Husserl, Fashion and Its Clothes: Introducing the Phenomenological Project of the Vestiary Object

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HUSSERL, FASHION AND ITS CLOTHES: INTRODUCING THE PHENOMENOLOGICAL PROJECT OF THE VESTIARY OBJECT

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Abstract

The article tackles the current conditions in which a phenomenological application can be done, in the case of having the domain of phenomenological practice as culturally expelled, even from the outskirts of European philosophy. In light of Husserl’s phenomenology, the way in which the natural attitude manifests with regard to the phenomenon of fashion and clothes will be uncovered, after which it will be explored in what terms can a phenomenological project of the vestiary object become a fresh, relevant endeavor.

Keywords: vestiary object, phenomenology, meaning and movement, natural attitude and its shortcomings in philosophy, Husserl, fashion.

I. Introduction

Near the end of her career, Vivienne Westwood wrote on the front webpage of an academic journal called “Fashion Theory” that its publication is a necessity for both students and professionals alike, in order to make them understand that “fashion has meaning as well as form”. While steering away from all eidetic-related meanings connected to the notion of “form”, the British iconic fashion designer underlines a fairly natural aspect, though not one that stands out in the context of belonging to a culture that evens out its foundation to a distinction. While still maintaining a suspicious gaze when dealing with sensuous objects, European culture somehow started to budge nearly all of its

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conceptual deposits which, long ago, were continuously referring to any formally distinguishable entities outside human perception as a primary way of being. It was somewhat unsurprising that, for an area of human activity such as that of clothes-making (and its complementary aesthetical considerations) – an area predominantly reachable through direct, unmediated sensuous experience – philosophy would award it a constant undermining attitude, and theory-makers would under-appreciate the phenomenon of fashion almost as if a philosophical analysis of this remote, deserted place of human experience can never be able to hook-up with those fine objects of human rationality – ideas.

Westwood proposes a more worldly understanding of “form”, as a motion defined, artificial, vestiary body. If we were to advance this, the “body” is seen as the fabric that envelops the wearer in a certain field of ways that emerges from the movements of that particularly animated wearer, meaning that the differences between cloth and vestiary body appear to reside near or around the concept of “animation”. While being manufactured by using a certain blend of crafting skills (technes), that vestiary body is an artificial body from at least two perspectives, the first being formal-ontological, while the second – phenomenological. Through the lens implied by the first perspective, we can fairly say that a jacket has the “nature” of an artifactual, unanimated matter, devoid of life – an object in the world, subject-less. If we go on and ask ourselves “what is a jacket?” while using the first perspective, we only reach answers whose mission is to rephrase the question in order to get new signification out of it, a new concept or some fresh sentences, that fill the need to know what the answer to that question really is: “an object”, “an (unthinking) thing”, “some filled portion of space”, “a particular entity”, “a tool lacking being”, or maybe just “an illusion”. On the other hand, phenomenological inquiry begins with questions that are related to the concrete, subjective experience that never bails out from any frame of analysis: “how does a jacket fit into human experience?”, “how is a jacket constituted as intentional object in front of human perception fields?” or “how does a difference between the tactile experience of wool fiber and the visual experience of the same thing emerge?”. Either way, it seems that the shared aspect of any phenomenologically configured questions is the intention of doing a fully-fledged analysis of the
experience of some vestiary object, while moving against the idea of mapping out the categories and the hierarchies that can be conceived in relation to those types of objects. So lays open the path to understanding the way in which a jacket is not just a moving artificial body, but a meaning bearing body sunk in constant motion, or, in short, a phenomenon.

