Seminario Vestido, moda y cultura.

Construcción y comunicación de identidades sociales diversas: del estilo medieval al dark.

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THE FUNCTIONS OF FASHION AND CLOTHING

INTRODUCTION

The previous chapters have provided a definition of what fashion and clothing might be and of the possible differences between them. Fashion and clothing were defined or looked at in terms of communication and culture. The present chapter will concentrate on what fashion and clothing might be for, on the different functions or jobs that fashion and clothing might have. Another way of posing these questions would be to ask the reasons why people adorn their bodies, why people wear and have worn clothes. It will be noted that, while it makes sense to ask these questions of clothing or dress, it does not always make sense, or the same sort of sense, to ask them of fashion.

In *Sartor Resartus*, which was originally published periodically between 1833 and 1834, Thomas Carlyle reports how Teufelsdröckh, Professor of Things in General, imagines that the 'first purpose of Clothes . . . was not warmth or decency, but ornament'. 'The first spiritual want of a barbarous man is Decoration; as indeed we still see among the barbarous classes in civilised countries' (Carlyle 1987: 30–1). A little later, however, the Professor seems to be claiming a rhetorical function for clothes. He describes two individuals, 'one dressed in fine Red, the other in coarse threadbare Blue: Red says to Blue "Be hanged and anatomised"; Blue hears with a shudder and . . . marches sorrowfully to the gallows' (Carlyle 1987: 47–8). Teufelsdröckh then wonders, 'How is this?' How can this happen when Red has no physical hold or threat over Blue? What has happened is that Blue has accepted the necessity of performing an action that is ultimately prejudicial to him, seemingly on the basis of what Red is wearing. What Red is wearing performs what must be among the strongest of rhetorical functions. The Professor provides the answer:

> Thinking reader, the reason seems to me twofold: First that *Man is a spirit*, and bound by invisible bonds to *All Men*; Secondly, that *he wears Clothes*, which are the visible emblems of that fact. Has not

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> your Red, hanging individual, a horsehair wig, squirrel skins and a plush gown; whereby all mortals know that he is a JUDGE?
> (Carlyle 1987: 48)

Leaving aside for the moment the claim that 'all' mortals would know that Red is a Judge, (for, clearly, only those who were members of the society in which it had been agreed that these colours and materials signify 'Judge' would know this), two things are worth extracting from this passage. The first is that clothes here are clearly fulfilling a rhetorical function: they are convincing Blue that he should obey Red who is telling him to be hanged and anatomised. The second is the identification of clothes as the visible emblems of the invisible bonds between all men. Again, on the proviso that the word 'men' in this passage is shorthand for 'humanity' or 'all members of a community', it is clear that Teufelsdröckh considers clothes to have a role in the production and reproduction of society. Indeed, he says 'Society, which the more I think of it astonishes me the more, is founded upon Cloth' (Carlyle 1987: 48).

The claim, that society is founded upon cloth, is quite a claim to make. What it means is that part of the role or function of cloth, of dress or clothing in this context, is to make society possible, to be part of the production and reproduction of positions of relative power within a society. What Red and Blue are wearing in Teufelsdröckh's example produces their positions of relative power and authority. It will be noted that this is a completely different claim to the claim that positions of relative authority or status are merely reflected by clothing, by what people wear. And it can be noted what a powerful counter-argument it provides to popular ideas, considered in the Introduction, concerning the triviality or the relative unimportance of fashion and clothing: it is hardly trivial for society to be founded upon cloth, as Teufelsdröckh suggests. Many of the issues raised here will be returned to in chapters five and six where fashion, clothing, social class and the production and reproduction of society will be investigated.

PROTECTION

With warmth, decency and ornament, however, Carlyle's imaginary Professor has hit upon some of the functions most commonly attributed to clothing. The next three sections will consider each of them in turn. In *The Language of Clothes*, Lurie continues her pursuit of the metaphor of clothing as a language by arguing that 'we put on clothing for some of the same reasons as we speak'; these are to make life easier, to 'proclaim or disguise' our identity and to attract sexual attention. They are also, as she points out, essentially the same reasons as proposed by Laver in his Principles of Utility, Hierarchy and Seduction (Lurie 1992: 27). While

other chapters in the book deal with 'fashion and status' and 'fashion and sex', the section on 'why we wear clothes' in *The Language of Clothes* considers the idea of utility solely in terms of protective clothing. Clothing is seen as offering protection from the weather and some anecdotal examples concerning how protective clothing may become fashionable are provided. No attempt is made to account for how clothing communicates or disguises identity.

Like Lurie's, Rouse's account of why people wear clothes in *Understanding Fashion* (1989) refers to protection, modesty and attraction, but Rouse also includes communication as a major function of clothing, offering more detail and more analysis. Rouse's account of protection begins with the Functionalist anthropologist Malinowski, who argued that things like shelter were cultural responses to basic physical needs. In the case of shelter, the basic physical need is that of bodily comfort and as Polhemus and Procter point out, this basic need for bodily comfort 'prompts people throughout the world to create various forms of shelter' (Polhemus and Procter 1978: 9). These various forms of shelter may range from igloos to grass huts to three-bedroom semis and from umbrellas to clothing. According to this view, clothing, although not necessarily fashion, is a response to a physical need for protection and shelter.

Flügel devotes the whole of chapter four of *The Psychology of Clothes* to the notion of protection and clothing, despite arguing in chapter one that, as a motive or reason for clothing, protection 'has few if any advocates' (Flügel 1930: 16). To be fair, however, he does debate more fully whether protection or decoration is the primary motivation for clothing in the course of chapter four. The chapter is nothing if not exhaustive, covering surely all of the things, both material and immaterial, that clothing could possibly be conceived as protecting body and soul from. Clothing protects the body from the cold, the heat, 'accidents incidental to dangerous occupations and sports' (Flügel 1930: 70–1), human or animal enemies, and physical or psychological dangers.

These psychological dangers are manifold, including a whole range of 'magical and spiritual agencies' which may be warded off with the aid of amulets and other magical adornments (Flügel 1930: 71). Moral dangers may also be avoided by the use of thick, dark-coloured and stiff clothing, such as a monk's habit. This may sound implausible, but a Hasidic Jew seems to back Flügel up on this point. He said that 'Hasidic clothing serve[s] as a guard and a shield from sin and obscenity' (Poll 1965: 146). Finally, there is a more general way in which clothing may be said to offer protection and that is as protection 'against the general unfriendliness of the world as a whole' or 'as a reassurance against the lack of love' (Flügel 1930: 77). Flügel manages to link this function to 'womb fantasies', fantasies of returning to the 'warm, enveloping and protecting home where we spent the first nine months of our existence' (Flügel 1930: 77). It may be that similar feelings

are also engendered by 'favourite' items of clothing; of course, one is not actually protected from traffic accidents or the ill will of others, but such items may make one feel protected in this way.

As both Rouse and Flügel realise, however, there are various problems involved in saying that there are basic human needs to which clothing is the cultural response. One problem is that different cultures make different responses to those needs. Some cultures are so different from that of late twentieth-century Europe that it may even be difficult to recognise that they are responding to a basic need for protection at all. Both Rouse and Flügel use the example of the Yaggans or Yahgans of Tierra del Fuego, who were visited by Charles Darwin, to show how tenuous is the connection between clothing and the need for protection. According to Flügel,

> Darwin's often-quoted observation of the snow melting on the skins of these hardy savages seems to have brought home to a somewhat startled nineteenth-century generation that their own snug garments, however cosy and desirable they might appear, were not inexorably required by the necessities of the human constitution.
>
> (Flügel 1930: 16–17)

Wilson is less charitable towards Darwin and the rest of the nineteenth-century generation who, she says, would have seen these 'savages' being naked in the snow only as 'further evidence of their idiocy' (Wilson 1985: 55). The point is made, however, that the link between clothing and protection from inclement weather is not a natural one, even if it was not strictly necessary to go all the way to Tierra del Fuego to find an example; the Ancient Britons, for example, are well known for wearing only woad, and the Picts are so called because they decorated their bodies with tattoos or pictures.

It might also be worth pointing out that it is not only between different societies and cultures that the response to the need for protection from the weather will vary: variation can be found, even within the same culture, in the response to the 'need' for protection. There are groups of young men in the cities of the north-east of England, for example, who display almost 'Fuegian' indifference to the cold, walking the streets in the bitterest cold with only a T-shirt for protection. Rouse refers to girls in the 1960s, who would brave snow drifts and below-freezing temperatures dressed only 'in the briefest of mini skirts and coats' (Rouse 1989: 2–3). Given these arguments, it would certainly be unwise to argue too strongly that protection is the most important function of clothing. This is not to suggest that nobody ever wears an item of dress for protection, that would clearly be absurd, but variation within cultures and between different cultures as to what constitutes protection caution against seeing protection as the prime function of clothing.

MODESTY AND CONCEALMENT

The cases for and against modesty as the prime reason for wearing clothes bear some resemblance to the arguments noted above concerning protection. The argument for modesty revolves around the idea that certain body parts are indecent or shameful and should be covered so that they cannot be seen. Both Flügel and Rouse locate the origin of attitudes such as this within the Judaeo-Christian tradition. Flügel argues that a great increase in modesty occurred after the collapse of the Graeco-Roman civilisation. This increase was the result of the influence of Christianity, which places great emphasis on the soul as opposed to the body. As Flügel points out, Christianity teaches that paying attention to the care and luxury of the body is 'prejudicial to the salvation of the soul', and one of the best ways of diverting attention from the body is to hide it (Flügel 1930: 57). Hiding the body by means of clothes thus becomes associated with the desire to avoid feelings of sin and shamefulness.

Rouse takes a slightly different approach, relating the wearing of clothes to the understanding of the Genesis story in the Bible. Before the Fall, Adam and Eve 'were both naked . . . and they were not ashamed' (Genesis 2 vs. 5, quoted in Rouse 1989: 8). After Adam and Eve had eaten the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge, 'the eyes of both of them were opened and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig-leaves together and made themselves aprons' (Rouse 1989: 8). Here it is explicitly the case that humanity's recognition of nakedness as a shameful condition leads to the wearing of clothes. This quote may also be used to introduce the idea that one of the functions of clothing, if not always of fashion, is to distinguish masculine from feminine: Steele quotes Merriam's humorous account of Adam's 'manly, rugged . . . outdoor' style fig-leaf in contrast with Eve's 'dainty, feminine, definitely slimming' fig-leaf (Kidwell and Steele 1989: 6).

Rouse suggests that for a long time the story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden was believed to be literally true that this was actually what happened. Hard as this might be to believe, it explains the actions of many western Europeans, and of many western European missionaries, in judging new civilisations and cultures on the basis of whether they wore clothes and, if so, how far they approximated to western styles. As Brown points out 'early missionaries often encouraged their converts to adopt western dress' (in Roach and Eicher 1965: 10). Polhemus and Procter recount how, having been introduced to 'snug . . . cosy' clothing by Darwin and the others on the Beagle, the 'savages' of Tierra del Fuego suffered ill-health and a decline in population. They imply that the clothing and the ill-health were not unconnected (Polhemus and Procter 1978: 10).

The case against modesty as the main function of clothing is succinctly made by Brown: 'There is', she says, '. . . no essential connection between

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clothing and modesty since every society has its own conception of modest dress and behaviour' (in Roach and Eicher 1965: 10). This is not to say, of course, that there are no conceptions of shame or modesty, but rather that those conceptions will be different in different cultures. There is no definition of modesty or shame that is natural or essential and therefore found in all cultures. So, while some form of self-adornment may well be a 'necessary sign of full humanity' (Hollander 1993: 83), what counts as proper adornment will vary from culture to culture. It might also be pointed out that, even within the same culture or society, different interpretations of modesty or decency will be found.

Examples of the cultural relativity of notions of modesty or shame abound. Hoebel recounts a 'favoured tale among anthropologists' which concerns the somewhat dubious practices of Baron von Nordenskiold on one of his Amazonian expeditions. The Baron wanted to buy the labrets or facial plugs of a Botocudo woman,

> who stood all unabashed in customary nudity before him. Only irresistible offers of trade goods at long last tempted her to remove and hand over her labrets. When thus stripped of her proper raiment, she fled in shame and confusion into the jungle.
>
> (in Roach and Eicher 1965: 16–17)

Polhemus and Procter tell a similar story concerning Masai women, 'whose genitals are covered only by an absurdly brief leather skirt' but who would be 'overcome with shame' if anyone, even their husbands, should see them without their brass earrings (Polhemus and Procter 1978: 10).

Examples of the relativity of notions of modesty or shame within a culture might include Rouse's example of underwear. She argues that if 'we' (presumably meaning late twentieth-century Europeans, although gender is not clear) were to appear wearing our underwear while sitting on the bus, we would still feel embarrassed and indecent, even though the prohibited parts of our bodies were covered and we were 'theoretically decent' (Rouse 1989: 8). The gender of 'we' is significant in this regard if the offence of appearing in public without any clothes on is considered. Men who appear naked in public can be charged with indecent exposure, but women will be charged with causing a breach of the peace. Indecency is relative here in that only men's nakedness is considered indecent by law.

Hoebel concludes that

> Such circumstances make it perfectly clear that the use of clothing does not rise out of any innate sense of modesty, but that modesty results from customary habits of clothing or ornamentation of the body and its parts.
>
> (in Roach and Eicher 1965: 17)

This sounds counter-intuitive, that modesty is a result of wearing clothes rather than a reason for wearing them, but it is a point with which Rouse also agrees. Using the example of young children, who are 'conspicuously lacking in a sense of modesty', often to the intense embarrassment of their parents, Rouse points out that children have to be taught which parts of their bodies are shameful and therefore need to be covered (Rouse 1989: 9). Learnt behaviour is cultural behaviour and cannot possibly be the result of nature or essence. This point may be used to add a further gloss to Carlyle's point, about society being founded on cloth (see p. 48); society is founded upon cloth insofar as socialisation into the standards of modesty through adornment is required in order that an individual becomes a member of a society, and thus that society continues or is reproduced.

There would appear to be one or two forms of concealment that are not necessarily to do with modesty. As Holman points out, some dress or clothing performs the function of camouflage (Holman 1980: 8). It is not only military dress or uniform that performs this function; Holman suggests that cosmetics which hide blemishes on the skin, 'deodorants whose smell masks body odours' and clothing which obscures the shape of body parts may all be considered to be camouflaging something in some way. All are making something, a blemish, a smell or a feature, either not appear at all or or to appear smaller or less obtrusive, by means of covering or masking. It may be worth speculating that more clothing and fashion than one might originally suspect performs this function. It was, after all, Beau Brummell, the leader of early nineteenth-century fashion and personification of fashionable clothing, who suggested that if John Bull turns to observe your clothing then you are not well dressed. Some fashion and clothing has the function of camouflaging the wearer in order that they do not draw attention to themselves. The suggestion is, then, that more fashion and clothing than might be suspected is worn simply to 'fit in' with those around one, and in such cases the name for that clothing might as well be 'camouflage'. In these instances, garments are being worn in order that attention is *not* drawn to the wearer.

IMMODESTY AND ATTRACTION

It should come as no surprise to learn that exactly the opposite theory of the function of clothing to that based upon modesty has also been proposed. On this account, the motivation for wearing clothes is precisely that of immodesty or exhibitionism. People have argued that it is the job of clothing to attract attention to the body rather than to deflect or repel that attention. The body, then, is more openly on display according to the immodesty argument, rather than being hidden or disguised, as it is according to the modesty argument. It may be of interest to note that, where the modesty argument stressed that a move towards full or proper

humanity was accomplished with the wearing of clothes, the arguments concerning immodesty stress the move towards a more animal-like status that is accomplished by wearing clothes. Arguments that stressed modesty as a function of fashion and clothing emphasised the humanity of the wearer; arguments that stress immodesty tend to emphasize the animality of the wearer.

