

Fashion Semiotics: State of the Art

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Abstract: Once the failure of classical fashion Semiotics (1960-1980) was certified, as it conceived the fashion phenomenon as a system devoid of meaning (Barthes), incapable of communicating (Lotman) and unbearable (Volli), the great designers and marketing strategists began a new period, that of the Pragmatics of Fashion (1980-2000), committed to resemiotizing the system by resorting to prestigious referents for their collections (the history of art and culture) and to the brand, defined as a hypericonema loaded with powerful literal, imaginary and psycho-emotional meanings (Paz Gago). This stage of fashion semiotics is described by Floch and Calefato, scholars of fashion brands as written text, since it is the proper name of the great fashion designers that has become a brand. Both agree on the need to move beyond the more linguistic stage of the discipline to develop a visual semiotics or a plastic semiotics that serves to analyze fashion as an essentially visual phenomenon. With the new millennium, in line with the new digital technologies that colonize and are colonized by fashion, the Neosemiotics of fashion (2000-2020) emerges, mediated by the stories and reels uploaded to social networks such as Instagram or TikTok, as Bianca Terraciano or Victoria Nannini will analyze. Fashion semiotics faces a new challenge today due to the emergence of Artificial Intelligence, which has already colonized all processes in the fashion system: design creation, pattern making, manufacturing, advertising and marketing campaigns, fashion shows, distribution, and marketing can all be implemented through generative Artificial Intelligence applications. These new technological phenomena respond to the semiotic mode I have called Machination, as opposed to the Representation and Simulation characteristic of classic analog and digital technologies.

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1. Introduction

The recently deceased Nobel Prize winner for Literature, Mario Vargas Llosa, recalled Roland Barthes's courses on the language of fashion, which he attended in the 1960s at the Sorbonne University in Paris. According to the spanish-peruvian writer, Barthes brought the most popular fashion magazines of the time, such as *Elle*, *Vogue*, and *Marie Claire*, and some of their texts to his classes for brilliant and incisive analysis¹.

Interestingly, in a newspaper article on sports criticism, Vargas Llosa referred to Barthes's theory of fashion, emphasizing that his study had little to do with the reality of women's and men's dresses, hats, shoes, ornaments, etc., but only with the verbal description of those garments. The result was rather a self-sufficient, self-sufficient rhetoric, highly original and inventive, but sterile and poor.

The essential function of that initial semiological approach would be to mythologize fashion, surrounding it with a fascinating and unreal aura, but he did so with inadequate methodological tools, valid exclusively for texts written about fashion and not for analyzing fashion itself with all its wealth of clothing products and accessories, its profusion of images, illustrations, photographs, videos and, nowadays, social media posts and generative artificial intelligence recreations. It is true, indeed, that fashion itself produces a fascination of an imaginary nature in its recipients, be they mere spectators, scholars, simple users, customers, or fashion-addicts, and it is precisely this phenomenon of seduction and true enchantment that the current semiotic discourse on fashion tries to interpret.

2. Classical semiotics of fashion (1960-1980): fashion as a language

It is essential to start from the founding text of the discipline, *Système de la mode* (1967), *The Fashion System*, to understand the epistemological scope and methodological limits of this first semiotics of fashion, since *this is a book of method*, in the words of its author, Roland Barthes. In addition to the method in its Foreword, it also specifies its object: *The object of this inquiry is the structural analysis of women's clothing as currently described by Fashion magazines; its method was originally inspired by the general science of signs postulated by Saussure under name semiology* (1990, p. X).

After distinguishing three structures, namely: one technological, the objet, another iconic, image, the third verbal, words, Barthes imposes a surprising restriction on himself in order to study *the generic object we call the garment of Fashion*: he dispenses with *real-clothing* and *image-clothing* and opts to deal exclusively with *written-* (or, more precisely, *described*), –he points out – *clothing*.

The *described-clothing* would be the only substance in which meaning resides, so he decides to focus exclusively on verbal structure, on the language of fashion as a system of signification. Because of the limitations of the saussurean semiology Barthes applied at that time, essentially linguistic, he limits himself to the structural analysis of written-clothing, to the description of the meaning of fashion. This self-imposed restriction will lead to the failure of

¹ Mario Vargas Llosa, Antología de la crítica de fútbol, *La Voz de Galicia*, 21.6.1982

this attempt at fashion semiotics, which ultimately reaches a disheartening and disappointing conclusion: the disappointment of meaning.

The French semiologist will fail in the construction of a grammar of fashion, since the structural relations that are established within it are unstable and variable, and in his proposal of a rhetoric or poetics of dress, which is strange and poor (1990, pp. 235-236). His conclusions could not be more hopeless for this first proposal of semiotics of fashion, a system whose meaning is tautological and empty of all content since fashion can only be defined by itself. In the words of Roland Barthes: *Fashion thus proposes this precious paradox of a semantic system whose only goal is to disappoint the meaning it luxuriantly elaborates* (1990, p. 287).

