Dress, Language and Communication

In the *Tractatus logico-philosophicus*, Wittgenstein proposes a clothing metaphor for language:

> Language disguises the thought, so that from the external form of the clothes one cannot infer the form of the thought they clothe, because the external form of the clothes is constructed with quite another object than to let the form of the body be recognized (Wittgenstein, 1922: Proposition 4.002).

Language, thought and dress are here associated and clothing is explicitly considered as a kind of bodily disguise, just as language is a disguise for thought. Language and dress are sign systems through which, Wittgenstein seems to be saying, what counts is not so much what is 'underneath', but rather the surface as such, the system or pattern itself which body and thought assume. The form of 'clothed thought' would thus be language, just as the garment is the form of the clothed body. Though perhaps not in Wittgenstein's intentions, in a more widely accepted sense today, the word 'language' does not simply refer to a verbal system, but involves all those sign systems with which human beings give shape to their relation to the world (see Ponzio, Calefato, Petrilli 1994: 58). Like language in this sense, dress functions as a kind of 'syntax', according to a set of more or less constant rules, depending on whether we are dealing with traditional costume or fashion. These rules allow a garment, and body coverings in general, to acquire meaning, whether that of a veritable social significance, codified in costume through time, or a pure and simple exhibition of interconnected signs on the body following associative criteria established by the fashion system.

Returning to Wittgenstein's metaphor and recalling how important the pictorial dimension of language is in the *Tractatus* – that is, its capacity to depict a fact (a 'state of things') through a system of images[1] – we may reflect on how the language of the clothed body shapes the body into a kind of map. Indeed, a sign-image is such in virtue of the connection

between its various elements, each of which makes sense on the basis of its position in a given sequence. It is this position which allows a sign to represent something else.

One such example concerns a particular form of body covering, indeed one of the most ancient and archetypal: tattooing. The structural anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss has shown that in many societies not only does tattooing have a special social significance, but it also contains messages with a spiritual purpose (Lévi-Strauss 1958: 288). The social and aesthetic significance of tattooing as a sign-image – observed by Lévi-Strauss in the Maori of New Zealand – may be better understood if one considers the effect of 'doubling' the face and body, which are decorated as if they had been split in two. According to Lévi-Strauss the decoration *is* the face, or rather, it *creates* it (1958: 289), thereby conferring on the face social identity, human dignity and spiritual significance. The dual representation of the face, as depicted by the Maori, is indicative of a more profound doubling: that of the 'dumb' biological individual and the social personage that s/he has the task of embodying (Lévi Strauss 1958: 289). Thus the sign-picture or the sign-tattoo on the face has meaning not in virtue of the single graphic marks, but rather on the basis of the opposition-association set up between the two parts of the face or body, the actual one and the painted or incised one.

Another example concerns what Hebdige (1979: 102) calls the *bricolage* of subcultural styles: the composition or arrangement on the body of a collection of apparently incongruous objects, which taken as a whole create for the subject who wears them an organized and meaningful system analogous to the world (see Calefato 1996: 5–6, 15–16). The Mod's starched white collar and black tie, for instance, or the Punk's skin-piercing safety pin are pieces of a subcultural *bricolage* emphasizing the sign-role – 'unnatural' by definition – that banal, everyday objects assume when collocated in unusual places. The sign-value of these objects depends on their collocation in a network or 'web' of meanings. So, a sort of body 'cartography' is drawn on social territory, where each sign has a precise value according to its position.

Bodily coverings, clothes and skin decorations 'create' the body, shaping it together with the surrounding world. What we might call the 'degree zero' of clothing, the naked body, is itself replete with significance, since it is either the result of a significant absence, as Barthes says,[2] or a construction permeated with meaning and value (the body incised, tattooed, tanned, wrinkled, scarred, exposed beneath transparent garments, etc).

But now let's look at what covering oneself out of a 'sense of modesty' means. According to Sartre, it indicates the specifically human ability to be

a *pure subject* (Sartre 1943: 363), by disguising the objectivity of the naked body exposed to the gaze and exhibiting, instead, our ability to see without being seen. Being a subject means, in this sense, recognizing that clothes have specific functions and dressing in order to convey a specific meaning, including the social meaning attributed to the notion of modesty. Moreover, in the case of costume (including uniform), functions are related to those aspects which make bodily coverings the sign of a person's age, social or sexual role, political career, and so on.

