

CHAPTER 6

Dress and the Body. An Essential Reciprocal Relationship in Everyday Aesthetics

Ian W. King

Abstract: Clothing or Dress is not something that we simply wear to keep warm or to protect our modesty. It possesses much deeper and more significant potential. Not least, it is the means by which we provide a personal and expressive form of non-verbal communication to audiences (and sometimes ourselves) about who we are. In this way, dress often characterizes the guise of subsequent communication – both verbally and non-verbally – not only between the wearer and the audience, but also internally to the wearer themselves. Amongst other things, this raises questions regarding the status and relationship of dress with the body, and as such, in the chapter, noting recent claims regarding the status (and privileging) of objects in new materialist writings, and turning to Merleau-Ponty's underdeveloped notion of chiasm; I argue that this is in fact a relationship of essential reciprocity and certainly not one about privileging one over the other.

Keywords: Chiasm, Communication, Dress, New Materialism, Object to Body Relationship

Art concentrates and intensifies the aesthetic qualities we find in non-aspects of our lives [...] Whether by the mediation of art or not, ordinary objects can (his emphasis) be seen in a way that gives them heightened significance, making them, sometimes surprisingly, objects of awe or at least, of fascination (Leddy 2015).

1 Introduction

My opening argument in this chapter is that ‘what we wear’ provides a valuable and immediately accessible means to understanding the guise

of aesthetics in everyday life. In this brief chapter I will not spend time rehearsing again the guise of everyday aesthetics – as I have little doubt that this will have been introduced and argued elsewhere in this book, so therefore I will assume that you are familiar with these claims – but what I should not assume is that you have the same familiarity with regards the potential of clothing/fashion and its value for exemplifying the guise and potential of understanding everyday aesthetics. For me, some of the examples put forward to exemplify everyday aesthetics require the reader to focus more on the feeling of ‘everydayness’ rather than provide a means/object to illustrate (for example, laundry or sitting quietly – see Saito 2009; Melchionne 2013). Therefore, for me, there is something missing in these types of accounts that I hope to demonstrate through this chapter that clothes/fashion does not neglect.

Let me start my claims, firstly, by saying that what we wear (and I will use the abbreviation of ‘dress’ here to encompass a range of descriptors – fashion, clothing, wearables etc) provides an indication of who we are as individuals. It should be understood that dress unlike language does not attempt (or is it capable) in providing an exact code of meaning in communication, rather its attributes are most valuable as a means for generating a ‘feeling’ or more accurately in philosophy terms, ‘sentience’, both for the wearer at one level but also at another, for the audience regarding the wearer of dress. In other words, as was suggested above, ideal for consideration for admittance to discussions of the everyday with the additional currency that is also an accessible ‘object’ for the vast majority of people.

As adults what lies in our wardrobes/closets (and other similar places) reflects a series of specific choices regarding how we want to appear or represent ourselves before an audience. The nature of this audience is important – they can either be multiple or singular and either be familiar or unfamiliar. And of course, the issues of conventions place a restriction on these choices, and I will elaborate on this further below. I also will not make these same claims when talking about dependents, rather my argument is reserved for persons able to express their own choice in wearing. Of course, this may not necessarily mean everything that we wear – so to further refine my argument, I confine my claim to what we ‘regularly’ wear in everyday life. For me, the difference between regularly wearing an item of dress, against something that is worn for special occasions produces different sets of arguments and these are often conditioned by the nature of the event, and this indeed might not be included in the ‘everyday’. I think if I were to rehearse more carefully the

issues regarding ‘special occasions’ and isolated wear then this will produce other, additional arguments and there is insufficient space here to rehearse these in the detail required.

Therefore, in conducting ourselves on a regular basis in our everyday world many of us choose to wear something that sends a message – it may not be a conscious decision to communicate – but the reality is that we do. Of course, this does not mean on every occasion we are intentionally sending a message to an external audience; for dress also is a form of personal communication to the wearer themselves. Therefore, the communicative potential of dress is not always intended for external audiences. What makes things complex is that for these external audiences, similar to verbal language, is that its message is not always consistent. Let me enlarge and initially concentrate my claims on the ability of dress to communicate with external audiences.

Firstly, for external audiences our choice of dress reflects a desire to represent something about ourselves – and this can either be to a lesser or greater degree – in other words, we want to wear something that we feel comfortable and ‘fits’ with our identity and that this choice reflects a primordial desire to communicate this meaning to others. Only mitigated/punctuated by the need to start again either by facing a different event/circumstance (or even perhaps a different audience) and therefore the need to choose alternative dress to meet the anticipated needs of a different context. This type of activity is felt and intuitively applied by the majority of us as we envisage our engagement with the everyday life over the period ahead (for a more detailed explanation see King 2017).

