

Semiotics of Fashion: Desire and Resistance, All Things Considered

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Abstract: This reflection aims to explore the foundations, limitations, and necessity of fashion semiotics, beyond the inertia that still binds it to a mere reinterpretation of Barthesian legacy. On the contrary, fashion semiotics reveals its compelling and contemporary relevance when it is considered in light of the explanatory power granted to a language too often relegated—for commercial reasons or societal conventions—to a marginal or reductionist role, rather than being acknowledged as an active part of present-day expression in all its forms. These include, notably, gender relations, political implications, the dynamics of possible and impossible relations in the context of digital interfaces, the dialectic between conjunctive tensions and the condemnation to disjunction. Desire and resistance will be the two key terms guiding us through this unaligned reinterpretation.

Keywords: Plastic semiotics, Desire, Resistance, Barthesian legacy, Rhythm

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1. Foundations of Fashion Semiotics

It may seem paradoxical or perhaps unnecessary, yet it appears essential to return to the foundations of fashion semiotics at the outset of this reflection—precisely because this is where, incomprehensibly, it has stalled. It has remained on those basic notions introduced by Roland Barthes as early as 1967 in his *Système de la Mode*, and foreshadowed by Algirdas J. Greimas's youthful work *La mode en 1830* (1948). What leads two linguists to elect fashion as virgin territory for the theories of signification they would later develop with a far broader analytical scope than the seemingly limited field of fashion itself? In both cases—albeit through entirely different approaches—the stakes seem to lie in legitimizing fashion as a self-sufficient category of discourse, one not subject to historical, literary, sociological, or even philosophical absorption that neglects the fundamentally textual nature of clothing itself. Whether fashion is, as Greimas writes, the first contribution to a “science of the transformation of meaning” (2000, p. 8), or simultaneously a “system and history” (Barthes, 2006, p. 14), both foundational acts underscore a shared intention: to pursue an understanding of clothing expressions as intrinsically capable of producing meaning.

Thus, fashion should not be subordinate to a psychology/psychoanalysis that sees it as a symptom of latent pathologies (Flügel, 1930), nor to a sociology that regards it as testimony to social transformations (Simmel, 1905), nor to the many histories and literatures that frame it as an open and closed figure bound to the analyzed conjunctures (Morini, 2011). Even less should it be reduced to a philosophy that treats it as a mute elaboration of metaphysical inquiry (Gadamer, 1960).

2. Beyond the Constraints of the Figurative

The first crucial step was in fact taken by Barthes when he distanced himself from the socio-historical discourse, where the distinction between 'dress' and 'dressing' brings into play the fundamental variable of enunciation and the distinction between the matrix and its subjective appropriation. For Barthes, the object of semiotics is not the practices themselves but the underlying structure that precedes and articulates its own syntax, managing the silent transformations of a culture through its plasticity. The debate between written fashion and worn fashion, to which Barthes's theories have often been reduced, is less important than the distinction—essential for semiotic analysis—of the immanent dimension of the structure itself.

The garment may seem to be frozen in the description of a figure, but what interests us is the provisional nature of its normative equilibrium, which is constantly evolving. The reason fashion can produce its own rhythm—an implicit and abstract cadence of its dynamics—must be recognized in the interplay between the figurative surface of manifestation—with its prohibitions and quotations, its adaptations and revolutions—and the underlying skeleton of figurality that qualifies its specific conceptual attribution. The relation between system and history, between *langue* and *parole*, can then be stripped of thematic or axiological investment and understood as a disembodied dialectic between the figure of the world and its abstract, plastic, and conceptual support—one that is not preexisting but always recognizable in the discourse that embodies and reveals it.

Conceived properly, and in its most precise sense, as a 'simulacrum of discourse production' (Greimas, 1979, p.143), the generative path of signification allows us to trace the procedures of figurativization that creatively and argumentatively enable the 'emergence' of the effect of meaning. The discourse, as Greimas writes, becomes figurativized when the syntactic Object receives a semantic investment that allows the addressee to recognize it. The figurative dimension to which fashion semiotics is often reduced, makes sense only when it includes a thematization of plastic figures that narrate the alternation of value systems. Figurative representation is not self-sufficient, despite traditional historical, sociological, or even semiotic readings.

We propose, instead—building upon but moving beyond Barthes—a metasemiotic figurativity of fashion and clothing that is 'capable of structuring conceptual schemas' (Greimas-Courtès, II, p.91), and of supporting a cognitive and affective dimension anchored to its plastic skeleton. This integrates a more radical (and hopefully more useful) idea of figurativization—one that goes beyond fashion's image album or its Instagram-mediated imaginaries.