In an essay not included in *The Fashion System* Barthes identifies an axiological function in costume, its ability to produce social values that bear witness to the creative power of society over itself (1998: 74). Barthes makes an important distinction between costume and dress: while the former is an institutional, essentially social reality, independent of the individual, the latter is a unique reality through which the individual enacts on him/herself the general institution of costume (1998: 66). While dress, or attire, can be the object of psychological or morphological research, costume, as Barthes says, is the true object of sociological and historical research (1998: 67). Moreover, Barthes maintains that the dichotomy between costume and dress mirrors the Saussurian articulation of language into *langue* and *parole*: the former, a social institution, the latter, an individual act. The similarity with the linguistic sphere basically concerns the social value of clothing as a generic group, that is, a combination of costume and dress, corresponding to *language* in the Saussurian sense (1998: 66).

Barthes collocates fashion within the phenomenon of costume, though at times it oscillates between costume and dress, with an effect of mutual contamination: for instance, *haute couture* may use a traditional costume in the creation of a unique garment, and women's fashion may diversify the uniformity of costume depending on the occasion; whereas men's fashion tends towards dandyism, that is, it tends to emphasize the *manner* of wearing a standard outfit (1998: 68–9).

For Barthes fashion is much more than an occasion to demonstrate how a system analogous to language functions. Rather, as Gianfranco Marrone says, fashion is an emblem of our 'progressive awareness of the indissoluble bond between sign and society, semiology and sociology' (Marrone 1998: 77). The history of costume, Barthes says, has a general epistemological value, whereby with 'history of costume' he means a socio-semiotic reading of the phenomenon of clothing as an articulate language through which it is possible to analyse a culture as system and process, institution and individual act, expressive reserve and significant order (1998: 73).

The articulation of clothing into costume and dress – corresponding to *langue* and *parole* – is further developed by Barthes (1998: 73) with refer-

ence to one of the founders of structural phonology, N.S. Trubeckoj, who proposes as part of the phenomenon of dress 'the individual dimension of a garment, and how dirty or worn-out it is' and as part of the phenomenon of costume 'the difference, no matter how slight, between a young girl's garments and those of a married woman in certain societies' (Trubeckoj 1939 cited by Barthes 1998: 80). Barthes extends this opposition by considering, as part of the phenomenon of dress, how untidy a garment is, what it lacks, how it fits and how it is worn (crooked buttons, sleeves too long, etc), improvised clothing, colour (except in special circumstances, like mourning), and the characteristic gestures of the wearer. As part of the phenomenon of costume, on the other hand, Barthes proposes ritualized forms, materials and colours, fixed usages and, more generally, all those systems regulated by conformity and compatibility, the outer limits of which are represented by costumes for specific purposes, as in film and theatre (1998: 80). In the light of this classification it is interesting to note how fashion – which we include in costume – has paradoxically appropriated usages and forms which Barthes included in dress.

Let's look at these aspects one by one. When a garment is made to measure it is certainly unique, though with the invention of standard sizes, the body has been squeezed into numerical limits. A worn-out garment may have a sentimental value for its wearer, but as 'second-hand' it becomes a fashion item; and the same goes for the vogue for faded or ripped jeans. Untidiness and dirtiness may be part of the phenomenon of anti-fashion or urban tribal forms. The absence of a garment may be the sign of a collective use made of costume: for instance, feminist bra-burning in the 1960s, or Sharon Stone without underpants in *Basic Instinct*, which becomes a sign of the protagonist's sexual ambiguity. Eccentricities in how a garment is worn, on the other hand, concern everyday fashions: the vogue for buttoning jackets crookedly, wearing sleeves that are too long, or deliberately creased, unironed clothes, a vogue recently taken up by high fashion. Gesture and movement, too, in wearing certain garments, are often indicative of socially produced attitudes: for instance, the fashion dictate of narrow skirts or high heels that impose on women fixed, even stereotyped, movements when seated or walking.

According to Lotman (1993), fashion introduces a dynamic principle into seemingly immobile, everyday spheres. Traditional costume tends to maintain such spheres unchanged through time, while fashion tends to transmit signals which are antithetical to the everyday: capricious, voluble, strange, arbitrary, unmotivated, these are the terms we normally associate with fashion. So fashion becomes part of the image of a topsy-turvy world, where a tension is set up between the stability of the

everyday, on the one hand, and the search for novelty and extravagance, on the other.

There is thus a structural difference between costume and fashion with regard to time – the stability and immutability of costume as opposed to the giddiness of fashion – and metaphorical space – a normal versus a topsy-turvy world. This difference directly concerns the social function of clothes: costume establishes a close relation between the individual and the community to which s/he belongs, while a fashionable garment has, by definition, a cosmopolitan status, even though its style may be inspired by 'ethnic' or traditional costume.