Even the most uninterested person in their own dress will have made similar choices (for example: being neutral, or wanting to be hidden etc.) about what they wear and how it represents themselves to others.

Of course, if we live in a solitary existence with no prospect of meeting others, then our choices reflect a different scenario and expectation, one that is ‘not’ governed by our desire to communicate to an external audience; and in these circumstances we employ dress purely for ourselves – for functional or comfort reasons. We, in these circumstances, then wear things to ‘relax’ around the house or even perhaps ‘now’ as many of us are in lockdown, we fall into the pattern of only presenting to ourselves.

2 Why Dress?

It seems to me that dress is the perfect exemplar for characterizing everyday life. Firstly, it is not vague, distant or invisible, rather it is

something physical, beautiful and relevant to each of us as we all go about our lives in the real world. In fact, dress is characterized by accessibility and democracy (such is consumerism!) and possesses a dynamism that fits well into modern contemporary life. This contrasts sharply with traditional discussions of aesthetics and its fascination with fine arts - these are often located in divorced places (museums, galleries) or possessing features that make them impenetrable to whole sectors of everyday persons. Dress does not discriminate against gender, age or religion and normally it is non-confrontational. We see dress everywhere – TV, computers, city centres, magazines. It is one of the most successful industries in the world, employs millions of people and indisputably it is one of the most innovative creative arenas etc. However, on the negative side, it is also guilty of massive environmental damage and employment issues – and in these, and associated areas, it does need to get its act together and invest in a more responsible future. Therefore, in summary it is relevant and its popularity on many covers of magazines, advertisements etc suggests that it indeed possesses the ability to communicate.

Suggesting that dress can communicate is not new. I have suggested above that dress provides information to audiences (see Barnard 2002). But can it? Does it possess a specific voice, or does it possess other communicative characteristics? The answer to these questions is: ‘Yes’ – but to varying degrees. For example, if the audience for a particular wearer is familiar, then the signal of dress might be more meaningful and precise – that is, the wearing of a certain colour or style might provide a powerful indicator of mood, desire, etc. whereas for unfamiliar audiences dress provides a powerful initial signal as we ‘pass’ people in everyday life – one that produces a ‘sign’ that precedes language conversation – one that may predicate the nature of any subsequent conversation or opinion. This is useful for appreciating aesthetics because it is grounded in pre-linguistic meaning and confers on the experience a sense of wholeness.

The wearing of a uniform – for instance, a traditional doctor’s coat or a nurse’s uniform or perhaps the habit of a religious person or even a member of the police – in each of these (and other) examples dress provides a clear signal of recognition. It is then (subject to the motivation of the moment) that we decide to either verbally engage or not. If we choose not to engage it should not be interpreted as the dress has not fulfilled its potential. For its purpose is not necessarily to always invoke a conversation, rather its aim is often simply to generate

an aesthetic ‘feeling’ for the audience. If looking at the other does not lead to a conversation (or other further layers of meaning beyond the initial moment) there might be multiple reasons for this non-engagement – including time, interest, distraction etc. Dress does not guarantee an impact - it is simply an invitation: a starting point. This silent meaning might be sufficient to have lasting value for members of the audience – thus, for me, dress represents our most primordial form of communication.

Of course, the accuracy and sophistication of dress as an intentional means of precise communication is unlikely – semiotician Fred Davis (1992, p. 5) describes dress as possessing a ‘quasi-code’ (in semiotics terms). He elaborates:

that although it draws on the conventional visual and tactile symbols of culture it does so allusively, ambiguously, and inchoately so that the meanings evoked by the combinations and permutations of the code’s keys (i.e. fabric, texture, colour, pattern, volume, silhouette and occasion) are forever shifting and in process (Davis 1992, p. 5).

This choice leads me to clarify what the intentional qualities of dress is. For me, one of the most important qualities of dress is that it is an excellent means of exemplifying ‘intentionality’ - a concept that is often slippery (see for example: Brentano 1874; Husserl 1900). In terms of discussions of aesthetics and its relationship to disinterestedness the concept of intentionality is not normally examined.