3. The Plastic Matrix

The plastic matrix refers to the idea that non-figurative elements are simply the desaturated pole of figurativity itself. This explains why, once the contours of a figure are eliminated, much of the interpretive process appears emptied or impaired. Without figures, it becomes difficult to think/to do history, sociology, or psychology, yet figures tend to invite analogical recognition—an inventory of deposited conventions that rarely promote renewal in theoretical thought.

Everything changes if we think of figurativization as a progressive and non-necessary saturation, where two different modes of figuration form a pair characterized by 'a correlation that registers the figural as a constant and the figurative as a variable' (Greimas-Courtès, 1986, p.92). It is under this perspective that fashion semiotics may be reconsidered in a new light.

We draw here from Jean-Marie Floch's framework of plastic semiotics (1986, p.25), which qualifies an image discourse that escapes mere linguistic reading and instead focuses on the significative dimension of elements that elude denotative recognition and cannot be reduced to connotative readings dependent on it:

La sémiotique plastique est donc la recherche de logiques du sensible présentes dans les photographies comme dans les tableaux, les affiches ou même les vêtements; une recherche qui procède du refus de voir ces œuvres réduites, quant à leur signification, à ce qu'il y a de reconnaissable et nommable en elles. (ibid.)

This 'refusal' leads to a renewed focus on the construction of the expression plane and its underlying architecture. Here, contrasting elements come into play, enabling the singularity of figurative elements to be interpreted through differential oppositions—topological, eidetic, chromatic—sometimes in co-presence. Floch names this partial conformity between expression and content planes 'semi-symbolic': a cultural and structural instability that encompasses continuity and variability based on socio-temporal fluctuations.

This is a second-order language distinct from denotation/connotation models (and thus diverging from naïve applications of Barthesian foundations), one closer to poetic language and capable of reframing the poetics that characterizes a designer's stylistic imprint. Consider cases in contemporary fashion such as Valentino's shift from Pier Paolo Piccioli to Alessandro Michele, or Piccioli's new role at Balenciaga following Demna Gvasalia's departure after more than a decade. What allows a new creative director to recover the brand's core identity—its essential constant on which to reinvest their stylistic signature—if not the ability to interpret the immanent matrix?

From that recognition—of that identity skeleton—the journey toward iconicity begins, which is the great trap of all fashion semiotics. The misconception of iconicity lies in confusing figure with matrix, the form of expression with the structural categories that decompose it into segments and refer to non-conforming categories open to new figurative investments. This is akin to how trends evolve when one moves from their banal phenomenological label to the conceptual root that enables them to intersect new sociological, political, and semiotic domains.

Floch again writes (*ibid.*, p.28):

L'iconicité d'une image présuppose un crédit d'analogie accordé à un tel système visuel, voire à tous les langages visuels par opposition aux langues. Or un tel crédit constitue pour le sémioticien un phénomène intraculturel; c'est à l'intérieur d'une culture, dans le cadre d'une économie des attitudes vis-à-vis des différents systèmes d'expression et de signification, que peut se comprendre l'iconicité.

Thus, iconicity may be reframed as a manipulative form of enunciation, which establishes a sort of complicity regarding 'reality' and its historical-sociological (even literary) implications. These are entirely legitimate, provided they do not obscure the specificity of the semiotic endeavor itself: the understanding of meaning-making procedures, rather than meaning per se (at least within the principles of generative semiotics to which we refer).

4. Rhythm vs History

Barthes clearly states (1993; It. ed. 2006, p.76) that fashion is not tied to any specific form of clothing but is, rather, and 'only,' a matter of rhythm—of spatio-temporal cadence. This alone should prompt a rethinking of the post-Barthesian theorization of fashion. One need only reconsider the well-known statistical analysis by ethnologists Kroeber and Richardson (1940), which Barthes employed to highlight the deep regularity of alternation in fashion phenomena, identifying a time span of about fifty years necessary for the appearance of phenomena of opposite sign.

One might be tempted to trace a simplistic correlation between historical superstructures and internal movements of the fashion system: boots during highly publicized wartime, shapeless sacks in the #MeToo era, shoulder pads for 1980s emancipation, miniskirts for 1960s youth protests. These correlations can be easily contradicted by counterexamples. Instead, it is more productive to explore the dialectical and interrelated relationship between cultural developments (understood as a sum of social, economic, and political evolutions) and the shifts

articulated by fashion trends, which manage their own internal dynamic of saturating and desaturating the figures that compose their manifestations, essentially alternating continuity and discontinuity.

