

Polyamorous Fashion: Towards a Moving Constellation of Buttons, Zippers, Coats, Accessories



Massimo Canevacci*

Department of Cultural Anthropology, Digital Art and Culture, Università Degli Studi di Roma 'La Sapienza Italy

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***Corresponding author:** Massimo Canevacci, Department of Cultural Anthropology, Digital Art and Culture, Università Degli Studi di Roma 'La Sapienza Italy

Book Review

This composition by Gaurav Monga is not exactly a dictionary about fashion that, as we know, lists words and explanations according to a logic based on historically shared values. In my opinion, the book has the shape of a constellation in the sense of Walter Benjamin's statement: "ideas are to objects as constellations are to stars." From this perspective, ideas, things, constellations, stars modify each other in time and space. Nothing is fixed, let alone objective.

The heavy feeling opening this Fashion Dictionary is that the reader sets off on a journey based on an itinerant self-representation. An amble among stories, clothes, styles, symbols, passions, memories, obsessions that compose fashion with a non-finished design. A sort of mutli-color and multi-narrative patchwork.

Gaurav's visions reminded me of the Dialogue between Fashion and Death by Giacomo Leopardi, an Italian poet that Benjamin— a Berliner— uncoincidentally cites when he takes on and elucidates one of his most celebrated concepts: the sex appeal of the inorganic. Uniting an entertainment slogan and a scientific word, fashion presents its unresolvable enigma. Erotic attraction, therefore, moves from the organic centrality of the human body— with its restless sexuality— to the infinite expansion of the inorganic eroticities made of fabrics, corsets, dresses, hats, handbags, shoes and so on. Traditional dichotomous thought is put in crisis: fashion doesn't always function more or less as the body-clothing or organic-inorganic dualism. Fashion exercises a sexed attraction that defies death as well as dualism.

In the aforementioned Dialogue between Fashion and Death, Leopardi brings Fashion into the scene which, after having

presented herself as Death's sister, explains to a very hurried and busy Death what makes her completely similar to her: they are both children of Decay. A fundamental concept. Madame Death affirms not having any memory of Fashion and responds: "I know also that we both equally profit by the incessant change and destruction of things here below, although you do so in one way, and I in another."

I shall quote a brief dialogic passage:

Fashion: Madam Death, Madam Death!

Death: Wait until your time comes, and then I will appear without being called by you.

Fashion: Madam Death!

Death: Go to the devil. I will come when you least expect me.

Fashion: As if I were not immortal!

Death: Immortal?

Here already the point of view of the poet-essayist is clarified: Fashion is as immortal as Death. It is almost possible to argue that Fashion is contemporary with the evolution towards Homo Sapiens. A human being is sapiens precisely because he produces culture and, therefore, also fashion in the act of dressing and ritually dressing up. For this reason Fashion is immortal: and Madame Death will never be able to kill her. So Fashion concludes: "I say then that our common nature and custom is to incessantly renew the world. You attack the life of man, and overthrow all people and nations from beginning to end; whereas I content myself for the most part with influencing beards, head-dresses, costumes, furniture, houses, and the like."

¹Benjamin, Walter. The Origin of German Tragic Drama. Translated by John Osborne, Verso, 2009.

The world is renewed thanks to the astonished alliance between fashion and death. And here we enter the challenge of the book in question. Gaurav immediately puts an identical concept, in a philosophical or identitarian sense, in discussion: even if two people wear the same clothes, what distinguishes them will be what the author defines as the accent, that is, the way in which everyone co-creates their own style of wearing clothes and performing the body. It is possible to develop an analogy using language: we can be two friends born together in Rome but our accents will be different, based on a layering of personal histories, ways of living, views of the world or media that differentiate us despite us saying the same thing. It is the accent that individualizes the discourse and the dress: by now everyone knows that fashion is also language.

Similar to the accent is the following: accessory. These minimal, apparently secondary objects that, as the matrix of the word itself underlines, are — or should be— of secondary importance, in as much as they accompany that which is principal than subordinate. Instead, these accessories are worn according to a project of visibility that changes even in the course of the same day and facilitates the public and private construction of itself. Monga rightly points out that even animals on a leash can become accessories, indeed more, even a newborn baby or the belly of a pregnant woman are exposed joyfully as accessories that can determine existence. The same partner can assume the role of the accessory if one has more media or social visibility than the other.

In other words, the principle that puts the aforementioned categories in question is of the same order of the sex appeal of the inorganic: the binary or dichotomous logic goes into crisis in the classic public or private dichotomy. At this point, with the expansion of digital communication, everything is simultaneously public/private. The anthropological connections between thing and being, are increasingly entangled and I stress that such profound changes fall within a process that I call meta-fetishism: that is, other than the classic concept of fetishism, of colonial matrix (*feitiço* in Portuguese). Fashion itself facilitates a move beyond the traditional concept of fetish to draw a growing subjectivity towards things, objects, goods that I call *fatticità*, or facticity. And then each button, with a circular design like an eye, is ready to absorb the polyamorous dimensions of the body, even to chew

and swallow it. That's why the fashion designer Elsa Schiaparelli saw and invented the body as "unconscious of clothing" (p.16). A concept that would be developed on other occasions by the author.

In his journey through more microbiological details, Gaurav Monga illuminates his interpretation of the button based on an extreme eroticism. According to the author, there is a lengthening immanent between the body and the button: buttons are the body, they have a secret affinity with lips, teeth, mouth, eyes and even the anus. To open a button means to penetrate those specific parts of the body: the button's task is to open up desire, to reveal it.

The journey through the book continues: every entry is also a key-word that opens unexplored rooms: like the firm affinity between home and attire. You live inside there. A room is as changing as a pair of pants or a corset. Home and clothing are genderless. It also evokes E.A. Poe's *Man of the Crowd*, where for the first time the differences in the carriage, clothing and walking (of the flaneur) that constitute the attraction of the metropolis are analyzed in detail. It is a spectacle to chase and decipher the details of the crowd, to grasp the differences in social class and visions of the world.

Moreover, the text deals with one of my meta-fetishist passions, which is what goes beyond traditional fetishism (reified, perverse etc.): dolls. It's not possible here given the space, but authors like Baudelaire or Rilke have written wonderful pages on the intrusive vitality of dolls: *ding-seele*, beings-things...Or artists like Hans Bellemer or Simon Yotsuya have invented dolls with infinite polymorphic sexual bodies. I also remember the sequence in Fellini's *Casanova* where the great seducer has a most sublime erotic rapport with a puppet.

The text ends with the zipper, once again evoking Schiaparelli, the metallic sound of whose going up and down seems like a sound-scape that opens noise-chords towards the sublime that is about to be revealed. My conclusion is a hope: that Gaurav Monga can continue his exploration on *Madame Fashion* to show the vital and mutant, erotic and falling complexity of our dressing and undressing of ourselves.

the book: Gaurav Monga *Fashion Dictionary* (forthcoming)

translation: Devanshi Khetarpal

² Leopardi, Giacomo. *Dialogue between Fashion and Death*. Translated by Charles Edwardes, Trübner & Co., 1882.



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