Passepartout – relating dress, the body, and socio-cultural contexts

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to develop the concept of *passepartout*, which describes and conceptualizes the aesthetic and social aspects of dress. *Passepartout* is concerned with the relationship of dress and the body as an embodied practice. This paper offers a transition from the origin of *passepartout* in couture to wider contexts of wearers and wearing clothes.

Introduction

Dress has been conceptualized as a borderline (Freitas & al. 1997), boundary, frontier (Wilson 2003), frame, rim, margin (Warwick & Cavallaro 1998), mask (Tseëlon 1995; Warwick & Cavallaro 1998), environment (Watkins 1984; Raunio 2000), container, fence (Dant 1999) and landscape (Appleton applied by Raunio 2000), and there may be more metaphors to illustrate the role of clothing/dress between a human being and her/his psychological, social, cultural and physical environment, or as an environment itself. This paper proposes *passepartout* as a metaphor that aims to conceptualize the aesthetic and social aspects of dress and their relationship with the human body and the environment.

Originally, the term *passepartout* emerged as an *in vivo* concept in an empirical study of custom-made couture clothes, when couturière Riitta Immonen said to the researcher of her work:

> I think that a dress is a *passepartout*. It accentuates a person and brings her forth just like a *passepartout* brings forth a picture. (What then is the frame, asked the researcher) It is the surroundings, an event for example. It surrounds but a *passepartout* accentuates. (Koskennurmi-Sivonen 1998: 202)

The above quotation is a concise verbal expression of a philosophy of dress, which had been played out through life-long designing work, in the practice of fitting clothes on living bodies of clients and models.

Joanne Entwistle (2000) has argued that, in general, studies of dress neglect the way in which dress operates with the body, and therefore, she notes, there remains a need to consider dress in everyday life as embodied practice (pp. 10–11). In a face-to-face and hands-on situation of creating customized clothes, which are not only individually measured and fitted but also individually designed, clothes and the body are brought together in a natural and inevitable way. Neither one is neglected, as dress becomes an embodied practice from the very beginning of the creation of an outfit through its often surprisingly long use. Likewise, in studying such clothes, their creators, and users, the researcher becomes a close observer of the dress–body relationship. Furthermore, when participation in the couturière's work in the role of a client and a dressmaker is used as one of the research methods, even studying itself becomes the situated bodily practice that Entwistle (2000) calls for.

No doubt custom-made fashion is ideal for highlighting individual demands. However, some notions developed in the context of couture may, on a higher conceptual level, help to

reflect dress in contemporary culture in general and help to discuss a consumer's anxiety in the fashion market. The purpose of this study is to establish a transition from an empirical study—the context of the original metaphor—to discussing the concept of *passepartout* in wider contexts of wearers and wearing clothes.[1]

Visual/aesthetic origin

The word *passepartout*, in the above quotation, was adopted from the visual world of picture framing. Framers use a carefully selected *passepartout*, i.e. cardboard surrounding, to accentuate the qualities of a picture and to adjust it to the shape, size and other qualities of the frame.

The initial idea of this metaphor was a visual and aesthetic one. Just as the *passepartout* cardboard is usually simple and neutral—an obvious choice is white or greyish—so are our clothes, when harmonious, often so obvious that they do not attract any special attention. Instead, they let the person to be in the central role. This does not imply, however, that such clothes would be dull and colorless. On the other hand, when more accentuation is needed, there is a vast selection of colors and qualities to select from and to match minutely with the shades of the picture. Accordingly, more specific attention may be exercised in the selection of dress in matching it with the personal qualities of the wearer and bringing her forth in an ideal way.

In this aesthetic sense, the notion of *passepartout* is present in Coco Chanel's (alleged) thought of the effect a dress should have. She thought that instead of thinking "what a beautiful dress," the observer ideally thinks "what a beautiful woman."[2]

Social effect

In the couturière's visual/aesthetic idea, there is only a dash of social context, when she mentions that the frame is the person's surroundings, an event for example. But if we decompose the French word into its components, we get *passe par tout*, "pass through everything", wherein lies the second meaning of the word, namely a *passkey.*

In the novel by Jules Verne (1872, in English 1873) *Around the World in Eighty Days*, Mr. Phileas Fogg travels with his cunning servant called Passepartout. The clever servant helps his master work his way through difficulties and exciting events. The name of the servant given by Jules Verne is surely not just a coincidence, as the name so well reflects the abilities of the character. Passepartout certainly helps open doors, as his name implies.

