

Wearing Black

In the film *Reservoir Dogs*, Quentin Tarantino alludes unmistakably to the black suit and dark glasses worn by the famous duo in *The Blues Brothers* (see Chapters 3 and 8), though the stylistic features he constructs are inverted with respect to John Landis' film². And paradoxically, the characters, who all wear black, are named after other colours: Mr. White, Mr. Brown, Mr. Blue, Mr. Pink and so on (see Chapter 3).

Strange that throughout the history of dress immense significance has been attributed to a colour which is really a non-colour, as theories and treatises on colour have demonstrated. Goethe and Wittgenstein, for example, have both argued (albeit from different standpoints) that the perception of colour is actually subjective, a modelling activity of the human consciousness, a linguistic game. Black is the obliteration of colour, since it absorbs the whole chromatic range, as opposed to white, which is a synthesis of the primary colours, and the condition for their physical existence and our perception of them. Yet black acts as a clear sign in film and theatrical costume (where every item of clothing is a *total sign*) and always has a precise signification. Linguistically, too, the word 'black' is enriched with further meanings, expressed by terms such as 'dark' and 'noir' that connote not only a chromatic tonality, but also a literary or musical genre, or an atmosphere.

In the film *Men in Black* the prerogative of black clothes to obliterate every recognizable sign on a person is described in Zed's brief to his colleagues, the MiB who control the movements of aliens on our planet:

Zed: You'll dress only in attire specially sanctioned by MiB special services. You'll conform to the identity we give you, eat where we tell you, live where we tell you. From now on you'll have no identifying marks of any kind. You'll not stand out in any way. Your entire image is crafted to leave no lasting memory with anyone you encounter. You're a rumour, recognizable only as *dejà vu* and dismissed just as quickly. You don't exist; you were never even born. Anonymity is your name. Silence your native tongue. You're no longer part of the System. You're above the System. Over it. Beyond it. We're "them." We're "they". We are the Men in Black.

In the Italian comic book series *Martin Mystère* by Alfredo Castelli, there is a powerful and invincible secret sect, like MiB, that is the sworn enemy of the archaeologist-detective Martin. They too are called 'men in black', because when performing their destructive deeds they wear black suits and ties and dark glasses. Their task is to preserve the secret society from anything that could upset received meaning, from proof of the existence of UFOs, to archaeological and scientific discoveries (the existence of Atlantis, for example). In other words, anything that does not coincide with the official line.

In the above instances, the man's black suit makes explicit an obliteration of meaning, a kind of physical absorption of all light rays that transforms the body dressed in black into a transparent, or invisible, entity and, like camouflage, gives it an absolute anonymity in the crowd, whether the body be that of a bluesman, a criminal or a secret agent. Black for film or theatrical costumes becomes a distinguishing feature and makes a character metonymic with respect to his clothes.

Thus conceived, the black suit is also a travesty of the black dinner jacket worn on formal occasions, the sole function of which is to make the male body completely insignificant as a physical, sensual entity – a prerogative entrusted exclusively to the female body on such occasions, draped in a long, elegant evening gown. The dinner jacket: black, standardized, always the same (summarily speaking). The evening gown: flowing, excessive, revealing, seductive, especially if it is black; the garment of a show-piece body accompanying the more serious patriarch.

Fashion communicates and is reproduced through intertextual strategies that involve different social discourses. The above examples point to the existence of a synergy between fashion as a form of mass communication and other discourses – such as those belonging to the imagery in films and comic books – that circulate tastes and produce styles.

The socio-semiotic definition of style refers to a system of intentional signs with distinctive features that are discontinuous with regard to a presumed 'naturalness'. In his essay 'Style and its Image', Barthes speaks of stylistic features as 'transformations' (1984: 133; see Chapter 3). Not an identity category,² therefore, the word 'style' recalls a sort of 'bending' of tastes, whether individual or collective, as well as a logic of otherness, or excess, with regard to a norm.

Black clothes indicate a style in this sense: a system that reformulates and transforms citations and archetypes, that shows how a garment can allude to a whole range of cultural texts and discourses. Gothic, for example, a style (of dress and music) in vogue in the 1980s, was an explicit reference to a literary genre (a genre also exploited by the Hammer House of Horror,

the famous British film company). The black, vampire-like garments worn by young Goths at Bauhaus and Sisters of Mercy concerts contrasted with the pallor of their skins, 'incised' with black on lips and eyes. In youth fashion today there is a vogue for black T-shirts with designs that allude to a comic book 'cult of mystery' or refer to heavy metal rock bands. The 1990s male vogue for black shirts, worn without a tie under black jackets, was a reaction against (and parody of) the yuppie's blue blazer of the 1980s. More recently, it has become a knowing and sophisticated citation of appearance styles on the British music scene in the 1950s and 1960s, somewhere between Beatniks and Mods.

