

Olga VAINSHTEIN

Russian State University for the Humanities, RUSSIAN FEDERATION

My favorite dress: constructing comfort and well-being in post Soviet Russia.

This article is based on my oral history project. In 1997-2008 I interviewed Russian women of different generations, asking them to tell me about their favorite dresses. The subjects of my study were women belonging to the social group of Soviet and post Soviet intelligentsia. 22 participants were interviewed over the period of 11 years. Most of the names are real, only few people expressed the wish to remain anonymous; some of the women came from different cities but finally settled in Moscow.

A total of thirty questions were developed to address the research questions concerning the construction of comfort and well-being in fashion. The questions were mainly open-ended and were revised over years. The list of questions included several thematic groups: 1. Parameters of physical comfort in dress: tight / loose; warm / cold; fitting / not fitting. 2. Parameters of social well-being in clothes: appropriateness of dress; changing clothes during the day; performance of gender roles, personal attitude to “rules of fashion” and social criticism of dress. 3. Wardrobe problems: choosing outfits; reasons for storing old clothes; favorite dresses.

The theoretical framework of the study draws upon the works using the pragmatic and anthropological approach to the study of fashion (Clarke & Miller, 2002; Guy A., Green E., Banim M., 2001; Storm-Mathisen, A. & Klepp I. G., 2006). Navigating what is clearly a contested terrain in fashion studies the methodology of my research is focused to distinguish between the cultural construction of concepts like “comfortable”, “well-fitting” or “pleasant” (Crowley, 2000; Grier, 1988; Woodward, 2005), and the physical qualities of clothes. The central field of research is the “dressed body” defined as an intersection of cultural and physical norms (Entwistle 2000) and the visual metaphor of identity (Davis 1992). The paper explores the lived materiality of fashion, overlapping of mental impressions and body sensations in the discourse of “clothes talk”. The feeling of well-being is frequently experienced

through the body reactions, but is finally constituted through the rhetoric of discussing fashion.

The topics that tended to reemerge in different stories, focused around the strategies of self-fashioning, used by the Soviet and post Soviet women: having one's clothes sewn by a dressmaker; the art of altering things; getting all the possible information on current western fashions through available journals; buying foreign clothes from the traders. The role of dressmakers as cultural producers turned out to be absolutely crucial: the majority of the favorite outfits described and shown during the interviews were sewn by private dressmakers. Although there are works about the history of dressmaking (Burman 1999; Ruane 1996), my study fills a gap in the existing literature by introducing the materials of Soviet and post Soviet fashion.

The first questions about comfort and the feeling of well-being seemed to function as a universal key: people started to talk not only about clothes, but to share quite personal memories. Eventually the chosen theme appeared to be inseparably connected with significant episodes in the life-story of each woman and also with the political and social landscape of the period. Tatiana T. shared a story about her favorite dress that provided a special sensation of well-being. She bought it without any fitting at the street market in 1995 because she immediately recognized in it the shape of her "dream dress": "The moment I saw it I knew what I should do with it – just make the skirt shorter". So Tatiana customized the dress and it became her "lucky dress" for many years (Tatiana T., 2007). The descriptions of favorite dresses were often structured around the concepts of "individual fit" and "lucky dresses". The feeling of well-being provided by wearing a favorite dress was often described as something internal, a sense of strength, inner confidence and physical ease. In many cases clothes that are not too tight or do not present an obstacle to activity were classed as "comfortable", but the notion of "comfort" always functions as signifier: it has no substantive content but is only realized through the discourse.

The theme of a favorite dress has more than once served as a convenient framing for autobiographical narrations (Beckerman, 1995; Young, 1992). The stories I recorded are far from being smooth tales of dreams coming true. By contrast, the materials of the interviews (Jartseva, 1997; Malakhova, 2006) demonstrate that getting and wearing favorite clothes was not as easy and unproblematic as one

could imagine: it almost always involved the use of different cultural and social techniques, rarely described by the researchers of Soviet and post Soviet Russia. Ideological message of clothes often totally defined the function of dress-codes in the particular context. One of the informants told me the story how she could never wear the favorite dress because it was considered too chic and luxurious for a wife of a communist (Popova, 1997).