Let's take as an example some aspects related to the social significance of colour. Black, associated with mourning in the traditional costume of certain societies, has the ritual function (Bogatyrёv 1937) of associating the nothingness into which the body of the defunct has passed with the meaningless state in which the bereaved person finds him/herself. In virtue of its magical function, on the other hand, the use of black is forbidden for the garments of new-born babies, who are thereby protected from images associated with night, death and demons. Black, therefore, in the context of a traditional, symbolic concept of clothing as costume, is always associated with a specific, yet timeless, function, the significance of which is inscribed in 'languages' which, while different, are nevertheless morphologically enduring and belong to the universal phenomenon of myth enacted within a context of social relativism (Greimas 1976). This concerns both the way in which so-called archaic societies function and the extent to which the functional dimension of a garment persists even in mass, industrial sectors of social reproduction (the wedding dress, for instance).

In fashion, which is characteristic of social reproduction in the modern age, especially mass reproduction today, the social significance of colour is dispersed in a multiplicity of languages which, in turn, become social discourses (Greimas 1976). Fashion uses black, for instance, in various contexts and discourses: urban tribal styles, such as Punks and Goths; intersemiotic strategies between fashion and cinema (the role of black in *The Blues Brothers* or *Men in Black*); 'designer styles' (the use of black in Yamamoto, Versace or Dolce & Gabbana) (see Calabrese 1992); *bricolage* fetishes, and so on.

Take the wedding dress as a further example, the ritual function of which is subordinated to the mutability of fashion. The dress itself may be decontextualized, white being replaced by 'provocative' colours (such as red) and shapes (low-cut bodices, short skirts, etc).

The objects generated by the discourses of fashion are no longer, therefore, products of a collective expressiveness – myths in the traditional

sense – but are rather signs of a style, and consumer objects. In other words, they become myths in the contemporary sense.

Rossi-Landi defines society as 'the aspect that material assumes on a human level' (1985: 32). And the sign dimension of society has characterized the history itself of cultures and civilizations. For instance, natural languages are transcribed as signs, and the sociolinguistic categories underlying them are too, by nature, signs. We might also adduce the symbolic function of non-verbal sign systems, like food and clothing. Sign systems, in which costume and fashion are included, manifest their functional mechanisms as generators of relations between individuals, devices for shaping the world and sources of meaning and value. It is in this sense that sign systems may be called communication systems. In the chapter entitled *Schema di riproduzione sociale* of his book *Metodica filosofica e scienza dei segni* Rossi-Landi defines communication as social reproduction (1985: 27–45), that is, as the whole context of the production-exchange-consumption of commodities and messages, all considered signs on the basis of his 'homological method'. It is not only the moment of exchange that involves the communicative dimension – expressed as techniques of persuasion in advertising, marketing strategies, etc – but production and consumption as well. This is especially evident in our 'post-industrial' age. The manifestations of sign production-communication go from the telecommunications industry, information technology and cinema to automation and educational systems. Consumption as communication includes, moreover, the use of telephones, electronic gadgets, computers, televisions, satellites, and should be considered in the light of its so-called 'fluidity', that is, its mobile, flexible and hybrid character (see Lee 1993: 254–9).

Today production, exchange and consumption are three virtually simultaneous moments: Rossi-Landi alludes to their structural similarity, which establishes a set of resemblances within social production itself, particularly at a level of 'global production'.[3] This regards the fact that a given artefact, whether verbal or non-verbal, makes explicit, 'recounts' as it were, the whole production process – language, culture, the human race even – that has generated it. Many contemporary signs-commodities – jeans, Coca-Cola, credit cards – make explicit the globalized social reproduction of which they are the result and within which they are exchanged and consumed. The particular socio-semiotic characteristic of such signs-commodities is that of containing within themselves a communicative value, of being communication *tout court*, whether they are produced, exchanged or consumed.

The proximity of signs and commodities[4] means that the latter's value is considered, above all, in terms of social relations. Today, in an age of 'total'

communication, these relations imply that the value of an object consists not so much in its function – its usefulness – or in what it is worth, in the traditional sense, as in its communicative value, measurable in terms of speed and innovation.

The concept of innovation is much less arbitrary than it might at first seem. It concerns the universal sign quality of social reproduction, as several recent research projects have demonstrated.[5] A creative process, a service, a development programme, an object can all be called innovative, especially from a communicative perspective, if innovation is socially represented as such, if it is founded on social discourses that circulate and are reproduced both within restricted groups (a company, a public administration, a government) and extended, mass communities. In this sense, the 'authenticity' of the social discourse that sustains innovation is crucial. The discourse must circulate 'as if' it were true; it must respond to hidden meanings and expectations, construct life styles and interact with other discourses.

