The body in clothing of delight

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Clothes, character and theory

'THERE IS A CONSIDERABLE TRUTH in the statement that clothes are an expression of character – a truth that is not modified by the fact that fashions change while character, generally speaking, does not. For changes in fashion – changes so sweeping as from a doublet to a frock-coat, or from armour to khaki – denote, so far as they are genuine, a change not in the character of human nature but in its environment and needs.' These words start a short preface by Mgr Robert Hugh Benson to a small book entitled *Roman Catholicism: an explanation of Catholic belief taken from official sources*, written by H. B. Coxon.[1] Benson drew analogies between changes in dress and changes in presentation of religious truth, suggesting that both are driven by environmental circumstances and the human need to respond to environmental change. Benson's argument is lucid, but the interest now lies in the fact that he was writing about fashion just before the radical cultural, political and social changes which overturned centuries of accepted differentiation between the way in which men and women dressed. Less than ten years after Benson wrote his preface, a period of experimentation with physical appearance and personal presentation was under way and it, in turn, has prompted a considerable body of literature on the subject of clothing and the body.

An Anglo-American publishing house – Berg – lists dress and fashion under material culture in its catalogues, where once, not so long ago, titles on dress and textiles might be found listed as applied or decorative arts. Berg's list of titles in print or planned for publication in 1999 is impressive. These titles include *Religion, dress and the body* (Linda Boynton Arthur (ed), 1999), *The culture of sewing, gender, consumption and homedressmaking* (Barbara Burman (ed), 1999), *Appearance and power* (Kim K. P. Johnson and Sharron J. Lennon (eds), 1999), *Fashioning the frame: boundaries, dress and the body* (Alexandra Warwick and Dani Cavallaro, 1998), *Consuming fashion: adorning the transnational body* (Anne Brydon and Sandra Niessen (eds), 1998) and *Dress and gender: making and meaning* (Ruth Barnes and Joanne B. Eicher (eds), 1993). This group, selected from a range of eighteen titles, makes the point that the subject has developed far

beyond a chronological analysis and discussion of changing fashions. In fact only one book, *Paris fashion: a cultural history* (Valerie Steele, 1998) has a title and contents which might make much sense to the average person in the street. Mgr Benson's notion that clothes are an expression of character has been replaced by new methodologies which explore the ambiguities of dress and the body within a context of multi-disciplinary research. The body in its clothed and unclothed state has become a subject of intense intellectual debate, but often in language which mystifies the uninitiated reader.

This article will touch upon these new ideas but the viewpoint will be closer to that of the clear-eyed observer in the Hans Christian Andersen story, '"But the Emperor has nothing at all on!" said a little child'.[2] The Emperor may have been hoodwinked by his crafty tailors, and the population may have been cowed by deference, but the child saw the reality.

Vile bodies?

'A mass of naked figures does not move us to empathy but to disillusion and dismay.' These remarks were made in *The nude* by Kenneth Clark, and have a world-weary tone which may not be unrelated to actual experience as well as artistic representations.[3] In the twentieth century, and more especially since the 1920s, partly clothed or unclothed bodies have become an accepted feature in western European society. However, in classical antiquity – notably seen in sculpture – and later, in paintings, engravings and photography, the body is usually an ideal of beauty, in both masculine and feminine forms; but clothing was often an adjunct to this perfection. The perfect body was based upon the natural body, though individuals such as Lord Byron or the Prince Regent might diet to acquire or retain such idealized forms. But in the twentieth century the pursuit of bodily perfection has spawned new industries – cosmetic surgery, silicone implants, diet and exercise regimes, all of which conspire to hammer home the idea that to have a less than perfect body is to have failed. This is patently absurd. Genetic and hereditary factors alongside nutrition produce a wide range of adult bodies: tall, medium, short; thin, average, fat; young, middle-aged, old. None is imperfect, though sensible diet and exercise can assist in creating a sense of well-being in nearly everyone. The human body is flexible and can be moulded to deceive the observer, especially when clothed in flattering styles. The celebrated French fashion designer, Paul Poiret (1879–1944) described one of his models thus:

> She was as silly as a goose and lovely as a peacock . . . in my Salons she appeared as a Messalina, an Indian Queen, pretentious, majestic and proud . . . am I the only one to know that this bird of paradise concealed the vilest of bodies, that her body had gone to pieces . . .?[4]

Poiret may have been exaggerating, for he was a self-publicist of awesome talent, but his main point was that well-designed clothing worn over the correct undergarments could create an illusion of perfection. He was writing in 1930 about his heyday before World War I when his sinuous and colourful garments, much influenced by the impact of the arrival of the *Ballets Russes* in Paris in 1909, offered a younger, more colourful and less statuesque vision of female elegance, in contrast to the heavily corseted and mature beauties of the *Belle Époque*. No young woman in the 1990s could hope to contemplate a career as a model with a body which 'had gone to pieces'. Bodily perfection is a prerequisite for all fashion designers and, unfortunately, their preference is for youthful androgynous sylphs rather than a variety of body types. Clothing which was once intended to enhance the body, disguising awkward physical attributes and highlighting agreeable ones, is now so revealing of every small imperfection that, in its most fashionable forms, it has become an impediment to self-esteem rather than an ally. This is less true for men's clothing than for women's; a well-cut suit will still disguise a multitude of physical inadequacies, but tailoring is an innately conservative business. Given this background it is unsurprising that surveys indicate that young women and, to a lesser extent, young men are dissatisfied with their bodies and feel less disadvantaged in the leisure uniform of jeans, unstructured shirts, sweater and trainers than in fashionable clothing which is so merciless in revealing physical imperfection.

The twentieth century has seen many advances in the manufacture of clothing, its laundering, its comfort and its availability. It also saw celebration of the diversity of the human form in the popularity in the 1920s and 1930s of movements such as Naturism and the League of Health and Beauty. Today, however, such diversity is rejected and exercise is seen as part of a regime whose end result is an idealized physique, and clothing is designed to suit young perfect bodies. Just before 2000 the imperfect body – which most of us have – is as much a cause for guilt and dismay as immodesty in dress was thought to be in earlier centuries.

Function: modesty and regulation

Clothes protect the body against climatic variations and against plant and insect life which can damage or irritate the skin; these are functional reasons. Clothing is also a form of modesty. In the Judaeo-Christian tradition we are accustomed to the idea that the metaphorical fig-leaf will impose a certain propriety, especially within mixed groups. Modest dress in the early Christian era took certain elements from the classical and Near Eastern traditions; loose, full-length garments were worn by both sexes for several centuries, though active masculine pursuits – fighting, hunting, hard physical work – required shorter tunics, but close-fitting garments were unusual until the fourteenth century when tailoring techniques improved.

Clothes also communicate ideas, some simple; so a medieval baron and a peasant instantly each knew who the other was, because their appearance was so dissimilar. Even the barons – to extend the analogy – could differentiate other, subtler gradations within their close-knit social world. Sumptuary legislation, first introduced into England by Edward III, but found elsewhere in Europe, reserved certain colours, fabrics and style of decoration to particular ranks in society. However, the frequent reissue of such prescriptive legislation suggests it can never have been effective. A vestige of this approach can be seen in the rows of ermine on a peer's robe which, if you know the simple code, will tell you the man is a duke, a marquess or a mere baron. Such exclusivity was always being threatened by the socially mobile and fell into disuse in this country in the early seventeenth century. By this time, there was greater choice in fabrics and decoration, and regulation was deemed impossible. Governments legislated to ban or restrict luxury imports which threatened native products, but this was another somewhat futile gesture as silks, laces and accessories were then smuggled into the country. Forbidden goods, typically, were more desirable than available ones. Underpinning all personal display is the wish to impress and the wish to attract. The former is usually aimed at both sexes within a particular social grouping, and is an economic barometer; the latter is usually restricted to a potential partner or partners.

