

FASHION AND VISUAL LANGUAGE: A SOCIAL SEMIOTIC ANALYSIS OF WOMEN'S CLOTHING IN PHOTOGRAPHS FROM THE 1920'S

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- **ABSTRACT:** Fashion makes it possible to understand the sociocultural developments of a given society. It can be seen as a cultural manifestation and as a form of language, making it possible to be analysed through semiotics. Thus, the objective of this study is to analyse the forms of representation used to build identity meanings from the observation of women's clothing present in photographs from the 1920s, through social semiotics, identifying and reflecting on the message visually transmitted by the clothes, establishing a relationship between the message transmitted by the image with the social construction of the female body and the historical and sociocultural context of the 1920s. Methodologically, the study presents a bibliographical research based on scholars in the fields of semiotics and fashion such as Natividade and Pimenta (2009) and Bonadio (2007) followed by the analysis of the images regarding their representational, interactional and compositional meanings, justified by the fact that visibility and fashion are sites of analysis that still lack deeper studies, but also due to the relevance of studying fashion and visual language for several fields of knowledge. The results suggest that clothing can transmit messages and information within a sociocultural context, being a manifestation of a non-verbal communication system.
- **KEYWORDS:** fashion; social semiotics; language, 1920's.

Introduction

Communication is a process of exchanging information that allows, through language, to send and receive a message in the form of a code that must be understandable to those who are communicating so that the information is fully processed, allowing the construction of meanings. This code may or may not be verbalised, and sometimes

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it is necessary to go beyond speech or writing, resulting from an articulation between the oral or written linguistic dimension and the imagery dimension.

The expansion of machinery and the development of new communication artefacts, from the Industrial Revolution to the present day, brought many changes, including alternative forms of production and dissemination of languages and, consequently, the transformation of linguistic codes. Thus, gradually, the prevalence of the written verbal code as a perennial recording instrument began to share space with other forms of expression, among them, sound and visual codes. This resulted in great changes that we are experiencing in contemporary culture, in which multimodal texts (which merge several semiotic modes) have become commonplace, redirecting language configurations in the creation of new communication dynamics.

In these new dynamics, the attribution of meanings to signs and codes they comprise lacks prior knowledge that can help in the analysis of their contents (Kleiman, 2008). Thus, when considering visual signs as articulation components of a visual communication system, which acts both as complementary and independently of verbal language, this work seeks to address visibility as one of the mechanisms for attributing meanings, based on a dimension located historically and contextually in the culture in which we are inserted, through symbolic mechanisms that, according to Sérgio (2014), act as a system of codes that place a kind of ideological veil between the receiver and the real world. Thus, we assume that the understanding of the visual text depends not only on the characteristics of the code itself, but also on the previous knowledge of the person who sees the message, as well as on his or her own culture.

These new forms of communication are also closely linked to the dissemination strategies of the capitalist system, such as media, marketing, advertising, and fashion, which have spread and gained prominence by establishing behaviours, lifestyles, ways of dressing, speaking, writing, etc., through the multiple expressions of language (Brígido; Nogueira, 2015).

Among the previously mentioned forms of communication, fashion stands out as an important field of production and expression in postmodern culture, presenting itself both as a reflection and as a reference of everyday values and customs. In this sense, the dynamics of fashion allows us to reflect, create, interact and disseminate the cultural constructs in force in a given time and society. In this regard, Moura (2008) suggests that the development and expression of fashion occur from interrelationships between creation, culture, and technology, as well as the historical, sociopolitical, and economic aspects that affect and are affected by social groups at a given time.

Thus, this study, through the social semiotic analysis of images from photographs, considers fashion and visual language as being able to transmit concepts of a certain time and space and, at the same time, establishing a relationship with later periods, among them, the views on the social construction of the female body and the historical context of the 1920s. The use of social semiotics as a guiding tool for the analysis of the images brings benefits to this study because it is an interdisciplinary field that studies the processes of communication, considering the diversity of semiotic modes that can

be present in texts, in which meanings are derived from actions and social interactions. It includes in its field linguistics and social phenomena.

Theoretical frameworks

Visual Language

Today's society speaks, produces, consumes and lives surrounded by images that are endowed with visuality. Going far beyond the biological phenomenon of perceiving the visual stimuli around us, the concept of visuality is related to the way we interpret and produce signs socio-historically. In this way, visuality can be interpreted as a social process of assigning meanings that allows us to understand the world around both through visual experiences as through social experiences and through the interaction of the visual with the various systems of communication signs that constitute human language. In this "society of visuality", language studies, among other fields of knowledge, try to understand the dimensions in which both verbal and visual language, among others, play a constitutive role in the production and dissemination of meanings, highlighting their importance for the construction of meanings through our experiences with the world.

Despite seeming a recent phenomenon, visuality and its integration with other forms of expression have been present since the first attempts at human expression, example of the writing created by the Sumerians on clay tablets, which maintained a close relationship with imagery representation systems for a long time and brought, in the integration between these different codes, linguistic and cultural representations that were socially conventionalized (Gomes *et al.*, 2019).