The disconnection of reality and image, so important for the communication of fashion, which could not exist without illustration first and without photography later, produced this resounding failure of Barthesian theory because, from its very Peircean origins, semiotics needs the object, the reference, insofar as it is a phenomenological (phaneroscopic) philosophy that is more encompassing and totalizing than a theory of verbal language.

The beginnings of fashion semiotics are closely linked to the origin of the discipline itself, at least in the field of the Greimasian school, because it will be in the process of methodological foundation of his main thesis, *La mode in 1830*, when Greimas will have the idea of a science of the transformation of the senses as an instrument of incomparable power, which he will later call *semiotics* ([1948] 2000, p. 8).

While Roland Barthes based his analytical corpus primarily on the magazines *Elle* and *Jardin des Modes*, also citing *Vogue*, from the 1958-1959 season, Greimas's pre-semiotic work analyzes magazines such as *Le Follet*, *Mercur des Salons* and *the Journal des Dames et des Modes* corresponding to the 1829-1830 season. However, unlike Barthes, Greimas, in his preface on object and method, claims to want to place himself as close as possible to things: taking as his starting point the world of realities and not that of words (2000, p. 7), in addition to also considering the engravings in these fashion magazines. Perhaps it is from this perspective that the phenomenological turn that the author of *Du Sens* would make in his later years, based on his works on the passions, lies.

3. Pragmatics of fashion (1980-2000): fashion as a communication

Barthes's legacy would be devastating to any possibility of a semiotics of fashion. For Volli (1989), fashion itself is unbearable and lacks meaningful consistency. This would not be so much a defect of the method as of the object, which would be parasitic, evanescent, and therefore produce the collapse of meaning.

But, beginning in the 1980s, fashion reinvented itself, and in the face of criticism from intellectual and academic circles, the fashion system was re-semiotized. And this operation would be carried out by the very exponents of the phenomenon, from the somewhat contradictory fields of creation and marketing. Thus, a new era of fashion communication began, based on its redefinition, which facilitates the pragmatic shift of the discipline.

If Lotman (1992) accused fashion communicators of being cryptic, incomprehensible to most readers, and incapable of communicating, it will be the designers who will strive to imbue

their collections with prestigious meanings (art, history, ancient cultures, avant-garde movements) so that they can be interpreted, understood, and valued in their proper measure.

Indeed, a new generation of fashion designers with a solid background in art and cultural history emerged in the globalized panorama of the 1980s—Jean Paul Gautier, Karl Lagerfeld, Christian Lacroix, Thierry Mugler, Gianni Versace, or the *enfants terribles* John Galliano and Alexander McQueen—to endow fashion with artistic references and powerful meanings, in permanent dialogue with the visual and performing arts such as film and music. In a vertical system where trends come from the top, the final decades of the 20th century saw the establishment of the fashion *star system*, led by great designers and top models, the undisputed queens of beauty and the catwalk, who ceaselessly spread the new sense effect of the fashion system: seduction (Paz Gago, 2016).

Alongside these great names in Haute Couture, another re-semiotization strategy emerges, this time led by marketing and industry: the brand, a concept I have defined as *super-iconemes of powerful visual identity that express a semantic, pragmatic, and also commercial complex of extraordinary impact on receivers-consumers* (2020, p. 24). Carefully designed logos with extraordinary symbolic force, fashion brands convey denotative and connotative messages that produce very powerful and addictive psycho-emotional effects on their followers. With the disappearance of some essential fashion figures from the central decades of the 20th century, such as Coco Chanel, Christian Dior, or Yves Saint-Laurent, their names have become emblematic fashion brands owned by business conglomerates in the fashion and luxury sector such as LVMH or the Kering Group.

Clotilde Pérez has aptly summarized the meaning of the brand in the final decades of the 20th century:

a perceptual sign of extraordinary communicative and marketing power, with its symbolic dimension that blends the physical and functional meanings of the product it embodies and the subjective meanings constructed through countless mediations with consumers and citizens, while also reflecting the proliferation of studies on the visual expressiveness and semiotics of the brand (Pérez, 2017 and 2020, pp. 31-32).

Those who best represent the semiotic reflection on these two decades of recent fashion history are Jean Marie Floch (1995) and Patrizia Calefato (1986 and 2002). From the perspective of marketing and greimasian semiotics, Floch analyzes the visual identity of brands from different sectors, paying special attention to the Chanel *total look*, a characteristic feminine silhouette proposed by the emblematic brand of French fashion par excellence.

