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The Emperor's New Clothes: When Nothing is Everything

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Abstract

The Emperor's New Clothes (Danish: *Kejserens nye klæder*, 1837) is one of the most famous Andersen's fairy tales. It's a typical apologue, with the vice of vanity as its target. The text will be subjected to a first reading to evince the narrative strategy and moral themes. A further, semiotic analysis of the text will be conducted on the basis of the first reading, so to expose the coding implied in the narration. Those codes will show the connection between dressing behaviour and the general system framing a human society. A narrative text, as Andersen's tale, encodes the author's implementation and re-writing of the social system, its map of values, both normative (moral) and phenomenological (experiential), and the reciprocal interaction. In particular, the semiotic analysis of *The Emperor's New Clothes* allows us to extract a representation of dressing behaviour and highlight its structure and dynamics.

Keywords: Hans C. Andersen; Semiotics of Text; Semiotics of Fashion; Sociosemiotics of Fashion; Pluralistic Ignorance.

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Andersen's folktale *The Emperor's New Clothes* was first published in Copenhagen on 1837, with the original title *Kejserens nye klæder*.[1] Since then it has become one of the most famous satirical fable in the Western literature, so that the sentence *The Emperor has no clothes*, or the simplified version *The King is naked*, with slight variations, is a metaphor we find in different languages.

Believing You Are Different When We You Are the Same

In social sciences, this tale is considered an example of *pluralistic ignorance*, which is defined as "when people erroneously infer that they feel differently from their peers, even though they are behaving similarly."[2]

One common example is the following: you are listening to a quite difficult lecture. After a while the lecturer asks if there are any questions. In fact, you are having serious problems in grasping some points. You would like to ask for explanations. But nobody raises their hand. You think that everybody has understood and decide not to pose your question, fearing to be the only one who is in trouble, and thus the less competent or less brilliant in the audience (you believe that the others feel differently from you). Actually, the large majority of the listeners are experimenting the same difficulty, but they all believe what you believe (they feel like you, but each of them believes to be the only one).

It is a peculiar situation somehow contradicting the common idea that the larger a number of individuals is, the closer to think right they are. As one may guess, such a phenomenon attracted the interest of researchers from different fields. It has been often cited a study on alcohol use on campus by Prentice and Miller.[3] In short, the research showed that students deemed their peers to be more at ease with heavy drinking than they actually were. This is common with emulative behaviours, where the goal is not the behaviour itself but to show the group of peers that one is doing it. You drink also to prove you can drink.

The present paper, however, does not follow this path of research. I will rather try to explore the interpretants of the text, that is, the logical/semiotic process of meaning production triggered by the text.[4] We will be able, this way, to see how pluralistic ignorance can be set in the frame of a narration.

In this text (as in many, when we consider fiction) we have two main threads of interpretation: the first is the fictional reconstruction of what the characters think and the reasons of their actions and discourses. The second is the thread that the Author proposes to the readers, the competence he attributes to them, the steps through which he takes the readers and the conclusions he wishes them to reach.

These two levels correspond to the categories of diegesis (within the tale) and extradiegesis (outside the tale).[5]

The method for the analysis is to explicit the inferences we normally employ in interpretation, with a particular interest in abduction.[6]

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1. Andersen's fable is well known. To refresh the memory, here is a free access English version of the text: https://andersen.sdu.dk/vaerk/hersholt/TheEmperorsNewClothes_e.html. For the original text see the reference section.

2. Roy Baumeister and Kathleen D. Vohs, "Pluralistic Ignorance," in *Encyclopedia of Social Psychology* (Vol. 1, pp. 674–674), accessed June 28/2022. https://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781412956253.n402.

3. D. A. Prentice and D. T. Miller, "Pluralistic ignorance and alcohol use on campus: Some consequences of misperceiving the social norm," in *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 64(2), (1993): 243–256. https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.64.2.243.

