of the day, always wearing the *hijab* in an extremely fashionable manner, combining the veil with Western outfits. In this image, holding a poster that says "Covered in Freedom", Amur V Ruma repeats the gesture of many Muslim women, trying to expose to the West that what they call "modest wear" is not a synonym of oppression or repression of women, but a matter of freedom of choice of the own appearance. Source: <http://amurvruma.tumblr.com> (last access in 21 December 2015).

That activist and undoubtedly political persistence manifests, in London, in several different ways. From the extreme humility – the one-piece black *niqab* – to high fashion – the so-called *Mipsterz*, a über-chic sub-culture of Muslim fashionistas (Ebrahem, 2015) – the veil's presence in London is marked by the blend. Throughout all the degrees of piety and humility, the message stays the same: not only the opposition to what is sexism and oppression according to *their* culture and ideals – the hyper exposure of women to the

delight of men's gaze – but the constant, yet silent (re)affirmation of the right to be free to wear what one wants.

Such freedom, however, contradicts the *surah* 24:31 from time to time. The covering of the hair is justified as a means to veil the beauty, to hide the charms. And yet, the complexity of the veils, the accessories, the colours and prints, the extremely chic designer goods are, frequently, artifices that do, indeed, arouse admiration. In a fashion scene like the Londoner one, the religious meaning of the *hijab* is almost completely diluted, and even banalised – to mention the most evident, and even funny example, some widespread supermarket and pharmacy chains provide *hijabs* printed with the company's logo, as part of their "modest uniform", shifting the veil's meaning from expression of modesty to a canvas where brands can be displayed.

The other downside of modest wear in Western cities lies, again, in a cultural meaning shift. If, for Muslim men, the *hijab* is associated with modesty, the same may not be true to a Western man, that may see in the veil the erotic, the fetish of the different and exotic, as extensively explored by controversial French author Michel Houellebecq (2005, 2015). Again, it is important to recall Ahmed's claims that a lot of the meaning invested in the *hijab* is done so by Western cultures (2011), which kidnapped this visibility of a faith as a metonymic manifestation of "Islam": for Western eyes, a modest wearer may be perceived as submissive and bent to male's desire, which is certainly appealing to a still extremely sexist society (our society, in that case), that regards feminism as an excess of liberties that ruined the ideal relation between male and female.

From meanings of sexism and oppression, to sign of resistance and opposition to Western objectification of women, the *hijab* becomes more and more distant of the media narratives we are normally exposed to. When combined with the enigmatic messages in the Qur'an, it gets more evident that, when it comes to veiling, the commandments of the Prophet are the least of the problems. Fashion and personal identity, on the other hand, appear more and more like a decisive factor in the adoption of *modest wear* when living in cities away from home.

3. Identity vs. Alterity, Identity-Alterity?

In his work *Presences de l'autre*, Eric Landowski elaborates the Identity vs. Alterity opposition – an old problem of Standard Semiotics (Greimas & Courtés, 2012) – by exploring the possible forms of processing *the otherness of the other* in relation to the identity of a *we* (Landowski, 1997). For the author, the principle of Identity lies in the resemblance, the similarities that form the *I plus we*, while Alterity is the essence of what makes the other other, and thus, not part of the *we* (Landowski, 1997). On a similar fashion, François Jullien, in *The L'être au vivre*, reminds us that the origin of the word *identity* remits to *idem* and *entity* – or *same plus existence* – which creates the feeling of homogeneity and stability, from where notions such as resistance to change, and a "pure" European culture derive (Jullien, 2015). Those are useful notions, when considering the problem of the *hijab* regarded through the eyes of the West: the vision of covered women is a clear statement of *Otherness*, that flags more than a cultural (or national) identity that is distant from ours, but an extremely undesirable alterity, that brings in itself so many meanings of feminine oppression, religious fundamentalism, backwardness. For some, the idea of a "Muslim invasion" of Western Europe – another topic explored by Houellebecq's literature (2015) – appears as a true threat to an *European identity*, an argument that serves the interests of conservative citizens that are explicitly anti-immigration, and claim for the tightening of the borders and harsher anti-refugee politics all over Europe.

Though impossible to argue that the *hijab* produces – and perhaps will never cease to produce – the effect of *Otherness* in the West, it is useful to ask, regarding the question from another angle, if the veils we observe in the streets of London are capable of producing an effect of *sameness* in the country of geographical or cultural origin of the same women. It doesn't take extensive research to understand that this is also not true: a Muslim Londoner, if landed in Saudi Arabia or Syria, will produce the same effect of otherness in their "own" culture. It is so because sameness with a remote location, nationality, or culture, is hard, if not impossible to produce, regardless the efforts employed, and the resources available to accomplish such task.

Despite the endeavour of more rigid Muslims to wear "exactly" as they are supposed – East London is rich environment to explore "Muslim Fashion" shops, able to fit any purchase power, as well as all degrees of modesty – the very fact of being in another locality makes it impossible for one to stay the same. Even if one can find *hijabs*, *niqabs*, and other items of apparel imported from their home countries, the accomplishment of the syntagmatic chain that is *the look* is conditioned to other products: shoes, socks, gloves, handbags or backpacks. Not to mention that, in the UK specifically, the weather forces a dramatic change of attire, no matter if you're Middle-Eastern, Asian, African, American or European: the constant rain invites fabrics such as nylon to our wardrobes; the windy and humid fall obliges the wearing of raincoats and jackets made of felt, faux, leather; in the winter, boots and tights are mandatory.

The combination of strict Muslim garments – that can be identified with choices governed both by volition, by the desire of wearing in a particular manner; or by prescription, as in following a code determined by religion, or the will of the family and friends – and properly English garments – forced by necessity, such as the weather, or other factors, like work or school uniform; but also by volition: it is possible to choose one particular jacket, among all available jackets, to keep yourself warm – creates a new *fashion syntagma*. And this manifestation can no longer be categorised as "Muslim Fashion" or "English Fashion" or "Syrian/Pakistani/Saudi/Turkish/etc. Fashion": it's a unique manifestation, the expression of a personal style that combines pieces carefully chosen to compose a visual identity that is exclusive to its owner, the woman who wears it.

From religious to national, from national to personal, the path traced by the garment identity apprehended in a city like London slowly shatters the idea of a fashion syntagma governed solely by religious codes, or even the fidelity to a *national dress*, and starts to leave room for understanding the *hijab* as a personal choice that relates to the subjectivity and sensibility of the ones who wears it. More than identity to the origins and alterity to the country of residence, the "modest wear" of the streets of London can be interpreted as a complex term (Greimas & Coutes, 2012; Greimas, 1983) conjoining *Identity and Alterity*.

Such perception can be extended to any manifestation of street fashion, especially in global cities like London, where elements of a national dress get mixed and remixed with the mass market, fast fashion items, luxury goods, accessories manufactured by street artisans, vintage pieces collected from variety shops, and even items belonging to other national dresses in vogue. In a city whose foundations are the multiplicity of national identities, the *personal style* will necessarily be a carefully balanced combination of Identity – *your* national identity, the place you came from, or the place your ancestors came from – and Alterity – the otherness that makes you unique. And that includes modest (and un-modest) wearers.

Under such perspective, the *hijab* can start to be freed from its statute of *religious garment*, a *sine qua non* of Muslim wear, to become a part of a wardrobe that can serve both the expression of a faith – the sameness of a Muslim woman with other Muslim women, the connection between her and a community based on a religion – and one of the many expressions of a personal style – the otherness with the rest of the people, that ensures the sameness of the self, as well as the otherness with values rejected by one's conviction, such as the Western decadence and sexism.

4. Conclusion

To finish this brief reflection about the *hijab*, it is imperative to remember the meaning of being *from elsewhere*, even when you are European born. In her 2014 TED Talk, the writer and photographer Taiye Selasi discusses the fiction of countries and how the answer to the question "Where are you from?" is simultaneously a manifestation of power – if you are from a wealthy country this manifests more power, if you are from emerging countries, less power – and an implicit justification for the question "What are you doing here?"³ The speaker reflects about how one's identity lies less in what is said in a passport, and more

³ https://www.ted.com/talks/taiye_selasi_don_t_ask_where_i_m_from_ask_where_i_m_a_local?language=en last access in 21 December 2015.

in the personal experience: the places where you are "a local", where you perform your rituals, maintain relationships, and deal with restrictions.

Jullien will also remind us that, as it happens with languages, a culture that ceases to go through transformations becomes dead, and belongs only in the museum (Jullien, 2015). Therefore, the resistance to the manifestations in fashion that remit to the idea of Muslim – and this resistance is manifested, nowadays, especially in the myth of uncovering all Muslim women in order to save them from oppression – proposes a more retrograde approach than the very idea of women deciding to cover themselves: it is a belief rooted in the wish of staying same, attached to a culture that never changes, or an European identity that stays unaltered throughout the time.

The racial and cultural mix, on the other hand, are not only marks of immigrations and migrations - the unavoidable side effects of Globalisation and Glocalisation of our societies - but the natural course of a culture that is developing by welcoming what comes from the outside. And one of the possible manifestations of this blend, perhaps the most evident one, lies in fashion: as it has always been, the shock of different cultures produces influences and appropriations that become figures apprehended, most of the time, first in the apparel. Fashion has always been a privileged place of understanding the culture and values of a society, observing the ways the apparel choses to form the body (Kunzle, 2003), or how the colours, patterns and prints in vogue among a generation reflect the advances of science throughout the centuries (Boucher, 2010). In the 2010's it is not different, and it is our jobs, as Fashion Researchers - but also as Social Scientists and Ethnographers - to use the manifestations of Fashion right before our eyes as a means to understand our time and society.

In the 2010's, in Europe, the presence of the *hijab* is a fact, more than a possibility, as much as the necessary blend that this presence denounces. Instead of banned or resisted, the *hijab* should be celebrated, on the side of the courage and true agency of the women wearing it, as the veil speaks of a culture that is alive – not a Muslim culture, or a European culture, but a culture simply, which is a privileged place to understand how different nationalities and religions and *people* are going to manage to live together – to co-exist – in a Global Metropolis, and which new values and meanings are going to emerge from this shock. Therefore, it is not the role of fashion researchers or social scientists to cling to the pro or con the veiling of women dilemma, nonetheless to wave flags for Muslim women's "liberation". I believe that in times like ours, our field has more to gain by solely asking: what does this presence, on the side of the reactions and passions it awakens, has to say about our time and our society? Why are we so afraid of the veil?

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Section 4

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BEYOND THE FREEDOM VS OPPRESSION OPPOSITION: THE MEANING OF THE LONDONER HIJABISTA LOOK

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Beyond the freedom vs oppression opposition : the meaning of the Londoner hijabista look

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Hijabista: slangy neologism used mainly on the internet, a union of *hijabi* and *fashionista*, referring to girls and women who use the headscarf and, at the same time, are fierce followers of Western Fashion trends. The term, on the one hand, manifests a union between the following of a religious code, manifested by the use of the headscarf and modesty in dress; and the affiliation to high street and designer style. Although that could appear to be a simple combination, a matter of personal taste or, perhaps, a cosmopolitan take on Islam, the style encloses a contradiction: it implies, as this analysis purposes to present, that Fashion is worn modestly; and the headscarf is worn fashionably – a conflict concerning both the principles of Islam and the purposes of Fashion.

Both objects involved in the analysis reclaim justification, especially when it comes to the semiotic study of dress, which is typically dismissed as a topic of minor academic importance. Nevertheless, the matter has been a lively subject in the works of Algirdas Julien Greimas – starting with *La Mode en 1830*, his PhD thesis, and reappearing in *De L'imperfection*, his last individual book – and many of his contemporaries and collaborators – Roland Barthes, *Système de la Mode*; Jean-Marie Floch, *Identités Visuelles*; Eric Landowski, *Présences de L'autre*; to mention a few. As in many of the above-indicated studies, this paper uses dress as a starting point, inviting the analysis to focus on broader issues this particular manifestation of London's 21st century street style seems to put on display: the effect of migrations, the attempt at an intersection of different identities, the struggles for staying unique in a global and globalised metropolis. Inside Semiotics and other Social Sciences, the study of dress has proven to be of capital importance, as clothing and the presentation of self continue to be a privileged space to apprehend the conciliation of the irreconcilable.

A complex operation of combining paradigms to compose dress, as described by Greimas in *De L'imperfection* (1987) but also remitting to the polemic contract which is part of the canonic theory (1993) to match headscarves with high street Fashion goes beyond a feminine daily ritual. It challenges not only the fundamental levels of both systems – can Fashion be modest? Can religion be fashionable? – but seems to compromise the black and white relations created between Fashion and Religion, as well as West and Middle East as anti-subject of each other.

What is the meaning, thus, of creating a form of dress that unites two manifestations which became emblematic of each one of those geographic locations, traditions, and cultures? From the 1970's onwards, the returning to veiling became a powerful symbol of the Islamic movements in the Middle East, bringing back the headscarf to unveiled societies as a visible sign of the Islamic faith and customs. (Ahmed 2011). Useless to say that, more or less at the same time, in the late 1980s, fast-fashion started to gain speed, with Fashion becoming one of the leading industries in the West, with its brands, trends, and ideologies spread across the globe. The same industry, in a proper capitalist manner, sees no distinction of gender, race, or creed, with leading European fashion houses catering to the wealthy Oil nations, designing special modest collections featuring headscarves and other religious garments. On the pinnacle of that struggle, London, one of the world's Fashion capitals of our days, sees Muslim girls and women trying to choose the best from each tradition to create a form of dress which, in the hopes of embracing both systems, seem to deny them both simultaneously.

Such a complex object became widely available to the mainstream audience in 2015 when H&M entered history as the first brand to feature a *hijabi* model in one of their campaigns. This one second – the approximate duration of the model Mariah Idrissi appearance in the video – is the main corpus of this work. Although such choice may seem fragile, when it comes to exemplifying a practice, the life those frames gained far beyond the original video justifies its pertinence as an object of study: in a campaign featuring other celebrities (such as rock legend Iggy Pop), and in the sea of H&M adverts appearing in the same period (including two videos dedicated to established celebrities, such as TV personality Kendall Jenner and former footballer David Beckham), Mariah Idrissi’s appearance made it to the headlines of papers all over the globe, with most articles featuring the image we chose to analyse. Secondly, whenever those articles discussed Idrissi’s appearance – and that includes anything from a fundamentalist Islamic perspective to xenophobe anti-Islam points of view – that image was the one served as the main course. The reiterations of that frame made that one second eternalised in the press and social media, converting it from individual choice to the emblem of a practice.

The chosen image will be described and analysed in its visual aspects, following the works of Jean Marie Floch on plastic semiotics. Appearing in Floch in the study of other bits of the Fashion system, the notion of *bricolage* from Claude Lévi-Strauss will be fundamental to this paper, as much as the Socio-semiotic works of Eric Landowski, mainly his writings examining the use and practice of objects (Landowski 2009). As the year invites us to honour the works of Algirdas Julien Greimas, this paper will focus his production relating to dress, especially *De L'imperfection*, as well as his detailed studies of the anti-subject, presented in *Du Sens II* and the *Dictionnaire*. Adopting a standard semiotic method, we will study the oppositions encountered in our object, and the extent to which the phenomenon observed in dress can be emblematic of social practices, reflecting how the composition of an appearance can provide visual manifestation of broader cultural contexts.

1. Fashion and Islam, subject and anti-subject

In the summer of 2015, the Swedish Fast Fashion giant Hennes & Mauritz launched a 1 minute 30 seconds video to their « Close the Loop » campaign, promoting the brand’s effort to encourage customers to recycle their unwanted clothes in store, in exchange for a £5.00 voucher. The video features dozens of different people, from various ages, sizes, genders, races, colours, ethnicities, faiths, famous and anonymous, while the voiceover prescribes formulas to break the established rules of dress. The ad closes with the sentence: « There are no rules in Fashion but one: Recycle your clothes ».



Figure 1. Mariah Idrissi models for H&M *Close the loop* campaign, in a performance lasting only one second¹.

¹ The few frames with Idrissi feature the long shot seen in this image and a face close-up. Idrissi poses in front of Peters & Co. Gin Palace at Broadway Market in East London, wearing an emblematic example of the street style

The big sensation behind the video, however, was undoubtedly the appearance of Mariah Idrissi (above), a British-Moroccan-Pakistani woman who became, at the occasion, the first model to wear a *hijab* in a Western fashion campaign. A quick search on the newspaper database *Nexis* returns fifty-six news articles in the period between 1st September and 31st December 2015 mentioning Idrissi and her appearance at H&M². The same period saw the launching of H&M campaigns, one featuring Kendall Jenner – which produced mere two mentions in the international press³ – and football legend David Beckham – appearing eleven times in the news of the same period⁴. Such result is remarkable, considering that unlike Jenner and Beckham, who are well-known celebrities starring one-minute videos exclusively dedicated to them, Idrissi was known only in social media, mainly among other Muslim girls and women who followed her accounts about Muslim beauty and fashion.

Besides breaking into the media for her one-second appearance in the video like no other participant in the same campaign did, it is important to stress that the image above was also featured in most articles mentioning Idrissi and H&M, and many more if we exclude H&M from the search. As such, what used to be one second in a 1'30" video became an eternalised frame, with repetitive appearances in news and social media to date (back to *Nexis*, Idrissi's appearances on news count three hundred fifteen, between 1st September 2015 and 27th October 2018), meaning likewise that a significant portion of the debate surrounding the mixing of *hijab* and fashion after the H&M video happened around that particular image. As such, it is possible to claim that single frame is an emblematic enough corpus to permit an insightful analysis of a practice, even if it refers to one person alone: one who was forced to count for all in the media discourse.

With her appearance paired with the voice-over « Look chic », she wears high-waist, wide-leg black culottes, a cream top, cream boots, oversized rose jacket, a simple black handbag, hands and wrists heavily accessorised with a golden wristwatch, bangles, and rings. The face features light makeup, with terracotta shades of blush and contour, and light pink sheen lipstick, complemented with oversized round sunglasses. Dressed like a typical Londoner for spring/summer 2015, the only detail separating Idrissi from other fashionistas is the *hijab*: a printed cream, burgundy and dark brown neckerchief, with a geometric print suggesting simultaneously a Middle Eastern pattern or a classic *pied de poule*, wrapped around her head and neck, playing the roles of both veil and scarf, modestly covering the head, or ostentatiously adorning the neck, falling through the chest and waist, adding print to the predominantly solid look.

Continuing, Idrissi is leaning against the jamb of a restaurant on the side of Peters & Co. Gin Palace, a popular location in Broadway Market – a hipster site in East London's Borough of Hackney. In the background of our model, a number of typically British elements catches the eye, even in the brief space of the frame: Union Jacks, the Gin Palace, the small pieces of paper advertising « small pie and mash £3.00 » – markers providing sufficient context to

this paper aims at analysing. Image: screenshot of the video « Close the Loop – Sustainable fashion through recycled clothes, » 0'55" from 2nd September 2015. Available at:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s4xnyr2mCuI> (Last access: 17th November 2018).

² Nexis results page available at:

<https://www-nexis-com.ucreative.idm.oclc.org/search/homesubmitForm.do#0|BOOLEAN||||>
(last access 11/11/2018)

³ Nexis results page available at:

<https://www-nexis-com.ucreative.idm.oclc.org/search/homesubmitForm.do#0|1|BOOLEAN||||>
(last access 11/11/2018)

⁴ Nexis results page available at:

<https://www-nexis-com.ucreative.idm.oclc.org/search/homesubmitForm.do#0|1|BOOLEAN||||>
(last access 11/11/18)

confirm this scene happens in Britain or, more specifically, in London. In this carefully chosen location and staging, a British-born Moroccan-Pakistani woman wears a headscarf, leaning against a small restaurant, evoking the image of the small business and the immigrant – another powerful element of a Londoner identity.

A perfect emblem of Fashion in the cosmopolitan capital of the United Kingdom, no doubt, Maria Idrissi in those brief frames of an H&M ad is also an emblem of the slang *hijabista*. The look created for the video, although the work of a stylist, is not at all distant from the way Idrissi presents herself in her social media⁵, even before the sudden fame granted by her appearance. Her 84.8k Instagram followers⁶ receive many images of her looks, clothes and makeup: always very fashionable; always urban, on the streets, shopping; and always wearing the headscarf, which appears in different colours, folds, and styles, always a part of the look, rather than a mandatory item of religious dress. The idea of a combination of two worlds, thus, is suggested both in the video and in the model chosen to feature in it. From her personal story – a daughter of immigrants, mixed-race, British-born Muslim – to the way she chose to present herself, between the world of Fashion and the world of faith, the negotiation of two systems of value is present and manifest in her virtual persona.

In *De L'Imperfection*, Greimas addresses the act of dressing oneself as the conjunction of the pressures of nature, especially its social representation, and the pressures of culture (Greimas 1987). For the author, the matter of nature, or function, relates to issues of comfort, or the problems posed by the weather; while social pressures relate to a context to which a woman belongs, the environment and circumstances that woman will face. If in Western Fashion the second dimension, the one of society and culture, could be read as one context, in the image of oneself created by the *hijabista*, that dimension is split in half: one half which tries to cope with the appropriateness of the religious code of *hijab*; and the other attempting at responding to the Western ideas of beauty, style, newness, and respect to trends. In other words, when it comes to the specific look we are analysing, the social context cannot be perceived as one, especially because this « context » tries to conjoint two symbolic spaces which are opposed in their fundamental levels: the space of consumption, the sacred space.

Still in *De L'Imperfection*, Greimas addresses the desire to please the other, which is the foundation of the act of dressing, as an operation of *seduction*: the risky adaptation of the image a woman has of herself, and the one others will make of her. The same word is used by Landowski in *Les Interactions Risquées* to describe one of the four possibilities in the mechanism of manipulation: to seduce is to focus on the euphorisation of the manipulated subject with the view of making that subject want [*faire vouloir*] (Landowski 2005). Again, the word relates to the *image* the manipulator makes of the manipulated (id. p. 22), but also the image the manipulated has of oneself, or whether or not they are at the level of the positive simulacrum the manipulator attributes them. In the case we are presently analysing, the idea of image relates strongly to the concept of « presentation of self », meaning the aesthetical result is important: the final look, aiming at adorning the woman who wears it, creates an image of self which aims at aligning with the prevalent simulacra of beauty and appropriate curation of an appearance.

However, the same word will have a different use outside the scope of Standard and Socio-semiotics: in this risky combination between Fashion and Religion, *seduction* can have both euphoric and dysphoric values. For the Western system, to seduce seems to be the ultimate goal, both in the operations described by Greimas and in the regime of manipulation presented by Landowski, both concepts firmly rooted in the Fashion operations. For Islam, on the one other hand, seduction in both senses is something to be avoided: in fact, the idea of modesty

⁵ Her public account can be assessed at:

<https://www.instagram.com/mariahidrissi/?hl=en> (last access 12/11/2018)

⁶ 12/11/2018 count.

in dress, for both men and women as prescribed in the Qur'an⁷ relates to the need of preserving the decorum, and avoiding the incitement of *fitna* – a word for the chaos caused by unrestrained feminine sexuality, in one of its many meanings (Shirazi 2003).

No matter how clear that boundary could be for a modest wearer, it is important to remark that in the eyes of the West, the veils could be perceived as sex appeal, erotic fetish, or even something to instigate the sexual desire, rather than preventing it. Similarly, modesty includes, in the Qur'an, avoiding to display adornments⁸, which is an opposite operation to the one performed by Fashion, which encourages adornment to create/enhance beauty. Therefore, to merge both Islamic faith and Fashion in one look not only means to respond to two system of values with opposed views on what to do with adornments, but it also means a risky attempt at dealing with concepts – such as *seduction* – which are perceived as euphoric to one system, and dysphoric to the other.

Many authors studying the veil today are emphatic when it comes to its marked opposition to what is named a « Western way of life » or « Western decadence. » (Shirazi 2010) Well, aren't beauty and Fashion the epitome of such decadent way of life? The feminine discourse on the veil today is marked in that sense when it places itself in direct (and sometimes radical) opposition to the ideas of display of beauty, or the mere existence of beauty as a measurement of feminine worth. Fashion and consumerism appear as the same side of this coin, its denial emerging as a new form of feminine liberation (Tario 2005).

Taking the previous paragraphs into consideration, it becomes clear how a social narrative is outlined, in the best Standard Semiotics style, with both discourses adopting the role of the hero, and pointing the Other as the anti-subject. In Greimas, it is precisely in the ethnic literature that the opposition between subject and anti-subject is coded as a moralist dualism between good and evil (or positive and negative) (Greimas 1983) the same dualism re-utilised by the media in the addressing of Islam in the West, or the West and its Westerners in the Salafist Islamic ideology.

The dance between subject and anti-subject is further explained in the *Dictionnaire raisonné de la théorie du langage* as the *polemic* [*polémique*]. In that work of Greimas and Courtés, it is suggested that the polemic relates to the social life as confrontation, which could be the competition between social classes, or the exchange and social cohesion (Greimas, Courtés, 1993). That describes precisely the point we are trying to expose, by observing the use of the solid (ecstatic?) opposition of subject and anti-subject, or the polemic structure, in the narratives of the social conflicts between the Secular West and the Islamic East. Greimas continues his analysis by mentioning that such a clear opposition is neither necessary nor general, especially when characters stop being exclusively good or evil, but located in the sub-contraries *deixis*. Back to the hijabista, in a historical moment when the dominant discourse continually tries to push the absolute opposition between East and West, the brief frames of Idrissi leaning against an emblematic London location create not a conjunction of contraries or complex term, but a contradictory meta-term, or neutral term.

2. Engineers and *bricoleurs*

Contradiction, rather than opposition, is the most appropriate word to describe what happens in the hijabista look: it is not an accumulation of opposed identities, but an operation of union in which the base opposition is diluted. By making Fashion modest, and modesty ostentatious, the resulting effect builds a relation of double denial (neither, nor) of the base opposition. Departing from a contrariety between Fashion – a term which stands for the West,

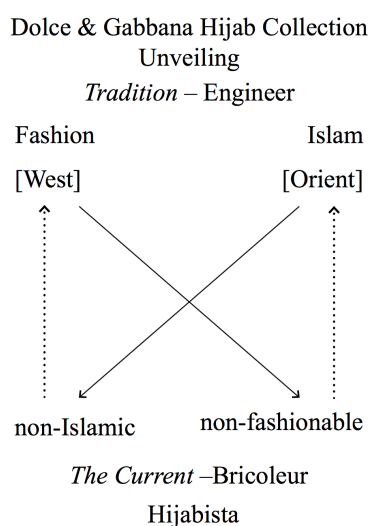
⁷ See the *surah Al-Nur*, 24:30 and 24:31, in which the Prophet addresses first men and then women to require modesty in the gaze and dress. Abdel Haleem (2004 222).