This is how we use our dress, too, in social contexts. Dress as *passepartout* is something that opens doors and helps to transcend socio-cultural constellations. We think consciously or subconsciously what we should wear when we take into consideration other people and social occasions, and especially when we want to work our way through critical situations.

Passepartout as a philosophy of dress

Passepartout epitomizes a philosophy of dress, which prioritizes a human being over the dress as a creation while highlighting the aesthetics of the dress and its social meaning at the same time. Heard from a designer, this conception of dress sounds even modest. It sounds as if the designer did not wish to see herself as an artist creating innovative styles, not to mention spectacular styles, although she certainly is a creative person.

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[1] The data of my original empirical study is from couture, which represents a small, female part of the fashion world. In this text I widen the scope of *passepartout* outside couture while still focusing on female dress.

[2] I have heard and seen this quotation from Chanel in a number of contexts but I have not been able to trace its original documentation.

Couture was the context of creative action, when this metaphor emerged, but the thinking behind it is not limited to couture. Not all couture clothes work as *passepartouts*, and, on the other hand, an industrial outfit may work as one, provided that the optimal relationship between the outfit and its wearer is found by the consumer herself, by a fashion professional, or by another advisory person.

Couture is celebrated for its utmost individuality. Yet some couture creations, especially the showpieces of contemporary collections, do not accentuate the individual person, although they may be individual creations of a fashion artist. The wearer—the model of a fashion show—is often literally used merely to carry the clothes; the person is needed to support the clothes instead of the clothes supporting her. Those clothes represent what *passepartout* refrains from.

Elsewhere, the opposition to the ideological order of universalization imposed by the imperatives of mass production and consumption has emphasized the specificity of individuality as a burning contemporary desire (Attfield 2000: 93). This is especially true about fashion. At present, couture has an even more elitist connotation than it used to have in its heyday. Although more and more consumers return to custom-made clothes, at least occasionally, customization remains marginal, and it is only one agency of individuality in dress. Mass-customization is a promising production concept, but it is not yet accessible and adaptable to all consumers. People need to find other means of self-creation and personal interpretations of how to make an impact on their body and the space around it. *Passepartout* may offer a conceptual tool for this pursuit.

Jeans are a good, even simplistic, example of mass-produced clothes, whose ability to function as *passepartout* has increased throughout their history. Initiated as men's working clothes, jeans' patterns and fabrics have been developed to be flattering on women, too, and to fit to more and more body types. And having been first associated with hard work and then with rebelliousness and youth, jeans have opened doors to people's everyday life and a vast range of social events across the world.

Fashion and anxiety

In countries with a high standard of living, dress—and fashion in particular—has become a source of anxiety, just like excessive attention to the body has become a common problem. Alison Clarke and Daniel Miller have studied English women's shopping for clothes, anxiety and fear of social embarrassment. They found that individuals do not really know what their taste in clothing is, at least outside of various social and institutional supports that give them confidence. Even when individuals are highly knowledgeable about matters of taste and clothing, they find the everyday encounters of aesthetic choice ostensibly fraught. In extreme, for someone a "fashion disaster" may be part of her biography (Clarke & Miller 2002).

Women seem to experience anxiety especially in periods of transition, in the change of social contexts after years of stability in one context. They use, for example, catalogues that show clothing in suitable contexts as their guides. Some people, who have had extensive wardrobes but nothing to wear, have turned to a color consultant and found "objective" advice, which has helped solve all or some shopping anxiety (Ibid.).

People express their identities visually, and fashion is the major means of this expression. Verbally, it may be easier to talk about identities that people do *not* want to adopt than to express clearly what they want (Freitas et al. 1997; Kaiser 1997: 576). In a study of women's relationships with their clothes, Alison Guy and Maura Banim (2000) outlined three interdependent views of self: The Woman I Want To Be, The Woman I Fear I Could Be, and The Woman I Am Most Of The Time. At times the mainstream fashion system offers a more

applicable selection of commodities for the construction of The Woman I Want To Be than at other times. Unfortunately, too often many adult women experience more anxiety than satisfaction and feel themselves aliens in the fashion market.