4. The semiotic theory of interpretation was first framed by C. S. Peirce (1839–1914) and the present research refers to his version. Umberto Eco, though, in several of his writings tries to adapt, apply and refurbish the theory, and his work is also paramount to my approach. Both the authors dedicated a large amount of their production to this topic, so that it is impossible to give a complete bibliography. I suggest the following: Peirce, C. S. "A Survey of Pragmaticism", in C. S. Peirce, *Collected Papers of C. S. Peirce*, eds. Charles Hartshorn, Paul Weiss, Arthur Burks (Harvard: Harvard U. P., 1931–35, 1958) par. 5.11–13, 5.464–496; Umberto Eco, *Semiotics and the Philosophy of Language* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), in particular chapters 1 and 2.

5. See Gerard Genette, *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1980).

6. Charles Peirce wrote several times that Semiotics (or Logic) is a Normative Science, that is, it is concerned with the way we *should* think, and not the way we actually think. On Peirce's classification of sciences see C. S. Peirce, "Classification of the Sciences", *Collected Papers of C. S. Peirce*, parr. 1.203–283; 7.374n10, 7.279, 7.362–387. On abduction see Umberto Eco "Horns, Hooves, Insteps. Some Hypotheses on Three Kinds of Abduction," in *The Sign of Three. Dupin, Holmes, Peirce*,

Andersen's text is fiction, and as such is a semiotic machine designed to lead the reader along a linear succession of steps and make her/him feel the effect devised by the Author. Yet, the interpretive moves that the text can trigger during its interaction with the reader's Encyclopedia and her/his inferential capability are not linear but can open to parallel and diverging paths, proving to be a more complex construction that it may appear at first reading.[7]

One of those lines of interpretation brings to an interesting view on how one's personal public image is managed, with some interesting consequences for a social approach to fashion.
The semiotic analysis will lead us along this path.[8]

Introducing the Main Characters and Theme

The Emperor is vain: "an Emperor so exceedingly fond of new clothes that he spent all his money on being well dressed."[9]
This is a judgment regarding a weakness of the Emperor, and is communicated to the reader to make clear that this is a moral tale about vanity. We are at the extradiegetic level (level 2): the Author is talking to the reader about the narration.

Two strangers arrive in town, introducing themselves as weavers.
That they are actually swindlers is known only to the reader, that is, this information is limited to level 2.

They say they can weave a fabric that:

(a) is "uncommonly fine;"

(b) "had a wonderful way of becoming invisible to anyone who was unfit for his office, or who was unusually stupid."

The Author avoids to explain that such a fabric cannot exist, since such a piece of knowledge is part of the Encyclopedic background of any adult reader, what we usually refer to as "the real world." Eco called it the World of Reference or W_0.[10]
It is important to notice that Andersen leaves the world of the tale (let us call it W_1) undefined. He never says whether it is fantastic or realistic. This is a crucial point in his narrative strategy. If W_1 were a fairy world, the magic fabric might exist, and the ability of the swindlers should be exercised in a different form. In another famous Andersen's tale, *The Little Mermaid*, W_1 is clearly fantastic, and of course none of the characters believing in the existence of mermaids is a fool. Thus, as to the nature of W_1 in our tale, the only real deviation from W_0 is how gullible are the citizens of that Empire. They are all credulous to such an extreme to be almost unbelievable, but in the frame of the moral fable such exceptions are accepted.[11]

The Swindle Unfolds

The Emperor thinks: "If I wear the clothes made out of that fabric 'I could tell the wise men from the fools'."
The Emperor believes both that (a) and (b) are true.

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ed. Umberto Eco and Thomas A. Sebeok, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1983), 198–220.

7. On Encyclopedia see Umberto Eco, *Semiotics and the Philosophy of Language,* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), chapter 2.

8. On the interpretative semiotic analysis see Umberto Eco, *The Role of the Reader. Explorations in the Semiotics of Text*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1979).

9. All the citations from the tale are from the English text referred to above.

10. See Umberto Eco, *The Role of the Reader. Explorations in the Semiotics of Text,* 227 ff.

11. Even in our W_0, however, we have witnessed in recent times a fair amount of credulousness.

The contrast between the two swindlers and the mass of dupes of the city creates a kind of complicity between the Author and the Reader, allowing the latter to smile and feel more intelligent than the characters. It also reduces the seriousness of the swindle.