⁸ *Ibid.*, 222.

and Islam – the Oriental or Middle Eastern term, we have two systems which manifest what Claude Lévi-Strauss named the *engineer* (1962). Fashion and Islam, when presented at their best, are the result of organised systems without limits when it comes to power, knowledge and means. Following Lévi-Strauss, the work of the engineer subordinates each task to the acquisition of tools and materials according to each project (*ibid.*, 27-29) which translates the position occupied by both Fashion and organised religion, especially today.

What Idrissi does – which is similar to the doing of every Muslim girl in London following this style – fails to comply with both systems. The manner in which religion and Fashion are used relates more closely to another concept borrowed from Lévi-Strauss: the *bricolage*. Opposed to the *engineer*, the *bricoleur* creates from scraps and residues of other projects, subscribing to a mentality in which things can always have a use. The weakness of *bricolage* – but also its poetry, according to the author – is that the result of the *bricoleur*'s doing is never what was planned, due to the limited possibilities and the barriers of what cannot be executed.

The operation executed by the hijabista, thus, transforms not only the meanings and values of the objects she chooses to compose her look – with neckerchiefs turned into headscarves, oversized lines used to disguise the silhouettes, and so forth – but the meanings and values belonging to the two original systems are also transfigured. On the one hand, the use of the objects belonging to Western Fashion in a « modest » manner results in the creation of a subcontrary term Non-Fashionable, with the repurposing of the items causing the loss of the ostentatious value originally intended by its creators. On the one other hand, the same occurs when the strict religious dress is recreated using non-sacred items, with the choices in dress appearing as Non-Islamic (as well as Non-Oriental, considering this happens in a Western country and using garments created within the Western Fashion system). The *hijabista*'s look, thus, unites not Fashion and Islam, but the Non-Islamic and Non-Fashionable terms, with a neutral term resulting.



What is done by the hijabista speaks very closely to another innovative manifestation belonging to the scope of Fashion, analysed by Jean-Marie Floch in *Identités Visuelles*: the Chanel Total Look (Floch 1995, 107-144). Following Floch's analysis, Coco Chanel's attempt at uniting opposing values – Classical and Baroque – results in the denial of both, with choices occupying the axis of subcontraries' rather than merging in a complex term. Following Lévi-Strauss, Floch proposes such visual identities are created by bricolage, an operation which he explained as « making new with the old ». When analysing the corset in

Fashion systems in my 2014 work, the category I proposed resulted in two meta terms, a complex term manifesting *tradition*, and a neutral manifesting *the current* (Jardin 2014). Looking at the analysis presented above, it is possible to see that the discoveries I presented then can be overlapped to the present analysis, in which the *engineered systems* – Fashion and Islam as an organised religion – can be named the axis of *tradition*, whereas the doings of the *bricoleur*, the hijabista, appear as the axis where *the current* is produced: a statement which recaps a long history of street styles as opposing the hegemony of the Fashion system, through the neutralisations of its traditional oppositions, especially those relating to class and gender.

To validate this proposition, we must consider that both Fashion and organised religion are heavily regulated systems, which dictate the expected behaviour of its followers strictly, even when their prescriptions aim at breaking their own established rules – and that includes the changes in Fashion as much as the many dress reforms Islam experienced throughout the Westernisation of Middle Eastern countries, or the different interpretations of the Qur'an co-existing within the religion. Which means that, if a complex term between Fashion and Islam was to be presented, it wouldn't be the fragile (and yet current) *bricolage* appearing in the hijabista style, but a manifestation incorporating the power, means, and knowledge of both Fashion and Religion: two possible examples would be the process of unveiling and adoption of Western dress happening in the late 19th- and early 20th-century in Middle Eastern countries; or the union *de facto* between Fashion and Religion presented by Dolce & Gabbana in their 2016 *Hijab Collection*, in which each item of dress is carefully crafted to serve the purposes of religious modesty. In both cases, the assimilation of each system is complete, successfully merging both terms in one, unsurprisingly, traditional manifestation, creating and reproducing a new tradition, or a new heavily regulated system responding to long-established rules.

The hijabista, on the contrary, not only creates the new – through the operation carefully described by Lévi-Strauss and Floch, where their identity is exposed by the materials they choose and the figures they evoke – but creates such by rejecting the rules of both systems simultaneously. In intention, perhaps the aim was to achieve the complex term, and a double relation of belonging, simultaneously subscribing to two opposing ideas. Unavoidably, in the attempt at reconciling the irreconcilable, a new value emerges, one resulting from the neutralisation of the tradition of both systems: mainly, the idea of Islam as Oriental and modest, and the idea of Fashion as Western and ostentatious.

What is observed in the responses to this form of identity provides colour to the semiotic analysis: both systems evoked in this look respond with scepticism, with religious peers believing the excessive use of Fashion is something harmful to the commandment of *hijab*, while, on the one other hand, the resistance to the term « Modest Fashion » implies the incompatibility of both words. Even if the hijabista is marking in her look the double affiliation to Fashion and Religion, both systems tend to resist in recognising this affiliation, at least in their traditional versions, which must belong as opposed terms in a base opposition.

The neutralisation of at least two oppositions – West vs Orient, Fashion vs Islam – can be gauged in most elements composing the look in the image. The trousers, for example, could be interpreted both as culottes, which became very fashionable in 2015, or a reference to the traditional Pakistani dress; the scarf chosen by the stylist to (re)create Idrissi's look possess prints evoking both Western and Oriental traditional prints, and its use relates both to the sacred covering of the head, or the profane use of scarves in Fashion; thus the modesty finds its way through the fashionable use of oversized lines, a mark of Western Fashion since the end of the 1970s; and the fashionable is created in the appropriation of elements belonging to the scope of the exotic, remitting to the vogue of Orientalism, inaugurated by Paul Poiret's

view of the Ballets Russes in the 1910s and his overall fascination with the East (Milbank 2005). Which is the correct order of influence, however, is impossible to determine.

Notwithstanding, it is possible to affirm that this style is *admired*, especially when compared to what is named traditional Islamic dress – terminology generally used in London in reference to the *niqab* or the *chador*. The careful blending with Fashion, thus, helps the secular Westerner to accept ideas considered disturbing, alien, irreconcilable with *our* way of life – another argument for our analysis identifying the *hijabista* with the denial of tradition. That goes hand in hand with a matter we discussed above, the opposition Subject vs Anti-subject which, today, appears as fixated, with the West and its way of life identified with the hero of the narrative. Through the neutralisation of fundamental values achieved in the look, the confrontation between West and East, as well as the one Freedom and Oppression no longer makes sense. Rather, the very domain of such oppositions is the one of *tradition*, the black-and-white distinctions relating to heavily regulated systems. The *bricolage* of the *hijabista*, on the one other hand, communicates current conceptions of hardened terms, updating the expressions and contents of Fashion and Religion, operating within the contradictions of what it means to be free, and what it means to be Middle Eastern today.

Although the meta-opposition between *traditional* and *current* appears as isotopic in my work and seems to resolve the analysis presented in this section, it is also pertinent to ask if the uproar about this appearance relates to beauty created by the look, versus our crystalised idea of the «Muslimwoman». For Greimas, the appearance of things has the virtue of allowing us to glimpse the possibility of something beyond the meaning. It is evident, in the object of this investigation, that such possibility relates to the generation of the aesthetic value, which is something that urges to be studied separately. Here, we relate this value to the surpassing of the *use* of headscarves, which we will analyse in detail in the next section.

3. The practice of Hijab, the practice of Fashion

At the end of his section discussing dress in *De L'imperfection*, Greimas leaves us with the problem of *use* and *usury*. The *use* will be defined by the author as a functional utilisation, which « (...) transforms sensible gestures in insignificance (...) » (Greimas 1987) whereas *usury* is what corrodes the moments one wishes to dedicate to what could be called « life », implying that the other things we do, the repetition of a routine, are something other than life. The overall conclusion is that the iterativity (or repetition) threatens to become the dominant dimension of life. By observing the analysis we presented so far, it is possible to read that the act of dress performed by the *hijabista* positions itself in the opposite direction of the *use*, at least in the sense Greimas attribute to the word: it is, perhaps, the exit presented by the author as what « life » is, and not iterativity of the same gestures, uses, routines.

Landowski revisits the theme of use versus practice in his paper *Avoir prise, donner prise*: similarly to Greimas, he will define *use* as the utilitarian utilisation of something, according to the « correct » manner of doing so (Landowski 2009). In the context of our object, it is possible to say that the correct use of a headscarf is one according to the commandment of the Qur'an, preserving the charms, hiding the beauty or the person: a modest use. Fashion, likewise, has a correct use, one which will respond to its regulations relating to the rhythm of changes it imposes, as well as with the ideas of body and presentations of self created within its system – even when those predominant ideas appear as the denial of previous rules. What happens, however, when the ostentatious use of a headscarf, as we have been discussing throughout this work, is introduced? Or when the Fashion system is blended with codes of modesty, and items of dress considered as costume, instead of fashion?

Many strict Muslims will claim that the fashionable use of *hijab* doesn't observe *hijab* – the word in its correct use, not meaning « the headscarf » but the moral conduct related to the head covering. Another possible claim is that the headscarf use made by women who dress hyper fashionably is « not correct » precisely because it surpasses the expected use of a headscarf. Likewise, and as previously mentioned, the terminology « Modest Fashion » is rejected in the West, where it is preferred to use « dress » or « wear » to refer to the type of clothing coping with religious codes. The manifestation analysed in this work, thus, seems to belong to the domain of what Landowski defines as *practice*: not only the repetition of the use with the view of perfecting the performance but the use in which the object is perceived as a partner which inter-acts with the performing subject.

In such relation, it is not the object (or the performing subject) who possesses the aesthetic value: it is in the union between the performing subject and the object-partner, and in the elevation of such practice, that the surplus of meaning is generated. For Landowski, the performer who develops the performance *with* an object to such level becomes the *virtuoso*, someone whose practice of an object surpasses the utilitarian utilisation of the same object to then invest it with aesthetic value. If we adopt this reasoning, it is possible to say the hijabista becomes twice a virtuoso: she is a connoisseur of both Fashion and Islam, performing in the edge of both systems. Her practice of both Fashion and *hijab* is admirable and full of aesthetic value precisely due to the mastery with which she combines elements belonging to both traditions, twisting the meanings of both. As a result, a new meaning is added to the one of fashionability and religious piety: a modest beauty, or perhaps, the beauty in modesty.

In this manner of dressing, the meanings of Fashion, and Islam and its commandments, are slowly stretched and (re)constructed in act, with new functions discovered in the object beyond its expected use. The line between one system and the other is challenged and, simultaneously, opposing and contradictory values are freely appropriated and rewritten: between flaunting and clouding, the meanings of clothing are *practised*, instead of *used*, to both accommodate and challenge established ideas about fashionability and religious piety.

Back to the beginning, Landowski himself evokes the importance of seeing beyond oppositions. The author remembers us, for example, that even if dichotomies are useful, they aren't definitive. That can lead us back to the problem of subject and anti-subject, which could be interchangeable, depending on the point of view adopted in the narrative. Or perhaps, we could recap Landowski himself in *Presenças do Outro*, where the idea of alterity is dismembered in several possibilities, beyond the opposition between one and the Other (Landowski 2012).

In that text, the author explores that, although every subject seems to need a *he* which is imagined as distant and foreigner, so that the *I* can be constructed by difference, there are no given borders between us and the Other, even though the dominant discourses insist in pushing such solid oppositions as definitive truths. Back to Idrissi, it is evident the effort of H&M in stating the lack of borders between West and Orient, not only through the composition of the look but the general staging of the scene. Throughout the sequence, the idea of union is pushed, rather than the separation.

As such, perhaps what is done by Idrissi in her look, and then validated and reproduced by H&M in their campaign, could be read as the *practice of Fashion* as well, opposed to its use. Under that light, it's not only the religious values which are being hijacked and bent but also the values and meanings of Fashion. Just like the neutralisation of both systems – Fashion and organised Religion – seemed to reverberate as neutralisation of a Subject vs Anti-subject opposition, here too the practice of Fashion and Hijab reverberate in the denial of the *use* of other values, such as nationality, ethnicity, and race.

The creation of this look denies the oppositions, or the *negotiations* surrounding the delicate relations between East and West. Rather than explicitly attempting at mediating the not always peaceful ties between East and West, the hijabista evokes both values and many more, making their union the value, rather than a strategic (perhaps engineered?) combination between both. Through the adjusted practice between the performer, Fashion, and Islam, the result is the *esthetic* union of both elements, both contexts, both traditions, and the emergence of a new aesthetic value arising from the act of union, and not from economic transactions of objects of value.

Our investigation started from a commonplace opposition when the issue of women and Islam is debated: the matter of « freedom versus oppression », followed by the idea that each term can be homologated to the Secular West or the Middle Eastern culture and custom. The manifestation we chose to analyse, on the contrary, challenges another opposition which unfolds from the first, one between Fashion and the Islamic religion which, as we hope to have argued, is neutralised through the performance of the hijabista who, like the Lévi-Strauss' *bricoleur*, creates the new with the old.

The static values from the base opposition – Freedom vs Oppression, but also West vs Islam, Fashion vs Religion, Subject vs Anti-subject – belong to an axis of *tradition*, which is reproduced through what we called, following Lévi-Strauss, *engineered systems*: the ones with means and materials to develop their projects with precision, which is the case of both Fashion as a system and an industry, and organised religion. The street style we analysed, on the one other hand, is formed through the *bricolage* of both systems, a process which causes the bending of the original uses of objects and meanings, thus creating *the current* as a meta-opposed neutral term.

Expanding from those concepts, it is possible to gauge that the neutralisation of the values of Fashion and religion in the look, which are replaced by the contradictory non-Fashionable and non-Islamic uses of objects, culminates in the neutralisation of other oppositions as well, which includes the idea of Subject vs Anti-subject from the fantastic tale analysed by Greimas, which seems out of place in this visual identity.

Between villains and heroes, the form of presenting oneself we analysed in this paper introduces forms of composing an appearance which denies the utilitarian use of objects, privileging their *practice* instead. Such practice, used in the sense Landowski attributes to it, happens throughout the elements in the look, from « hijab » as a name-of-use, to the manner in which Fashion is used religiously, and the religious requirements are used fashionably. According to the author, it is in the practice that meaning is created: through freely practising all the elements of her dress, the hijabista becomes the virtuoso, capable of adjusting both the values from Fashion and Religion, a performance which is then validated and reproduced by a giant in Fast-fashion retail, which makes us question how long the traditional values of the industry will be able to survive in the 21st-century.

When Fashion becomes *modest*, and piety becomes *trendy*, both Fashion and Islam are challenged, inviting the one who apprehends this look to reconsider the meanings of objects inside and outside their own systems, as well as what they can mean in the eyes of the Other. Beyond the ecstatic opposition « freedom versus oppression », understood as a solid binary West vs Islam reoperated in the moralising « good vs evil » observed by Greimas, we find the aesthetic axiology as the agent revealing the freedoms of Islam and the oppressions of the West, without, however, completely reversing the original meanings of both systems. Would it then be possible to argue that the dilution of so many oppositions could be the path to the

dilution of Otherness? That this form of dress brings the Other closer to us, by exposing the fragility of *tradition*, versus the poetry of the *current* which is born from a bricolage?

What is possible to state, from now, is that the performance of the hijabista exists in the fine line between one and the Other, a performance which, attempting at conjoining Fashion and Faith without compromising none, results in the compromise of both. Nevertheless, it is impossible to deny that is precisely in the risk of such performance that the aesthetic value is allowed to emerge. In Greimas' aesthetic accident, the hijabista lives away from the mere practical use of an object, or the usury of repetition, showing through the composition of her dress the *échappatoire*, the exit to her portion of the lived life.

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Section 5

4º CIMODE – CONGRESO INTERNACIONAL DE MODA Y DISEÑO

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THE CORSET AND THE HIJAB: ENUNCIATION, INTERSUBJECTIVITY, AND
DRESS

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THE CORSET AND THE HIJAB: ENUNCIATION, INTERSUBJECTIVITY, AND DRESS

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Abstract: *An important topic within the field of Fashion and Urban Studies today is the problem of dress as a form of communication, and its role in determining intersubjective relations which are the foundations of social interactions between subjects. In the global city, the problem of cultural difference and miscomprehension is added to this relation, especially when it comes to the matter of feminine dress and the forms of feminine identity resulting from it. Looking into the not always peaceful relations created between Western and Islamic feminine bodies in the global cities, this paper examines the corset and the hijab as a starting point to analyse the different layers of communication established between body and cloth, and different clothed-bodies. A theoretical investigation, this work adopts the theories of Greimas, Husserl, and Said, investigating the possibility of approaching dress from an intersubjective point of view.*

Keywords: *Enunciation, Corset, Hijab, Intersubjectivity, Orientalism, Socio-semiotics.*

1. Introduction

One of the dominant narratives in our media today relates to the irreconcilability of an opposition, born perhaps back in the day of the colonial expeditions: the one between West and the Orient. The way in which this opposition is presented, reiterated, and scrutinised, is largely connected to the problem of dress: different from other forms of cultural manifestation, which require time to be observed and assessed, what we wear is immediately available to the gaze of others, and is also the first place where an idea of *who we are* starts to be formed.

It is important, thus, to begin by admitting this paper departs from the premise that dress can be understood as a form of communication, and clothes are not mere inanimate objects: the theoretical scope in which this work is written admits that actants are not just humans, but could be anything or anyone acting or suffering action. Dress, thus, has a strong case to be understood as an active subject in human communication, not only because it “speaks,” to a certain extent, but because it works *on* and *with* the body, transforming its silhouette, its shapes, colours, textures, and topology, and negotiating, meeting the body half-way to create an appearance.

The delicate exchange established between body and cloth is the first layer of an intricate process of communication, in which the result of the relation between body and dress is the starting point to the interchange between subjects, which forms the broader relations we call “society.” On the side of being an important form of intersubjective exchange and communication, dress could be read as the foundation of social intercourse, if we consider its ability to create prescribed forms of interaction. What one wears, to a large extent, determines the manners in which other bodies and subjects should interact (or *not* interact) with them, which comprises their gender, their social conditions and roles, their place in the world.

At the global metropolis, another challenge is added to this complex interactive chain, which is the one of cultural miscegenation and contamination, but also cultural miscomprehension. In cities where people from all the corners of the world have to find ways of living together, codes belonging to different cultural systems are freely read and interpreted, and become a fertile ground for both collaborations and polarisations. In this chaotic context, two historical objects, and yet strongly present in our day and age, the

corset and the hijab seem to continue to be key techniques of femininity, and, at the same time, strong emblems of the cultural systems in which they were born.

Epitomising an entire set of ideas and ideologies relating to women and social roles, the corset and the hijab are not as opposing or contradicting as we like to believe they are. Sharing more characteristics than we like to admit, both forms of clothing bear the weight of their worlds in their shoulders: forced to mean “everything to everyone” in different moments of their history, both “objects” possess a complex trajectory as techniques of femininity which carry, in their manifestations, prescribed behaviours of both the one who wears and the ones who gazes, and the simultaneous meaning of freedom and oppression. Likewise, both forms of dress encompass moments of “rise and fall” of societies, being associated with both the “golden era” of a certain social configuration, and the backwardness of its institutions – both meaning the ultimate oppression of women, and their struggle for emancipation.

The complexity of the bold parallel we aim at establishing in this paper demands methodological and theoretical flexibility and, following the singularity of the global city and the identities it produces, we propose an intersection of theories and concepts which are, at times, perceived as irreconcilable. Looking into the Structuralist Semiotics and Linguistics from Greimas and Hjeltmslev, the Phenomenology of Husserl and Merleau-Ponty, and Said’s work on Orientalism, this paper addresses the place where oppositions are so wide they meet at the other side. Structuralism and Phenomenology, West and Orient and, finally, I and Other, our aim is more than “merging” theoretical approaches and opposing terms, but to look into points of dialogue. A task started by Marsciani, who investigated the overlapping aspects between Husserl’s intersubjectivity and Greimas’ enunciation; and Sara Ahmed, who crisscrossed Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology and Said’s Orientalism, our work will also look into their insights, in an attempt at outlining a possible theoretical approach to our object.

Far from being the result of finished research, what is presented here contains more questions than answers, as is the nature of any work-in-progress. The following items, thus, attempt at laying the first stones on two problems, which relate first to the approximation, rather than opposition, between Western and Islamic techniques of dress (and, consequently, of femininity); and the possibility of an intersection between Semiotics, Phenomenology, and Orientalism in the study of enunciation, intersubjectivity, and dress.

2. Enunciation, Intersubjectivity, and Dress

In the *Dictionnaire raisonné de la théorie du langage, communication* is defined as a form of intersubjective exchange in which meaning and signification are produced (Greimas & Courtés, 1993, p. 45-8). Therefore, the concept doesn't relate to the mere transmission of knowledge, but to an act performed between subjects. One of the structures through which communication happens is defined, still in the *Dictionnaire*, as *enunciation*, which is addressed as a “situation of communication” and a “mediating instance” through which the virtualities of language are put in discourse (Greimas & Courtés, 1993, p. 126).

Although concerned mainly with verbal communication, it doesn’t require effort to understand the possibility of employing the same concepts in the study of dress: the apprehension of the clothed body is, likewise, an act of *enunciation*, as much as the communication established between dress and body can be understood in the same fashion: the entire relationship determined by dress is pervaded by acts of communication, in which dress and body signify, in act, through their interaction with each other, and the interaction between clothed body and the body which apprehends. The idea of communication as an act is, likewise, one common to both theories we are attempting at intersecting in this work, as well as the matter of mutual presupposition uniting the subject of Enunciation, and also the presupposition between expression and content. In *Phénoménologie de la Perception*, Merleau-Ponty addresses the problem of *exterior fixing* and the *thought* in language, in which the word appears as the act through which both instances are brought to realisation as a presupposed pair (Merleau-Ponty, 2000, p. 863, 868), in a similar fashion to Hjeltmslev, who not only clarifies that expression and content form a relation of mutual presupposition, but that there is no expression without content, or a form of content which can be apprehended without being manifest (Hjeltmslev, 1971). More importantly, Merleau-Ponty’s treatment of

the word can also be approximated to our treatment of dress, in which this work not only recognises dress as a performing subject in the narratives of the body but, likewise, clothing can be understood as more than the “dress of the body,” as the word is seen, in Phenomenology, as more than the “dress of thought” (Merleau-Ponty, 2000): word and dress, far from being “empty vessels” carrying the “thought” or “content,” form a presupposed pair with those elements, without which the act of communication wouldn’t be possible.

A core conceptual idea, thus, unites both schools of thought when it comes to the analysis of manifestations – which Phenomenology calls the “exterior fixing”, and Semiotics “expression”. The idea of enunciation, fully developed in Greimas, is already suggested in Merleau-Ponty when he claims there is no “person who speaks,” but a flow of words which are produced (Merleau-Ponty, 2000, p. 861) – the idea of communication which takes place in act and in presence, instead of a situation of communication in which there are fixed instances of “sender” and “receiver.” Furthermore, the notion of this absence of a “person who speaks” opens the possibility of understanding the idea of role interchangeability.

As noted by Francesco Marsciani in *Soggettività e Intersoggettività tra Semiotica e Fenomenologia*, Greimas’ notion of the *enunciation subject* is not the enunciator alone, or the one who speaks, but the presupposed pair, enunciator-enunciatee, and the established solidarity between them (Marsciani, 2013; Greimas & Courtés, 1993). Marsciani moves forward, by overlapping this notion with Husserl’s concept of intersubjectivity, in which the roles of subject, object, and other are also interchangeable: one individual can be simultaneously the “I” in his own narrative, but the “you” in an enunciation act, or the “he” of someone else’s world (Marsciani, 2013), a notion not distant to the conclusions I reached in my work about the corset when stating body and dress can also interchange the roles of subject and object, depending on the point of view adopted in the analysis (Jardim, 2014).

Thus, there are grounds for expanding the concept of communication to acts of intersubjective exchange other than verbal language, and also to address clothing not as an *object*, but as an *actant* – the one who performs or suffers the act (Greimas & Courtés, 1993, p. 3), and which can assume, in the interaction, the role of enunciator as well as the one of enunciatee. It is important to repeat, however, that the roles of the presupposed pair enunciator-enunciatee are in constant interchange throughout the act of enunciation, and the same is true when it comes to understanding dress as an enunciation act: body and dress take turns, the body at times shaping dress and being shaped by dress at others, and vice versa.

Such relation, however, is not limited to the dynamics between body and dress: the clothed-body, formed through the union of body and dress, is also a term which can assume both of the roles in the enunciation act, or to exist within the interchangeable role of subject and object in a broader social logic. It is in the different layers of this complex interaction between body and dress, and clothed-body and other subjects, that the social role of dress is denounced. In other words, dress can *act* both as the enunciator end of communication – the one more commonly identified with the expression in communication – and as the enunciatee, which “receives” the messages from the body. And so can the body be both expression, the one who speaks to dress, and call, the one who “receives” dress; and, finally, clothed-body, as one actant subject, exists likewise at both ends in its intersubjective exchange with other actants in society: as much as the differences in gesture, which more than denouncing different cultural backgrounds in subjects *are* those different cultural backgrounds (Merleau-Ponty, 2000), the differences in dress likewise both denounce different means of living one’s own religion, freedom, or femininity, but can also be read as the presentification of such manners of living.

Moving forward, a central topic for both our research problem and Phenomenology is the matter of the I and the Other, which was exhaustively discussed by Husserl in his *Cartesian meditations* (1982). In this *Fifth Meditation*, the phenomenologist unfolds the matter of how man understands the world and his surroundings from the point of view of the “absolute I,” which is “primordially constituted” versus everything alien to him, which is perceived as “secondarily constituted” – a phenomenon he defines as the “law of oriented constitution” (Husserl, 1982, p. 133-4). He continues to examine how this manner of orientation creates relations in which one, the “I,” becomes a central member, whereas other subjects appear as a “given horizon,” an understanding which the author himself expands into the problem of the contact and appreciation of other cultures.

