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A Philosophy of Clothes



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BASIC BOOKS

New York

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To Almaraz



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PROLOGUE

The Chinese Dress

She wears a different cheongsam in every scene—stiffened silk, capped sleeves, high collars—and is, somehow, impossibly lovelier each time.¹ All quiet grace and lissome limbs, she is a sylph, silently slipping through narrow corridors and darkened stairwells, her tiny wrist brushing against his sleeve, their bodies only momentarily turned to each other on their star-crossed paths.

After the revolution of 1949, the Communists had curtailed the wearing of the cheongsam in Shanghai, but émigrés carried them with them to Hong Kong as a marker of a defiant elegance. In Wong Kar-wai's film *In the Mood for Love* (2000), Maggie Cheung's cheongsams are perfectly fitted to her slight frame, the upright collars reaching to the neck, always meticulously matched to studded ears. The dresses are

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structured and traditional, skimming close against the ribs and over the waist, holding her in place, holding her back, holding off the tumult inside. She never lets go.

He, by contrast, is young and warm, capable of passion. Tony Leung plays him with a rueful, smiling carelessness: a slim hand habitually running through glossy hair, rolled sleeves and slackened collar. He is plain-shirted but stylish-smart, quick to laugh, neat in a narrow tie and tiepin.

When, partway through the film, she realizes that they can never act on their desire, the camera catches her gazing wistfully from a gilt-edged window, its golden frame picking up the yellow jonquil printed on her dress, the flower's own mute beauty, in turn, mocked by the landlady's loudly chintzed lounge stretching behind her. The green tendrils of some climbing plant creeps into the edge of the shot. In its original Cantonese, the film was titled *The Age of Blossoms*. Maggie Cheung's still-girlish character, in the spring of her



In the Mood for Love (2000)

x

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life, mourns the loss of a flowering that never comes. She sips absently from a glass of water; her slender arm is pressed against her waist, holding in everything she might once have felt, might ever feel again, under the blooming yellow jonquil printed on her bluish-grey dress and across her heart.

The Boots

When the American heiress Claribel Cone purchased an oil painting depicting a pair of discarded boots, she grimly conceded to her sister, Etta, that she was “not so pleased” with her newest acquisition. You picture her writing from the satin-slipped serenity of her salon with a disappointed, grudging respect: “the pair of shoes will not grace my living room with beauty—however—it is a Van Gogh—almost certainly—Mr. V. [Vallotton] says *sans doutes*.”² The painting is unmistakably Van Gogh’s, a variation on one of his particularly obstinate themes. The boots were his too, bought in a Parisian flea market in 1886. The feverish series of paintings that followed indicate how they possessed him in that wildly productive year, repeatedly commanding his painter’s eye and demanding the touch of his brush.

The 1886 canvas in the Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam is also, unmistakably, his, profoundly marked by that peculiarly heavy hand and rendered in the dulled browns of his Dutch Nuenen palette.³ The paint is thickly knifed, the pigment-clogged brush visibly scrubbed across the canvas next to vigorously crosshatched textures. The brushwork is graceless, brutish, honest. So are the boots. They sit exhausted, reluctantly ordered like chided children, right and left in place, the battered leather robust and defiant, and the long-worn uppers curled from use. The laces are tightly

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Vincent Van Gogh *Shoes* (1886)

threaded but left strewn, resting in the gleaming eyelets they have pierced. The lolling tongues dip into each boot's dark internal recess. And yet they have the grace of the sunlit earth on which they rest. *They rest*. These boots have walked, have worked, and though they come to rest here on this sunlit earth, they are only momentarily stilled, as though they might labor yet with ragged breath.

The German philosopher Martin Heidegger, seeing the painted boots in an exhibition, wrote of them in an essay of 1950. He feared and romanticized them, projecting onto them the “toilsome tread of the worker” and “the menace of death.”⁴ The shoes, he claimed exultantly, contained a world, full of ripening grain and fallow, wintry fields. “On

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the leather,” he wrote, “lie the dampness and richness of the soil. Under the soles slides the loneliness of the field-path as evening falls. In the shoes vibrates the silent call of the earth.” But perhaps the world they contained was less even than this and more profound. The boots are simple and entreating, piercing us with their visible fatigue. They ask us to imagine the life of feet, conjured, as they are, by Van Gogh’s hand. But walking and painting were always bound together for him.