Even after the advent of writing, the human being, faced with the need to record and share events, information, and ideas, over the years, has created systems of representation beyond the verbal: "paintings, statues, publications and so on. These allow us later to share non-verbal experiences or knowledge of past cultures" (Burke, 2005, p.16-17).

More recently, the relevance of visual representations can be seen in the study of fashion, which is grounded in both painting and sculpture, as well as in other forms of visual expressions. In this case, we see in the visual signs that fashion produces an attempt to perennially record the meanings it generates, because if the material with which the clothes are produced is generally perishable, making it difficult to preserve and study many years after its manufacture, with the visual signs we have a more stable record, capable of providing information not only about the physical characteristics of the garments, but also about the social and cultural aspects surrounding them.

Thus, visual studies, or visual culture, have been growing and increasingly standing out inside and outside academic environments, especially from the 20th century onwards, due to the mass culture established in postmodern society, spreading across all

fields and making itself present in all areas of human activity with the role of drawing attention to the mechanisms of production of meanings, as well as to the means of manipulation and social and cultural control.

In this context, visual language appears as an element as important as any other form of meaning, including verbal, since it encompasses a wide range of meanings, which are sometimes difficult to be expressed by mechanisms such as the verbal. However, the tradition of considering image and visuality subordinated to the verbal system persists, understanding them only as a complement to the latter, considering that many still disregard the complexity of the visual code and its ability to act independently of the verbal code (Gomes *et al.*, 2019).

In this text, therefore, we adopt the perspective that the image consists in a set of complex representation mechanisms through which we can access ideologies, cultural and social representations, and worldviews. Through the analysis and observation of images, it is possible not only to get to know snapshots of a certain period, but also to reveal the cultural practices of a certain social group, the relationships that were established over the time, interpret, and build imagery narratives of their own and those of others third parties, as well as constructing speeches and communicating ideas and concepts according to different communicative purposes.

Far from solving the question between verbal and visual text, this text aligns with the ideas of Kress and Hodge (1979), Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006, 2001) and Brito and Pimenta (2009), which consider the need to look for language from a satellite perspective, not understanding it as a complete mechanism for producing meaning, but as one among several other modes of meaning. Hence the need to consider that it is not only the verbal that produces meanings in a cultured society and that there are other different paths of possibilities beyond it. Therefore, these other different paths, sometimes marginalised, are placed in the same degree of importance, although each of them may use different strategies and paths to signify.

For Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006), visual language is a system of symbolic representation, influenced by principles that organise possibilities of representations and meanings on a given culture. Orlandi (1999) informs that it is considered a process of construction of meanings in which one can capture the author's intentionality, the materiality of the text and the reader's possibilities of reframing, among other aspects.

This perspective gains strength nowadays, when people begin to recognize that in order to express and share information, experiences, ideas and feelings in different contexts and produce meanings that lead to mutual understanding, it is necessary to consider the different forms of representation that lead to meaning, such as static images (photos, illustrations, graphics, infographics), moving images (videos, gifs), sounds (sounds, music) and the now traditional written forms, as we live immersed in a world full of multimodal texts, that integrate several semiotic modes at the same time (Kress; Van Leeuwen, 2001).

These various forms of representation are disseminated through the most varied types of texts, artistic and advertising expressions, fashion, social networks and

technologies in general, pointing out what to wear, what to eat, how to look, how to behave, what to read, what to study, etc., which definitely generates immersion in the world of language that impacts subjects, culture and education and becomes present in society as a whole. They also guide habits, manners and customs and create stereotypes to be followed, denoting their power of influence based on the desires of society and individual beings.

In this perspective, semiotics, in its various aspects, has been dedicated to offer theoretical support for the analysis of visual language. Among its various aspects, social semiotics stands out here as a set of theoretical principles that emphasises the mechanisms of production of meanings from power relations and social ideologies that are implicit in signs.

Through relativity: Social Semiotics

Social semiotics, inserted in the current of critical language studies, with a tradition of analysis based on systemic-functional linguistics, is a theory initially developed by Hodge and Kress (1988), in the 1980s, in Australia, as opposed to other semiotic perspectives developed from the works of Ferdinand Saussure and Charles Peirce. The review made by the new approach proposes to read the image (as well as other forms of representation) from a multimodal view, characterised later in this work.

The concept of semiotics derives from the concept of sign, so some initial considerations are relevant. Social semiotics differs from other approaches, such as Saussure's semiological approach, because as there is no necessary relationship between sound/form and meaning for Saussure, there is no relationship in the signifier that motivates the meaning (Fiorin, 2017). For social semiotics, signs are immanently motivated, because a given sign may not present evident relationships between signifier and meaning, it is possible to trace these relationships through historical analysis and social and cultural motivations, among other forces, that are in the constitution and dissemination of signs. Furthermore, the Saussurean notion of sign finds shelter in the idea of verbal representation, leaving aside other forms of representation.