Rudofsky, for example, is explicit on this matter; he argues that 'man's and animal's clothes serve much the same purpose – sexual selection' (in Rouse 1989: 11). The equation of man with animal is unproblematic for Rudofsky, even to the point where he feels happy referring to the stuff that animals are covered with (fur, hair and feathers) as 'clothes'. The only difference, it seems, is that roles are reversed between the animal and human worlds. In what Rudofsky calls the 'animal kingdom', it is the male who appears in great finery, and uses it to attract a mate. In human society, however, he thinks that it is the female 'who has to track and ensnare the male by looking seductive' (in Rouse 1989: 11). Clothing as well as fashion are explained by reference to the need for women to attract a mate. According to Rudofsky the woman has to keep her mate 'perpetually excited by changing her shape and colours' (in Rouse 1989: 11). This is one of the few occasions thus far that fashion, as opposed to dress or clothing, has been made available to analysis in terms of function.

Rouse also reports Laver's attempts to explain clothing in terms of immodesty or display. Laver employs what he calls the Seduction Principle, the Utility Principle and the Hierarchical Principle in these attempts (see p. 48). The first and last of these principles are used to explain the differences in the sorts of display that are achieved by men's and women's dress. Women's clothes, he says, are 'governed' by the Seduction Principle and men's clothes are 'governed' by the Hierarchical Principle (in Rouse 1989: 12). That is, women's clothes are intended to make the wearer more attractive to the opposite sex because, throughout history and prehistory, men have selected 'partners in life' on the basis of the woman's attractiveness. Men's clothes, however, are intended to display and 'enhance social status' because women, 'for the greater part of human history', have selected their life partners on the basis of their ability to 'maintain and protect a family' (in Rouse 1989: 12). So, women's clothes display the woman's sexual attractiveness and men's clothes display the man's social status.

Rudofsky's and Laver's positions have also been associated with what has become known as the 'theory of the shifting erogenous zone'. This is the idea that clothing, and in some cases fashion, is the result of the ways in which different areas of the body are seen as attractive at different times in history. Flügel, for example, claims that a culture's sexual interest in the female anatomy continually shifts from one part to another, now the bust, now the behind, now the legs and so on. He claims that these

shifts are reflected in the ways in which fashions change (Flügel 1930: 160. Cf. Laver 1969b: 241). Vivienne Westwood's mid-1990s experiments with bustles might be seen as an attempt to shift attention to women's bottoms, as opposed to their breasts or legs, in the interests of accentuating a 'new' erogenous zone.

There are various problems with this type of account. For instance, it is often unclear whether reference is being made to all clothing or only women's clothing. And, if it is said to be fashion that is explained by the theory, then it is often difficult to see where the definition of fashion as change ends and the shifting erogenous zone begins. As Steele argues, 'in the past, men wore clothing that was at least as erotic and extravagant as women's clothing' and 'yet no one has suggested that changes in men's fashions reflected ... shifting sexual interests on the part of women' (Steele 1985: 35). She might also have pointed out that, as men wear or wore erotic dress, so women wear and have worn dress that has marked their social or political status. Steele herself seems to be unsure here whether it is clothing or fashion that is to be explained by these shifting erogenous zones, but the point is made that there seems to be some asymmetry between the treatment afforded to men and women with regard to their clothes. The argument here is that, if it is men's clothes and fashions that are to be explained, then why have the fluctuations in women's interests in the male anatomy not been chronicled?

Steele also argues that, while it is 'perfectly plausible that different fashions could emphasize different parts of the body', it is not to say that the changes reflect 'society's shifting interest in these various parts of the body' (Steele 1985: 36). She says that fashion has more to do with the way in which one style comes after another, as some kind of almost 'natural' progression which adheres to the particular rules of modesty in vogue at the time, than it does with the perceived attractiveness of a part of the body. If it is indeed fashion that is to be explained, as opposed to dress or clothing, then it is very easy to make the mistake of identifying changes in women's fashion as a culture's changing interest in different parts of women's anatomy.

Finally, Rouse is surely correct to suggest that explanations of either clothing or fashion of this type 'show a considerable disregard for historical accuracy' (Rouse 1989: 12). There have been many periods in history when men have worn extremely elaborate and attractive clothing. And, as noted above, it is hardly unknown for women to dress in such a way that their social status is displayed and enhanced, whether that status is high or low. One might also point out that, in the same way as modesty and concealment vary from culture to culture, so too do immodesty and display. While not wishing to deny that a lot of clothing, and fashion, is intended to display and enhance the sexual or social attractiveness of both men and women, it cannot be denied that many non-European cultures

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set little or no store by such displays. Nor can it be denied that there is variation as to what counts as sexual or social attractiveness between those cultures that do.

But it is probably the set of assumptions regarding the natural or essential behaviour of men and women that is most offensive in both of these accounts. Both assume that there are modes or patterns of behaviour that are natural to men and women, and that they are natural to them in the same way as behaviour is natural to animals. Thus they assume that it is natural for women to be decorative and seductive. They both assume that it is the natural role for men to be seduced by female beauty and then to want only to look after these seductive creatures. As Rouse says, 'clothing cannot be reduced to a mere trigger for a biological mating instinct' (Rouse 1989: 15). It might be worth pointing out that these types of accounts also seem to be firmly heterosexualist, in the sense that none of them conceive the possibility that men and women might wear some clothing to attract sexual partners of the same sex.

COMMUNICATION

In the previous chapter, fashion, clothing and dress were said to be cultural phenomena insofar as they were signifying practices. They were, that is, some of the ways in which a social order was experienced and communicated. So, by means of fashion, dress and clothing, an individual's position in that social order was experienced and communicated. And there is a sense in which all of the examples used so far have presupposed a communicative function. Roach and Eicher point out, for example, that fashion and clothing symbolically tie a community together (Roach and Eicher 1979: 18). It is suggested that social agreement on what will be worn is itself a social bond which in turn reinforces other social bonds. The unifying function of fashion and clothing serves to communicate membership of a cultural group both to those who are members of it and to those who are not.

In terms of protection against the elements, the Yaggans, with snow melting on their skins, are experiencing and communicating their place in a particular social order just as much, and in much the same way, as the Europeans with their snug and cosy garments. The Masai women, with their absurdly brief skirts and brass earrings (see p. 52), are also communicating their membership of a cultural group and in much the same way as European women, who will also take certain precautions against immodesty while wearing absurdly brief skirts. Protection, camouflage, modesty and immodesty are all ways of communicating a position in a cultural and social order, both to the other members of those orders and to those outside them. This section will look at fashion, dress and clothing in terms of their communicative functions.

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Holman's essay 'Apparel as communication' (Holman 1980) is fairly comprehensive on these matters. It provides an exhaustive, although not very detailed, taxonomy of the functions of apparel and is written from a social-psychological standpoint. Roach and Eicher's essay, 'The language of personal adornment' (Roach and Eicher 1979) is both comprehensive and detailed. It covers the matter of communication and clothing from an anthropological standpoint. The following account is heavily indebted to Roach and Eicher, who identify ten kinds of information which clothing may be used to communicate.

INDIVIDUALISTIC EXPRESSION

The relation between clothing, or fashion, and the idea of individual expression is more complex than may at first appear, and is dealt with in more detail in chapter four. This section is not concerned with explaining how clothes express, but with the different types of thing which they may be said to express. It was noted in the introduction to chapter two that one kind of popular prejudice concerning fashion, clothing and communication involved beliefs concerning the link between colours and moods. It cannot be denied that clothing and fashion may be used to 'reflect . . . reinforce, disguise or create mood' (Roach and Eicher 1979: 8). Bright, contrasting colours may reflect light-heartedness, at least in parts of the West. Linear contrast, where lines change direction or intersect, may also be used to reflect inner dynamism. As Roach and Eicher say, 'thus, at least for Americans, contrasting line and colour can express exuberant mood to others and also reinforce the same mood in the wearer' (Roach and Eicher 1979: 8).

The wearing of what are perceived as happy, joyous lines and colours may be used in the attempt to change a person's mood, from down-hearted and melancholic, for example. The purchasing and wearing of new clothes is an increasingly well-documented way in which some people attempt to alter their mood. It is increasingly well-documented as it seems that more and more people are becoming 'addicted' to the feelings they get when they do wear something new. Those feelings may be of increased or reinforced uniqueness or of pleasure in presenting a different appearance to the world, and it is not difficult to understand the appeal of those feelings to certain people. Individuals may also derive aesthetic pleasure from either 'creating personal display' or from appreciating that of others (Roach and Eicher 1979: 7), although these aesthetic qualities will inevitably be given non-aesthetic meanings. They will be interpreted or used to stand for things that are not simply to do with aesthetics: these will be dealt with in chapter four.

Simmel's argument that fashion depends upon the conflict between 'adaptation to society and individual departure from its demands' (Simmel 1971: 295) is also relevant at this point (see p. 11). Roach and Eicher

suggest that the emotional survival of humans somehow depends upon their ability to strike a balance between conforming to society and preserving a sense of self-identity. Fashion and clothing are ways in which individuals can differentiate themselves as individuals and declare some form of uniqueness. Clothes that are rare, either because they are very old or very new, for example, may be used to create and express an individual's uniqueness. Clothes that are neither very old nor very new, and which are moreover mass-produced, may also be used to create this effect. By combining different items and different types of items, individual and, indeed, unique dress may be effected. The ways in which these types of difference and combinations work to produce meaning will be introduced and fully explained as 'syntagmatic' and 'paradigmatic' differences and combinations in chapter four. They may also be seen and followed up in the account of bricolage, the use of odds and ends to create new and original works, in chapter seven.

SOCIAL WORTH OR STATUS

Clothing and fashion are often used to indicate social worth or status, and people often make judgements concerning other people's social worth or status on the basis of what those people are wearing. Status may result or accrue from various sources, from occupation, the family, sex, gender, age or race, for example. It may be fixed or it may be changeable; the former case is known as 'ascribed' status and the latter as 'achieved'. So, one's occupational status may be that of a refuse collector, a local government officer or a university lecturer. Family status is a result of being a brother, or a mother, or a second cousin, for example. Status that is the result of one's age may be gauged by whether one is over or under the age of eighteen in Great Britain, or whether one is an old age pensioner, for example. Clearly, status that is the result of one's sex, race or family position cannot be changed, easily and is fixed or 'ascribed'. Occupational or marital status are more easily changed and are therefore 'achieved', at least in most western societies.

All cultures take great care to mark different statuses clearly. They probably take even greater care to mark those who are undergoing changes in status. Anthropological accounts of clothing and fashion will, consequently, be extremely interested in studying these phenomena as well as those examples where status is deliberately blurred or made unclear (see Leach 1976: 55–60). The advertisement for Levi jeans which appeared in the mid-1990s featuring a New York transvestite being leered at by a lascivious cabbie until 'she' notices some facial stubble and begins to shave, plays upon such ambiguous status. All cultures will use clothing, if not fashion, to distinguish male from female, most will use it to mark the difference between secular and religious classes, and some will use it to

mark membership of different families. Major changes in status, such as going from being single to being married, or going from being married to being a widow/er, will be marked by all cultures and are often accompanied by the most elaborate and costly changes in clothing. In many western societies, the transition from being single to being married typically involves the bride wearing white, and being marked by something like a honeymoon. In those same societies, the transition from being married to being a widow typically involves the woman wearing black and being marked by a period of mourning.

Various sumptuary laws, enacted throughout the world at different times, may be seen as examples of dress being tied to status. Roach and Eicher refer to an ordinance passed in late fourteenth-century Nuremburg which declared that 'no burgher, young or old, shall wear his hair parted; they shall wear the hair in tufts, as it has been worn of old' (Roach and Eicher 1979: 12). This is interesting in that it is social status that is singled out here; status as it relates to age is deemed irrelevant. They also refer to a highly detailed set of laws from the Tokugawa period in Japan (1600–1867) which specified the exact fibres out of which each social class could make their sandals (Roach and Eicher 1979: 13). Because it involves the possibility and desirability of moving between classes, it may be said that this example concerns fashion, as well as clothing or dress. It was noted in the Introduction how fashion seemed to require the possibility of moving between classes in order to exist.

The use of clothing to indicate status as it relates to age may be seen in some of Lurie's chapter on youth and age. She touches on the example of long and short trousers (Lurie 1992: 45–6). There may no longer be many young boys that undergo the experience of fighting for the right to wear long trousers at school when their mothers insist that they wear demeaning and childish short trousers. But those that do will not forget the satisfaction that accompanies wearing long trousers. Lurie also refers to the way in which very young girls wear 'completely non-functional' AA and AAA 'training bras' as 'a sign' that they will eventually become women (Lurie 1992: 45–6). In the cases of both boys and girls it is the status, the feeling that one is a grown-up man or woman, that is indicated by the various garments and which is so desired. It might be worth speculating that the so-called 'Young Fogey' look of the 1990s, in which relatively young men dress in the manner of an older, or old-fashioned model of masculinity, with tweeds, sensible brogues and twill trousers, for example, is another version of this phenomenon.

DEFINITION OF SOCIAL ROLE

The different types of status noted above, regarding class, occupation, sex and so on, are all accompanied or surrounded by a number of

expectations. These expectations define or express how individuals occupying those positions of status are to behave, and may be referred to as roles. A person's social role, then, is produced by their status and refers to the sorts of ways in which they are expected to behave. For example, the status of a wife is accompanied by the role of wife, and the status of local government officer is accompanied by the role of local government officer. In all societies, wives are expected to behave in certain ways and not in others. In societies that have them, local government officers are also expected to behave in certain ways but not in others.

Clothing and fashion may also be used to indicate or define the social roles that people have. They may be taken as signs that a certain person occupies a certain role and may therefore be expected to behave in a particular way. It has been claimed that the different clothes, and the different types of clothes, worn by different people enables social interaction to take place more smoothly than it otherwise might. The fashions and clothes worn by doctors, nurses, visitors and patients in a hospital, for example, indicate the role of the people wearing them. Knowledge of the person's role is necessary in order that one behaves appropriately towards them. This sort of knowledge could be seen as helping to avoid embarrassment; as a visitor to a hospital, one already has a good idea as to how to behave towards the doctor and what sort of behaviour to expect from him or her. The Hollywood film *Working Girl* shows how fashion and clothing signal social roles, and also how they may be used to disguise social position. The secretary (Melanie Griffith) abandons her cheap, working-class clothes (along with her cheap, working-class boyfriend), and literally steals her nasty, 'bony-assed', female boss's clothes in order to appear, and be taken seriously, as a businesswoman (as well as attracting the romantic interest of serious businessman Harrison Ford).

Clearly, another way of looking at the relation between social role and fashion or clothing is to see the latter as making inequalities in the former appear to be natural or proper. For example, the differences in clothing between doctor and nurse may be understood as legitimating differences of power and status between the two to the extent that it is thought proper for the doctor to be patronising and impatient to the nurse, and for the nurse to suffer such indignities without complaint. The difference in status, and the different expectations with regard to behaviour, are made to appear natural and proper when they are given concrete form in clothing and fashions. The difference in what the individuals are wearing seems to justify treating them differently. The way that fashion and clothing may be used to be critical of the ways that inequalities have been made to appear natural and proper is touched on by Roach and Eicher. They refer to the ways in which, in the late 1960s and early 1970s,

> racial roles, the roles of rich and poor, the roles of male and female were questioned and efforts made, particularly by the young to articulate new roles within all these categories and to wear dress that reflected these new roles.
>
> (Roach and Eicher 1979: 11)

These points will come up again in chapters five and six, where they will be treated in more detail and in relation to the reproduction and critique of gender and class identities and positions.

ECONOMIC WORTH OR STATUS

While it is obviously closely related to social worth and also to social role, economic status is slightly different to both. Economic status is concerned with position within an economy. This section will look at the ways in which fashion and clothing may indicate productive or occupational roles within an economy. As Roach and Eicher point out, 'adorning oneself can reflect connections with the system of production characteristic of the particular economy within which one lives' (Roach and Eicher 1979: 13). Fashion and clothing may reflect, that is, the sort of economic organisation that one lives in, as well as one's status within that economy.