The stakes develop on the long run, which is why we must already distinguish between some notions that, if still entangled at a later stage, might undermine the analysis. Westwood talks about clothes in the context of them already being a part of fashion. Because of that, it is fair to say that fashion is a part of culture. That tells us that fashion, as a culturally configured phenomenon, is also an artifactual one. Then again, so are sunglasses. Or slim fit shirts. They’re also manufactured, they’re also artefacts, and that begs us to ask the question aiming at the difference between those two, while keeping in mind that we ought to try and find both distances and similarities in these two types of objects. By using Husserl’s *epoché* on both of them, some more or less chosen areas of significance that are permanently connected to the two (“fashion” and “sunglasses”)² will now be bracketed. At a first glance, we can easily say that experience of the sunglasses goes both through the visual and tactile means of perception. We simultaneously touch and see through our “eye remodeling devices” that so many love to use, which is not what we can say about fashion. Not that we do not perceive fashion, but we do not perceive it the way we perceive a smooth silky shirt. When dealing with such philosophical scenarios, we are most likely intrigued by the fact that there might be something amiss, though we cannot actually pin-point it. This is where the phenomenological reduction comes in.

II. Applying the Phenomenological Reduction

What do we do when confronted with technology-related concepts like “being”, “subject”, “self” or “idea”? What options do we have besides

² Some reductions will be improved by adding or removing clusters of meaning that are welded together, scarcely connected or a central notion, as the text develops. These are natural occurrences amidst phenomenological applications.
forcing our way through various nets of senses that arise when we wonder “what would being be”, “how can I understand my own subjectivity”, “what structures does the self-conceal” or “what ontological status does an idea have”? And even if we bend those bunches of meaning that pertain to whatever central concepts we work with, if we recontextualize those altered meanings, if we link together something so unrelatable (like philosophy and clothes) that instantly becomes interesting, or even rewrite and rebrand them as new, “fresh ideas”, can we still call these cases of conceptual manipulation – philosophy? This is where the phenomenological reduction arose, at a time when philosophy seemed to be stuck.

For Husserl, the reduction is the main method through which we manage to surpass the classical aporias of European philosophy, by treating them as artefacts of meaning. When identified as such, the interpreter can suspend notions that may appear vague or misplaced, mainly because he can. If a concept is a constructed entity that bears bulks of meaning, then it can also be avoided (not to say, deconstructed) through the same means by which it was made to be. While suspended notions pave the way for a clearer view of the others, “free” and untouched, the reduction starts to produce self-standing results, as the interpreter gets to know what exactly can be gained or lost through suspending this or that concept, after which he might, at some point, come across those famed things in themselves, that is, the experience of those things in themselves. Of course, phenomenology is not about seeing the eidos of a human being or the doorstop-in-itself, but more about experiencing (grasping) the backbone of the experience constituting processes that we are always having throughout our lives. That’s why the first step towards phenomenology understood as rigorous science – the evidence – is, “in an extremely broad sense, an experiencing of something that is, and is thus” (Husserl 1960, 12). When different concepts and, more importantly, various cultural habits are suspended, we seem to gain a deeper, more meaningful insight into what makes us be the way we usually are. We gather evidence and we gather it as meaningful content from our most basic areas of human experience and, if guided by a method specially crafted for clearing up the whole mess involved by our multiple nets of experience, we might
be able to fully grasp the whereabouts of our most intimate human habits. But this means that some evidence, which helps us reach a fuller understanding of the inner working of experience, must be somehow differentiated from other, lesser evidence.

If we closely follow the first (Cartesian) meditation (§7-§9), we get to see that, for Husserl, the world must go through the reduction, as its counterpart, “the evidence of world-experience would, at all events, need to be criticized with regard to its validity and range, before it could be used for the purposes of a radical grounding of science, and that therefore we must not take that evidence to be, without question immediately apodictic” (Husserl 1960, 18). For phenomenology, the being of the world, by reason of the evidence of natural experience, says Husserl, must no longer be an obvious matter of fact, which is why we must see the importance of getting to an apodictic type of evidence, through the phenomenological reduction. Well, if our simple being in the world must go through the reduction, it is implied that also all cultural artefacts that we are used to must also be placed under the same conditions. And if talking about the experience of the world and not the world in itself, it becomes clear that evidence can be safely called apodictic only when it has a direct correlation to a basic, usually passive experience, or range of experiences, being unmediated in its relationship with those felt realities by any artefact that might distort the “original” meaning of that subjectively lived slice of life.