The idea of oriented constitution is definitely the motto of Sara Ahmed's work *Queer Phenomenology*, where *orientation* is further linked with the idea of *oriental* as the one who needs to surround what is central (Ahmed, 2006), or, as the one who is in the horizon, rather than the centre (Husserl, 1982). Such idea is what makes the bridge between Husserl and Said possible: both authors are addressing layers of discourse in which subjects do not exchange in equality, but where hierarchies are already established and operating, defining that there are subjects which are central and *others*, which are secondarily constituted. Although vaguely defined in the *Dictionnaire* as "non definable," but "interdefinable by the relation of mutual presupposition" the concepts of identity and alterity (Greimas & Courtés, 1993, p. 13, p. 178-9), or the hierarchy of subjects in a narrative is explored vibrantly in *Du Sens II* (Greimas, 1983), where the relations of subject and anti-subject are defined and studied. In *Les actants, les acteurs et les figures*, Greimas explores the matter of the I and the Other in the instances defined *subject* and *anti-subject* which are, in literature, often dressed with binary relations of *good* and *evil* (Greimas, 1983, p. 52). It is not difficult to see how such notions relate to Husserl's analysis, and equally, how the same logics are transposed to the daily life when it comes to the confrontation of cultural traditions.

Yet another touching point in which the three theories are intertwined is the notion of *simulacrum*. As all the three theories agree with the separation between "real" subjects and their image or manifestation, or yet their instances which are projected in the discourse, Said talks as if he addressed the concept of *addresser* (Greimas & Courtés, 1993, p. 94) when he claims the image of the "Orient" is created by and for the West (Said, 2003). In the words of Husserl, the same phenomenon seems to be identified, even if the phrasing is not as straightforward as Said or Greimas: "'In' myself I experience and know the Other; in me he becomes constituted – appresentatively mirrored, not constituted as the original." (Husserl, 1982, p. 149). Indeed, the idea of a mirror or a reflex is one strongly marked in Said's study of the relation between Orient and West (Said, 2003), which can remit back to the idea of a intertwined presupposed pair (Greimas & Courtés, 1993; Merleau-Ponty, 2003), and also to a social form of oriented constitution (Husserl, 1982).

Therefore, the addition of the concept of Orientalism to the equation exposes the complexification of the relation we aim at mapping in this work: the different layers of communication established between bodies and garments, and dressed bodies and *other* dressed bodies; and finally, the intricate cultural, hierarchical layers created in the relations between primordial "Is" and secondarily constituted "others," dominant and dominated. On the one hand, the exchanges between body and dress continue to play a role in creating meaning in the interaction between clothes and the one who wears them and, together, body and cloth construct meaningful appearances which determine, to a large extent, the social interactions of and with bodies. However, such manifestations are no longer determined by the relationship between body and cloth itself, or read within the same system of values producing those manifestations: the intersubjective exchange between Western and Oriental bodies happens, in today's metropolis, in presence and in act, and such "alien" manifestations are apprehended according to opposing systems of values.

A challenge, thus, is posed to the problem of dress as communication: in the Babel Tower of contemporary cities, where different nationalities, languages, and customs are forced to live together, clothing is probably the first place where miscomprehension happens, where codes are no longer able to be read "correctly," but are necessarily apprehended "out of context," outside the systems in which those manifestations were once imagined. Secondly, to speak of contemporary culture is, necessarily, to admit contamination, resignification, and dessemantisation, in a moment when dress tries to go the opposite way, striving to ressemantise meanings long lost: the ultra-femininity of the Victorian Era as the epitome of a "Western way of life," on one side; and the ultra religiosity of the Islamic Revival, as its nemesis.

3. The Corset and the Hijab

More than forms of dress chosen "by chance" from the two cultures we are aiming at comparing and placing into a situation of communication, the corset and the hijab are emblems of dress and other cultural practices born in their respective cultural contexts. Apart from manifesting ideas and techniques of femininity, or "typical appearances" of women in this or that geographical location, corset and hijab also manifest ideas of intersubjective exchange, by prescribing manners in which bodies should be apprehended or inter-acted with. In other words, I chose those two techniques of dress and feminine appearance due to

a particular characteristic uniting them both: the manner in which they form the body, through the establishment of a multilayered communicational process comprising the relations between the subject and their dress, but also by deeply affecting the acts of communication the resulting clothed-body will both suffer and perform.

Starting with the corset, our extensive work about that form of clothing revealed its imbricated connection with the concept of the procreating female: by altering the proportions of the body, the reduced waistline creates an important visual contrast, which produces the effect of enlarged breasts and hips, a plastic composition associated with the idea of increased fertility, combined with the potential to bear and give birth to children (Jardim, 2014). Throughout the corpus of dresses we analysed then, the most traditional manifestations of the feminine body in Western culture prescribed procreative, heterosexual interactions with the clothed-body, aiming at highlighting the places of the body relating to its fertile, sexualised places. Such visual operations happened through relations of topo-hierarchy (Hammad, 1986), a concept borrowed from the scope of semiotics of space, but appropriate to a study framing the body as a topological object: in a nutshell, dress creates operations of thymic valorisation of spaces in the body, signifying its importance over other places, which result in the privileged visibility attributed to them through the acts performed by the dress.

Centuries after, it is possible to perceive the resistance of such forms of topo-hierarchy of the body, when large breasts and hips combined with small waists keep coming back into mainstream culture and Fashion, even if the so-called “high fashion” continues to reject such bodies (Church-Gibson, 2011). A controversial topic, in times of *Slutwalk* and its slogans which claim “my body, my rules,” but it is important to revive Greimas, when he claims: “That the complex isotopy of the discourse is provoked by the conscious intention of the speaker, or that it is installed at its source, it doesn’t change a thing at the very structure of its manifestation” (Greimas, 1986, p. 98, our translation). Therefore, intentionally or not, the meaning created for and by those manifestations, as well as the prescribed relations which accompanied that appearance, survive and continue to replicate themselves. Not by chance, this form of dress was fiercely attacked by the First and Second Waves of Feminism, the 19th century claiming for clothes which didn’t include “differentiations between the sexes” (Tillotson, 1873, cited in Steele, 2001, p.60); and the 1960s focusing their efforts on gender-defining articles, mostly dress which purposed to promote a conformation of the body and its resulting appearances, in the figure of Miss America (Hanish, 2007).

However, is it possible that to claim the same, when it comes to the hijab? When regarded as objects acting over the body, and producing prescribed formulas of apprehension and interaction, corsets and their variants seems to be closer to veils than us secular Westerners would like to admit. To begin with, both garments are recognised (and recognisable) forms of defining gender, as well as their presupposed roles in society: the corsets preoccupied with the reproductive potential, even if its action over the body can be responsible for the opposite outcome (Kunzle, 2004; Steele, 2001), while the veil, by preaching sexual modesty, manifests a similar concern with procreation – worried, however, with signaling that the woman is *not* available, but reserved to her one legitimate husband, an operation identified by Leila Ahmed with the origins of patriarchal societies in the Middle-East and their concern with passing on states and wealth (Ahmed, 1986). By doing so, both garments impose a certain form of seclusion, which creates an ambivalent value invested in women, signifying simultaneously their superior and inferior status. I will explain myself.

In both societies, Western and Middle-eastern, seclusion is associated with leisure and social privilege, for obvious reasons: if part of a family is kept in the privacy of the home, it can only be because there are financial means to do so. Therefore, even if the corset became popular among other social classes during the 19th century, and the hijab is widely seen among working women, then and now, in its roots, the extremely laced waist (Steele, 2001; Veblen, 1994) and the heavily veiled woman (El Guindi, 1999; Mernissi, 2011) are both associated with a superior social condition, because they are directly connected with a physical impossibility of producing manual labour. However, the mere possibility of seclusion presupposes the “male provider” who can keep that woman in seclusion in the first place. In its roots, thus, both garments are invested with contradictory and ambivalent values, which can also be read as a contradictory and ambivalent feminine condition existing in both societies and cultural systems simultaneously.

As for the prescribed interaction, the veil fulfils the same role of determining how a body is supposed to be seen – or, in this case, *not* seen – and interacted with, even if doing so through a different manifestation. In opposition to Western society, in which mixed social contact between men and women is encouraged and the space where potential pairs are to be met, Islamic societies are based on the segregation of the sexes (Ahmed, 1986, 2011; El Guindi, 1999; Mernissi, 2011), and any “mixed” contacts should be limited to a minimum, ideally only between spouses, in the intimacy of the home. The heavily veiled body, thus, prescribes an interdiction of social contact – as stated by Mernissi, the veil marks the symbolic invisibility of women in the public space (Mernissi, 2011), which explains why it is worn in public only, where such interdictions must be reaffirmed.

Regarding topo-hierarchy, it can also be argued that in the same manner as the corset, the hijab constructs a body and prescribes a form of gaze. The silhouette created by the veil redirects the gaze, again, to the outside of the body; when fully veiled, the monochrome, mono-material covering the body creates the shape of an arrow, which points outward and to the top, reiterating the religious commandments to preserve modesty, and reminding the one who apprehends that body to look above, to the divine, instead of below, to the profane or carnal aspects. The “contemporary” version of the veil, the commonly seen headscarf, used in combination with regular, Western dress, carries in itself a reduced (symbolic?), but similar prescription: by framing the face and creating a topo-hierarchy of the head, the attention is removed from the body and the reproductive potential of that woman, signifying her unavailability to sexual contact, and is relocated to the head: in both Western and Islamic systems of values, a space signifying the mind, the knowledge and faith.

Therefore, not only both garments appear as united in their syntax and semantic, but they both appear as privileged spaces to study intersubject exchanges. Firstly, the body and its dress, at least in the past thousands of years, appear as a presupposed pair; secondly, the exchange between those two instances, the body and the dress, can be read from at least two points of views, in which the addresser and the addressee – or, perhaps, to use the phenomenological lexicon, the primarily and secondarily constituted subjects – are not fixed, but a matter of orientation. Which means, at times, body and dress can exchange who occupies the dominant role, and who assumes the dominated (or oriented) role. However, not all dress is born the same, and the same relations of hierarchy permeating intersubjective exchanges in communication and society apply to cultural artefacts such as clothing.

4. Occident and Orient

As previously mentioned, the intersubjective exchange between those two forms of dress, which emblematises two opposed or contradictory systems of values, doesn't take place in the space of equality, or free interchangeability between enunciator and enunciatee. The global city has one defined *addresser*, and it is the West: replicating the mentality of imperial days, the centre of the world continues to be Europe and, more recently, the United States, and the positions in the interchange between subjects are fixed, so much so that the West is positioned as an absolute “I,” and other cultures are objects populating *their* world, or secondarily constituted elements belonging to *their* horizon.

The mere use of the terminology “occident” and “orient,” in a world that is a globe always in movement, is indicative of the crystallisation of narrative positions. Sara Ahmed explores such issues in *Queer Phenomenology*, through the deep examination of both words, describing the relation between *Orient* and *Orientation*: the *Oriental*, thus, is the one who needs to find their way using a reference point, which is fixed – the West (Ahmed, 2006). Such ideas of the Occident as a reference point surrounded by those who are *orienting* themselves pervades all the layers of cultural interactions: *our* way of life is a reference point, synonyms with the good, healthy, advanced, and civilised, and *others* are judged and measured according to the Western ruler. That is not less true when it comes to the matter of dress, and the cultural meanings it carries: the European idea of how each sex needs to be clothed, from the 19th century onwards, is more or less established as the idea of *correct* – or even *neutral* – form of *contemporary* dress.

From the semiotic point of view, it is possible to say such hierarchies are marked by thymic components, in which what is dominant, or more Western, is perceived as more euphoric, and what is dominated, or more

“other” is perceived as more dysphoric. Not differently, adopting a phenomenological perspective, it is possible to identify that what is Western is normally identified with what is primarily constituted, whereas what is “other” is identified as what is oriented, or as what needs to find orientation – which almost always means to be “Westernised.” However, what do we make of manifestations containing ambivalent values, as we have seen is the case with both the corset and the hijab?

It seems, at least when it comes to dress, that ambivalence is not to be resolved through a deeper examination of the values being manifested, but something judged almost exclusively from the rule of the *I* and the *Other*. Which means that, when it comes to those “complex” feminine issues, just to be something belonging to a Western tradition permits that manner of clothing to have its euphoric aspects highlighted, and the opposite is truth. Such mechanisms (or perhaps strategies?) promote a widening of the opposition which, according to Said, serve the purpose of increasing the distance between East and West (Said, 2003).

In *Living the end times*, Slavoj Žižek reminds us about the problem of measuring the degree of “civilisation” of a country based on the way they “treat their women” (Žižek, 2011). Now, although Westernisation was imposed during colonial times, with unveiling and adoption of Western dress among women becoming a sign of modernisation of a country (Ahmed, 2011), the naturalisation of Western womenswear as a sign of “modernity and civilisation” seems unavoidable, even if what that form of dress means – in plain English, the glorification of the “procreating female” – doesn’t translate into a necessarily civilised “treatment of our women.” To keep up with the dominant position, thus, the need for a myth of a superior status of the Western “liberated” women was imposed and it persisted, despite the anecdotal references relating to the perception of Victorian women among their Middle-Eastern peers, who thought their queer, constrictive underwear, and the heavy layers of garments covering it, something shocking and curious (El Guindi, 1999).

Therefore, it is possible to understand that the perpetuation of a West as the dominant position in a narrative is imbricated with the superior status of women in the West: our unquestionable and unquestioned *freedom* a sign of the civilisation and superiority of our men, which, on its turn, works towards the goal of consolidating the West’s position as the world’s addresser, or the absolute “I.” Now, zooming out the intersubjective relation between both cultures, when considered from the perspective of dress, the presupposed pair Occident-Orient presupposes a “natural” contrary. If West will be homologated with the euphoric values of advancements, civilisation, and freedom, then everything Oriental will not only be considered from fixed narrative positions in which the role of hero is not available, but will also be designated the dysphoric side of the opposition, meaning everything backward, barbaric, and oppressive. And that includes dress: not only due to the historical facts of unveiling and adoption of Western dress as a sign of “advancement,” but also in the set of myths which accompany the “Muslimwoman” and her unquestionable and unquestioned status of an oppressed being without agency.

5. Conclusion

This brief exposition aimed not at completely answering the complex question of the risky interchange between perceptions of Western and Islamic dress today, but purposed, perhaps, to start a debate. The choice of objects here not at all “innocent,” but explicitly resorting to discussions surrounding dress which are at the spotlight of our era, when the critique of both veiling (and its banning likewise) shares the stage with the controversy of “feminine empowerment” through sexuality (or its denial). This leads us to yet another aspect uniting corset and hijab, the fact that both are a topic of conversation everyone wants to have a saying, which denounces the belief that it is society’s job to have an opinion on what women wear and do, or how their bodies are controlled and surveilled – which is yet another aspect in which Western and Islamic nations go hand in hand.

The recognition of the matter, thus, as a feminine issue, and not an issue of interchange between cultures, works against the goal of the present research, which is to explore how similarity is re-manifested into difference, creating and feedbacking into a system of presupposed relations: the Western techniques of dress means “freedom” because the West is a dominant culture, but the dominance of Western culture also depends on the Western techniques of dress meaning “freedom.” Another presupposed relation is created from that, in which, so that Western techniques of dress can mean “freedom,” Oriental techniques

of dress must mean “oppression,” otherwise, without its presupposed contrary, the formation of a dominant Western identity is compromised.

Such chain of presupposed relations is not limited to those established by dress, but, as Sara Ahmed reminds us, starts in the very use of the words “Occident” and “Orient.” To be Oriental, according to her writings, is to be forced to have an *orientation*, which means being queer, in the sense of not coinciding with the given lines (Ahmed, 2006). Such idea of orientation – one of the many touching points between the set of theories we attempted at intersecting in this work – pervades all the layers of the objects (subjects?) we briefly analysed, all the levels denouncing the presence of hierarchies which stop subjects from exchanging in equality, but through pre-established relations of power.

When addressed outside the scope of fixed narrative roles between Occident and Orient, the reversal of this opposition results in a large number of Western women converting to Islam, a phenomenon that could be interpreted as the roots of France’s obsession with the niqab: as noted by Žižek, most of the women among the few thousands wearing full body veils in France are, as a matter of fact, European converts (Žižek, 2011). But is the reversal of the opposition the solution to this problem, to recognise the superiority of our “enemies” and Others? Or is the West in need of a deeper interrogation of the very structures it created, in which presupposed pairs are necessarily invested with thymic values, and in which systems are necessarily binary?

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Section 6

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THE CORSET AND THE VEIL AS DISRUPTIVE MANIFESTATIONS OF CLOTHING:
THE TIGHTLACER AND THE TUAREG

Marilia Jardim

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The corset and the veil as disruptive manifestations of clothing: the tightlacer and the Tuareg

O corset e o véu enquanto manifestações disruptivas do vestuário: a tightlacer e o Tuareg

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[54] **[abstract]** This work investigates two items of clothing and the relations constructed between their fashionable and disruptive manifestations: the Corset and the Veil. Examining the societies which are emblematic of those practices – the Victorian Era and the Tuareg, from Northern Africa – the works of Greimas and Landowski will provide a framework for a Semiotic and Socio-semiotic analysis of the practices of tightlacing and male veiling as opposing practices to traditional gender roles. Even though the two practices forming the corpus of this work are geographically and chronologically distant, our analysis forms a parallel between them, exposing how the mechanism of Otherness through clothing occurs similarly at different times and locations, as well as the importance of Fashion in creating and sustaining prevalent ideologies.

[keywords]

corset; veil; tightlacing; Tuareg; semiotics.

[resumo] O presente trabalho investiga dois itens de vestuário e as diferentes relações construídas entre suas manifestações alinhadas com a moda, ou rompendo com seu sistema: o *corset* e o véu. Examinando as sociedades das quais estas práticas são emblemáticas – a Era Vitoriana e os Tuaregs do norte da África – os trabalhos de Greimas e Landowski serão utilizados enquanto base teórica para uma análise semiótica e sociosemiótica das práticas do *tightlacing* e do uso masculino do véu muçulmano enquanto oposição aos papéis de gênero tradicionais. Ainda que as práticas discutidas neste trabalho sejam geográfica e cronologicamente distantes, nossa análise forma um paralelo expondo em que medida os mecanismos de alteridade criados por meio da vestimenta ocorrem de maneira similar em diferentes períodos e locais, e igualmente a importância da Moda na produção e no suporte de ideologias predominantes.

[palavras-chave] corset; véu; tightlacing; Tuareg; semiótica.

Throughout its history, Fashion has proven to serve two main distinctive roles: the one of reproducing prevalent ideologies or forms of social order and, at the same time, the one of challenging and rejecting what is established, proposing change. As such, every new Fashion can be interpreted as a disruptive manifestation in which, to introduce the new, the old must be challenged, deemed as outdated and backward so that it can make room for the new. However, not all disruptive manifestation becomes a new Fashion, in the sense of a widespread embodiment of a manner: some disruptions remain as cluster practices belonging to a small group, while other disruptions may become the fashion of one society, but be perceived as something else outside of that particular cultural milieu.

The present work will closely examine two manifestations of this type, which sprout from established sartorial practices in a given society, resorting to the same garments, but completely subverting its meanings: the corset and the veil. Looking firstly at the extreme tightlacing in the Victorian Era, by comparing the excesses of corseting versus the "fashionable" form of body modification, we will attempt at understanding how the same object can manifest both the conformation to an established social order and ideal feminine role, or the complete destruction of that role and social order. Secondly, we will look at the Tuareg custom of male veiling, which is opposed to the Muslim tradition where, when veiling is practised, it appears as covering the heads and faces of women. Such reversal is normally interpreted by those seeing their culture from the outside as a possible "gender reversal," which on its turn is perceived as a rejection of a masculine social role or of patriarchal privilege.

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The analysis proposed must resort to the context in which those two garments are apprehended as "disruptive" – meaning that we are discussing the "normal" corset use versus the "excessive" use from a Victorian perspective, as well as understanding the "strangeness" of Tuareg veiling as seen from an Islamo-Arab perspective. The disruptive character of the objects, thus, doesn't belong to the object enclosed in itself, but to the different relations which can be established through the different dress practices. That includes the understanding that tightlacing exists "after" the invention of corsets for "regular lacing;" and that Tuaregs are, likewise, part of a larger community of Muslims, which gives Islamo-Arabic societies the possibility of understanding their custom of veiling as deviant from a fundamentalist¹ interpretation of the Qur'an. In other words, what we are here naming a "disruptive manifestation of fashion" is the non-conformity to the established practices, which happen through the use of the same object: what makes the disruption, in our corpus, is a change in the manner in which the object is used. Those different practices are responsible, from the point of view of the culture where those objects originated, for a degeneration of the objects in rebellion, perversion, anti-fashion – in other words, for the construction of a relation of Otherness.

The investigation presented here is focused on reflecting theoretically about the case, rather than offering an enclosed case study. Our analysis resorts to the scope of Standard Semiotics and the Semiotics of Interactions, anchoring our study in the notion of *thematic role* (GREIMAS; COURTÉS, 1993), and how the two sartorial objects – the corset and the veil – originate as means of reinforcing those thematic roles, by supporting the wearer in performing their own thematic role. When it comes to an understanding of the disruption of such roles, we will examine how the thematic role can be conforming to an established social structure, producing programmed interactions (LANDOWSKI, 2005), or how it can degenerate in accidents (LANDOWSKI, 2005), producing manifestations which constitute a disjunction between the narrative path of the individual and society. The result of the analysis led to Landowski's works about taste presented in *Passions sans nom* (2004), which permitted the unfolding of our category in terms of sociability or intimacy associated with the different uses or practices of the objects in discussion.

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Another concept we borrow from the analysis of the text is the idea of *actantial engagement* (*embrayage actantiel*) (GREIMAS; COURTÉS, 1993) which, although belonging to the domain of written discourse, can serve the purpose of analysing any manifestation which can be read in terms of enunciation and enunciate. We understand that dress is one type of manifestation which approximates the concepts of enunciation and enunciate, considering it produces acts of communication as much as written text, and therefore the link between the two fields appears as pertinent. Our aim is to study dress in a manner which is not grounded in Visual Semiotics, as is usually the case whenever a work aims at using Semiotics as a method to analyse Fashion and Dress: we understand that the plastic is not the only significant dimension of this particular object and that other concepts appearing in Semiotics can produce enriching discussions and analysis.

One of the key aspects concerning the two objects selected to compose our corpus of analysis is the matter of identity vs alterity – an old friend of Structural Semiotics. The forms of self-presentation resulting from the uses and practices of corsets and veils are also closely linked to a problem of distortion of meaning, which was pointed by Barthes (2009) as the operation through which myth hijacks and bends signification. Following those definitions, it is possible to state that perhaps the main element uniting the Tightlancer and the Tuareg is the manner in which the presentation of their bodies creates mythical identities, both in the sense that their practices are distortions of "crystallised" identities, and when it comes to the interpretations those practices suffer outside of their cultural milieu.

It is essential to remark we understand the delicate place in which this investigation is located: the one which turns the Othered subject into an object of research. Even though the attempt at further looking into those practices carry the aim of understanding prevalent misunderstandings, to speak of the Other is, more often than not, to support the mechanisms producing Otherness in the first place. Trapped in a dilemma of which of two evils is worse – to comply with the invisibilities and misconceptions, or to reinforce the "exotic"? – we chose to attempt at addressing the Other as a subject, as well as accepting the noise those practices create in the mainstream culture as important places of struggle and challenge of the established norms.

The tightlacer

[57] We continuously perceive the "us" and the "others" through a series of oppositions, and dress is certainly an important part in this intricate process of recognition of the insiders – the ones who belong to our group; and outsiders – the ones who do not conform to the established, and sometimes unspoken rules of presentation of the self. According to Kunzle, what delimits the "ins" and "outs" of the Fashion system are normally intimately intertwined with the dominance of a social class (KUNZLE, 2004) – undoubtedly a statement derived from Veblen's thinking (2007) – but the same could also emerge from concepts presented by Baudelaire, such as a form of "circumstantial beauty," or even as the "obsession of an era" (BAUDELAIRE, 1964). Or, to follow Greimas, the rhythm of Fashion, which includes not only the sartorial practices, progresses following or preceding the rhythm of the generations (GREIMAS, 2002). For Barthes, finally, what is fashionable is nothing less than "[...] health, it is a moral code of which the unfashionable is nothing but illness or perversion" (BARTHES, 2006, p. 68).

When it comes to marking relations of affiliation and membership through dress, it is easy to see how "foreign" dress can easily be identified as a badge of Otherness. However, it is not rare the dress of the Other – or, what we are here calling a *disruptive manifestation* of dress – appears within the same society, the same system of values, as a "perversion" of a practice already existing in the predominant form of dress. It is undoubtedly the case of the *tightlacer* or the one who "perverts" the use of the corset through the exaggeration of its function and action over the body.

Tightlacing, a term without equivalent in other languages, is the name given to the practice of lacing corsets very tightly, with the objective of dramatically reducing the size of the waist. A gradual, but permanent (and perhaps irreversible) process, tightlacing is a form of body modification requiring training and discipline, which includes wearing corsets every

day, and sometimes all day (even during sleeping hours). With the years of practice, the body slowly starts to accommodate the smaller waist size and to reorganise itself around the new shape, which includes repositioning of the organs and bones, increase in the shape of the spine, and changes in the texture of other body tissue. Although the descriptions in this paragraph frequently appear in popular culture as a reference to *all* corset use in the past, it is important to stress that many authors agree that tightlacing was never a "widespread" practice, and is far from being the norm at any given period (KUNZLE, 2004; LYNN, 2010; STEELE, 1997, 2001).

For Kunzle, Fashion and Fetishism must be regarded as antagonists, especially when the fetish in question relates to an exaggeration of what is fashionably accepted (KUNZLE, 2004). Therefore, what produces Otherness in the practice of tightlacing is not the use of the corset *per se*, which is, essentially, the same corset used by other women in the Victorian era. What separates both, thus, is the *quality* of the use or practice: in one case, the modification created in the body is according to the fashionable limits, whereas in the other case, the modification surpasses those limits. At this point, it is imperative to affirm that what separates "normal lacing" from tightlacing is not the assumption that the first one is not sexualised: even if "The history of tight-lacing is part of the history of the struggle for sexual self-expression [...]" (KUNZLE, 2004, p. 38), the primary function of the silhouette created by corsets and crinolines is one of enhancing the sexual characteristics of the female human body (JARDIM, 2014). The compression of the waist – even when practised within the fashionable limits – produces the illusion of broader hips and broader chest, both intimately associated with the reproductive function of the female body, communicating the ability to get pregnant, bare children, and give birth.

