

Training the Eye, Fashion Design and Fashion History as an Argument for Women's Emancipation

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Abstract: This article consists in the discussion of the “training the eye” process of design students, taking the relationship between history and sociology as a crop for the examination of the female emancipation analysis based on the dressing relation. For that reason, the investigation works inside the fashion field and through the significance analysis of the works of four modern designers: Charles Frederick Worth, Paul Poiret, Christian Dior and Yves Saint Laurent.

Key words: training the eye, female appearance, visual discourse

1. Introduction

This article aims at introducing a discussion in the field of study that seeks to identify the “eye training” (M. T. Lopes, 2014) of *haute couture*¹ modern fashion designers — Worth, Poiret, Dior and Saint Laurent (YSL) — as a historical and social process of shifting the identity/image of the female figure through historical times, when woman remained as triggers of style². This argumentation was possible by virtue of the concept ‘training the eye’ (Lopes, 2014) and due to the fact that this concept is of great importance when studying fashion content, since still nowadays the aforementioned female aesthetic prevails.

Subsequently, in order to substantially legitimize our study, the arguments of this article came from an exploration of the significance of the theoretical universe of the course “History and Aesthetics of Stylists”³ — (HEE in Portuguese), offered to undergraduate major students of Design at the Federal University of Pernambuco — Agreste Academic Center⁴ (UFPE — CAA). This teaching and learning apparatus is a process that enables the comprehension and analysis of visual discourses proposed by whom we will call here “the four moderns”: Worth, Poiret, Dior and Saint Laurent. What will be done here is the observation of how these four fashion designers outlined the feminine silhouette and how they ended up being a reflection of changes in female behaviour.

The aim, then, is to comprehend by critical observation. Taking as our starting point the fashion design field, and observing how its signification points out the visual elements and formal settings of the feminine look from 1870 up to 1970, such as: the type of silhouette, the skirt length, the waist marking, the range of motion and the

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¹ As a fashion phenomenon that accumulates in history and global fashion memory.

² These designers are in this provocation of style condition based on the argument of the trickle down as a process of fashion acceptance and as a social behaviour characteristic of modernity.

³ História e Estética dos Estilistas – HEE.

⁴ Universidade Federal de Pernambuco (UFPE) — Centro Acadêmico do Agreste (CAA).

use or not of prostheses that redraw the body, such as creoline, hip shapers, petticoats or skirt frames. These visual settings can act as indicators of the discursive movements that compose the background of emancipatory feelings of the female image.

As it can be inferred, the *Mademoiselle Chanel* will be set outside of our study, evidently for being a woman and for seeking with their style propositions, or as I prefer to approach, with her “eye training”, a significant path in which she sustains a very firm position in the process of emancipation of the female appearance. Also, she proposes a peculiar image of ‘feminine’ when she gets inspired by the available shape and dissemination of male apparel props, thus, investing in this signification of appearance (Maffesoli Michel, 1996)⁵ of the woman of the 20’s, 30’s decades until nowadays.

Not only Chanel, but also many other women were left out since we intend here to highlight the way modern man, or more precisely, the fashionable male eye, regardless of being homo or heterosexual, thought and proposed the feminine appearance of modernity. However, the role of YSL is mostly important to be noted here since it is more distinctive from the others, as he is the one who will make the connection between the modern and the postmodern, bringing to *haute couture* the bumps of the *prête-à-Porter*, which will be displayed as a hypermodern (Lipovetsky Gilles, 1989) manifestation in the contemporary Fast Fashion and also the creation of “Le Smoking”, by male mimesis, imposing a symbol of distinction and power for women.

Therefore, to carry this empiric research, apart from the relationships that the design field punctuates, a body of knowledge was articulated here. It is organized through the intersection between the historical (historical existing time), sociological (appearance phenomena) and fashion field (as a territory of power to women), and in the signification cut (Darras Bernard, 2012) — where inferences will here be pointed out — as we realize the dressing proposition as a process of constitution and negotiation of visual discourses (M. T. Lopes, 2014) which will generate, to certain extent, women’s emancipation.