As a child, he had roamed the fields and woodlands of Brabant, feeling the colors of sky, marsh, heath, and sand resonate with unspoken tone and atmosphere. When in 1890 he suffered a breakdown, he sought solace and tranquility in the grounds around Auvers-sur-Oise, painting landscapes palpably freighted with an emotional charge. “Sometimes I long so much to do landscape,” he wrote, “just as one would for a long walk to refresh oneself, and in all of nature, in trees for instance, I see expression and a soul, as it were.”⁵ In July 1890, he walked out into the wheat fields around Auvers for the last time and shot himself in the chest.

The Denim Jacket

“Take me to the center of everything” is what she demanded, apparently, when she first arrived to New York City in 1978, clambering into a taxi.⁶ The driver deposited her in Times Square. She found a job in Dunkin’ Donuts before being fired for squirting jam into a customer’s face. It’s an apocryphal story, but you believe it, and have a sense of how well she would retell it, laughing wickedly. She is fearlessly, unstoppably fun and almost feline in her daring, confident that she’ll land on her feet and right herself whatever risks she takes.

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Madonna lived in the Lower East Side of Manhattan and in Corona, a neighborhood in Queens, during the early 1980s. By the time of “Borderline,” the fifth single from her first album, titled *Madonna*, she had dated the artist Jean-Michel Basquiat, was kicking around with Andy Warhol and the Beastie Boys, hanging out at Studio 54, Danceteria, and the Pyramid Club. Her style in those first years was boho-punk, both feminine and tomboyish, cool, carelessly sexy, fingerless gloves and string vests, a jumble of jewelry, jackets you could leave behind on the subway, on a dance floor, in a Brooklyn apartment at four in the morning.

“Borderline” was released in 1984. In the video to the track, she is a messy blonde, her hair a peroxide tangle with visible roots, topped by an orange-red headband tied in an impudent bow.⁷ She pairs a tangerine vest with baggy black cargo pants, dressed up with fluorescent socks and an armful of bangles. She finishes the look with a sleeveless denim jacket, oversized, as though she’s borrowed it (and has no intention of returning it). The whole ensemble has the haphazardness of a spree around a thrift shop—and a certain poise, too.

The video begins with her dancing under a bridge, bopping with her cute Latino boyfriend, against a backdrop of corrugated iron and dilapidated warehouses. A handsome photographer in a slim-cut, tan-colored suit turns up. He carries her off in his smart car and gives her an expensive leather jacket, but she’s street-smart and unseduced by his debonair ways. When she tires of his studio, the classical busts, and faux Roman colonnades, she takes a canister to his marble walls and spray paints a wonky heart so rudimentary that Basquiat would have been ashamed of her. No matter. Boys don’t matter. She can take their jackets or throw them off at will.

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Madonna in concert (1985)

The opening notes of the song (you may know it) are high and clear—a penetrating sweetness to them—the synthesized melody uncomplicated, given momentum by the drums that roll in, blithe and relentless. “Something in the way you love me won’t let me be,” she sings in that high, still-childlike register. “I don’t want to be your prisoner, so baby, won’t you set me free?” But it’s not a request. Nothing will curtail her ambition, and she’ll meet every question with a level and challenging gaze.

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Over the years, there will be other jackets—the short, glittering, greenish-bronze cropped jacket with zebra-patterned lapels and a pyramid embroidered on its back that Rosanna Arquette returns to her in the 1985 film *Desperately Seeking Susan*; the lurid purple leather bomber jacket, paired with an eye-wateringly high-leg leotard and a Farrah Fawcett flick for the disco-themed *Confessions on a Dance Floor* album; the snug-fit, one-buttoned denim jacket, worn with nothing underneath it, her honey-colored, beach-waved hair flying against the wind as she leans into the hurtling, high-speed flashes of the *Ray of Light* video.⁸

But back then, singing “Borderline” with all her heart, dancing under the bridge in that sleeveless denim jacket, you sense in her the longing of youth and the vulnerability that comes with it. The lyrics of the song are reflective, knowing how alert young people are to their own dreams, how determined they can be in their right to pursue them undiscouraged. They are buoyed by an innocence that hasn’t yet met experience. She skips and trips in that opening sequence, moving guileless and free, filled with the kind of elation that you are only ever capable of at that age. “Take me to the center of everything,” she said.