The basic Soviet fashion etiquette drew heavily on the imperative of dressing-down. So for many women the feeling of well-being was connected with dilemmas of visibility and the ability to stand out in the crowd. According to Ariadna Nurok, "The feeling of comfort in dress is in fact fully determined by your psychological mood of the day. Suppose you intend to make an impression, then you will feel comfortable in a bold dress, attracting attention. But another day you could prefer to be invisible, and then the adequate dress for you should be inconspicuous, so as to hide in a crowd. I guess there is no universal "comfortable" dress even for one person" (Nurok, 2007). Many respondents referred to "comfortable" clothes as the source of the individual feeling of well-being as opposed to the anxiety connected with official culturally defined roles. Fashion theorists point to the variety of factors influencing our choices of clothes: "Our mood and emotions can also affect our choice of clothes. Feeling confident and positive means we may be more likely to risk wearing that brightly colored jacket. Feeling fragile and vulnerable may lead us towards the enveloping softer clothing which we usually reserve for home use only, or to bright clothes in a bid to cheer ourselves up. However, there are few "rules" about what clothes suit which moods. Moods can constrain our choices of clothes but we often don't know until that "wardrobe moment" what those constraints are going to be. For women across a broad range of cultures, ages and sexualities, our emotions and bodies (and our emotions about our bodies) can dictate the clothes which we will consider or reject each day" (Guy A., Green E., Banim M., 2001: 3).

The specific ideological context of the Soviet society, however, added the additional dimension to the emotional and bodily aspects of the "wardrobe moment". The official regulations fossilized the look of poverty and proletarian clothes, going back to the first decade of Soviet regime. Much like the sumptuary laws, which operated in medieval and early modern Europe, the rules were designed to keep down the potential social climbers and keep all the existing social groups in their sartorial

place. The sharp criticism was directed against the habits of dressing up, and the "style of excess" was taken as an attempt at bourgeois chic. A unitary aesthetic originating in the ideology of collectivism codified social behavior, concepts of propriety and thoroughly normative notions about beauty. Michel Foucault argued that modern power works on the micro-level, by inducing patterns of acting, thus forming the specific bodily practices (Foucault, 1977). The Soviet society controlled the docile bodies not only through the material economy, responsible for the limited choice of clothes in state shops, but, what is more important, through the rigorous fashion etiquette.

The canon of the Soviet fashion (Vainshtein, 1996) was based on two key formulas: "simple and appropriate" and "modest and attractive". Simplicity and modesty constituted the socialist ideology of beauty. The epithets "comfortable", "understated", "practical" and "severe" also entered this conceptual field, but they were less programmatic. The concept of modesty in the Soviet fashion was part of the disciplinary code imposed by ideological regulations upon one's appearance. It was the important idea linking the normative aesthetics of fashion with social and political dimension. The requirement of "modesty" implicated the attitude of general restraint and moderation both in body and dress: undecorated and functional clothes, dark colors, scanty accessories, reserved manners. The perfect item of clothes in terms of modesty was, for instance, the plain black skirt, that could be worn with different blouses and sweaters.

Modesty seems to have served as an absolute imperative of appearance, dress and manners of the fashionable woman of the sixties: "Everyday hairstyles, like one's outfits, should be marked by modesty" (Rabotnitsa, 1962, 1). Modesty was also touted in advertising: the editors of the magazine *Krestianka* featured photographs from a Czech fashion journal because "the fashions are modest and comfortable" (*Krestianka*, 1965, 5). Predictably, then, any and all extravagances were instantly branded as "immodest": chunky metal chains were considered immodest, as were miniskirts, bright make-up, and long, loose hair.

The corresponding concept to modesty was "a sense of measure". It functioned as the fashion plate's conscience, the interiorized voice of decorum, of the social norm, and thus the guarantor of beauty and good taste. Soviet fashion adopted and urged

“moderation”, “simplicity” and “modesty” as the supreme aesthetic criteria for three reasons. First, through inertia, the ascetic ideals that characterized the first decade of Soviet rule had not yet lost their hold. Secondly, light industry in the fifties had barely recovered from the economic ruin of World War II. Third, “modesty” was encouraged in the framework of an ideology of collectivism – discipline demanded that one not stand out from the masses. In this context the epithet “modest” fit into another series of synonyms: “serious”, “honest”, “dependable”, and even “party-minded”.

The social nature of the Soviet “modesty” can be clarified with the aid of J.C.Bologne’s theoretical differentiation. In his study titled “Histoire de la pudeur”, he posits a distinction between “pudeur” as the individual sense of shame and “décence”, as the norm of social decency. Soviet modesty is closely associated with “décence”. According to Bologne, the dialectic of shame presupposes an inner conflict between various levels of consciousness: between emotion and reason, the libido and the Superego (in Freud’s definition), the fleshly and the divine. Accordingly, the category of “moderation” in Soviet fashion is invoked to mediate between the imperative of “modesty” and personal taste, which, as experience showed, leads women steadily away from the puritan aesthetics of physical appearance.

