

Semiotics as a Costume Sign System

Lyudmila Vladimirovna Efimova

Russian State University of Tourism and Service, Glavnaya Street, 99,
rn Cherkizovo, Pushkin district, 141221, Moscow region, Russia

Abstract: The article contains the characteristics of the form elements of the female costume. Throughout the development of the society the costume form changed. The author traces that the transformation of the costume functions carried out in the society, highlighting the sign function as the main one bearing extensive information on a person. The costume is seen as a sign system, the aesthetic and social functions in the fashion history are analysed. During the historical development the costume has become the means of the social differentiation and in the times of the Renaissance—the means of the self-expression. The author argues that the modern costume incorporates a variety of cultural origins. Selecting the cloths is based on the principle of rationalism and personalism. The article reveals the semiotic status of the costume as a group of functionally interrelated and interdependent objects and its development throughout many centuries.

Key words: Sign • Costume • Social Significance • Fashion

INTRODUCTION

The female costume has been always an aesthetic element which performs an important design role upon its construction. The female costume contains a lot of form elements which impact much on creating the costume form as a whole and its design [1-4]. The form elements of the costume are not only determined by the general trends in the form development, but also have their own specific features, which are due to the specifics of the female costume. They are not only the result of the designer's activity, but are also influenced by the traditions of the classic and applied arts [5]. When speaking about the female costume of the several epochs, we mean a very definite, clearly expressed nature of one or two forms, which were dominant during this period of time (under the form we mean the dynamic, organic model of the spatial and temporal system which has a multi-level structure of relations between the elements, a man figure and the environment) [6].

The sign system and the social meanings of the costume have developed gradually, throughout its whole history. Initially, a few centuries B.C., there was no fashion itself. People used clothes to meet their basic biogenic needs, providing the individual and specific human existence, such as the protection against the adverse environmental conditions. But gradually, with a

shift from the primitive societies towards the ones of the mixed economy the forms and cut-out of clothes had been complicated and the first signs of the social differentiation through the costume appeared. While analysing the clothes of the ancient (archaic) age, the ancient Egyptians and the Sumerians, the ancient and medieval costumes, those of the Renaissance and while comparing it with each other, it is possible to confirm the hypothesis on the evolution of signs and meanings, as well as to understand the conditions and factors which determine it.

Therefore, the most important function of the costume is the sign one, as it gives the others the important information on a person: on his social status, political preferences, religion, aesthetic sense and culture. Therefore, except the listed functions the costume has the following ones: the age, social and gender, class (group), occupational, regional, religious and aesthetic ones.

The studies show that, depending on the functional characteristics and the other criteria the cloths continued to divide into gender and age for centuries, were the casual and festival ones, differed by the type, the general style and the nature of jewellery. Being the sign of the gender and age, as well as the family status, the traditional costume indirectly connected a man with the nature. It was some kind of a threshold between the body (microcosm) and the world (macrocosm) [7].

The functions of the modern clothes are ambiguous: it has the utilitarian, aesthetic purposes, symbolizes any life events, is a sign of the group membership (a person's entry to a certain group or his resistance to it), or the expression of his individuality. Cloths are like a mask in the ancient Greek theatre, to a certain extent it determines the emotional perception of a person (bright dresses make the life optimistic, increase the importance of the perceived person, white or black cloths-are the sign of the ritual, one costume results in the inquietude, the other-in the imperturbability, the peace of mind, one implies joyful associations and experiences, while the others-the sad ones, etc.). Finally, in its best examples the couture dresses come closer to the independent works of art.

However, the clothes as the designer's creation are the result of the human creativity, his choice, preferences, sense, skills, etc., therefore, are the reality, deliberately made by a man. In this sign system of clothes and fashion not just an objective world, but also the perception of the world, as well as the way of its reproduction-the moments of our creativity, our selective relation, our values, our occupational skill and sense are reproduced.

Just one look at the person's clothes, the way he wears it, tell us a lot about his personality. His psychological and social portrait is built immediately: the character, the field of activity, the political views, the income level and the marital status.

In XVII-XVIII centuries the basis for the female costume was a shirt which expressed the woman social status in Russia. Wealthy women wore two shirts-an undershirt and an overshirt at the same time and the undershirt was made out of expensive fabrics. A shirt could smoothly encircle a neck, but it could also be densely shirred at the neckband and narrowly fringed. A shirt was wore with a rather narrow belt and often ornamented [8].

