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SARTORIAL ICONOGRAPHY AND UNIVERSAL GENDER ENTRAPMENT

To Professor Thomas Sebeok, in memoriam

ARCHITECTONICS OF DRESSING

*How can this people expect to have good architecture
when they wear such clothes.*

William Morris

The **sartorial and vestimentary signs**, most visible within the cultural **semiosphere**, are the transcultural, transtemporal and transglobal symbolic features of Human Culture which form a very significant cultural layer, reflecting the most complex social, cultural, political, economic and historical interrelationships, and processes. The sartorial iconography derives its signifiatory power from the universal semiotic principle of **Symmetry**, exhibiting the familiar and the **traditional analogy** between shelter and dress, whose designs are invariably parallel. This paper will address the issue of general meanings of **sartorial signs** in their relation to architecture and simultaneously to other **cultural signs** – sociology, aesthetics, politics, economics, and ethics while capturing the changing functions during the general cultural shifts via displacement, transference, resemblance, and duplication.

1. TRACING THE ORIGINS OF VESTIMENTARY SIGNS

Contemplating about the origins of the **vestmentary signs**, Gerald Heard stated nature had stripped him [man] of a decent coat, so he stole the other from animals (Heard 1924, 41).

The most basic mimetic impulse of *homo sapiens* is assuredly behind the prehistoric costume, modelled after the most natural vestimentary signs - fur coats of other species. The stone age man must have reinvented the natural costume of the neighbourhood animal species. Eventually, the skins and fur coats of animals would be replaced by the man-made robes. The thread and weaving marked a significant step in the human civilization, initiating the production of the vestimentary signs. The concentration and saturation of a **natural sign** – thread, in turn, led to another- **cultural sign** – fabric, assisting in constructing a new image of the body, or a new system of signs. Along with the costume, the reinvented natural signs – skin or fur – became **displaced signs**. The woven fabric, eventually shaped geometrically, commensurate to one's physical body, would later symbolize one's position in society. The ancient Assyrian, Babylonian, Egyptian, Ethiopian, or Phoenician garments, such as capes, kalasiris, aprons, robes and even loincloth's signified geometrical space, occupied by a human body. Most of these attires were uniform for people of both sexes. Very early on, clothing began to signify one's status, occupation and wealth. Layered capes and robes of the idle kings and queens, high priests and dignitar-

ies, contrasted with the semi-naked bodies of the toiling slaves and labourers. This tradition of sartorial distinction would persist through the ages, reaching highest acme in such European countries, as Italy, France and Spain. The well-dressed upper-class individuals also wanted to distinguish between themselves, i.e. robes of priests and royal family differed in their geometrical shape. The apparent similarity of draping was purely superficial, the status was indicated through the length of fabric. The triangle obviously took less than the rectangular piece, and this was the main difference between the robes of a priest and king (Köhler 1928, 73).

The remarkable resemblance between the shape of the hat of the Assyrian King – Mitre and the Mesopotamian Ziggurat – suggests the uniform geometrical imperative equally at play in architecture and costume design (Heard 1924, 44). Marilyn Horn draws an exciting parallel between the Doric order columns and the Greek chiton of the same period, as well as the Ionic column and the Ionic chiton accordingly. The **vestimentary** and **architectural signs** signify in a strikingly similar way through the displacement of contours, lines, figures, and openings. The windowless structures in the Moslem countries correspond to the now infamous female attire – the burqa, the prescribed ‘pious’ clothing, completely covering a woman, leaving only mesh peepholes over the eyes. The attire, rendering a woman invisible, is symmetrical to the numerous Moslem structures, while both are influenced by the religious beliefs, prescribing the visual and other modalities. The decorum of the places of worship often matches the decorative displacement in the **vestimentary signs**. Purely pragmatic functions, such as protection from climate and convenience in movement, traditionally regulate the physical space and the fabric size, which, in turn, form the secondary spatial layer, simultaneously signifying three other spaces – physical, social and symbolic. And within all of those spaces, the vestimentary sign creates a double signification system through the design of the fabric, its texture and decorum, and external writing pattern over the body.