Yet, this is an oversight. For through phenomenology and discussions of everyday aesthetics, we can note, argues French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1962, p. 105) that: “through the body that we can appreciate our intentional opening to the understanding of the world.” For Merleau-Ponty, our bodies are not merely a thing – they are lived – they are “phenomenal.” He enlarges further: “It is never our objective body that we move, but our phenomenal body, and there is no mystery in that, since our body, as the potentiality of this or that part of the world, surges towards objects to be grasped and perceives them” (Merleau-Ponty 1962, p. 106). This quote reveals the potential of the body to be more than simply an object from which to view broadly speaking, rather it reveals through intentionality that it is interested in the relationship between our own mental states and external objects/events (outside the body). Thus, dress is an effective means of mediation from mental state to the concreteness of everyday life. It is normally difficult to find concrete examples to

illustrate this argument – but, for example, in verbal language, the speaker can deny or change their thinking and reasoning; whereas the evidence of what is worn on the body is undeniable. It is there for all to see – thus, it is this concrete evidence that provides direct causal links and therefore produces interpretation and meaning.

The body is the essential ingredient for understanding the nature of what is ‘dress’ – for without the body and in particular its movement, ‘dress’ remains either a piece of fabric or an empty item. It is the body and its movement in wearing dress that gives this fabric its ‘being’ – of course, it might be equally claimed that it is the fabric itself that generates something equally important towards the body. This is the start of the claims by recent discussions labelled ‘new materialism’. Let me enlarge further in the next section.

3 The Status of Dress

Partly my motivation for writing this chapter is to offer a response to New Materialist claims regarding dress in relation to the body. Yet, in opening this aspect of our examination it is also an opportunity to rehearse a relationship between dress and body that exceeds simply clothing being worn on the body. Let me attempt to elaborate.

Firstly, for those unaware of new materialism (and I might need to also include Object-Oriented Ontology - OOO), they claim that there is an anthropocentric imbalance that favours the human and therefore overlooks their reliance (and therefore status) of material/things. Since its arrival in the 1990s, there has been various elaborations and attempts to de-couple these relationships – often because they are argued to be negative ones, the inference being that people are seemingly exploiting objects/things and not giving them suitable respect or recognition that they deserve. This may be the case for some relations, but for me, I would argue that inherently dress and its relationship to the body is one of essential reciprocity, that is, a relational balance between ‘body to dress’ and likewise ‘dress to body’. It may be for some readers the distinction I offer is an identical relationship. But if we return to the writings of Merleau-Ponty he offers a different perspective. His notion of *chiasm* (Merleau-Ponty 1968) provides a means to understand this relationship through a different lens and one that therefore generates an appreciation of the contribution of each.

Merleau-Ponty (1968) presents the example of our two hands interlocked with each other – where one is holding the other in a firm

grasp; thus, in such a way, where one hand is touching and the other one is being held. For Merleau-Ponty such an action reveals that there is no sharp division between ‘sensing’ (the feel of the hand holding) and ‘sensed’ (the felt of the hand being held), rather, for him using his terminology, there occurs a form of chiasmic overlapping relationship. Merleau-Ponty’s example relies on the hand and therefore our fingers and its facility for touch – whereas for the arguments here, and I think Merleau-Ponty would agree, we should not confine our thoughts regarding sensing and sensed exclusively to our hands. Rather we can feel with our skin as well as our fingers/hands – both on the outside but also internally.

Our skin is our largest sensory organ. The very top layer is the epidermis and contains very sensitive cells called ‘touch receptors’ that generate for the brain a rich variety of information about the environment the body is in. As we clothe it with dress our skin feels its impact. Of course, my hands (and fingers) are vital in placing it on my body but once it is worn then I feel its surface pressed on my body. Yet, once the dress is on my body, they are no longer felt as separate items, but rather they merge together and overlap creating an essential relationship where both feel natural to each other.

Furthermore, extending Merleau-Ponty’s example a little further, as I look in the mirror to my reflected appearance and within its frame I can see my reflected self of my body enclosed in this dress – I see not only the appearance of dress, but I can concurrently feel its warmth, weight, (and texture, if I were to brush my fingers over its surface). Therefore, with this elaboration, we are witnessing both visually, and sensually feeling, a complex interaction that both exemplifies sensing and sensed and further amplifies this through a form of visual confirmation. We now can, if we reflect and break down this relationship, it is one that exceeds a relationship between body and dress, for we also have to include that our fingers, hands, skin, and the visual together with our mental assessment of fit and how we feel this experience conforms to our projected intention to portray and communicate a particular message to our anticipated external audiences. Furthermore, the visual through the auspices of the reflected image of our appearance in the mirror, this either provides an endorsement or perhaps even a refutation of my intention and message through wearing the dress on the body. That is, as I look at the image in the mirror and although it feels good on my skin, my assessment of it may not be consistent with the image I want to communicate to external audiences. In these circumstances, I may

remove it and look for a substitute. This balancing between internal and external assessments of our dress with/on our bodies in everyday life might well become a compromise in order to fulfil its practical needs (for example: getting to work on time or meeting someone for an appointment) – but for some of us, such a compromise is not acceptable and therefore we continue to experiment with changing dress in order to fulfil the harmony between felt and visual as described above. This is indeed a complex but rich means of knowing about the sophistication of our bodies and its relationship with dress. Dress here then is not simply an item to clothe our bodies for warmth or protection rather it reveals an essential reciprocal relationship that goes to the very core of our everyday lives.

