

Our Clothes

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The terms “model,” “modern” and “mode” come from the same root, “med-,” which means to measure. This original meaning has been forgotten. For example: we no longer remember that “modernity” as the progressive modeling of models means “unmeasured.” The meaning of “to measure” and “to evaluate” are similar. Measuring rulers evaluate. The evaluative connotation of the term enumerated above is also falling into oblivion. The proof of this is that when we hear the term “mode” we think above all of clothing.⁶ In the case of women’s fashion, for example, it is not a case of values. In the case of models of cars, it is possible to sustain the thesis that the models from the 1980s were better than the ones from the 1970s. The models of Einstein’s physics may be considered as “better” than Newton’s. But no one will try to sustain that the current models of trousers, that do not even have a pocket, are “better” than the preceding ones. In the field of fashion, progress has become even more “exempt of values” than in the fields of cars, of science or of economy. It has evidently become absurd. However, it is possible to object that the values of fashion are not epistemological, as in the case of scientific models, or ethical as in the case of cars. That it is a case of aesthetic values. That fashion trends are comparable to trends in art. But even if we assume such a (doubtful) position, through fashion, progress presents itself as absurd. Tendencies in fashion observe ephemeral impulses that are in a large sense alien to aesthetic considerations, and its models are aesthetically inferior. If then, as we hear the term “mode” we think above all of clothing, it is proof that we have lost our faith in progress and in modernity. This explains why the field of clothing is the first in which progress has stopped to function. This is the first field in which we have stopped being modern. The field seems to offer an image of chaos. Everyone dresses as they please and do not feel obliged to follow models. So that at first sight the field of clothing seems to allow us to escape social programming, and to escape from those apparatus that project the “haute couture” models in Paris and Rome and that transmit such models through the channels of fashion magazines and fashion shops, in order to first program the so called “elite” and afterward, the ever wider layers of society. It seems that we are escaping such irradiating amphitheatres, that we are “freeing” ourselves. But that is a mistake.

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¹ 6. “Moda” in Portuguese is the term used to designate current fashions, as it also used to be in English when speaking of “modes.” The current use of the term “fashion” still connotes a mode of behavior, but that has also been forgotten, which in my mind further reinforces Flusser’s point. However, for the sake of the text, I will opt for the literal translation of the term only wherever it makes sense, so that Flusser’s play with the word’s variations and its root stays consistent. Whenever the use of the term “fashion” is more appropriate, it will appear in italics as a reminder. [TN]

People do not dress as they wish to, but as they believe they should. What one sees is not chaos, but a complex system of uniforms. Uniforms for liberated women (free breasts), for anti-racists (afro-look), for the new left (hairy chest), for the new right (leather jackets), for intellectuals (turtle neck), for female university students (bed-linen and boots), for theologians “after the death of God,” for pacifists, for businessmen, for followers of Krishna and for conservative politicians. In sum, what one sees is a system of uniforms for those that refuse to walk uniformed. This system is a complex code. It allows one to decipher the clothes carrier. Whoever knows the code, knows everything about the carrier; their economic, social and political position and their philosophical and religious opinion. Therefore, the method of multiform uniformity is more efficient from the point of view of censorship than the method of Maoist egalitarian uniformity (everything blue). Within a scene that is programmed in this way, it is easier for the apparatus to retrieve the feedback of its programming than in China. In other times the situation was different. Whoever wished to decipher the clothes carrier...