The notion of sign for Peirce, on the other hand, extends the sign to the field of action, experience, or even a mere quality of impression, freeing itself from the shackles of a purely verbal sign, characterising itself as a theory of all systems of signification, of the discourses manifested by any kind of texts, be it verbal, be it a painting, a film, an opera, an advertisement, a sculpture and so on (Fiorin, 2017). Despite this, it still gives little emphasis to the role of sociocultural constructs in the attribution of meanings to signs, emphasising the relationship between form and meaning and exempting itself from an analysis that involves more deeply the external components to the materiality of the sign, today recognized as fundamental in the constitution of human language.

For social semiotics, signs are sociocultural products shaped by the experiences of the groups that use them. Thus, there are many ways of thinking about the sign. As

the focus of this work, the semiotic project of social semiotics thematizes meaning as a process, as can be seen in Gomes *et al.*:

The sign, for social semiotics, is not understood as a pre-existing conjunction of signifier and meaning recognized and used in a block, as advocated by traditional semiology. Rather, it is seen as a meaning-making process in which the strata of signifier and signified can be treated relatively independent of one another. The association between these two entities, in turn, is established through the social knowledge shared between the producers and readers of the texts (GOMES *et al.*, 2019, p. 172).

The interesting point in this approach is the relationship between signifier and meaning based on the interests of the participants involved, whether in reading or in writing texts. Such interests arise from cultural, social, political experiences, that is, the relationship between the systems involving social practice, which is why it is said to be significant, as explained:

Social semiotics approaches readings of ideological and power processes, taking the dimension of political, historical and critical analyses, as it seeks to unravel the paths taken by the producers and interpreters of the texts based on their choices and interests, placing the use of language as coated by potential meanings associated with specific situations and influenced by the organisation social and cultural (PIMENTA; NATIVIDADE, 2012, p. 22).

Gomes *et al.* (2019), using the support of Hodge and Kress (1988), observe that social semiotics and the semiotic systems that underlie this practice do not occur in isolation, apart from their social dimension, but according to the functions and uses of the systems involved, as well as their relationship with social practice. Social semiotics, points out Gomes *et al.* (2019, p. 171), is the study of semiosis, that is, “the processes and effects of the production and reproduction, reception and circulation of meaning in all forms, used by all types of communication agents”. It studies the processes of communication, considering the diversity of semiotic modes that may be present in texts where meanings are derived from actions and social interactions. It includes linguistics and social phenomena within its scope.

An offshoot of social semiotics was the development of “Visual Design Grammar” (GDV) by Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006), in which the authors claim the urgency of a new literacy, and specific form, based on image analysis categories. The authors focus on the notion of function already advocated by Halliday (1985), justifying that language develops to satisfy human needs, that is, the way it is organised is functional. Thus, the authors consider the role of language in the lives of individuals. As the corpus

of this work is constituted by the imagery semiotic mode, some points of the GDV are privileged in the analyses that will be presented later.

Understanding that language is organised around a purpose, a function, Kress and Van Leeuwen establish three GDV meta functions, namely: ideational/representational (visual construction of the nature of events and transitivity system), interactive / interpersonal (relationship between participants involving what is seen and what is seen) and compositional/textual (distribution of information value). It is relevant to point out that “representational, interactive and compositional meanings operate simultaneously in every image, to build patterns of experience, social interaction and ideological positions from the choices of which reality is being represented” (Santos; Pimenta, 2014, p. 308). The metafunctions do not act isolated, but in interaction with the text, giving it a multifunctional character.

The representational metafunction refers to the representation of world experiences through language. It allows semiotic systems to represent objects and their relationships with each other and with meaning processes. From the identification of the represented participants (that is, people, animals or objects present in the images) and the relationships that they establish among themselves in the visual text, it is possible to describe the mechanisms of meaning that are at the level of communicative functions such as narrating, describing, acting, suffering action, among others. Such roles can be indicated from patterns in which participants are represented as doing something to or with each other, or patterns in which participants relate to one another in terms of class, structure, or meaning (Santos; Pimenta, 2014).

The interactional metafunction, on the other hand, reads with the interaction relationship between people and texts, considering the modulizations in a communicative event. Therefore, meaning is the result of an exchange between social actors: the message producer and the message receiver, or reader, mediated by contact with the materiality of the visual text. For this function, Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006) describe three mechanisms present in the image that act as mediators of the interaction between author, reader and text: the gaze of the represented participants, the framing and the perspective.

Regarding the look category, there are supply and demand images. A demand image is one in which the represented participant places himself looking directly at the reader to create a bond of affinity, seduction, or domination, for example. The purpose is to maintain the approach between whoever reads the image and the participant represented in it, as if the latter demanded something from the reader. This requirement can be an attitude, a position, or a thought. Brito and Pimenta (2009) point out that this strategic movement already indicates an ideal reader, since the images are planned to suggest charges according to factors such as sex, social position, age group, cultural experiences, among others, in view of the type of influence that is intended to exert on those who read.

