

Utopian clothing: The Futurist and Constructivist proposals in the early 1920s

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Abstract

‘Can fashion start from zero?’ is a question that, as observed by theorists, historians and curators, ultimately haunts those radical sartorial projects embodying a ‘new’ vision of the world. In the experimental overalls designed at the beginning of the twentieth century by Thayaht in Italy and Stepanova, Rodchenko and Popova in Russia, it is possible to follow and progressively unfold the aspiration to a total renovation and reorganization of life. The differences between the artistic contexts to which these artists belong – Italian Futurism and Russian Constructivism – have often induced critics to discuss their sartorial proposals separately, overlooking their points of convergence. Within this article, the overalls by Thayaht and the Russian Constructivists are instead analysed in relation to each other, as agents of change, or rather as instances of a ‘utilitarian outrage’. In examining their biographies, the article questions the newness of these creations, the rhetoric of the ‘new’ that accompanied them and their status as ‘anti-fashion’ projects. Combining material culture with cultural history, it argues that their iconoclasm and utopian potential resides precisely in their proposing a rationalization of clothing, and in ‘questioning the very fashion project itself’, in both its symbolic and tangible presence. Finally, on the basis of archival research and interviews conducted at the Thayaht-RAM Archive, Florence, the characterization of Thayaht’s *tuta* as a Futurist creation, which has often been taken for granted, is reconsidered and problematized further.

Keywords

Futurism

Constructivism

Utopia

overall

Thayaht

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On alternative futures

In the ideal society outlined in *Utopia* by Thomas More (1516), people wear practical clothes that are ‘quite pleasant’, ‘allow free movement of the limbs’ and are suitable for any season. In *Utopia*, people are ‘happy with a single piece of clothing every two years’ (More 1965: 79) and do not possess more than what is strictly necessary. In a utopian society, clothing is functional and rational, and is often depicted as an overall, ‘with its connotations of the masses at work and its ability to suppress individuality’ (Ash and Wilson 1992: 233). Interestingly, in the early twentieth century, Italian artist Ernesto Michahelles, known as Thayaht (1919–1920), and members of Russian Constructivism (1922) designed, in the space of just a few years, very simple and linear overalls, adhering to the principles of practicality and comfort. These ‘rational’ clothing, inspired by both ideals of simplicity and purity of form, were meant to emphasize discontinuity

and change in comparison to the contemporaneous fashions, social conventions and prejudices of class.

The experimental proposals designed by Thayaht and the Constructivists are interesting cases as they highlight the intersection of art and fashion in shaping ordinary life, as well as the 'expressive aspect of material culture in one of its most radically creative forms' (McCracken 1990: 61). Clothing can in fact be an agent of change, an 'initiation of change' (McCracken 1990), and these overalls allow the observation of the role that two historical avant-garde movements have played in the renovation of life in its public as well as domestic hemisphere. The divergences between Thayaht, usually associated with Italian Futurism, and the Constructivist artists are numerous and rather obvious, and yet in interpreting the modern condition in the post-war years, both overalls emphasized the social role of art and the relevance of industrial production. The power and attractiveness of the avant-garde, as emphasized by Loschek, resides exactly 'in the fact that it presents the possibility and framework to permit interruptions in everyday awareness, to make radical demands, and to promote social visions' (2009: 103). The boiler suits by Thayaht and the Constructivist artists thus represent a crucial moment in the utopian vision of a total reorganization of life or, as the Futurists stated, a 'reconstruction of the universe' (Cerutti and Sgubin 2009: 237).

The differences between the two artistic movements have often induced critics to discuss the two overalls separately, overlooking their points of convergence. Within this article, the sartorial proposals by Thayaht and the Constructivists are instead analysed in relation to each other, and the characterization of Thayaht's *tuta* as a Futurist creation, which has often been taken for granted, is reconsidered and problematized.

Almost 100 years have passed since the first appearance of Thayaht's *tuta* and the Constructivist *prozodezhda*; the *tuta* in its innumerable variations (e.g. the tracksuit, the jumpsuit) is nowadays one of the most common pieces of clothing. Considering their evolution and, in the case of Thayaht's *tuta*, wide diffusion, the article will question the newness of these creations, the rhetoric of the 'new' that accompanied them and their status as 'anti-fashion' projects.