Moreover, within this foundational plastic polarity, there emerges an aspectual quality whereby rhythm invokes time, managing the tension between continuous and discontinuous traits. This creates a structural tension within clothing itself, in relation to the syntax and paradigm it belongs to, and the conjunctural background in which it is situated. The triad of events-situations-structures proposed by Barthes for fashion rhythms is unsatisfactory here, as it is too easily misinterpreted as a historically rooted alternation. Especially the structures or basic patterns (e.g., kimono, full skirt, tight jacket) are preassigned configurations that diminish sensitivity to subtler plastic traits. Internal contrasts, shifts in balance, revolutions that ignore or emphasize the relationship with the body—which becomes merely a physical pretext—are overlooked.

Rhythmic shifts within the fashion system—figural rather than merely figurative tensions, dynamic abstractions of full and empty boundaries—are self-sufficient, driven by the necessity of a tensional alternation that precedes figural actualization. It is an exercise in mute signification, often operating in counterpoint to the referential context (including the body and social status of its wearer). As political semiotics well knows, what one wears can communicate much more—and something entirely different—than what is verbally expressed, yet still enacts a meaningful, consensual, or polemical act.

History does not determine the alternation of fashions, neither figuratively nor plastically. And never mind that fashion history has assigned convenient labels to specific clothing items tied to historical periods or figures. Rather, we should gradually construct within fashion its own sense of rhythm, understood as a device. This brings us back to the basic hypothesis of this reflection and to what we have developed more broadly (Ceriani, 2020): rhythm—conceived as a constraint—serves to represent 'the invariant underlying the process of transcodification between two texts of different semiotic nature (that is, having different materials of expression)' (op. cit., p.101). Rhythm thus generates information that runs parallel to textual content, yet remains autonomous.

From this perspective, the meaning of fashion—and of a fashion semiotics that is true to its name—must be sought in the organization of its significative arrangement, within the structures governing its manifestation. These structures remain implicit and constitute the figural infrastructure upon which the challenge of creative renewal (versus tired reproduction) in fashion is played. Naturally, this involves not only the 'garment' per se but the entire enunciative practice of dressing: accessories and posture, hairstyle and layering, and above all, closures vs openings, concentrations vs releases, subtractions and accumulations that go far beyond any single figurative label.

5. The Dynamics of Desire...

The plastic reorientation of semiotic analysis in fashion forcefully reinvests the dynamics of desire (and consequently, of resistance) as a pre-figurative foundation of the relationships generated by clothing structures. A mute discourse that is no less effective for its silence—indeed, it thrives in the immediacy of conjunctive and disjunctive tensions.

Let us begin with desire. It engages a deep category that opposes a will to a contrary will, and only becomes culturally and figuratively colored at a higher level through thematizations of seduction, narcissism, ostentation, submission, and all that can be framed as conjunctive tension. 'Desire implies otherness and change,' writes Ugo Volli (2002, p.10): it represents a pathemic management of what oscillates between the need for the other and the transformation that coincides with the pleasurable experience of its fulfillment.

The fashion text is the strategic object produced by desire as the enunciation of a will grounded in mobile correlations. It shifts plastic traits such as multiplicity (e.g., layering) and unity (e.g., total look), verticality (e.g., low necklines) and horizontality (e.g., hip width), condensation (e.g., tight waists) and expansion (e.g., crinolines) as primary inscriptions of the body and its dialogical expressions. Desire is plastic by definition: it does not coincide with a physical object (e.g., the garment) but modulates its function through variable pathemizations—from overt intensity to inert neutrality, from thematic roles to emotional functions (indifference, aggression, envy, rebellion, etc.). Desire, which underlies clothing's matrix, is a remarkable alternative example of drawing as an implicit narrative of the world.

There is a history that escapes historians and sociologists alike: an evolutionary history that marks contractions and condensations, releases and voids, clusters and pauses, and shapes the course of fashion much like that of interior design and, later, product design. It is a history of forms alternating the plastic traits that sustain them—a pure grammar that evades the coverings that domesticate it into so-called 'styles.'

We are not speaking, of course, of desire reduced to erotic or romantic tension. Rather, the desire embedded, for example, in a long off-shoulder dress articulates the tensional balance between the covered ankles and the bare shoulder—opposing ends that provoke a vertical navigation of the body in search of a restored harmony. The plastic traits defining clothing frame the desirability of being or not being fashionable (→ being attuned to the *zeitgeist*) through their diverse articulations—now more overlapped than those described by Kroeber (1940) and Barthes (1967).

They express desirability not just as an association with the spirit of the times but also as a sexual articulation of language, blending bodies and discourses in rhythms motivated not by gender but by adherence or resistance to prevailing conventions through their plastic structure.