The official imperative of modesty was promulgated in the numerous books on fashion and conduct, manuals of etiquette which appeared by the end of the fifties, containing prescriptive recommendations on what to wear and how to behave (Rusanova, 1962; Savelieva, 1966). The books “On the culture of clothes” “The art of dress”, “Thoughts about beauty and good taste” were published in millions of copies. Several generations of women were indoctrinated with such understanding of modesty and their feeling of well-being in fashion heavily depended on these prescriptive principles. Women’s magazines often published the articles around these themes. The fashion advice offered to the readers usually adopted the tone of social moralizing and was very restrictive both in form and message. Even the titles are very telling: “Watch yourself, please!” (Rabotnitsa, 1959, 12) or “Jewelry? Yes, but not to the excess” (Rabotnitsa, 1960).

The practical subversion of official modesty can be found in the widely spread

phenomenon of “dressing up”. The people, who dressed up, especially at work, often became the object of angry social criticism: “You happen to go into an office on business and among the *modestly* dressed women you can’t help but instantly notice someone in a revealing dress of patterned silk brocade, with earrings in one’s ears, glittering beads around her neck, and three bracelets on her wrists. Heavy make-up and a complicated hairstyle complete her getup. Such an outfit is out of place during working hours; it does not inspire confidence in the efficiency of its wearer” (Rabotnitsa, 1963).

The idea of experimenting with one's looks was strongly disapproved: the potential for upward mobility seemed to be highly suspicious. Violating social rules about "modesty" was frequent area of conflicts around fashion. There are many records when in the beginning of the 1960s women were arrested for wearing a sun-dress with open back – such outfit was classed as "violating the public conventions" and the wearers had to pay quite a huge fine - 10 roubles. According to A.Ribeiro, “the game of fashion is to some degree an ever-changing confrontation between modesty and sexual display, between desire and disgust, between dress and undress” (Ribeiro, 2003: 16). However, the Soviet ideology of fashion of that period also paradoxically rejected the style of unisex, in spite of the evident absence of sexual display. The official moral in the beginning of the 1960s banned lady's trousers - the appropriation of clothes of the opposite sex was considered as the violation of modesty. Women were arrested by the police and fined, and although by the end of the 1960s women’s trousers made their way to fashion and gradually became accepted, before it was a public scandal.

Although being fashionable under the Soviet regime could be quite a risky adventure, many women under these circumstances managed to preserve individual style and resist the ideological control of their looks. They found ways to be nicely dressed even in the conditions of general shortages of basic goods and by skillful maneuvering achieved amazing results in self-fashioning. Due to subtle techniques of self-fashioning many Soviet and post Soviet women not only successfully affirmed their own right for individual choices in developing a personal style, but also created a unique gendered sphere of symbolic feminine space, a kind of women's conspiracy against state's surveillance and intrusion in their private life. This was women’s response to the challenge of power. But what were the hidden resources

these women could possibly use for their potentially subversive self-fashioning practices?

The materials of the interviews give evidence that women developed their own modes of cultural production, using "the cracks" in the official system in Soviet and post Soviet fashion. Its most salient feature is the wide use of domestic dressmaking (Vainshtein, 2000). The popularity of dressmaking can hardly be overestimated. A typical story about the dressmaker would portray her as a family friend, almost a good fairy, and a person appearing by magic in the most important moments of life. "My mother had a dressmaker. She was an old woman; we got acquainted during the war. Her name was Sophia Borisovna. She was great at sewing new dresses and altering the old ones. Sometimes she could completely renovate a costume, as it was, for instance, when my father defended dissertation. Sophia Borisovna was a dressmaker of the old school; in fact, she was a true fashion designer. She did not use patterns; she cut the fabric, putting it to a client's body (Kazavchinskaya 1997). As it is clear from Tamara's description, home dressmaking was quite common, so Sophia Borisovna is a very typical figure. She has skills and intuition for the right fit and influences Tamara's style. She represents an old school of sewing and sets the classical standards of taste.