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Therefore, if tightlacing is intimately connected to sexual self-expression, it is not the sexualisation of the body which constituted the "illness or perversion" of a practice, but the matter of disrupting a thematic role relating to a particular form of sexuality. Following Greimas and Courtés, the thematic role relates to the determination of a position in the path of an actor, which permits a precise isotopy to be fixed to their role (GREIMAS; COURTÉS, 1993, p. 393). In other words, it is a repetition of a *theme*, in which there is very little room for "personal self-expression." When it comes to dress and, more specifically, to the corset, it could be argued that the thematic role of the corset is to support the body in the fulfilment of its own thematic role which, on its turn, will ensure the individual fulfils their own thematic role. In the context of the societies in which the use of the corset was the norm for women, the sexual enhancements it creates in the female figure relate to a thematic role that finds its roots perhaps in religion, but existing to serve a clear social function: the one of generating heirs.

To what extent, thus, surpassing the established fashionable limits of body modification degenerates into illness and perversion? To answer such question, it is crucial to examine broader thematic roles – not only the ones governing the actions of individuals (e.g. men and women in the Victorian era) but the ones dictating the global relations established between countries and their peoples. Hence, to speak of Victorian England is necessarily to speak of the focal point of a large empire, one very attached to the ideas of its own civilisation and superiority, regarded necessarily as *different* from the subject races they conquered. Therefore, it is not an exaggeration to say that the thematic role of Victorian England was one of dominance and progress or, at the least, that was the thematic role the Victorians felt to be their own.

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Tightlacing, different from its fashionable counterpart, is a form of body modification which tends towards permanence (KUNZLE, 2004) – while, to evoke timeless statements, “[...] fashion is characterized by change” (STEELE, 2005, p. 12). Thus, before anything else, tightlacing can already be defined as an anti-fashion practice due to its tendency of lasting, challenging the expected change and progress which characterises Fashion, an idea connected to the core of a Western mentality of constant development. Besides denying the thematic role of “natural” sexuality – one focusing the bearing of children and a life of dedication to the home² – the practice of tightlacing also attacks the thematic role of Fashion, which is one of producing successive changes in the dress, but also in the body. Corset-wise, in three centuries of its use in the West, it is possible to see the development of the feminine silhouette from a more triangular shape in the 16th to mid-18th century, to a more cylinder-like shape in the late-18th century, to a round, hourglass or wasp-shape in the mid-19th century, all the way to the straight front corset of the 1900’s (cf. LYNN, 2010; STEELE, 2001). Notwithstanding, due to the nature of tightlacing, not only the de-formation of the body is to a certain extent irreversible, but the body becomes incapable of following the different shapes which may subsequently become a new vogue, becoming forever trapped in the same form, which can only develop into more exaggerated variations throughout the years of practice.

In addition, permanent body modifications are also commonly associated with “primitive customs” of non-Western cultures (KUNZLE, 2004), many of which can be found among the peoples who are, for the British, their “subject races”: tattooing and foot binding, popular in China at the time; body piercing, a mark of “Indian-ness”; or the many forms of skin scarification, practiced among the native peoples of Africa and Oceania. Furthermore, Kunzle and Steele identify tightlacing not as an affluent phenomenon, but a “minority cult”, practised mainly by lower- and mid-

dle-class women (KUNZLE, 2004; STEELE, 2001). When regarded from this angle, the practice of tightlacing can be read as an affront not only to individual thematic roles, but to the thematic role of the collective, through the engagement with a practice that is closer to the ones of the "uncivilised" conquered nations, as well as to the lower classes, than to the ones of the "superior," "advanced," and distinctive, dominant Westerners. By crossing a very fine line which distinguishes the fashionable from the unfashionable, the tightlacer manifests through her body and her corset a multi-layered opposition to the thematic role of Victorian women, which goes from the claiming of a sexuality that is freed from the mythical "succession of pregnancies", to rejecting all the forms of privilege attached to an English Victorian identity: the affiliation to a dominant class, the possibility of following Fashion, or the very status of "civilization".

Permanent body modification, thus, can be understood as a badge of Otherness in the West, in the sense that it tends to *permanence* and *duration*, versus the prevalent idea of *change* as a mark of *progress* and *development*. Regarding the matter through the theory of aspectualisation (GREIMAS; COURTÉS, 1993, p. 21-22, 111, 270, 285, 389), Fashion belongs to the process of *punctuality*, which marks the beginning of a process, but also the absence of duration; a practice such as tightlacing, on the one other hand, not only produces bodies marked by *terminativeness*, or accomplished bodies when it comes to the goal of permanent modification, but it presupposes *durativity*: a body doesn't become modified overnight, requiring years of disciplined training to achieve a visible alteration of shape. One cycle of Fashion is surely not enough time to accomplish tightlacing goals, which means the practice is not compatible with Fashion's punctuality, producing bodies which become inevitably "outdated".

Secondly, the irreversibility of tightlacing approximates the ones who practice it to the "true" Others, the ones geographically and chronologically distant. Such closeness between the perverted and healthy side of a practice can be the explanation to the passion with which many different subjects in Victorian society fought tightlacing. It was associated with atheism, with "race suicide", with infanticide and abortion, with masturbation, and, following the late 19th century obsession with racial purity, accused to be both cause and symptom of the degeneration of the Anglo-Saxon race; If all that was not sufficient, tight-lacing was also considered to be linked with excess of vanity, excess of work, and excess of study – all of which was perceived by the conservatives as incompatible with the place of women in society (Kunzle, 2004). Finally, Kunzle points that the fiercest opposers of tight-lacing as a practice were the most misogynist defenders of the ideal of the "natural woman," who should be dedicated to the home, to house chores, and to children (KUNZLE, 2004, and also STEELE, 1997), a

statement which confirms our relation established between the moderate use of the corset and a thematic role of maternity.

In his analysis of taste, Landowski constructs a category that separates objects in *cosmetics*: items and substances serving to adorn the body, transforming its figure with the aim of pleasing the other; and *narcotics*: acting over the objectal dimension of the body and opposing interaction, producing bodies that are intoxicated with themselves (LANDOWSKI, 2004). While cosmetics generate sociability and interaction – even if, paradoxically, they turn the body into an object for the gaze of the other – narcotics produce the opposite of communication: they are for lonely enjoyment, focusing on the relation with one's own body. Observing the practice of tightlacing through this category can provide clues about the extent to which the moral investments play a strong role in one and another form of using (or practising) the corset. The presupposed use reveals a cosmetic role of the corset as an object embellishing the body and constructing a *desirable* figure, related to fulfilling a role of procreating for/with another; the tightlacing, however, even if not a sexual perversion or a form of "masturbation," is at least a form of obsession with the own body, *regardless* of the perception of the other. As such, the corset ceases to play a part in constructing a body-for-the-other, constructing a body-for-the-self instead: the accomplishment of a waist reduction is a goal in itself, and one that *intoxicates* the body (both physically, through the reduction of the breathing capacity; and psychologically, through the accomplishment of a goal, or vanity, or fetishist sexual arousal).

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Hence, there is a moral line separating the fashionable use of the corset from its anti-fashion counterpart: the same that separates the cosmetic use of substances as an enhancer of sociability, or the use creating addicts, who isolate themselves from society to fully surrender to the excess of pleasures – and even that can be subjected to Fashion. Finally, Landowski remarks that in the relation with the narcotics, body and substance become one, through a mutual assimilation which culminates in the subject annihilating themselves in the object (LANDOWSKI, 2004): the tight-laced body becomes tightlacing, the corset becomes the body, and the body becomes the corset – two instances that can no longer be separated.

The objective of this item has been the one to expose how the rejection of tight-lacing happening in every society in which it was practised confirms our analysis, which places the practice as an anti-thematic role institution in several different manners. Notwithstanding, such is also the way in which a mythical identity of the tightlacer was able to be born in the first place. Perhaps, the manner in which popular imagination presumes that all women from "the past" were tightlacers is our manner of

reaffirming the idea that tightlacing is a retrograde, backward practice, which is associated with the past (permanence) and not with the future, with progress, with advancement (fashion, or change). Even today, fetishism and corsets are associated either with a "vintage" aura – romantic almost, but still "freaky" and "repelling" – or with a "futuristic" feel which is both dystopian and dysphoric: a *degenerated* future. The uneasiness associated with the body of the tightlacer is deeply grounded in the disruption of thematic roles we are, as a society, used to, but also to the disruption of what is human in a body, transcending the limits of a fashionable figure.

Ultimately, it is possible to identify the fear of the opposers of tight-lacing with a fear of elimination and destruction, which is at the foundations of the fear of the Other, embodying both the unknown and the familiar – and here we could evoke both Said, when he claims the Orient is feared because it is so close and so similar to the West (SAID, 2003), or even Freud, the *Unheimlich* defined as what was once familiar but became unfamiliar (FREUD, 2010). Such possibilities will help to take us to the next step in the analysis.

The Tuareg

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It could be concluded that the identity constructed through the extreme lacing of corsets is a mythical one, and that the strangeness of the practice, as well as the results it produces when permanently modifying the body, are directly related to the possibility of creating relations of Otherness. For Žižek, following Lacan's ideas, the Other is linked to the unknown and to what one cannot understand (ŽIŽEK, 2012). The narratives created for the big Other, in Žižek's writings, are closely linked to the presence of veiled faces in Western society, and the Westerners' repulse for the *niqab*³ appears related to the manner in which it causes the suspension of facial recognition and facial expression, which is at the base of social interaction in Western culture (ŽIŽEK, 2011).

The discomfort with a veiled face, however, is not exclusive to the West. In Islamo-Arab societies likewise, although the veiling of a woman's face is naturalised, the veiling of a man's face can be seen as out of place, and to produce confrontations to multiple thematic roles in the same fashion as the tightlacer. It is certainly the case of the Tuareg, as they are known in Western vocabulary: a nomad Muslim people from Algeria, Libya, Mali, and Niger, which are known for their fierceness as warriors and their music, but mainly for their "intriguing" custom involving the veiling of their men (instead of their women).

As remarked by Jean Sebastian Lecocq, the Tuareg would rank very high in an imaginary list of the most mythical peoples (LECOCQ, 2010).

Named by the French *les guerriers des sables*⁴ (LECOCQ, 2010) and *les hommes bleus*⁵ – which refers both to their emblematic traditional dress of indigo robes, turbans and veils, and also to the manner in which the rubbing of the clothes stains their hands and feet (MURPHY, 1964), their image was used, in the West, to illustrate a broad range of concepts, from the Muslim rebel in the desert to the selling of off-road 4x4s. As much as it was possible for Victorian society to make the tightlancer responsible for all evils, the same complexity and strangeness of Tuareg custom in dress permits the coining of an identity embracing all the extremes, both to the West and to their Islamo-Arab neighbours, who seem to find their customs equally curious, deviant of their tradition and religion.

Authors who studied the nomad peoples of the Sahara seem to agree that the veil is by far the most potent symbol of "Tuaregness" (KEENAN, 2004), as a great deal of analysis was dedicated to the attempts at understanding the "meaning" of the veil among Tuareg men (KEENAN, 2004; LECOCQ, 2010; MURPHY, 1964). What is of special interest to the present work is that the misunderstanding, followed by a mixture of curiosity, fascination, and repulse surrounding the sartorial practices of the Tuareg men seem to unite the West and the Arab world. Although the image described in the previous paragraph is undoubtedly an orientalist one – to evoke the meanings Said creates for the word (SAID, 2003) – it is important to clarify that the relations of Otherness created around the Tuareg remit back to before the colonial conquests (KEENAN, 2004; LECOCQ, 2010). On the one hand, even if the adherence to Islam unites the Tuareg and the Arab peoples, the animist form of maraboutic Islam practised by peoples of the Sahara is very distant from the fundamentalist interpretation of the Qur'an practiced in the Arab world (KEENAN, 2004); Murphy remarks, for example, that even though Tuaregs are Muslims, they are perceived to be, in Islamo-Arab eyes, as "[...] infamous and unregenerate back-sliders who observe neither proper law nor custom [...]" (MURPHY, 1964, p. 1262).

Although many earlier works about the Tuaregs attempted at providing many explanations for the use of their veil, some of them aiming at presenting a utilitarian reason relating to protecting the face from the sun, the wind, and sand (cf. DUVEYRIER, 1864), the three authors selected to support our present investigation agree when it comes to the fragility of such theories, chiefly because they fail to explain why only men would wear the veil, and also why its use would be extended to all the hours of the day, including the moments in which men are alone or asleep indoors (KEENAN, 2004; LECOCQ, 2010; MURPHY, 1964). With such debates in view, we opted for dismissing the possibility of a functional account of the veil among the Tuareg, focusing on the social functions presented by the same authors as prevalent in their anthropological investigations among tribes from different geographical locations.

Our analysis of the tight-lacers' situation concluded that the relations of Otherness are closely related to an opposition of progress vs permanence, which couldn't be more accurate to the case of the Tuaregs. In many ways, their culture is perceived as something "from the past" for both the West, the Arab world, and the surrounding African societies. Furthermore, and again similarly to the tightlacers, the Tuareg occupy a place in between, at least when it comes to their relation to the Arab world: not geographically distant and, to a certain extent, with cultural practices which meet at their roots, and yet lost in an archaic version of the religion and culture. To summarise, the core aspects in which the veil is "interpreted" by the surrounding cultures (sedentary African, Islamo-Arabic and Western societies) relate to the alleged relation between the veil and matrilineal societies, or a "reversal" of gender thematic roles among the Tuareg; and the ambivalent role the veil assumes in social interactions.

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The matter of matrilineality among the Tuaregs divides authors, especially due to the difficulty in creating a clear-cut category in which every Tuareg group would fit in (LECOCQ, 2010). The most informed analysis on the matter seems to come from Robert F. Murphy, who states that the relations of rank and class among Tuareg groups are defined through *both* patrilineal and matrilineal ties (MURPHY, 1964). Even if a complete opposition with the West and Islamo-Arab societies is not formed in the matter, it is relevant to remark that Islam is a religion associated with the emergence of a patriarchal social order: in *Women and the Advent of Islam*, Leila Ahmed highlights how the many aspects of the revelation seemed to serve the transition from a matriarchal model of society and lineality to a patriarchal and patrilineal organisation (AHMED, 1986). Among those aspects, polygamy and the seclusion of the women – both the seclusion *de facto* and the symbolic seclusion, manifested in the veil – are probably the most visible indicators of a patrilineal organisation, in which the certainty of biological paternity is crucial, culminating in a substantial reduction of feminine sexual freedom. Such relates, on its turn, to the close relation between passing on a state to the heirs, and the idea of social position as spatial occupation. From a patriarchal, if not Islamic point of view⁶, the thematic role of men would more or less universally surround the elements mentioned above: control over women, the occupation of space through possession, and the possibility of passing on a state to heirs.

When attempting at understanding why nomadic customs seem so incomprehensible to sedentary societies, Lecocq concludes the matter emerges from the renunciation of spatial occupation (LECOCQ, 2010). In the absence of spatial ownership which marks nomadic societies, the positions are not defined by what is owned, but by to whom you are related to (KEENAN, 2004; LECOCQ, 2010; MURPHY, 1964), a social order which is

compatible with both patrilineal and matrilineal organisations. Again, the renunciation to this primordial part of a masculine thematic role can be interpreted as the opposition to the masculine thematic role itself which, visually, is manifested through a difference in sartorial custom: the men who accept the thematic role (in Islamo-Arabic societies, for example) do not veil, but their women do; whereas the men who reject the thematic role (the Tuareg) veil their faces, and their women do not.

Face the overlapping of the reversal in the veiling custom – when compared to Islamo-Arabic societies – and the mix of matrilineal and patrilineal relations of class and rank, it is easy to reconstruct the path to concluding that the veiling of men can be interpreted as a different condition of women in that society as well, when compared to other Islamic societies. In fact, Tuareg society seems to allow a higher freedom in the interactions between the genders (LECOCQ, 2010; MURPHY, 1964); the main miscomprehension, however, is to believe that, opposed to fundamentalist Islam, the veil is there to mark the seclusion of men: again, considering the absence of spatial occupation and possession in Tuareg society, the weight of biological paternity is reduced, when compared to traditionally sedentary and patriarchal societies, making seclusion not relevant.

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Among the many meanings associated with the male veil, Keenan reaches an intriguing conclusion in his work: for the author, the veil is used mainly as an ambivalent tool to both facilitate and protect the individual from the dangers of social interaction (KEENAN, 2004). This conclusion is primarily drawn from the writings of Murphy, who presents a detailed analysis of the relation between the custom of veiling and the protection of the mouth and the area surrounding the eyes, which are the most expressive features of the face, the ones which allow interacting subjects to read thoughts and feelings the most (MURPHY, 1964). The role of the veil could then be to both disguise and to show: through the obliteration of facial expressions which could denounce uneasiness or manifest contradictions between words and thoughts/feelings, the veil permits a safe presence in social interactions, which is marked by the absence of the individual (the recognisable facial expression), who is replaced by the role he plays in the group.

The resulting effect of emptying the individual from subjectivity, to privilege the presentation of a social role, relates to the procedure of *actantial engagement* (*embrayage actantiel*) in written text, appearing in Standard Semiotics: in place of erasing the marks of the enunciate to then project non-persons in the enunciate, the engaged discourse suspends the oppositions of person, time, and space, proposing a return to the enunciation (GREIMAS; COURTÉS, 1993, p. 119-121). For José Luiz Fiorin, in

the engaged discourse amplified persons can mean singular persons and vice-versa, as well as the non-person (the projections in discourse resulting from the procedure of *disengagement* (*débrayage*)) can signal persons (FIORIN, 2016). In written text, or in the "live" interactions – which we accept, in this paper, to constitute enunciations in act – the instances of "I/here/now" are the ones which anchor the text as enunciate, as a product rather than an act. The *engagement*, on the other hand, proposes a return to the enunciation, destabilising the referential character, unveiling the referential illusion. Hence, the veil can be interpreted as destabilising many different referential aspects, from facial recognition to the reading of expressions, to the separation between individual and social role.

Finally, engagement can be understood as the denial of the "non-I" – the "I" projected in the discourse – by the "I" subject of enunciation, which aims at the impossible return to the source of enunciation (GREIMAS; COURTÉS, 1993, p. 120). In the written text, the actantial engagement manifests an ideal, the erasure of the marks of the enunciate, proposing a return to the act of communication; in that sense, it is possible to interpret the mechanism as one of *treachery*: the engagement is what gives the reader one person in the place of another, or multiple persons who can count as one, or one person who can count as multiple. By doing so with what we identify more closely to an "identity" – the biometrical identity, facial recognition, and the facial expressions which frequently accompany the conversational communication – the Tuareg veil gives a social role in the place of the individual, but one can count for the other, the opposition between them suspended. In the written text, the engagement aims at disguising the enunciate, whereas the veil, in the face-to-face interaction, aims at disguising the marks of individuality. More than relating to the Tuareg fame among Westerners and the Arabs of disguising their faces for deceptive purposes (KEENAN, 2004), the idea of the face veil as actantial engagement remits back to a set of fears relating to veiled figures, mainly the ones that what is seen may not correspond to what is underneath – that what we perceive visually as a woman can be a male terrorist in disguise, for example, especially in the West.

Different from the tightlaced, the use of the veil generates ambivalent meanings, depending on the point of view adopted in the analysis. At a first glance, and continuing the conversation about narcotics and cosmetics, it could be argued that the role of the veil is a cosmetic one, as it relates to the maintenance of appropriate social relations: the veil works protecting the individual to enable the accomplishment of his social role. However, with the prolonged use in mind, the Tuareg veil's relation to the body of the wearer approximates the one created between the corset and the tightlaced, in which veil and man too become one, mutually appropri-

ated, inseparable even during meal time, sleep, and even the sexual act. As such, even when in social interaction, the subject's experience is always mediated by the object which is omnipresent, literally creating a barrier to sociability – even if that barrier is, contradictorily, what enables sociability.

An ambivalent manifestation in itself, the veil is the perfect case to present the discourse surrounding a group which, in our analysis, can be homologated to the contradictory figure of the Tuareg man. The alleged matrilineality, the relative gender freedom of their society, the social fragility exposed by the need of protection during social intercourse, all construct a value of "in between", which, on its turn, can be unravelled in a few more oppositions: future vs past, dominant vs dominated, I vs Other. In a very similar fashion to the tightlancer, the Tuareg veil appears as a practice which dances between extremes, constructing relations of Otherness through practices which can be understood as misappropriating or exceeding [*détournement, dépassement*], to follow Landowski's (2009) terms. Similarly to the tightlancer, the veil of the Tuareg also responds to more than one set of meanings within the cultural milieu in which it appeared, as well as outside. In both cases, the garments construct relations of Otherness through the denial and rejection of established thematic roles, but also precisely because the meaning one group attributes to the garment doesn't match the meaning attributed by the groups surrounding it, or looking at that particular culture from the outside.

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In the case of the Tuareg specifically, the Otherness closely relates to the suspension of facial expression, which can be more "disturbing" than the deformed body of the tightlancer: the idea of mystery, the possibility of treachery or the suspension to the "right to see" can stimulate the imagination much more than what is explicitly manifest, gaugeable by the eye. However, for both European and Islamo-Arab societies, the strangeness goes beyond that, sprouting perhaps from the idea of a gender reversal, which can be read, at the fundamental level, as a rejection of the patriarchal privilege; such is also linked to the nomadic way of life, which dismisses the occupation of space, the most disseminated form of expressing patriarchal domination and social position. Secondly, even if the social meaning of the veil remained unknown among the first anthropological attempts during colonial periods, the manner in which the veil is used to disguise facial expression as a form of social protection also confronts the classical patriarchal idea of man as consistently strong and fearless, the one who protects and not the one who needs protection.

The analysis presented in this item certainly does not cover the multitude of issues concerning the Tuareg veil and its relation to Otherness. However, with the aim of constructing a parallel with the Victorian Era's

extreme tightlaced, we opted for focusing on the emblematic elements which provided the occasion of proving that those two garments, the corset and the veil, can be analysed together, as they were shown to form isotopies which persist, regardless of geographical and chronological distance.

Conclusion

The present work aimed at analysing two manifestations which, although geographically, chronologically, and culturally distant from each other, seem to produce similar effects of Otherness within the cultural milieu surrounding them. Throughout our analyses, it was made evident that both manifestations share the same popular anecdotes which identify the Other in a society, which relate to the misunderstanding of their practices – in the present case, sartorial practices – and how those are reinterpreted and connected to the "evils" associated with social decay.

In both cases, the confrontations to the sartorial practices seem to relate to the rejection of a traditional thematic role: in the case of the tightlaced, the traditional feminine sexuality, which should focus on the home and procreation; in the case of the Tuareg, the veil comes connected to an alleged matrilineality, which links to the rejection of a masculine thematic role, one of domination and power over women, space, and possessions. Following that logic, the tightlaced becomes the abortionist, the pervert or fetishist, the infanticide, and the one contributing to the "degeneration of the Saxon race" for the Victorians (KUNZLE, 2004; STEELE, 1997); whereas the Tuareg become the ones who cover their faces because they are ugly (KEENAN, 2004), or because they are treacherous, bad Muslims who observe no proper law or custom (KEENAN, 2004; MURPHY, 1964). The type of Otherness created can be summarised in an inability to conform to the established codes for women and men in a given society, which results in the identification of such practices with what is outside (Other) rather than inside (us) that particular society.

When it comes to the actual items of dress in discussion, however, the possibility of comparing those two garments as isotope – may Jean-Marie Floch rest assured we are not here comparing locomotives and racoons (FLOCH, 1990, p. 29) – reside in the ambivalence created around the piece of clothing, which assumes a contradictory role in the social interaction. For Kunzle and Steele, the evening corset must be the tightest, because it is at night that sexual insinuations are permitted, but also when the body needs to be guarded the most (KUNZLE, 2004; STEELE, 1997) – the corset becomes, thus, what shows and what disguises, revealing the sexually insinuating silhouette, but also armouring the body against unwanted advances: perhaps another presentation of the mechanism of engagement

(*embrayage*) we identified with the veil. For Keenan and Murphy, the veil covering the mouth and the area around the eyes functions as a tool safeguarding facial expression, disrupting the possibility of reading involuntary reflexes of the face which can give away thoughts and feelings (KEENAN, 2004; MURPHY, 1964) – the veil becomes, equally, what shows and what disguises, erasing the marks of the subject and enabling him to engage in social interaction not as an individual, but as a social role. Both garments seem to function through mechanisms relating to the complex term, rather than belonging to one or another term of the opposition.

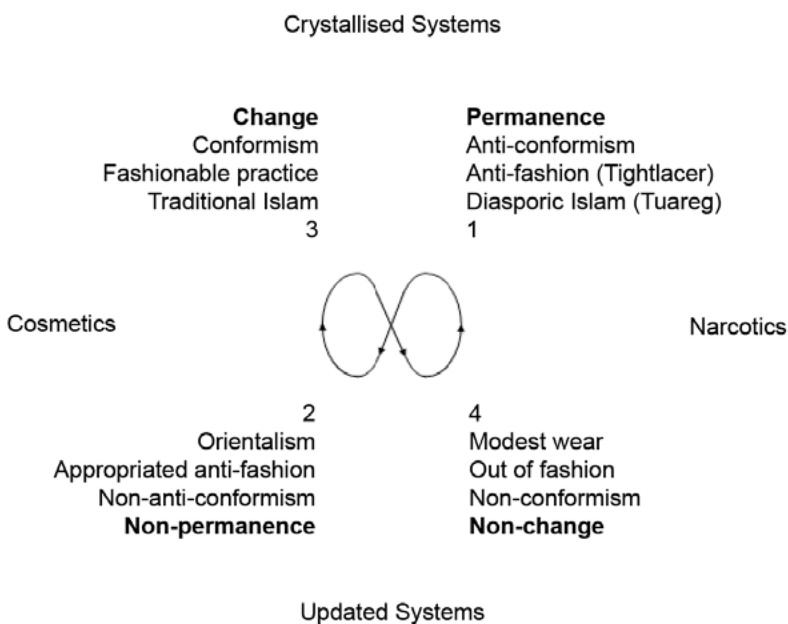
The analysis showed that both items of dress are governed by a category of change vs permanence, in which the Other is customarily associated with permanence, which is reinterpreted as "backwardness" – while, to evoke the writings of so many theorists of Fashion, change is perceived as a value relating to evolution and development, hence the euphoric feelings still associated with it in the West and in countries aiming at belonging to a Western logic of civilisation. In the case of permanent body modification, the corset approximates the practices of the Others perceived as "subject races" in the Victorian Era, denying the possibility of following Fashion: the body becomes eternally trapped in the shape of the corset. The Tuareg, likewise, are normally associated with an "outdated" version of Islam which, as we exposed, relates more to pre-Islamic practices than those of the fundamentalist Islam practised in the Arabised societies, and the same goes for their nomadic customs, which are still perceived as something which came "before" sedentary societies. From that point of view, it is important to remark that Arab culture is also invested with imperial aspirations, and the rejection of "properly Islamic" practices, the ones relating to a patriarchal masculine role, are also oppositions to the thematic role of an empire, similarly to what the tightlacer does by rejecting her role as part of a dominant culture, identifying with practices belonging to the Others, the "uncivilised" subject races.