Roach and Eicher suggest that the uniform of policemen (Figure 3), predominantly dark blue, with a helmet and badges, indicate what sort of services may be expected from them. They suggest that a nurse's uniform does the same thing, also giving an indication of the sorts of services which may be expected from someone wearing it. Uniforms here give an indication of economic worth or status insofar as they indicate the services, as opposed to the roles, to be expected from an individual. This aspect of clothing and fashion may be described as signifying the economic, or contractual side of adornment, as opposed to the social or the cultural side. And it may be found on a number of levels.

In addition to giving some idea of the sorts of services to be expected of people, clothing may indicate what sort of job they have. Fashion and clothing may suggest at which level in an economy people operate or work. The well-known descriptions of people and their jobs as either white-collar or blue-collar indicate what sort of jobs those people do. White-collar means that the person's job requires wearing a suit or smart jacket with a shirt and tie, or that it is not a job that involves using one's hands. Blue-collar means that the job involves manual labour. The use of the phrase 'pink-collar', to indicate a white-collar worker who is a woman, does not seem to have taken off in quite the same way as the others. This may be as a result of confusion with other uses, in similar contexts, of the word 'pink', which indicates that homosexuality is intended. However, white and blue, in the context of collars, indicate economic status; white-collar

workers are generally perceived as being of higher status than blue-collar workers. It may be, of course, that this perception is only made by the white-collar workers whose job it is to write about such matters.

Roach and Eicher suggest that, in America, 'women's dress is generally more ambiguous in its symbolism of occupational role than is men's' (Roach and Eicher 1979: 13). They are writing about the large numbers of women 'who are exclusively homemakers' here. They argue that it is partly because industrial societies recognise only occupations which produce income in the form of money that women's dress is ambiguous. As such societies do not recognise homemaking as a proper occupation, the women who are homemakers have no clearly defined or perceived status in the economic structure. There is, therefore, no form of dress that could 'correspond' to that status. And women's dress and fashions are, therefore, for the most part ambiguous with regard to economic or occupational status.

They argue that nineteenth-century traditions are also partly responsible for this ambiguity. Nineteenth-century expectations that women would perform a more decorative role and indulge in more personal display than men have persisted into the twentieth century. This means that women's dress and fashion, even when women are working alongside men in white-collar occupations, still tend not to indicate occupational or economic status. There are 'occasional' attempts to indicate women's occupational status by means of clothing and fashion, such as the adoption in turn-of-the-century America of something approaching the dominant white-collar male worker's dress. But, as Roach and Eicher say, it may be that the comparative novelty of white-collar work for women has meant that fashion and clothing have yet to catch up (Roach and Eicher 1979: 14).

POLITICAL SYMBOL

The workings of power are also clearly very closely connected to economic and social status. And it is clear that fashion and clothing are just as closely connected to the workings of power. However, it is as well at least to try to keep the analytical issues separate in these matters. This section revisits some of the issues that were introduced above, in the discussion of the definitions of fashion and non- or anti-fashion. Roach and Eicher suggest that 'adornment has long had a place in the house of power' (Roach and Eicher 1979: 15), and it must be emphasised that both fashion and non- or anti-fashion may be analysed in terms of their political function. What has been referred to as fashion and what has been referred to as adornment, which is not necessarily fashion, may be used to illustrate the workings of power.

While the definition of power will be dealt with in more detail in chapters five and six, it is worth indicating that fashion and clothing are

implicated in the workings of two different conceptions or kinds of power. These may be characterised as 'Power' and 'power'. The first refers to the power of the state, of government or party-political power; 'power' refers to the workings of power between people, on a much smaller scale. The latter, 'power', refers to the ways in which power works between parents and children, for example, or between lecturers and students, and the former refers to the ways in which power is exercised by the state or representatives of the state. Professor Teufelsdröckh's Hanging Judge (see pp. 47–8) would be an example of someone exercising 'Power'.

Roach and Eicher suggest that Napoleon 'reintroduced types of dress that were symbols of state from the old regime to support the legitimacy of his empire' (Roach and Eicher 1979: 15). Modes of dress from a previous state regime are being used here to attempt to give a new regime legitimacy by hijacking some of the grandeur of that previous regime. This would be an example of the relation between clothing and 'Power'; here power is to do with the operation and legitimation of the state, and clothing is being used as a way of helping to achieve that operation and legitimation. The example of anti-fashion that was used above in chapter one, Queen Elizabeth's coronation gown, may also be seen as an example of the relation between clothing and 'Power'. The 'traditional' and 'fixed' nature of the gown is a sign of continuity, a way of making the House of Windsor appear legitimate and proper. An example of fashion being put to the service of political power may be seen in the use of beauty spots in eighteenth-century England. Apparently, political preference could be indicated at this time by wearing one's beauty spot on either the right or the left cheek. Whig women wore their spot on the right cheek and Tory women wore it on the left; those claiming political neutrality wore two spots, one on each cheek (Roach and Eicher 1979: 16).

Examples of the relation between fashion, clothing and 'power' include the late 1960s and early 1970s youth, mentioned above. These people adapted their fashions and clothing to try to reflect the new roles between different social groups. Thus, attempted changes in power relations between different races and different sexes were expressed or reflected in terms of fashion and dress. Many workers in professions like social work are wary of wearing anything that will mark them out as an obvious figure of power to their clients and will tend to avoid a show of opulence. Consequently fashions and clothing that will mark them out as establishment or authority figures will be avoided and some sort of attempt made to dress on a level with the client. Doing this, of course, they run the risk of falling into the 'sandals and oatmeal-coloured hand-knits' stereotype. In the 1970s and 1980s, various American police forces abandoned their uniforms and adopted civilian clothes in order to appear more friendly and approachable. This may also be explained as an attempt to transform, or at least camouflage, the perceived power relations between the state and its citizens.

MAGICO-RELIGIOUS CONDITION

It seems plausible to suggest that this section will be dealing with dress and clothing, rather than with fashion. This is because magical and religious practices rely for their effects on elements like the fixed or god-given status of officials, and the high value placed upon tradition and the maintenance of order. Teachings and practices that alter with the fashion are not religious or magical practices. Reference to the magical or religious use of clothing has been made above, in the section on protection (see p. 48). Flügel, for example, refers to the use of amulets and other magical adornments to ward off malevolent magical and spiritual agencies (Flügel 1930: 71). He suggests, less convincingly, that the thick, dark, stiff cloth of monk's habits may help to avoid or escape moral dangers. This section, however, is more concerned with the use of clothing to indicate such things as belief and strength of belief.

So, whether worn permanently or as a temporary measure, dress and clothing may indicate membership of, or affiliation to, a particular religious group or denomination. They may also signify status or position within that group or denomination, and they may indicate strength or depth of belief or participation. Crawley cites numerous cases of dress being worn temporarily for religious or magical purposes. He refers, for example, to the Muslim practice of wearing only the *ihram* when undertaking the *hajj* or pilgrimage to Mecca. The *ihram* consists of 'two seamless wrappers, one passed around the loins, the other over the shoulders'. And he notes the Zulu practice, reported in 1857, of tearing up and trampling into the fields the mantle worn by the king. At the festival of new fruits the king would dance in this mantle, made of grass or herbs and corn leaves (Crawley 1965b: 138–41).

Among the clearest and most well-known examples of religious dress are those of the Roman Catholic clergy and the Hasidic Jews. Roach and Eicher (1965), as well as Rouse (1989) and Poll (1965) may be consulted on the latter. Poll provides the most detailed account, describing the dress codes of each of the six classes making up the Hasidic community of New York. For example, the *Rebbes* constitute the highest class in this particular social order; they are the most religious and their observance and behaviour are entirely ruled by their religion. The *Sheine Yiden* are the third group; they are known as religious professionals, teaching the Talmud, performing ritual slaughter and circumcisions. The *Yiden* are the lowest class in this order; their behaviour and observance is neither intensive nor frequent.

Each of these ranks and levels of observance has a corresponding dress code. The *Rebbes* wear all of the regalia, *shich* and *zocken* (shoes and socks), *shtreimel* and *bekecher* (sable fur hat and long silk coat), *kapote* (long overcoat worn as a jacket), *biber hat* (hat made out of beaver) and

bord and *payes*, (beard and side-locks). In the middle, the *Sheine Yiden* do not wear the *shich* and *zocken* or the *shtreimel* and *bekecher*, but they do wear the other things that the *Rebbes* wear. The *Yiden*, however, wear only the minimum of regalia, the 'dark, double-breasted suits that button from right to left' (Poll 1965: 142–57).

It is clear that dress is being used here to indicate strength and depth of religious belief and observance in a number of very intricate ways. The different forms of dress indicate first, and most obviously, that one is a particular type of Jew and second, but less clearly (at least to the *Goyim*), which level or grade of observance one practises.

SOCIAL RITUALS

Social rituals, such as weddings and funerals, have been mentioned above with regard to the use of fashion and clothing to indicate different positions of social worth or status. In this brief section, fashion and clothing will be considered simply in terms of the way in which they may be used to mark the beginning and end of rituals, and to differentiate between ritual and non-ritual. In many western rituals it is expected that, while the ritual is taking place, those involved in it will wear something different from their usual attire. One does not normally wear the things one wears every day to a wedding or a funeral. In the former case, one usually wears something smarter, newer or better than everyday wear. In the latter case, what one wears is to a great extent prescribed by the rules of the ritual.

RECREATION

Recreation may be seen as the obverse, or other side, of ritual. Where ritual is formal and rule-governed, recreation is supposed to be more informal, even if it is not necessarily less rule-governed. Fashion and clothing may be used as recreation or to indicate the beginning or end of periods of recreation. The former requires either time or time and money and, in this respect, may begin to function as an indicator of social class. As Roach and Eicher point out, in societies where 'leisure is a scarce resource monopolised by a social elite', having the time and money to engage in leisure will signify membership of that elite (Roach and Eicher 1979: 19).

In the same way that fashion and clothing were seen above to signal the beginning or end of ritual, they may also be seen to signal whether one is engaging in recreation. Clearly some recreational activities, like cricket or fishing, will demand a change of clothing and permit one to show off the latest fashions in those activities. Others, like drinking in pubs or watching television, will not necessarily demand a change of

clothing. Where the latter do involve a change of clothing, it is interesting to note that while members of lower social classes generally dress up to go out, members of higher social classes generally dress down. Members of lower classes will want to look smarter than they do while maybe working manually during the day. Members of higher classes, however, will want to wear something less formal than the relatively smart clothing they have been wearing all day. This is clearly a substantial generalisation, paying no attention to either the age or the sex of those involved, but it may be usefully compared with the account of white- and blue-collar workers in relation to Veblen's account of conspicuous consumption found in chapter five. There it will be seen that Veblen argues that members of the higher social classes will dress in clothes that are expensive, wasteful and both difficult and costly to care for. Here, on the contrary, it is suggested that in certain circumstances the opposite is true.

To point out that fashion and clothing have a recreational aspect is partly to indicate that they may be the occasions of pleasure, that they may simply be fun, ways of deriving pleasure. These are not necessarily aspects that are emphasised by writers on clothing and fashion. This may be because fashion and clothing already have enough problems in being derided as trivial pursuits; writers may be reluctant to add to the idea that they are only a bit of fun that nobody need take very seriously.

There are at least two misconceptions operating here. The first is that fashion and clothing may be seen as merely a bit of fun. This chapter has proposed that fashion and clothing are not only fun, but that they also have social and cultural functions. It has also suggested that these social and cultural functions are not simply appendages to the main business of human life, but that they are essential in a number of ways to that business. The second misconception is that pleasure and fun are simple matters. While they will be discussed in more detail in chapters five and six in relation to gender, it is worth raising here the issues of gendered pleasures and of different kinds of pleasures.

Flügel, for example, spends what will seem to some a suspiciously large part of *The Psychology of Clothes* discussing the somatic pleasure of wearing clothes. Many people derive a great deal of pleasure from the feel of certain fabrics and textiles. But Flügel comments at length and in some detail on the pleasure experienced by fit, young bodies in moving those bodies and in flexing the muscles of the body. He also writes of the pleasures to be gained from feeling clothes moving over the skin. And, of course, he advocates the pleasures to be gained from wearing no clothes at all, from feeling the sun and the breeze upon one's naked skin. Similarly, few will doubt the pleasures to be had in looking at attractive people dressed in lovely clothes; it is hard to explain the appeal of fashion photography and fashion magazines with endless pictures of pouting models flouncing up and down catwalks otherwise. The pleasure gained from

looking, scopophilia, is different to the kind of pleasure gained from touching and feeling. It also seems to work in a different way, depending upon the gender of the person doing the looking. Berger has pointed out that 'men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at' (Berger 1972: 47). He is suggesting a fundamental difference in the pleasures gained by looking and being looked at, and much work has been done in developing the insight into this asymmetry. So, while fashion and clothing may be fun, an opportunity for light-hearted playfulness, they are not only a bit of fun. Moreover, the analysis of what counts as fun, how one might define pleasure, and for whom, are not simple matters.

CONCLUSION

This chapter claims, then, to have outlined the functions of fashion and clothing. In doing this, it has added a little more detail to the definitions of fashion and clothing established in the previous two chapters. Various functions, including protection from the elements, modesty and attraction, were discussed as potential explanations of the function of fashion and clothing, but none were able to explain fashion and clothing satisfactorily. What counted as protection from the elements was seen to vary from culture to culture and from one point in time to another. What people understood by modesty also varied between cultures and in time. It was also argued that fashion and clothing could not be reduced to serving the interests of the heterosexual sex drive. The chapter then dealt with the various communicative functions of fashion and clothing. These functions are consistent with the definition of fashion and clothing as cultural phenomena that was established in chapter two. They are consistent in that culture was itself established as, or defined in terms of, communication. So, culture having been established as a form of communication, this chapter has explained some of the things that are communicated by fashion and clothing as cultural phenomena.

Chapter four will look at how meaning in fashion and clothing is generated. If fashion and clothing have been established as forms of cultural communication in the previous chapter, and if the sorts of things that fashion and clothing may be used to communicate have been enumerated in this chapter, then the next chapter must analyse and explain how those meanings are possible, how they are generated or produced.

FURTHER READING

The classic text, to which this chapter is indebted, is clearly Mary Ellen Roach and Joanne Bubolz Eicher (1979) 'The language of personal adornment', in Cordwell, J. M. and Schwartz, R. A. (eds) *The Fabrics of Culture; the Anthropology of Adornment*, Mouton Publishers. I am not aware of this essay being reprinted anywhere else and suspect that *The Fabrics of Culture* is not the most readily

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available volume; I thought that these were good reasons for spending so much time simply representing and occasionally updating or augmenting Roach's and Eicher's views.

The views of J. C. Flügel, while not receiving as detailed a coverage as Roach's and Eicher's, are just as classic and in many ways are more interesting as they frequently strike one as so odd. This oddness may simply be the product of the 1930s' psychoanalytic framework to which Flügel is committed. The first five chapters of *The Psychology of Clothes*, published by the Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psychoanalysis (1950), are well worth a look.

4

FASHION, CLOTHING AND MEANING

INTRODUCTION

As we saw in chapter one, Davis has pointed out that it has become something of a cliché to say that 'the clothes we wear make a statement' (Davis 1992: 3 and in Solomon 1985: 15). Most people are content with the idea that the clothes they wear, and the combinations they wear them in, have or can be given meaning of some sort. Most people will also be happy with the idea that they make choices concerning what to buy and wear on the basis of the meanings that they perceive garments to have. And many people are perfectly happy to let the meanings of other people's clothes influence the way in which they behave towards those other people. It is probably a safe bet, however, that very few people spend much time wondering what sort of thing 'meaning' is, if it is a 'thing', where it might 'come from' and how they or anyone else manages to do anything so sophisticated as interpret it.