4 Discussion

Therefore, returning to the essence of new materialist claims, for me, in denying the presence of the body through privileging the dress fails to appreciate the essential relationship of the body and likewise the body without dress literally reveals a state of undress. Of course, if anything, the problem for dress (unlike the body) is this issue of substitutes. That is, a body can choose alternative dress to clothe them and therefore this perhaps leads to dispute the status of specific dress. However, what this latter observation also provokes is the realization that any dress hanging in a wardrobe/closet without regular use reflects our current societal problem of over-consumerism and furthermore, perhaps demonstrates the need for recycling of it to a different audience one that would more regularly employ it? Therefore, it might be claimed that dress does not have an essential relationship with a particular body – as it can be transferred to a new wearer, but the question arises – if there is no body that wears it – is it still dress or is it simply cloth hanging in a wardrobe/closet?

This leads me to voice a question: is this an admission of the limits of the value of dress or alternatively is this then what Žižek (2014) warned us about – that is, supporters of new materialism are looking to claim a status for objects/things that is similar to the status of people? If this is so, then Žižek might be asking is the inference then that objects/things aspire to be subjective? However, I am not convinced that this is the substance of the new materialist claims rather it is simply a form of recognition for the role and contribution of the object.

What I am suggesting in terms of the relationship between body and dress is that privileging the body or de-coupling body from the dress or

simply privileging the dress independent of the body may at one level seem appropriate, but at other levels, it may reveal limits and inequalities if the desire were indeed to seek a status similar to people. Above we spoke about reciprocity and substitutes and this may reveal a power inequality, but this overlooks a more critical and substantive argument and this I hope to develop a little further here.

Returning Merleau-Ponty's claim regarding Chiasm – a concept unfortunately, not fully developed due to his untimely early death at the age of 53 years in the early 1960s – we are left to speculate how he might have amplified its potential and this concept has been subsequently widely examined – but never with dress. As Emmanuel de Saint Aubert (2005, p. 165) notes, Merleau-Ponty's interest in this term may have been inspired precisely by its dual sense, which suggests it as a figure for thinking through the relationship between the body and the mind, the factual and the ideal. Toadvine (2011) suggests as well the unity-in-difference of the chiasma ("like the chiasm [chiasma] of the eyes, this one is also what makes us belong to the same world" (Merleau-Ponty 1968, p. 215). Of course, dress and the body are not of the same world – one is indeed an object and the other a live, feeling 'homo sapiens' – and yet at the same time there is an essential relationship of body with dress (and vice-versa) – it may not be a relationship to specific items of dress, but it certainly is an essential reciprocal relationship with dress overall.

As a general structure of mediation, chiasms may be found operative in any number of relationships and at different levels of complexity, according to Merleau-Ponty, including the relationships between mind and body, self and world, self and other, fact and idea, silence and speech, imaginary and real, past and present, Being and beings, philosophy and non- philosophy. In a sense, then, there is not one chiasm but many. As Renaud Barbaras (2004, p. 307) notes, "It is necessary [...] to picture the universe as intuited by Merleau-Ponty as a proliferation of chiasms that integrate themselves according to different levels of generality." Certainly, what chiasm reveals is that when dress is placed on the body and we reflect on its presence we might as we reflect a desire to separate them but in reality, they also achieve a form of 'encroachment', in the sense that they cross into each other and blur their boundaries – and yet concurrently without their distinctive properties being erased. There is still the cloth of dress that is different from the skin on our bodies. In other words, we experience this crossing in a corporeal way, that is, as a structure of our sensible exchange with our own bodies, what Merleau-Ponty (1968, p. 146) introduced as a form of Dehiscence.

The body's (flesh) is the coiling over of the visible upon the seeing body, of the tangible upon the touching body, which is attested in particular when the body sees itself, touches itself seeing and touching the things, such that, simultaneously, as (his emphasis) tangible it descends among them, as (again his emphasis) touching it dominates them all and draws this relationship and even this double relationship from itself, by dehiscence or fission of its own mass.