The answer to our initial question, about how the same garment can produce belonging and Otherness, seems to locate in the matter of the transformation of the object's meaning in the same cultural tradition. Both the corset and the veil, in the contexts of the Victorian Era or fundamentalist Islam, are garments associated with women, and the fulfilling of a patriarchal feminine role. In the Western Victorian era, the corset is the piece that covers the body of the woman, shaping it into an ideal form, which is one manifesting values of fertility, sexual availability, and the competence to procreate. In Islam, the veil is the piece that covers the head and the face of the woman, manifesting her symbolic seclusion, signalling her unavailability to other men. The tightlacer and the Tuareg both subvert those thematic roles – both the garment's and the subject's – through the use of the same sartorial objects to fulfil different, de-formed functions.

Although it was not our initial objective to study the subcontraries resulting from this opposition, it is possible to imagine the manners in which our base category of change vs permanence can unfold in transitional terms (figure 1). Each term of our initial opposition possesses two manifestations, one relating to British/Western culture, the other to Islamic culture. The first, relating to change and Fashion, is the one manifesting the *conformity* to established systems and manners, both Fashion and the religious/cultural codes which are subject to change, following the development of societies. The manifestations of permanence, on the other hand, can appear both in anti-fashion practices (which more often than not look at the past, or practices outside of the cultural milieu) and by religious diaspora, which are both linked to "anti-progress" attitudes, but also with confronting or *anti-conformism* towards newly established practices. Both sides of this opposition constitute traditional, and thus crystallised systems, even if they are subject to change.

Figura 1: Articulation of the category Change vs Permanence.

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Source: elaborated by the author (2018).

The terms leading from one and the other relate to what leads the path from anti to fashionable, or from conformity to anti-conformism, positions which are strongly entangled with the destiny of Fashion and Culture. Starting with anti-fashion – after all, we are here to discuss disruptive manifestation of Fashion – the appropriation of countercultural dress and behaviour by the mainstream system is well known in Fashion Theory, and is the mechanism through which what used to be unacceptable can become "a classic". The *negotiation* of elements from anti-fashion to fashion

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manifests a form of non-permanence, transforming *anti-conformists* in *non-anti-conformists*, in which the permanence is appropriated and used as a substance for a new trend, which can then be assimilated and become a new consolidated fashion. The gradual reduction of the waist from the 16th to the early 20th century (LYNN, 2010) can serve here as evidence that, at least to an extent, tightlacing "inspired" the fashionable use of the corset, pushing the boundaries of the appropriateness and the acceptable to accommodate smaller waists which, slowly, became mainstream – but also pushing the "real" tightlacers to become even more extreme since, as remarked by Melissa Richards, "Anti-fashion is [...] the opposite of fashion, so if it exists, it should be different every time fashion changes" (RICHARDS, 1999, p. 146). As for the veil, Orientalism is a strong element of Fashion, both for the Western and Arab worlds, which are ironically entangled in trends that promiscuously mix cultural manifestations, with no regard for previous meanings invested in objects and practices. In Landowski's ellipse of the regimes of taste, this position is identified with the seductor or the pleaser, the one seeking sociability even if that costs their pleasure (LANDOWSKI, 2004, p. 267): perhaps a discerning definition of what contemporary mainstream fashion has become. In both cases, the meaning behind the cultural practices is lost, emptied to accommodate the fashionable.

The opposing subcontrary position inverts this relation, presenting us with the "pleasure seeker", the one living for the taste of pleasure, even if at the cost of the sociability (LANDOWSKI, 2004, p. 267). A position relating to the same "taste for pleasures" that marks the narcotic relations between body and object, it could be manifested in the practices that blend fashionable/culturally accepted behaviours to their narcotic versions. In this term, we see the purposeful "out of fashion" that accommodates the comfort or the pleasure of the wearer, or the mixing of fashionable and religious codes which, again, serve the enjoyment of the clothed subject. What separates this type of outcast from the seductor/manipulator is the absence of a desire to please or to belong to the mainstream (or to the anti-cultural) system, which is replaced by a form of "personal cult" of the objects. The bottom axis formed by the subcontraries presents updated systems which are not yet crystallised but serving as points of transition in which either new fashions and cultural customs, or new forms of rebellion and counter-culture are cultivated.

It is possible, thus, to propose a new category, one of *certainty vs ambivalence*, which could be what separates Fashion from the disruptive manifestations of dress that may occur with the same item of clothing, but depending on the manner in which this item is worn. Fashion, to recap the words of Barthes, is a manifestation of what is correct and healthy, and

even when its discourse is monstrous or grotesque, the relations constructed by Fashion belong to the realm of *certainty*: in or out. On the one other hand, whatever is *out* – of Fashion, of custom, of propriety – can have many shapes, many reasons, many meanings. The dis-ease in dress, the unhealthy, the out, the old, the kitsch, the vulgar, the camp – the dysphoria of what is outside of the custom is, thus, related to ambivalent meanings and its many possibilities. Perhaps the source of Otherness exists precisely in the complex place in which the reading of the codes is confused, and a clear message is no longer possible.

Hence, the production of Otherness through dress can be summarised in the suspension of the certainty of the thematic roles, which is replaced by a complex manifestation – belonging to the regime of the accident, to use the concept proposed by Landowski (2005) – which doesn't provide clear borders like the traditional thematic roles do. The Other, thus, becomes the one who doesn't yield certain codes, limits, and messages, destabilising the social structures and challenging the established roles, manners, and formations. Proving once more the critical role of dress in defining social interactions, but also as a manner of reading society, clothes become a major social actor, capable of manifesting both terms of this category, as well as both possibilities contained in the two items of dress and their practices presented in this paper: the complete con-formation to the rules and conventions of society, or its destruction.

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NOTES

¹ The term here used to its literal meaning, a literal or strict interpretation of the scriptures, rather than the current derogatory used by Western media.

² Besides exploring such ideas in depth in my work about the corset (cf. JARDIM, 2014), authors such as Anthony Giddens (1993) and Michel Foucault (2012, 2012a) provide extensive insight supporting the arguments made in this section.

³ The veil that covers the face, leaving only a small slit for the eyes, worn by a small minority of Muslim women in the West.

⁴ "The warriors of the sands" in free translation.

⁵ "The blue men".

⁶ Although the Qur'an is replenished with references to possessions and the proper manner for men to divide them among their wives, sons, daughters, and other relatives, which appear throughout the text (cf. ABDEL HALEEM, 2011).

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Section 7

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THE CORSET AND THE HIJAB: ALTERNATIONS OF ABSENCE AND PRESENCE
IN THE 19TH AND 20TH-CENTURY FASHION SYSTEM

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The corset and the hijab: alternations of absence and presence in the 19th and 20th-century fashion system

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Two emblematic sartorial objects that, on the side of embracing a vast historical significance of feminine techniques, have also sustained unpaired presence at the forefront of debate in society: the corset and the hijab. Presented as belonging to traditions portrayed as opposed in the prevalent discourses, the idea of contrariety is not exclusive to the garments but extends to the countries producing both practices of dress, which function, to a large extent, as emblems of both cultures and nations: England and Egypt. However, by rejecting the superficial layer of misconceptions and stereotypes and regarding both locations and sartorial practices from the point of view of transits of values and narrative utterances, more approximations than contrasts can emerge, enabling the bold possibility of constructing a parallel overlapping the West and the Orient.

Firstly, both objects seem to share a similar trajectory in their chronologies: both Fashion histories, in England and Egypt, are not marked by a monotone use of those objects, but showcasing a complex system of transformations including periods of absence and presence, as well as different moments of presence, in which the values invested in those objects are transformed. But the trajectories of England and Egypt as powers are also similar, once we look beyond the more often discussed differences between both cultures and locations: both imperial nations and largely influential over the cultural and economic practices of their neighbours, England remains at the forefront of the dictation of trends in the Western world, while Egypt is still a pivot of the cultural and political life in the Arab world. Finally, both locations occupy spaces “in-between”, clinging to their glorious pasts – be that the “Great British Empire” or a Pharaonic Era – while

aiming at promoting themselves as modern nations. A regard considering those elements, rather than the stereotypical layers of difference we often find when it comes to the “West vs Orient” dynamics, justifies the possibility of constituting a West-Orient amalgamation as a pertinent corpus of analysis.

To achieve such a goal, we mapped key points in the histories of the objects in England and Egypt respectively, using the works of historians and ethnographers to support our sectioning of the corpus (Ahmed 2011; El Guindi 1999; Kunzle 2004; Lynn 2010; MacLeod 1991; Steele 1997, 2001; Werner 1997): the late 19th century, the 1920s, the 1970s and the post-1990s, decades in which the contrast between different vogues of dress and cultural behaviours are the most evident, constituting representative and exhaustive (Greimas 1986) historical moments. The result of this historical examination permitted the reconstruction of the parallel, analysing the fundamental values the authors identified as the most significant for the objects in their original cultures, to then working their generative trajectory (Greimas and Courtés 1993) from the fundamental value to the manifestation, with the objective of presenting the paths leading different values to manifestation in and through a Fashion system.

Besides resorting to the standard generative trajectory, the work is interested in how the rhythmic changes of Fashion can be understood with a theory of aspectualisation, emphasising the importance of analysing the discursive level of Fashion not from a plastic/visual perspective, but by using the same apparatus of enunciation usually reserved for the analysis of verbal text. Such analysis will give us the opportunity of understanding the manners in which the markers of an implicit observer (the enunciatee) of dress enables Fashion to create relations of approximation and distancing between the subjects, investing the changes in Fashion with changes in the communication between subjects which reverberate as changes in the dynamics between subjects in society.

1. Corset and hijab: two fashion trajectories

Throughout the works of the key theoreticians concerned with the corset (Kunzle 2004; Lynn 2010; Steele 1997, 2001) and the veil (Ahmed 2011; El Guindi 1999; MacLeod 1991; Werner 1997), it was possible to gauge that the rhythms of Fashion at both locations seemed to follow the same relations of absence and presence, as well as similar transits of values marking the culturally specific meaning of both objects in their respective locations: the 19th century was marked by a saturated mainstream presence; the 1920s by and elite-led movement of abandoning of the garments; the 1970s reintroducing the objects that appear as appropriations of the past, resignified by subcultures; and finally, post-1990s, the reappropriation of subcultural references marks the path of return of the objects back into the mainstream Fashion system. Although at first

glance, the overlapping of trajectories may seem unsurprising, it is important to remark that the socio-cultural structure in both countries seemed to take almost opposite turns, with English social order marked by declining religiosity and the consolidation and strengthening of capitalism, whereas Egypt revolved around “Arab socialism,” or a selective use of Islam as a justification of practices (Macleod 1991; Maloul 2017; Wener, 1997), culminating in an environment in which religion was strengthened as a grounding social practice.

Throughout the decades discussed above, the presence, absence and return of both objects created the conditions for a “confusion” of meanings to emerge: all round the multiple desemantisations and resemantisations (Greimas and Courtés 1993) suffered by those garments, corset and hijab had the chance of meaning “everything to everyone” – from normative dress to revolutionary uniform. Those reinvestments of value, as well as the waves of absence and presence, seem to be closely linked not only to transformation in each society, particularly concerning the role of women but, likewise, to embody a fight for change denouncing emblematic moments of social transformation.

2. Presence, absence, and return – a generative trajectory

The rhythmic cycle of changes that governs Fashion, and particularly in the case analysed in the present work, seems to be linked to transits of values, as well as to their development in “manipulation utterances” – relation-functions between (at least) two actants (Greimas and Courtés 1993: 381). Such understanding is important for the present investigation, as it permits looking at Fashion beyond its visual manifestations, which are often understood as the totality of the sartorial discourse. By using Greimas’ generative trajectory to study dress, we aimed at exposing the extent to which the visual elements of dress, or its discursive level, are homologated to deep, semio-narrative structures which, in our understanding, link both to political and religious discourses: the roles of gender and class played by women and manifested through their dress; and Christian and Islamic concepts of femininity. Although it is not usual in the theory, our analysis opted for presenting the trajectory from the fundamental to the discursive level, rather than starting from the manifestation, firstly with the purpose of showing the surfacing of social values through the mechanisms that are enabled by Fashion, while also avoiding the prevalent practices of “looking for the meaning” of different forms of dress.

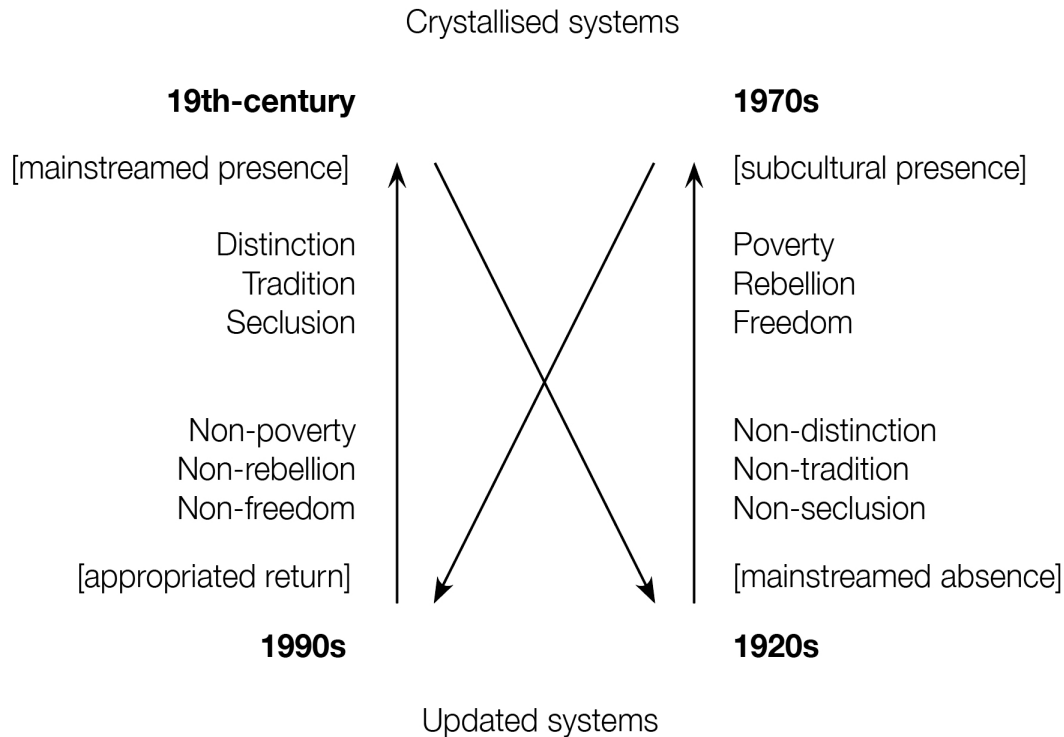


Figure 1. Articulation of the categories distinction/poverty, seclusion/freedom, and orthodoxy/rebellion.

Building from the values pinpointed by the authors, we identified a triple category as the starting point of the Fashion changes we identified through the periods comprising our corpus: Distinction/Poverty; Tradition/Rebellion; and Seclusion/Freedom. The articulation of the category, on its turn, seems to respond to a fourth layer of value, that is the Fashion rhythm de facto, forming a path from mainstreamed presence, to mainstreamed absence, which then bounces back as subcultural presence and appropriated return of the objects. As shown in our square in figure 1, the articulation of the fundamental category follows the chronological time, with the movements of the square and the movements of Fashion aligning perfectly.

The main “change” faced in our corpus is certainly the first relation of denegation, occurring between the 19th century and the 1920s: an elite-led movement, both locations face transformations consequent from a transit from mainstreamed presence – in which, in both societies, corset and veil are fully invested with the values of distinction, tradition, and seclusion, a meaning of the garments that is not only a consensus among the members of society, but widespread as a desirable/euphoric value – to mainstreamed absence – in which the rejection of corset and veil among the elites at both locations appears as a rejection of the values invested in object as well: the blending of social classes, the rejection of rank and “everything 19th-century,” as well as

the desire for freedom and taking the streets are well-known “side effects” of the 1920s, which we, in agreement to some authors (Ahmed 2011; Lynn 2010; Steele 2001), credit to the changes in dress, and not the other way around.

However, the flapper vogue in the West and the uncritical Westernisation in Egypt still are movements generated among the elites, not only meaning the access to those lifestyles was restricted to a group of privileged but equally that the ideals communicated in this transformation were not relatable to the majority of people. It makes sense, then, that the subcultural backlash, in relation of implication with the mainstreamed absence, is a movement generated among the working classes at both locations. The reutilisation – in fact, an appropriation as well – of objects typically associated with privilege, the corset and the hijab of the subcultural movements are not used with the aim of “imitating” the 19th-century practices: it is indeed a new form of the corset, or a new veiling (Ahmed 2011; Werner 1997), in which the original meanings are completely subverted and reversed, aiming at meaning either the opposite, the punk corset that turns appropriate moral into amoral conduct, bringing chaos; or exceeding the meaning, the subcultural Islam of the Muslim Brotherhood appearing as much more radical and strict than the “mainstream Islam” practised in Egypt at the time, proposing an extremist return to religious moral as an antidote to corrupt Western values.

Finally, the “...constant and fundamented fear...” of anti-fashion – to become Fashion (Diederichsen 2006: 69) – comes true at both locations in the post-1990s, when Fashion rhythmically reappropriates subcultures back into the mainstream, utilising their aesthetics as material for new trends, but emptying the values of poverty, rebellion, and freedom and reinvesting them into palatable versions of the look which do nothing more than preparing the return of a new, saturated vogue of mainstreamed presence.

Although our work is concerned particularly with the trajectories of the corset and the hijab, the model of transit of values just described doesn't have to be exhausted in this analysis: the Punk and the Muslim Brotherhood are not the only victims of mainstream reappropriation, but they are also not the inventors of the operation through which objects of dominant, traditional cultures are resignified into the destruction of that culture. Our case, hence, is part of a larger cycle of appropriations that seems to fuel the constant cycles of Fashion renewal.

Continuing our examination towards the narrative level, the articulation of abstract values in utterances of making doesn't only take place in between human subjects, but dress appears, likewise, as one of the actants facilitating those relation-functions that form the narrative structures of society. Hence, our analysis takes Greimas' definition of actant literally – “...the one that

accomplishes or suffers the act...” (Greimas and Courtés 1993: 3) – accepting that, as much as “human” subjects do, dress too can play the role of actant-subject. An analysis of the narrative level, thus, must consider that the relations of presence and absence concern both the relations taking place between clothed-bodies and others and the interactions established between body and dress.

Initially, the propositions in the categories previously presented can be understood in terms of exchange of values: an inventory of manipulations in which the presence and absence of the garments aim at make-doing both their “users” and the ones around them. Such utterances, however, can unfold differently in each period, accommodating the changes identified at the fundamental level.

In the first moment of our corpus, the 19th-century vogues are in correspondence with a narrative structure in which both garments embody social addressers or, perhaps, are invested with the role of addresser [destinateur] (Greimas and Courtés 1993: 94-5) of the feminine body – meaning the communication between those objects and the body is unilateral, with the garment more or less “leading” the interaction. Both corset and hijab appear as the normative dress of women, associated with the correct morals expected of the feminine social actor: be it through the emphasis of attributes that link to the ability of generating heirs associated with the emphasis of the hip by the constrained waist or through the “covering of one’s charms” that is prescribed in the Qur’an as the correct attitude of a respectable woman. In both cases, the garments are simultaneously constructing, reproducing, and keeping such social norms in check.

If the 19th century appears as a moment of investment and consolidation of values in the objects, the 1920s are marked by their rejection or renunciation: the abandoning of corsets in England and the unveiling in the Arab world communicate the same transformation, in which the elites start a vogue of dress that can be read as an abandon of the values that secure their own condition. From all the moments in our corpus, the 1920s is the most significant in terms of a transformation of the condition of women: for those who indeed abandoned the corset or the veil, this transformation of state was the most gaugeable, mainly because it transforms the status of the body: rather than the addressee [destinataire] “submitting” to the garments and their meanings, the body that renounces value is a body taking control of the unilateral relation of communication, becoming the addresser of Fashion, choosing to change.

Although a transformation in the condition of women is linked to the renunciation of the three values through the rejection of corset and hijab, that vogue is still bred in the upper classes, meaning that a transformation of the feminine role then didn’t necessarily mean a broader transformation in society.

That moment was to come in the 1970s when, for the first time, a movement generated at the bottom of society would reverse not only the meanings and values invested in garments but the direction of the dictation of trends. If the “voluntary” abandon of the garments corresponds to an operation of renunciation of value (Greimas, 1983: 38), the subcultural hijacking of those garments promotes a dispossession (Greimas, 1983: 38): by reinvesting a new meaning in the corset and veil, Punk and the Islamists groups are not only displacing the use and context of those garments but forcibly removing the meanings of upper-classness, tradition and orthodoxy from the objects and reinvesting them with the meanings of irony, rebellion and ideological religiosity. This transformation, thus, marks the complete destruction of the 19th-century social order, comprising the opposition of values and the turnaround in the relation of dictators and subjects of trends.

Our cycle ends with the (re)appropriation of the subcultures back into the Fashion system – the occasion of a re-reversal of narratives returning society and the roles of body and dress to their initial establishment. Post-1990s, the subcultural initiatives of the 1970s – in our case, namely the Punk and the Islamic groups in Egypt – become material for mainstream Fashion systems, both in the form of visual reference, and in the spreading of sartorial behaviours. That hijacking of plastic manifestations seem to be in correspondence with an appropriation (Greimas 1983: 38) of values: through the claiming of the subcultures from their status of anti-fashion back into the Fashion system, the values are, again, forcibly returned to their original state.

Looking back at the semiotic square in figure 1, the narrative level adds two distinctive operations in its deixis: the positive deixis, belonging to the Fashion system, represents the utterances that work towards the reproduction of Fashion and the cultural practices supported by it, also marking bodies that are more objectal or, at least, invested with the role of addressee in the communication contract. On the other hand, the negative deixis represents anti-Fashion practices, displaying the utterances that work towards the destruction of Fashion and the social order it prescribes, which can only take place through bodies that are more subjectal and invested with the role of addresser. That analysis uncovers an important aspect of the rhythms of Fashion: that the cycle of trends is grounded on a careful interchanging of roles of body and dress, each one leading the way through the different utterances of acquisition and loss of value. Those transformations not only correspond to the changes in the establishment of the body – as object of Fashion or agent of anti-Fashion – but, consequently, mark periods in which femininities are objectified by society – either the completely surrendered bodies of stratified societies, or the bodies submitted and reshaped Fashion – or subjects of their own emancipation.

Moving to the superficial levels of our object, the analysis of an alternation

of absence and presence is necessarily an analysis of the aspectualisation of the discourse, or what significant relations are established between the moment of a Fashion cycle – inchoateness, duration, or terminativeness (Greimas and Courtés 1993: 21-2) – and to which values each aspect is connected. In other words, alternations of absence and presence (or of different presences of the same objects) are determinations working as vehicles putting in discourse fundamental values and narrative mechanisms which, as much as written text does, possess syntactic and semantic components.

In the case analysed in this contribution, the discursive level can be examined from (at least) two perspectives: the visual element of the objects, their manifestation *de facto*; or through the apparatus utilised to the examination of verbal texts – the actorialisation, temporalisation, and spatialisation. Although Fashion is often examined in its visuality, our proposition is concerned with the manners in which a discursive level of dress can also construct relations between subjects that communicate the same mechanisms of distancing and approximation observed in written discourse, positioning the clothed-body in different situations of communication with the world around them and other subjects.

Firstly, when looking at the aspectualisation, the moments identified as most emblematic in our corpus consist of one moment of absence (the 1920s), and three distinctive moments of presence (19th century, 1970s, post-1990s). As much as each form of presence was homologated to a different term of the identified categories, each moment is also in correspondence with a different aspect of a Fashion cycle: the beginning of a trend, or the inchoateness, appears in the subcultural presence of the garment, a moment in which corset and hijab produce the effect of newness (even though they are being appropriated). Following suit, when the garments migrate from subcultures back into the Fashion system, their presence is gaining continuity, aspectualised as durativeness. Finally, the moment when a vogue reaches the complete dissemination in the mainstream – such as was the case in the 19th century – contains in itself the perfectiveness and the announcement of the terminativeness, or the instant immediately before the next rupture that culminates in the movement towards absence. Once a cycle of presence is completed, a brief period of absence follows, in which the system is “reset” – the moments of suspension which are more often perceived as “change.”

Those cycles, on their turn, also correspond to different configurations established between bodies, garments, and the ones who gaze at those bodies, considering that the amalgamation clothed-body is not only modified by the dress, but that the set of modifications imposed on the body that is veiled or corseted acts as a set of prescriptions that, beyond any cultural meaning, determines in situation how a body should be looked at, which parts of those

bodies are the most meaningful, and from which distance the other, the enunciatee of the sartorial utterance, should be positioned.

Such relations link to forms of actorialisation, temporalisation and spatialisation: clothed-bodies, no matter whether they are conforming to or rejecting a trend, are communicating different statuses of the body in the categories of person, time and space, also constructing presupposed positions for the ones in correspondence with those bodies. In the 19th century, the heavily veiled or corseted silhouettes, for instance, produce bodies that are almost statuesque, inviting the viewer to take their distance so that the ensemble can be apprehended. That need for distance places the clothed-body in a category of elsewhere/then, enlarging the social abyss in between the genders, as well as social classes. The same relation of distance is invested in the subcultural movements, in which the heavily modified bodies construct an effect of “self-segregation”, perhaps in the effort of marking their removal from mainstream society and what it stands for. Finally, the construction of distance is probably the most evident in the post-1990s, a position identified with the body of Fashion – the image body seen in the ads, magazines, in the catwalk and, nowadays, the body of social media, belonging both to celebrities or to former-anonymous who acquire, through the platforms, the status of someone to be followed – which, more than the others, is completely transformed in utterance: an accomplished body transfigured into image, even when seen live, never meant to be apprehended as an act of enunciation or “a body in the making.”

