SEMIOTICS AND THE LANGUE OF FASHION

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RATIONALE

• Introduction to Semiotics
• Definition of Semiotics
• Key terms in Semiotics
• Key thinkers and Linguists
• Basic Principles
• Application to Fashion
• Summary
INTRODUCTION TO SEMIOTICS

La trahison des images, Rene Magritte 1928–29
“The famous pipe. How people reproached me for it! And yet, could you stuff my pipe? No, it’s just a representation, is it not? So if I had written on my picture ‘This is a pipe,’ I’d have been lying!”

Rene Magritte
One and three Chairs, Installation, Joseph Kosuth, 1965
**Definition of Semiotics**

se·mi·ot·ics also se·mei·ot·ics  
(used with a sing. verb)  
The theory and study of signs and symbols, especially as elements of language or other systems of communication, and comprising semantics, syntactics, and pragmatics.
A tradition of thought that identifies the formal structures of signification, of meaning making in culture, it is used as a form of critique or analysis of social behavior or culture.
Key Terms

• Sign
• Signifier
• Signified
• Denotation
• Connotation
• Semantics
THIS IS NOT A HORSE
FERDINAND DE SAUSSURE

Swiss Linguist, 1857 – 1913.
'Cours de linguistique', 1916
Paper on the basic principles of semiotics or the study of signs.
Mathematician, Philosopher and logician, 1839 – 1914.

“Semiotics depict the foundation of every kind of communication and the major requirement for knowledge.”
SIGN

Basic Unit of meaning, or anything that makes meaning
Any material thing that signifies

The concept of that material thing
Sign

ROSE

Signifier

Signified
The most basic form of a sign

ie. The literal meaning of a sign
Connotation

Becomes the signifier for a second signified

ie. A secondary signification or concept
Connotation

PASSION
CONNOTATION IN FASHION

• Many layers of meaning and signification
• Varying complexity
• Varying ease of reading or understanding
• Based on our own frame of reference
• Subject to misinterpretation
The study of meaning
Usually associated with linguistics
Study of the meaning of words
Study of language
Study of a visual language
Study of a visual fashion language
Clothing is not just to keep us warm
FASHION IS A LANGUAGE

A means of communicating about the body and the wearer
A series of signs, symbols, rules and codes
A means of social language
A means of personal language
Described as monumental, indigestible, turgid rebarbative
The semiology of Fashion
According to Barthe......

- “Fashion is the product of the Social Relations and Activities involved in putting an outfit together”

- “Fashion is actualised through the way the garments and accessories are worn…”
The Padung Tribe, South East Asia
Mursi Tribe, Ethiopia
Mystery Woman, Pretty Little Liars.
Context
SEMIOTICS IS THE SCIENCE OF FORMS OR SIGNS, IN FASHION THESE SIGNS WOULD BE

- Garments
- Footwear
- Details
- Accessories
- Modes
- Combinations
If each element is a sign then we can conceive of how they compose a language (langue) of clothes. Individual choices constitute a statement about the individual.
SUNGLASSES

Denotation = eye protection
SUNGLASSES

Connotation.............
Kate Middleton
Russell Brand
Other signs & symbols

Connotations change with the context in which an item may be place…
So we add in all of the other details of langue as well as previous knowledge and experience when we read the signs
We read a ‘Contextual Grammar’ into our interpretation of langue.
**Denotation = Straightforward Meaning**

Eg.

A man wearing trousers is a simple example of a man wearing normative dress.
CONNOTATION = LAYERS OF READING

1st layer of reading

A woman wearing trousers might be seen very differently, especially in cultures where this is unheard of.

Or in different times...
'Should Women Wear Trousers?', Picture Post (1 November 1941),

**Connotation = Layers of Reading**
2nd Layer
features and symbolism of trousers

Fabric
Cut
Pockets
Pleats
Creases
Zips
Turn ups
Buttons
3rd Layer
Type or Style of Trousers

Jeans
Formal Dress Trousers
Uniform Trousers
Leggings
Sweat Pants
4th Layer
Overall outfit
Last Layer of Reading

Interpreting the whole outfit along with its wider context = the connotation or contextualised meaning and symbolism
The Contextual Reading is a code or a set of shared rules that enables us to connect the signifier with the signified.
Contextual Reading of Langue or Codes

- Primness
- Authority
- Formality
- Practicality
- Relaxation
- Hostility
- membership
Introduces ideas about the way that clothes present a semiotic coding by forcing physical behavior

"Thought abhors tights."

Essay ‘Lumbar Thought’, 1976
The End
**Task**

**Part 1** - Find 3 – 5 images or outfits and aim to undertake each level of reading carefully, noting your thoughts about each component.

**Part 2** – Think about examples of where, when or how Umberto Eco might have been right about clothing forcing physical behavior which ultimately impacts on the coding or reading of the outfit
Part 3 – Undertake close reading of the essay by Umberto Eco, entitled Lumbar Thought from 1976. Make notes and highlight interesting observations from the text.