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COSTUME

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“The simplest, and most theatrical, way of thinking about how many characters there are in any one play is to ask how many costumes the play requires,” declare the authors of an important book on early modern English clothing and costume (Jones and Stallybrass 2000: 197). This statement is at first straightforward and concrete – if you’re making a play, count the costumes required and you know how to proceed. However, this “simple” statement betrays complex issues about the role costume plays in the alchemy of turning actors into characters, the stage into a story.

Costume is the element of the theatre that integrates the performer into the scenography; it constitutes the margin between the performer’s body and all the other material factors that make up the performance. As such, costume occupies a complicated position – is a costume part of the actor or the character or the material context of the performance? In the theatre, costumes perform many functions: they establish facts about the character, participate in and communicate the overall production scheme, they must function well no matter what the actors do while wearing them, and they provide visual appeal, calibrated to interest the viewer. Meanwhile, audiences “read” costumes on many levels too, looking to them to signify dramaturgically and semiotically, aesthetically, and as “real” material goods. Aoife Monks describes an “essential perceptual indistinguishability between the actor and their costume,” which not only makes analyzing costume complicated but can also verge on the affective and uncanny. “Costume,” Monks writes, “is a body that can be taken off” (Monks 2010: 11).

Definitions

Costumes are complicated, not just in the way they need to mediate between moving, performing bodies and the rest of the mise-en-scène, but also because of costume’s continuities with the equally fraught realm of clothing “in real life.” Today the word “costume” in English usually has a very clear meaning: clothing put on in order to appear like someone or something one is not. A costume’s theatricality is supposed to be evident – that is, the person in the costume should be recognizable as double, both signifying the thing to which the costume refers and signifying that she or he is not really that thing.
This theatrical doubleness can be articulated in comparison with other terms for clothing. For example, a *disguise* is also “false” like a costume, but in a successful disguise those who see the disguised person do not recognize that the wearer is not what they appear to be. The word “fashion” meanwhile does not immediately suggest a doubleness of identity in the same way that “costume” and “disguise” do, but if we think through some of the common critiques of fashion – that teenagers dress too sexily or sloppily or that women should dress to disguise their bodily “flaws” – we realize that anxieties about fakery, doubleness, or theatricality seem to cling to virtually all forms of clothing.

In some sense, all clothing always maintains some danger of theatricality (that the person wearing the clothes may not be what she or he seems) – a quality that can provoke intense anxieties as well as pleasure. Indeed, many people rely on clothing to help outwardly create (perform) and fix the identities they feel are essentially true. For example, a transgender person may use clothing to display the gender that they feel is true for them. A motorcycle gang member may wear biker boots and leather jackets to establish herself as a member of a subcultural identity. On the other hand, biker boots and jackets have also been adopted as fashionable items in their own right, and so may be worn not to identify with motorcycle culture, but as simply “cool.”

Today then, “costume” is one of the more unambiguous words denoting clothing, however the meaning of the word “costume” was not always so evident. Just a hundred years ago, the word costume could refer to all kinds of ordinary everyday clothing: fashion magazines presented images of “walking costumes,” “morning costumes,” “riding costumes,” “children’s costumes,” and so on. This more ambiguous sense of costume is still present in terms like “folk costume” or “traditional costume,” which ostensibly do not indicate that their wearers are somehow dressed other than they truly are (although this is debatable – a careful history of folk costume reveals that these “traditions” are carefully calibrated productions, often made at the behest of colonial or elite powers, not the “natural” outgrowths of folk culture they are often fantasized to be [Maxwell 2014]). Costume could also have the meaning we ascribe to it today, but just as often the Victorians used the word “get-up,” or “fancy dress” (the latter is still in use today in Britain) to refer to stage and special occasion outfits meant to present a person in the guise of some other identity.

Thus, costume both adds and subtracts a layer of uncertainty. On the stage, an additional layer is added to interpretation because the person in the costume is at least two personas at once – the actor and the character (and sometimes more, as when characters disguise themselves). However, other uncertainties that accrue to clothing off the stage are assuaged because we can be certain that costume was planned, was meant to be seen, and meant to be read semiotically as indicative of the character, or the stage setting, or the artistic vision of the production. That is, a “costume” is less ambiguous than everyday clothing, precisely because it explicitly acknowledges its theatricality. In contrast, on the street, it can be unclear whether a sartorial statement is ironic or sincere, what the wearer intends as his or her sartorial message, or if they intended to send a message at all. Of course, costume, just like other clothing, remains susceptible to “failures” of communication – sometimes leaving audiences wondering *who* someone is, what kind of character was meant to be portrayed, or oblivious to intended semiotic messages.