Function: uniformity and self-expression

Certain closed societies, for example China and Japan, wore the same styles of garment for many centuries, only the fabrics from which they were made varying in colour and surface pattern. Regional and national dress in certain European countries also changed little, except in details

of decoration; this presented a strong, visual identity, which distinguished natives from foreign armies and regimes in areas of constantly shifting political allegiances. This conformist approach to clothing is also associated with a particular way of life or type of work. Economic factors were crucial in this, but certain social groups exhibited a fluidity of attitude towards clothing which confused outsiders. In the eighteenth century foreign visitors to England invariably remarked on the simple garments worn by gentlemen during daytime, and the fact that it was difficult to differentiate between a maidservant and her mistress because their styles of dress were so similar. However, as uniforms for more and more occupations were introduced, notably in the nineteenth century, such mistakes became highly unlikely. Uniform can be a social leveller or a constraint, depending upon the individual's attitude towards it, but its role was and remains significant.

In the twentieth century individuality and self-expression have played an increasing role in all aspects of life, including physical presentation. However, most people cannot avoid pressures to conform: even if their work requires a uniform, they are not wholly unrestricted in their leisure hours because they have to buy what is available, i.e. fashionable. Opportunities to break free of conformity do exist – ethnic goods, second-hand clothes or home sewing allow individuality to flower, but such styles are not always acceptable. Dress codes have replaced regulation for both sexes; organizational and social pressures are significant factors in what to wear and when to wear it. For example, in a heat-wave, dressing as for a holiday in the sun and also retaining professional credibility are mutually exclusive, and nudity, as various foolhardy souls who 'streak' at public events discover, is per se a public order offence which no political or other pressure group would attempt to overturn.

Fashion: moralists, poets and satirists

Fashion, in the sense that the word is used today – an awareness of and a desire to be in the forefront of new styles of clothing – has been a preoccupation of governing and merchant or business classes in many European countries for well over six hundred years, though fashions changed faster as means of communication – transport, printing, literacy – improved, and new sources of goods for the adornment of the body were discovered. Tracing its complex history is well beyond the scope of this article but one approach to the subject is to indicate some of the criticism that fashion attracted, from both moralists, novelists

and writers on etiquette. The earliest critical comments were often, though not invariably, directed at female fashions and bemoaned the fact that fashionable dress was an incitement to lust, fornication and pride, sometimes all three. The Puritan Philip Stubbes wrote *The anatomie of abuses* (1583) at the height of the richly extravagant and distorted fashions worn at the court of Elizabeth I. He considered current styles 'the devilles nettes, to intagle poore soules in'.[5] By the 1630s, when the court of Charles I and Henrietta Maria was at its apogee, clothes were elegant and flattering to the figure and made from the cool linens and shimmering silks which van Dyck painted so skilfully. The poet Robert Herrick found such fabrics decidedly sensuous:

> Whenas in silks my Julia goes,
> Then, then (methinks) how sweetly flows
> That liquefaction of her clothes.[6]

Poets, of course, often had a more relaxed attitude towards flattering fashions than moralists did; somewhere between the two the truth will be found.

From the late seventeenth century onwards most of the physical distortions and seeming immodesty associated with earlier fashions for both sexes became focused on female dress. Men settled down into a version of the three-piece suit – coat, waistcoat and breeches (later trousers), and although their taste in wigs, fabrics and jewellery could provoke criticism, they understood the need to dress with care. Lord Chesterfield, writing to his son in 1745, stated that 'Dress is a very foolish thing, and yet it is a very foolish thing for a man not to be well dressed according to his rank and way of life'.[7] A view that would have been shared by an Italian traveller in 1760 who, when annoyed by a sermon preached against dress, wrote, 'Dressing is one of the many things that increase the difference between the reasonable animal and the unreasonable, and anything, be it ever so small, that increases that difference, is never much amiss'.[8]

It was the changing female silhouette which attracted most ridicule. The width of a skirt, distended by hoops in the eighteenth century, by bustles and crinolines in the nineteenth century, or even cut too tightly, as in the 'hobble' skirt of about 1912, was frequently a focus for caricature and criticism. Similarly, the wearing of corsets to create an illusion of perfection, namely a high, rounded bosom and narrow waist, was perceived not just as unnatural but, by the nineteenth century, as

injurious to health. Doctors and dress-reformers joined together to persuade women that simpler styles which followed the contours of the body, supported by undergarments which did not distort or suppress the natural curves, were preferable. Aesthetic considerations were also added to these arguments, but such styles remained a minority taste, and were themselves derided as 'greenery-yallery Grosvenor Gallery' absurdities, in the George du Maurier cartoons of the 1880s and the Gilbert and Sullivan light opera *Patience* (1881).