The cultivation of the silk worm in China and Japan further advanced the vestimentary signification, with the attire, drawing attention to the pattern, painted on the fabric rather than to the bodily contour. The silk pattern and its visual appearance displaced the shape and cut of the dress to the background, “drawing full attention to the beauty of the cloth” (Horn 1968, 49). The softness of silk was exploited as a new social status signifier. Since the fabric was more expensive and time-consuming to produce, only the upper classes could afford it. In general, the vestimentary and architectural signs were subordinated to the vagaries of social semiotics. The pendulum of the social semiosis would periodically swing towards the accessibility, with the obsessive differentiation imperative, acting as a suppressing and controlling device. The wealthy, who wished to separate themselves from the poor, signified their social distinctness both through their dwelling and their dress. If the size of a dwelling, the physical space could indicate one's status, the attire could intensify the same messages. However, unlike the buildings, expandable in height, width, and solid materials, attire had its limitations. The vestimentary code could not signify through height to the same extent as a tower could. The notorious farthingales, the 15th–19th century frames in the women's dresses, with the extended natural width of a body at the hips, represented such a creative attempt to emulate the architectural sign and were widely used throughout Europe. Eventually, the impractical frame, which prevented from signifying through movement and gesture, would be abandoned altogether. The participation of women in the work force during the Industrial revolution dictated the shift in the vestimentary signs, again attesting to the symmetry between the social and aesthetic signification. Thus, the only modus of signification left was through the fabric texture, ornamentation and intricacy of the design and style, or in other words through the layered vestimentary text – underwear, outerwear, head dress, footwear, and accessories.

Since the physical ability of the body to carry and withstand this vestimentary armour was limited, the producers of the signs had to adapt to the narrow semiotic possibilities of this “second skin” and accept its limited volume. The body, wrapped into the second skin, could successfully signify only if the natural kinesics were not suppressed. Consequently, the focus of the producers of the vestimentary code was on **displacement**, as a tool and main semiotic device.

Because the body could not signify the same message of grandeur and wealth for prolonged periods, the periodic fashion change offered the possibility for displacement and production of new signs. This was a successful mechanism of the semiotic denouement which only the upper classes could sustain. Fashion tyranny became a way of sustaining the social semiosis in favour of the wealthy and still is unchanged. The pace of displacement rather than displacement itself became the expression of the social status. Here the symmetry between the vestimentary and architectural signs breaks, because if architecture tends to preserve the sign, the clothing industry derives its impetus from destroying the old signs and displacing their semes.

2. NAKED VERSUS CLAD

The first most primitive vestimentary sign - fig leaf - stands for the earliest act of civilizing and ennobling *homo-sapiens*. Since then the naked/clad paradigm has always ruled the vestimentary code, with the diachronical history of the code revealing the cyclical oscillations in covering and uncovering the body. The naked/clad paradigm tends to be symmetrical to the public/private space division, the predominant social moral prescription, and the power of the religious institutions. Eventually, the leisurely aristocracies of the global village would modify this syntax by exposing certain body parts in public. Public entertainment within the confines of the royal domain (balls, reception, concerts etc) prescribed a certain dosage of nakedness via controlled erotic function of the dress. For instance, it was not unusual for the aristocratic females in the 15th–17th century to expose their upper body parts, drawing the attention to the neck, head, while accentuating the head ware, hair style and jewellery and extending the height. Male eroticism of the Western dress was in the vestimentary signs, covering the lower part of the body, while the female attire signalled the erotic through the designated nakedness of the upper part.

The ancient customs dictated that slaves have minimal dress both for practical work reasons and sexual exploitation. For instance, slaves, working at construction sites in ancient Egypt or Babylonia, wore comfortable “professional clothes” and the loincloth was the most suitable garment. On the other hand, the female slaves, whose primary service was catering to the erotic fantasies of the owners, required the least. Their naked bodies distinguished them from the clad bodies of their masters, who entertained their guests and themselves through the visible display of different attire. Deliberately dressing the female slaves in the most seductive way, the ancient masters reversed the semiotic relationship between a master and a slave. Instead of a master, designing the display of the erotic, it was the slave, displaying the naked body. Since very frequently slaves were foreigners, the Other was the sign of perversion or signified:

Naked = Other
 Low
 Sinful
 Barbarian
 Uncivilized

The naked/clad paradigm has been used in the military as well to establish the boundary between the protected, safely clad warriors and the unprotected passive civilians, incapable of playing the war game.