What must be remembered from this very rough sketch of the phenomenological method is that any attempt to work with the reduction and apply it to some third party domain of interest presupposes that the method itself is open to alteration, and that it will suffer changes. Like a continuous oscillation between the method and the content of study, (applied) phenomenology will take care of all artefacts that stick together to scarcely occurring pure subjective experience and clear up all misunderstandings that frequently mingle with the subject at hand.

III. Some Usual Considerations Concerning Clothes

When writing about natural attitude in correlation to the better, more refined, phenomenological attitude, Husserl does not mean that
the first should be eradicated. In fact, the natural attitude that we colloquially seem to have and constantly fuel up should be suspended in order to be subsequently enriched by knowing the structures of meaning that permanently lie beneath it. If we are to apply phenomenology to the domain inhabited by clothes, we need to round up some usual attitudes, “natural” attitudes regarding those objects and their synthesized form of appearance – fashion. By doing this, we will come to understand that common perspectives on the matter at hand will not be stigmatized and eliminated from course. In fact, they are not to be treated as simple opinions or weak ideas, but as the starting point for a full-on phenomenological tackling of the subject, which means that they are not only gathered perspectives, but a coherent frame of conditions for any future analysis that may more or less reconfigure their sets of meaning.

We all know that everybody dresses up at some point in their lives. Most of us do it daily. That’s why it’s easy to guess that anybody would agree: vestiary objects are universally known, created and used, no matter the sex, religion, geopolitical context, and so on. Any person that is presented with some form of textile material, remodeled into something that can be worn, will understand what is the basic palette of acts to be eventually enacted regarding that object. However, even if recognized as a vestiary object, it does not imply that it will be appropriately worn, delivering us our first distinction and common thought recurrence. Successfully recognizing an object as a vestiary object does not imply that one will also know the “right” way of using it, or, with more accuracy, the intended way of using it. In essence, one act does not imply another, and furthermore, one act does not imply the possibility of another. This is a logical truism as much as it is a stalemate, which means that any perspective that wants to know more must go deeper and remark some differences between those two kinds of “acts”. With minimal philosophical skill, we can still perform under natural attitude and ask a second, more meaningful question that can peel off some extra meaning from our dilemma.

By what standards do we know which velour jacket is the finest? This still is a problem that can be discussed at large under natural attitude, given the fact that it is centered on the concept of “value”, which largely means that it can accept an infinite amount of relativism
into its context of discussion. Ironically, it is also a question that usually produces just two types of answers. The first would maintain that the standard is imposed by professionals of the field, creators of critics, and that they would know what’s best for everyone regarding fashion. The second would, of course, go against the first, by saying that each is their own judge of taste when it comes to clothes. This is usually regarded as an already classic debate between predetermined aesthetics and free individual taste. This is the most frequent of all dilemmas sprung out by natural attitude and it is to be found among the broadest range of people. Even if knowing what clothes are does not imply knowing how to appropriately use them, it seems that knowing what clothes are does imply knowing some sense related to the value that those clothes have. After all, everyone knows how to brag about clothes, and this is specifically where the natural attitude fails to advance – and where some new way of inquiry can come in and flourish.

Besides all of these, there is yet another conceptual situation laid out by natural attitude that eventually ends up as a dead-end, as accurately described by Lars Svendsen in his book about fashion and philosophy called *Fashion: A Philosophy*. From his interpretation of the matter, it is a specific idea that catches the eye, an idea that acts like a constructed, conventional, high-order driving force behind fashion, and is always littered on top of the basal meaning of particular vestiary objects: How novel is the idea of “New”? How is fashion aware of its continuous search for the new? When referring to the new, are we talking about new materials, colors and shapes, or are we pointing at new expressions that emerge out of movement? All of these questions usually occur around fashion theorists, who tirelessly ask about the aspects that can be conceived along this concept of “new”. As Svendsen tells us, “all fashion theorists stress the new as the basic characteristic of fashion” (Svendsen 2006, 25), with one exception, that of architect Adolf Loos who considered that only object with enough elapsed duration can constitute some form of fashion. All in all, it seems that temporality is just an aspect correlated to the notion of “new”, and that professionals rationalizing about clothes and fashion within the natural attitude, mistake the new for a conceptual opportunity upon which they can imagine newer and newer
definitions of the term, while it is in fact suffering from being overdefined. By default, concepts such as “the new” have an increased number of meanings attached, even though the links between those specific areas of meaning remain fuzzy, unclear, or cannot be perceived in any way. It must be said that this rarely bothers anyone while under natural attitude. After all, as long as a concept has correlates (or, as long as a term has some meaning), it does not matter how clear are the connections to those correlates. The same case regarding the “new”: if we can link situations, things, events, and others to this concept of “new”, then it can be used within a philosophical framework. As before, phenomenology aims to recover any basic hidden sense that the natural understanding of the “new” misses.

