

Fashion and Art: Dressing freedom

Norval Baitello Junior

Among the diverse ways of displaying and reaffirming one's freedom is fashion, together with other artistic systems like architecture and design, in short, the so-called applied arts. Understood in a more restricted sense as the clothing domain, fashion reaffirms man's freedom to create his own skin (not the first, which is biologically given) but the second, engendered by his own imagination and fantasy and objectified by his technical ingenuity. Through clothing man frees himself from his own biology: bedecked in feathers, he changes into a bird; by using leather he becomes a wild animal; cocooned in silk or adorned with fluttering wings, he is transformed into a caterpillar or a butterfly; dressed in plant fibres or the colouring from their flowers, he takes on a vegetal existence; he reverts to the mineral state by adorning himself with gems, metals or by manufacturing synthetic textures from resources extracted from the bosom of mother earth. Thus, he transcends the limits of his unique existence to acquire a multiplicity of existences in a single one. He multiplies his identity. He diversifies, being simultaneously one and many; he lives many lives in the course of one. He plays the game, he pushes the game of mimicry to its ultimate conclusion. Thus, dressing up not only requires clothes but a suitable gesture, the appropriate behaviour for the clothes, it even requires the transformation of the body (and of the personality) in order to wear the clothes. Fashion, in the broad sense, is no longer merely the art of apparel, of man's second skin. Since skin, according to great specialists like the American Ashley Montagu, is man's second brain, his emotional brain, fashion can be seen metaphorically as his mimetic intelligence.

The Age of Mechanical Reproduction: The Great Tribes

The development of new technical resources and the discovery of new materials has brought in its train not only the widening of horizons for fashion's potential but also, on

the other side of the coin, uniformity, the endless reproduction of identical patterns, of the same forms, of copies - each of which enjoys the status of originality. Uniqueness and exclusivity no longer exist. What was exclusive is beginning to be mass-produced in huge quantities. All this, which was diagnosed by Walter Benjamin, in his famous essay *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, as a break with the “aura” of the unique, is transformed into the driving force of fashion in the XXth century. At the same time as the creation of designer labels brings about the reproduction of the product, the “aura” of the unique migrates to the trademark or to the fashion designer, creating new myths, new gods to be worshipped. However, the most recent and interesting occurrence is the fostering of a feeling present in every individual - the need to belong to a group, to look like someone, to have one’s circle, tribe, clan, society properly defined. As part of a great tribe one does not have the individual burden and responsibility of decision-making, which is increasingly difficult in an already complex society. Consequently, the age of reproduction has its greatest weapon in fashion. Since clothes are skin and skin is intelligence, fashion is the communicative intelligence of a group, its symbol, its coat of arms, its emblem, its anthem.

To be on the inside or on the outside: to feel reassured or to escape?

“No man is an island”, said the English poet John Donne. In the same way human imagination and creativity are never a product of a single imaginative mind but of a network of minds that communicate, co-exist in a specific time and space. Also because human beings can only be human if they complement and support each other, as individuals in the emotional systems of which they form part, during the various stages of their lives: the maternal affective system, that of the age group, that of the complementary sexes, and of the adult or paternal affective system. To be part of a group, to be on the inside, is no doubt pleasant and reassuring. But it also has its price! Sometimes that price is extremely high! It can cost freedom itself, sacrificed in the name

of respect and compliance. There is only one way out: to leave, to make one's escape, to sever the oppressive bonds of compulsion. And this is the other aspect of fashion and art: the place of the misfit, the nonconformist, the awkward, all rebellious and bolshy, all courageous wreckers of established systems (since these, as a rule, tend towards sameness, and at times even to sheer inertia). It is the territory of the avant-garde, of unmentionable audacities, of transgressions, of visceral and radical creators. The price of their courage is often rejection and isolation but they do not mind; their task will be accomplished at whatever price, since their recompense will always be greater than any price they are paid through the hatred, envy or spite of others. Their reward will be the irreplaceable pleasure, joy, ecstasy and the dizzying vision of their dreams come true. Even if the way to this is the razing of the stout walls of history and the dashing to pieces of the supposed immortality of the gods. It was Walter Benjamin himself who wrote in another essay called *The Destructive Character* that, "the destructive character is young and happy, since destroying rejuvenates because it prevents the signs of age itself."

Norval Baitello Junior is a lecturer in Communication and Semiotics of the Post-Graduate Course of the PUC, in São Paulo. He is also the scientific director of the Interdisciplinary Semiotics Centre of Culture and Media (ICSC).