An offer image, in turn, addresses the reader indirectly, as the reader is not the object of the gaze of the represented participant, since the person or animal captured in

the image will be captured by the image as in the midst of an action, without realising that he is being observed by the reader. Brito and Pimenta (2009) explain that this type of representation is an offer, because it “offers” the represented participant as an item of information, object of contemplation, while the reader acts as an invisible observer, feeling more comfortable to observe and less charged to exercise something in relation to what is seen.

Regarding the framing category, Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006) propose considerations on the distance established between the represented participant and the reader based on the feeling of proximity and distance that the image framing generates in the reader. The smaller distance placed between the two, obtained in the image by the close-up of the represented participant’s face, the greater the degree of creation of an imaginary social relationship of inclusion value by the reader. There are three main shots for this category: close shot (intimate, with emphasis on the face of the represented participant), medium shot (social, with emphasis on the face and torso of the represented participant), and open shot (impersonal, showing the entire body and cloth background).

The perspective category, on the other hand, reveals the angle or point of view from which the represented participants are portrayed. The image, in these terms, can be subjective – when the represented participant can be seen only from a specific angle; or objective – when it reveals everything that exists to be seen or everything that the producer of the image deems necessary. Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006) point out that it is in this dimension that the power relations, established or ratified by the vertical angle, or the relationships of greater or lesser empathy, through the horizontal angle.

Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006) also point modality as a component linked to the way in which the reader relates to the image and whether he is influenced by it. In this sense, the modality is an indicator of political struggles, capable of demarcating what a social group will consider as real, true, or not. It manifests itself through the gradations that the colours, proportions and contrasts assume in each image, approaching or distancing itself from reality, assuming an air of truth or fiction.

Methodology

This text presents a study of a bibliographical nature based on scholars in the areas of visual language such as Gomes *et al.* (2019), Kress (2010), Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006), Orlandi (1999); social semiotics, such as Hodge and Kress (1988), Fiorin (2017), Pimenta and Natividade (2012) and fashion, such as Laver (1989), Kohler (2001), Braga (2009), Nery (2009), Fiell and Dietrix (2014), Boucher (2010), Bonadio (2007), Pollini (2007), who provided theoretical support for the literature review as well as for the analysis of images using the categories proposed by Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006) and Pimenta and Natividade (2012), as they added to the modality markers of

Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006) the modality marker “appearance conformity”, which we consider important for the analysis of fashion images,

Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006) consider that the meanings of images always belong to culture, therefore, social semiotics considers the relationships between signifiers and meanings from the sociocultural contexts that involve the systems of production, dissemination and reception of the message, in order to scrutinise the textual structure and the discourses they imply. In this way, photography is considered as a social event and a communicational entity and, therefore, a multimodal view of semioses constructed through interaction with social phenomena is adopted in this analysis.

The analysis corpus of this study consists of four images (Figures 1, 2, 3 and 4) of young women from the 1920s that were selected considering some criteria: a. The target audience: women; b. The time: 1920s; c. The content: photographs that captured the fashion adopted in the 1920s; d. Images available on the internet (free access).

This study aims to analyse the construction of interactive meanings in period photographs in the 1920s. To this end, priority is given to the interactional metafunction and the following categories of analysis: look, framing, perspective and modality, already mentioned in its* own section.

Analysis and discussion of the results

It is worth noting at the outset that in a socio-semiotic analysis, the represented participants are treated as social actors (Van Leeuwen, 1997), they are positioned in some way in the world, are part of certain ideological groups, are involved in social practices and can be used to construct and/or deconstruct concepts. Therefore, the analyses of this study suggest a potential for communication between represented participants and interacting participants (the readers) through the perception and interpretation (visuality) of the visual components inserted in the sociocultural contexts in which they were produced, also considering the current contexts image reception.

Figure 1 – Woman in the 1920s



Source: Cultura Mix¹.

In Figure 1, the Represented Participant is in a central position with an offer look, because there is an indirect look, not turned towards the reader (Interactor Participant), since he is not the object of the look. At the bottom of the image, there is a curtain with textures, embossed designs and a predominance of dark colours. These tones do not convey affective meanings, as they represent a high degree of naturalistic modality and low sensory modality, which induces in the reader a strong association of the image with real life, that the image represents a faithful snapshot of reality at a given historical moment. The background has only a secondary role, as the woman at the centre is commonly interpreted as the most important piece of information in the visual composition by the reader, both because of her centrality and because she is the only human component, with capabilities that can be attributed to the actors. social issues discussed by Van Leeuwen (1997). The colours of the photograph are shown in light and dark tones, with the light colour directed to focus on the Represented Participant, highlighted in the foreground of the photograph.