For Merleau-Ponty then this dehiscence coincides with Chiasm especially when there is a touch which is touched and perceive which is then perceived. Perhaps this chiasmic relationship might resonate with new materialist writings? I am reminded of the opening paragraph written by Karen Barad (2007, p. IX), a well-known proponent of New materialism who writes in the opening words of the preface to her book the following words:

To be entangled is not simply to be intertwined with another, as in the joining of separate entities, but to lack an independent, self-contained existence. Existence is not an individual affair. Individuals do not pre-exist their interactions; rather, individuals emerge through and as part of their entangled intra-relating.

The inference for me in appreciating the contribution of object/thing is an appreciation of their status at a similar level. I am not sure this occurs in terms of the body/dress relationship that I describe here. There is certainly mutual appreciation, but it seems to me, the notion of substitutes reduces the currency of the claim. Barad (2007) employed quantum physics as the means for her explanation. Whilst I acknowledge and support much of what she says – where a relation is mutually dependent then recognition of the status of the parties needs to be appreciated – but in life, relations do not always remain stable and whilst with some relations it reveals the independence of the parties, in others it reveals inequalities. Of course, some readers might be appalled that the wearer possesses this choice but this is the reality of the relationship and situation.

5 Conclusion

In this brief paper it has been suggested that dress provides a rich and accessible means of appreciating the guise of everyday aesthetics. My claim is that in terms of everyday aesthetics, dress is an effective communicator that fulfils the important role as an accessible and

democratic means of exemplification. The second half of the paper looks to respond to new materialist claims regarding the status of dress and here I employed the writings of Maurice Merleau-Ponty and his unfinished claims regarding 'chiasm'. Here I suggest rather than privileging either the body or the dress as deserving primary status, that in fact, their relationship is one of an essential reciprocity that appreciates their respective contributions.

Bibliography

- BARAD, Karen, 2007. *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*. Durham/London: Duke University Press, ISBN 10: 9780822339175.
- BARBARAS, Renaud, 2004. *The Being of the Phenomenon: Merleau-Ponty's Ontology*. Translated by Ted TOAD VINE and Leonard LAWLOR. Bloomington: Indiana University Press. ISBN 10: 0253216451.
- BARNARD, Malcom, 2002. *Fashion as Communication*. Second edition. London-New York: Routledge. ISBN 10: 0415260183.
- BRENTANO, Franz, 1973 [1874]. *Psychology from an Empirical Standpoint*. London: Routledge. ISBN 9781138019171.
- DAVIS, Fred, 1992. *Fashion, Culture and identity*. Chicago. University of Chicago Press. ISBN 10: 0226138089
- DE SAINT AUBERT, Emmanuel, 2005. *Le Scénario Cartésien: Recherches Sur La Formation Et La Coherence de l'Intention Philosophique de Merleau-Ponty*, *Bibliothèque D'Histoire de la Philosophie*. Paris: Vrin.
- HUSSERL, Edmund, 1970 [1990]. *Logical Investigations*. Translated by John N. FINDLAY. London: Routledge. ISBN 978-0415241892 (Vol. 1) 978-0415241908 (Vol. 2).
- KING, Ian W., 2017. *Aesthetics of Dress*. New York: Springer. ISBN 10: 3319543210.
- LEDDY, Thomas, 2015. Experience of Awe: An Expansive Approach to Everyday Aesthetics. In: *Contemporary Aesthetics* [online]. Vol. 13 [Accessed. 30.6.2021]. Available at: <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/spo.7523862.0013.008>.
- MELCHIONNE, Kevin, 2013. The Definition of Everyday Aesthetics. In: *Contemporary Aesthetics* [online]. Vol. 11 [Accessed 30.6.2021]. Available at: <https://www.contempaesthetics.org/newvolume/pages/article.php?articleID=663>
- MERLEAU-PONTY, Maurice, 1962. *Phenomenology of Perception*. Translated by Colin SMITH. New York: The Humanities Press. ISBN 9780415834339.
- MERLEAU-PONTY, Maurice, 1968. *The Visible and the Invisible*. Translated by Alphonso LINGIS, Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press. ISBN 10: 0810104571.
- SAITO, Yuriko, 2007. *Everyday Aesthetics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. ISBN 10: 0199575673.

- TOADVINE, Ted, 2011. The Chiasm. In: Sebastian LUFT and Sören OVERGAARD, eds. *Routledge Companion to Phenomenology*. London: Routledge, pp. 336-47. ISBN 9780415780100.
- ZIZEK, Slavoj, 2014. *Event: Philosophy in Transit*. London: Penguin Random House. ISBN 978310002224.