Another important theme in this narration is that all the characters believe themselves to be smart because they are able to conceal their stupidity. The readers, at the extradiegetic level, are endowed with more and better information, and from their superior position are able to see that it is just the opposite: if the characters would not disguise what they believe to be their stupidity they would be smart, whereas it is exactly their pretended smartness that makes them stupid.

The Emperor intends to use the magic fabric as a test to tell the wise men from the fools, and the fit from the unfit.

We smile once more, because he takes for granted that everybody will be honest and tell what she/he really sees.

This is another point of the pluralistic ignorance theory: every individual believes that the others feel differently, and therefore acts as if she/he would feel like them. But in so doing he/she implies that the others are sincere, that is, that they show what they really feel and therefore he/she is the only one to lie. As the size of the group increases, the probability of one being the only one to lie decreases. For this reason, there is always a shade of gullibility in pluralistic ignorance.

Needless to say, before he actually goes to check it, the Emperor has no doubt that he will be able to see the fabric, since it is impossible to suspect that the Emperor can be a fool or unfit.
As the narration unwinds, we discover how much knowledge is considered as necessarily implied by the characters even if it is only possible. This is not at all a property confined to fictional worlds. There is a long list of certainties that have no strong grounds but are considered to be solid, in order to face the daily social life with a steady image and a recognised role. At the first places is our confidence that we see things as they "really are," whatever that might mean.

The two con men are hired by the Emperor.

The two con men begin their work, pretending to weave. Actually, there is nothing on the looms.

The tale is a milestone in visual narration because of the extraordinary invention of the two weavers that mimic the interaction with the invisible fabric, first on the loom and then when they drape the clothes on the Emperor. Here the characters must accept that not only the fabric is invisible, but is also untouchable.
Furthermore, it is implied that the mysterious process of weaving the magic fabric turns threads with standard material properties into an invisible textile.
Actually, at the extradiegetic level we are advised that "All the finest silk and the purest gold thread which they demanded went into their traveling bags." None of the characters, however, seems to have any suspicion. Once more, the real wonder is how stupid the inhabitants of the empire are.

The Fake News Spread

The news spreads quickly: "The whole town knew about the cloth's peculiar power."

The citizens share the curiosity of their sovereign: "all were impatient to find out how stupid their neighbors were."
At the diegetic level both the Emperor and the citizens believe the fabric is working beyond any doubt.

The Moral Turn: Don't Mind if You're Stupid. Behave as You're Not

The Emperor sends his "honest old minister" to see how the work is going on.

"He couldn't see anything" Andersen explains, and he adds to reassure us W_o inhabitants: "because there was nothing to see."

This is the turning point of the narration: instead of staring at the two rascals and telling them "You think I am an idiot?" and putting them in jail, the Minister is shocked by the fact that he cannot see anything, and his self-confidence is shaking.

The Minister doubts himself: "Can it be that I'm a fool? I'd have never guessed it."

The sentence "I'd never guessed it" is great: the honest old man is so confident in the power of the magic fabric that he doubts he is actually a fool, and unfit for his office. And this will be the reaction of all the citizens, except the child. They all believe that proposition (b) is true.
Now we see the next step, that we can put in the form of a deduction:

> If somebody cannot see the fabric, he/she is a fool;
>
> I cannot see the fabric;
>
> I am a fool.

At this point the problem is: "What am I to do?"
I have two choices.

The first is to let it know to everybody that I cannot see the fabric.
This is where the theory of pluralistic ignorance comes into play. It says that every character believes that the others believe what he actually doubts. In this folktale the point is slightly different. First it is not a question of belief, but of perception. Second, it is a question of making one's perception public. Immediately after having realised they cannot see the fabric and having therefore concluded that they could be fools, all the characters face the question of how to publicly act about their perception. The first interpretative step brings from the individual cognitive fact to the self-evaluation, then the second one brings from the personal judgment of possible stupidity to a social image management problem: how to communicate in the situation?
It is important to keep in mind that our communication in public is always connected to what we think the other social actors think and are inclined to do. Those actors are all the subjects involved in that specific circumstance and in our social environment in general. This situation is intrinsically paradoxical: Ego wants to know what the others think before Ego constructs the response, but to know what the others think Ego must utter a response. To get out of the impasse there are three main ways.