Introduction

THE THOUGHT OF OUR CLOTHES



A girl in a jade silk skirt dashes past on the escalator. She is like the glimpse of an unguessed possibility, a dauntless flash of brilliance against the ambient blue wash of an ordinary day. A man in neon-striped running shoes steadily circuits the park. He is racing the earth as it rotates beneath him, striving to peel back the years with each stride. What am I to them, in grey woollen coat and red suede gloves, this wintry morning? Only another person, walking through the world, thoughts carried in a fragile body, dressed like any other.

But when I listen closely in a crowd, I am conscious of the synthetic rustle of a jacket's lining as it grazes against an acrylic sweater, the crackle and quick hum of a zip as it zooms up to a neck, the pleasing clatter of an assortment of heels. I know precisely the smart smack of a leather sole against a solid floor. When the noise of voices, traffic, and TV subside, you'll hear it too—a cloud of inchoate sounds, the murmur of tangled fibers as they brush against surfaces



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of all kinds. When a sweater snags on a door handle or a button dangles from a dangerously loosened thread, our clothes pointedly remind us that they are there. They are there: these wordless witnesses to our lives.

If, like me, you are haunted by clothes (garments you have worn, discarded, or dreamed), and your memory is replete with the form and feel of dress (belonging to people you have loved, known, or lost), then you will understand something of the mystery and allure that this book sets out to investigate. If you are compelled by that irresistible impulse to read dress, then you know that to do so is to peer into a world that is continually reconfigured round every new corner. I could not say how far an alertness to dress is as particular a facility as an ear for music or an aptitude for numbers, but I can easily believe in the deep and equal logic of our clothes, the subtle and complex ways they work in our lives.

I confess, from the start, that the thoughts gathered here come from my own irrepressible interest in matters of appearance and self-presentation. My eye is easily caught by a stranger's coat in a train carriage, my hand prone to drifting absently through any array of textures, my brain too readily disengaged from the task at hand and inclined instead to wonder about the sympathies and sensibilities made visible in the things worn by any passing body at any given moment. Yet I know, too, that the understanding won by this mode of wondering is not always wasted and that this form of engagement with the world can be humane, responsive, and thoughtful. To care about clothes is to care about the people who make and wear them too. Each time we feel ourselves distracted by the color of someone's cardigan or we straighten

a friend's crooked tie, our clothes compel us to concede how susceptible we are to each other.

Some people love clothes: they collect them, clamor over them, take pains to present themselves correctly and consider their purchases with great care. For some of us, the making and wearing of clothes is an art form indicative of our discernment and the means by which we assert our distinction. For others, clothes fulfill a function or provide a uniform, rarely meriting a thought beyond the requisite specifications of decency, the regulation of temperature, and the unremarkable meeting of social mores. I write here for readers from both these houses (or wardrobes), since dress is, at its heart, really about memory, meaning, and intimacy: the ties, if you like, that bind. In clothes, we are connected to other people and other places in complicated and unyielding ways.

The pleasure of dress comes easily: in the unexpected thickness of velvet into which our fingertips sink or a skinny, knitted tie the exact color of moss. Clothes can work upon us quickly—the suit that commands our attention with the authority it emanates, the fluorescent vest that warns us of the hazard from which we must swerve, the gown whose golden lustre summons our eye like a sunbeam in a darkened room. But the ubiquity of clothes means that we can be careless of them too. We rarely think to take the things we wear and hold them up to the light, inspecting them as objects of intellectual enquiry.

What do we talk about when we talk about clothes? Mostly, I think we are liable to lapse into truisms. Our “identities are expressed” by them, we say vaguely, as though the boy in the Ramones T-shirt was the sum of what he wore and as though selfhood were a thing that could be articulated so effortlessly.

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Fashion historians, more usefully, trace the genealogy of corsets and conscientiously chronicle the Victorian dress reform movement. Ethnosociologists identify the sartorial markers of subcultures in leather jackets and feathered headdresses. Formidably stylish bloggers swoon over the sumptuous details of designer wear.¹ None of this explains what it feels like to pull on a padded coat on the first cold day of September. Why do some of us carry rucksacks and handbags spilling with stuff we *think* we need and can never find what we *do*? What is the peculiar peace that overcomes us when we peel off our shoes at the close of day? These are the questions that interest me.