2. The Four Modern

Considering the arguments proposed in this article, an incision was made in the general body of the History and Aesthetics of Stylists course, which will be presented later on. Notwithstanding, here the so-called “four moderns” composed the signification base of analysis for the definition and understanding of the male eye on female appearance, they are: Charles Frederick Worth (1825–1895), Paul Poiret (1879–1944), Christian Dior (1905–1957) and Yves Saint Laurent (1936–2008), with an exception in the case of YSL, as it was already explained above. These four designers form a time line which here becomes interesting for our investigation, beginning in 1877 and running until 1966, as shown in the picture below:

Based on the reading and analysis of the images above, the aspects represented by these “four moderns” can be understood as four different female propositions for different social times and conditions. These women represented by these images assume a position in which they are recipients of an investment of significance, being emancipated, but not agents of their own emancipation. The four men portrayed through their creations before, work as agents of aesthetic negotiations among three perspectives: the female desire prevalent at that time, their own desire of differentiation and capital success, and the behaviour of the society toward women, balancing these three aspects in the material order presented as “female appearance”.

⁵ To discuss the appearance as a place of conflicts and visual speeches.



Picture 1 The Silhouettes of the Four Moderns⁶

This form of social negotiation, seen by the eyes of postmodernity, is rather slow compared to the apparel displayed on the streets for example, or by women who worked and used modern urban mobility and, therefore, new ergonomic life that was being imposed at that specific time such as the use of cars, bicycles, subway, trams and also the occupation of new jobs, especially if we analyse the social condition post first and second wars.

In this sense, we highlight that the relations among the need for mobility, the decrease in form and ornaments, the mimesis with the male figure and the modern life has shown to be key factors for the changes in the history of clothing. In order to understand and thus, deepen this relationship between *haute couture* and women's emancipation, it was necessary to infer, for example, the analogy of the skewed cut (M. Vionnet) which shows improvements in the modelling and fitting, providing fluidity to fabrics and becoming essential for comfort in wear, or even the male identity discourses of *Chanel*. However, these examples are subjects for another article.

As it is possible to be seen in the small timeline above displaying the *haute couture* field, the notion of "female emancipation" occurred not in a linear way, but in the negotiation from-object-to-object, that is, at each minimum significance of style and form definition. However, the waistline is one of the strongest elements in this embarrassment of women regarding their apparel.

On one hand there is a great aesthetic rupture between Worth and Poiret, when the latter moves the waist to the line below the bust and extends the mobility "a little" at the bottom of the dress. Notwithstanding, with his *New Look*, Dior brings the celebration of romanticism in domestic, monetary and North American environments, redesigning the body by dismissing the free form, proposed by Poiret, and accentuating again the waistline and bringing back the petticoats and skirt frames, indeed, compromising mobility.

On the other hand, YSL with *Le Smoking* make a complete break in this organization of women's appearance

⁶ "Worth", accessed on 20th February, 2016, available online at: <https://wandabvictorian.wordpress.com/tag/dinner--dress/>; "Poiret", accessed on 20th February, 2016, available online at: http://www.kci.or.jp/archives/digital_archives/detail_116_e.html; "Dior", accessed on 20th February, 2016, available online at: <https://danabowen.wordpress.com/2014/10/18/the--revolution--of--fashion/>; "YSL", accessed on 20th February, 2016, available online at: <http://www.parischerie.com/10898/le--smoking--a--fashion--favourite--is--a--fantasy--for--all--designers/>.

by imposing a mimesis with the male figure which, in this case, there is no skirt of any length, the mark on the waistline is light, and the prosthesis has left the hips, where it used to impair mobility, and were put at the shoulders (shoulder pads). Therefore, resources of the male system of power were used, based on something that historically is an image of distinction for the man, the Tuxedo.

In conclusion, we can complete the analysis by inferring that the constitution of female appearance is an aesthetic negotiation between women's social status and its role as recipient for the existing order of the spirit of time. Nonetheless, in the case presented here, the establishment of female appearance is actually an analysis of the derived style propositions from the *haute couture* sphere of influence, where the *trickle down* prevailed as a deflagration system for the fashion behaviour. With this in mind, we are able to comprehend that through this accumulation of significances, the style propositions strengthen throughout the history of fashion and, based on the historicity regime of Hartog (2013), men were the solid designation agents of the feminine style by giving and subtracting power, as they were changing their own overall appearance.