1: to frankly tell the others one's own feelings: "I can't see nothing, what about you?"

2: to make little moves to probe the others' thoughts. Like saying "Oh, how do you like this wonderful fabric? From certain angles it seems really invisible..." and carefully observing the reactions, and tuning one's further moves to their content;

3: to disregard what the others think and act only upon the facts, limiting one's communication to the minimum required by the situation, waiting for reactions from the others. Say nothing, do nothing.

In preparing one's response, however, Ego goes a step further, like in a chess match: Ego makes a hypothesis on how Alter will react to Ego's reaction: "What is Alter going to say/do if I say/do that?"
So, the choice between 1, 2 and 3 depends on the consequences they might produce. The choice is made according to the effects Ego sees as more desirable, or less risky.

It is a typical backward reasoning, that is, an abduction: inference from effect to cause.
All along this interpretive process, both Ego and Alter do not take into account whether to tell the truth or not. Every communicational move is weighed regardless its being true or false. The possibility of lying is always an option. The fact that 1. is the only sincere reaction does not make it better than 2 and 3.[12]

12. We would go too far if we would open a reflection on the fact that our moral principles bear upon the way itself in which we reason in everyday life.

Let us come then to see the possible consequences of the different reactions to the discovery by the Minister that he cannot see the fabric.

1. Telling the truth. The only win result would be if ALL Alters would say the same thing. Since all the characters believe (b) to be true, that would mean they are all fools. But how many are the probabilities that everybody is a fool and, if she/he is, to admit it? What if everybody would stare at him wide-eyed and shake their heads in embarrassment? Moreover, he is a very high rank official, and he might loose his face, his place and his dignity. The risk is too high.

2. Proceeding by small steps. This solution means to let the others express themselves, but it can give him information on what they think only if they add something to his communication. If they also make a neutral move, like nodding or saying something like "Oh, yes, indeed!", then he stays with what he has got. Moreover, the higher your rank, the more your following will agree with everything you say. The move can be useless.

3. Adapt to the situation. The minister tries to follow this pattern. It is the most conservative and less compromising choice. Since everybody believes that (b) is true, the chances that the others might confess that they don't see any fabric are low. The main logical pillar supporting this belief is that those who admit they don't see the fabric admit that they are stupid, and, unless they are a very large majority, the position of those who pretend to see has more social value. So, to play the game seems to be the best move.

Unfortunately for him, the swindlers ask for his opinion. They "begged him to be so kind as to come near to approve the excellent pattern, the beautiful colors." He looks closer at the looms and the more he stares the less he sees. The honest old man is shocked: "Am I unfit to be the minister?" he asks himself. But he is not so honest as to admit his fault. He immediately decides: "It would never do to let on that I can't see the cloth," and goes on with solution 3.

" 'Oh, it's beautiful — it's enchanting.' The old minister peered through his spectacles. 'Such a pattern, what colors!' I'll be sure to tell the Emperor how delighted I am with it.'"

I called this passage the moral turn, but I might have called it the social turn. The characters reveal how the hierarchy of their Encyclopedia is organised: first comes the safety of one's social position, from which any wealth and rank derive. Moral principles come next. So, it doesn't really matter whether (b) is true or false, that is, whether you are unfit or not to the position you occupy. What matters is that if you say it is false, you jeopardise your rank.
Your opponents might even be so mischievous as to all agree on the effectiveness of the magic fabric even if no one sees it, just to get rid of you. In politics we see many times that, in order to oppose a bill, a series of pretexts and sometimes fake informations are raised and shared by large numbers of politicians, journalists and common people, just to sweep it away.
Thus, it is therefore convenient for everyone to play along and pretend to see the magic fabric.
Of course, behind this moral lesson there is the Author, who is spinning his thread on the diegetic side by telling the story, and on the extradiegetic side by conversing with the Reader.
As far as now, those who put their interest before honesty, as they have probably done during their whole career, seem to have found the right reaction to the shocking discovery of their own incompetence.