Based on the 1993 Chanel Catalog designed by Karl Lagerfeld in five drawn plates, Floch attempts to define the visual identity of the overall female silhouette conceived by Coco Chanel and reworked by Lagerfeld in order to unravel the conditions of production of its meaning. From the perspective of figurative semiotics, the Chanel look's narrative content is the conquest of individual freedom and modern gestures for women (1995, pp. 113-114), in addition to the signifiers of masculinity (androgyny) and work. The feminine identity that Chanel constructs is based on a game of inversion of signifiers and meanings of sexual identity.

The silhouette designed by Chanel's *total look* forms a fundamentally visual identity, so its analysis must be approached as a visual process whose semiotic nature would escape the

exclusive verbal segmentation in which both Barthes and figurative semiotics itself, subject to lexicalization processes, had remained (1995, p. 116). The methodological limits of a semiotics that fails to overcome the linguistic perspective are clearly appreciated here, so Floch proposes a plastic semiotics to analyze the sensitive and intelligible dimension of the silhouette of the Chanel brand in Lagerfeld's conception: lines, accessories, colors and materials that would define a classical aesthetic vision as opposed to the baroque vision (1995, p. 120 ff.). Logocentrism and the staunchly structuralist position based on binary oppositions and very simple schematizations of classical and baroque aesthetic visions hinder this promising proposal by Jean-Marie Floch, which reaches a conclusion as poor as it is disappointing, undoubtedly due to the limited development achieved at that time by Greimasian plastic semiotics: Chanel's classical aesthetic corresponds to a personal ethic, to a way or style of life of the fashion designer herself, rather than to a phenomenon of fashion considered as a system of signs (1995, pp. 139-140).

More interesting in its analysis and results is Patrizia Calefato's long trajectory of semiotic studies on fashion, with its central idea of the clothed body as a written text, represented by the proper names of these great designers converted into a brand or fashion label.

The proper names of fashion designers, loaded with meaning and symbolic value, are not simply trademarks but represent the complete style of a clothed body (2002, p. 79), for example, Gucci or Fiorucci. For Calefato, the signature (the brand of a designer) gives a fashion garment three types of value: market value, aesthetic value, and paradoxical value, along with the consideration of a garment as "unique" because it is signed, even if it is physically reproduced.

This proper name converted into a brand acquires extraordinary symbolic power for Italian professor, being at the same time a signal through a logo (the Lacoste crocodile), a symbol of a look that represents a lifestyle and an icon as an advertising image. This nominal brand can tell stories, invent modes, and produce signs that go beyond the universe of words, signs of power or ownership. The brand—in Calefato's (2002, p. 80) reflection—can give a dress greater prestige and a higher price, and, to the extent that it is displayed externally, it shows us the full parodic power that pervades fashion, since its value lies in a word, in an element of language that, ultimately, ridicules the very law of value.

4. Neosemiotics of fashion (2000-2020): fashion as a technologized system

Beginning in the new millennium, there was a radical shift in the hegemonic communication medium for fashion, from women's magazines, film, and television to the internet, which became the preferred medium for disseminating new trends, first through cool-hunter blogs and later on social media, especially Instagram and, today, TikTok. This technological revolution, moving from analog to digital, will change the very semiotic nature of the phenomenon because—let's not forget McLuhan's maxim—the medium is the message, and so fashion becomes technologized intensely.

The new communicators of fashion will no longer be specialized journalists but influencers, Instagrammers, or TikTokers, whom I have called *fashiongrammers*, who will progressively serve designers and brands. From the verticality of the previous period, we moved

to horizontality: fashion comes from the street, from users, and from there, through social media, it passes to the market.

This paradigm shift in its communication media is clearly outlined in two works published twenty years apart: *Mass Moda* (1996) by Patricia Calefato and *Social Moda* (2017) by Bianca Terracciano. Calefato, following Barthes, describes fashion as a mass media that reproduces itself and interacts with other mass media systems: specialized journalism, photography, especially cinema, marketing, and advertising (1996, p. 32). For Terracciano, on the contrary, the contemporary fashion system is the opposite of the mass fashion system described by Barthes and Calefato, as digital media, the blogosphere, and social networks have atomized and individualized the reception of trends.

The mutation is so radical that neither top models nor major star designers will survive, collectives replaced by anonymous models and creative directors at the service of brands, omnipresent in the digital world. From the verticality of the previous period, we move to horizontality: fashion comes from the street, from users, and from there, through social media, it passes to the market.

If Floch (1995) called for the application of a plastic semiotics that could account for fashion as a visual system, Calefato (1999) advocated for the use of visual semiotics to address the complex visual status of fashion. Both proposals are already indispensable today since, as I described five years ago:

Digital media technologies have colonized and been colonized by fashion, which has lost its verbal character to gain visual spectacularity and mediated textuality, temporal instantaneousness and spatial universality, and a fiery and dizzying virality—all of them essential properties of the new fashion system (Paz Gago 2020, p. 24), strictly mediated by technology.