Institutional fashion collects and reformulates many of the signs present in different social discourses. With regard to black, there are a few fashion designers who are particularly enamoured of this colour: Yamamoto with his 'essential black', Versace with his 'black image' and Dolce & Gabbana with their 'Mediterranean black' are three such examples.

Yamamoto's case is a special one, since his choice of black is motivated by his search for the essence of a garment, be it for men or women. Yamamoto's clothes are 'pure form' (see Chapter 11); the choice of black for his garments exhibits the body essentially as a silhouette, a form which Barthes defines as 'symbol and sign, fetish and message' (1982: 114).

Versace loved to use black in his fashion creations. His 'little black dress' (1994) is perhaps one of his most memorable garments: a long camisole-dress with a plunging neckline, held together at the waist and shoulders by gilded safety-pins.³ This garment provocatively inverts the bourgeois role of the classic 'little black dress' as a sign of perennial *bon ton* that every lesson on style advises a woman to keep in her wardrobe. As Richard Martin says, Versace's aim was to shock the middle classes through an ironic and sophisticated use of strategies that play with the role of the media image, somewhere between vulgarity and fetishism, but reformulated in his unmistakable style:

Versace chose as his heroic female model the prostitute or streetwalker, but her transfiguration was into art and media, just as her transmogrification in the 1880s and 1890s under the aegis of Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec was about bringing the vernacular custom of the street into the couture-standard of the art. (Martin 1998)

Dolce & Gabbana's black outfits propose typically Italian, more specifically Mediterranean, imagery.⁴ Black for their women's clothes is soft and sensual, for their men's, simple and severe, almost always accompanied by loose, long-sleeved white shirts. Citations from cinema are often explicit in

their collections: Italian Neorealism, black and white footage, women who remind us of Anna Magnani in the unforgettable scene of her chasing the Fascist wagon in *Roma città aperta*.

Black is the colour *par excellence* of fetishist clothing (see Steele 1997), clothing that parades, or exhibits, the status of fashion objects and the fashion system in social imagery. Fetishes are inanimate objects, *things*, invested with a power and fascination 'stolen', as it were, from individual sensibility. According to Ugo Volli, the contemporary fascination with fetishes is a kind of metaphor representing the relation between the social subject and consumer objects, a metaphor that concerns, more broadly, the present condition of the consumption of signs, images and bodies (Volli 1997: 102).⁵

For Walter Benjamin, fashion is a celebration of fetishism: on the one hand, it transforms the human body, especially the female body, into the sum of its parts, each of which is considered a cult object in itself; on the other, it is the form in which merchandise, the inorganic object, reveals an unexpected fascination (see Chapter 5).

Many items of fetishist clothing – from silk lingerie to high-heeled shoes, all naturally inspired by the female body – are black. This colour, or non-colour, 'marks' the body with strips of leather, lace and fabrics like silk, satin and velvet. Black thus 'dresses' the female body, incises its skin.

What socio-semiotic explanation can we give to the diffusion of fetishist tastes in fashion, present not just in Versace's collections, but also in more widespread and everyday fashion signs? Perhaps one linked to the fact that, in this way, fashion exhibits its own laws in a strange admixture of erotic games on the body (see Chapter 5). The prerogative of fashion is to mediate between taste and received meaning, a mediation that operates through a special relation between the sign and the senses. Fetishist black in fashion discourse thus has a specific function. Black absorbs the light, obliterates all other colours, evokes darkness and night as zones in which the unforeseen, the unexpected and the unheard become the norm. And so this 'degree zero' of colour becomes a 'black hole' that swallows all the senses and regurgitates them in transfigured forms.

If we were to characterize the contemporary fetishist attitude in terms of gender we would undoubtedly say that it is a male attitude, since it evokes man's socio-cultural possession of the female body and its related imagery. Some scholars, however, have spoken of a female fetishist attitude linked to forms of desire and to imagery elaborated without the mediation of the phallus.⁶ Nevertheless, in the social discourse of fashion, it is difficult to establish a clear gender divide. While it is true that such discourse follows the dominant cultural order and appeals to established socio-sexual hierar-

chies, it is also true that both clothing *bricolage* and, more generally, fashion as an *eccentric* system are situated on the outer limits of this order. And so fetishism can be seen, not as a visual and erotic stereotype, but as a perverse, dissonant and imperfect possibility that, like a black cosmic hole, swallows and reformulates *ex novo* every sign belonging to an established order.