For a long period of time there was a tradition in Russia according to which the married women had to hide their hair. Only the unmarried girls could be bareheaded. It was enough to strip the head-dress off the woman's head in order to dishonour and humiliate her. It was the harshest insult for women in Russia. So the phrase "come out at the short end", which meant to disgrace oneself had started up.

Girls could wear their long hair loose, which was caught up by a hairband, a ribbon or a headwrap. The most typical hairstyle for a girl was one plait, braided low on the back of her head. One often wore a wreath-the headband out of leather or birchbark, covered by the expensive gold fabrics. A wreath could have teeth-the triangular or quadrangular ones. The wreath, which had

the raised front part was called ochele. Married women covered their hair by a contoured cap-the povoinik which consisted of the donya and the okolysh (a cap-band), tightened on the back of their head. A headscarf folded up as a triangle, the so-called ubrus (the Sudarium) was usually worn over it. The Sudarium was linen and noble women had the silk one. It was thrown on a head and pinned under a chin. Two its ends which hang down to the breast, were richly embroidered. The Sudarium could be not only of the white but also of red colour. Thus, the headdress reflected the social woman status in the society.

The replacement of the Russian wear by the All-European fashionable costume occurred at the beginning of the XVIII century, after series of the special decrees made by Peter I.

One of the ways to struggle with the conservative nobility was the replacement of the ancient aristocratic costume, the knee-length and uncomfortable for work one by more convenient All-European clothes.

For women, the shift towards the new costume was even harder. They dressed in heavy pinafore dresses which hid the body shape, the closed shirts, with their heads covered tightly, according to the new fashion, suddenly had to put on low dresses, to pull their waists, to curl their hair in locks. [9]

At the beginning of the XVIII century the court women wore dresses, which consisted of a puffy skirt and a narrow bodice with a low neckline. They usually wore two dresses at the same time: the lingerie, deaf one and the coat, the unbuttoned one-gros de Tours. Clothes were often furred. Dresses, skirts, bodices were made out of heavy silk fabrics-brocade, satin, moire, crepe of different colours, often being decorated with floral ornaments.

The court dresses were trimmed so luxuriously that under Catherine II there appeared several regulations which regulated the degree of the costume luxuriousness.

The women had few coats, as in winter they spent much of their time indoors. However, capes, round, furred rotundas, redingotes, camisoles and woollen frock-coats like the men ones gradually came into a fashion.

The national peasant costume remained almost unchanged and even kept its local differences in the provinces and counties. However, in the suburban villages young women often changed their costumes according to fashion. Under the influence of the fashion silhouette of the late XVIII-early XIX centuries many peasant women began to belt their pinafore dresses under the breast. Among the peasants and partly among the merchants the ancient custom to hide the hair under a headdress or a headscarf remained.

Thus, the costume has stopped modelling only the sacred world, or its elements and begins to specialize in expressing the social and cultural meanings (in particular, it marked, emphasizes and decorates a variety of other objects-the personal semiotics of the individual and the semiotics of the costume) [5].

The first signs of the social differentiation through the costume have gradually occurred. For example, in the Egyptian costumes of the Old Kingdom the gender identity was emphasized. The woman's social role is reflected in the costumes of Western Asia. In the ancient Rome, the social status of the Senator was emphasized using the red stripe applied to the toga, the mourning was marked by the toga-pulla of the grey colour.

Later in the Middle Ages, the pagan (ancient) and archaic beliefs were reinterpreted and transformed into the new attitude and outlook. The Medieval culture has arisen from the three different sources-the Christian movement, the decaying ancient culture and its successor-the "barbarians" culture. The Medieval art performs several functions: bringing a man together with the God, the earth world together with the God's one, supporting the Christian universe, realizing various unfulfilled religious desires and experiences of a person. Although the medieval man has been integrated within the Christian community, his individual life becomes very intense and contradictory. The opposite desires struggled in it-to live in virtue, the Christian godliness and to perform the natural human aspirations. The Medieval female costume, for example, had two groups of meanings: On the one hand, it emphasized the "femininity, motherhood (the image of the mother, Madonna) and on the other hand, in accordance with the church regulations-it had to make the impression of the ascetic and ethereal body". At the same time the costume expressed the struggle of the earthly and spiritual natures, it was reflected in its principle of two colours, in the closed head, legs, arms and naked upper part of the chest, in the symmetrical arrangement of the heraldic symbols.