Fashion: decency and etiquette

Attitudes towards dress, whether critical or admiring, tended to reinforce an alliance of Christian values and social stratification. This is expressed in the work of the popular Victorian novelist Charlotte Mary Yonge who wrote that, 'Exposure is always wrong; whatever be the fashion, it is the *Christian woman*'s duty to perceive when indecency comes in and to protest against it by her own example'; also, women should not 'promote a fashion which is bad for the *lower classes*' (my italics).[9] Mrs Yonge would have found an ally in an unusual quarter, as recorded in Quentin Bell's book *On human finery*. He mentions a Mohammedan prince visiting London in the 1880s who thought he had been invited to an orgy in Kensington because the female guests at a straightforward evening party 'had stripped off the greater part of their clothing, leaving their arms, their shoulders and the greater part of their breasts bare, save for powder and cosmetics'.[10] Such provocation in evening wear for women is conveyed, at its most extreme, in Sargent's portrait of Madame Pierre Gautreau, seen recently in the Sargent exhibition at the Tate Gallery. Madame Gautreau was an American married to a Frenchman, and famed for both her beauty and her love affairs; the low décolletage of her black evening dress, the slim diamond shoulder straps and the lavender-powdered skin caused a scandal when the portrait was exhibited at the Paris Salon of 1884. Even today it is easy to understand how a non-European might have assumed that such a quantity of bare flesh must indicate a certain profession rather than provide a fashion statement. At the time, it would have been thought less socially acceptable to appear without evening gloves, a more crushing breach of etiquette than to reveal so much flesh. Etiquette worried about details and good form, and left moral pronouncements to others. The plethora of etiquette books owed their success to increased social mobility in the nineteenth century. A slender volume of 1834 warned men 'not [to] affect singularity in dress . . . and

so become contemptibly conspicuous'.[11] An American book of about 1880, possibly a satire, but a clever one, told its male readers, 'Don't . . . wear anything that is *pretty*', and advised them to choose becoming, graceful and dignified apparel.[12] Women are advised to 'Leave excesses of all kinds to the vulgar', a sentiment supported by a later rule, 'Don't wear diamonds in the morning . . .'[13]

Fashion: reform and censorship

In the twentieth century excess, provocation and vulgarity in women's fashions have been a continued cause for adverse comment, as more and more flesh was revealed, and as male garments, such as trousers, entered the female wardrobe. There were occasional worries about male fashions indicating effeminacy; garments as seemingly innocuous as Oxford bags (the very wide trousers popular in the 1920s) and polo-necked sweaters were castigated. The rigid formality of male dress was challenged when the Men's Dress Reform Party was launched in 1929. This foundered on a mixture of innate conservatism and inertia. A tailor who addressed them in 1932 voiced the opinion that 'soft, sloppy clothes are symbolical of a soft and sloppy race'.[14] A more potent influence on men's and women's dress was the American film industry. The formal and casual styles of masculine American dress had a sharp, snappy quality which was far from 'sloppy' but different enough to be appealing to the young and impressionable. Women, in particular, modelled themselves on film stars, copying hairstyles, make-up and clothing. However, as a result of a number of scandals in the industry in the 1920s, the world-weary and amoral heroes and heroines of a stream of films about doomed love affairs were 'cleaned up' by the introduction of the Hays Code in the late 1920s and 1930s. The creation of the National League of Decency in 1934, a Catholic organization which was concerned about the low moral standards of the film industry, strengthened the work of the Hays Code and, in effect, there was close censorship of what was and was not acceptable in films. Guidance extended to clothing and 'Indecent or undue exposure is forbidden' was one of several precepts dealing with the costumes of film stars. Hollywood, however, was ingenious at coping with censorship. It shifted emphasis from dresses cut low at the front to those cut low at the back, and used all of the technical skills of the corsetry industry to enhance the clothed but distinctly provocative curves of its leading actresses.