The paradoxical imperative of modernity institutionalized nakedness despite the ethos of feminism and appeals for equality. The postmodern Britney Spears mid rift and Madonna's defiant bra symbolise the parade of the eternal erotic sign and the paradoxically abused postmodern female body, the postmodern despair, confusion and fatalistic surrender to the tyranny of the time. The 20th-century style mocked the secluded private space of the past, bringing it into the public square, paradoxically reducing the semiotic effect and power of seduction, since the transparent sign had a diminished **semiovalence**. The notionally liberated postmodern woman, denouncing her enslaved sister of the past, actually stands quite powerless in her ugly clownish dress, neither loved nor admired, and envious of her more beautifully clad historical counterpart. The cult of reductionism, minimalism and the 20th abstraction in architecture affected the vestimentary code. The fondness for Picasso and Kandinsky, Levy jeans and average grey concrete block in New York and Toronto, Hong Kong or Tokyo are profoundly symmetrical and harmonious. Grey naked concrete went parallel with the blue-jean jeans.

3. GARMENT AS A CARITATIVE SIGN

Roland Barthes found another meaning of the vestimentary code - the meaning of love:

The garment is sometimes loving, sometimes loved; we could call this the "caritative" quality of clothing. Hence, what is being signified here is the role, simultaneously maternal and childlike, that devolves upon the garment (Barthes 1983 [1967], 241).

He points out to the possibility of clothing provide *psychological insulation* for the Body. One informant, working in a clothing store, pointed to the healing or soothing power of certain soft fabrics, such as velour or silk. The touch of the fabric does create a special bond between the body and its "second skin". The "*caritative quality*" of the signifier has been extensively exploited by the fashion industry and fashion magazines, persuading to buy extra garment as an expression of self love and care towards one's own Body. The caritative quality could be expressed not only in the narcissistic manner and directed towards oneself, but towards others. The gift giving custom utilizes the Barthean meaning, expanding the canonical non-verbal communication beyond the realm of sociology and economics, and towards psychology. Garments silently intensify, repair, or initiate emotional ties with other people.

Peter Corrigan, studying sartorial relations of some Dublin families, observed a special gender marking within the garment gift giving and concluded that wives more frequently display their affection towards husbands through cardigans, socks, sweaters, pants, pyjamas, ties and underwear than in reverse (Corrigan 1989, 516). According to Corrigan, similar attitudes and patterns exist among the non-verbal display of affection between mother and children, i.e. mothers give and sons receive (Corrigan 1989, 517). Daughters and mothers reciprocate in vestimentary signification but there is an age-marking threshold, beyond which the pattern changes. Mothers cannot give satisfactory clothing gifts during a troublesome teen/age, since then signs are misinterpreted on both sides and daughters stop responding to caritative meanings and reject the selected garments on the grounds of outdatedness ("old style", "not my style"). They also reject the mother/child bond during their early and late teens when clothing, purchased and given by a mother, is interpreted as a symbol of forced and prolonged dependence, detested childhood.

The desire to be clad independently is the expression of the Self. A teenage self rejects the family link, communicated through the sartorial ceremony, seeking his/her pseudo independence by conforming to the external command of the fashion industry or peers. The sartorial signifiers of the mass media seem to exert more semiotic power than the **caritative selected signs**, coming from the close family members. It is true that females frequently exercise their control through the monopoly on clothes buying. Frequently, this is the major historic and the only control they possess within the family unit. Daughters who purchase clothes for their fathers also communicate their desire to signify through vestimentary code and practice their future prescribed gender roles. They rehearse the drama of sartorial relations and learn to receive love and affection associated with it. The **caritative signs** -garments could be divided into two major groups – made and bought. The handmade garments are more **semiovalent** in the sartorial rituals than the ones that are purchased. Today's modern liberated female who purchases garments, made by the industry, unknowingly and paradoxically exploits other female coldly and anonymously.