In conclusion, what unites the three forms of presence is the mechanism of disengagement [débrayage], in which all the categories of discourse are projected in distance: he, elsewhere, then. The body of stratified societies, the subcultural body, and the body of fashion share the matter of distance – regardless of the motivation – installing the bodies in relation of separation with their surroundings. On the other hand, the suspension of presence, when regarded from the point of view of the body in situation of communication, becomes the source of social transformation, as it interferes with the problem of how bodies are looked at. If corset and hijab produce prescriptive manners of gazing at, their absence not only frees the bodies from the multifarious values and meanings invested in those sartorial objects, but also through the construction of non-prescriptive visual interactions. This suspension can be read as the engagement [shifting in/embrayage] of the discourse, suspending the categories of person, time and space, constructing the effect of a present now in the utterance, which can be interpreted as a mechanism of approximation between the enunciator (clothed-body) and enunciatee (viewer) or, to use Landowski’s words, “...suppressing the distance between the I ‘being’ and the I ‘been’.” (Landowski 1992: 52). That suspension, in the case analysed in this

article, appears as a powerful antidote to the static effect corset and hijab install in the social fabric – whether that means separating the genders, the social classes, or believers from non-believers. When sartorial discourses are engaged, those barriers seem to dissolve, inviting periods of true interaction between subjects – even if such periods last only a brief diastole in the heart of Fashion.

3. Conclusion

The present investigation aimed at offering a proposition contradicting the current discourses about the study of dress and culture, as well as the field of Orientalism and Occidentalism, by analysing objects belonging to English and Egyptian cultures in parallel, rather than in opposition. Working from historical and ethnographic writings from key theoreticians concerned with the dress practices we examined – the corset and the hijab – we presented a semiotic analysis that purposed to expand from the usual address of clothing from the perspective of visual semiotics.

Utilising Greimas' generative trajectory, the work described and analysed the aspectualisation of corset and hijab in the cultures originating those objects as a fashion trajectory, aiming at scrutinising the construction resulting from each aspect linked to a different presence, or the absence of those sartorial objects in the wardrobe and in society. Through the different levels generating the meaning, the article examines the articulation of fundamental categories manifested by the objects, as well as the manner in which different narrative utterances determine the relation-functions we call "social role", particularly the roles of women in culture, society and religion – a role that is achieved largely due to practices of dress linked to gender techniques. Finally, at the surface level, the work identified the manners in which different sartorial enunciations construct different situations of communication which are linked not only to the aspectualisation of the garments – their discursive presence or absence in the social context, as well as whether the presence is in inchoateness, durativeness, or terminativeness – but the mechanisms of shifting in [embrayage] and shifting out [débrayage] performed by dress, and the consequent relations of distancing and approximation resulting from those mechanisms.

Following emblematic past works in the semiotic theory, where the approximations between Fashion and language (Greimas 2000, 2002), Fashion and Grammar (Barthes 1967, 2006), Fashion and Identity (Floch 1995), and Fashion and Politics (Landowski, 1997) examine the manners in which rhythmic changes are ingrained into the social fabric, not merely "reflecting" History but actively constructing it, appearing as a force mutually forming the manifestations of the present (Oliveira 2011), our study continues that trajectory, aiming at the proposition of a semiotics of Fashion beyond its language or plastic manifestation. The analysis of the different levels of sartorial objects, as well as

the transit of values and transformations in utterances governing the actions of subjects in societies, argues the case for the study of dress as a critical agent, both producing and reproducing cycles of vogues that create the rhythms of History. Throughout Fashion's merciless appropriations, ressemantisations and resignifications, the irreconcilable is amalgamated, showing that dress, perhaps, is the one site of culture where what is at odds can dissolve into sameness.

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Section 8

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THE CORSET AND THE HIJAB: ABSENCE AND PRESENCE IN THE 19TH AND
20TH-CENTURY FASHION SYSTEM

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Introduction

The corset and the hijab : more than emblems of two societies and cultures, those two objects could perhaps be classed as being among the most evocative items of dress produced by two traditions often addressed as opposed : English and Egyptian cultures. Placing both objects and the two selected locations in parallel may seem, for some, a comparison not possible and, hence, surpassing the possibilities of the semiotic theory ; however, looking closer at both objects, not only they produce similar trajectories in time, but similar values are invested in, and manifested through them, as we hope to show.

As much as England is an epicentre of Western culture and remains a dictator of Fashion trends and a centre for the qualification of designers, Egypt, as well, is a pivot of cultural and political life in the Arab world. Similarly, while the British cling to their glorious monarchical, colonialist history, Egyptians are tied to their Pharaonic past likewise, pulled in opposing directions, also being at the forefront of the proximity with both the Arab and Western worlds¹. By presenting Egypt as a country similar to England in history and cultural influence, both nations can be placed side by side at least as a corpus to analyse the trajectories of feminine dress, while also serving to fulfil Edward Said's celebrated statement about the West and the Orient being, contrary to the prevalent discourses, reversed reflections of one another².

Both sartorial objects, traditionally and normatively worn by the woman, share more with each other than being part of the feminine wardrobe. Although it is not customary, in Fashion theory, to talk about "Fashion" as something existing outside of Western culture, this reflection aims at the argument that the transit of values that forms the rhythmic changes in Fashion systems is also shared by corset and hijab and, consequently, by the cultures producing those objects.

"Fashion is defined by change" is probably one of the most succinct illustrations of a Western obsession since the 18th century : Fashion is a mode of existence marked by correlational hierarchies — a system — which governs the alternation of different appearances periodically, through processes of erasure and renovation. Hence, the Fashion system is marked by the *punctual* aspect : the attempt to prolong the duration of a vogue is precisely the signature of the kitsch, the *demodé*, or what stayed outside of the loop of change, choosing persistence over renewal.

1 A.E. Macleod, *Accommodating Protest : Working Women, the New Veiling, and Change in Cairo*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1991.

2 E. Said, *Orientalism*, London, Vintage, 2003.

Although commonly associated with dress, Fashion dictates everything in a given culture, from food preferences to political views or religious beliefs. As different paradigms rhythmically appear and erase previous vogues, relations of durations, as well as absence and presence of the same objects or concepts become the means through which Fashion constructs meaning.

The meaning of rhythmic changes in Fashion can be observed and analysed through the apparatus of categories marking the implicit presence of an observer, that is the aspects of person (actorialisation), space (spatialisation) and time (temporalisation)³. In literature or in sartorial fashion, those markers permit the observer — the enunciatee — to locate and decompose the path and actions of actors in the narrative. When analysing Fashion through those lenses, mapping the aspects of a trajectory can assist on isolating emblematic moments of the panorama we aim at analysing, namely fashions of dress and behaviours from the late 19th to the early 21st century.

Defined by what we could perhaps name the “durativity of punctuality”, constant ruptures and renovations are the language of Fashion, which can be analysed in two manners : the cycle of one trend, or the alternation produced in a syntagmatic chain comprising of past vogues, regarded from a chronological distance. Those two modes of analysis concern both our objects, the corset and the hijab : both are subjected to subtle, yet significant alternations of different silhouettes of the body and the head of the wearer, but they are subjected also to the more often debated alternations of *absence* and *presence* of these items in Fashion.

Although both processes can be discussed in terms of sartorial manifestations of Fashion, each silhouette created by the corset and the hijab, as well as the absence or presence of such garments, can be homologated to the alternation of different femininities as well, which relates to the forms of life constructed around dress practices : the shape the female body chooses to present to another creates different meanings which simultaneously construct and reflect different conditions of women in society, as well as transformations in the roles played in the interaction between genders, or between bodies and spaces. However, it is also the case that different values present at a given era or society surface to and through sartorial objects : Fashion is not a one-way street, but both directions are possible pathways of analysis, from object to meaning, but from meaning to object likewise.

One of the grand arguments in need of deconstruction today is the one that only the West has Fashion⁴ — that claim used precisely to back the idea that Fashion is what makes the West more “civilised”, or perhaps more “advanced” than other cultures and nations, side by side with the need for other cultures to *follow* our Fashion — a view that contributed to the idea of “being Westernised” as synonymous of being “modern”, which emerges from the enduring self-image of the West as a “modern nation”⁵. Throughout History, to be Westernised was homologated to being in tune with progress, Western fashion becoming the manifestation of “future”, whereas any other form of national dress became the “past”, or tradition — a badge of backwardness and otherness.

3 Cf. A.J. Greimas and J. Courtés, *Sémiotique. Dictionnaire raisonné de la théorie du langage*, Paris, Hachette, 1979. (*Semiotics and Language : an Analytical Dictionary*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1982).

4 The common theoretical conception is mentioned in Valerie Steele, “Fashion”, *Encyclopedia of Clothing and Fashion*, New York, Scribner, 2005 ; while a similar questioning of the Western “ownership” of Fashion appears in Abby Lillethun and Linda Welters, *Fashion History : A Global View*, London, Bloomsbury, 2018.

5 Cf. L.F. Maloul, “Political Islam, Islam as faith and modernity in 1970s Egypt : a socio-political reading of Ahdag Sourif’s *In the Eye of the Sun*”, *Contemporary Levant*, 2017.

And yet, when looking at the history of headscarves in Egypt, we won't find a monolithic, constant — or *durative* — presence of the practice of veiling, as is commonly stated in dominant discourses about the Orient and its “traditional past”. Our observation of works about the history of veiling in Egypt has shown that, not only the practice was marked by the same two types of punctuality as the vogue of corsets in England, but that the dance of absences and presences at the periods we chose to analyse overlapped with the Western trajectory of the corset.

To achieve the objective of placing both Fashion systems in parallel, the key points in the “Fashion History” of the corset in England and the hijab in Egypt will be mapped through the work of authors who deeply examined the history of both objects, such as Eleri Lynn, Valerie Steele, David Kunzle⁶ ; and Leila Ahmed, Fadwa El Guindi, Arlene MacLeod and Karin Werner respectively⁷. Once mapped, the key moments in the histories of both objects will be analysed according to the hierarchy of levels composing the so-called “generative trajectory” of Greimas's semiotic theory⁸, with the aim of gauging the different markers of the objects' paths throughout the periods examined.

By working from historical writing, our analyses of both garments take the opposite direction that is practised in the examination of dress and Fashion. Rather than working from the visual manifestation to the fundamental level, the work starts from the values identified in both societies as motivations for the use of the garments, reconstructing the generative trajectory to the visual manifestations. That approach also uses the apparatus of absence and presence of both objects in their respective cultural contexts to understand how each aspect signifies in Fashion, and whether it is indeed possible to analyse the West and the Orient as one.

From the start, it is possible to gauge that, as much as the generative trajectory is multi-layered, the objects produced by Fashion similarly contain in themselves (at least) three layers : a visual and enunciative manifestation, which corresponds to the discursive level ; while the semio-narrative structures contain both the narratives of femininity and social in their different modes of relations between different actors in society ; as well as fundamental, deep values that are tied to religion, culture, and society.

In an address of Fashion, it is impossible to leave out the adjacent topics that stem from the study of dress. To talk about sartorial practices is to talk about taste, as well as politics and change — themes that reflect back to the socio-semiotic works of Eric Landowski, which will also serve our investigation⁹. Hence, the present work aims at investigating the corset and the hijab in their respective cultural environments, while also examining the socio-political implications of the alternations of absences and presences we aim at identifying and analysing. The relevance of this investigation today is critical, mainly due to the efforts in deconstructing “orientalisms” and “occidentalisms” that are so present in the mainstream discourses, both in academia and the media. By

6 E. Lynn, *Underwear Fashion in Detail*, London, V&A, 2010. V. Steele, *Fetish: fashion, sex and power*, New York and Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1997 ; also V. Steele, *The Corset. A Cultural History*, New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 2001. D. Kunzle, *Fashion and Fetishism. Corsets, tight-lacing and other forms of body-sculpture*, Stroud, Sutton, 2004.

7 L. Ahmed, *A Quiet Revolution*, New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 2011. F. El Guindi, *Veil : modesty, privacy and resistance*, Oxford, Berg, 1999. A. Macleod, *op. cit.* K. Wener, *Between westernization and the veil : contemporary lifestyles of women in Cairo*, Bielefeld, Transcript Verlag, 1997.

8 A.J. Greimas and J. Courtés, *op. cit.*, pp. 157-160.

9 Mainly E. Landowski, *Présences de l'autre*, Paris, P.U.F., 1997.

presenting England and Egypt in parallel, rather than in confrontations, this reflection goes against the grain and proposes an innovative approach to investigating sartorial practices in the West and the Orient, while exposing the contemporary relevance of traditional semiotic approaches.

1. Between West and the Orient : the waves of change

The 1868 Offenbach's opera *La Vie Parisienne* provides us with a statement of unpaired insight : "Blind is the man who cannot see that the form of the corset explains the pattern of social custom"¹⁰. That fragment of the libretto inspired my investigation about the corset in Western Fashion, where I explore the matter of interactions between body and dress, and clothed bodies and other clothed bodies : after analysing the numerous possible combinations of body and dress, including the comings and goings of the corset — or its rhythms of absence and presence — the work concludes that, indeed, the form of the corset, as well as its presence or absence, are ingrained in the perception of women, their bodies, and their role in society, while also appearing as an active participant in the interactions of and with different bodies¹¹.

Throughout the semiotic examination of the history of the corset in the West, the work identified some key moments which are well known in the histories of Fashion : the late 19th century, the 1920s, the 1970s and, finally, the aftermath of the 1990s. The 19th century, the beginning of the end for the corset in the West, was marked by its golden age, the Victorian Era, where its use and development peaked, and so did the debate about the pros and cons of that particular item of clothing to female health¹², as well as concerns about the perks of extreme gender-defining dress¹³. The 1920s, the official date of a consolidation of "un-corseting" for women, were marked by the most radical transformation in both dress and in the feminine condition in the West : after the social consequences of World War I, women seemed to distance themselves from the social institutions that marked their existence in society, to construct new ideas of what it means to be a woman. During the 1970s, a strange movement of revival takes place, and subcultural movements¹⁴ look back at the 18th and 19th centuries for inspiration, and particularly the Punk movement brings ironic revivalism of corsets, at the same time bending and exaggerating the previous meaning invested in the garment. Then, last but not least, from the 1990s to our day, corsets become popular again, among celebrities and regular women likewise, as a "trusted" apparatus for shaping the figure, with public figures like Kim Kardashian becoming advocates of the item, influencing thousands of women to practice waist training, bringing a long-forgotten practice back into mainstream culture¹⁵. Following suit, celebrities

10 Cf. E. Lynn, *op. cit.*, p. 73.

11 M. Jardim, *O Corset na Moda Ocidental*, São Paulo, PUC-SP, 2014.

12 D. Kunzle, *Fashion and Fetishism*, *op. cit.*, and V. Steele, *Fetish : fashion, sex and power*, *op. cit.*

13 V. Steele, *The Corset. A Cultural History*, *op. cit.*

14 Following the collection of definitions presented by Dick Hebdige, subcultures are a "mechanism of semantic disorder" (p. 90), through which forbidden contents (such as consciousness of class and difference) are expressed in forbidden forms — particularly codes of dress and group behaviour (p. 91). The term *subculture* refers to the "subterranean" character of youth culture appearing in the post-war, organised in marginal movements that resist the hegemony of mainstream culture, symbolically breaking with the myth of "consensus" in culture and society (p. 18). Cf. D. Hebdige, *Subcultures. The meaning of style*, London, Routledge, 1979.

15 A report about Kim Kardashian and tight lacing appeared at the *Medical Daily* on 23rd of August 2014, but the matter of Kardashian and corsets made more news recently after her appearance at the 2019 Met Gala, in which

such as the actress Cara Delavigne and the American fashion models Bella and Gigi Hadid¹⁶ were also spotted wearing the garment on multiple occasions and, since 2016, many well-established Western brands which are at the forefront of leading trends that trickle down to the high street have included corsets in their collections, such as Prada, McQueen, Dion Lee, Burberry, and Tom Ford, and even the American fast-fashion retailer Forever 21 embraced the corset trend in 2018.

Perhaps not strangely at all, Leila Ahmed identifies the same key periods as tipping points for the veil in Egypt. In her work *A Quiet Revolution*, the scholar aims to reconstruct the recent history of the practice of veiling, mapping the process of unveiling occurring in Egypt and other Muslim majority countries, all the way to the present return to veiling, which the author names “the veil’s resurgence”¹⁷. Following the panorama Ahmed presents, the custom of veiling too tipped in the 19th century, and then slowly started to dissolve as a consequence of the European colonial occupation of Egypt, where not only a strong presence of Westerners made Western dress part of the landscape but it was also during that period that the idea of Westernisation as progress began to gain speed ; in the 1920s, the process of unveiling is led by the ruling elite, and for women coming to age between the 1920s and the 1960s, not wearing a veil becomes the norm¹⁸. It is in the 1970s, however, that Islamist groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood started to gain strength¹⁹, and the revival and resignification of the veil starts to take place, acquiring subcultural tones and marking a separation between “regular” and “radical” Muslims²⁰. Finally, from the late 1990s to date, the hijab expanded from the Islamist subcultural space and made its entrance back into the mainstream, both in Egypt, other Muslim majority countries²¹, and even in the West, also having influencers and celebrities advocating its use, as well as a growing presence in contemporary advertising.

From the start, it is possible to argue that there is not much surprise in this perfect overlapping, since Egypt was, after all, a Westernised nation after the 19th century, and also an active participant in the world order at the time : if, as a country, Egypt was subjected to the same cultural and economic contexts as the West, it is only natural that the feminist waves would more or less align in both places, as well as the manifestations of change through dress resulting from it. However, it is imperative to remark that, if in England the period discussed was marked by declining religiosity and the consolidation and strengthening of capitalism — which would provide the perfect conditions for the strengthening of Fashion, even counter-cultural “fashion” which was, curiously, marked by

the celebrity wore a traditional corset. A headline from 7th of May 2019, appearing in the *Women’s Health Magazine* reads “People Are Freaking Out About How Small Kim Kardashian’s Waist Looks In Her Met Gala Corset Dress.”

¹⁶ Delavigne made it to the news in the world known fashion magazine *Harpers Bazar* for her look merging a Little Black Dress with an embedded corset in the September 2019 edition, which echoes her appearance in the Amazon Prime historical show “Carnival Row,” featuring the actress wearing corsets. And the October 2016 fashion magazine *Cosmopolitan* broke the news that Gigi Hadid is following Kim Kardashian’s “lead” on a major corset trend. Since then, both Gigi and Bella Hadid were spotted wearing multiple corset looks, including an original vintage 1993 Vivienne Westwood worn by the model Bella Hadid to New York Fashion week, according to the September 2019 *Vogue*.

¹⁷ L. Ahmed, *op. cit.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ L. Ahmed, *op. cit.* ; A. Macleod, *op. cit.* ; L.F. Maloul, *op. cit.* ; K. Werner, *op. cit.*

²¹ L.Ahmed, *op. cit.*, and E. Tarlo, *Visibly Muslim : fashion, politics, faith*, Oxford, Berg, 2010.

conspicuous consumption likewise²² — Egypt took the opposite turn : not only their address of social and economic issues revolves around what authors name “Arab socialism”, which uses Islam selectively to justify its practices²³ but mainly, an environment in which religion was strengthened as a grounding social practice is constructed. Hence, even if a broader global context can partially explain the similar trajectories of our objects, the local contexts couldn’t be more diverse from one another.

More importantly, we can learn from the key moments listed above that, from the late 1890s to our day, both corset and hijab had the chance of literally meaning “everything to everyone” : from normative dress to revolutionary uniform and back, both garments were invested with different values, resignified multiple times, while also suffering operations of desemantisation and resemantisation, or the loss of value followed by the recovery of the initial value invested in the object²⁴. Similarly, when regarding particularly the case of Western Fashion, there is also the intersection between Western Fashion and “Oriental” dress — which, in Great Britain today, is labelled as “modest fashion”, an umbrella term that comprises any sort of intentional modesty in the presentation of self, including religions beyond Islam. To discuss that particular form of remixing both systems, however, is not the object of the present investigation, although we have presented an analysis elsewhere in which the matter of converging traditions in dress is debated²⁵. Those semantic trajectories are particularly interesting for the present investigation, because they help to deconstruct the “confusion” of meaning that both corset and hijab provoke in those who apprehend corseted and veiled bodies : between composed tradition and rebellious disobedience, the same item of dress has done it all and, in our day and age, it can be hard to decide whether the wearer of one or the other is embodying traditional affiliation or ironic non-compliance.

Nonetheless, and to conclude this initial exposition, it is important to discuss the extent to which those waves of absence and presence, which are either followed or occasioned by different semantic investments, contribute to or grow from transformations in the feminine role in each society ; or yet, if they embody a fight for change, which relate to the condition of women but, particularly in the hijab’s case, also manifest the claims for equality for a religious group. Likewise, it is possible to see that those trajectories align with moments of socio-economic crisis, meaning that the desire for change is bonded to a historical context, in which the transformation of the dress of the woman has appeared, historically and repetitively, as a flag denouncing broader social change.

2. Presence, absence, and return

Through the key moments presented above, it is possible to point at an interesting characteristic relating to the corpus we are discussing : that *absence* rather than presence (or return) of the objects is more broadly perceived as *change*, whereas the permanence or reintroduction of the objects are currently related to either “persistence of the same” or “retrospectiveness”, to which a sour feeling is

22 D. Hebdige, *op. cit.*

23 A. Macleod, *op. cit.* ; L.F. Maloul, *op. cit.* ; K. Wener, *op. cit.*

24 A.J. Greimas and J. Courtés, “Désémantisation”, *op. cit.*, p. 93.

25 M. Jardim, “Beyond the freedom vs oppression opposition : the meaning of the Londoner hijabista look”, *Greimas aujourd’hui : l’avenir de la structure* (Actes du congrès de l’Association française de sémiotique), Paris, AFS, 2019, pp. 758-768.

associated, the idea that Fashion cannot *invent* anything new anymore, but merely repeat and remix itself.

The matter of Fashion and change, both in sartorial practices and in the prevalence of political ideas, is discussed by Eric Landowski in *Présences de l'autre* : for him, fashion is a mechanism of regulation of social time, which produces and reproduces identities by imprinting a *rhythm* to a collective *becoming*²⁶. The individual tendency to follow this rhythm is interpreted as a compulsion for feeling (for oneself) and making manifest (for others) the fact that one is “present to the present” : as the author puts it, the strength of this appeal is that of a “presentification of the present”²⁷ ; hence “the virtue of inchoateness”²⁸. Adopting what appears as a new form in a given domain (that of clothing, eating, speaking, or even thinking) provides us with a means to attest our being part of our times. The rhythm of Fashion, thus, appears as the medium through which change is both produced and sustained. But “change” in itself is nothing but the suspension moment between the terminative aspect of a given process and the beginning of its renewal or restarting under some relatively new form (inchoateness) : the point of intersection that binds an end to a new beginning, or the discontinuity that separates a before and an after²⁹. This confirms the idea that rather than the specific substance of what is changing through the dynamic of Fashion, what matters first is its very dynamic — the rhythm Fashion conveys to the alternation of presence and absence.

Still, even if the “changes” are not radical or complete, Fashion is made of constant ruptures. As I analysed in my work about the corset, the long persistence of the same sartorial Fashion can be homologated to the persistence of other manners³⁰, including life itself, politics, and even religion, whereas fast-paced changes like the ones lived in our times are also aligned, if not with change *de facto*, at least to a constant *desire* for change. When regarding a timeline of Fashion with its many ruptures, it is evident that while the duration is perceived as dysphoric, punctuality is exalted both from a business perspective — more change equals more sales — as well as for those who follow Fashion : to be able to catch up with the many alternating vogues and to be perceived as someone who is always presented according to the latest trends means to be in tune with the times but also to be part of the elite *creating* the times, the innovators and early adopters who push trends forward and help to disseminate them.

Looking at our corpus, we see (at least) two possibilities of interpreting the alternation of absence and presence. From a diachronic perspective, every trend has, to an extent, a form of duration. Hence, the beginning of a trend (for example, the change in the season, or the moment when the first early adopters start to be spotted parading a new look) is marked by inchoateness ; the adoption by the mainstream is marked by duration, but it also contains in itself the announcement of the terminative aspect : the saturation of a look creates the need for something new. However, when zooming out Fashion history, both corset and hijab display much more moments of presence than absence in the

26 E. Landowski, “Mode, politique et changement”, in *Présences de l'autre*, *op. cit.*, pp. 120-121.

27 *Op. cit.*, p. 127.

28 *Op. cit.*, p. 134. The author refers to Georg Simmel’s essay, “La mode” (1895), in *La tragédie de la culture et autres essais*, trad. Paris, Rivages, 1988.

29 *Ibid.*

30 M. Jardim, *O Corset na Moda Ocidental*, *op. cit.*

feminine wardrobe. In that sense, it is possible to analyse that both the inchoateness and terminativeness are aspects connected to the early stages of a subcultural presence, as well as the complete dissemination of the garments in the mainstream which marks the necessary end of a trend ; whereas the brief periods of absence of one form or another of corset and hijab can be interpreted as the brief suspension, the discontinuity interpreted as change that marks the end before the return. Even further, the different aspects can be homologated to different meanings invested in the garment : the subcultural rupture bringing the flavour of inchoateness ; the (re)adoption of the garments by the Fashion system the durative aspect ; whereas the complete mainstreamed saturation of a look contains in itself the perfectiveness, the completed cycle of an object or trend that carries the announcement of change, or the preparation of another rupture — a moment of suspension that is marked by the absence of the objects.

Although Landowski remarks that the Fashion changes can be understood as capricious, responding to a need for Fashion to justify its own existence³¹, different from the changes in politics which systematically claim to respond to “real needs”³², more and more it has become evident that the link between changes in dress and changes in society is marked — particularly when it comes to the conditions of women. In the case analysed, there are at least three layers of social discourse to be taken into consideration when investigating the relations of presence, absence and return of the corset and the hijab : the sartorial discourse, which is commonly associated with the word “fashion” ; the political discourse linking forms of dress to forms of femininity and its socio-cultural narratives ; and, finally, the social and religious discourse, comprising both Christian and Islamic ideals of femininity, as well as ideas of social class and distinction, and the conformity with or rejection of those ideals. Each of the layers of Fashion persistence and change corresponds to one of the levels of Greimas’ generative trajectory : the surface or discursive level, the narrative level and the abstract or fundamental level³³.