The late twentieth-century fashion industry is a worldwide and multi-billion-pound business. It develops new technical systems, new fabrics, new machinery and new marketing techniques to offer apparently limitless choice in every type of garment and accessory. The choice is limited by the fashion industry's dictates about seasonal colours, fabrics, patterns and styles. It is now more of a 'sin' to be unfashionable than to be scantily or inappropriately clothed. The dress reformers, etiquette writers and moralists have been replaced by fashion journalists as the arbiters of fashion. Criticism is principally directed at public figures; ironically, for most fashion writers are women, the principal butt of their criticisms are women. Men, cleverly camouflaged in the uniform of the dark business suit leavened only by the bolder colours of shirt and tie and their style of footwear, are only targets when they venture out in inappropriate leisure wear, but that is mild, seasonal fun compared to the vociferous comment levelled at women.

Meaning and theory

This article draws upon a range of published sources, and these include the work of theorists who study the meaning of clothes. This tradition can be traced back to the end of the nineteenth century when scholars used their knowledge of anthropology, economic and social theory, sociology and psychology to analyse why and how certain fashions became popular. One of the most influential early writers was the American economist Thorstein Veblen, whose book *The theory of the leisure class* (1899) categorized fashionable dress as symbolizing conspicuous consumption, conspicuous leisure and conspicuous waste. A detailed examination of his approach can be found in Quentin Bell's *On human finery* (revised edition, 1976) and in Valerie Steele's *Fashion and eroticism* (1985); Dr Steele also considers the contribution of other early theorists. A much simpler explanation than Thorstein's was offered by the German historian of dress and manners Max von Boehn in *Modespiegel* (1919), where he promoted the idea that fashion is 'a visible manifestation of the *Zeitgeist*'. The sexual significance of dress was a major theme in the psychologist J. C. Flugel's *The psychology of clothes* (1930); this popularized the idea of 'shifting erogenous zones'. Flugel's claim that all clothing is charged with sexual symbolism owed something to earlier work by Havelock Ellis and also to Richard von Krafft-Ebing's discussion of erotic fetishism and its place in the interpretation of dress in the *Psychopathia sexualis* of 1886.

The more recent theoretical approach to the study of clothing can be sampled in the quarterly Anglo-American publication *Fashion Theory, The Journal of Dress, Body and Culture*, which examines fashion from the standpoint that it is 'the cultural construction of the embodied identity'. This is a multi-disciplinary approach which encompasses gender, multiculturalism and sexual preference. Thus, body decoration (piercing, scarification, tattooing), clothing and high fashion are merged to create a much wider subject area. Ideas from American and European philosophers and cultural historians have been applied to the study of dress and the body, resulting in publications which are frequently incomprehensible to all but those of similar mind and view. This, however, is a salutary antidote to the approach of fashion journalists whose critical faculties frequently dissolve in the presence of 'great' fashion designers.

In ranging widely over themes concerned with clothing and the body, the intention has been to indicate the diversity and vitality of the subject, and to suggest other sources for readers interested in pursuing some of the themes further. Fashion is a subject which excites debate and derision, but it is never dull. The most unexpected people have taken a more than passing interest in its vagaries, and there is no sign that it will lose its perennial fascination. Clothing is a delight, the meaning and role of which will be redefined in each generation, an ephemeral but essential adjunct to life in a civilized society.

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NOTES

1 H. B. Coxon, *Roman Catholicism* (London, 1912), p v.
2 J. M. and M. J. Cohen, *The Penguin dictionary of quotations* (London, 1975 edn), p 4.
3 Quoted in Q. Bell, *On human finery* (revised edn, London, 1976), p 50.
4 *Ibid.*, pp 52–53.

5 Quoted in A. Ribeiro, *Dress and morality* (London, 1986), p 69.
6 Cohen, *op. cit.*, p 189.
7 Quoted in Bell, *op. cit.*, p 18.
8 Quoted in A. Ribeiro, *Dress in eighteenth century Europe 1715–1789* (London, 1984), p 15.
9 Ribeiro, *Dress and morality*, p 139.
10 Bell, *op. cit*, pp 47–48.
11 Anon., *Hints on etiquette & the usages of society* (reprinted London, 1947), p 32.
12 Anon., *Don't: a manual of mistakes & improprieties more or less prevalent in conduct & speech* (reprinted Whitstable, Kent, 1986), p 29.
13 *Ibid.*, pp 89, 91.
14 Ribeiro, *Dress and morality*, pp 157–158.