The further development of the sign system was in the times of the Renaissance. In the Renaissance culture the ancient culture was the ideal one, the direction towards the beauty was developed.

In the times of the Renaissance the separation of the particular forms of the human life started: the uniform, regulated existence of the medieval man has been gradually divided into the working, social, personal, everyday, art and communication lives. The practice of the individual training, the individual occupational choice, the opportunity to independently look at the world, to

build own life, to think, to feel, to desire has been gradually developed. From the Renaissance onwards and especially in the XVII-XVIII centuries a social institution of the personality and the man's personality itself was developed in the modern sense [10].

The development of the personality is based on various signs, primarily on those of the science and art. In its turn, the need for the new signs (languages) was determined by the needs and problems of the new cultural situation and communication. If in the Middle Ages the languages of the theology, science and art ensured the relationship between a man and the God, the community, in the New Age the need for the relationship between a man and a man, as well as a man and himself occurred. From the Renaissance onwards the focus on the other people, the social groups and the social system has become more important. A man of the New Age identifies himself with the other people, he eagerly learns the behaviour patterns, compares himself with the others. As the special sign systems the costume, the new art, the architecture, the science, the philosophy provided, on the one hand, the development of the institution of the personality, on the other hand, a new type of the man's behaviour and life; all these sign systems were developed in the context of the new artistic communication prevailing by that time. It ensured, firstly, the exchange of experiences, *i.e.* the "empathy" and secondly, the detection and the implementation of the own experiences of the person, this phenomenon could be called the "self-experience." The movement from the medieval communication "a man and the God" to communication "a man and a man" contributed to the fundamental transformations in the costume itself. The spiritual importance began to decrease, which had controlled the Middle Age costume. The ordinary world and a man in it became the spot. A new sign system of clothes reflects the human world: the social roles, the occupation, the education level, etc. For the first time the personal self-expression of the Renaissance man occurred. In the opinions on each other, the Renaissance man unified the direction towards the creation and the use of the scientific concepts.

As a result of inventing the new subject and reality, drawing on the scientific knowledge, the new costume aesthetic was developed.

In the middle of the XIV century at the new stage of the Western European countries social development the concept of "fashion" occurred. Due to the occurrence of more and more new cloth items of different forms and different names the social meanings have also been differentiated.

Some meanings have been adopted from the past. Napoleon, for example, "borrowed" the costume types, which were a symbol of the monarchy from the old regime, in order to support the legitimacy of his empire and thus emphasized his political status. The Queen's of England coronation dress is also a model of the continuity of its meaning as a sign of power, which allows the Windsor's House to prove its legitimacy and necessity.

As the time passed both the new social meanings appeared and the old ones were interpreted in the spirit of the new epoch. The languages of fans and patches allowed women to silently refer to the opposite gender. While using patches the British women reported about their political preference, for example, the women, which became the members of the liberal movement stuck patches to their right cheeks. Carnivals allowed interpreting the meanings of the old costume samples, thereby giving it a game function. The carnivals, as the social rituals, require that all those who take part in it, put on something different from their everyday dress. In the first case, the participants dress something elegant, never worn before. In the latter one the individual's costume is to the great extent prescribed by the ritual rules. By the end of the XIX century, a more complex system of the social meanings was established. In the industrial society the class boundaries and social identification of a person are gradually blurred. The costume reflects the economic system in which the individual lives, as well as his status in this economy. The industrial or occupational man's roles in the economy could be traced using the example of the "white" and "blue collar" work descriptions. The "white-collar" concept implies that the man's work requires wearing a suit with a shirt and a tie and the fact that this work does not involve the use of the manual labour. The "blue collar" expression, on the contrary, means the physical labour and the presence of the special clothes. The "white-collar" employees are usually perceived as those who have a higher status relating to the workers-the "blue collars". The business suit is some kind of the uniform, reflecting the economic and occupational status.

The modern view of the costume, has, firstly, been synthesized by a variety of the cultural origins-the archaic, ancient and medieval ones, etc. Secondly, it has its own long-term evolution.

The contemporary culture in comparison with the previous ones has two dominant ideas: the rationalism, based on the natural science outlook and the achievements of the modern technology, as well as the personalism, i.e. the man's self-perception as a person.