**Costume as mise-en-scène**

Costume is one of the earliest scenographic elements – it could even constitute the entire *mise-en-scène*. For example, a performer in costume can transform an ordinary
public space into a performance space simply by entering it, even before beginning to “perform.” That is, costume functions as portable scenography, the *mise-en-scène* inex-tricable from the body of the performer herself. To be more provocative we could say that at times the actor is secondary to the costume in presenting character or story: in much ancient Greek and Roman theatre character types were created by masks and costumes, brought to life by the voice and movement of the actors within. In Japanese noh theatre, a male actor plays every main role (*shite*), be it a demon, a young woman, a warrior, behind the appropriate mask and huge, symbol-laden costume. The mask and the costume do the majority of the establishment of character; the actor doesn’t even modulate his voice to approximate the character’s voice – verisimilitude is not the point of the actor’s performance. The sumptuous brocade and silk costumes contrast with the spare, never-altered stage, presenting the main actors as ghosts, gods, demons, and other supernatural beings, not because the costumes make the actor look how a ghost, god, or demon would “really” look, but through highly conventionalized semiotic codes of fabric pattern, costume style, and mask.

Like noh, early modern English theatre invested heavily in costume as their primary scenographic expenditure: historians speculate that with relatively simple and unchanging stage designs, the establishment of place and time was most often left to costumes and text. Costume holdings of an early modern theatre company were so important that S. P. Cerasano calculated that the costume collection of the Rose Theatre was worth more than the entire playhouse itself (Cerasano 1994: 51).

In part this is because, before the Industrial Revolution, the manufacture of fabrics was a time-intensive process, raw materials often came from distant sources, and therefore clothing was much more expensive and precious than it is today. Philip Henslowe, who invested in more than one company of players, was also a pawn broker who often took in noblemen’s clothes, and noble patrons of companies were known to donate their old clothes to the troupes, so that an actor playing a nobleman may very well have been attired in an actual nobleman’s garments (Jones and Stallybrass 2000: 189).

Because fabrics and clothing were so valuable, they circulated across boundaries, accruing meaning and value as they traveled between nobles and commoners, on- and off-stage. Plays also consistently dramatized the emotional and memorial value of clothing – as when *Twelfth Night*’s Viola dresses in her (seemingly) dead brother’s clothes or when a misplaced handkerchief serves as a precipitating event to Othello killing his wife. Shakespearean actors were occasionally disciplined for wearing their valuable costumes out into the city as if they were their own clothes. Indeed, in many other theatres over history actors were responsible for providing their own costumes. The contents of a nineteenth-century actress’s costume trunk, for example, needed to prepare her for comic and serious roles, with attractive, eye-catching costumes that would enable her to stand out. Tracy C. Davis declares, “while black velvet and white lace were the marks of artistry, gauze and spangles were the key to mass appeal and commercial success” (Davis 1991: 111). Some costumes in the nineteenth and early twentieth century were even meant to double as fashion advertisements to encourage audience members to buy what they saw on stage (Kaplan and Stowell 1994; Schweitzer 2009).

**Beauty and realism**

Oftentimes, as costume-as-advertisement might suggest, the primary function of the costume has been not so much to convey information as to impress the spectator through...
its sheer beauty or magnificence. Many traditional and popular performance forms such as noh and kabuki, Chinese opera, kuttiyattam and kathakali, west African egungun masquerade, and Las Vegas showgirl revues prominently feature elaborate and beautiful costumes. Garments that emphasize spectacle over functionality highlight the visuality of theatre—put another way, we might declare that an audience member’s visual experience of a costume is ultimately the real function of costume, trumping the garment’s practicality for daily activities or approximation of offstage norms. These performance genres often feature wildly oversize costumes that render the performer more monumental and easier to see from afar—literally larger than life. Other forms emphasize beauty in other ways through sumptuous fabrics and decoration as in Indonesian legong, or ballet, where the “skirt” of most tutus has become so stylized it no longer even fulfills the ostensible function of the skirt: to cover the lower half of the wearer’s body. For many of these monumental costumes, such spectacularity isn’t intended only to impress spectators but to impress upon them the spiritual or metaphysical connections performers have beyond the realm of ordinary human existence, as is the case of the ceremonial garments of Catholic and Orthodox clergy members.