It is true that, in times of crisis, what we wear can feel like the most trivial of concerns. But isn't it curious that so many of our most heated cultural disputes should circle around the right to wear particular clothes in particular circumstances? Think only of the dresses claimed by trans women, the near constant state of anxiety over the visibility of the Islamic veil in Europe, or the length of skirts regularly rebuked in cases of sexual assault. In our clothes, we see our larger social crises play out. If I elect not to address these specific issues in this book, it is because you'll find the arguments around them rehearsed at length in innumerable other places.² What strikes me, though, is how the undeniable politics of dress illuminates a paradox: we dismiss dress as the most superficial of subjects but we return to it too, again and again, in the critical debates of our time.

What I mean to say here is that life happens in clothes. In the chapters that follow, I focus on selected aspects of dress—gowns, suits, boots, animal skins, pockets, and bags—identifying in each the articulation of a particular idea or dilemma. The depredations of violence and ageing, the longing

for freedom, our illusions of civility, and the erosion of privacy are the themes of this book. Underlying every chapter is a concern for the body—invested with authority as it is for men and subject to surveillance as it is for women. I write to both male and female readers here and also to anybody for whom the conventions of gender can make the act of dressing an especially alienating or emancipatory practice. In the end, we are all of us returned to the fragility of our human form for which our clothes provide only the thinnest protection.

We are dressed. In all parts of culture—literature, music, film, and art—we find the representation of clothes. They can be ordinary and unremarkable or glamorous and arresting, but they are *there*. I gather some of those representations together here in an effort to truly see our clothes, hoping to better understand how they function and what they might mean to us. In many ways, this is less a book about dresses and dinner jackets than about desire and denial, the fever and fret with which we love and are loved in clothes. Our deepest internal life is found in them. The garments we wear bear our secrets and betray us at every turn. I want to encourage us to put aside the distracting questions of what constitutes “fashion” and move beyond the conventional discussions of identity, subcultures, and social history. What I have in mind is something more expansive and open than that: a kind of philosophy of dress. I want to suggest that in dress we might find a way of apprehending the world, understanding it as it is expressed in an idiom that is found everywhere, if only we care to read it.

We are, everywhere, surrounded by ideas. For the most part, we unthinkingly suppose that they are found in the form of books and poems, visualized in buildings and paintings, explicated in philosophical propositions and mathematical

deductions. Some ideas are born of dogged intellectual enquiry or diligent scientific discovery; they are taught in classrooms, a form of knowledge expressed in the mode of language, number, and diagram. But what if clothes could be understood as ideas too, as fully formed and eloquent as any poem, painting, or equation? What if in clothes the world could open up to us with the tug of a thread, its mysteries unraveling like the frayed edge of a sleeve? What if clothes were not simply reflective of personality, indicative of our banal preferences for grey over green, but more deeply imprinted with the ways human beings have lived, a material record of our experiences, and an expression of our ambition? Could it be possible to understand the world in firmer, *felt* truths, in the perfect geometry of a notched lapel, the orderly measures of a pleated skirt, the stilled, skin-warmed perfection of a circlet of pearls?

For all the abstracted and elevated formulations of selfhood and the soul, interior life is so often *clothed*. Our memories tenaciously retain the texture and forms of dress. My own childhood replays itself as a jumble of sense impressions, often in the color and shape of clothes—most unforgettably, an emerald green winter coat, fur-lined, hooded, and belted, worn to the circus one afternoon, its silhouette so perfect that every coat after is a vain attempt at recovering it, caught at like a dream. I remember that coat and I see myself in it as I was then: a childish body, unbruised and uncurbed. We outgrow clothes, of course, and yet they stay with us, as though their fibers were imperceptibly threaded into our memory, winding through our experience. But our clothes do more even than this, sometimes more than we can know.