2.1 The Use of the Concept "Training the Eye"

This article adopts the concept of "training the eye" proposed by Lopes (2014), in which the author describes below:

"Training the eye" is a process of teaching and learning, which, in this case, depends on the figure of a discursive mediator (a professor) and it occurs through the use of images as instruments. These Images are understood as the tangible representation of the manifestation and materialization of a visual discourse. For this reason, the 'training of the eye' requires the steps of reading, analysing and criticism of the significance frame in which these images are structured, organizing them in order to articulate the independence of the person that is part of this process (Lopes, 2014, p. 469)⁷

This concept contributes to the comprehension of the idea that the images produced by designers are *manifestations* and *materializations* of their Visual Discourses, a discourse defined by the same author mentioned before as:

[...] taking Foucault as reference, the "visual discourse" can primarily be defined likewise all other discourses, i.e., as a human act for systematization of a body of meanings which its intrinsic existence is anchored in a disciplinary symbolic field and on the probable and possible shades of other fields. This type of discourse is characterized, just as the non-visual ones, as a commitment to a desire for truth that is ideological and sometimes political. Also, the visual discourse concept reveals, setting itself apart from non-visual discourses, the position of its manifestation in a noticeable way by happening through a settling ideology in its own appearance (Lopes, 2014, p. 57).⁸

In this sense, the silhouette produced by those four designers at their decades, combined with the effort to preserve the results of memory (and its images) and history are an ideological settling of the signification order ruling at that time. Nowadays, the interlaced discourses represent the contemporary order, Lopes (2014) goes

⁷ Formação do olhar é um processo de ensino e aprendizagem, que nesse caso depende da figura de um mediador discursivo (no caso um professor), que ocorre por meio do uso e do agenciamento de imagens. Imagens estas que são entendidas como manifestação e materialização em aparência de um discurso visual. Essa formação prevê etapas de leitura, análise e crítica do corpo de significação em que essas imagens se estruturam, que assim se organizam para articular a emancipação da pessoa que faça parte desse processo.

⁸ ... tomando-se Foucault como referência, começa a ser definido como todos os demais discursos, ou seja, como um ato humano para a sistematização de um organismo de significados, que para existir ancorase em um campo de poder simbólico disciplinar e sobre os sombreamentos prováveis e possíveis com os demais campos. Esse tipo de discurso se caracteriza ainda, assim como os não-visuais, por envolverse em uma vontade de verdade que é ideológica e às vezes política, e revela, como argumento de diferenciação dos não-visuais, a condição de que a sua manifestação é aparente e por decantação de ideologia em aparência.

further with that when she deepens the definition of Visual Discourse in order to come across the relationship of power (by the light of Foucault):

Another essential condition is that its search for truth is established under the control of background forces, which is situated between two symbolic arguments: materiality (objects) and spiritual chains (subjectivity). Visual discourses settle under a ritualistic and subject order and they require for their occurrences visual stimuli, perceptions and comments. Thus, this occurrence is an action which represents essence and the existentiality of this discourse. It is a subjective space in which is concentrated an enormous potential for activity and developing efforts (p. 57).⁹

Finally, we take into account the position in which these images are situated together with “the four modern” (who even today are at the top of the *trickle down* pyramid), as extremely relevant for the “eye training” of fashion design students. Furthermore, when a reference of “Beauty” is presented in books, in the classroom and in fashion blogs, an ideological force will be activated, which is going to lead to personal questionings such as the one suggested here: women's emancipation. Therefore, our inquiry is: this desire for visual truth is hegemonic for whom?

2.2 The Course History and Aesthetics of Stylists

The HEE course is the starting point of the proposed investigation. It has been part of my teaching field for five (5) semesters, which in over 2 years of work has compiled a number around 300 (three hundred) students who went through the training process, all of them from varying periods, as the course is part of the elective body of classes that is connected, in the aesthetic hub, to the emphasis on fashion design from the Federal University of Pernambuco, Agreste Academic Center, UFPE-CAA.

The syllabus includes, through four months, the history of fashion design; the designers that most influenced worldwide fashion and Brazil; social, cultural and visual identity analysis of the creations of these designers, as well as their influences and innovations; and finally, today's fashion and new designers.

Further, the course presents as syllabus the following:

- 1) Culture, forms of production and fashion communication of pre-industrial revolution;
- 2) XIX century: The skill and influence in fashion of the English designer Charles Frederick Worth;
- 3) Designers of the XX century: influences, innovations and transition behaviour;
- 4) Formation of the *Haute Couture* commission;
- 5) *Pret-à-porter* designers;
- 6) Conceptual fashion;
- 7) Brazilian fashion designers;
- 8) Nowadays fashion and new designers.