Up until this point, we saw that theorizing on fashion usually moves around aesthetic hierarchies, discussions about higher values and the nature of the “new”. If some collection of scarves is new (the latest), does it become valuable? In what ways can some aged denim pair of pants be of value, or even the spark needed to mark the return of a vintage fashion? Philosophically, it seems that we can distinguish between two main interwoven pillars on which interpretations coming from the natural attitude stand upon: duration and charm. Even though classic philosophy prefers “time”, “temporality” or “historicity”, duration is here important because it does not call out to all those meanings which hint at multiple interpretations of history and the changes regarding human values. A similar view can be found in Aristotle’s account of time, in the Physics IV, 11 where time doesn’t exist without change as we seize that time is an element of movement – “when we perceive that some time has passed, simultaneously it would seem that motion has occurred; but, because it is not movement by itself, necessarily it will be something of movement; but because the moved object is moved from one starting point to one finish point and because any measure is continuous in nature, it means that movement follows measure” (Physics, 219a). All of this means that the sheer feeling of having something measurable in the context of change – having a duration – is closer to practice and practically formed meaning than “historicity” or “temporality” are. More on that, duration does not only refer to quantity (e.g. for how long did those moving feet dance?), as
being phenomenologically conceived hinting that is also encompasses areas of sense pertaining to quality (e.g. for how long did you feel that the dance took place?), and also a third, synthesized version of those two, that sticks to the particularities of the analysed situation (e.g. how did you feel the trails of motion in Plisetskaya’s tan-beige singlet, as part of her interpretation of the Bolero?). In short, when talking about duration, we feel we talk more appropriately about more sensuous areas of interest, such as clothes and fashion, which is what we can also say about charm. However, a more complete analysis of charm, be it configured by natural attitude or phenomenology, cannot take place here, as it relies on other sections of meaning which have not yet been disclosed or fully analyzed. But what can take place here instead is a sketch of how phenomenology can stick its nose into fashion and culture, while brushing off all undesired ways of constructing a philosophy of clothes.

IV. Applied Phenomenology is not only “of Something”

As many other great human achievements, phenomenology is not an activity “of another activity”, but an “apodictical” activity, one main discipline of actions (be those thematic or reflective-thematic actions) that is not founded on and not exercised for another, more foundational domain. Phenomenology is not “predicate” for another “subject” then the one that all disciplines and areas of knowledge rely upon – human experience. That is why phenomenology is not a natural attitude configured cross-breed between comparative history of ideas and excessive “in-depth” reshaping of meanings through various lettermen derived methods like: overstretching etymologies, bypassing usual context while reforging meaning for the artificial context of argument, using alliteration as disclosure of some previously unformulated truism (e.g. after all, it’s not about the original, but the originary!), making up words from recognizable fragments of meaning3 (usually from ancient