Yet, paradoxically, we may also speak of the 'destructive semiotic character'[6] of innovation: the fact that a consumer item, or indeed a production means, has become obsolete concerns depletion as a sign, not as a 'body'.[7] Discarding the old, and substituting it with the latest novelty, happens in every phase of social reproduction, in virtue of communication techniques that exploit 'total' signs: modularity, speed, design, virtuality, customization and so on. Endless examples could be taken from contemporary life: the philosophy underpinning the idea of software, the role of design in the car, hi-fi and electrical appliance industries, the concepts of time, space and the body in the use of mobile phones, and Web consumerism are just some examples.

Contemporary fashion acts as a paradigm in sign systems; it is, by definition, concerned with innovation, as demonstrated by Simmel (1895), who was one of the first to analyse the dialectic between innovation and imitation. The fashion system contains a mediation[8] between taste and received meaning, filtered through a special relation between sign, discourse and the sensible world.[9] In particular, fashion oscillates between an orientation towards the new and the immediate communicability of this 'new' as something which is socially approved and has the validity of an aesthetic absolute.

As Lotman (1993) says, fashion is collocated in the sphere of the unpredictable; what we might also call the sphere of imperfection,[10] a concept that makes explicit the way in which fashion manages to present itself both as an unexpected interruption of received meaning and its perennial reconstruction. What I have called 'mass fashion' (Calefato, 1996) is a complex

system of images, words, objects and multilayered social discourses, all using a plurality of expressive forms: *haute couture* experiments in style, popular urban culture, everyday wear, and the clothing imagery that populates the intersection between fashion and cinema, fashion and music, fashion and design. The extent to which these discourses are perceived and reworked within the social sphere influences the relation between fashion and the sensible world, while the problem of 'sensing' and representing the world through dress, fashion and style becomes increasingly urgent.

This raises the interesting theoretical question of whether a sign system (in this case, fashion) models[11] the world as a *continuum*, an amorphous mass, 'Hamlet's cloud', or the world as a place in which the sensible is already manifest (Greimas 1970). These two theoretical approaches have traditionally been considered antithetical – for instance, in the field of the cognitive sciences – whereas they are actually parallel, one implying the other, if seen from the perspective of a social significance linked to taste and the senses. If there is a sense 'of the world' in fashion today, this can only consist in 'giving the word' to a world which is sentient but mute with regard to the unexpected, the unheard, the non-stereotypical. A world in which social reproduction is also essentially 'sign alienation';[12] that is, the stereotypical repetition of types of behaviour and images, filters so encrusted with sense and the senses that signs, especially visual signs, become imperatives.

Fashion, more especially its visual component, is communicated as the new, the unexpected, the unpredictable; but it is also, paradoxically, communicated through what Barthes calls the 'linguistic theft' of contemporary mythology. So, to what extent is the discourse of fashion, especially its visual dimension, reproduced in the form of sign alienation, or as Greimas (1995) would say, as a simulacrum of existence? To what extent do we perceive the clothed body, its form, its beauty, through the already-seen, the already-felt, through codified, obsolete roles, such as those connected with male and female stereotypes? Conversely, to what extent do the images and (not just visual) complexities of the fashion system transform, or disrupt, the existing order? To what extent do they display continual excess and turn aesthetics into a*esthesis* and social practice?

Notes

1. Wittgenstein 1922: Proposition 3: "The logical picture of the facts is the thought."
2. For instance, not wearing a tie; see Barthes *Scritti* (Ital trans 1998: 82).

3. See the chapter entitled *Omologia fra produzione linguistica e produzione materiale* in Rossi-Landi, 1985, especially the author's classification of the tenth and final level of what he calls "the production ... of utensils and statements".
4. Ross-Landi proposed this as early as the 1960s.
5. The European Commission's *Green Paper on Innovation* (1995) is a good example.
6. Paraphrasing Walter Benjamin in *Il carattere distruttivo* (Ital trans 1995).
7. On the distinction between sign and body see Rossi-Landi 1985: 137–66 *et passim* and Calefato 1997b: 12–13.
8. For socio-semiotics this mediation is typical of fashion.
9. Nearly half a century after the publication of *The Fashion System* it is now clear that for Barthes fashion was not simply writing about clothes, but as Gianfranco Marrone says "a type of discourse in which clothing practices, aesthetic representations and specialised utterances were combined in a complex form of life" (Marrone 1998).
10. Paraphrasing Greimas.
11. As language or *bricolage*.
12. Paraphrasing Rossi-Landi's "linguistic alienation".