As discussed in chapter two, fashion, clothing and dress constitute signifying systems in which a social order is constructed and communicated. They may operate in different ways, but they are similar in that they are some of the ways in which that social order is experienced, understood and passed on. They may be considered as one of the means by which social groups communicate their identity as social groups, to other social groups. They are ways in which those groups communicate their positions with regard to those other social groups. While it should not be assumed that the differences between these terms have been ignored, it is claimed that fashion, clothing and dress are not only ways in which individuals communicate. They are also the means by which social groups communicate and through which communication they are constituted as social groups. However, it is clearly not the case that social groups sit around and explicitly discuss what they will use to communicate and what they will communicate. There seem to be major differences between meanings on the level of individuals and meanings on the level of social groups.

Part Three
Appearance Communication in Context

DAILY life consists of numerous interchanges between self and others. These interchanges require that we continually shift or alternate (move freely) between a focus on self-presentations and on others' appearances: in other words, between appearance management and appearance perception.

In Part Three, our concern is with the intricate process of **appearance communication**, which is the meaningful exchange of information through visual personal cues. Mutual processes of appearance management and appearance perception contribute to appearance communication. Both senders (observed persons) and receivers (perceivers) bring unique qualities, past experiences, and frames of reference to social interaction. Moreover, appearance messages are unique and complex in their own right, and they are perceived in a way that involves a filtering of personal experiences and expectations.

What is required for appearance communication to be meaningful? It may be described as meaningful when the way we look "calls out essentially, if not precisely . . . the same images and associations in ourselves as it does in others" (F. Davis, 1985, p. 21). As we will see in Chapter Seven, appearance messages have certain characteristics that make it somewhat unusual for these messages to elicit *exactly* the same definitions, associations, or emotions in senders as they do in receivers. Nevertheless, meaningful communication can proceed when a sender and receiver can sufficiently mesh their interpretations to develop a sense of shared understanding.

We will proceed in Part Three from a discussion of appearance as a visual context per se, drawing from semiotics (in Chapter Seven), to a focus on processes of social cognition influencing appearance perception (Chapter Eight). Then, because appearance perception is only

one component of the two-way process of appearance communication, Chapter Nine will consider the qualities perceivers bring with them to social contexts that influence, and set the stage for, appearance communication. (As perceivers, we vary in how we see and understand the world around us.) Finally, in Chapter Ten the various pieces and processes of appearance communication will be pulled together to explore mutual negotiations of meaning in everyday life.

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Chapter Seven
The Underlying Context of Appearance

As we have seen in our contextual study of clothing, appearance is a context in and of itself. In this chapter, we will explore how the "parts" of appearance fit together to convey an overall, visual impression. Culture provides guidelines about what items of dress we should wear together, or which appearance elements are associated with one another (for example, a man's shirt with a tie). At the same time, appearance elements are manipulated on a daily basis by individuals who actually participate in the process of making meaning *through everyday choices and combinations of these elements. Specific appearance elements acquire meaning, then, in the context of a visual system that allows for the emergence of meaning. The overall impression of a person's appearance is a medium for conveying messages about the self, and appearance as a mode of communication holds some unique properties that will be examined in this chapter.*

In everyday life, personal appearance becomes a context in and of itself. This visual context of personal appearance may be distinguished from what we might refer to as the larger social context, which consists of the appearances of whomever is interacting (as shown earlier in Figure 2-14 in Chapter Two). What is the difference between appearance per se and social context? Appearance is a component, of course, of social context. Whereas appearance as a context addresses the way all the elements (that is, body, different clothes and accessories, and grooming) "fit" together as a whole, the larger social context is concerned more generally with how separate appearances compare with one another to define the situation.

Appearance is a whole—a framework or configuration—that is often ordered by rules or principles of interpretation and placement. These rules are often supplied by culture and enable perceivers to make sense of the appearances they behold. Culture provides guidelines as to how we can interpret the meaning of clothes and/or what articles of clothing should be worn together. For example,

take note of the German man's appearance in Figure 7-1. German culture provides the "rules" that compel him to wear knee socks with shorts (*lederhosen*) and to wear a green hat. We can look at this appearance and the way all of these parts "fit together" based on these rules of association. Then, looking at the appearance as a whole, we can interpret that this man is German based on rules of interpretation. Of course, the setting—a small town in Bavaria—also helps. Nevertheless, his appearance may be contrasted with that of persons surrounding him, such as the man observing him to the right. This man also wears traditional German attire, but his appearance is governed by different rules. Still other passers-by might be American tourists whose appearances are set apart from these men's. These differences among appearances help to make up the social context that set the stage for rules of interpretation. Therefore, we seldom see a person's appearance in a vacuum; rather, we use surrounding cues to make sense of that appearance.

In this chapter we will focus on the qualities and characteristics of appearance as a visual context, considering:

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. Kaiser.

1. How clothes and styles of appearance management derive their meanings.
2. How elements of appearance (body, hair, hat, shorts, and socks), taken together, make up a visual context. Here we are interested in the underlying guidelines on what articles of clothing can or should be worn together. For example, a man's business suit is often associated in people's minds with a tie. We also tend to "connect" socks with shoes, pajamas with robes, and tank tops with shorts. See Figure 7-2 for an illustration of the associations that tend to guide perceivers' impressions of males' and females' business suits.

In this chapter, we will also explore the basic elements of appearance and characteristics of appearance messages as compared with other forms of communication. In this way, we can address the unique qualities of appearance messages and understand how these qualities influence our perceptions.

FIGURE 7-2
Research by Scherbaum and Shepherd (1987) indicates that perceivers evaluate a man's appearance more favorably when he wears a vest with a suit jacket as opposed to a vest without a suit jacket. This distinction between wearing and not wearing a jacket is not as critical in perceptions of a woman's appearance. Additionally, perceivers are more receptive to a woman wearing a red suit than they are to a man in a suit of that color. These findings suggest that the cultural rules linked to a businesslike appearance are still more stringent for men than they are for women. That is, in the professional context, women are afforded more latitude than men in terms of aesthetic codes governing how clothes should be layered and what colors they may be. Drawing by Wendy Dildey, adapted from Scherbaum and Shepherd (1987).

arance Signs

rial versus olic Properties

Clothing has a dual role: It functions as a tangible thing and also as a sign (Bogatyrev, 1976; Delaporte, 1980). The concept of sign has been defined various ways by different authors. Some of these differences may be attributed to the types of signs they have written about (for example, words versus objects); still other variations are due to usage of the term in different disciplines. For our purposes, a sign is anything that has *social meaning* or that refers to something else. The close connection between thing and sign in one object is not unique to clothing. A car is also likely to be a sign, as are any other consumer products that are valued by the owners. Yet clothing is one of the most eloquent and powerful products we use; it is an *expressive* medium, or a concrete way of revealing particular ideas in the mind that cannot be otherwise articulated (McCracken, 1988). The object and sign are linked in a way that is highly visual, connected intimately with the person (owner), and conducive to every social dimension of daily life.

What is the difference between a thing and a sign? Essentially, the world around us displays two kinds of material objects: those with and those without any ideological significance (reference to other cultural beliefs). Yet even the most ordinary object may become a sign. For example, a person may take a sea shell from the beach into the home and turn it into a decorative object for the bathroom. It now is not only linked to the beach, as in nature, but is also likely to be associated with the homeowner's aesthetic taste and feelings about the beach. The sea shell has become a *sign* as people interpret what it implies about the homeowner and to what it refers. Virtually all clothes and accessories are likely to become signs, or to *signify* information. Yet it is essential to remember that clothes and accessories do not have intrinsic meanings of their own. In other words, their meanings are not merely established when the objects are created and then ingrained as *the* meaning. A designer may have a meaning in mind while creating, but regardless of his or her intent, consumers themselves assign meaning to clothes and accessories as they interact and influence one another. The meanings we associate with clothes emerge and change as a function of social interaction. We obtain our ideas about what clothes *mean* from our observations and interpretations in everyday life. We learn, for example, that a bathing suit would be considered inappropriate for a formal restaurant, that men seldom wear skirts in most Western societies (with the exception of the Scottish kilt), and that certain items of women's attire (for example, spiked high-heeled sandals and teddies) have erotic connotations.

At the same time, clothes tend to have a practical function; they can serve more than one purpose. Let's look at an example of how we can view clothing in more than one way, depending on our knowledge of how it can signify (mean) certain information. This example comes from Bogatyrev's (1976) study of Russian folk costume:

> Let us imagine that we obtain the dresses of a rich peasant woman and of a poor peasant woman from some village, for instance from Vajnor in the Bratislava area where formerly rich peasant women embroidered their sleeves with gold and the poor only with silk, and that we send these dresses to a secondhand dealer in town. Even if the dealer should not know that both costumes were symbols of class distinction between peasants, he still would appraise the sleeves differently, judging them as material objects (p. 15).

In this example, the appraiser is likely to rely on the material properties of the sleeves to assess the worth of the costumes, whether or not he or she knows about the more abstract, social-class meanings.

Bogatyrev goes on to note that in certain special cases, however, the social distinctiveness of clothing may appear as a sign only. For example, a military uniform has certain details that indicate the rank and rights of the wearer in the army. When a private sees a uniformed officer, he or she knows the implications of the uniform; the quality or aesthetics of the uniform is irrelevant. A secondhand dealer who is unaware of military symbolism would be unlikely to "appreciate" the differences between a private's and a colonel's uniform, and therefore would evaluate the "worth" of these two uniforms equally, based on their material properties.

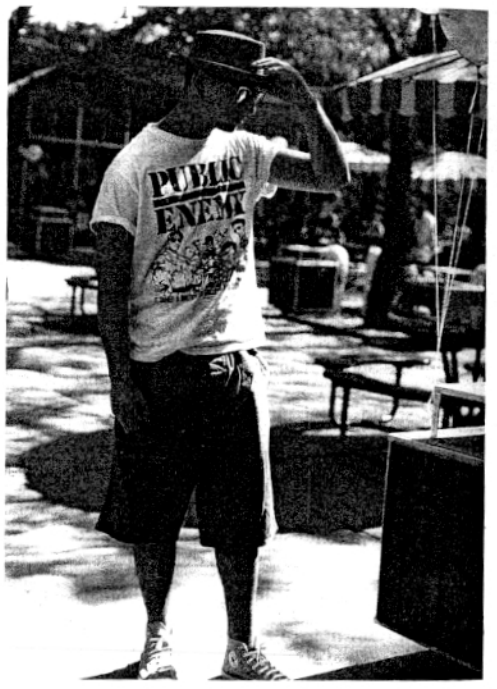
Bogatyrev (1976) also notes that some of the functions of folk costume are also derived solely from its property as a sign. For example, an unwed mother may be obligated to wear certain items of costume, and neighbors note that she wears this type of attire rather than those appropriate for a "maiden." The quality of material and the aesthetics of the garment are irrelevant; what is relevant is the social meaning attached to the costume, known only to those who understand the culture.

The Parts and the Whole

Here, our focus is not so much on *what* appearance means as it is on *how* appearance means, and part of the "how" involves culturally patterned ways of thinking about appearance. For example, we can consider the various components of a police officer's appearance: a hat, shirt, badge, belt, pants, shoes, and tools and weapons. Each component part is distinctive, but the effect it has on our perception is derived from the whole ensemble. When one part of the ensemble—one sign unit—is altered, the entire appearance context is altered (Manning, 1987). For example, a baseball cap may be substituted for a traditional police hat; this baseball cap may then be contrasted with the message supplied to an observer by the gun. (A baseball cap may seem to contribute to a friendly impression, whereas a gun is viewed as serious.) Also, the entire uniform serves to differentiate the police officer from the average citizen.

It becomes clear at this point that if we want to understand how appearance *means*, we need to pursue three tasks: (1) dissect the appearance into component parts and interpret the meanings of these parts, (2) identify the rules of association among the component parts (Holman, 1980), and (3) compare the meaning of one appearance (as a whole) with another "whole" appearance. The way the parts and the whole of appearance communicate in everyday life works in part on the *principle of contrast* (Manning, 1987): (*a*) by what *is* versus *is not* carried or worn, (*b*) by how different elements of appearance may seem to contradict one another, or (*c*) by how one person's appearance may be distinguished from

another person's. Let's explore these points by considering the appearance in Figure 7-3. First, we can look at the specific elements that make up this appearance (hat, sunglasses, "public enemy" T-shirt, baggy shorts, and high tops). Each of these items may be interpreted separately and contrasted with what *is not* worn. One might imagine the difference in the ensemble if the hat were missing, or if a tuxedo jacket was worn instead of the T-shirt. Second, we can examine how the different articles of dress "work together" to make up a visual image. Does the hat seem to "contradict" the shirt? Do certain articles seem to go together, like the sunglasses and hat, to create a certain mood or impression? Would you find it unusual, in conjunction with the rest of this appearance, if this male were wearing knee socks like the German man in Figure 7-1? Third, we can consider this appearance as a whole and contrast it to other images (male police officer or college professor).



E 7-3
the "principle of contrast" apply to this male's
ce? Note the combination of the "public
T-shirt, the long shorts, the high-top tennis
d the sunglasses with a traditional man's hat.
Wendy Dildey.

Semiotic Analysis of Appearance

You will recall from Chapters One and Two that semiotics involves the study of signs and that semiotics may be explored within the cultural perspective. Semiotics provides concepts and methods for analyzing the visual context of appearance and its potential in communication:

> Clothing usage forms a semiotic system. Because clothing can be easily manipulatable by the individual, it falls into the realm of voluntary activity. It is, in fact, the most easily controllable aspect of the external environment of the individual (Holman, 1980).

Semiotic analysis encourages us to note the significance of the sender and receiver of signs, as well as the message, the channel used and the style of its communication. Again, it is important to stress that the meaning of signs is not *intrinsically* linked to the signs themselves, but rather that the signs acquire their meanings through processes of interpretation. The meanings associated with signs in general, and appearance in particular, tend to be tentative, or subject to change. In everyday social contexts, signs begin to hold some associations for us or make sense to us. Signs serve to represent social values, illustrate or express personal feelings and ambitions, and depict what we wish to convey about ourselves.

Semiotic analysis provides methods for pursuing the understanding of appearance, focusing on the component parts of appearance and how these parts influence one another. For example, consider the South American women's hats in Figure 7-4. In North American culture, these hats may be evaluated as masculine, but in the context of the cultural context depicted in the picture, North American observers are able to surmise that these hats hold different associations in South America. Even when we lack a cultural framework for interpretation, then, we are influenced by the other cues (clothes and gender) in a given appearance.

Semiotics also deals with how messages can develop in one context and possibly move across contextual boundaries (Manning, 1987, p. 44). For example, in the 1980s the rock singer Madonna "borrowed" appearance cues normally associated with religious contexts (for example, a cross or crucifix necklace), juxtaposed these cues with those holding erotic cultural connotations (black bra, corset, and black leather), and created a new kind of appearance context. Thus, her appearance as a whole context required a new framework or set of rules of association, for purposes of interpretation. Individual cues (cross and black bra) moved across contextual boundaries (religious and erotic, respectively) into a new appearance context calling for a new mode of perception.

Semiotic analysis is largely based on two principles in relation to appearance. First, there is the idea that a system or structural context exists and precedes the emergence of a particular sign or symbol. For example, a black bra was part of an erotic appearance context even before Madonna used it. The bra itself,

'GURE 7-4
'aditional bowler or derby ts are worn by Aymará dian women in Peru and livia. This style might be ustrued as masculine by rth American and ropean standards; arly, it is important to w the hats within their ltural context and to nd imposing the rules or les of one's own culture them. Photo by Stephen nha.

then, served to represent a more general erotic context, and Madonna used it for those purposes, as a component part in her own appearance. After she devised her own visual context, some new associations emerged for the black bra. Now it could be seen as being associated with a new set of appearance elements, including religious ones. Second, this system or structural context designates the nature of the associations among signs (Manning, 1987, p. 26). Madonna's appearance developed a new set of associations among such cues as crosses, black leather, lace, and black bras. Despite the presence of a system or structural context, however, signs are human constructions, and they make communication possible. Wearing certain clothes and engaging in various appearance-managing processes are part of this vital process of *making things mean*. Therefore, although culture tends to provide guidelines or systems for managing and perceiving appearance, there is often a great deal of room for individual freedom and expression.