Once more, Barthes is surpassed and simultaneously reaffirmed, provided his ideas are updated and analytically applied. This applies, for instance, to accessories—take the choker, for example, which draws a sharp line between the neck and the head, between the head and the body, severing the vertical desire path and forcing a discontinuity that delays overall tension. Its focus is sustained by imbalance, returning the narrative to a self-reflexive dimension that sustains communicative interest. Pearls, velvet ribbons, gemstones, and chains may follow, but the essential pattern in the choker lies in its disproportion between top and bottom, its clean cut, its delimitation.

The same logic could be applied to any clothing figure, regardless of its fashion status. Indeed, desire moves along the ambiguous line between body and clothing, investing according to the ideology favored by fashion or by the subject who chooses to conform—or deliberately resist—the fashion contract.

Plastic traits animate the value object, making its mobility a play of desire dynamics, withdrawing and then re-presenting the value object. Think of pleats that close and open, lace

that reveals and conceals, brocades that invite touch and then release it. Or think more complexly of identity silhouettes: for instance, the continuous trait of Chanel's figure versus the disjointed complexity of Schiaparelli's frontal aesthetic.

6. ...and the Drawback of Resistance

Two final and symmetrical notes on the question of resistance. Conceptually, resistance is defined as an action opposing a force of opposite direction. In simpler terms, within narrative structure, it is the action of a subject who strives to counter an anti-subject with a conflicting program of action.

This logical structure is easily identifiable in multiple manifestations of 'dress resistance,' particularly when the narrative framework we have outlined manifests across various figurative isotopies. Examples include:

- Subversion of contextual and situational norms, withdrawal from expectations
- Expression of individuality and group belonging in opposition to a collective external front
- Articulation of dissent against a political regime, historical situation, or conjuncture
- Awareness of sustainable practices and resulting alternative selections.

In each of these instances, it is easy to recognize the investment in a resistance trajectory marked by inversions, transgressions, grammatical ruptures, and alternative paths to those dictated by the codes of each respective context. We must also remember that resistance is a key component in the cyclical alternation of fashion trends, indicating the saturation of one phenomenon and the emergence of its opposite.

The type of resistance we aim to briefly examine here is instead anchored once again in the plastic figurality through which the discourse of clothing—and later fashion—finds its representational form. This resistance transcends occasion, thematization, and ideology, and instead appears as a matrix opposing the conjunctive tension of desire: a disjunction marking a threshold, a limit. A refusal.

Resistance, then, is the withdrawal from a transformation otherwise forecasted by the logic of desire, and it manifests as pause, suspension, or deferral within the realm of clothing variables: laces that counter zippers, drawstrings versus flares, high necklines versus plunging ones, slips versus transparencies, studs and velvet...

Resistance can certainly act within the syntax of gender, introducing impertinences and self-reflexivity frequently seen at the highest levels of creative expression—such as the knotted sleeves behind the back of a denim evening gown shown at the Cannes Film Festival 2025 by Balenciaga. But its use becomes even more compelling when considered in relation to the variants listed by Barthes (*ibid.*).

Whether dealing with identity variants (species and artifices), configuration (combinations and movements), material (textural contrasts), measure (disproportions and volumes), continuity (openings and closures, fixations and mobility), position (horizontal vs vertical, front and back), distribution (multiplication and subtraction), or connection (associations, emergences, regulations), the aesthetic function of dress is enacted through the plastic play of

resistances that interrupt the conjunctive tension of the gaze—desiring in nature and thus diametrically opposed to resistance itself.

7. Conclusion

The core idea we aim to introduce and have sought to support throughout this paper is that, while it is inevitable to acknowledge that the foundational semiotic analysis of clothing and fashion introduced by Barthes has been surpassed, it is equally important to underline that this is true only in terms of his attachment to the written dimension of textuality as systematized by the author. On the contrary, the complex analytical architecture outlined in *Système de la Mode* remains alive and necessary, provided it is transferred from writing to the objectual configuration of clothing itself.

Fashion must be recognized as a discourse and discursive composition that lends itself remarkably well to the identification—across genres and variations—of plastic, topological, eidetic, and chromatic contrasts, which allow us to trace its fundamental architecture. This recognition grants fashion its intrinsic value, essential for freeing it from socio-historical ideologies precisely because it is grounded in the essential nature of a matrix.

This same matrix is what designers and stylists—but also the everyday individuals seeking self-expression through dress—recognize before history and before theme, as a figural matrix and bare narrativity: a horizontal dialogue upon which the most immediate identity promises are built.

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