A central question is where appearance styles are created. To what extent are they created by consumers themselves, and to what extent is the "fashion system" responsible for creating them (Kaiser 1997: 555)? As Breward (2003) notes, the creation of meaning is shared between the dresser and the dressed. Yet histories of dress have tended to emphasize the solitary and autocratic role of the designer in "dictating". Fashion studies have very little to say about the life of sartorial products once they have left the sphere of production and promotion. Breward admits certain methodological difficulties in the kinds of studies he calls for (p. 159). Following industrial products through their life cycles with anonymous consumers is indeed a major methodological challenge. However, in the study of customized clothing, where clients are more easily found, the simultaneous study of the designer, clients, and dresses reveals specific anxieties, desires, ways of individual style creation, experimentation, resolutions, and long relationships, which individuals may have with their clothes. (Koskennurmi-Sivonen 1998)

Couture is generally equated with the elite, and earlier with perpetual novelty and wasteful follies, too. But an acquaintance with small-scale, local couture or boutique patronage, from the 1940s to the present day, reveals from the client's perspective a different picture of searching and also finding gratifying aesthetic solutions, sensibilities of the body, fabric and shape, and sensitivity to socio-cultural demands. These experiences resonate with everyday life and down-to-earth problem solving rather than wasteful follies. When a consumer conceives fashion as a broad and liberating framework, it is easier to negotiate a balance between up-date fashion and individual style, and thereby to wriggle out of anxiety.

Fashion show and spectacle—boredom and freedom

Why do people seem to be tired of fashion? Why do so many people—experimenting young consumers, average adult consumers and even dress scholars—say that they are not interested in fashion, although they are quite clearly interested in clothes?

"Why people hate fashion" is the title of an article by fashion historian Valerie Steele. She reminds us that the antifashion sentiment goes back many centuries and continues to flourish today. Many people are more or less hostile to the very idea of fashion. Even in fashion-friendly countries such as Italy, there is an underlying ambivalence about fashion (Steele 1998). Even a fashion editor entitled her report on Paris fashions "Battle of the Boring" in *Time* (July 30, 2001). It may well be that fighting boredom with "The Greatest Show on Earth" (title of Duggan 2001) soon becomes boring.

My argument is not that all fashion has lost its interest for the consumer, but at least part of fashion creators seem to have forgotten the consumer in their battle for attention of the media, which increases anti-fashion attitudes among consumers. There seems to be an inherent contradiction in the way fashion shows and fashion publicity work. As Nadine Frey writes:

> As spectacle, they [fashion shows] are both too showy and formatted to convey the subtleties of a designer's individual aesthetic […] fashion show, from conception to execution, is almost entirely orchestrated for the most banal of commercial aims. […] Fashion shows today are staged for publicity, and in their hustle for editorial and television coverage, the clothes have taken a backseat to almost everything else. (Frey 1998)

One might imagine that a fashion show, if it is commercial, is about something the consumer would eventually buy, and that a suggestion of this prospect of consumption would be mediated to her/him.

It is easy to notice, of course, that designers have different relationships to their creations and persons wearing their creations. Warwick and Cavallaro give an example:

> The Versace design refers to the body, the excess of decoration draws attention, it is essentially spectacular; while the Armani dress effaces the body and is supposed to displace attention to the other, unfleshly qualities of the wearer. […] the former might be seen as something to be worn by woman-as-possession […] By contrast the Armani dress is usually seen as that of an independent woman, who possesses power in her own right, yet reveals it through a similar strategy of concealment. (Warwick & Cavallaro, 1998: 82)

In Armani style of this quotation, I recognize the idea of *passepartout* I discuss here. My study even supports this type of relationship with power, although not quite simply so. Most of the couturière's clients, whom I interviewed for my study, were women of social, cultural, intellectual, or economic power. But there were also women who used dress for empowerment —to overcome their anxiety in a social context. (Koskennurmi-Sivonen 1998)

Habitus and passepartout

Pierre Bourdieu's (1994) work on *habitus* and practice provides a tool for thinking through dress as a situated practice as Entwistle (2000) has proposed. Although *habitus* is a very slippery and diffuse concept, a comparison with it may help to situate the concept of *passepartout*.