Once we have discovered the underlying rules of association that compose a "system," it becomes easier to bend these rules, distort or exaggerate them, or break them. Fashion change promotes such an interplay with appearance-related rules. Designers are especially likely to manipulate these rules, but consumers are also prone to do so as they coordinate ensembles, mix and match, and reconcile a total look by "softening" its impact or integrating component parts.

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See Figure 7-5 for an extreme example of this kind of manipulation of rules. A clown purposely juxtaposes signs that were derived from distinct systems (for example, a tie from a business context and a Mickey Mouse sweatshirt from leisure context). A more subtle form of manipulating and "breaking" rules is depicted in Figure 7-6.

Code and Message

We can distinguish two concepts that help to clarify the contrast between culturally provided rules of association and individual manipulation of these rules. **Code** refers to the rules of association or underlying patterns provided by culture. It is like a kind of protocol or "etiquette" for dressing. This concept is derived from that of *language* in semiotics (Barthes, 1988; Simon-Miller, 1985). Culture provides the tools we have with which to groom and dress ourselves and affords certain principles to guide how we can, should, or must use these tools. For example, by convention, a male wearing a business suit also wears (a shirt and) tie.

In contrast, the concept of **message** refers to individuals' own manipulations of appearance rules and is derived from the semiotic concept of *speech* (Barthes,

FIGURE 7-5
Clowns help to create a context of "play" by manipulating and breaking traditional "rules" about what elements of appearance "fit" together. Photo by Mark Jordan.

E 7-6
appearances can be constructed in everyday life
ning garments and accessories as shown here.
lting look evolves from a manipulation of rules
esents a new concept that has little to do with
ment parts' (petticoat, high tops) previous
ns. Photo by Jock Sturgus.

1988; Simon-Miller, 1985). Through expression, individuals fashion (make or create) their own appearances. Symbolic interactionist Gregory Stone (1965) would have called these created appearances "programs." By developing such programs, individuals can derive a sense of personal style or derive "fashion statements." Table 7-1 summarizes the differences between code and message. Note that code is *culturally* prescribed, whereas message is *individually* created. This distinction is illustrated in Figure 7-7.

It becomes evident that codes provide a cultural frame of reference for interpreting appearance. In other words, we come to expect certain combinations of appearance parts. Imagine a male wearing a tie, but no shirt, to a job interview. Granted, he has taken his roommate's advice and has worn a tie, but his appearance (and lack of a shirt) violates the convention of appropriate interview attire. Now

Appearance Code	*Appearance Message*
Convention	Expression
Cultural schema	Individual act
Fashion as institution	Personal fashion statement
Facilitates expression (individual acts)	Produces new conventions (cultural codes)
System of meaning	Meaning as process

let us look at this same appearance in a different social context—a nightclub for women only. Now the appearance context in question shifts from a possible meaning of inappropriateness to one of sexual suggestiveness. Different rules of association are applied in these two social contexts, and it becomes evident that appearance context structures meaning, being mediated by social circumstance.

Thus a structuralist point of view suggests that we should consider how much our thinking (the mental images we hold or rules of association we apply) produces social meanings or interpretations. At the same time, changing social realities create new ways of thinking (Manning, 1987, p. 31). Once a perceiver has seen a male wearing a tie without a shirt, that appearance context no longer seems implausible, but is still likely to be associated only with particular social contexts, because the principles guiding the association of a shirt with a tie are still linked to strong cultural convention.

On the other hand, there are infinite possibilities for the act of expression, especially outside the realm of uniforms or career apparel. Expression allows for "active consumer participation in the sign production process (by encouragement of flexibility and creativity rather than conformity to a socioeconomic code or to a fashion consensus)" (Simon-Miller, 1985, pp. 80–81). Acts of expression keep individual contributions to fashion change alive and help avoid the translation of personal style into an institutional mode.

Now we have considered signs within the context of appearance, as well as the manipulation of the rules of association governing these signs through the coordination of, and interplay between, convention and expression. At this point we need to turn to a closer inspection of signs and consider how they come to assume meaning in the minds of beholders.

Analyzing Signs

Since by definition a sign represents or stands for something else, two component parts of signs may be delineated for purposes of closer scrutiny: signifier and signified. The **signifier** is the vehicle through which a sign conveys its message. Clothes and other accessories, as well as hairstyles and other grooming styles, can be conceptualized as vehicles that have the potential for carrying a message. Once the message becomes time-worn, irrelevant, or unexciting, then the vehicle may cease to convey the message in question. This point raises some critical questions, if we desire to compare appearance messages to words. Why do some ordinary words such as *cat* and *dog* continue to hold their meanings after hundreds of years of usage, whereas other words (*groovy* and *radical*) seem to be more

FIGURE 7-7
African culture is an important part of the lives of these black newlyweds from Philadelphia (spending their honeymoon in San Francisco). They have just had a traditional Yoruban wedding, and they are authors of short stories based on folktales of African origin. Their appearances draw on codes in African as well as North American cultures. Yet these codes are combined as different ethnic elements are mixed together and interpreted in a way that makes the resulting appearance messages personally satisfying and meaningful. Codes are culturally based, whereas messages are individually constructed. Photo by Carla M. Freeman.

time-bound? A parallel may be seen when we contrast "classic" styles such as business suits with trendy styles such as bicycle shorts. Still, appearance messages, as *signifiers*, are extremely complex because of the potential for mixing and matching, fashion change, and other characteristics related to the visual realm. Whereas the signifier is the medium that *carries* the message, the *signified* is the actual content of the message, as shown below.

sign	
signifier	***signified***
artifact	*message*
vehicle	*concept*
tangible	*abstract idea*
image	*ideology*

A signifier may be a complete appearance (a whole) as well as a particular unit or element of that appearance (a part—a shoe, a hairstyle, or a garment). In fact, we normally see people's appearances in their entirety, so it is important to recognize that signifiers may be complete appearances or images. Consider the ensemble in Figure 7-8. This style was introduced to the public after World War II and was labelled the "New Look." What was *signified* by this ensemble

FIGURE 7-8
Designer Christian Dior's 1947 "New Look" (like an other look or even a single element of a look) illustrat the concept of signifier. Th signifier (image, look, or silhouette) is the medium vehicle that carries a message (what is signified —in this case, newness an change from the styles of t Second World War). Pho courtesy of the Trustees of the Victoria and Albert Museum.

was newness and a rather drastic change from the shorter, narrower skirts during the war period.

The signifier, then, is the tangible, concrete, visual, and physical artifact (clothes) or image (appearance) through which meaning is conveyed. The signified, on the other hand, is more abstract and intangible; it is the concept or idea to which a signifier refers. How do these two concepts connect and relate to the concept of appearance sign? The appearance sign is the union of the signifier and the signified; it is similar to a composite of a tangible artifact (part) or image (whole) and an intangible idea or message. Therefore, an appearance sign is at once concrete (tangible) and abstract (intangible).

The union or linkage of the signifier and signified is made possible through codes of interpretation or understanding. The concept of **code**, introduced in Chapter Two, becomes the principle of association that enables us to link the signifier with the signified, all within our minds (and influenced by social context). We have already considered the rules of association that link one sign with another in an appearance context; such rules of association also may be referred to as codes. Therefore, there are two types of codes that are relevant to a discussion of appearance: (1) those that link signifier with signified within a specific sign, and (2) those that link the signs themselves within the context of an appearance. See Figure 7-9 for an illustration of these two types of codes.

Therefore, a code, in the more general sense, is an underlying set of rules governing signs (connecting signifier with signified) and linking signs into a larger system of signs. A code makes it possible for appearance to convey meaning (F. Davis, 1985; Simon-Miller, 1985).

The fit between signifier and signified, or the code that links them, may range from tight and precise to diffuse and ambiguous. The next section shows how signs may be distinguished on the basis of this fit.

Variations in Appearance Signs

Sociologist Nathan Joseph (1986) distinguishes between two kinds of appearance signs, on the basis of the degree of complexity of the codes used to interpret them: signal and symbol. A **signal** is a relatively straightforward, easy-to-interpret appearance sign, based on a simple cognitive link between the signifier and the signified. The cognitive process involved in making straightforward connections between signifier and signified may be referred to as **signaling**. Some examples of appearance signals might include a police uniform or a business suit, when they are worn in contexts where a perceiver would normally expect to see them and does not need to concentrate on (or even consciously note) their meaning(s). The cognitive link between police uniform and police officer, or business suit and professional, is relatively straightforward. However, if these clothing styles are worn in unexpected contexts or by persons one would not expect to see wearing them, then they do not necessarily function as signals. For example, if a uniformed police officer walks into a college classroom, more interpretation is required than if she is seen in a police car. Therefore, the social context becomes a critical factor in whether or not a specific appearance functions as a signal.

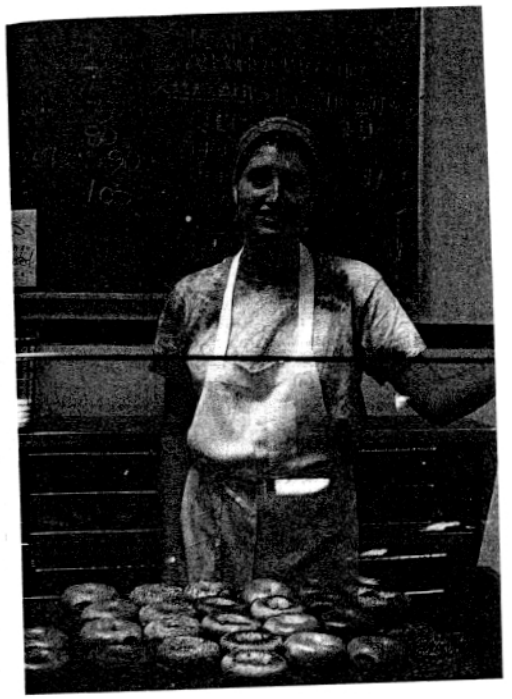

FIGURE 7-9
Let's consider two types of appearance codes. First, there is the type of code that links the signifier with the signified. This student's tie-dyed T-shirt, accessories, and apron compose an appearance that signifies (refers to) her identity as the "bagel lady" at a natural-food coffee house. That is, the code helps us to link the signifier (appearance) with what is signified (her identity). Her fellow workers as well as her customers (especially the "regulars") are well aware of this code and have come to develop a mental association between the signifer and the signified, especially in this situational context. Second, we can consider the type of code that links the different elements of her appearance together. The tie-dyed T-shirt, accessories, and natural look (lack of heavy makeup) all "fit" together, because there is a late-1960s-influenced association (or late 1980s version thereof) that provides a historical and cultural context for her appearance. Photo by Wendy Dildey.

A **symbol**, on the other hand, is more complex and intricate, in terms of the link between signifier and signified. This link is not as likely as that found in a signal to be simple or straightforward. The cognitive activity of **symboling** is required when more interpretation is needed. It may be that the appearance in question conveys meanings about values, beliefs, and emotions. These meanings are harder to put into words, the codes are more complex and variable, and more concentration or conscious attention is required on the part of a perceiver. Accordingly, social interactions become critical as participants negotiate and renegotiate or socially construct and reconstruct meaning.

A sign, then, can be either a symbol or a signal depending on the kind of mental activity or type of cognitive processing in which the perceiver (and wearer, too) is involved. Social context may trigger one activity or the other (signaling or symboling). Whether appearance signs function as signals or symbols is not dependent on the items of clothes themselves, or hairstyles, facial hair, or makeup. The difference between a signal and a symbol is not absolute and

distinct then, but is dependent on the context in which appearance signs are viewed and the mental processes participants use to interpret them. *Signification* is a process of making things mean, and a perceiver is a vital part of this process (MacCannell and MacCannell, 1982). Thus, social-cognitive processes are critically linked to the interpretation of appearance signs. At the same time, it is important to recognize that convention provides the means for interpreting some appearance signs more readily than others.

At times, culture provides an explicit code or close or tight fit between signifier and signified. The concept of **semanticity** refers to the degree of associative "fit," or the correlation or close connection between an appearance sign and its referent (Harrison, 1985). A code that is high in semanticity is likely to be linked to conventional attire and to clothes that function as signals. On the other hand, a "fuzzy" connection between signifier and signified, or a lack of specific rules for interpretation, is likely to promote the functioning of clothing as a symbol—arousing emotion and referring to values but not neatly pigeonholed.

The concept of meaning is central not only to a cultural and semiotic point of view but also to the symbolic-interactionist perspective, which promotes the idea that everyday interactions must be studied in process, in naturalistic contexts as they occur, if we are to understand how meaning is conveyed through the give and take of social life (Blumer, 1969a). In the symbolic realm of appearance, meanings enable us to (1) interpret what is occurring and (2) organize our actions toward one another.

In everyday life, appearance signs are used as a cue for understanding others with whom we come into contact. Because appearance is a seemingly silent and visible form of communication, as contrasted with conversation, it is classified in the realm of nonverbal communication.

Appearance as Nonverbal Communication

All too often, the importance of appearance is disregarded or overlooked in the study of communication, which tends to suffer from a "discursive bias" (Stone, 1965). This means that when we think of communication, we ordinarily think of having the ability to *discuss* during the course of interaction. If we want to change the subject when we are speaking, we can easily do so. If we want to clarify a point that seems uncertain, there are means for accomplishing this when engaging in conversation. And, if we want to elaborate on a theme or argue an alternative viewpoint, language and the act of conversation provide adequate mechanisms. In contrast, when we *appear* before others, we cannot discuss through this medium of communication. We have decided before interaction occurs (in the "backstage" of grooming and dressing rituals) what messages we would like to convey and to whom we especially want to convey them. Yet once interaction begins (in the "front stage"), we cannot easily shift the subject of our appearances (change what is signified) or repair unwanted messages through appearance alone. If we desire to negotiate the meaning of our appearances with

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others, it becomes necessary to resort to conversation, to explain who we are and what we represent and what we anticipate for interaction.

At the same time, it is important to recognize that appearance is a form of communication in its own right, and it is not the only type of communication that is frequently overlooked or taken for granted. Other nonverbal forms of communication, many of which are to varying degrees discursive (for example, gestures, facial expressions, and bodily positions) are also studied less than conversation, a linguistic form of communication (based on language).

Communication is based not only on language, but also on the senses, including vision, tactile sensations (feel), smell, and taste (Wilden, 1987, p. 137). Vision is the most fundamental sense involved in appearance communication, but the other senses function as well, for example, when clothing is touched or worn or the aromas of others are smelled. (In cases where perceivers are visually impaired, tactile sensation of clothes and a sender's physical features, as well as the sense of smell, become increasingly significant.)

The realm of nonverbal communication, then, includes personal appearance as well as gestures, facial expression, and bodily positions. Where do clothes and appearance fit into larger schemes of communication? It is helpful to look at different types of nonverbal communication, based on varying codes and functioning through diverse channels. Four types of nonverbal codes may be distinguished: artifactual, body, media, and spatiotemporal (Harrison, 1985). Each of these codes is broader in scope than is their relation to appearance. The first two codes most directly bear on personal appearance, but the other two may be intricately linked to it as well.

Artifactual Co

Culture provides objects and artifacts that are imbued with meaning in the domain of consumer behavior. Products that consumers select and use are associated, in a cultural sense, with qualities or attributes they would like others to assign to them. Obviously, clothes are consumer products, and therefore cultural artifacts, as are shoes, jewelry, or any other commodities that serve to express identity or intent. Artifacts that carry meaning are both things and signs.

Variables such as color, texture, pattern, form, and design influence how garments, parts of garments, or combinations of garments are perceived. These variables appear to be subject to aesthetic rules (principles of design such as balance and proportion) as they blend with social and cultural rules (see Figure 7-10). Social Focus 7-1 considers this blend of rules that influence perceptions of clothing.

Although clothing is clearly classified as an artifactual code in communication, it interacts with the other three codes in the sphere of nonverbal communication. Personal appearance per se is connected with, and made up of, the interplay between artifactual and body codes. Similarly, clothing-related elements and body-related elements are what jointly compose an appearance context (Hillestad, 1980).