Represented in a medium plane, that is, contemplated by the reader at a certain distance so as not to create a direct link with him, the offer look also does not suggest proximity to the text receiver, as well as the absence of a smile suggests little involvement with the reader. This semiotic association between offering gaze and medium shot reinforces the distance with the interacting participant. The absence of a

¹ Available at: <https://moda.culturamix.com/tendencias/a-interessante-historia-da-tendencia-da-moda-dos-anos-20>. Access on: 28 Apr. 2022.

smile, in turn, was a recurrent phenomenon in photographs at the beginning of the 20th century, gradually changing in later decades, when smiles began to be incorporated into photographic images. According to Fabry (2016), among the factors for the lack of smiles are both the oral hygiene conditions at the time, which did not favour the display of careless teeth by many; the long exposure time of the film to light for the image to be taken, requiring the photographed to spend a few minutes motionless; and the culture coming from another form of representation, painting, in which smiles were not seen as suitable for representing people.

The attitude of the represented participant before capturing the image is subjective, as it imposes a certain point of view on the reader, among other possible views. It is noticed that there is a concern with the way the body is arranged, seeking a representation that suggests physical health and an ideal of beauty that today has become a stereotype of women in the 1920s of the last century. This is a young woman between 20 and 30 years old, with a dress and jewellery that assume the symbolic value of representing an era and a certain social group.

In terms of perspective, it is an image taken at a horizontal angle, at the height of the observer's gaze, suggesting social equality with the reader. For Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006), the horizontal angle in a photograph suggests to the reader a greater interaction with the represented participant, creating a mechanism of social identification. At the same time, however, the represented participant's posture mixes frontal and oblique perspectives, leading the reader to attribute at the same time a certain tone of confidence, but also an air of mystery to the represented person. Such semiotic strategies assume little interaction without, however, causing a loss of affinity motivated by other elements.

When considering the context of the 1920s, we have an image that reflects the processes of change in progress. On the one hand, we observe the woman who already shows courage in allowing herself to be photographed, which demonstrates the freedom conquered by women in the 1920s. On the other, we see the represented participant dodging looking directly at the camera, still with a certain shyness. You can also see a comfortable garment, made of bright fabric. It is a flapper dress characterised by having a straight line, without a defined waist, without sleeves, which allows the display of the arms and a neckline that already reveals, although discreetly, the cleavage.

According to Marcangeli (2015), the 1920s dresses, with cleaner lines and which avoided demarcating the breasts and hips, represent the beginning of an androgynous culture in fashion and the questioning of the standards arising from the 19th century, when women were expected to wear large amounts of fabric and corselets that restricted their movements. These garments, generally designed by men, came to be associated with repression and gender inequality, to which women were imposed. In this way, women's clothing in the 1920s also marked a movement for gender equality, not only in relation to what to wear, but also in terms of social roles in fields such as work, education, the right to vote, among others, others.

Thus, the clothing style widespread at the time can be interpreted as a visual manifesto that aimed to convey a message that reflected the freedom desired by women

of those times. In this regard, Coco Chanel, one of those responsible for questioning the social role of women through fashion, stated that “a girl should be two things: who and what she wants” (Karbo, 2011 *apud* Marcangeli, 2015, p. 30). Like clothing, hair, although braided to the scalp, in a fair way, denotes the boldness of the woman in that period, because when opting for short hair tied to the head (reminiscent of a hat) with a unique adornment that draws attention to the hairstyle, it registers strength and courage, which defied the standards from previous decades, marked by large adorned hats and high, elaborate and uncomfortable hairstyles.

This social-visual manifesto that constituted the fashion of the 1920s can also be noted for the diversity in fashion accessories: elongated necklace, bracelets, earrings and rings that prioritised the simplicity of shapes and lightness. There is the presence of makeup – marked eyes and lipstick – that enhances feminine power, demonstrating that the “new” androgynous look of that decade was not related to the loss of femininity.

Although the image represents a moment of social transition and the questioning of roles assigned to genders, the low level of emotional content, observable through the unique colours and absence of interaction with the reader (observer), points to a socialisation system still traditional, since the femininity represented, although with bold clothes and accessories, still demonstrates repressed postures.

Figure 2 – Woman in the 1920s



Source: Revista Claudia².

² Available at: <https://claudia.abril.com.br/moda/as-10-mulheres-que-marcaram-o-mundo-da-moda/>. Access on: 28 Apr. 2022.

Figure 2 presents an image of the Represented Participant with the look of demand, that is, establishing contact with the reader by looking at him, as if demanding something from the observer. For Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006), both the contact gaze and the demand gaze are strategies that aim to influence reader behaviour, but each of them operates through different mechanisms. If in the offer gaze there is the visual equivalent of modalized verbs, which only indirectly suggest actions, in the demand gaze they become imperative, which demands explicit actions from the observer. Thus, in opposition to Figure 1, the woman in Figure 2 demonstrates greater confidence and security, as she stares at the reader fixedly, demanding attitudes, positions or thoughts from him. The look directed at the reader also gives her an active posture, because even being observed, she is the one demanding something, which corresponds to the look of the reader.

The look that stares at the viewer, however, contrasts with the oblique perspective of the woman's face and body, by adding an air of mystery to the image's senses, as if something were not being revealed in its entirety. This impression generated in the reader is usually due to the individual experiences themselves. In everyday life, we tend to associate sincerity and clarity with the body language of a person who looks us in the face, as if there was nothing to hide (Kress; Van Leeuwen, 2006). On the other hand, it is customary to judge someone who withdraws as an elusive person, who tries to mask or hide something from us. Thus, in the previous image, the interaction between the look of demand and the oblique perspective suggests to the reader that this is an intriguing, mysterious woman, who is sure of herself and at the same time does not reveal herself completely to the observer.