> The *habitus*, a product of history, produces individual and collective practices—more history—in accordance with the schemes generated by history. It ensures the active presence of past experiences, which deposited in each organism in the form of schemes of perception, thought and action, tend to guarantee the "correctness" of practices and their constancy over time, more reliably than formal rules and explicit norms. (Bourdieu, 1994)

Habitus is acquired through history and acculturation into a certain socio-cultural group, and as in Bourdieu's thinking in general, the distinction between groups is present in this concept, too. Furthermore, he differentiates between class *habitus* and individual *habitus*. In contrast, *passepartout* is not about belonging to a group. Rather, it is about transcending such distinctions. While it is highly individual in its aesthetics, socially it associates more than separates. *Passepartout* presupposes some schemes of perception, just as anything that conveys shared meanings. And like *habitus*, it is also more a matter of "correctness" of practice than formal rules or explicit norms.

Today, dress is less likely to give consistent clues about socio-economic groups than it used to do, although it certainly still may reveal affiliations. Accordingly, class (or socio-economic) *habitus* of contemporary people is not so clear. But even in the era of more consistent dress codes, say up to the latter half of the 1960s, times that coincide with the heyday of couture, couture clients may have shared a certain class *habitus*, but not all clients' individual *habitus* functioned like *passepartout*. Some people wanted their dress to stand out

over themselves just as some people do now, when they work to bricoler their appearances in malls, department stores, boutiques or flee markets.

> Only in imaginary experience (in the folk tale, for example), which neutralizes the sense of social realities, does the social world take the form of a universe of possible equally possible for any possible subject. (Bourdieu 1994)

And yet:

> The notion of the *habitus* as a durable and transposable set of dispositions allows some sense of agency: it enables us to talk about dress as a personal attempt to orientate ourselves to particular circumstances and thus recognizes the structuring influences of the social world on the one hand, and the agency of individuals who make choices as to what to wear on the other. (Entwistle 2000)

Likewise, the woman dressed in *passepartout* has the sense of agency. She is a passkey holder who can play out the self, use her body and dress as a selfing device (Boultwood & Jerrard 2000). One more common feature is that people are aware of neither *habitus* nor *passepartout* at all times. However, *passepartout* may demand conscious effort to be acquired, as all forms of dress do not entail this effect. In contrast, all people and their dress can be perceived as *habitus*, although people may work in order to have a certain type of *habitus—passepartout*, for example.

Dress in time and space

How to dress in a world where one can no longer say that this is our custom or our religion but where we are making up our own rules and values? The last three decades have seen a clear decline of the traditional form of fashion authority, too. This has happened at the same time with the democratizing of individuals' relationship to fashion and freedom (Clarke & Miller 2002). Yet all people do not seem to be contented with this freedom of creating one's own style or choosing it from the heterogeneous market. As the study of so-called "casual Friday" indicated, men were not always happy to have the freedom of dressing casually on Fridays. They began to have same kind of wardrobe and decision-making problems that women have always had (Janus, Kaiser & Gray 1999). A norm, be it fashion or other, facilitates sharing the common shame as Simmel (1904/1986) argued. If one looks ridiculous, no one is ridiculous alone.

If there is to be fashion, there is to be some change. But how to make sense of this change? When the antifashion movement was at its strongest in the early 1970s, even some apparel producers, at least in Sweden and in Finland, tried to hire designers to create basic garments for women in aspiration of a dress style that "never" changes. Hardly anybody remembers what this eternal fashion was like. Fashion scholars have also noticed these types of endeavors of timelessness and the failure of the efforts (Wilson 1990).