Body Codes

Body codes arise from personal appearance and the movement of the body and face. These codes govern and link variables such as physical attractiveness, size

RE 7-10
nsider the variables
to aesthetic rules
ltural codes in this
nd jacket designed
riano Fortuny
l 1920. Note how a
sense of balance and
ion is created
h the use of lines,
s, and shapes.
al codes connecting
ulting design to
es such as formality
gance may also be
red in this style.
courtesy of the
s of the Victoria and
Museum.

of the body, facial expressions, gestures (for example, waving, pointing, or saluting), and bodily positions (how one sits, stands, or moves). Therefore, the appearance of the body when it is still or moving comprises the domain of body codes. Clearly, communication through the body can be more discursive when movement is involved, but even when still its visibility conveys messages.

Robert Hillestad (1980) regards the body as a vehicle for dress and distinguishes three kinds of bodily expression: body form, body surface, and body motion. Body form refers to the shape of the body or its constituent parts. The

▪▪▪ *Social Focus 7-1*
Aesthetic Rules in Context

The aesthetic experience of perceiving clothing is based in part on its structure. However, in recent years there has been a breakdown of many conventional aesthetic rules. Punk and postpunk aesthetics relied on experimentation with, and exploitation of, such rules. Fashion change, then, is intricately linked to changing ideas about aesthetic rules. What is considered beautiful in one period of time may be viewed as unpleasing to the eye in another.

Aesthetic rules are culturally derived and tend to change with fashion, but in part they are based on fundamental principles of design (that is, proportion, balance, emphasis, and rhythm). The complexity of understanding apparel structure stems from the blending of aesthetic codes and social and cultural trends. It seems that apparel designers command considerable latitude in their interpretations of aesthetic rules, according to a study conducted by Elizabeth Lowe (1984). She examined magazine pictures of women's evening apparel from 1926 to 1980, to see if the theories about aesthetic rules were consistent with the empirical reality. The dimensions of skirt length, waist length, décolletage (neckline) length, skirt width, waist width, and décolletage width were measured and then converted to relational ratios.

Lowe found that there was a lack of uniformity in these ratios. Skirt width seemed to have greater freedom to vary than did waist length or width. The aesthetic rule of avoiding too much sameness (for example, too much width in all dimensions) was broken in some cases; in fact, some designers seemed to have actively sought to achieve sameness. Still, they did not combine wide waists with wide décolletage. Perhaps this may be explained in part by the Western ideal of beauty, in which there is a marked preference for vertical emphasis.

It seems that designers were careful not to cut the body in half with the position of the waistline relative to the hemline, nor did they create skirts that were as wide as they were long. Overall, however, Lowe (1984) concluded that several of the rules associated with design principles were simply not supported empirically and proposed three alternative conclusions: (1) The rules are wrong, (2) the designers are creating an abundance of poor designs, or (3) they are breaking rules but still somehow are creating pleasing designs by compensating in some way. Lowe indicated that she is inclined to believe that a "hierarchical structure exists in the ordering of these rules such that some rules may be broken with greater impunity than others and still a pleasing effect may be achieved," especially if compensating elements are operating (Lowe, 1984, p. 181).

To enhance our understanding of the importance of aesthetic rules, it is important to consider consumers, as well as designers. Although research is needed to see if consumers rely on aesthetic rules in their evaluations of apparel, it is clear that aesthetics in general are important to them. Research indicates that aesthetics are likely to win out over utility in terms of how female consumers value apparel (Morganosky, 1984). Showing good taste and enhancing one's own beauty seem to be among the most important factors influencing the apparel selection of female consumers (Woods, Padgett, and Montoya, 1987). In a study of male and female consumers, aesthetic appeal appeared to be more closely related to clothing preferences than were economic and performance characteristics (Lubner-Rupert and Winakor, 1985). Clearly, consumer aesthetics "matter" and deserve further attention. Part of the complexity in studying consumer aesthetics is that evaluative or appreciative responses interact with other variables (for example, fashion change and social context). Moreover, consumers vary in their interpretations of what is beautiful. There is "meaningful heterogeneity" in their preference structures (Holbrook, 1986).

As we attempt to understand the role of aesthetic rules in perception, it is important, then, to recognize that aesthetic judgments are participatory. That is, consumers take part in a process that evokes feelings and emotions. In other words, we do not live by rules alone; neither do designers—they may actually manipulate and bend rules as they create. To focus strictly on aesthetic rules about what "works" is to promote the idea that aesthetic judgments are always analytical and detached. There is a paradox in aesthetic judgments of clothing in that some degree of this type of detachment is probably necessary to enjoy the visual qualities of a garment, but conformance to aesthetic rules alone are not enough to "make" a successful garment.

> Active enjoyment of beauty involves a certain paradox. Detachment is required, and yet the attitude of the detached observer, sensing the surface and discerning the form of an aesthetic object, is not enough. Pure detachment is aesthetically barren (Wheelwright, 1960, p. 357).

appearance of body form can be altered through the use of articles of clothing and accessories. Factors such as fit, clinginess of a fabric, and actual configurations of garment parts (for example, sleeves and skirts) can visually create or re-create body form. Body surfaces include such factors as the color and texture of skin and hair (see Social Focus 7-2 for a discussion of the color of clothing as it relates to that of physical features). The appearance of body surfaces may be visually altered through the use of cosmetics or apparel. For example, hose tend to change the surface characteristics of legs. Body motions include individual posture, gait, gestures, and facial expressions. Again, clothes can influence the manner in which body motions are visually perceived. A dancer wearing and using scarves in her routine can accentuate her bodily movements, for example.

Awareness of bodily shapes in one's self or others may complement an awareness of clothing elements, but it may also supersede awareness of clothing in importance. For instance, a man may notice a woman's curves or legs as accentuated by clothes and shoes (for example, a tight skirt and high heels), but he may not later be able to describe the clothes and shoes, or even consciously notice them during the actual observation. The concern here is with the way the body looks, rather than with the clothes themselves.

Of course, we rarely see bodies without clothes in social situations. So it is important to consider how clothes function with body codes to alter, clarify, exaggerate, or contradict those codes (see Figure 7-11).

Research suggests that perceivers have the ability to distinguish between impressions made on the basis of bodies and clothes (Conner, Peters, and Nagasawa, 1975). Subjects were shown a series of photographs of three different females. One female appeared rather athletic in appearance, with a stocky build and short hair. Another female appeared intellectual, with a slightly more serious expression and her hair in a bun. The third female was intended to look friendly and sociable. She had long hair and a smile on her face. Three forms of dress were manipulated as variables in conjunction with the bodily types used. One costume was meant to be sociable, one intellectual, and one athletic. The costume (clothing style) was more important than the body type in the perceivers' development of impressions of sociability, whereas the body was more important in determining the impression of being athletic, as measured by the use of such adjectives as *robust* versus *frail*. Even when the athletic person was pictured in the sociable or intellectual clothing, the impression remained athletic. The individuals without the athletic body type did not appear to be more athletic as a result of wearing the athletic costume. Neither the body nor the costume communicated an intellectual impression to a significant extent. The social impression was highest when the models were consistent with the clothes on them. In other words, the models were seen as more social when the athletic costume was on the athletic body, the social costume on the social body, and the intellectual costume on the intellectual body. Apparently the consistency between the two was an important factor in the subjects' impressions. Basically, this study tells us that although there is a tendency for perceivers to view appearances holistically, they do have the perceptual ability to distinguish the

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▪▪▪ *Social Focus 7-2*
Personal Color Analysis

> Most women grew up with an elaborate set of rules, which were usually passed on by their mothers, concerning the relationship between color in dress and the natural color of their hair and skin. Some black women were told not to wear red. Others were told not to wear black. . . . Redheads were constantly warned against wearing red or pink. As a blond, I was told I shouldn't wear yellow because it made my hair look so yellow. A childhood friend of mine whose distinguishing features were emerald-green eyes was cautioned against red on the ground that it "makes you look like a Christmas tree." With these endless injunctions in mind, it's hardly surprising that many women regard color as a minefield and fall back on neutral choices that are unlikely to give offense.
>
> —JACOBY, 1986

What was left at one time to a kind of personal color folklore, passed on from one generation to the next, was transformed in the 1970s into big business. Rules related to personal color were organized into "systems" based on the premise that each individual looks best in a specific set of colors that are determined by skin, hair, eye color, bone structure, and sometimes even personality (Rasband, 1983). Towns and cities throughout the United States today have personal color analysts or wardrobe consultants who categorize their clients based on their "reading" of the clients' personal features. Ironically, this process emphasizes that each consumer has individual uniqueness, even though each one is "squeezed . . . into one of three or four molds" (Abramov, 1985).

The most prevalent system has been the "seasons" system, in which consumers are typed as fall, winter, spring, or summer. Systems such as this one are used to develop "personal palettes" for consumers; these palettes composed of the consumer's "ideal colors" govern his or her choice in clothes, jewelry, shoes, and sometimes even interior decorating and automobile color. Academics who study color are concerned that individual choice and creative expression are diminished by color typing. In the process, what is probably the complex and stimulating element of design is oversimplifed, and consumers may feel locked into a system in which they are eventually likely to experience: (1) boredom with wearing only the "right colors" (and, indeed, often great difficulty even finding them in the marketplace) or (2) feelings of guilt if they take their color palettes seriously but instead wear their old "wrong" favorites (Rasband, 1983).

Other concerns stem from the fact that color systems are supposedly based on more than rules of etiquette (merely opinions of arbiters of good taste and behavior). In fact, they are said to be based on rules with a factual basis. Yet color science does not support the concept of color palettes or categories such as those promoted by these systems. Moreover, there is no good evidence (1) that facial colorings can be categorized or that facial coloring determines color preference, (2) that color preferences and personality are related to each each other, or (3) that individuals' lives will improve if they wear colors in their palettes (Abramov, 1985).

Moreover, even if we assume the systems are valid in the first place, anecdotal evidence abounds that they are not applied consistently by analysts. Some clients have received diametrically opposed advice from different analysts (Abramov, 1985).

> I have, on separate occasions, been typed a Winter (most common), an Autumn, and also a Summer. Typed as a Winter by a Beauty For All Seasons analyst, I was told I "should never wear" my favorite olive-green Austrian cape because it was attractive on Autumns only. . . . Over the years, I have been told, I'm never supposed to wear black, always supposed to wear black, and sometimes supposed to wear black—as long as it's accompanied by tan or beige. I've been told to wear white but not ivory, or ivory but not white. I've been instructed to wear only silver jewelry but not gold, and gold but not silver. In Phoenix, Arizona, I wore a mixture of silver and gold chain necklaces. A woman from the audience asked me to remove the silver because "the ladies in our group have learned that gold and silver can't be mixed harmoniously." At an autograph party some months ago, a woman who identified herself as a color analyst complimented me for choosing a dress harmonious with my Winter warm tones. Within an hour at the same party, another analyst expressed regret that I was wearing a color so obviously inappropriate for my Season—Autumn (Rasband, 1983).

What is needed to sort out some of this color confusion is research on how people actually perceive themselves and others in certain colors, how and why people vary

ɔcial Focus 7-2 (continued)

their perceptions of personal and clothing color com-ıations, and how these perceptions are influenced by ıtextual factors such as culture, fashion, and social ·anings for certain situations.

Cross-cultural research has suggested that there are ysiological, environmental, and cultural explanations · how we perceive color and its affective (feeling- and eference-oriented) meanings (Adams and Osgood, 1973). Perceptions of clothing color in the context of its visual impact against a background of skin, hair, and eye color are even more complex than perceptions of color alone. Hence, as we attempt to understand the meanings people assign to color in the context of personal appearance, it becomes imperative to factor in a range of variables and to acknowledge the intricacies in color choices and perceptions.

most relevant cues for the type of impression formed. In other words, appearance perceptions factor in the *context* of the type of impression in question. Therefore, the body is a more relevant cue than clothes in the formation of athletic impressions, but clothes are more relevant than the body in formulating impressions of sociability. The combined effect of the two is also important.

Clothing also serves to communicate jointly with discursive body codes. For example, a military salute (a discursive body code) is easier to interpret if an observed person is also wearing a military uniform, especially if individuals facing one another are not on a military base—a context in which military personnel in civilian attire often salute. Thus either the uniform or the setting can provide a context conducive to interpretation and definition. Similarly, a hitchhiker's chances of getting picked up are probably enhanced by a neat appearance. While a neat appearance may convey positive attributes about a hitchhiker, the "thumbing" gesture is imperative to conveying his or her intent. Thus, perceivers driving by (or stopping) are likely to factor both appearance (including artifactual as well as body codes) and gestures (relying upon body codes) into their evaluation and decision as to whether to offer a ride.

Media Codes

In concert, the body and clothes make up appearance contexts that are visible and tangible, yet also refer to more abstract *social forms* having cultural and interpersonal significance in context. Culture provides appearance imagery through mass media, and the images we behold are likely to shape our perceptions of desirable appearances, of what is current or fashionable, of what it means to be male or female, and of how social reality is ordered. Movies, cartoons, television, music videos, advertisements, and magazines may all influence our interpretations of appearance in everyday communications.

In media life, appearance can become a kind of **format**. We come to expect certain styles of appearance in particular media, and these styles serve to facilitate shared understanding (Altheide and Snow, 1979). At the same time, the media may perpetuate stereotypes about different groups of people (see Figure 7-12).

Spatiotemporal Codes

Some codes refer to individuals' use of time and space in terms of social interaction. For example, studies indicate that males occupy more space in terms of bodily

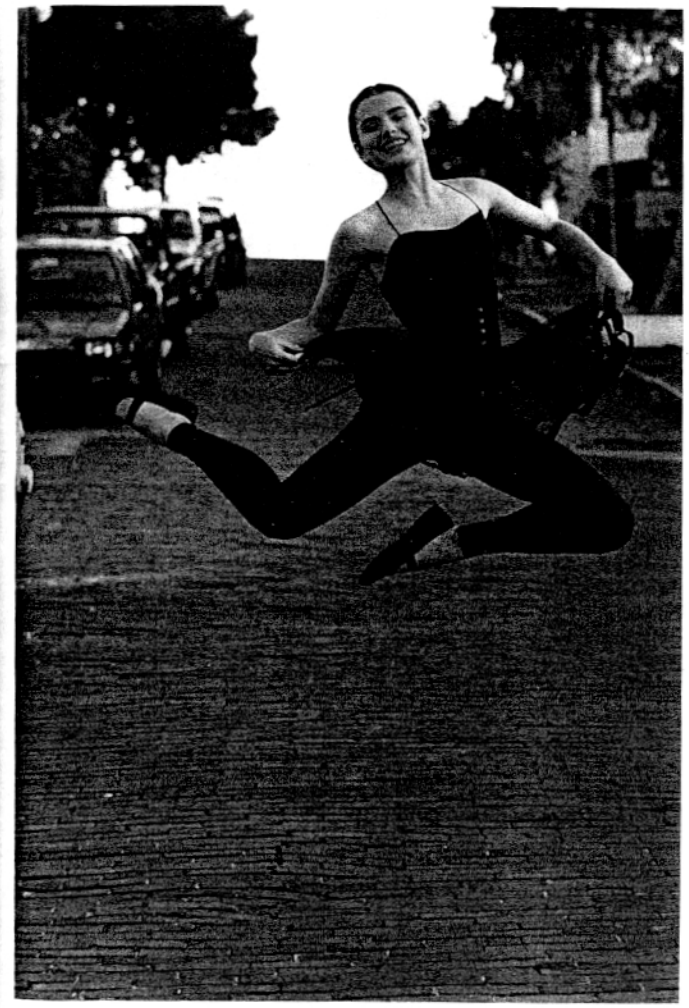

FIGURE 7-11
Bodily movements give form to the body as well as to one's clothing. Note how this model's attire accentuates the impression conveyed through body codes. Photo by Mark Colman.