The first layer is the visual manifestation of Fashion, and the most evident matter of our investigation : at some (or most?) times in the section of history we are analysing, women wore constraining foundation wear in the West or veils in the Orient, and at rare times, they went uncorseted or unveiled ; after those brief vogues, corset and hijab found their way back into the mainstream via subcultural movements, resuming their permanence and parading changes in their visual manifestation — those could be changes in the shape of the silhouette, or in the manner of wearing the veil. Those visual manifestations are the vehicles that put in discourse the fundamental values and narrative mechanisms underneath those garments (no pun intended) and, as much as written text does, possess syntactic and semantic components.

Secondly, when we start discussing ideas of femininity, or the extent to which corset and veil construct femininities through their actions over the body and over others who apprehend those clothed bodies, our investigation has reached the narrative level, in which utterances (*énoncés*) articulate relation-functions between at least two actants³⁴ : it is at the narrative level that values are

31 “Mode, politique...”, *op. cit.*, p. 114, 135.

32 *Ibid.*, p. 114, 139.

33 Cf. A.J. Greimas and J. Courtés, *op. cit.*, “Génératif (Parcours)”, p. 160 ; “Sémantique”, pp. 328-332 ; “Syntaxe”, pp. 379-381.

34 *Ibid.*, p. 382.

actualised via their junction with subjects. If we accept that as much as “human” subjects do, dress can play the role of actant-subject, an analysis of the narrative level of corset and hijab in relation of presence and absence in Fashion can produce different utterances, which concern both the relations established between body and dress, and the relations between clothed-body and other subjects.

Finally, the fundamental level is where the elementary structures of signification categories are articulated : “...a type of organised space comprising the inter-defined terms over which the syntactic operations take place...”³⁵. In other words, in the level formed by abstract values that are still virtualised, the subjects find an inventory of categories that can be exploited in the narrative level. This “inventory” is formed by “pure”, “undressed” value that is not yet articulated in intersubjective exchanges, or given a textual or visual manifestation. In the present case, there are at least three possible, overlapping categories which both concern and unite our objects : upper class / lower class, seclusion / freedom, orthodoxy / rebellion. Throughout the historical moments presented in the corpus, the relations of absence and presence can be homologated to those different categories but, as we approach the movements of return, there are transformations and resignifications of the objects in which the values can converge or become blurred, building contradictory relations.

In this particular work, we opted for presenting our analysis from the abstract level to the surface structures, rather than starting from the manifestation. That choice serves two purposes : firstly, to show how values present in a given society surface through the mechanisms that are enabled by Fashion ; however, secondly and chiefly, our intention was to avoid indulging in the prevalent practices of “looking for the meaning” of different forms of dress, a saturated approach in the study of dress and identities today. Regarding our trajectory “backwards” also gives us the chance of looking at both objects beyond the layers of stereotypes and clichés that, unfortunately, blur the judgment of so many authors when they opt for addressing the past or the Orient.

2.1. The values of Fashion

It is practically a consensus among theoreticians concerned with the corset and the hijab³⁶, that the primary value associated with those garments — even before femininity or religiousness — links to *class affiliation*. Particularly in the 19th century, where our trajectory starts, those values were the strongest in both social milieus, with both corset and hijab marking the affiliation to the upper classes. The category seclusion / freedom, thus, overlaps with the values of class, with the “domesticity” created by the corset being immediately bound to the idea of class distinction through its association with the absence of manual labour outside of the home, whereas the secluded covered woman symbolised the higher status of the husband, which allowed his wife (or wives) to be maintained, rather than being required to contribute to the generation of income. Similarly, the move to an absence of those garments culminating in the 1920s is not a “revolt of the masses” against apparatuses promoting a separation of the social strata, but a movement of the ruling elites at both ends : the “uncorseting” in Western Fashion starts among the so-called “socialites” — women who are famous

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 380.

³⁶ See above, respectively, footnotes 8, and Th. Veblen, *The theory of the leisure class*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2007, and 9 as well as F. Mernissi, *Beyond the veil : male-female dynamics in Muslim society*, London, Saqi, 2011.

for being wealthy and fashionable, normally used by designers to showcase their creations — as well as artists, and fashion designers, while in Egypt it was led mainly by a well-educated princess.

That movement of the elite is what slowly “trickles down”³⁷ to the majority, creating a more or less homogeneous absence of the garments in both societies — even if there are attempts of return on both sides, such as Christian Dior’s New Look in 1947, that occasioned a brief vogue of Belle Époque silhouettes worldwide and among all classes³⁸, or the persistence of the veil in locations outside of the city centres in Egypt³⁹, as well as in the emergence of Islamic groups that would subsequently be credited with the return to veiling as a mainstream practice. That passage from mainstream presence of both objects to their elite-led absence is also marked by a relation of denial of a value of orthodoxy — both in Religion and Fashion, as well as in social norms — in which an established notion of “appropriate dress” is challenged from the top-down, also questioning the meaning of social distinction through a certain form of dress : is it possible to be distinguished when a vogue is already spread to all the layers of the social strata?

What leads us back to the opposition categories, however, is no longer a movement from the elites that trickles down to the masses, but the movements bred within the lower classes : the return of both corset and hijab into the mainstream is articulated via subcultural practices, such as the Punk in the UK and the Islamist groups in Egypt⁴⁰. Hence, what is mistakenly read as a “return to orthodoxy” is, in fact, the proposition of a new form of both corset and hijab : the first reinterpreting the original meanings and uses of the object through irony ; the second radicalising tradition, creating new manners of living and spreading the religion, pushing the boundaries of Qur’anic prescriptions. Similarly, it is not only the fact that those movements are bred in the mid- to lower-classes that makes them oppose the value of upper-classness : for both forms of subcultures, the upper classes are perceived as something that needs to be opposed : either because of their role of “oppressors” of the working class in England, or because they are perceived as morally corrupted by money and Western values in Egypt. As for the seclusion / freedom category, even if the objects were formerly associated with domesticity, the return of those garments is followed by a reinvestment of values that reverses the meaning of the object : in the Punk, corsets become synonyms of explicit and intentional *amoral* behaviour, which includes an exaggeration of feminine sexuality manifested by the constriction of the waist ; whereas, for Islamist groups, the act of veiling is used as an instrument of conquering freedom to take the streets, sustaining a symbolic seclusion marked by the covering that is used, in its turn, to enable the presence of women outside the home : being covered means being able to go to work or study outside of the house, without sacrificing the values of modesty and piety that are prescribed by the group’s take on the Qur’an.

Finally, the trajectory of our three categories ends with another contradiction, the appropriation of the subcultural movements back into the mainstream. In Western Fashion, from the 1990s onwards

37 Th. Veblen, *op. cit.*

38 Cf. E. Pulajet-Plaa, “New Look”, *Encyclopedia of Clothing and Fashion*, Farmington Hills, Thomson Gale, 2005, and V. Steele, *Fifty years of fashion : new look to now*, London and New Haven, Yale University Press, 2000.

39 L. Ahmed, *op. cit.* ; A. Macleod, *op. cit.*

40 Cf. respectively D. Hebdige, *op. cit.*, V. Steele, *op. cit.*, and L. Ahmed, *op. cit.*, A. Macleod, *op. cit.*, K. Wener, *op. cit.*

and still clocking, not only Punk is used as a reference or inspiration by contemporary designers year in year out, but the corset worn as outerwear makes periodic returns, alternating between vintage looks retrospective of the 1950s, and rougher looks with references to Goth and BDSM (Bondage Discipline Sadism Masochism) groups ; if that was not enough, corsets as underwear have been regaining space in the mainstream as well, with recent celebrity endorsements from the Kardashian clan, who claim to use the garment regularly to achieve long term tightlacing goals⁴¹, resulting in visibility of the garment in the media, as well as a marked presence both in the luxury market and in the brands consumed by the average woman, a trend that peaked in 2018. Comparably, the form of Islam advocated by Islamist groups in the 1970s also inspired a mainstream return of hijabs in the Arab world – which includes countries where the garment is not required by law – and even in the West ; meanwhile, the Western Fashion industry has opened its arms to headscarves likewise, with the garment appearing in the same American and European popular high street retailers, as well as luxury brands : the Italian fashion house Dolce & Gabbana, for instance, and their first Abaya collection in 2016, which was followed by regular lines launched every year ; the Swedish fast-fashion multinational company H&M, launching a modest line in 2018 (and being the first to feature a Muslim hijabi model in their campaigns in 2015), as well as the UK based fast-fashion brand River Island, promoting the hijab and modest wear in their 2018 line ; and even the sportswear giant Nike has recently launched their “hijab pro”. As both garments become associated with consumption, rather than idealistic political movements, their “meaning” becomes diluted again, denying the radicalism of the movements while reconstructing the territory to reinvest the value of class affiliation that started our analysis : those new forms of corset and hijab, now produced by aspirational brands and worn by celebrities and influencers, mark a return to conspicuous consumption as a manner of social distinction, which may also indicate a possible return to seclusion and orthodoxy associated with the garments in the near future.

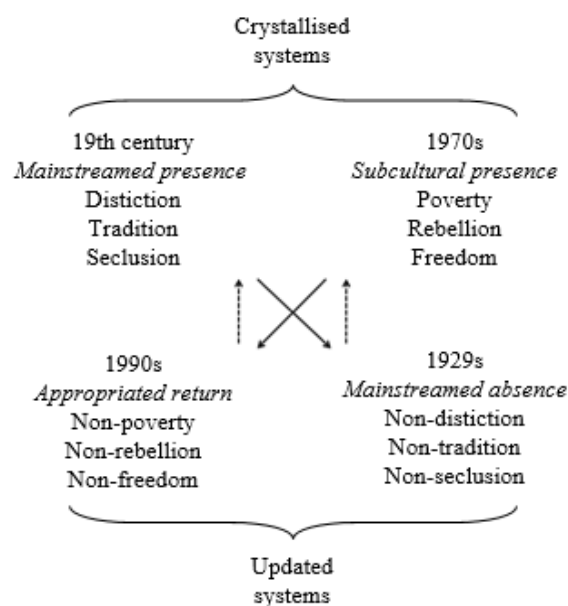


Figure 1. Articulation of the categories.

⁴¹ Cf. *Medical Daily*, art. cit.

2.2. The narratives of women and others : clothing femininities

However, how are the multi-layered virtual values presented in the previous items actualised in relations between subjects? Although both societies in the discussed periods are heavily heteronormative and grounded in couple-centric social relations, the modern history of dress is our witness that “change” is always more emphatically inflicted in the dress of the woman, as much as those changes are frequently followed by large debate — in politics and, subsequently, the media — about the kind of “behaviour” a certain vogue of dress will produce. Hence, it is not difficult to deduce that the utterances (*énoncés*) of state and doing (*faire*) relate to make-doing (*faire-faire*) and make-being (*faire-être*) the *woman*. At a first glance, all the positions in the categories presented previously can be understood in terms of exchange of values in the strict sense of the standard theory : a series of manipulations⁴² in which the presence and absence of the garments aim at make-doing both their “users” and the ones around them.

The first set of values homologated to the 19th-century vogues present a narrative structure in which the corset and the veil appear either as the “hand” of a social Sender, or “Addresser” (*Destinateur*⁴³), or assuming the role of senders of the female figure, social behaviour, and religious duty. Through the corset, the body appears competentialised to perform the role of maternity⁴⁴ which is manifested through the emphasis on the hip area the silhouette creates, promoting both an enlargement of the hips which are currently associated with fertility, while also increasing the visibility of the waist-hip area in the plastic arrangement of the toilette. The idea of the woman as a mother-to-be links, of course, to a traditional Christian idea of femininity.

The idea of the veil in the 19th-century Egypt is not distant from the English narrative of the corset : the covering of the head (and sometimes the face) marks social distinction that is acquired, in Islam, through the roles of wife and mother⁴⁵. Similarly to the corset, the veil marks the acquisition of competence to perform those roles in compliance with social norms, marking the superior status of the free woman (opposed to a slave), or secluded wife. In both cases, the presence of the items of dress marks the conjunction of the subject woman with the values of upper-classness, seclusion and orthodoxy, a bond that is euphoric both from individual and social perspectives : the values manifested by those forms of dress are the ones presented by religion as the very foundation of society and culture ; hence, complying with those values means contributing to the continuity of society. That particular moment — as previously mentioned, a “tipping point” for both objects at their respective locations — marks the end of an era in which the deep values in the category presented are fully stabilised and disseminated in society, creating almost a consensus about the link between values and garments.

42 A.J. Greimas and J. Courtés, *op. cit.*, “Manipulation”, pp. 220-222.

43 *Ibid.*, « Destinateur », pp. 94-95.

44 Cf. M. Jardim, *O Corset na Moda Ocidental*, *op. cit.*, and *id.*, “The corset and the veil as disruptive manifestations of clothing : the tightlaced and the Tuareg”, *dObras[s]*, XII, 25, 2019.

45 Cf. M.A.S. Abdel Haleem, *The Qur'an. A new translation*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2004. The surah “Women” (*Al-Nisa'*) discusses the manners in which property should be divided among women and men as well as the fair treatment of wives, but there are extensive mentions in other *surahs* about the roles of women as wives and mothers.

When the elites start to give up those values to propose new forms of femininity, there appears to be an attempt for a reversal of roles, in which women aim at taking over as senders, resorting to a renunciation of values invested in the objects, through rejecting those items of dress at the level of sartorial discourse. That transformation is one of the most significant in the histories of Fashion we are analysing, because the rupture with the objects of dress, at the narrative level, is related to a true transformation in the role of women – which could, unfortunately, explain why those vogues are so brief and rare in the trajectory of feminine dress. That agency produces utterances in which women pass from a regime in which the garment makes-do their bodies and themselves, to the search of a new model in which the garment's role is not as marked, or appears as a helper rather than a master : in the West, the utilitarian style of Gabrielle Chanel is the most emblematic of that new narrative of feminine dress, whereas in the Orient, it is the adoption of Western Fashions and their self-professed values of “modernity”, which included more progressive forms of femininities.

But as mentioned previously, that movement was born and bred in the upper-classes, still responding to mechanisms through which the elites dictate Fashion and social norms to the lower classes, which are supposed to follow and catch up. Hence, the moment of subcultural return of both corset and veil seems to continue the discourse in which bodies take the role of sender, which is marked by a form of “destruction” of the corset and veil as they used to be, or as they were used by the upper classes until the 19th-century, to recreate a regime in which the bodies make do the corset and veil : by creating new meanings, the subcultural take on those sartorial objects displaces their use and context, making the objects mean irony, rebellion ; or extreme, radical religiosity, all of which belong outside the scope of mainstreamed social practices. In that sense, the manner in which authors name the return to hijab in Egypt “the new veiling”⁴⁶ couldn't be more appropriate : it isn't only the visual appearance of the veil that is new, but the narrative regime that governs the relation between body and dress is also transformed.

Finally, the (re)appropriation of subcultural values into the Fashion system causes a re-reversal of the narrative discourse, returning the status of sender to the garments and transforming the body into a follower of trends, performing an appropriation, in reference to Fashion's ability to “highjack” manifestations belonging to cultural contexts outside of itself. Not only, in the Fashion systems, the garments make-do the bodies that then become competentialised to display the “present now” of each new vogue, but it is through the consumption of those objects that the values linking to belonging are actualised. Thus, the 19th-century and the post-1990s form a deixis of the garment as the sender of the body, whereas the absence of the garments and their subcultural manifestations construct narrative utterances in which corset and hijab are receivers (*destinataires*) of the bodies which take control over the interactions. It could be argued that the 1920s and 1970s are marked by bodies and subjects that are more “subjectal”, whereas in the 19th century and the post-1990s the bodies are more “objectal” in the narrative discourse, which is followed by an increase of the subjectal status of garments. Such relation doesn't appear mistaken when we see the peak of consumption today, and the power certain brands still hold in the consumer's imagination – not to mention the large volume of retrospective

46 Cf. L. Ahmed, *op. cit.* ; A. Macleod, *op. cit.* ; L.F. Maloul, *op. cit.*

exhibitions in English Fashion museums that aim at reviving the golden age of Haute Couture and Royal Dress.

Traditional narrative discourse of acquisition or loss of values, however, does not exhaust the analysis of our objects' narrative levels. Following the works of Landowski, it is also possible to homologate our square of values invested in the corset and hijab at different times with different regimes of interactions⁴⁷. In fact, an analysis presented elsewhere addresses a similar problem relating to the appropriation of subcultural and religious manifestations by mainstream fashion, debating how the different regimes of interaction can be homologated to different moments of the trajectory of both garments⁴⁸. At the same time, the passages from one regime to the other not only outline the transformations in the discourse governing femininities and their intersubjective exchanges with others through clothed bodies, but also the transformations in the points of view linked to the changes in Fashion.

The positions of *programming* and *manipulation* appear forming the mechanisms utilised by the Fashion System, including the trickle down and bubble up effects, manifesting relations of lower risk in between Fashion and its followers, whereas the positions of *accident* and *adjustment* form the Anti-Fashion tools belonging to subcultural movements or elite-led breaks with the rhythm of Fashion, manifesting relations of higher risk between subjects and Fashion.

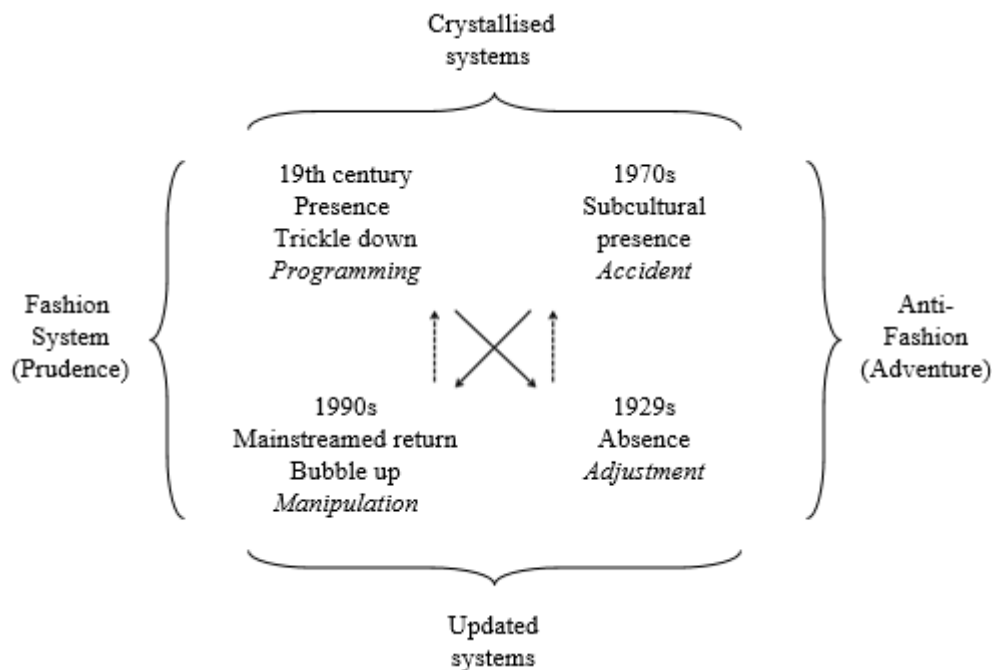


Figure 2. Interaction regimes and Fashion systems.

In the present context, *programming* appears as a regime that corresponds to the 19th century — the moment when the investment of values was fully consolidated, and so were the thematic roles of women that became entangled with both objects. Besides the programmed thematic interactions, in which the agency of subjects is fairly reduced, there is a concept from the economic theory of Thorstein

47 Cf. *Les interactions risquées*, Limoges, Pulim, 2005.

48 “The corset and the veil...”, *art. cit.*

Veblen, the “trickle-down effect”, that appears as governing the Fashion “transactions” taking place in the 19th century : each vogue is created and consolidated in the upper classes, and then it is dictated from the top to the bottom of society, meaning that the lower classes follow the manners and fashions of the “high society”⁴⁹. Again, that can be read as compliance with established programmes and thematic roles, in which each social class remains in their own set of rules and expected actions, corroborating the maintenance of culture and its status quo.

As it couldn’t be different, the 1920s movement of unveiling and uncorseting is generated among the elites, equally “trickling down” to the bottom. However, before this vogue became “fashion” — before that particular manner was disseminated and consensually adopted in society — the first women to live a fast flapper lifestyle in England, or the first members of Egyptian royalty to go unveiled and wearing the latest Western fashion experienced a moment of *adjustment* : the pure interaction between social subjects without the exchange of *any* objects of value. That pure, non-mediated relationship comprises both the newly found forms of dress and the freedom they provided to the body — for women who indeed *abandoned* the corset, rather than being born in that vogue, or for the women who indeed *unveiled*, that experience was the most significant — as well as a new form of relationships with the surroundings including other subjects, in a moment of suspension of the established social rules, before a new set of social codes was organised and consolidated.

As for the 1970s, that is perhaps one of the most challenging moments of our corpus, mainly because there are internal counter-movements that mix social upheaval and revolution with the recovery of objects that are (still) associated with backwardness. Both the Punk and the Islamic Revival appear as the union of both directions, as if the movements danced in between extreme rupture and extreme compliance. The regime of *accident* appears in many different aspects of those movements, in what can be defined as the co-occurrence of narrative programmes that were not previously connected. Firstly, both movements manifest an attempt at disengaging with the “main programme” of mainstream society, creating the conditions for accidents to appear. Secondly, there is a disentanglement of the programmes of the objects, removing them from their “original” contexts — the corset as an insignia of leisure and upper-classness ; the veil as an object of the distinguished, wealthy Egyptian women — and re-introducing the garments in contexts where those programmes are not fully disseminated. And finally, in the relations established between body and dress, since both objects ceased to be part of the routine attire of women, the re-encounter with those objects becomes a form of co-occurrence likewise.

Finally, as we re-enter our era, the appropriation of subcultural values ends our diagram in the regime of *manipulation*, one that recovers the traditional discourse in which values are exchanged, which is typical of economic relations that mark the Fashion system today. Like the multiple accidents involved in the subcultural level of our corpus, the level in which subcultural discourse is re-appropriated into the Fashion system is also multi-layered, comprising different levels in which consumers, designers and, somehow, the garments themselves need to be persuaded. First of all, there is the matter of reversing the “off-putting” values that the subcultures carry for the mainstream society — the agenda of both the Punk and the Muslim Brotherhood was none other than the destruction of

49 *The theory of the leisure class, op. cit.*

mainstream society — a work fashion has to do repeatedly so that it can convince its followers to abide by the latest trends. Resorting, again, to Fashion theory, the operation enabling this change in the perception of objects, or the looking at street style and allowing it to influence high fashion, is named the “bubble up effect”, which is the opposite of the trickle-down mechanism⁵⁰. And, last but not least, the reintroduction of such objects into mainstream fashion produces a series of manipulations in the interactions between body and dress, which is linked to a transformation in the garment’s meaning for each individual — which contributes to the “semantic versatility”⁵¹ of corset and hijab, and the consequent difficulty in reading what each wearer means to manifest.

Each deixis forms a “constellation” which is based on the relation established between the risk of interaction and the production of meaning, defined respectively “prudence” and “adventure”⁵². In our analysis, those constellations are translated into the spaces of Fashion and the mechanisms working for its production and reproduction (prudence), and Anti-Fashion, or vogues that aim at attacking the Fashion system (adventure). When visualised in that manner, the ellipsis shows not only that there must be alternations in between compliance and rebellion, but also that one feeds on the other : Fashion both creates the spaces for its own destruction, and uses it as the “fuel” to renew and strengthen its system.

2.3. Sartorial utterances

The most superficial level of our objects, or the manifestation we previously identified as the visual / plastic layer of the discourse, belongs to the so-called discursive level : the space where actants are invested in discursive actors, as well as where the figurativisation of values takes place. When it comes to corset and hijab, the analysis can take place in at least two distinct manners : the most evident, the visual and plastic elements of the objects, but also in the discursive mechanisms used to examine verbal written text, such as the actorialisation, temporalisation, and spatialisation. In fact, it is our understanding that both dimensions are linked, and that the plastic of the garments is a crucial factor determining what type of relations (or re-actions) can be constructed between different subjects.

As we have seen, the appearance created through the use (or non-use) of corset and hijab are presentifications of values relating to social class, to affiliation (or not) to traditional cultural practices and, ultimately, those manifestations can be read as cues about the secluded or freed status of the woman who wears the garments. At the same time, however, those figurative or plastic codifications of values can also be read at the level of enunciation (*énonciation*)⁵³, with the garments literally putting values in discourse through syntagmatic reorganisations. Nonetheless, the ensemble of an appearance has more to it than the plastic elements forming a look, constructing relations of distance and approximation, while also positioning the wearer in different situations of communication with the world or other subjects.

50 Cf. T. Polhemus, *Streetstyle*, London, PYMCA, 2010, p. 12, and V. Steele, *Fifty years of fashion*, *op. cit.*

51 F. Shirazi, *The veil unveiled : the hijab in modern culture*, Gainesville, University Press of Florida, 2003, p. 7.

52 *Les interactions risquées*, *op. cit.*, p. 72.

53 As distinct from the level of the “utterances” (*énoncés*) which are produced (“enunciated”) by the act of enunciation.

In the West and in the Orient, the plastic constructed through the different vogues of silhouettes of the torso or the head are manifestations of transformations of the body and its “natural” shape : the basic function of the corset is the reshaping of the feminine torso through the repositioning of the body’s matter, creating effects of exaggeration and obliteration of one’s shape, while the hijab, besides determining if the wearer’s head and/or face is covered or uncovered, also promotes a transformation in the size and the shape of the head. In the three forms of presence analysed in this corpus — the normative / mainstreamed 19th century ; the subcultural return of the 1970s ; and the return to mainstream Fashion in the aftermath of the 1990s — both objects work over the female body in a similar manner, exaggerating the shapes of the torso / head creating, chiefly, relations that guide the gaze of the viewer(s) towards the areas over which the garments act. Besides being symbolically bound to ideas of normative femininity — the domestic bourgeois or upper-class Victorian woman, as well as the secluded Muslim wife — the plasticity of the garments also determines, in act, the manner in which such bodies should be looked at, or interacted with. It is not only a question of culturally constructed meaning, but a matter of situation : even if constrained waists are the norm in a social milieu, the particular configuration of the body promoted by the corset invites the gaze of the other to that area of the body, whereas the complexly folded headscarves, draped in layers of see-through fabrics, equally invite the gaze to the head of the covered body.