4. FAMILIAR SARTORIAL INDEXES

Clothes make the man.
(An old saying)

The visual power of garments, their force, seductiveness and enormous aesthetic impact have been known to people since time immemorial. The design, making, buying, selling and exchanging clothes have become an important cultural system within the system, crossing the geographical, temporal, spacial and religious boundaries. The traditional folk or ethnic garment was another method of expressing difference on a more pronounced level than merely another group, gender, or class. Since the ultimate differentiation barrier between the sartorial signs is next to impossible, various vestimentary traditions utilized the power of certain specific diversification via the sartorial displacements, claiming difference. For instance, some Croatian ethnographers, trying before the proclamation of independence to prove the uniqueness of their folk dress, pointed out to various colors used in embroidery on male and female garments of villagers, ignoring the fact that all ethnic garments of the Mediterranean region basically do not differ. Moreover, there is a surprising running **seme** in all embroidered blouses across the entire globe, from the Black and Mediterranean seas to China. The embroidered flowers and leaves repeat the same pattern in Ukraine and Poland, Bulgaria and Slovakia, Russia and Estonia, Latvia and India, Chinese provinces and Moldavia. The natural **protosign** – flower – is reinvented in a variety of familiar ways, becoming a **familiar index**, i.e. sign, leading to the other signs. Apron, a part of the functional dress of the agricultural people of Europe, Africa and Asia, is also an index or a familiar **recognizable sign** of many occupations, such as carpentry, meat cutting, baking or cooking. The length of a dress in the 20th century signalled another revolutionary change in the global vestimentary code. The long garments proved to be impractical in the post-industrial activities, and the skirts of all women in the rural and urban areas became globally shorter. Jewellery, made of precious metals or stones, is a universally recognized index of status and wealth, or, what Charles Peirce understood, as a sign, leading to other signs of greater semiovalue. From ancient Babylonia, Egypt, Phoenicia, Greece, and Crete to the modern countries of Europe, Asia, America and Africa, the precious metal is still the index of wealth. The accessibility of goods makes it frequently a **false sign**. Conformity to the prevalent fashion is also a familiar display of the sartorial signification.

The old/new paradigm is being successfully exploited by the clothing industry when the familiar vestimentary visual semes or the signifiatory motifs are yearly discarded as “old”, “uncomfortable”, “unappealing”, or “unaesthetic”, and the allegedly new visual modalities are introduced as authentically “appealing”, “suitable”, “innovative”, and “beautiful”. The partial success of this global campaign stems not only from the public willingness to conform due to the overpowering strength of the universal mimesis, but due to the unanimous global silent surrender. Any displacement of the familiar *seme* creates an illusion of newness while no new style is utterly new, but only partly new, but the “new old” is invariably presented as the absolutely new. The consumer embraces the new due to the “the primavera syndrome,” the delight in spring, multiple rejuvenations and permanent duplication of the natural semiosphere. The changing vestimentary semiotic patterns are symmetrical to the natural cycles – the seasonal shift stimulates redressing, the vestimentary vicissitudes, as well as even some behavioural changes.

The “second skin” penetrates deep into the human unconscious, forever unwilling to accept the notion of the End. Constant changes in vestimentary semiosis and its enthusiastic mimesis extend and prolong the dreamlike state of human existence, sustained by death denial and the existential delusions of eternal Youth and Beauty. Every new layer of dress indexically points out to the symbolic rejuvenated new skin, i.e. a new cycle in the eternal movement and being.

The semiotic upheavals in the other layers of the cultural text are intricately encoded into the vestimentary code. For instance, the Venetian and Florentine nobles used to be clad in soft velour fabric, adorned by lace and precious stones, while lower classes were not allowed the same. The Jews of Venice, Florence, Pisa and Siena had to wear distinctive red or yellow hats to be distinguished from the gentiles. Similarly, when the social semiosis shifts towards democratization, the sartorial system reflects it as well – the notorious blue jeans, the best signifiers of or false signs of equality, democracy, and liberty. Formerly a professional uniform of farmers and dockers, jeans have become a false sign of pseudodemocracy, the public postmodern day masquerade costume of students, Marxist or pseudo-marxist university professors and playful businessmen, imagining the working proletariat by “dressingdown”. John O’Neill wittily described this paradoxical masquerade, commenting on his own peculiar dress combination of a tie and silk shirt, and torn jeans, “I am an aristocrat at the top and a proletarian at the bottom” (1994).

A century after the post-industrial revolution, the clothes of males did not substantially change, at least, in urban Europe. Females, on the contrary, continued to signify intensely in the sartorial styles. Their active participation in the vestimentary coding process, marked by a total revolution in dress, went parallel with the sexual revolution, equal rights in the market place and political governance. The Russian 19th-century feminists asserted themselves first by their new hair styles – short hair cuts and berets. The revolution consisted in foregrounding what was previously invisible and shifting the visual focus of the style.