Can a Fool Behave Like He's not?

Here is the other central point for the moral fable: all the characters lie rather than lose their face, that is, they place their social image above the moral duty to testify their senses.

They do not consider that, by putting the social values before experience, they can be more easily tricked than by relying on their senses. In fact, it is easier to induce somebody to declare she/he sees something that she/he's not really seeing, than to make somebody see what he/she does not see. On the other hand, it is also simpler to lie in order to protect one's interest than to embark in a complicated demonstration of one's honesty, when it requires contradicting what seems to be the common perception of the facts.

Besides the opposition between honesty and interest, can we say that there is in this text a contraposition of empiricism/realism to rationalism? Maybe this reading is too extreme, but the Author repeats five times such sentences as "there was nothing on the looms" (1), "there was nothing to see" (3), "they had nothing to hold" (1). I use both the terms — empiricism and realism — because Andersen puts the two philosophical approaches together: he repeats the formula: "X couldn't see anything, because there was nothing to see." Empirical sensations (seeing) correspond to reality (being).
How, on the other side, is the world where the Emperor, the court and all the adult citizens live?
The Emperor is totally dedicated to vanity, the ministers are all concentrated on defending their privileges, and the citizens' main wish is "to find out how stupid their neighbours were."
I used the term rationalism because such an attitude is not irrational: it is the application of the principle of personal interest. The social equilibrium resulting from the balance of individual interests relies on the reciprocal acknowledgment of specific positions and roles, which it its turn implies the basic qualities of soundness of mind and ability to perform one's task. Thus, it is rational to defend at any cost one's social image. Though, when the two principles come into conflict, the empirical facts prevail. Or they seem to prevail.

Now, let us go back to the narration.
After the minister, the Emperor sends another official to check how the weaving is going on. The scene is similar. The man cannot see nothing, he suspects to be unfit to his office, but he decides: "I mustn't let anyone find it out, though."
At last the Emperor himself wants to see the magnificent textile. Now the two officials who have already seen the fabric point to the empty looms as if they were showing the most extraordinary masterwork.
The Emperor is shocked as the others have been, but his position is even more difficult: he is the highest authority, he cannot risk to come out as a fool. The decision is the same as that of the officials: "Nothing could make him say that he couldn't see anything."
The Emperor is imitated by the whole retinue, and they propose the idea that prepares the climax of the story: "they advised him to wear clothes made of this wonderful cloth especially for the great procession he was soon to lead."

Now the establishment of the new social code is completed. To preserve their position in the social system, which depends on a convention, all the characters have cooperated to produce another convention. The illusion of the fabric is instrumental in the keeping of another illusion.

As the tale goes on, the two swindlers pretend to cut and sew, tailoring the clothes for the Emperor. Then the clothes are presented to the sovereign, and now the Author has the problem that the fabric must be touched and draped on the body. But the con men have en explanation also for the untouchability of the garments: "All of them are as light as a spider web. One would almost think he had nothing on, but that's what makes them so fine." And the ceremony of dressing goes along smoothly among the enthusiasm of the noblemen.

So the Emperor walks in procession under his canopy and now we meet the third main character of the story, a collective subject, the people. They have been informed and are well ready to support the illusion, all for the same reason: "Nobody would confess that he couldn't see anything, for that would prove him either unfit for his position, or a fool."
With a keen touch of irony Andersen observes: "No costume the Emperor had worn before was ever such a complete success."

