So that's who you are!

Clothing and identity

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THE CREATION MYTH OF THE INCA people of the Andes portrays human kind as first appearing fully clothed, identifiable immediately in ethnic origin and gender from what they are wearing.[1] This contrasts with the Judeo-Christian creation myth of Adam and Eve being unclothed and their eventual need for clothing as a covering for their 'shame' – the awareness of their nakedness.

Whatever the theological spin that can be put on the metaphor of nakedness and fig-leaves, this most enduring of biblical stories has created a legacy of negativity towards the body and, by extension, a less than positive view of clothing. Yet by today's understanding, the Inkas got it right. Clothing is about our identity as social beings. It is fundamental to our relationships and Christianity is essentially a faith of relationships. While the social anthropology of dress and gender is a young discipline, begun in the second half of the nineteenth century as part of the development of the human sciences, from it we know that all societies have modified or supplemented the body in some way: by paint, jewellery or clothing. It is a prime means of social communication. Symbolic adornment preceded and can take precedence over warmth, protection and modesty as with the Xicrin Indians in Brazil, for example, who feel naked and embarrassed without their dark blue body paint, while for the Dinka people of East Africa it is considered unmanly to wear a covering, even on cold nights.[2]

Clothing and relationship

In the more closed and static societies of the world, the stable context has allowed the cultures to develop detailed codes of meaning not only in their clothing but in the whole process by which that society's clothing comes about. In parts of south east Asia the entire process, including the preparation of the thread, is likened to the creation of life.[3] For traditional societies, where fabric comes from and how is as significant as how it is worn and by whom. If the fabric is woven, for instance, the process is usually gender-specific and is generally, though not always, carried out by women.

Western European culture, however, is peculiar in having a pattern of changing clothes' styles, 'fashion', traceable back to the thirteenth-century Burgundian court. The changes reflect the ambiguities in social relationships which occurred in phases under a myriad of influences. The positive link with the source of our clothes has been largely lost sight of in the West, too. In the three decades following the end of World War II, for example, the manufacture of cotton clothing and fabrics in the UK fell into rapid decline in the face of cheap imports from the Far East. Except for those directly involved in the manufacturing communities, it is doubtful whether this loss of connection was registered elsewhere as commerce in the UK moved painfully into the post-industrial era with large-scale job losses across many industries. Even the revival in the market for natural fibre clothing did nothing to stem this decline. After such disconnections, however, the West is reconnecting, to some extent, with the origin of its clothing as concern mounts about the ethical circumstances of its production. (See 'Just dressing' p 226.)

Changes in clothing styles are accounted for by ambivalences in society which can both cause and effect recurrent instabilities in social identities. At any one point in history there are these ambiguities, and over time they change. Such creative tensions include youth vs age, masculinity vs femininity, androgyny vs singularity, work vs play, domesticity vs worldliness, revelation vs concealment, conformity vs rebellion, licence vs restraint.[4] And while we tend to think of the choice of clothing as an individual matter, or fashion somehow 'happening to us', Davies comments that at any one time in a society there are certain feelings and attitudes, experiences, tensions and yearnings making up strong collective currents impinging on our sense of self which are given collective expression in clothing as much as any other form.[5] The present health- and body-consciousness of a swathe of Westerners feeds the huge market in sports and leisure clothing.

Every piece of clothing sends a message in the context in which it is worn. To ignore the effect that clothing has on us is to avoid reflecting on one of the most common ways in which we judge the worth and desirability of knowing another person. It is a core part of our spirituality. Before any other exchange takes place between two people they will have formed an impression as to who and what that other person is from what the other looks like, and whether any futher interaction is even desirable. But clothes are not just visual – they have touch, smell and sometimes sound, any or all of which can have a positive or negative effect on the observer. We have all heard of the local villain

who is advised to wear a suit in court to suggest a respectability contrary to the other evidence. And why do reports of court proceedings always tell us what the suspect was wearing? What is a serial killer supposed to have in his wardrobe? Going into any social context we choose our clothing deliberately to blend in or to stand out, depending on how we want ourselves to be perceived within that group. The T-shirt culture (been there, done that, got the T-shirt) means that we actually walk round wearing public statements about ourselves. Clothes are so ordinary that most of the time we are unaware of them, which is another reason why it is easy to underestimate their effect.