This woman's self-confidence is also reinforced by the cigarette she holds and the black dress she wears. Second Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006), sometimes the represented participants assume the role of carriers, that is, they are like mannequins that carry with them the attributes borrowed from the objects they carry. Regarding cigarettes, Gorberg (2020) tells us that it represents the ongoing emancipation of women in the 1920s, because before that decade it was the prerogative of men, so that women who smoked were not socially well regarded. However, the period immediately after World War I saw a series of changes in current social conventions, many of them directly involving the representation of women in advertising, especially in magazines with wide circulation at the time. Thus, in this context, such was the symbolic power that such a change in behaviour generated, which, until today,

Cigarettes are often associated with the established stereotype of the 1920s flapper, both in the academic sphere (LATHAM, 2000; ZEITZ, 2006; PINHEIRO, 2015) and in the popular imagination. In carnival costumes and thematic costumes [...] that refer to the character and the period, it is common to have a composition that includes a fringed tubular dress adorned with pearl necklaces, feathers, hairband and cigarette holder. (GORBERG, 2020, p. 225).

Also for Amos and Haglund (2000), the presence of cigarettes in everyday scenes of the 1920s represents the overthrow of certain female ties, since previously it was associated with a lack of female morals, pornography and prostitution. However, the authors draw attention to the fact that although it has become a common habit for women, some layers of society still condemn such a habit. Santos (2021), in turn, clarifies that this association between cigarettes and female empowerment was a strategy widely used by the tobacco industry to induce consumption, to manipulate feminist ideals in its favour.

Like the cigarette, the black dress is another symbolic artefact that characterises the stereotyped image of the 1920s today. Designed by Coco Chanel, a famous fashion designer from the beginning of the last century, and popularised by American Vogue magazine, the black dress was female power and the questioning of the social roles previously attributed to different genders. In fact, Chanel's proposal was both to rival the fashion standards that were popular in the early 1920s, with colourful and patterned dresses, as well as to appropriate a colour that was traditionally associated with the masculine universe, since black was the predominant colour in men's clothing and objects associated with them, such as the luxury cars of the Ford brand. Thus, in the 1920s, the colour black was re-signified for the female public, which was no longer synonymous with mourning, submission and sin to assume connotations of power, luxury and style (Marcangeli, 2015). In Figure 2, these socioculturally attributed meanings to the objects carried by the woman are lent to her by the reader, who tends to perceive her as a strong woman and in control of herself.

As for the framing of the image, the fact that it brings the represented participant in a semi-closed shot, in a position of intimate distance between the represented participant and the interacting participant, almost in closeup, contributes to an interpretation focused on seduction and domination exercised by the woman in the photograph. Likewise, the positioning of her image at the height of the observer's gaze reinforces social equality between the interacting participant and the represented participant, contributing to establishing an identification between the reader and the represented woman, as well as the symbolic contents that she represents. Such a textual structure also assumes content with a strong emotional and appealing charge, even if the image is marked by the absence of vibrant colours.

Regarding the modality, what is seen is a monochromatic distribution of colours, mainly due to the photographic standards of the time, when there were only black and white tones in the photographs. Despite this, the image carries a high sensorial and naturalistic modality, induced by the sharp contrast between light and dark, by the luminosity in the background, which is reflected in the contours of the woman's face and body, and by the proportions and shadows, which reproduce those of the real world. In a way, the woman anticipates the image of the *femme fatale* that would be popularised in the film noir of the 1940s.

In relation to the prevailing social norms at the time, the represented participant presents herself as a challenging person, as she is a young and determined woman

who follows fashion standards (clothing, long necklaces, well-marked makeup, mouth outlined in the shape of a cupid's bow, short hair and accessories like rings). Therefore, the semiotic resources together suggest a woman with high social power.

The Participant Represented in Figure 3, below, is also a young woman and, like the previous ones, omits her smile for the camera. It, however, mixes characteristics found in the two previous images.

Figure 3 – Woman in the 1920s – *La Garçonne* style



Source: Dani Noce³.

The French expression “*à la garçonne*”, which literally means “like a boy”, is often used to describe the style of women’s haircut that became popular during the 1920s, whose main characteristics are the length above the ear, bangs above the eyebrows and colour in dark tones. The term gained notoriety in the 1920s with the publication, in 1922, of the book *La Garçonne*, by the French author Victor Margueritte. In the plot of the literary work, a young woman decides to wear her hair short, men’s clothes and live a free sex life after discovering her fiancé’s betrayal.