The comment is worth some reflection, since this point is meaningful to fashion theory. The success is not so great in spite of the fabric being invisible but just because of that. A real outfit would have necessarily possessed some specific qualities. For instance, it should have had some colours and not others, an embroidered horse and not a peacock, and so on. Since the individual tastes are different, when facing a new fashion an amount of adjustment (small or large, depending on many variables) to the collective trend is always required. However, it is impossible to have a unanimous agreement. Somebody would like the new proposal more than another. Not in this case, because everyone can imagine the garments the way they like them, or just imagine nothing, since there is nothing to see.
Is the absence of the aesthetic object the secret for a convergent aesthetic evaluation? Such a position

would reduce aesthetics to persuasion, or autosuggestion, that is, a socio-psychological phenomenon independent from any empirical external object. It is not so.

What Andersen is evidencing is the collective construction of social values, not only in the aesthetic field. The crowd and the imperial retinue do not experience any objective or subjective aesthetic feelings. They just talk as if they did. They say "Wonderful! Beautiful!" but there is no sensation and no imagination. Just social sharing of expressions. But the situation is not a collective aesthetic experience, as, for instance, a theatre play. It is a public exhibition of power, where the social hierarchy is shown in detail, and aesthetic appreciation, in this case, is an act of deference. In particular because of the personal inclination of the Emperor. "Whatever the King wears is beautiful" is the code implied in this kind of rituals. We apply the same code to all the red carpets shown on the media today.
Andersen's purpose is to highlight this aspect in a moralistic frame. The Author depicts the whole population of that city as a mass of dummies, so involved in the social process maintaining the power system that they have lost any grip on reality. Therefore, they deserve to be cheated. And the reader is allowed to laugh at them, feeling she/he is not such a fool. And we have even more reason to laugh if we think that while they are being swindled, they think they are smart.
A dummy who thinks he's smart is even more dummy.

The First Final Interpretant

At this point of the tale, we can see the first final interpretant, or the moral of the story: placing one's social role above the common sense of reality is stupid and can put you at the mercy of those who want to cheat you.[13]
Yet, the text is more surprising than that. The tale is not over.

The Breaking of the Code and The Second Final Interpretant

Here is how the story goes on:

> "But he hasn't got anything on," a little child said.
>
> "Did you ever hear such innocent prattle?" said its father. And one person whispered to another what the child had said, "He hasn't anything on. A child says he hasn't anything on."
>
> "But he hasn't got anything on!" the whole town cried out at last.

The theory calls this the "fragility" of pluralistic ignorance, that is, a single or a few subjects openly claiming that they don't believe what most believe the others believe, thus breaking the spell and immediately spreading the awareness that sweeps away the false opinion.[14]

Here we have the second final interpretant: the common sense of the innocents (the children, and then the commons) will eventually come out and say that the Emperor is naked, that is, that social roles are established by agreement, and without agreement there is no social hierarchy.
This is the moral for which this tale has become famous as a parable on equality, and appreciated even by anarchists and libertarians.[15]
However, though this is the most popular reading of the tale, it is not the end of the story. Before the end, let us introduce our main point of view: fashion.

13. See Eco, *The Role of the Reader. Explorations in the Semiotics of Text*, 197 ff.

14. See Jens Ulrik Hansen, "A Logic-Based Approach to Pluralistic Ignorance", in *Future Directions for Logic — Proceedings of PhDs in Logic III,* eds. Jonas De Vuyst and Lorenz Demey (Lund, 2012). Accessed June 28, 2022. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/256295865_A_Logic-Based_Approach_to_Pluralistic_Ignorance.

15. A famous counterculture Italian review was called *Re Nudo* (*The Naked King*). https://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Re_Nudo.

Now We Come to Fashion

Let us enter the fashion field by commenting again on the fantastic sentence: "No costume the Emperor had worn before was ever such a complete success."

At the beginning of her book *Fashion-ology*, Kawamura explains the approach of social science to fashion: fashion is not dress, it is something humans do with several different things among which are clothes.[16] Like University is not classrooms, libraries or laboratories, it is what we do with them.
In short, fashion is a social system and process that rules what is new and aesthetically positive in individual public image, and constantly renews it. It requires a society where individuals are supposed to have a personal image and at the same time to belong to style groups and where innovation is a positive value.[17]
Is there any requirement that a material object must possess in order to be recognised and legitimised as fashionable? Or is the process so independent from any empirical product that anything can become an item of fashion, included the total absence of anything?