Clothing is one among several emblems which give a person social identity. But clothing styles do not send the same message to all members of a society, or even of a group, at the same time. What is communicated will depend on the identity of the wearer, the occasion, place, company, even the mood of the wearer and viewer. Our clothes say not only who we are in our society but how we are in relation to the prevailing religious and moral value system. In post-modern western society the sheer diversity of clothing and the apparent absence of taboos is arguably symptomatic of the collapse of a definite consensus of values. Eclectic wardrobes reflect eclectic lifestyles without a common thread.

Uniforms: what do they say?

Uniforms are perhaps the most obvious way to realize how deep an effect clothing can have on us. Within any culture at any one time they send a clear signal. They can arouse feelings from profound gratitude to the most deep-seated hatred as we can see at present in Kosovo where a diversity of military uniforms is producing both those responses. Uniforms portray most definitively the vocational self, and can have both positive and negative effects, at varying levels, on their wearers and viewers. The uniform may be all-embracing, signalling an occupational priority of team over individual, as with the military or firefighters. Or it may be read as 'them against us' if, for example, you belong to an ethnic minority which feels it is being unfairly penalized by law enforcers or, on a rather more trivial level, if you see a traffic warden booking your illegally parked car. Or the 'uniform' may be simply a symbol of connection or allegiance, such as the religious symbol of the Sikh turban or the Muslim women's head covering. The Jewish *kippa sruga*, the cap worn by men, is a complex symbol with

different meanings in different Jewish contexts about religious orthodoxy, political allegiance, occupation and even personality.[6]

A uniform implies a public commitment of the self to others, first to the other people bearing that uniform past and present, secondly to the rest of society as it relates to that uniformed group. The spiritual significance of such commitments can be judged by the deep emotion that surrounds ritual or memories in connection with uniformed belonging. And the effect is not only on members – why do so many of us feel dewy-eyed at the sight and sound of a military band, or a choir of monks?

A cerain use of uniform can reverse the usual process of clothing and eliminate any authentic expression of self, with consequent potential for deep psychological and spiritual damage. The wearing of religious habits was part of a dying to the self in a way that we would now understand to be unhealthy, and the desexing of women religious by their dress was consistent with the wider denigration of female sexuality in Christianity and its necessary elimination for the 'holy' life.[7] It is an interesting state of affairs that women religious, liberated from their habits as well as in many other ways, have become a force to be reckoned with in the Roman Catholic Church in a way that is unpalatable to the authorities. In a vain gesture those authorities are exerting pressure for women religious to re-don their habits, as though containing their bodies within particular clothing will simultaneously harness their liberated spirits.

Gender and clothing

Of all the relationships indicated by clothing the most distinctive is that of gender, revealing a society's qualities associated with gender, especially its preconceived ideas as to what is biologically correct. Dress both indicates and creates gender distinctions. The desirable relationship of gender dress to society used to be to encourage sexual overtures in a way approved by society, leading to mating and the production of children to continue the society. In the mid-eighteenth century there was 'The Great Renunciation' when men abandoned elaborate dress and refocused their clothing messages on to the women, 'the exhibitionist but passive women being the embodiment of men's desire'.[8] Behind this lay the desire to reject the flamboyance, extravagance and reprehensible lifestyle of the aristocracy, most graphically expressed in the French Revolution, and to express the sober and serious commitment to hard work as befitted the coming of

industrialization and the so-called Protestant work ethic. Women, consequently, and until very recently, became the vehicles for the signals men wished to send out – largely to other men. While men entered two and a half centuries of boring and humourless styles of dress (recently ended), wife, daughters and dependent sisters became increasingly elaborate in their clothing and appearance as men used them to display their rising prosperity.[9] This was a fundamental way in which the women's identity was appropriated by men, reinforcing powerfully the sense of dependence, passivity, lack of self-worth and status as a second-class human being. And until women gained some degree of financial independence they remained a living statement of a man's financial status.