The general trend toward equality and democratization affected the wider manifestation of the erotic which was no longer a part of the segregated economy. The seductive quality of the attire, universally known but used only to a limited degree, was intensified in the days of what Marshall McLuhan labelled as the “tactile cool mass media”, which caused the global arousal, regardless of class, occupation, and religion. The erotic message of the post modern vestimentary code is even more intensified and saturated despite the energetic parade of feminism and women’s rights movement. The controversial Madonna shocked with the erotic and semiotically displaced attire – a large cross on a semi-naked, corsetted breast of the actress and the black fishnet stocking

Cross = sign of piety, morality, religiosity
 garter belt + fishnet stockings = sign of promiscuity
 cross on a naked body instead of a clad one

The artist monopolized on the **recognizable signs**, which she distorted, displaced and deconstructed freely, simultaneously relying heavily on the familiar imagery to produce her own post-modern **cultural signs**. Incidentally, married Madonna who switched to writing books changed her sartorial style to fit the new social role – a business suit and no cross.

5. COOL OR HOT SIGN?

Marshall McLuhan used these familiar cultural icons (hot/cold) to draw a map of the modern media, on the one hand, and to classify the society-consumer of the very media, on the other. To him,

there is a basic principle that distinguishes a hot medium like radio from a cool one like telephone or a hot medium like the movie from a cool one like TV. A hot medium is one that extends one single sense in "high definition". High definition is the state of being well filled with data

(McLuhan 1964, 36).

McLuhan tried to access the civilizing value of versatile sign-production within the diminishing capacity of the human brain and in the context of, what he perceived as "cold," self-amputating TV medium, reducing the experience to the vulgarized and barbaric form. According to McLuhan, TV was the modern water of the technocratic Narcissus where the global tribe may see its reflection, while being turned into a numb, narcoleptic state of a non-thinking being. The best example was the American cultural text, dominated by the visual signs:

In America, the intensely visual culture, TV has opened the doors of audile-tactile perception to the non-visual world of spoken languages and food, and the plastic arts (54).

He saw a profound symmetry between the ancient Biblical diagnosis of barbarism and the modern American cultural text. Quoting the 115th Psalm of the Hebrew text, McLuhan perfectly redescribed the modern barbaric, "cold" culture:

Their idols are silver and gold,
They are work of men's hands,
They have mouths, but they speak not;
Eyes they have, but they see not

(54–55)

This pathetic state of the modern American and global culture was attributed to TV, a metaphor of our displaced perception "where the seer is so inundated with imagery that the senses are dulled and numbed" (*ibid.*). Where McLuhan saw mere passivity and ineffective semiosis he could not but underestimate the actual impact and negative semiovalence of the visual. His statement, however, about the dangers of visual perception has proven to be rather prophetic:

Once we have surrendered our senses and nervous systems to the private manipulation of those, who would try to benefit from taking a lease on our eyes and ears, and rights left. Leasing our eyes and ears and nerves to commercial interests is like handing over the common speech to a private corporation

(McLuhan 1964, 73).

The producers of vestimentary signs have empowered the postmodern **vestemes** with multiple extra meanings, having bombarded the macrotext by the visual signs that no longer signify the purely vestimentary marking code, but a powerful controlling complementary noise for the pro-

duction of other signs. The vestimentary semiotic system invades the symbolic referentiality of the macrotext, going beyond the consumption, production, exchange and renovation of the garment while the political, ethnic, racial and sexual semiotics of the macrotext is reversed and subordinated to the *vesteme*. To buy a dress from Benetton means to endorse the allegedly progressive, broad-minded liberal views since their products stand for the modern progressive humanistic thinking. Ultimately, the vestimentary code of the postmodern society masks the calculating intentions of the industry and global capital. Unlike the Renaissance artist, whose taste, elegance and creativity were behind the sartorial designs of the past, now it is the capital, sale and product-obsessed marketing strategist, who manipulates, controls and vulgarises the popular beliefs for the needs of the dominant market and the global coloniser, subordinating Culture and Art to the industry, trade, machinery and profit. Despite the feminist movement and its achievements, the postmodern woman is clothed by Gap and Gucci, perfumed by Christian Dior and Oscar de la Renta, made-up by Marcelle and Max Factor – all of whom dictate the beauty type and the ideal presentment of the ideal woman-sign, ultimately valued only for her external gender entrapment.

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