In 1994 Robert Altman realised a film on the world or fashion, *Ready to Wear (Prêt-à-Porter)*. In one of the final scenes we watch a fashion show where the models walk down the catwalk completely naked. The last one is visibly pregnant and wears a bridal veil and bouquet.
Altman represents the reaction of the audience —all fashion professionals and journalists — as astonishment, but quite moderate. There is no scandal and no protest. Only an American journalist, Kitty Potter (Kim Basinger), leaves the hall.

In this case the circumstance is different from the folktale. It is defined as a (satirical) comedy drama, and therefore it is set in W_o. Specifically, it takes place during the Paris Fashion Week.
Now, let us try to interpret a fashion show where the models wear nothing.
At the first level we can say it is a moral provocation. In a moralistic approach, fashion, as we all know, has often been considered a futile and vain affair, all frills and fads, a typical creation of the bourgeoisie. The partial exposure of the female body is used to stimulate attention and reassure women of the seductive power of the products. But the totally naked body is revolutionary, because it cancels every layer that culture has imposed on it. Nudity means going back to Nature, and no capitalistic structure can be built in a natural human group. For this reason, for example, nudity was an important trait of the Hippy culture. By reducing dress to a sort of zero degree Altman aims at showing the emptiness of the fashion system.
There is probably no other level in the movie to be investigated, but a bit of intertextual interpretation may be useful to our analysis.

First we will see the end of Andersen's tale:

> "But he hasn't got anything on!" the whole town cried out at last.
>
> The Emperor shivered, for he suspected they were right. But he thought, "This procession has got to go on." So he walked more proudly than ever, as his noblemen held high the train that wasn't there at all.

The Emperor suddenly understands what has happened. The Author does not mention the swindle. But he stresses the crucial statement: "This procession has got to go on."

This final sentence makes the Emperor the winner of the game. He is now aware he has been cheated, he realises the stupidity, the vanity, the dishonesty of the officials and of the citizens, including himself, but at the same time he realises that, more than ever, now it's time to support the system. After all, everything is transient, this is only an episode in the fundamental continuity of the social play.

16. See Yuniya Kawamura, *Fashion-ology. An Introduction to Fashion Studies*, (London, New Delhi, New York, Sydney: Bloomsbury, 2005) p. 33 ff.

17. That change in society is good is not a constant in history. On the contrary, for centuries and in many societies change was seen as a danger or an act of subversion.

This is where all the moral criticisms come to an end. Fashion is probably the more visible of the various cooperative processes that establish and manage the codes of social interaction.
In particular, fashion has the function of marking a social group (today more than one) as the carrier of innovation in costume, and of reminding that change is a positive value.
This function is implemented through communicative processes and patterns of behaviour and can be performed by means of a wide range of products, and in theory even without them. However, operating without the elements of material culture renders the function empty, devoid of content.
It is true that, stripped of the scenery, coded ceremonies and events loose most of their appeal, thus revealing their nature: the ritual reiteration of social structures and processes. For example, we all know that a wedding can be reduced to signing a document that is going to be filed as an official record. All the rest of the common behaviours that usually mark a change in the relation between two persons and two families can be left out. This way, we can understand the basic function of marriage. But how long can a social institution survive without the sharing of conventional values that connect the individuals in that network we call society?

Conclusion

Thus, stories like that of the Emperor can remind us that social codes cannot exist if we, as social agents, do not act as if they existed, filling them with meaning. All the same, though they are just social conventions, they have solidity and steadiness, coming from the functions they perform.
Andersen's folktale is a precious artwork that makes us laugh and at the same time allows us to appreciate how strong invisible things can be, when human beings decide to believe in them.
When a moral fable is told by an author endowed with the ability to spin his thread along more dimensions than the ordinary canon requires, we realise how art can extend its network of interpretants beyond the intention of the artist. We see how art is rooted in the depths of an entire culture. This way, besides offering us aesthetic pleasure, art allows us to reflect on social institutions that, though aimed at a different function, also rest on the same foundation.

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