Broadly speaking – and perhaps until the *Full Monty* phenomenon – men's bodies and their sexuality were taken for granted while women's were extensively defined and sexual and social meanings imposed. In her book analysing the images created by dress in film, *Undressing cinema*, Stella Bruzzi comments, 'A woman's dress and demeanour, much more than a man's, indexes psychology; if costume represents interiority, it is she who is turned inside out'.[10] Nowhere is the judgemental attitude to women's clothing more clearly and shockingly illustrated than in the law courts, where for decades women have been blamed for the sexual assaults made on them by men because of the clothes they were wearing.

Dress and the liberated woman

The entry of so many women into 'public' life, especially in the professions, commerce, politics and the media, has given a new dimension to gender and dress. How are women to present themselves in what is effectively still a man's world? How far can they present themselves as women, and what sort of women at that? As a measure of how great the challenge can be, a former male police officer and psychologist comments that a female 'loose in the depths of male territory is provocative and offensive, producing something of a spiritual and conceptual problem for male prestige'.[11] As entering the workplace is one of the most significant ways in which women are challenging and changing the patriarchal system, there are serious issues of self-identity here; a great deal is at stake. The challenge brings together several strands of feminist thinking, not all of them compatible.

Is succeeding in the formerly man's world about meeting men on their terms – being pseudo-men – or asserting the equal value of dif-

ference? Both have fundamental implications for self-perception and consequently for dress. Or is equality in the workplace about androgyny? If so, what constitutes appropriate dress? In gender exchanges so far, women have borrowed from men but not a lot has happened in the opposite direction, although in a wonderful spoof fashion article one April Fool's day, a British broadsheet gave over a whole page, photos included, to the launch of 'skuits', men's suits with skirts, at a major department store in London.

When significant numbers of women first hit the professions, the style favoured the pseudo-men approach. In the 1970s and 80s, women's bodies seemed to become thinner and more muscular. Dark tailored suits, echoing the boring city uniform of generations of men, signalled the seriousness of career intention and laying aside of feminine frivolity, caprice and irresponsibility. Wide shoulders declared ambition set on real power, men's power. Above all, any hint of 'eroticism' had to be eliminated. Were men's bodies and clothing 'better'? Or were women being drawn to (apparent) symbols of personal freedom and power? But surrender was not total, some final marker of difference was necessary, so floppy bows (so reminiscent of The Iron Lady herself and the era of Thatcherism), frills, flimsy blouses and even bare midriffs were lifelines to the feminine.[12] But with the cleaner lines of more recent women's fashions, even those have gone. As any evening on the television will reveal, plain, dark suits with a scoop-necked plain cotton top is de rigueur for any female presenter, politician or business woman. (Frills and flounces are the territory of drag queens – which raises a whole other topical issue of cross-dressing.) Even though many city institutions have adopted a 'dressing down' day for Friday, a glance down a carriage of commuters reveals endless bodies of both sexes in dark suits, punctuated only by the bright cartoon colours of the men's ties which have almost become a uniform in their own right. Women don't seem to have worked this one out yet.

Dress for dissent – the material protest

Using dress as an instrument of protest against the prevailing culture, including its spiritual values, is not new. The 'bohemian' nonconformer has been around in Europe for two hundred years, Gandhi called for Indians to wear homespun cloth to challenge the spectacle and grandeur of the British ruling classes. But one of the most striking anti-culture styles of dress in the past half century has been punk. Like milder anti-fashions before it, its characteristics have been assimilated

and domesticated but in its original form it still has the ability to shock and intimidate. A punk colony must exist somewhere near my central London station where every day I see black-clad spindly girls with vivid pink or electric blue hair and lean young men in their studded leathers, large boots and with lots of body piercing. Always quiet and gentle, they draw wary and curious looks from the many tourists.