If through them we seek to declare our place in the world, our confidence and belonging, we do so under the veil of a deception. We select clothes painstakingly as though they

didn't ruthlessly appoint us, indifferent to our intentions and contrary to our will. Old, favored clothes can be loyal like lovers to our cause, while newer ones dazzle and deceive us. There is a naivety in the perilous ways that we trust in clothes because dress never promises to indemnify us, neither from external assault nor internal anguish. Skin turned to sunlight, some of us exult in exposure, as though unclothed we could be closer to truer, freer, more naked realities. E. M. Forster, misquoting Henry Thoreau, wryly cautions us to "Mistrust all enterprises that require new clothes."³ He has the slogan scrawled on a wardrobe belonging to the soulful George Emerson in *A Room with a View* (although there is another kind of closetedness we might read into Forster's own Edwardian elegance too). Our clothes can also provide refuge, acting as a canopy under which we shelter our most secret agonies. When despair echoes deep inside, dress can help us pacify and dull pain; a blazer and slacks somehow allay our vulnerability. Yet to trust that our clothes will keep our secrets is a seduction in itself.

Clothes can be the disguise in which we dissolve, the camouflage that allows us to keep something of ourselves in reserve, as though the only thing we are and own is that which we refuse to articulate in our outerwear. Or else they enable us to acknowledge our responsiveness to life, and we demonstrate it in the deft and quirky ways that we fix a belt, hang a tie, roll a sleeve. The clothes we love are like friends, they bear the softness of wear, skimming the various planes of our bodies, recalling the proportions that they seem almost to have learned by memory and habit. There are certain clothes that we long for and into which our limbs pour as soon as we find a private moment: the jumper in which you, at last, exhale at the close of day, the T-shirt that is the

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only thing pressed between you and your lover through the long hours of the night. We need not be the sort that wears our hearts on our sleeves for our clothes to already know everything we might say and many things for which we could never find words.

Writers sometimes find the words. In Edith Wharton's 1905 novel, *The House of Mirth*, Lily Bart concedes to herself the powerful truth of her passion for Laurence Selden:

She was very near hating him now; yet the sound of his voice, the way the light fell on his thin, dark hair, the way he sat and moved and wore his clothes—she was conscious that even these trivial things were inwoven with her deepest life.⁴

When we speak of things being “woven together,” we mean affinity, association, inseparability, but Wharton’s “inwoven” suggests yet more than this, something like an intimacy so close that it is constitutive. Her insight is more complex than the crass idea of clothing as an expression of character, more profound than the paradox of a surface that could speak of the inner self. Lily is bound to Laurence, not simply by some romantic pledge of affection but in the particularities of his being, as though the tightest seam ran back and forth between her slow-gathered sense impressions (his voice, his hair, his *clothes*) and the interior life to which they seem to reach. As Lily is to Laurence, we too are inwoven, bound up with things and the people to whom they belong or refer. To engage thoughtfully with clothes is to acknowledge the nature of objects and our utter entanglements with them. Isn’t it possible that what we *are* could in some way be dispersed through the stuff of the world? Objects are imbued

with the lives of those they serve, nicked, as they are, by incident, worn by habit and warmed by touch. Our clothes are closest of all.

For Karl Marx, clothes perfectly epitomized the mystification of objects that he detected as symptomatic of modern culture. When he described the world in the language of labor and economy in *Capital*, his treatise of 1867, it was a coat that exemplified the distorted nature of all commodities in a capitalist society.⁵ This, he understood first hand. Down on his luck one summer, he deposited his gentleman's overcoat with a pawnbroker and found himself barred entry to the reading rooms of the British Museum without the appropriate attire.⁶ What was it about objects like coats that they could so magically open doors and bestow permissions? Not even a coat belonging to Marx could evade the ineluctable mechanisms of capitalist exchange.

All commodities, including coats, it seemed to him, were mysterious things, loaded with significance, drawing their value not from the labor invested in their production but instead from the abstract, often ugly and always competitive social relations of capitalism. Commodities, as Marx understood it, were alienated from the workers who made them. He observed how the mundane and repetitive making of such objects exhausted their will and drained their vivacity, and he noted, too, the perversity with which a commodity could, in turn, appropriate and imitate the qualities of a human being as though they possessed a diabolical life of their own.

Clothes present that awful mimicry with a particular acuity. Think of the swaggering braggadocio of the newest trainers with their insouciantly swishing insignias; the dress that seems in possession of its own flirtatious personality as it swings on a store hanger; or the dangerously vertiginous heels