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3 Besides Molière’s “Imaginary Invalid” and the newly conceived soporific factor seen as the essence of opium, be sure to check out Deacon (1997, 28-39).
Greek or Latin), and so forth. Phenomenology does not associate with such kinds of philosophical attitudes because they rely on the unspoken idea that they are always a discourse “of something”, and not “for something”, meaning that they work from outside the subject area which they are debating, assuming the artificial form of objectivity that, by definition, bypasses the input coming from experience and all subjective, felt aspects. When phenomenological activity remains undisturbed by this objective “white coat of truth” (Sheets-Johnstone 2011, 352), woven from either technical or humanistic sciences, then phenomenology becomes what it was meant to be in the first place: a reconfiguring presuppositionless science that encompasses subjective felt realities and gets results that are meaningful for the human lifeworld (Husserl 1970, 6-8) or, as James Dodd also remarks in his essay about Husserl’s lush text, “science, in its contemporary form, fails to address what needs to be addressed, not in order to be science, but in order to be a human being” (Dodd 2004, 30).

All of that means that a phenomenology of the vestiary object cannot be limited to an interpretation of facts about various fashions that arose and dispersed far and wide through European culture for almost three millennia. Of course that phenomenology can use certain well documented interpretations about how 14th century stall owners were dressed when celebrating Christmas – as raw material – but it must be made clear that any interpretations that simply link some historical instances belonging to an intuited pattern (e.g. 13th, 14th and 15th century stall owner clothes in Lower Saxony) to a more abstractly formed meaning (e.g. earlier prebaroque habitualities that ended up as baroque statements) are only interpretations of a prephenomenological attitude. In need of supplementary refining, those interpretations need to grasp that it is not so much the “causal” link that matters in phenomenology, but the way we understand how that transition must have been felt and why people operated with it in the specific way that they did. Furthermore, a phenomenological account must not only explain the dynamics of rational attitudes, but also how prerational intuition can mingle with active reflective ones, and finally, how active rational acts can slowly budge prerational ways of synthesizing basic passive
meaning (e.g. how the “idea” of a baroque perfection can release dormant seeds for an OCD type of disorder).

Those are aspects from which we can draw the conditions we were set out to find. Given the reasons, a phenomenological project of the vestiary object: a) will not offer a cultural rollercoaster through a stunning plethora of vestiary curiosities from European (or global) history; b) will not try be a final close-circuit philosophical endeavor that offers an account of the universal “true essence” of fashion; c) will not create or hint at aesthetical ideologies or hierarchies concerning clothes and designers; d) will not avoid the subjective aspects concerning clothes and fashion, as it will not avoid such aspects from meaning-production in which clothes or fashion are involved. It will also not tell people how to dress.

An applied phenomenological project such as this one sets out to accomplish one or more of the following: a) to expose, reinterpret and clarify the way in which meaning and movement always intertwine in human experience; b) to clarify how this twofold structure works with the preliminary (usual) meanings that surround the objects aimed at by the interpreter and how the stratum of those preliminary meanings can be enriched through phenomenologically guided effort; c) to analyze particular ways in which the human body works with meaning and syntheses when confronted with vestiary objects (as types of intentional objects) – in short, how does it feel when being conscious about clothes or clothes-related meanings (e.g. differences between Klein blue on silk and Klein blue on wool); d) to interpret a coherent, embodied, “vestiary” attitude and its habitual protuberances, from what is uncovered at (c); e) to disclose ways in which vestiary artefacts (even ideas derived from fashion) can influence basic, passive syntheses of the human body (e.g. how those tight Oxford shoes can modify my usual walking pattern and what meanings do I get to bear and suggest from that altered kinetic attitude).

Though Husserl never considered phenomenology as a useful way of inquiry for anything outside the forms of thought, not to mention the vestiary body, much has changed. Biosemiotics and anthropology can offer valuable insights into how embodied consciousness works with its surrounding areas, and it would surely be philosophically attractive to see that a perceived covering blanket acts as a constructed surrounding area that dictates a certain attitude to that body. As the famous **noema-noesis**
conceptual couple is overshadowed by more refined phenomenological results, even by those Husserl produced in his late genetically dominated writings, it becomes clear that the father of phenomenology has distant siblings to be reckoned with. Most importantly, being an applied phenomenological project means that exegetical study will be secondary to phenomenological practice regarding vestiary object and the correlated interpretation through writing.

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