Although punk was more overtly political, it was one in a line of youth cultures in the post-war period, following the Teds (Teddy Boys), Mods (precursors of the Carnaby Street phenomenon) and Rockers, and Skinheads, all of whom adopted anti-culture dress of a distinctive but less aggressive kind.

Punk culture[13] expressed the most desperate cry of the human spirit: that there is no future at all. It was not about change, that there should be a better or different future because there was none. It expressed hatred and despair and preached anarchy and nihilism. Punk had complex origins with serious economic and social underpinnings and came to be expressed most identifiably in music, clothing and body decoration. While underground music in the States came from the bored middle classes, the roots of punk lay in the underprivileged, white working-class youth of the mid 1970s in the UK, especially those in London. Unemployment was high, the working classes were embattled for survival, and in the tough economic conditions of the day white youth were the losers. Punk culture symbolized their physical and spiritual condition. Their music was raw and harsh, a savage counterpoint to the bland popular music of the time, just as their bodies became visually harsh, jarring and intimidating.

The focus was the rise of the Sex Pistols group in 1976. The fans turned up at their anarchic and much-reported performances in black refuse bags, wearing bondage gear, chains, slashed clothing held together with safety pins, multi-coloured hair spiked with Vaseline, lurid make-up and – famously – safety pins through the flesh. They had white faces with blackend eyes – the 'walking dead', as befits those who have no future. Their neutered, asexual appearance was also important, causing gender confusion. Punk anti-fashion specialized in anything ugly and offensive to the general public. But its designs were not to be taken at face value; swastikas, for example, were not displayed in agreement with fascist philosophy but to remind society of the atrocities it commits. The total look was lean and hungry, looking threatening and capable of violence, and under the influence of amphetamines – real or cosmetic. It is interesting to note that over twenty years on, some of the international fashion shows were heavily

criticized for giving their models the 'heroin look' – anti-fashion well and truly domesticated.

But while these were the roots, punk became an artistic movement by attracting others, most famously perhaps, Vivienne Westwood, the British fashion designer. Popularity emasculates protest. The punk look (and music, if not philosophy) was taken up by many middle-class youth. A young man whom I know took up the punk look and music at 14 and is only reluctantly letting it go in his early 30s. He came from a middle-class family, was an accomplished student and sportsman at an excellent school and knew where his career would be. Why did he adopt the punk look and, later, while at university in a dying industrial city, the company of 'real' punks? For a fundamental spiritual reason: because he despised the superficial way that most people judged others. For those who ventured to get beyond his chains and studded leather he would deliberately surprise them by bringing into the conversation the ancient classical texts he loved to read. The sudden warming to him of his conversation companion only endorsed his view of the shallowness of human contact. And his punk clothing gave him access to the world of the homeless and unemployed in a way unique to his era as he sought to experience something of what their reality was about.

Restyling dissent

But this most arresting of clothing styles has become tamed and domesticated, integrated into every level of fashion. This is the fate of most anti-fashion as the spirit behind it becomes absorbed into the mainstream, creating a vacuum for the message of the next anti-fashion. Back-to-nature, simple-life 'freaks' of the 70s led the way to society's obsessive preoccupation with health consciousness today, environmental concern and creation spirituality and brought us via baggy track suits to the leisure-wear industry and more natural-fibre clothing. Why does this happen? With punk it is because it was taken up by middle-class disaffected youth, the 'threat' came literally closer to home in the mainstream culture and by its very familiarity became less alarming. The protest it embodied was diluted into the much more manageable 'teenage rebellion'. This was anathema to the purists for whom total alienation from mainstream culture was of the essence, and to be accessible in any way was to weaken. Similarly, the closeness of the gay culture to the fashion industry ensured that its sartorial characteristics – leathers, tight T-shirts, earrings – soon became mainstream and unremarkable. Fashions from black and Hispanic