As most of the syllabus presented in the undergraduate major, this one is more ambitious than an organizer of a teaching sense, focused on delimiting the relationship between theory applied to practice, which is something commonly expected from a degree in design. Moreover, this same ambition ends up providing the professor an expanded reading of the various subjects studied, and it preserves a certain time line that helps the students

⁹ Outra condição essencial é que a sua vontade de verdade se estabelece no engaste das forças de poder que se instalam entre dois argumentos simbólicos: a materialidade (objetual) e as correntes espirituais (subjetividade). Os discursos visuais requisitam para os seus acontecimentos a percepção por estímulo visual, seus comentários, e estão sob uma ordem ritualista, e por sujeição. Contudo, esse acontecimento é uma ação que é a essência e a existencialidade desse discurso. Trata-se de um espaço subjetivo no qual se concentra uma enorme potencialidade para ações e esforços formadores.

understand how the fashion phenomenon happens nowadays.

The intentions of the course also came to enable the professor to cut what is associated with his best “income”, for example, interlacing the research questions that work for him or even relevant issues to the local market if he wants to focus on some kind of extension activity. Since the course is carried within a teaching and researching federal institution, it comes as an advantage for everyone, strengthening a commitment to the triad: teaching, researching and extension activity as organizers of everything. Not that private institutions cannot do the same, but it is known that, in practice, these types of activities are more difficult to be seen in these institutions, since we are in the context of undergraduate courses in Brazil.

In this sense, the following lesson plan was possible to be created, it is organized in 18 meetings, which happen over four months and are divided in four main structures, as follows:

- 1) Objective;
- 2) Teaching Structure 1 — Introduction to the phenomena of aesthetics and fashion as constitution of appearance;
- 3) Teaching Structure 2 — A significant timeline: Worth & Ducet and the precariousness of mobility; Poiret, Vionnet & Chanel: as developers of urban mobility for leisure and work; Lanvin, Schiaparelli and the period between the wars: motherhood, art and identity with the militarization of life; and finally, Dior & Yves Saint Laurent: Romanticism, power and feminine;
- 4) Teaching Structure 3 — Seminars about the 1910-2000 decades - the modern and the postmodern fashion field, from *Trickle Down* to *Bubble up*;
- 5) Teaching Structure 4 — Fashion and contemporaneity: National and international designers;
- 6) Evaluation system: Individual and group assessment - seminars and projects.

In this process, the offered teaching methodology seeks to provide the student the skills and competencies to:

- 1) Read images based on the significance analysis;
- 2) Analyse the visual discourses of different styles and eras along with the comprehension of its materialization process in the appearance of the female body;
- 3) Discuss and understand the discursive setting that generates the process of women's appearance as emancipation locus, based on historical and cumulative action of meanings.

As a result of this process, in November 2015, the exhibition entitled *Recreating fashion: the artefacts according to the aesthetics of fashion designers*¹⁰, was held at *Difusora* Shopping Mall, in the city of Caruaru, from October 29th to November 29th of 2015. The images below reflect the students' ability of making a *Sign-Crossing*¹¹ between a designer chosen by them, and a contemporary object.

¹⁰ Recriando a moda: os artefatos segundo a estética dos estilistas

¹¹ (LOPES, M. T., 2015) a design methodology used for the creation of fashion products, taking as a basis the need to work with the exchange, from meaning to meaning, from one field to the other. This methodology was one of the developed results after the consolidation of the research project for innovation in the Agreste region, and still is in its testing phase.



Picture 2 Posters Displaying the Works in Recreating Fashion: The Artifacts According to the Aesthetics of Fashion Designers - Photos: Jessica Vanessa

Therefore, we can conclude that the course History and Aesthetics of Stylists works as a tool to facilitate the “training the eye” process since it provides the students a learning procedure where the displacement of the designer’s role is actually deterministic to a negotiator of an appearance and, subsequently, understanding the need to give autonomy, mobility and freedom for women’s bodies, is something precisely contemporary. Furthermore, that mimesis with male figure has to be seen as an option, not the only condition as it was in the 1960s and 1970s.