Although certain timelessness may be emphasized as an excellent and desirable quality of dress by people dressed according to the *passepartout* philosophy (Koskennurmi-Sivonen 1998), I do not suggest timelessness as a necessary quality of harmonious dress. I especially do not wish to offer a fashion-hostile concept of dress. It is rather worth to be eclectic or even suspicious about fashion than to try to dismiss fashion as a real world phenomenon or any conceptualizations of it. What I suggest is an alternative to the hectic change and the alienation of fashion from living people's beauty and well-being. If fashion functions in the role of cultural clock (Breward, 1995), dress as *passepartout* certainly knows and feels the pace of that clock. In a wider context of fashion, fashion's meaningfulness to human beings

cannot be belittled. I continue to concur with Herbert Blumer (1969) in that fashion helps individuals to move in time, to detach themselves from the hold of the past, to resonate with the present, and to anticipate the future.

Passepartout is akin to classic in its success in resistance of time. But while "classic" implies a fossilized form that is generally recognized and widely accepted, the timelessness of a *passepartout* may lack this generality. Furthermore, it is important to notice that the *passepartout* effect of dress is only perceptible when dress and the body function together, whereas classic dress forms may circulate amidst us on display without a wearer. Individuality keeps clothes wearable for long periods of time. Individuality is coupled with articulating personality more than with novelty seeking per se, although novelty is included in creation.

Thus *passepartout* is more about style than fashion, yet acknowledging that these have much in common. This relationship can be clarified with the help of pairs of terms offered by Susan Kaiser (2001). These terms are related to each other but have different emphasis: Subjectivity (a way of being and becoming in the world) is to intersubjectivity (collective understanding of how things are) what style is to fashion, and truth is to knowledge. In each case, the former term suggests individual actions and intentions, whereas the latter implies collective negotiations and understandings (p. 80).

Fashion may give us a good hint of what to wear. However, fashion may be too public, because a fashionable individual belongs to the whole world (Calefato 1997 referring to Baudelaire), and sometimes we prefer the private to the public. Walter Benjamin used a *passage*—an arcade or gallery in modern urban buildings of Paris—as a metaphor for space. In this space a *flâneur*—"a man in a crowd"—*looks* at the modern world, fashion included. And here, in the public space, fashion itself acts as a passage, as an exchange system between merchandise and the world (Benjamin 1999; Calefato 1997).

Patrizia Calefato (1997) offers a metalinguistic awareness of multiple meanings of the word *look* that captures something of the aesthetic and social meanings of dress. First, as a noun *a look* may be used synonymously with *appearance style*. Second, following the double meaning of the verb *to look—to seem* and *to look at*—the clothed body is simultaneously defined by being looked at and by its own way of looking at the surrounding world. In this sense, the look is a way of being in the world and of creating a social universe, where one can live with a certain self-recognition of adopting and rejecting fashion.

If a *passage* is a public space where our dress is viewed as fashion, could dress as *passepartout* (passkey) let us open an escape door from the *passage*—to withdraw in some privacy and come back to public/social space again? If we do not distinguish *passepartout* from fashion too sharply and foster subjectivity alone, fashion's intersubjectivity (see Kaiser 2001) allows us to "return" to the public, into the world of shared meanings.

If dress (an outfit) works well as *passepartout*, i.e. is harmoniously related to the person, it may also be regarded as *personally universal*. *Personal* implies that it suffices that dress (individually designed or put together in whatever way) is becoming to one person only. *Universal* is used to imply the presumption that in such dress a person can go anywhere (at least in so-called Western cultures) and that other people would probably not perceive her through strong cultural lenses. In other words, such clothing travels well both in time and space. (Koskennurmi-Sivonen 1998: 283–284)

Continuity and coherence

In a way, *passepartout* is an antithesis of style surfing (Polhemus 1996). Although both may help a person to move from one context to another, *passepartout* offers the sense of continuity that the contemporary world so often lacks. With different means, a style surfer might also

find the effect of "going native." Clothing that travels well from one context to another and has the sense of continuity has also been referred to as *contextually flexible* (Kaiser 1997: 583). Contextually flexible clothing has often turned out to be favorite clothing, too, to which the wearer has a strong emotional relationship (Kaiser, Freeman & Clandler 1993; Raunio 2000), just like couture clients dressed according to *passepartout* ideology have had long friendships with their clothes (Koskennurmi-Sivonen 1998: 282).