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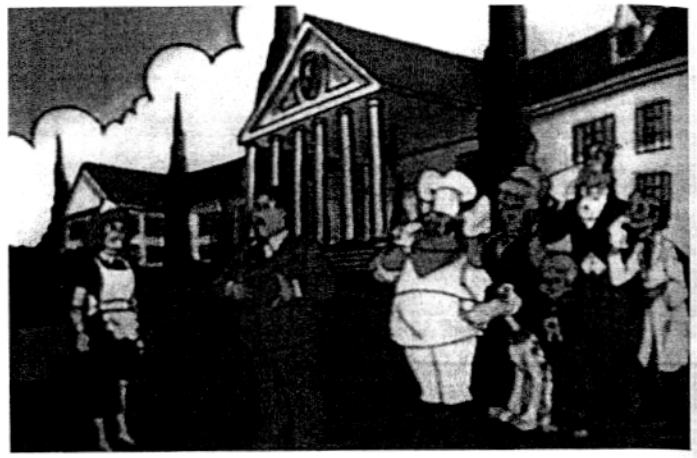


GURE 7-12
'dia codes or formats are d in animated cartoons create a kind of mmunication to the ick" (Harrison, 1981). rt of these codes or mats is based on a nciple of exaggeration by ans of caricatures or reotypes. What are the rious stereotyped tracters in this cartoon? oto by Susan B. Kaiser.

position as compared to females. Males are more likely to spread their legs apart or fold their arms behind their heads (Henley, 1977).

Clothes are likely to be a factor in the amount of space one takes up because of bodily position. Goffman (1963) observed the public behavior of women in mental hospitals, to assess the degree of what he called "situational harness," and noted a link between body codes (manner of sitting) and artifactual codes (a dress) that is often taken for granted:

> The universality in our society of . . . limb discipline can be deeply appreciated on a chronic female ward where, for whatever reason, women indulge in zestful scratching of their private parts and in sitting with legs quite spread, causing the student to become conscious of the vast amount of limb discipline that is ordinarily taken for granted (p. 27).

Use of time is also governed by nonverbal codes. Studies indicate that males guard their time more carefully, and there seems to be a cultural idea that males' time is more valuable—that every second counts (Henley, 1977). Sommer, Gemulla, and Sommer (working paper) studied men's and women's watches and found that artifactual codes ordering perceptions of watches are linked to these cultural, gender-based distinctions. Males' watches tended to be more precise, being more likely to contain second hands and other mechanisms for scheduling time, evaluating how much time an event takes, and setting alarms. Females' watches, on the other hand, were more likely to be decorative and less precise in terms of "making every second count."

Characteristics of Appearance Messages

Appearance signs serve to communicate at various levels of complexity in social interaction. In the simplest case, they denote or validate claims to membership in a particular group, cultural category (gender, age, social class, and ethnicity), or occupation, and verbal labels come to mind almost unconsciously: "female executive," "police officer," "football player," "ballet dancer," "fraternity member." Media codes may exaggerate these kinds of claims to membership by using "communication to the quick" (Harrison, 1981), based on codes that are high in semanticity through signs that function as signals, as Figure 7-12 revealed.

On the other hand, some appearance messages are rife with ambiguity, emotion, and expression. The meanings or associations connected with these messages are difficult to put into words or to describe, but sensibilities are aroused and experienced (see Figure 7-13). No ready labels come to mind.

Most everyday appearance messages fall somewhere in between total precision and total ambiguity. In real life, some interpretation and negotiation are required because of the interplay between person and context. The degree of fit between a clothed appearance and a context influences the degree of complexity of a visual impression. In fact, even when an appearance message seems relatively straightforward in its own right, the social context in which it is found can transform its meaning or raise new questions as to the appropriate interpretation.

FIGURE 7-13
The messages associated with "wearable art" tend to be hard to pinpoint because no ready labels come to mind to characterize them (as compared to the stereotyped appearances in Figure 7-12). Wearable art deals with aesthetic qualities and evokes evaluative responses in perceivers. The designer of this ethnic-styled garment, Gayle M. Bon Durant, desires to convey a feeling *of "richness and ceremony" in her work. Thus the message she intends by the piece is in the emotional realm of experience. Courtesy of Gayle M. Bon Durant; photo by Kathi Silva.*

To complicate matters further, seldom is only one meaning associated with an appearance message. More commonly, a range of possible meanings exist or meanings are layered on one another, almost creating a rainbow effect of meaning. Some meanings are derived from cultural experience, some are negotiated during social transactions, and some are conjured independently in the minds of participants. For two-way, meaningful communication to occur, the meaning intended by a programmed appearance should roughly coincide with that reviewed and interpreted by a perceiver. Note that the meaning does not need to be exactly the same; in fact, often a rough approximation of jointly constructed interpretation is sufficient to allow participants to understand one another and to proceed with communication. Alternatively, they give and take, clarify, and rearrange potential interpretations to mesh with some semblance of understanding. Even after meaning is assigned, there may be some "effort-after-meaning" (Davis, 1982) as potential interpretations are checked, refined, and modified.

By looking at specific characteristics of appearance messages, we can better understand how these messages are shaped and interpreted. In everyday life, the following characteristics tend to be interrelated and interconnected; together they shape the course of appearance as a unique form of communication.

Nonlinguistic Characteristics

Appearance as a form of communication is transmitted primarily in the visual mode. A receiver's gaze is required (Enninger, 1985), and information is processed visually. As a general rule, appearance messages are *not* interpreted on the basis of a linguistic code (relying on words). Rather, they tend to be interpreted using *aesthetic codes*. There is a distinction between verbal cognition and visual cognition that parallels the contrast between the use of linguistic and aesthetic codes.

The nonlinguistic, aesthetic quality of appearance messages assumes significance in two ways. First, words seem to fail us when we attempt to *describe* appearance; it is difficult to express appearance through words to others in a way that evokes an image (picture) in their minds. This characteristic becomes evident when a friend describes what he or she plans to wear to a party. The receiver of the verbal message may conjure an image of an outfit and then be surprised to see the actual outfit at the party. Often, the verbal and the visual do not match. It is virtually impossible to describe all visible attributes (Peacock, 1986, p. 21). Therefore, when we perceive an appearance-related object, as well as a total appearance, we tend to rely on those attributes that are most salient to us.

Second, it is difficult to verbalize the *meaning* of an appearance message. Words may not exist to describe the emotions aroused or the feelings of appreciation or disgust. Receivers may find it challenging to express what they like or dislike about an appearance.

Clothes can convey messages that are inaccessible or inappropriate to language. So, given that appearance messages tend to be nonlinguistic, what does this mean in relation to the nature of their communicative value? Frequently, their meanings or significance cannot be verbalized, because aesthetic impressions are involved, just as we see paintings or sculptures with nonlinguistic eyes. It is difficult to "put into words" the emotions, sentiments, and intangible associations

that clothes often convey. Appearance messages actually rely on codes that lie somewhere between aesthetics and language. At the aesthetic end of the continuum are signs such as wearable art, laden with emotional content. Often preferences and moods fall near this aesthetic side as well, when they are invoked on the basis of observing certain appearances. It may be possible to *feel* when observing appearances, but be unable to put these feelings to words, to like or dislike without really being able to explain why. Because appearance is visual and taken for granted in everyday life, there is probably a tendency not to verbalize messages conveyed, but rather to implicitly note them in passing (unless they require more diligent attention and interpretation). Therefore, it may become somewhat annoying if clothes become a prominent topic of conversation, in a context where the sender would prefer for them to speak silently, yet effectively.

In the everyday world of communication, then, appearance signs are often used to construct social realities, without verbalizing these realities. Who wants to be told "Oh, I see you are trying to impress me," or "You must be depressed; you've been wearing dark colors all week"? In essence, most individuals probably welcome compliments but not trilogies on the essence of meaning of appearance signs. Sociologist Harold Garfinkel (1967) contends that everyday worlds involve taken-for-granted meanings that interactants want neither to be disrupted nor to emerge as the focal point of attention, in a manner that may disrupt the smooth and nonstressful flow of interaction. Of course, the extent to which this preference applies is likely to relate to the context and the participants in interaction.

Language possesses a different kind of potential to convey messages, and expresses those messages through a different medium, with a different effect. Therefore, it is inappropriate or misleading to speak of "clothing as language" (Enninger, 1985; McCracken, 1988). Before understanding what appearance messages can and cannot convey, it is important to explore *how* they convey. Whereas language "materializes in sounds or graphetics, . . . clothing materializes in fabrics of certain shapes and colors" (Enninger, 1985, p. 81). The aesthetic code is like an underlying pattern or system that links fabric, texture, color, pattern, volume, silhouette, and occasion (F. Davis, 1985). The body also materializes visually and is perceived aesthetically. Therefore, we should be careful not to impose the structure of language on that of clothing, or more generally, on appearance. To do so may limit our thinking about the nature and potential of appearance messages. Language is only one of many sign systems; appearance is another. Each system has its own range of possibilities for signifying, stimulating, and shaping meaning.

> We might consider whether the nonlinguistic codes of material culture communicate things that language proper cannot or, characteristically, does not. Do cultures charge material culture with the responsibility of carrying certain messages that they cannot or do not entrust to language? (McCracken, 1988, p. 68).

However, at times it is useful to *compare* clothing and appearance to language. At times, appearance signs seem to resemble linguistic signs. They are both

relatively complex in terms of their organization, and both rely heavily on social context in order for a message to be comprehended (Delaporte, 1980). In some cases, linguistic messages actually appear on clothes, as in the case of T-shirts with written slogans, labels, or proverbs. Through linguistic messages, T-shirts can display political and social attitudes, loyalty to a school, the location of one's vacation(s), taste in music or food, sense of humor, and so on, as shown in Figure 7-14.

Other uses of linguistic codes in relation to clothing apply when verbal labels may be used to identify a wearer on the basis of his or her clothes: "police officer," "businessperson," "baseball player," or "punk." Receivers may be able to establish the "look" of an appearance before them and place that look into a category with a ready-made, verbal tag. But often, such linguistic labels do not exist and the meanings are not easily put into words. Interpreting appearance then becomes more similar to solving a puzzle than to labeling.

In an analysis of Russian folk costume, Bogatyrev (1976) noted that perceivers can more easily determine the social position, cultural level, and taste of a wearer through his or her appearance than through speech. The appearance can convey messages that languages cannot, and these messages cannot necessarily be conveyed in words.

At times, clothing is clearly more aesthetic or artistic in terms of communication than it is linguistic. This is especially true when "emotions, allusions, and moods

FIGURE 7-14
Linguistic messages are illustrated on this T-shirt in a shop window in Paris. Photo by Susan B. Kaiser.

. . . are aroused" (F. Davis, 1985, p. 15), and meanings assigned defy simple cognitive interpretation. Davis goes on to note that clothing can sometimes make a statement as does language and arouse feelings as does art, or possibly accomplish both at the same time. That is, our appearances can explicitly state who we are while "alternatively or simultaneously evoking an aura that 'merely suggests' more than it can (or intends to) state precisely" (F. Davis, 1985, p. 15).

Multimessages and Ambiguity

Appearance in general, and clothing in particular, has the capacity for "interference-free transmission of unlimited numbers of messages" (Enninger, 1985). Multimessages are the number of distinct meanings that may be associated with or linked to a single signifier such as an item of clothing (Sebeok, 1985, p. 465). The choice of interpretation depends on the time, place, and social circumstances surrounding the signifier.

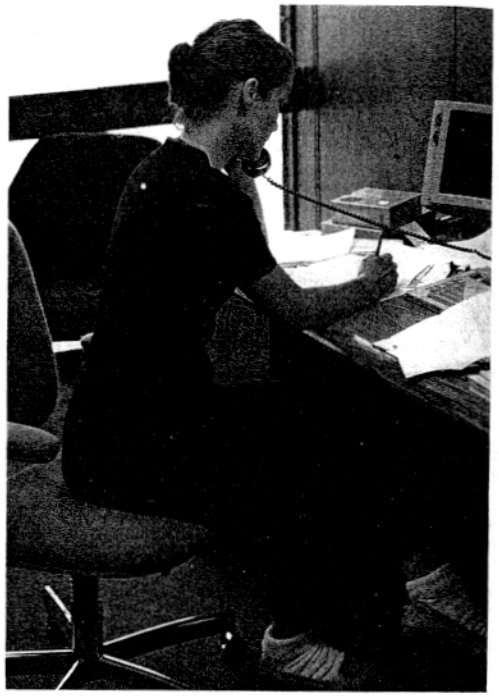
Clothes rarely convey single meanings; more often, their messages may be described as consisting of *layers of meaning*, with some layers more applicable than others in a specific context. For example, if one asks "what do jeans mean," it is difficult to answer with a single meaning. As Joseph (1986) notes, jeans have variously "meant" membership in groups such as agricultural laborers, civil rights, youth subcultures, and foreign communist elites with access to Western consumer goods. They have also signified "designer" goods, unisexuality, comfort, earthiness, and sexiness. Because clothes are social artifacts, they have the potential to derive meaning in and from a variety of social and cultural contexts.

Given that an article of clothing has many possible meanings, there is likely to be a certain degree of ambiguity as to which is "correct" (Delaporte, 1980). Moreover, the articles of clothing that are worn together may have numerous possible meanings, and they also interact with one another to produce additional ambiguities. To interpret, perceivers are likely to refer to the appearance context, as well as the social context, for additional guidance. These contexts are important factors in any interpretations of appearance messages, but become especially critical when a range of possible meanings may be identified.

Ambiguity, in fact, becomes an overriding characteristic in clothing and appearance messages (Delaporte, 1980; F. Davis, 1985). Ambiguity is present when a receiver (*a*) cannot simply or easily interpret because of a variety of possible meanings and, therefore, does not know which one to select (see Figure 7-15), or (*b*) lacks a frame of reference to understand an appearance, while also possibly being able to loosely relate the appearance to a similar one from his or her past experiences, as shown in Figure 7-16. Ambiguity can be created by the presence or absence of certain items of clothing, that is, in how the parts of the appearance context work together, just as it can evolve from the social context when one attempts interpretation (Delaporte, 1980).

Nonlinear, Gestalt-like Characteristics

When people perceive a sender's appearance, they are not likely to "read" it from top to bottom, or in a linear progression from one part to another (McCracken, 1988). Rather, it seems that appearance tends to be perceived in



GURE 7-15
t form of ambiguity is illustrated in the way this nan is dressed in her city office for what has been ared "1950s day" (although few people are actually sing up for the occasion). Namely, there are ltiple messages that we can "read into" her tarance, and it is difficult to know which one (if) is "correct." Is she dressed this way to achieve a Os look? (Her appearance is neither distinctively Os enough nor sufficiently different from a 1980s to be certain.) Or, is she simply dressing a little e casually than usual? Photo by Mark Kaiser.

its entirety, all at once, as an integrated system. Even if perceivers were to move systematically from one part of the body to another, interpretation would not involve a simple "adding up" of the meanings of all of the parts to arrive at a sum (total) meaning of appearance, because the interaction among the parts of the appearance influences the assessment (Lennon and Miller, 1984–1985).

Anthropologists frequently use the concept of *holism* to refer to the interconnectedness of parts in human experience. To perceive holistically is to see the parts in relation to the whole, to avoid stripping the part from its larger context. When we fail to see holistically, we are more likely to be blinded by our own perspectives (Peacock, 1986, p. 11).