While visually spectacular or beautiful costume remains a constant in many contemporary performance forms (think of pop singers’ concert outfits or Mardi Gras and Mummers parade costumes), for more than a century Anglophone and European theatre has most often been costumed under a different rubric: realism. Realistic costume cannot be thought of as opposite to spectacular or aesthetic costume—realism is itself a stylized aesthetic, one that guides a viewer to evaluate and appreciate costumes on the basis of their indistinguishability from “real life” or how one imagines “real life” was in the time and place depicted on the stage. Within realism’s appeal to verisimilitude, costumers still regularly balance measures of historical “accuracy” with contemporary audience tastes and storytelling; for example, plays set in the medieval period often eschew stocking-like hose for men in favor of trousers because modern audiences find hose unattractive, dampening the aesthetic appeal of a medieval hero like Romeo or Robin Hood. Indeed, sometimes realistic costumes are themselves presented as spectacular—perhaps through jaw-dropping luxury, as one might see in a magnificent period Shakespeare production, or perhaps through painstaking recreations of worn and patched clothes, suggesting a long life before and after the production itself.

Trends and tastes for realistic costume index modern concerns with “theatricality” and modern and postmodern theatres’ navigations of the “fourth wall,” and theatrical illusion. Modern and contemporary theatre makers have gone ever farther in pushing the boundaries between realistic illusory costumes and the “real itself” onstage by using strategies of neutral costume (plain black turtlenecks and trousers for example) or an aesthetic of “rehearsal clothes”—as if the actors had simply walked onstage from their everyday lives or continued to wear for the performance the clothes they would choose for rehearsals. Costume choices like these that present themselves as not choosing may be thought of as the triumph of the “real” over illusion on the stage; they take the notion of realism so far as to break open the fourth wall and introduce onto the stage the “real” of performers physically working—ballet dancers in legwarmers and sweatshirts, actors in mismatched contemporary garments. The apparent non-costume of neutral clothing or of rehearsal clothes semiotically suggest that performing is labor, and that actors or dancers are in their “work uniform.” These costumes seem to suggest, a couple thousand years after Aristotle, that scenographic “spectacle” is the least important element of the performance. On the other hand, the performance of apparently untheatrical “reality” on the
stage remains highly illusory in its careful disavowal of the fact that the bodies on stage remain self-consciously presented before the audience.

What about cases where costume is entirely absent – when performers appear without clothes at all? Certainly, many performance forms exploit the tensions costume can evoke through revealing and concealing the performer’s body. Because the naked human body is often considered taboo or transgressive in contemporary Western society, nudity tends to punctuate theatrical illusion by breaking audiences’ absorption; audience attention splits between the theatrical presentation and the phenomenological experience of being live with someone else’s unclothed body. However, these audience encounters with non-costume are entirely encoded with the effects of clothing and costume’s ubiquity. It is precisely because, as writer and journalist Karl Kraus put it back in 1906, “Nakedness is still indissolubly bound to the idea of clothing. We perceive a clothed state as the natural condition and nakedness for us, is primarily a state of being undressed and appears to us as bareness, as nudity” (Kraus 2004: 242).

Far from seeming natural or neutral, the shock of the nude performer demonstrates how powerfully costume and clothing works to normalize the human body. For example, in Young Jean Lee’s 2012 Untitled Feminist Show, the six performers were naked throughout the wordless one hour show until appearing clothed for the curtain call. One of the performers, Becca Blackwell, described how complicated it was for them, as a non-gender-conforming individual who has never identified with the label “female” (Cruz 2012), to perform themself without clothes. Blackwell’s example reveals that, far from being neutral, the body itself can be as much a vehicle of illusion as a costume can be.

Conclusion
Like so many elements of scenography, costumes are often judged most successful when they are not noticed at all, but blend seamlessly into a general impression. Yet, the position of costume is perhaps the most complicated element of scenography, mediating between audience and actor, stage and “real life,” reality and illusion, inextricable from any of those spheres. Just as psychologists have demonstrated that the concept of “dress for success” has real psychological impact, actors frequently acknowledge the power of the costume to prepare them for the emotional and psychological work of portraying a character (Adam and Galinsky 2012). Far from being “mere” superficial spectacle that Aristotle deemed least important to tragedy, costume has deep and broad import, across the apparent boundaries of stage, street, audience, actors, real, and theatrical.

Note
1 Blackwell uses the singular pronoun “they/them.”

References
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