Quite controversial at the time of its release, after suffering several boycotts and attempts at censorship, the book produced strong echoes in women’s fashion. This can be seen in Figure 3. The represented participant poses for the photograph in a serious way, but at the same time relaxed, reflecting the contradictions and changes in the social

³ Available at: <https://www.daninoce.com.br/moda/moda-nos-anos-20-o-fim-das-silhuetas-e-a-busca-por-liberdade-e-conforto/>. Access on: 28 Apr. 2022.

roles attributed to men and women that were processed in the 1920s. Above the waist, we see the arms in a typically masculine posture for photos of the time, reinforced by the coat that also recalls the garments worn by men. The large flower on the lapel and the fabric of the garment, which looks like velvet, however, denounces that it is a piece that questions gender roles.

The same can be said about the represented participant's legs, which, although wearing pants (typically male clothing in this context), are positioned in a posture associated with the female gender, reminiscent of classical ballet dancers. The fabric and cut of the garment also express a difference between it and those commonly used by men. Likewise, it is curious to note that the clothes worn by the represented participant contrast with the large amount of detail on the wall and some furniture in the background, again suggesting the search for aesthetic simplicity and breaking with the patterns from previous decades. Thus, the image shows a young woman in tune with the innovative trends of the time, which denotes an air of rebelliousness and haughtiness.

These qualities are reinforced in the image by the look of demand, which seems to demand a position from the reader, be it about the clothes she wears, or about the symbolic contents that are present in the image, that is, about the questioning of the traditional roles assigned genders and the social norms they try to impose. In this sense, as well as in other figures, male culture becomes an object of appropriation, without a loss of female identity. Care for health and aesthetic concern can be seen when posing for the photograph. Her vibrant mouth (noticeable lipstick) contrasts with her rigid countenance and produces divergent meanings, but at the same time complement each other to express the duality that marks the cultural and social changes of the period.

As for the framing category, there is the position of the young woman in an open plan, denoting greater impersonality and objectivity and, at the same time, a greater sense of sincerity expressed by the represented participant. According to Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006), the open plan also favours the idea that the participant interactor has access to everything he needs to know about the image, as it shows someone in full body, completely, including himself. often extensive information about the backdrop.

These impressions are reinforced by the predominance of the frontal angle in which the woman is positioned, despite a slight inclination of the torso, face and hidden right hand, which contributes to the image keeping certain mysteries. In turn, the horizontal angle of the image, with the woman positioned at the level of the reader's gaze, suggests social equality between these participants, provoking feelings linked to the reader's identification with the woman, with the clothes she wears and the ideologies that she represents.

By focusing on semiotic analysis with their discursive meanings, the young woman appears confident, without shyness. The social contents involved point to an active woman in society, who possibly plays various social roles, fleeing the standardisation of being a housewife. According to Marcangeli (2015) and Gorberg (2020), the fashion of the 1920s provided subsidies for the domestic role assigned to

women to be questioned, as it produced and disseminated aesthetic styles that valued the woman worker in industries, lacking hands. because of the wars and pandemics that marked the historical context at the time: short hair made women less prone to accidents when handling machines.

Figure 4 – Young people in Brazilian society in the 1920's



Source: Ana Pago⁴.

In Figure 4, there is an image of four young women, who pose smiling side by side. This last characteristic distinguishes the image from the others, since, as discussed earlier in this text, smiling when photographing was not yet a consolidated habit in the third decade of the 20th century. Again, this suggests that the 1920s were a period of transition between 19th century mores and the contemporary culture that took hold especially after the mid-20th century. In fact, the effervescence of the 1920s, also called by some “the crazy years”, only found restrictions with the economic crisis and the new war that outlined the 1930s. emerging industrialization, the growth of urban centres, in the emergence of workers’ movements and in the dynamism of the cultural life of the wealthier classes, which adopted European models of behaviour and aesthetics (Cano, 2012). In art, for example, these trends were represented by the Modern Art Week and the popularisation of avant-garde currents among artists.

⁴ Available at: <https://ocio.dn.pt/memoria/os-loucos-e-belos-anos-20/24469/amp/>. Access on: 28 abr. de 2022.

In the image, it is possible to perceive the modernist influence in the background, as well as the party atmosphere that became a hallmark of that decade, as the represented participants appear to be in the midst of a festive celebration, in a moment of relaxation. These impressions are influenced using the open plan, which suggests to the reader that he has access to everything there is to know about the scene. Likewise, the demanding gaze of the women in the image induces greater interaction between the interacting participant and the represented scene, as if they were extending an invitation to participate in the moment of relaxation. This is reinforced by the image on the horizontal axis, that is, with the participants represented at the reader's eye level, in order to give the impression of social equality and proximity.