Images of dressmakers are abundant and the memories of having one's dress sewn form a recognizable pattern. They are structured around the concepts of private space and body. The room of a dressmaker is repeatedly represented as a kind of enchanted cave from fairy-tale, a magic place for future transformation of the Cinderella. The noticeable details in the descriptions of the room is, off course, the Singer sewing machine, the dressmaker's mannequins and the embroidered pictures, covering the wall (that was a traditional craft since the old days.) The scattered fabrics, paper patterns, the rich supplies of pins and colored threads created the atmosphere of feminine kingdom: the ancient cultural link between woman and textile is sensually reaffirmed. The process of measuring the customer's body and fitting a half-ready dress contributed to the development of intimate trust between a dressmaker and her client, favoring an easy confidence and a spontaneous openness in relationship. Secrets were shared; stories about love and family affairs were exchanged.

The fact that originally almost every dressmaker was recommended by a friend set up a vision of network or the conspiracy of fashion-fans. All these factors marked dressmaking as distinctively corporeal, warm and private sphere as opposed to the cold public space. The individual approach to client's needs was a contrast to collectivist spirit of the age. This paradoxical utopia, the women's kingdom of private fashion, continued through all the Soviet history, transforming home-salons of private dressmakers into unofficial women's clubs. This was a place for relaxation, exchanging news, quiet tea parties, discussing latest fashions - one's own time outside of daily worries and routine problems of everyday duties. It was, perhaps, the strongest resource for the women's feeling of well-being in fashion.

Many dressmakers, acting as "secret agents" of European culture, were often very influential in their circles as cultural producers. Their outfits were copied; their advice on style meant a lot. Their cultural identity of "foreigner" created the desirable contrast with the dull and plain fashion at home. The potential mobility and relative freedom made them different in the eyes of ordinary people, bound by institutional links and social conventions. Atmosphere of secrecy, the exotic touch of "connections abroad" added to their special reputation of "people who know". Part of the popularity of dressmakers relied on their role of unofficial "fashion-agents", giving them the authority to consult others.

Sometimes the dressmakers with bourgeois background could also offer their clients something more substantial than fashion advice - they had big supplies of fabrics, buttons, ribbons and laces left from the old time. They frequently used the trimmings from pre revolutionary clothes to decorate newly designed dresses. "I used to have my dresses sewn by an experienced old dressmaker Varvara Ivanovna. She had a large trunk full of trimmings, different elastics, linings, you know. My late sister dressed exquisitely due to her work!" (Zarzhitskaya, 1997)

The dressmakers used their skills not only for designing women's garments. There were specialists, sewing children's clothes and underwear. One dressmaker, Opekunova, was famous for lady's bras, and she had clients who really wanted individual fit and delicate work, coming to her from all over Russia. One could order, for instance, cambric slips with fine hand embroidery. Again, the prices for such work

were affordable. According to M.Zarzhitskaya, bras made by individual measure were very comfortable to wear.

The Russian system of clothing sizes was constructed by the typical measurements of a bulky worker, fit for physical labor. The very idea of "individual fit", viewed through the prism of collectivist ideology, seemed to be an exception. This was a privilege, reserved for those on top: generals, party officials, famous actors. The rest were supposed to be happy with standard outfits. Or, if they still hoped to get an "individual fit" from the state, they had to come early in the morning and stand in a line to be served in state's dressmaking salons. It was virtually impossible to extend the flexibility of the Soviet system of sizes, going back to the time of 1920s. Men's shirts, for example, were sized only by the collar. The length of arm did not exist as a separate measurement: it was presupposed, that men with thick necks were high and large and, respectively, had long arms. The case of someone with slim figure, thin neck and long arms, was out of question. Similarly, in shoe sizes the notion of wide feet simply did not exist. The notion of personal comfort was irrelevant for the rigid world of official fashion. No wonder, that private dressmakers, paying attention to the individual fit, were much more successful in attracting the clients, than state's salons. Many women had their dresses sewn not out of material need, but rather because of the deep-grounded desire for personal style and well-being in fashion. Furthermore, the recent period of the post Soviet history viewed the new rise in the cultural status of dressmakers. They started to construct their reputation as original designers, caring for the individual needs of a client.

The materials of the interviews revealed the existing tension between the feeling of well-being and the large social context that determines clothing choices. In Russia mainly unofficial fashion was associated with comfort and privacy. As we see, private dressmaking functioned as a unique source for free creativity and well-being for Russian women and even in post Soviet Russia private dressmaking remained a unique gender-marked sphere for women's self-fashioning. Relative freedom from social pressure, cheap prices and expressly feminine overtones turned the home salons of dressmakers into a privileged "comfortable" space of women's fashion.

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