‘Wearing black’ is an expression with a dual significance: in everyday speech, apart from indicating the act of wearing something black, it can also refer to ‘black’ as a linguistic term invested with physical and cultural significance (as in ‘black’ fashion). The ‘black’ in question is the subject belonging to a ‘non-white’ human group, whose racial identity is the product of a hegemonic, colonial discourse devoid of any biological or scientific basis. The construction of ‘black’ as an object of discourse is associated with the social practices of exploitation, violence and segregation that dominant cultural and racial groups have inflicted over the course of history on non-dominant groups.

In the stereotyped images that are part of fashion and mass culture, that of the ‘black body’ is particularly important. I refer here to the body of the ‘black’ top model constructed in the hegemonic discourse of ‘white’ fashion as an artificial body that impersonates an obsessive and animal-like ‘naturalness’. Think of Grace Jones’s body, whose ‘perverse fascination’ is associated with feline and masculine images; or of Naomi Campbell’s, unnatural to the point of the total cancellation of a salient feature of black identity: her curly hair, which she wears fanatically straight.

bell hooks (1990) maintains that in African-American culture, dress (like music) has always played an important role in forms of self-representation and has always had a political function, especially amongst women, who use style to express resistance or, conversely, conformity. hooks particularly criticizes the exploitation of the image of the ‘black beauty’ through media figures such as Tina Turner, Iman and Naomi Campbell.

Nevertheless, this is an ambivalent process, since the values at stake in the construction of aesthetic commonplaces are not merely prescriptive and objectifying. For example, the black models, pop stars and athletes idealized by young whites have made it possible to construct cultural spaces for an interaction between bodies that excludes common stereotypes of the black physique and sexuality. This has come about especially through independent modes in the representation and communication of images of black culture; jazz and blues music, for example, and more recently cinema and fashion, to the point of creating actual genres, ‘black movies’ and ‘black fashion’.

In jazz the relation between the garment and music is particularly significant, since jazz represents much more than just a musical genre; it is a

veritable universe in which appearance style *counts*. In the 1930s the Zoot style included long, wide jackets, broad-brimmed hats and garish colours – all elements based on hyperbolic exaggeration.⁷ In the 1950s, on the other hand, the hipster style, created by musicians like Thelonius Monk, Charlie Parker and Dizzy Gillespie, was more sober and essential. The clothing of female jazz singers, like Billie Holiday, alluded to dress styles typical of the Deep South: soft fabrics, sensual models and floral designs.

Music has always acted as a bridge between black appearance styles and their wider social reception and circulation, even in hybrid forms (see Gilroy 1992). Along with jazz, reggae has played an important role in this, inspired by Rastafarian culture and its icon Bob Marley, with his long, braided locks and parti-coloured clothes. Today hip-hop, its roots in North American black urban communities, proposes open and irreverent forms in a ‘street-and-sports’ style. Just as everyone can make hip-hop and rap music, so everyone can play basketball, climb walls or bungee jump. Amateur sports imagery, especially that of extreme sports, has invaded the world of fashion with trainers, baggy tracksuits and hooded sweatshirts in the style of black rappers. Black *haute couture* fashion, on the other hand, was successfully launched in the 1990s by African and African-American designers.⁸

The colour black can be an unusual, unheard note; it can be the search for an essence, or it can be citation and contrast. In other words, it is something that produces a particular kind of aesthetic pleasure (not necessarily linked to beauty) that turns the body into a place of passage and transformation (see Chapter 11).

Notes

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1. As if to say, you can and can't judge a book by its cover; what's important is that its status is clearly visible.

2. As in the more common, accepted sense of the term.

3. It was worn by Liz Hurley at the opening night of *Four Weddings and a Funeral*.

4. The Mediterranean is the archetypal backdrop for these two Sicilian designers.

5. For the various interpretations of the term ‘fetishism’, see Chapter 5. In Freudian psychoanalysis the fetish is a substitute for the phallus, the meaning and value of which is removed, and comes to be represented by a single object, perhaps a garment or a certain part of the body.

6. See T. de Laurentis 1997, in which the writer links female fetishism to lesbianism.

7. The most famous exponent of this style was Cab Calloway.

8. The doyen of African fashion is Lola Faturoti. Other names include: Alpha Sidibé, whose name means elephant; Alphadi, who dresses the Senegalese musician Youssou n'Dour; Oumou Sy, a nomad designer who mixes popular styles with technological materials; and Pathé O, who designs Nelson Mandela's shirts. African-American designers, on the other hand, include CD Greene, whose collections are inspired by 1940s and 1950s female jazz singers, Byron Lars, with his 'funky' collection, and Kevin Smith, with his balloon skirts and silk and satin fabrics.

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