The participant students of the HEE course understand that fashion is, indeed, an accumulation of meanings and that, nowadays, values from the past are not so distant from the future, actually they are often desired to propose the design of clothes/objects of the present. In addition to that, in this significant moment in which these two time forces coexist, at the same time that they designate the apparel of women and express their desires and social achievements, they end up attributing responsibility to the designer, in the present, not to graduate only to create authorial styles, or even contribute to the frenetic *fast fashion* market. The responsibility of the contemporary designer is to be a professional who seeks to understand that the dictatorial and modernist appearance gets attenuated before the reality imposition of female emancipation and, by remaining oblivious to these changes, designers damage themselves and the design field professionally, since they can get into a relationship that alienates more than emancipates.

3. Methodological Aspects

As said before, this text has the characteristic of being an introduction in the fashion discussion as a female emancipation tool, this introductory aspect is important to be stressed here since the history of feminist movements often denotes this relationship between fashion and freedom as being oppressive to systems of signification in which the woman is engendered.

The intention here is to display a historical, epistemological and responsible position for many of the women’s achievements, which I, particularly, give a lot of respect. What I do here is start an investigation into the fashion design field by focusing on it as an activity that organizes thoughts, the intangible and the symbolic into object and materiality, and, in their turn, these tangible matters become knowledge producers of a circle of meanings that can often become contradictory to the wishes of social transformation, although they do not cease

to be a representative of these changes and, in some cases, indeed, a later experiment in the prevailing reality.

The history of women's apparel can be understood not only by a timeline of oppression, but also as a history of female emancipation. It is a social signification field where women build a path where they cease to be dressed, or to receive male presuppositions of being a woman and start to dress up themselves, being the protagonist on the creation of their appearance. Also, even in most cases when they cannot step away of the mimesis with the male figure to evoke power, it is also a fact that does not stop them from having power and being a woman.

Therefore, in order to get to this kind of reasoning within the scientific thinking universe, we reached for support with a bibliographic review, based on what was proposed for the HEE course by going through the fields of history, fashion and sociology, as a method to subsidize our significance analysis. Furthermore, we chose the semiotic studies of Darras and Foucault's understanding of basic speech analysis systems in order to account the present investigation.

4. Last Remarks and Inferences

I conclude this article by making some inferences and notes that I consider relevant, reinforcing the importance of the HEE course for the development of fashion designers, beginning at the cut which was made exposing fashion and its significant areas for female emancipation. The course give support to the students by providing a historical view and making them think about women's position from when they were just victims of fashion until reaching contemporaneity when they, through a historical process, is exposed to a system of accumulated meanings which once allowed and still allow the reconstruction of the trajectory of the female image in society. Thus, one can understand modern fashion as a time when the proposition of the male eye for female action lasted vehemently, allowing embarrassing moves, such as the "S" silhouette.

In addition to that, I reinforce the fact that the history of fashion can and should be told from various knowledge perspectives; here the fashion design is just one of the reasonable viewpoints. The given outlook of this article sees fashion as a knowledge which organizes materiality, it also needs to ensure that the development of the design student is no stranger to social transformation processes, so by discussing women's emancipation, we collaborate with that perspective. Also, the fact that there are other social groups, which have their history associated to political, cultural and economic oppression systems, shows that they can also have their story told by negotiation processes of visual discourses displayed by fashion.

With questions and investigations such as: what is the role of Blacks and Asians in *haute couture* style proposition? Or the fact that even today, the presence of women is still very select this environment shows that much remains to be discussed. In fact, the structure in which fashion is born, as a phenomenon that builds its significance and materialization for the capitalist order, makes itself hostage by the unpleasantness of inequality and social exclusion, however, fashion is not only that. The contemporaneous *Bubble up*, in the midst of the counterculture movement of the 1960s until today, transcends fashion to a space where there is a search for emancipation, freedom and beauty for everyone, democratically speaking.

Therefore, I sustain my argument that people need to know more about fashion history in order to be able to criticize it. Not only to talk about a discourse that at first sight seem emancipatory, where fashion is understood as a system of oppression, but also under the careful eye of history, sociology and other disciplines, one can understand that the woman is the trigger of meanings, aesthetic propositions and behaviours for more than a century and this needs to be deepened and discussed, making room for the comprehension that fashion should be

also understood as space for social transformations.

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