enclaves have 'floated' into the mainstream.[14] Despite the boom affluence of the 80s, the effect of punk lingers on. The all-black outfit has become standard teenage wear – if not for longer – to the despair of many a parent. The wearing of heavy boots, popularized by 'Doc Martins', by so many young women even, at one time, with ball gowns, is a clear rejection of much that was once deemed 'appropriate' for their age and sex.

The origins of punk raise a serious general issue. Protest by clothing can only take place in a democratic society, but in this lies a paradox too. If society is so democratic that 'anything goes' – the present situation in western democracies – then how can you dress sufficiently distinctively to be noticed as making a protest? Punk clothing and music may have pushed at social boundaries, but it was containable, and arguably expressed social dislocation that could have taken more violent forms. If dress ceases to have the power to protest, perhaps the disaffected will have to resort to less containable expression.

An inverted form of protest involves the 'designer label' culture where the claim is not about alienation but about belonging, using clothing to claim membership of a category from which the group is totally excluded. Members of the economically deprived urban underclasses go to great lengths to sport the designer leisure-wear symbolic of the flamboyantly affluent and prosperous. In this way not only do they create gang insignia and a hierarchy of identity within their own communities but dare social authority to question how they came to own it. Apart from routine theft, crimes of excessive violence go with this culture. In Chicago in 1990 it was reported that a youth killed for a fashionable jacket; another murder was committed for a 100-dollar pair of trainers.[15] The desire for label 'status' also fuels a huge industry in counterfeit clothing.

Next time you see someone . . .

For many of us clothing is purely functional, of little interest and even a necessary nuisance. For others it has a more conscious presence in their lives as a source of pleasure, challenge, interest, self-expression, livelihood. But consciously interested or not, our relationships with other people and within society are influenced by the clothes we all wear and the messages they communicate. Many of our most deep-seated prejudices and fears are rooted in the appearance of other people, the visual image 'framed' by their clothing. As our societies become more multicultural, and Westerners travel more widely, our perceptions of

relationship are constantly tested and found wanting. If we can at least realize how powerfully the chosen clothing of another person can affect our judgement of them as worthwhile human beings, we will then be freer to move on to meet the person beneath the clothes . . . if you see what I mean!

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NOTES

1 'Pachamama the Inka Earth Mother of the long sweeping garment' by Penny Dransart in *Dress and gender: making and meaning in cultural contexts*, eds Ruth Barnes and Joanne B. Eicher (Berg, 1992), p 145.
2 Claudia Brush Kidwell (ed), *Men and women: dressing the part* (Smithsonian Institution Press, 1989), p 10.
3 Barnes and Eicher, *op. cit.*, p 4.
4 Fred Davies, *Fashion, culture and identity* (University of Chicago Press, 1992), p 18.
5 Davies, *op. cit.*, p 17.
6 'The Jewish kippa sruga and the social construction of gender in Israel' by Suzanne Baizerman in Barnes and Eicher, *op.cit.*, p 103.
7 Today women who choose to wear a habit usually do so freely and for positive reasons.
8 Stella Bruzzi, *Undressing cinema: clothing and identity in the movies* (Routledge, 1997), p xviii.
9 Davies, *op. cit.*, p 40.
10 Bruzzi, *op. cit.*, p 126.
11 'Dress and modes of address: structural forms for policewomen' by Malcolm Young in Barnes and Eicher, *op. cit.*, p 267.
12 Davies, *op. cit.*, pp 42, 44.
13 Tricia Henry, *Break all the rules! Punk rock and the making of a style* (UMI Research Press 1989), pp 66–80.
14 Davies, *op. cit.*, pp 181, 182.
15 Davies, *op. cit.*, p 61.