Social media is the ideal ecosystem for the dissemination of new trends, which have multiplied, diversified, and accelerated incredibly in space and time. Consider that a magazine like *Vogue* can reach one million readers in print and around five million followers in its online edition, while an influencer like Kendall Jenner is on the verge of reaching three hundred million followers, with hundreds of thousands of interactions on each of her posts, linked to the brands that hire her.

The evolution of semiotic reflection on this renewed fashion system is marked by two special issues of *deSignis* magazine, the first edited by Lucrecia Escudero and Giulia Ceriani (2001), *Fashion: Representations and Identity*, and the second, edited by me in collaboration with Bianca Terracciano and Victoria Nannini (2020), under the very significant title *Back to Fashion... on the Web*.

Having overcome the logocentric phase of semiotics, Terracciano (2017, p. 8 and 40) attempts to interpret the strategies deployed by fashion brands on the web and social media as social practices in which users construct their own identity through their online versions of their bodies (influencers), shaping and redefining them as they see fit on networks like Instagram. Social media, indeed, is the ideal ecosystem for the dissemination of new trends, which have multiplied, diversified, and accelerated incredibly in space and time. Consider that a magazine like *Vogue* can have up to one million readers in print and around five million followers in its

online edition, while an influencer like Kendall Jenner is on the verge of reaching three hundred million followers, with hundreds of thousands of interactions on each of her posts, linked to the brands that hire her for more information and to facilitate compulsive buying.

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The first issue of *deSignis* addressed the plurality and transversality of methodological perspectives and the new approaches to its subject matter adopted by this Neosemiotics of fashion in the new millennium: from sociological and culturalist theories that interpret clothing styles as a social discourse, to visual and transmedia semiotics, Fashion Studies, aesthetics, and art history. This implements a more comprehensive sociosemiotic and visual approach to analyze the new semiosis produced by third-millennium fashion, fully integrated into digital communication technologies.

Fashion as a social construction, its role in the production of increasingly ambiguous corporeal and gender identities... The contributions of Escudero, Calefato, Ceriani, Magli, Castilho, and Oliveira delve into the construction of the contemporary body through clothing, a media-driven, hypervisualized, narcissistic, and exhibitionist body, trends intensified to the point of paroxysm by social media.

In the most recent installment of *deSignis* (2020), Bianca Terracciano and Victoria Nannini reflect on this new shift in the semiotics of digitally technologized fashion, in which the internet medium has produced a mutation of the object and, consequently, of the method as well. Fashion has adapted to a new ecosystem that uses very short videos, in stories or reels on Instagram or TikTok, to spread instantly on a global scale, producing an explosion of images that generate numerous microtrends, in very short periods of time, at the service of fast fashion or, worse still, ultra-fast fashion (Temu or Shein). It is clear that we are not facing the written or described fashion analyzed by Barthes, but rather a hypervisualized fashion, expressed in visual microtexts, which is thus made visible and accessible to all, enunciators surrendered to its models who can express their tastes and desires, manifesting themselves through their endorsements in the form of likes, in real time and in a shared intimate space. Major fashion brands have adapted to these viral phenomena by incorporating their clothing products into the permanently exposed bodies, for a few moments, of influencers, Instagrammers, or TikTokers, transformed into mannequins in a luscious global showcase.

5. Conclusion: the challenges of the future

Fashion and its semiotic study in the future face a significant challenge, a consequence of the very evolution of digital technologies: Artificial Intelligence. After the periods of Pret-à-porter and Net-à-porter (Paz Gago, 2016a and 2016b), since 2020 we are fully immersed in the era of IArt-à-porter. Fashion, in fact, is the social and semiotic system in which AI has become most ubiquitous, following a previous passage through the Metaverse, which high-fashion brands such as Gucci have so effectively developed (Paz Gago, 2024).

Today, in fact, all the processes of fashion creation, production, communication, exhibition, and marketing can be generated by generative Artificial Intelligence applications, unleashing unprecedented processes of meaning production. In contrast to the Representation of analog technologies and the Simulation of digital technologies, I have proposed the term "Machination" to designate the new semiotic modality established by AI:

We propose this term for its double semantic value of machine and deception, both meanings that agree well with the models replicated by multimodal generative AI. In English, as in other languages, the lexeme Machination implies both the semes *intrigue, plot, trick, device* (Collins English Dictionary) and the semes derived from its etymological root, Machine, defined as *any mechanical or electrical device that automatically performs or assists in performing tasks*, a meaning that agrees perfectly with AI (Paz Gago, 2025, p. 7).

When the creative process of a new design and its subsequent journey to become a fashion phenomenon—that is, a trend that will reach users—is not a human mind, but a machine, the consequences for the fashion system itself and its semiotic interpretation are unpredictable. This is a new and stimulating challenge for the neosemiotics of fashion in the future.

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