The so-called "visual background" of the contemporary culture impacts much on the modern sign system development. Such mass visual systems, as the fashion, film, television, photography, magazines and visualized clothes clearly express the basic meanings and ideas of the modern culture, carry the specified information.

The modern visualized clothes are not only the mass ones (in a big city a man demonstrates his clothes to thousands of people each day), but also perfectly express the another principle of the visual culture-the clothes reproduce and show a variety of styles and genres of art, carry various information, many functions-the utilitarian, informative, artistic, symbolic and other ones are summarized in it. Actually, when looking at the contemporary, especially summer clothes, we could see monochromatic dresses (the white, black, purple, grey ones) which at all times were in vogue and often symbolically expressed any rites or a person's social status. We will see the clothes decorated with ornaments or embroidery (such dresses were widely spread in the Ancient East and in the ancient culture), the clothes which are given colours by flowers, trees and other creatures of nature and they are made in a variety of art traditions-the realistic, impressionistic, symbolic ones. For example, dresses, jackets, scarves, which depict horses, cars and trains; medieval castles or modern urban landscapes; numerous works of the abstract art. However, the clothes introduce not only the modern contents, themes and traditions, but also the historical ones to a man: Today the improvisations on the Egyptian and ancient culture, on the medieval culture, on the Renaissance and Modern Age culture are not a rare thing. The clothes often play tricks (the blouses ornament made up of the footprints), teach (show the prehistoric monuments, the history, the technique, particular works of art, etc.) or shock (the hippie's clothes, intentional patches, holes, etc.). In general, on the modern clothes there is the whole visual culture of our and past epochs.

The author reveals that the semiotic status of the costume as a group of functionally interrelated and interdependent objects throughout many centuries has remained very high, it has had both the utilitarian and sign pragmatics, i.e. met both practical and symbolic requirements. The childhood, the adolescence, the adulthood, the movement from one age category towards the another one, the man's involvement in the kinship system-all this, as in the previous centuries and in the early XX century, although in a different form, continued to be reflected in the national clothes, contributed to the creation of a certain personal image.

As a part of the cultural human space, the clothes reflected the changes in his existence at the level of its concept or at the functional level.

The clothes, as a man himself, give the information on the age, gender and ethnicity of the individual, his place of residence, the social status, the occupation, etc. The costume could tell a lot about the epoch in which he was created. The analysis of the psychological and expression mechanisms of perception of the appearance through the appearance of the other person shows that the clothes are the extension of the individual's body. The ambiguity of the clothes is a broad research field, in which the costume ethnic and image signification are of the special interest.

The sign system and the social meanings of the costume have developed gradually, throughout its whole history. Initially, a few centuries B.C., there was no fashion itself. People used clothes to meet their basic biogenic needs, providing the individual and specific human existence, such as the protection against the adverse environmental conditions. But gradually, with a shift from the primitive societies towards the ones of the mixed economy the forms and cut-out of clothes had been complicated and the first signs of the social differentiation through the costume appeared.

REFERENCES

1. Ogden, C.K. and I.A. Richards, 1964. *The Meaning of Meaning*. New York, pp: 1-238.
2. Boym, S., 1994. *Common Places: Mythologies of Everyday live in Russia*. Cambridge: Mass, pp: 1-195.
3. Foster, G., 1972. *The Anatomy of Envy*. *Current Anthropology*, 13(2): 15-36.
4. Silverman, K., 1996. *The Threshold of the Visible Word*. London: Routledge, pp: 38-42.
5. Kaminskaya, N.M., 1976. *The History of Costume*, pp: 248.
6. Kozlova, T.V., 1980. *Costume as a Sign System*. Moscow Textile Institute, pp: 197.
7. Galkina, T.V. and T.N. Tretyakova, 1998. *Historical and Cultural Impact on the Costume Development*. South Ural State University, pp: 354.
8. Kommisarzhovsky, F., 1999. *The History of Costume*. Minsk, pp: 276.
9. *The History of Costume/(Series "21st Century Textbooks")*, 2001. Rostov-on-Don: "Phoenix", pp: 416.
10. *Fashion and Style*, 2002. Ed.-i-C. Volodin, V.A. Modern Encyclopedia Avanta+, pp: 480.