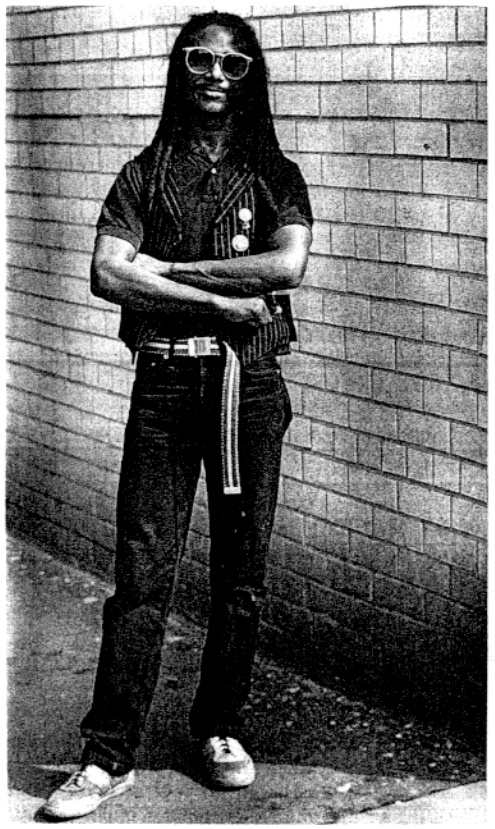
The psychological concept of **Gestalt** (Asch, 1946) is useful in understanding holistic perceptions. *Gestalt* is the German word for "shape" or "form," but it is often used to describe holistic perceptual processes enabling us to organize our impressions with respect to the parts in relation to the whole—in this case,

FIGURE 7-16
A second form of ambiguity (see Figure 7-15 for the first form) is depicted in this picture. Unless one is familiar with the University of Texas Cowboys (the service organization that promotes spirit at football games), these males' appearances may seem ambiguous or difficult to interpret. That is, a perceiver must have some frame of reference to interpret an appearance in a given context. Otherwise, the meanings or possible meanings are vague or unclear. Photo by Mark Kaiser.

the visual context presented by a person's appearance. The concept of Gestalt emphasizes that the whole is often greater, or more powerful in its impact, than the sum of the parts. (For an example of this, refer back to Figure 7-13 and note how each element of appearance contributes to a unique whole that must be perceived in its entirety; also see Figure 7-17.)

Appearance, as presented and received, is a kind of "formed expression," created through the use of fabrics, shapes, and colors combined in and across articles of clothing, and through the way an entire ensemble of clothing looks on one's body (based on its size, coloring, and other features). As we have already seen, the parts of appearance work together to convey an impression on the base of an underlying aesthetic code. The concept of Gestalt, as applied to appearance, refers to the aggregate impression made possible through aesthetic codes that present "rules of well-formedness" (Enninger, 1985). Each time a creative individual develops a new ensemble by combining garments and accessories that have not previously been seen together, a new Gestalt is formed (Enninger, 1985). Figures 7-5 and 7-6 are good examples of "created" Gestalts.

The concept of Gestalt can apply either to a given article of clothing or to an integrated system of clothing articles, accessories, and the body. Let's look first at a given article of clothing. Here we can focus on the parts of the garment, including the colors, textures, and forms that compose it. When single garments are disassembled, they can no longer be interpreted in the same manner as when the parts are a composite unit of dress (Wass and Eicher, 1980). Garments can be subdivided into component parts, as can composite, clothed appearances. Yet the manner in which the parts of a garment or a total appearance connect is vital to interpretation. Whether we are concerned with a single item of clothing or a total appearance as an integrated system of parts, underlying aesthetic codes influence appearance management and perception. These codes provide the glue



RE 7-17
ncept of ***Gestalt*** *is illustrated in this male's nce. That is, the whole is greater than the sum arts that compose it. Each time articles of , accessories, and modes of grooming are ed or recombined into a new look, a new Gestalt ed. Photo by Larry White.*

that connect component parts and distinguish meaning on the basis of "what is worn with what." An awareness of how component parts of appearance are interconnected and interdependent refers to the Gestalt nature of appearance messages.

How are interpretations influenced by the "breaking" of aesthetic codes? Some evidence suggests that cognitive forces lead perceivers to try to simplify their understandings of others. When the pieces of the appearance puzzle do not fit together and perceivers cannot explain the appearance on the basis of a Gestalt, they may experience *cognitive dissonance* (Festinger, 1957). That is, there

is a lack of mental "balance" in one's perception and some cognitive tension may result. When the parts of appearance do not "gel," a less-than-positive impression may be produced in the mind of a perceiver. At the same time, many perceivers have the cognitive flexibility to provide some rationale or explanation for an unusual combination of appearance parts. In a study by Gibbins and Schneider (1980), subjects were shown a woman clothed in a 1900-style coat paired with an incongruent style of pants—harem pants. The subjects interpreted that the woman must be "basically dressed in the harem outfit" but needed to throw "the coat on over it for warmth or from embarrassment." The subjects could not believe that anyone would *choose* to wear the two at the same time, together.

Because appearance codes change with time and fashion, appearances inducing a sense of cognitive dissonance also change. For example, a woman wearing a business suit with jogging shoes on a city street was, at first, an image that seemed inconsistent. The parts did not go together. Over time, however, this Gestalt became accepted.

Context-Dependence

The context in which any message is transmitted influences its interpretation. All kinds of messages are more or less context-sensitive (Sebeok, 1985, p. 454). Clearly, appearance messages are complex, prone to be ambiguous, and holistically emitted and received. Therefore, they rely heavily on context for meaning, and they also serve to alter the meaning of context. There are three kinds of contexts we can consider in relation to appearance messages: (1) the appearance context per se, (2) the social context, including the people involved and the nature of the interaction, and (3) the cultural and historical context.

Changes in clothes facilitate and accommodate changes in contexts (Joseph, 1986). Even the slightest alteration in a person's appearance can alter the meaning of the appearance context. At the same time, the total appearance context (Gestalt) is used to interpret individual clothing or appearance cues. An identical material such as the black gauze of a funeral veil "means" something very different when it is sewn into the bodice of a nightgown (F. Davis, 1985). In this case, the black gauze is part of a larger appearance context and therefore becomes part of a Gestalt-like image.

Similarly, clothes not only help to define the social and cultural and historical contexts but also rely on those contexts for meaningful interpretation. A jogging suit has a very different meaning when one is lying on the couch watching television, as compared with when he or she is running around a track or shopping in a grocery store. Wearing blue jeans "meant" something very different in the late 1960s and early 1970s (unisexuality, deemphasis of materialism, comfort, and earthiness—back to nature) than it did in the 1980s (designer goods and sexiness).

Although all types of verbal and nonverbal messages are more or less dependent on context for meaningful interpretation, it seems that this context-dependency especially applies to appearance messages. Why is this? Sociologist Fred Davis (1985) notes that there is a high degree of social variability in the link between

signifier and signified when it comes to appearance. Different groups of people attach different meanings to the same signifier (style, appearance). As compared to many other expressive products of modern culture:

> meanings are more ambiguous in that it is hard to get *people in general* to interpret the same clothing symbols in the same way; in semiotic terminology, the signifier-signified relationship is quite unstable (F. Davis, 1985, p. 18).

In other words, different groups of people (for example, age groups or occupations) can use different codes to interpret the same signifiers. For example, what is considered to be "fashionable" differs between persons immersed in the world of fashion (designers, retailers, and journalists) and the consuming public. Retailers have different concepts of what shoes are fashionable, high in status, and expensive than do consumers (Kaiser et al., 1985). Within the general public, as well, there are a variety of perceptions about applicable meanings for given clothing and appearance styles, as people interact in different spheres of social interaction, have different social identities, have differential access to fashion (where they live, what they can afford, and how interested they are), and pursue different leisure activities regardless of social class. Due to the visible nature of appearance, styles may be imitated and adopted without involving social interaction to ascertain their meanings to senders. Therefore, they may be "stripped" from their original contexts and take on totally different meanings that need to be constructed by the people who have adopted them and others with whom they come into contact. For example, head scarves used by the Palestinian Liberation Organization became fashionable in the late 1980s in the streets of New York. Consumers adopted them after seeing these scarves on television for a number of years. Most of these consumers were probably not as concerned with ideological connotations as they were with aesthetics.

Focused Characteristics

Appearance messages are often unfocused in nature, meaning that senders cannot readily control who receives the messages conveyed through appearance. Given that different groups of perceivers may interpret the same cues in various ways, this characteristic can lead to unintentional sending of messages, to individuals with whom one may not be attempting to communicate. Whereas with speech a sender can separate people in conversation and direct messages to particular receivers, it is not possible to "focus" appearance. It is available as a form of communication to all potential receivers within sight. Once clothes are placed on the body, one's hair is fixed in a certain style, makeup is applied, and a person enters a social context, the resulting appearance functions much like a "broadcast signal" (Enninger, 1985; McCracken, 1988). That appearance is "turned on" and emits signals until the person leaves the context.

A male trying to impress a female may dress accordingly but may impress others instead. Similarly, unsolicited or unwanted whistles from admiring males on the street are likely to annoy women who are on the way to important business meetings, wearing skirted suits. Depending on the awareness of the

individuals with whom we come into contact, any or all of them may receive messages intended for a select few.

Nondiscursive Characteristics

Relative to the nature of appearance as a "broadcast signal," it is also important to note that people cannot *discuss* with appearance once they are interacting in a social context. The adjective "discursive" refers to the movement from one topic to another. Any planning of a particular appearance message on the part of a sender must be done in advance of interaction, for the most part (in the backstage). Appearance does not "fade" as a message, unlike discursive forms of communication. A sender cannot free the channel for new signals, because the signal is constant throughout interaction—the whole time actors are on stage (Enninger, 1985, p. 88).

In contrast, in verbal communication a variety of subjects can be discussed in the same encounter, and if communication is not going well, it is possible to change the subject or to apologize for a previous statement.

The nondiscursive quality of appearance makes it difficult (if not impossible) to "repair" messages that were not intended or that have been received poorly. In everyday appearance communication, senders lack the ability to exert total control over how a message is conveyed in the *front stage*. Once clothes have been donned and appearance has been groomed (behind the scenes of interaction) and a sender is now engaging in social discourse, it is difficult to alter the message. It is not easy to shift from one message to another or to change the topic or tone of conversation, because appearance is visual and omnipresent. (It is hard to change clothes or restyle one's hair in the middle of a social transaction; senders of appearance messages tend to be "stuck" with what they are wearing.) However, appearance communication can be a little more discursive in some contexts than in others. Imagine a male college professor removing his jacket, rolling up his shirt sleeves, and loosening his tie. A male stripper also engages in a discursive act.

Characteristics as Commodity

Clothes, in particular, are not only forms of communication used at the discretion of senders. They are also *commodities*, or consumer products that are purchased at a cost. These signs are sold, in contrast to words or discursive nonverbal messages. They involve expense and are therefore not equally accessible to all potential users.

As commodities and signs, clothes (and other accessories and forms of grooming that are purchased) are part of the extended self. Consumer objects have no inherent meanings; rather, their meanings are formed in their production, marketing, and use. Despite fashion advertisements, store displays, and fashion shows, however, the meanings of clothes as commodities are rarely entirely shared (Belk, 1987).

A Gestalt approach may be taken to understand how groupings of products tend to be clustered together in consumers' minds and to carry some of the same meanings: "All goods carry meaning, but none by itself. . . . The meaning is in the relations between all the goods, just as music is in the relations marked

out by the sounds and not in any one note (Douglas and Isherwood, 1979, pp. 72–73).

Research suggests that products are grouped along symbolic rather than functional lines. In one study, 80 business graduate students were asked to form a mental picture of a person described in terms of his or her occupation. Then they were asked to picture any products this person would be likely to own. What resulted were products grouped in constellations for each occupational social role. For example, for the occupational label *professional*, the products generated included a Seiko watch, Burberry raincoat, Lacoste shirt, *Atlantic* magazine, Brooks Brothers' suit, Bass loafers, silk tie, French wine, and a BMW. In contrast, the label *blue collar* elicited the following products: Schaefer beer, AMF bowling ball, Ford pick-up truck, Levi's jeans, Marlboro cigarettes, RCA TV, *Field and Stream*, Black and Decker tools, and McDonald's. Almost half the products came from three categories: clothing, electronic equipment, and cars. Clothing was the most frequently mentioned product, which is not surprising given its communicative value, not only as a commodity but also as a part of personal appearance linked to one's occupation (Solomon and Assael, 1987).

Fashion marketing and merchandising can effectively make use of the principle of product clusters and/or a Gestalt effect of groupings of products based on symbolism rather than functionality. For example, innovative consumers may be encouraged (in advertisements) to wear layers of shirts and tops to create their own "Gestalts." By wearing layers of outerwear shirts, the traditional distinctions among underwear, indoor-wear, and outerwear are blurred; the idea of wearing the shirts together is symbolic rather than merely functional (Kehret-Ward, 1987).

Similarly, retailers may promote the idea of combining products in use. However, traditionally products have been grouped, shelved, and displayed in departments according to similar attributes rather than on the basis of social meaning or the same consumption goal. For example, shoes are generally found with other footwear in shoe departments, jewelry with other accessories, and so on. More and more manufacturers are urging or even forcing retailers to display their products (including clothes, accessories, and shoes) together, grouped symbolically as they might be worn and with a particular consumption occasion and goal in mind (rather than separated into different departments). Manufacturers who produce complete costumes had been complaining that retailers failed to accessorize clothing displays, refused to stock their entire line, and lacked the space to make a full presentation of the manufacturer's complete collection. Accordingly, manufacturers began to get more involved in how their merchandise is sold and presented, and the result has been boutiques within major department stores (for example, an Esprit boutique within Macy's and Bullock's stores (Kehret-Ward, 1987).

The commodity characteristic of clothing and accessories interconnects with the multimessage characteristic, as well as the Gestalt quality. Given that different consumer groups may assign various meanings to a particular clothing style or brand, fashion advertisers may strive to use this potential to convey multiple meanings to their advantage. The world of advertising is essentially a system of

symbols, pulled together from the range of culturally determined ways of knowing and establishing a sense of consumer need and desire. Advertisers would like for consumers to regard the products as relevant to their social experiences. Therefore, advertising is more than a system of creating messages; it is a system of discerning or discovering meaning (Sherry, 1987). The idea is to appeal to a variety of consumers in different ways, by playing with the multimessages, the Gestalts, as well as the other characteristics of appearance messages. Without multiple potential meanings, an extensive and diverse audience could not be attracted to a product (Zakia, 1986).

In summary, appearance becomes a visual context in its own right. The visual nature of appearance, coupled with its direct and personal association with a sender, provides it with some relatively unique characteristics that distinguish it from other forms of communication and contribute to its complexity. In the course of interpretation, like the proverbial customer, the interpreter is always right (or thinks he or she is and proceeds accordingly, in the absence of any disqualifying information). Thus researchers need to focus on consumers' interpretations, in their own words (Mick and Politi, 1989). Therefore, in the next two chapters, we will look more closely at (*a*) the process of social cognition (Chapter Eight) and (*b*) the qualities perceivers bring to social contexts (Chapter Nine).

Suggested Readings

Davis, F. 1985. Clothing and fashion as communication. In M. R. Solomon, ed. *The psychology of fashion*, pp. 15–27. Lexington: Heath/Lexington Books.
Davis explores the characteristics of clothing and fashion that distinguish them from language. He draws from semiotics and the symbolic-interactionist perspective to consider the changing nature of aesthetic codes and suggests that underlying ambivalences about identity provide fuel for fashion change.

DeLong, M. R. 1987. *The way we look: A framework for visual analysis of dress*. Ames: Iowa State University Press.
DeLong presents a framework for analyzing appearance, with a sensitivity to the visual and aesthetic dimensions of perception. The apparel-body construct is explored as a means of visually interpreting appearance as a whole entity.

Enninger, W. 1985. The design features of clothing codes: The functions of clothing displays in interaction. *Kodikas/Code 8*(1/2):81–110.
Using a semiotic approach, Enninger examines a number of characteristics making clothing a unique form of nonlinguistic communication.

Hillestad, R. 1980. The underlying structure of appearance. *Dress 5*:117–125.
Appearance is conceptualized in relation to interactions between the body and clothing. The visual impact of these interactions is explored using a structural approach.

McCracken, G. 1988. *Culture and consumption*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
In this book on a cultural understanding of consumption, McCracken includes a chapter on clothing as a form of communication and argues persuasively that the metaphor of language is inappropriate and inadequate to comprehend clothing—a nonverbal and nonlinguistic medium.