The feeling of continuity is valuable for many people when their time is sliced and one does not know how to master the next challenge of change and uncertainty. Fragmentation is not, however, a phenomenon of the contemporary world only. As early as in 1904, Georg Simmel (1904/1984) argued that the homogenizing quality of fashion is especially significant to modern people whose lives suffer from individualist fragmentation. Later on, Elizabeth Wilson (2003) has discussed the positive effects of fashion. According to Wilson, fashion acts to glue together the fragmentary self into the semblance of a unified identity. If this is true about the phenomenological aspect—lived inner experience—of fashion, dress as *passepartout* conveys this type of message to other people in a visually coherent form that all fashionable dress does not do.

Telling the truth or not

Given fashion's penchant for obfuscating the distinction between deception and truthfulness, even the boundary between "telling lies" and "telling the truth" becomes precarious and uncertain (Warwick & Cavallaro 1998). But here dress works, as a good sign should: It allows one to tell a lie. What one cannot use to tell a lie, one cannot use to tell the truth either, as Eco (1976) puts it. In the case of *passepartout,* in principle, one should be able to tell a lie or hide something, and tell the truth simultaneously. Aesthetically, one may wish to give an untrue—more flattering than real—impression while being socially sincere at the same time.

For appearance, meaningfulness and intersubjectivity are more important than truth. But although we cannot be forced to tell the truth, it may easier to us to reveal something in appearance than in words. As Kaiser notes, it is difficult to verbalize affirmative identity truth claims. Such claims are more likely to be represented visually as people work through and experiment with various possibilities. And what is put forth as truth is often nothing more than a meaning, an interim space between truth and meaning (Kaiser 2001 referring to Trinh Minh-ha).

Dress as *passepartout* may offer us means of camouflage or refuge (see Raunio 2000), if we wish so, but above all, it facilitates to focus the attention of the perceiver and it allows us to tell such partial truths we may wish to tell.

From uneasiness to some easiness

Warwick and Cavallaro (1998) ask whether dress should be regarded as part of the body or merely as an extension of or supplement to it. Where does the body end and where does dress begin? As a margin, dress connects the individual to other bodies, and it links the biological entity to the social ensemble and the private to the public (pp. xv–xvii).

According to Elizabeth Wilson (2003), clothing marks an unclear boundary ambiguously, and unclear boundaries disturb us. Symbolic systems and rituals have been created in many different cultures in order to strengthen and reinforce boundaries, since these safeguard purity. It is at the margins between one thing and another that pollution may leak out. Dress is the frontier between the self and the non-self (pp. 2–3).

Freitas et al. (1997) also discuss clothing—especially least favorite clothing—and identity in relation to the metaphor of borderline. It defines who we are and who we are not.

This borderline needs continual maintenance, and that is why clothing continues to receive attention and consideration. As the boundary between self and dress is never clearly drawn, the way someone thinks she looks her best may have more to do with how she feels, what her mental attitude is (Tseëlon, 1995: 59).

These cited conceptualizations of clothing as a border highlight more or less the psychological aspect of dress. *Passepartout* primarily combines the aesthetic and social aspects, but psychological (or social-psychological) aspects are very close, too. Namely, the couturière, who saw her creations as *passepartouts*, described an ideal dress as "loose inside and tight outside." Again, the "tight outside" implies the visual aesthetics of a dress, not literally tight but well-fitting with a graceful line, while "loose inside" refers to a good bodily feeling. The looseness of the material may also be interpreted as bridging the private bodily and mental comfort of the inside with the tightness of the social world on the outside. (Koskennurmi-Sivonen 1998: 210)

As a whole, the concept of *passepartout* may be called a philosophy of dress, if not an ideology, since it offers a way not only to reflect upon one's appearance conceptually but also to resolve at least some tensions of looking at and being looked at in the world. Yet it can hardly address to someone who wishes to focus, for example, on fashionable clothing items per se instead of dress and the body as a mutually supporting ensemble, or to someone who wants to blur the body and dress and the use of the body as a material for dress in radical ways. As an ideology, *passepartout* is concerned with an ideal appearance. However, this ideal is not coupled with young and thin or any other such yardstick. Neither does this ideology offer an "objective" opinion of a good personal appearance style. The dresser, the dressed and the outside perceiver cannot be entirely divorced from their cultural measures, but the idea of *passepartout* may contribute to measuring how clothes fit to the body instead of vice versa.

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