Similarly, the manner in which bodies are constructed by corset and hijab produces forms of actorialisation, temporalisation and spatialisation imposed to the wearer : a dressed body, according to Fashion or against it, displays a heavily altered silhouette, inviting the enunciatee to take the proper distance to better apprehend the amalgamation *clothed-body*. Particularly in the 19th century, the almost statuesque appearances constructed by corsets and veils places the clothed-body in an elsewhere / then, constructing the proper distance between women and others. The same operation is repeated in the subcultural movements — almost a form of “self-segregation”, removing oneself from the body of mainstream society ; and, equally, in the body of high-Fashion — the body of the “catwalk” and of the photographs, in magazines or online, to always be seen as image, always as utterance (*énoncé*) and never as an act of *enunciation*.

Hence, the suspension of the presence of both objects becomes the source of profound transformation in the manner in which bodies are looked at. If both sartorial objects — and no matter whether their presence is mainstreamed or subcultural — produce prescriptive manners of gazing at, guiding the eyes of the observer to particular parts of the body, the absence of the same objects promotes bodies that are *not* secluded or traditional, but also invites freer forms of visual interactions to unravel, without the coded manners the shaping of the body determines. When regarded from that angle, it is possible to see that, while the presence of corset and hijab, as well as the prescriptive manners they construct produce objectifying relations, projecting a time and space of reference around the subject, their absence seems to literary *free* the body, placing it in a here / now or, to use Landowski’s words, “suppressing the distance between the I ‘being’ and the I ‘been’”⁵⁴. The presence and absence of the garments, hence, can be homologated with the procedures of disengagement (or “shifting out”, *débrayage*) and engagement (or “shifting in”, *embrayage*), with Fashion using the

⁵⁴ *La société réfléchie*, Paris, Seuil, 1989, p. 57 (our translation).

presence of the objects not only to organise the time of History, but the times of the subject in their interactions with others, while the absence — or *change* — appears as what suspends the markers of enunciation, promoting a return to a present now.

Conclusion

The analyses presented in this work link to a research project started in 2015, as a response to my first impressions of the hijab presence when coming to London in 2014⁵⁵. The investigation unfolding since then responds to a desire to deconstruct the prevalent discourse that places the West and the Orient in opposition, departing from a bold proposition : that the corset is, to an extent, the veil of the Western woman. In the present contribution, the concept of Fashion as a cultural apparatus exclusive to the West is questioned : by investigating the same key historical moments, it is possible to see that not only the Orient also has a Fashion in the same moulds of the Western system, but that the trajectories of their most emblematic sartorial objects overlap perfectly, sharing all the levels of a generative trajectory.

Although we explored the possibility of the overlapping being caused by the assimilation of global culture and contexts in Egypt, it was made clear throughout the text that the local contexts are very diverse, ruling out the overlapping as the result of a global “influence” over Egyptian culture. In fact, we have clarified that, in the case of subcultural groups, both nations arrive at manifestations of the same fundamental values through distinctive discourses.

The trajectory of both objects so far points towards a return to tradition and orthodoxy at both locations, which is already announced by the political choices populations are making all over the world. It seems there is a global craving for hard-line conservative politics in many countries, which translates into a desire for a harsher control over the bodies and the spaces or, in the terms of our analysis, to a return to regimes where bodies are distanced from one another, and the social fabric is stratified. Such observations are aggravated by the fact that societies and cultures are more connected than ever, which not only amplifies the power of influence of certain countries over the cultures of others but creates environments in which societies are willing to adopt customs and fashions that make no sense to their cultural past or present context.

Whether the analysis presented in this project can be used to risk predictions about the future — of Fashion and society — or not, our results certainly make a case for an opening when it comes to the established discourses of opposition between the West and the Orient. Due to global “intercultural contamination” or not, an address of Fashion — perhaps one of the central aspects that constructs the feelings of “now-ness” and belonging among members of the same society — proves to be a critical tool in the understanding of social dynamics that go way beyond the appearance and the sartorial presentation of individuals. In the past of our theory, the approximations between Fashion and language, grammar, identity and politics⁵⁶ shows us the manners in which the rhythmic alternations of

55 M. Jardim, “Humility and Identity : First Impressions of the Hijab Presence in London”, *Proceedings CIMODE 2016 – 3^o Congresso Internacional de Moda e Design*, 2016.

56 A.J. Greimas, *La Mode en 1830*, Paris, P.U.F., 2000 and *De l'Imperfection*, *op. cit.* ; R. Barthes, *Système de la mode*, Paris, Seuil, 1967 and *The Language of Fashion*, Oxford, Berg, 2006 ; J.-M. Floch, “Esthétique et éthique du ‘total look’ de Chanel”, *Identités visuelles*, Paris, P.U.F., 1995 ; E. Landowski, “Mode, politique et changement”, *Présences de l'autre*, *op. cit.*

manners are ingrained into the social fabric, acting not as a “reflex” of a historical moment, but appearing as a force that mutually forms the manifestations of the present⁵⁷. Our investigation places another stone in that journey, aiming for a study of Fashion as a system that is not exclusive to one culture or society, but that builds rhythms that are shared by locations that may seem disconnected but have, if nothing else, at least one thing in common : the insatiable appetite for change.

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ON NIQABS AND SURGICAL MASKS: A TRAJECTORY OF COVERED FACES

Marilia Jardim

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On Niqabs and Surgical Masks: a Trajectory of Covered Faces

MARILIA JARDIM*

TITOLO ITALIANO: Di niqab e mascherine: Un percorso tra volti coperti

ABSTRACT: The face is pivotal in our cultural practices and language, as well as a central topic of debate in the realm of society: the early 2010s were marked by a diatribe around Islamic facial covering, both in Arabo-Persian countries and in the West and, today, the outbreak of COVID-19 pandemics all over the globe brought another facial supplement to the discussion — the surgical mask. Niqabs and surgical masks have more in common than their function of covering the face: they are united by their image of Otherness, related to Middle- and Far-Asian countries, but also to a project of transcendence of our natural condition. Saniotis (2012) analyses the matter of Transhumanism and Islam as problems of body techniques which, like the two systems, meet at their roots: our analysis adds to his investigation by examining face veiling and facial covering as transhuman praxes, both concerning the discursive and narrative levels of the Greimasian theory reaching beyond their cultural meanings, while also debating the matters of Otherness and Alterity emerging from those supplements, utilising the socio-semiotic works of Oliveira and Landowski as our framework of analysis. The article reflects on the manners in which both objects, the niqab and the surgical mask, operate through similar enunciative mechanisms and construct similar narrative utterances; nevertheless, culture invests polemic contracts in these objects, creating a ‘false binary’ system around them, which is largely emerging from their plastic configuration. Through our analysis, a series of ‘false binaries’ — such as religion and technology — are explored with the goal of reflecting on the

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assimilation and rejection of cultural customs and the manners in which the many goals of transcendence, divine or scientific, are centred around the control of the bodies and the emergence of authoritative orders that fix subjects in thematic roles.

KEYWORDS: Niqab; Surgical Mask; Identity vs Alterity; Socio-Semiotics; Enunciation

1. Introduction

The face — or the *being able to see* it — is a central theme in the 21st-century media landscape and academia, notably the Islamic face veil, and its banning in European countries. A vivid example of the matter, Žižek's (2011) account of the *niqab* as what suspends empathy with another is grave, radically distant from Barthes' (2009) almost poetic examination of the mythical face of Greta Garbo. The range of considerations is proportional to our obsession with facial features: their visibility and *recognition* can be associated with identity and our roles in social contexts but, ultimately, with what makes us human to the eyes of Another — for Levinas (1961), the face-to-face, the original event of signification, is the primal content of expression itself: a point of openness to anOther.

When considering the matter of racialisation of face covers — the *niqab* an undisputable “face of Islam”, a readily recognisable sign of Islamic faith; whereas the respiratory diseases claimed to have originated in Asia contributed to the construction of surgical masks as a “Sino-sign” (Phu 2011) which inscribes markers of race beyond the body — the dichotomy visibility of the face versus its disguising can be homologated to a binary West versus the Orient. Similarly, the divide between the alleged freedom enjoyed by women who go uncovered is often presented as a marker of “Westernness” against the Islamic practices of female veiling, but that is not the only manifestation of this contrast: the images of masked crowds in Japan, Hong Kong and China during the SARS epidemic constructed the surgical mask as a far-Asian, not Western, visage. In both cases, the customs and rituals associated with facial covering are constructed as something located elsewhere. However, despite the stories about the new coronavirus outbreak insisting on narratives of Chinese origins, the global dimensions of the pandemic forced the practice of face-covering into Europe and America, causing not only compliance with the custom but

public pressure for officialising mask-wearing that came from bottom-up, even among its fiercest opposers.

What *niqabs* and surgical masks *are*, in essence, is very similar: the central matter is the manner in which one and the other are represented. The operation of covering the face (for public health, as well as religious reasons) can be understood as originating from a place of transhuman aspirations: as a philosophy, the core claim of Transhumanism is that future humans will be radically different from ourselves, as a result of utilising technologies to prolong our livelihood. Saniotis examines the extent to which the varying notions of the body appearing in Abrahamic religions, particularly Islam, are comparable to the transhumanist utopia, especially when it comes to the themes of *transcendence* and *self-improvement* (Saniotis 2012). As such, techniques of cleansing, restricting, consuming mental enhancers and, finally, the use of *supplements* over the body are some of the areas in which religion and technology meet: facial covering is an important part of both, creating faces that are, if not “transhuman”, at least something quite other than human.

Human, post-human, transhuman: where those lines are drawn intersect matters of religion and technology, while centring debates around *citizenship*, both in a socio-economic way, our “place in a country”, and the problem of race and alterity. As our almost unrestrained movement and large-scale immigration seem to reinforce binaries, widening gaps between cultural practices more than ever, occasions such as public health crises seem to promote a temporary suspension of the established symbolic orders, facilitating a type of “reverse assimilation”, in which it is no longer the Other who naturalises the customs of the constructed “Us”. Face-covering is an example of this forced union with practices we reject, the conventions we associate with Others but equally, the welcoming of transhuman implements we might otherwise repudiate—such as the diatribe around contact trackers, or the dystopia of lives lived almost entirely online. Within that framework, the article presents an initial reflection on the problem of *niqabs* and surgical masks, aiming at a comparative of the religious and the public health face cover in their existence as discursive praxes, chromatic manifestations, and the narrative utterances emerging from and through them. The address of both practices from a Greimasian perspective proposes an account of their respective rejection and acceptance today, as objects communicating predicaments stemming from transhumanist goals.

2. The discursive level

The two words forming this issue's title — *visage* and *face* — possess meanings that reach beyond the idea of the human face as an ensemble of features. *Visage*, in the dictionary, signifies “the manifestation, image, or aspect of something” (Stevenson 2010, p. 1984), whereas *face*, as a noun, equally relates to *surface*, which can be the face of anything — of a building, a solid, or the plate of a clock — possessing, in English, the use as a verb likewise: *to face* is to be positioned towards, as well as to confront or accept and, finally, *to cover a surface with a different material* (Stevenson 2010, p. 624-5, our emphasis). In that sense, the theme of improvement predicted in Transhumanism is somehow professed in the linguistic meaning of *face*, when it can mean both the human, “natural” face, or the face as a surface, covered with a different substance to change its attributes. While Barthes states that a face, more than a material object, can be an “idea” or even an “event” (Barthes 2009, p. 63), the covered visages — whether they are masked or veiled — become a manifestation which replaces the most evident markers of identity. This replacement of the face with something else is, perhaps, at the core of Western culture's repulse towards covered faces, or its perception of masking as a type of disfigurement (Phu 2011): the interruption of direct (visual) communication, *tête-à-tête*, which becomes mediated with a supplement acting over the body wearing it as much as over the bodies who gaze.

Both cases of face covering, although invested with plastic differences, produce the same (contradictory) enunciative mechanisms: at the same, covered-faces install a distance between the interacting subjects [*débrayage*], while also constructing a radical effect of presence, shifting in the markers of enunciation [*embrayage*] (Greimas & Courtés 1993, p. 79-82, 119-21). In my analysis of the Tuareg veil (Jardim 2019), the covering of the face among those men is invested with a dual function: at the same time interdict and facilitate social contact. The covered face suspends the “reading” of facial expressions which can give away one's feelings and intentions (Murphy 1964); contradictorily, that is the mechanism that facilitates one's presence in the social space — not as an individual, but as a *social role* (Jardim 2019). The installing of a role takes place through discursive interactions which, for Oliveira, can be understood as acts of *positioning* — or, to recover the dictionary, of *facing* — causing the complex

subject of enunciation, the enunciator and the enunciatee, to embody a “here” and “now” (Oliveira 2013, p. 242). Beyond cultural meanings inscribed in the objects (or their misconstructions), every facial covering can be understood in the same manner: the covering of the face is the rawest form of denying individual subjectivity and installing a (collective) *role* which, on its turn, is constructed around specific positions in the situation of communication. In the case of the *niqab*, it is a marked, feminine role that responds to one single narrative programme (Greimas 1983, p. 64) which also presupposes enunciative positions which are fixed. The surgical mask is not different: the covering of the face performs a similar enunciative operation which competentialises the surgeon with their role, also sacralising their figure; as for the masked civilian in a pandemic scenario, the mask installs the role of *cooperator* with the maintenance of social order and collective health: the masked subject no longer an individual, but part of a collective narrative programme of obedience, compliance, and partaking in the effort of containing a virus.

The veil, the mask, and other forms of face-coverage possess the same objective: to protect a surface (the face) from something, while simultaneously protecting something from that surface. More than a *mediator*, it is a kind of two-way barrier: a *disruptor* or *interrupter* that affects the (at least) two subjects involved in a visual communication situation. Although the debate around covered faces emphasises what is “kept away from the gaze”, every form of covering suspends both ends of the communication: while who is on the outside is not able to receive what is inside, the one who remains inside is also not able to “emit” that which must remain guarded. The “agent” that needs to be kept in/out varies, as well as the motivations invested in the act of blocking the face: if surgical masks aim at containing invisible particles or secretions that can carry contaminants, in the *niqab* the visual attributes of the face, both its beauty and its expressions, must be shielded so that it can both be guarded and guard others against its sight. Both projects share a common premise: Nature appears as the enemy of man, with its varied delegates portrayed as acting against the goals of transcendence. The use of supplements, *culturalised objects* — sacred or technological — permits the human body to attain transcendence from its natural condition, either through techniques that teach us to control our urges, becoming more like our Heavenly Father (Saniotis 2012) or through techniques that prolong our livelihood by repelling agents that can kill us.

Nonetheless, even the manners in which masks and veils are installed as enunciative praxis seem to possess ambiguous motivations which blur the lines between Technology and Religion. Burgess and Hori (2012) for example, remark that, although a “scientific” object, the surgical mask presence in Japan and other far-Asian countries possesses a marked ritual function in channelling the anxiety of disease, while Ahmed will emphasise the strategic revelation of the Surah about veiling, enabling the Prophet to accomplish personal interests (Ahmed 1986). The impossibility of absolute verifiability in both areas — the sacred and science — invests both supplements with dual functions: to channel, simultaneously, the repetition of “tested and approved” methods, and to respond to miasmatic understandings that stem from faith, in religion or in science.

3. The chromatic formant

Transhumanism, as a field of study or a praxis, merges together three aspects of human life: philosophy, technology, and religion. However, the recent debate relating to technological enhancements seems to return to the matter of social problems emerging from such technologies coming true and invading the mainstream, namely the widening of the gap between the rich and the poor. Equally, the problem with the supplements we already have exists in correspondence with ideas of national identity and race, which are necessarily attached to the problem of religion and technology surrounding our object. Beyond the problem of efficacy of veils and masks, supported by divine or scientific sources, the matters of identity and subjectivity are pivotal to a discussion about covered faces. When discussing the 16th-century veil worn by Venetian and Paduan women, Riedmatten debates the possibility of a unilateral subjectivity: to see without being seen as a form of “total subjectivity”, in which one is unable to become an object for the other’s gaze (Riedmatten 2016). Although the statement considers only the facial features, and not the plastic ensemble of a veiled figure which can, as a totality, be seen and turned into an object, the notion is interesting to the contradictions of two manifestations of covered-faces and the double standards they produce: it is more than the binary Religion versus Science that supports the use of surgical masks and rejects the use of the niqab, but a problem of to *whom* do we grant such privilege — to echo Levinas (1961):

it is only God who sees the invisible, and does so without being seen.

Accepting that covering the face possesses similar (and contradictory) effects, the simple decision about which type of face covering is acceptable—in a social setting in which seeing the face is the ideal—marks which types of *transcendence* we welcome. In the prevalent discourses about face-covering, to transcend our biological constraints (one of the key objectives of transhumanists) through medical knowledge appears as a preferable practice when compared to the transcendence through altered states of consciousness and rigorous regimes of ablutions and prayer. Within this context, the most emblematic chromatism of facial supplements invites the discussion of an important distinction: *black* and *white*.

Greimas' proposition of Figurative Semiotics as a "semiology of images" considers colour, a formant producing "undistinguished plates", as one of the significant dimensions of flat images (Greimas 1984). In the operation of covering the face partially or completely, the chromatism of the face is radically transformed, replacing the distinguishable eidetic features of the physiognomy with a continuum that dis-figures the original figurativity of the visage, disrupting its original reading orientation. Hence, the colour applied over the face becomes largely determinant to the resulting interactions with (or reactions to) it.

The semantic binary Black/White as a motivated, hyperbolic reading of skin colours is central to Dyer's (1997) work: by widening the gap between the two "races", binary values associated with both words as linguistic signs are invested in skins and their subjects. Black is the colour of darkness, terror, dirt, difficulty, tragedy and despair; whereas White, its opposite, is the colour of light, transparency, and refinement (Stevenson 2010, p. 172-3, 2023). Not by chance, the *black* veil of Muslim women is more resisted than the *white* surgical masks — or light blue and green, natural colours equally bonded to the idea of cleanliness and purity, hence echoing the semantism of *white*. The opposition also contrasts the dark ages of religion, and the enlightenment of science: while the dark veil covers the face of "superstition", the light covering of the face comes from "reason"; the dichotomy of niqabs and surgical masks returns to the problem of who are the subjects allowed to transcend but, likewise, what vehicles of transcendence a given culture privileges. It is tempting to draw an opposition of "divine" versus "man-made" transcendence — ignoring that religion too is a human construct — or "faith" versus "fact" — leaving

out the important issue of imagination and quasi-fictional character of innovation in science, particularly the highly speculative field of Futurology, the main face of an “applied Transhumanism.”

Nonetheless, beyond the symbolic matters of purity and pollution at the core of both sacred and secular societies which can manifest as the terms Black and White, our perception of the different facial supplements, *niqabs* and surgical masks, are often read as a binary “(religious) backwardness versus (transhuman) progress”, since the forms of transcendence intended with the covering of the face are distinct and, in a Western cultural logic, opposed. As emblems of Others, each type of facial covering is culturally anchored, but also attempting at transcending through different means: by repelling the environment through the use of technology, or by controlling the body through ritual. If the (black) religious transcendence of Islam is feared, associated both with repelling conditions of life in third world countries, and with the power of oil Princes and their harems — both, to recover Žižek (2011), producing barbaric treatments of their women — the (white) technological transcendence of the surgical mask is admired, associated with technologies, industries and economies stronger than our own, but also plagued by super populations, “excentric” cultural practices... and pandemics.

4. The narrative level

While our perception of facial coverings is often associated with the superficial level of objects as visual communication, the ways we react to masks or veils are grounded in the apprehension of narrative programmes and utterances which are manifested through those plastic-visual objects, and the discursive mechanisms they champion. For the analysis of the narrative level of facial covering, the matters of *citizenship* and *integration* within social practices are pivotal, particularly in Europe, where assimilation is prevalent to the predominant discourse about immigration. It is not news that Western media consistently tried to portray Islamic practices, particularly face veiling, as “anti-social” whereas, today, the using of face masks — whether by health professionals or by the complying public — became an act of heroic proportions: to collaborate with government guidelines, to save lives, to be a patriotic citizen.

Hence, as much as the superficial level of facial supplements can expose their approximation as discursive praxis or create plastic divisions, the semio-narrative structures can equally unmask convergences and divergences, linked to the problem of function versus constructed binarisms. Cultural rivalries on the side, both supplements appear connected to the construction of thematic roles linked to projects of transcendence, stemming from the imposition, by an addresser or operator, of a certain discipline which authorises the realisation of a single figurative trajectory by the presupposed competent agent (Greimas 1983, p. 63-4). On the one hand, a citizen complying with their duty of stopping the spread is not only utilising an enhancing object to preserve their own health and livelihood: the narrative utterance constructed to and through that object promotes the preservation of the totality, the collective social organism of a Nation. The face-covering utilised in religion responds to an identical programme: the preservation of a social organism — however, it is not a Nation, but the Ummah one wishes to protect. In both cases, the realisation of the programme depends on the compliance of subjects which are interdicted of responding to any other figurative trajectory.

When the objects are regarded as isolated manifestations, both supplements are linked to the construction of equivalent thematic roles. However, the examination of the objects in relation to one another and in their relations with the West exposes the construction of a *polemic contract*: an utterance formed by the confrontation of a subject and an anti-subject which, in popular literature (and in media stories undoubtedly) is often dressed with a binary of “good and evil” (Greimas 1983, p. 52). Although both forms of face covering belong to a narrative of Otherness (Middle-eastern or far-Asian) against the Western ideal of “showing the face,” the appropriation of those body techniques (and the forms of transcendence they champion) can be split into the “identification” with different social roles — of “cooperators” or “opposers” of the established cultural norms — both of which are, nevertheless, thematic roles which are not chosen but imposed by an operator, addresser of the corresponding social orders. In the present case, where the contemporary West constructs itself as the norm, the scientific form of transcendence appears as preferred, closer to the Whiteness Dyer discusses, which extends the subject/anti-subject dynamic to the other binaries presented previously: White and Black, but equally Reason and Superstition, Science and Religion, and

thus forth, all of which are connected to the binary West versus Orient.

Beyond the narratives stemming from 21st-century political tensions, or the matters of race, culture, religion, and different degrees of citizenship, masks and veils return to the syntax of junction from the standard theory — the virus’s role as a “negative object of value” (Landowski 2004, p. 115), a notion that could be extended to the Islamic theme of female beauty, an equally negative object of value, when shared at the wrong time and place, instigator of *fitna* (Shirazi 2003), a word that can mean any form of chaos, from unrestrained sinful urges to civil war, which can equally have an epidemic character. Facial coverings, religious or technological, are part of disjunctive utterances (Greimas 1983) in which a positive subject renounces a negative object of value, a disjunction appearing as euphoric to the subject, since the conjunction with negative values — a lethal virus or sinful urges — would reverberate a disjunction with the positive value aspired by the subjects: their path towards transcendence, divine or technological. From that perspective, even when subjects step out of a programme in search of “free will”, the value invested in the objects motivating the use of supplements is sufficient to return the subjects to their roles, facilitating “obedience” as an almost involuntary trajectory.

5. Conclusions

The layering of three aspects examined — two of them belonging to the discursive level, the enunciative mechanisms of face-covering and the emblematic chromatism of each supplement; and one belonging to the narrative level, the construction of thematic programmes and their articulation in polemic contracts, paired with the disjunction with negative values promoted by facial coverings — permit us to draw a series of fundamental categories: White vs Black (as semantic values, not as colours); Science vs Religion; Citizens vs Dissidents, all of which seem to fit the eternal “West versus Orient” binary that followed my recent work (Jardim 2019, 2020). The present article continues a recurrent theme in my research, the problem of oppositions constructed around practices that are, in essence, stemming from similar operations producing similar discursive and narrative mechanisms, which I would name “false binaries”.

The recent euphorisation of facial covering — with surgical masks,

not *niqabs* — seems to widen a cultural gap that ostracises religious facial supplements (and the ritual practices they communicate), presenting surgical masks as a type of accepted exception. The analysis showed, however, that both supplements operate from similar enunciative and narrative mechanisms, producing similar thematic roles — the “complying citizen” or the “believer” — which respond to equivalent goals of preservation of social order. The only difference seems to be the addresser one fears: the Government or God.

Yet, the assimilation of surgical masks raises another crucial question: the problem of a return to authoritative States in the West, and the (perhaps Foucaultian) theme of control over the bodies. The matter is central to the goal of transcendence, in which both futurologist supplements and sacred rituals of cultivating the body entangle their roots and practices, as observed by Saniotis: to transcend our natural condition is necessarily done through discipline, control and authority. Religion and Technology as practices repeat the problem of response to one unique “possible” narrative programme, which is unilaterally communicated by an addresser-operator. In Socio-semiotic terms, such fixity of roles doesn’t provide the space for interactions to take place, trapping the actants into co-incidences that are operated (Landowski 2005) or into closed situations in which things don’t “make” but “have sense” (Oliveira 2013).

While the use of surgical masks in far-Asia imparts ritual and etiquette over science, constructing emblems of discipline and compliance (Burgess & Horii 2012; Phu 2011; Tomes 2010), veils can also shift from pure Sacred to reinforcers of a social order (Ahmed 1986; Murphy 1964; Shirazi 2003), exposing the problem of reducing such practices to one realm — science *or* religion. The possibility of hybrid motivations of facial supplements echoes the hybrid root of Transhumanism as a philosophy, practice, and field of study: a point of dissolution of the binary reason versus faith, Transhuman studies and practices respond to a historical moment in which religion and science seem to be moving from a dogmatic, scripture-based system, to exercises grounded on experience and intuition (Pinchbeck and Rokhlin 2019). The insights from the present investigation substantiate a regard of cultural, scientific, and religious practices that dissolves oppositions standing in the way of the progress and transcendence we seem to universally pursue, even if through different means.

As reality becomes more unreal than fiction, the adoption of practices

belonging to the Other grows to be an expected outcome of the *zeitgeist*. While the hope is spread worldwide that 2020 will occasion the emergence of a utopian world order, a more urgent question is presented by this article. Amidst the oppositions we construct between cultural practices and the body techniques they produce, the differences we create often don't stand the test of semiotic analysis, dissolving whenever we look below the surface. As the constant exposés of our social constructions continue at multiple fronts, reflecting on the double standards practised (by traditional media and the public likewise) when it comes to facial covering is another step on a long road: a trajectory leading from irreconcilable binaries to intersubjective practices.

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