Regarding this aspect, it is interesting to note that all the images that constituted the research corpus present this textual structure. According to Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006), if on the one hand the perspective at eye level suggests equality, when the represented participant is in a superior position to the reader, the suggested impression is that the person represented holds power and strength. In opposition to this, when the participant is in an inferior position to the reader, the impression is that there is weakness and fragility. Regarding this aspect, however, it is necessary to point out that the similarity between the analysed images (all in the perspective at the height of the reader's gaze) does not necessarily suggest that there was full acceptance of women's rights and gender equality. In fact, although the 1920s were a period of many changes in this and other aspects, it is necessary to remember that conservatism and prejudice, in different ways, remained strong, returning with great force in the following three decades. About this, Machado *et al.* (2008, p. 4) tells us that:

The woman of that time is modern and most of the time causes astonishment with her attitudes considered advanced for her time. There is a break in the public-private hierarchy, and women begin to be seen walking alone through the streets of large centres. The correct thing would be for the man to go out into the public space while the woman dedicates herself only to domestic tasks. As women become "modern", this "correct" hierarchy is inverted. Women take over the public space, go out on the streets alone, go shopping without a companion. This inversion raises questions, and many men at the time want women to return home and continue with the previously established tasks. There is also a fear that women will take the place of men in society, and the equality of the sexes will be discussed as never before.

Regarding the colours, despite being in black and white, one can see different shades of colour in relation to women's clothing, some lighter, others darker, but without clashing with the aesthetic standard of the time, that is, a slender body type, without accentuated curves, which were compensated by the "V" neckline, by the apparent arms and legs. On the face, there was little or no makeup on the cheeks to enhance the

lips and eyes, which were made up in darker tones. Hair à la garçonne could also be arranged in neat curls, with accessories that suggested simplicity, such as headbands. On the feet, it is possible to notice the “doll shoes”, another fashion brand at the time.

Regarding the discursive content, we are faced with women who demonstrate confidence and femininity during the androgynous look of fashion in the 1920s. It is also possible to perceive that they belong to wealthy and urban social groups, representing European aesthetic values, notably the French influence that was present in the culture of the Brazilian elites in the first decades of the last century, disseminated to the female public especially by fashion and variety magazines. In this sense, it is possible to assume that although these characteristics were consolidated as part of the stereotype of fashion and culture in the 1920s, not all women adopted such standards, since those from less affluent social groups probably did not have access to the instruments of communication and fashion in the style of Paris.

Conclusion

The multimodal analysis of the semiotic texts presented in this study made it possible to investigate the forms of composition and their interrelationship to produce meanings. Photographs of female profiles from the 1920s, in Brazil, were selected and analysed from the perspective of Visual Design Grammar. Exploring the way they are intertwined in the text’s layout reveals a feminine world linked to the social-ideological context in which people lived. Based on the analysis of women’s clothing, materialised in photographs from the 1920s, and under the category of interactional meta function, the focus of this study, it was possible to perceive women’s social positions being protected by cultural tradition, even though clothing presents traces of modernity for the time in question.

From visual choices, such as the photographic pose, the arrangement of hands, arms, legs and, mainly, the display of fabrics, textures, colours, clothes shapes characterising the fashion of a time through clothes, all this articulation between semiotic modes reveals a femininity engaged with current social standards: sociable women who wear clothes that denote dignity and respect to achieve a representation of the ideal woman in Brazilian society.

Short hair in female profiles, the use of fashion accessories, marked and/or unmarked make-up, and, mainly, clothing, with modern trends for the time, despite marking a time in the history of sociability, do not reach everyone in similar ways. By semiotic analysis, allowed by a look from the multimodality, it was noticed that fashion reaches different places, yes, beauty standards and clothing standards are replicated, however, the social and the ideological space in which this social is made the present does not undergo modernity’s as quickly as the fashion of an outfit. We realised with the study that some women represented in the time frame of the beginning of the 20th century, although in fashion, presented postures of the last century.

ALBUQUERQUE, S.; PIO, G.; GOMES, F. Moda e linguagem visual: uma análise semiótico-social da roupa feminina em fotografias da década de 1920. *Alfa*, São Paulo, v.67, 2023.

- *RESUMO: A moda possibilita compreender os desdobramentos socioculturais de uma determinada sociedade. Pode ser vista como uma manifestação cultural e como uma forma de linguagem, possibilitando ser analisada por meio da semiótica. Assim, o objetivo deste estudo é analisar as formas de representação utilizadas para construir significados identitários a partir da observação da roupa feminina presente nas fotografias da década de 1920, por meio da Semiótica Social, ao identificar e refletir sobre a mensagem transmitida visualmente pelas roupas, estabelecendo uma relação entre a mensagem transmitida pela imagem com a construção social do corpo feminino e o contexto histórico e sociocultural dos anos de 1920. Metodologicamente o estudo apresenta uma pesquisa bibliográfica fundamentada em estudiosos das áreas da semiótica e da moda como Natividade e Pimenta (2009) e Bonadio (2007), seguida da análise das imagens quanto aos seus significados representacionais, interacionais e composicionais, justificando-se por ser a visualidade e a moda áreas de análise ainda carentes de estudos, mas também pela relevância do estudo da moda e da linguagem visual para diversas áreas do saber. Os resultados sugerem que a roupa pode transmitir mensagens e informações dentro de um contexto sociocultural, sendo, portanto, uma manifestação de um sistema não verbal de comunicação.*
- *PALAVRAS-CHAVE: moda; semiótica social; linguagem; década de 1920.*

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