In order to understand their innovative and oppositional power, it is necessary to retrace their biography, focusing on some key factors: their origins; their use; the ideal destination and the actual destiny they had; and finally the impact they had or failed to have on contemporary life and fashion, and the reasons behind it. Following Bonnot (2009: 5) and Kopytoff ([1986] 1988), the emphasis is placed on diachronicity, as the itinerary of these proposals is explored with attention to their forms, uses and trajectories. In these, observes Appadurai, are in fact 'inscribed' the meanings of the things (1995: 5). The *tuta* and the *prozodezhda* well exemplify the role that clothing can play as an agent or initiator of change. As stated by McCracken (1990: 61), 'in its diachronic role, clothing serves as a communicative device through which social change is contemplated, proposed, initiated, enforced, and denied'. It will be argued that the two overalls are examples of 'future-oriented' projects (McCracken 1990: 110), as they are meant to facilitate the realization of ideals that are not yet fulfilled in the actual state of affairs. It emerges from their biographies that they seem to break the continuum of history, articulating another vision of the world – the utopian idea of a total reorganization of life – perhaps even too modern for the collective taste and the conditions of contemporaneous life and society.

The two overalls are iconoclastic and modernist precisely in their proposal of a rationalization of clothing, and in ‘questioning the very fashion project itself’ (Wilson 2003: 63), in both its symbolic and tangible presence. However, the possibility of enacting a complete revolution through clothing has to be questioned, given that any innovation takes place in a specific context that could resist to and sabotage the change; in this respect, Barnard argues that ‘to conceive clothing, even revolutionary clothing, as offering a complete change in conditions is misleading’ (2002: 128). The overalls by Thayaht and the Constructivists thus raise a common question, that is, ‘can fashion start from zero?’ (Bartlett 2010). This interrogation ultimately haunts all those radical projects articulating a ‘new’ vision of the world, and provokes many further questions. For instance, how can a design project be recognized as avant-garde? How is it possible to talk about it when it intends to break all the existing conventions, including the linguistic ones? It is interesting that the Futurists, in their renovation of clothing, invented new words that redefined the old items: they articulated a new sartorial vocabulary (Crispoli 1986: 137). The rhetoric of the ‘new’ is manifest in the ideological as well as aesthetic agendas of Futurism and Constructivism. It has been argued that early Futurism, in particular, ‘took the form of a pervasive sense of a dislocation in the logical, causal relationship between past, present, and future’ (Sartini Blum 1996: 82).

The fact that the overalls designed by Thayaht and the Constructivists are referred to by two new names is emblematic: ‘*tuta*’ is a neologism that, since 1920, has permanently entered the Italian vocabulary, whilst ‘*prozodezhda*’ (Bartlett 2010: 273) is derived from the merging of the Russian words ‘industrial’ (*proizvodstvennaya*) and ‘clothing’ (*odezhda*). Interestingly, though, the two overalls were not entirely ‘new’ at the time of

their appearance, as similar garments had already been used by factory workers since the second half of the nineteenth century (de Marly 1986: 162). Overalls were also worn by artists at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth (e.g. Picasso, Braque, Itten at the Bauhaus), both for practical reasons (in the studio) and as anti-conventional clothing that distinguished them as ‘artists’ (Degl’Innocenti 2007: 12, 20).

At the start of the twentieth century, bid-and-brace overalls and boiler suits were widely diffused in Europe, especially amongst mechanics and motor engineers (Williams-Mitchell 1982: 112); for instance, the denim overall that came from the United States and was adopted in Europe ‘was standard and mass produced and provided a kind of undifferentiated anonymity’ (Crane 2000: 89). The development of work uniforms through time is linked to the progressive specialization of work, gender roles and status designation (Steele 1989). Despite the similarity that the *tuta* and the *prozodezhda* bear to the work wear of the time, their revolutionary potential emerges if they are considered within the cultural and artistic context they were born into, and in relation to the contemporaneous taste of the masses. What is, or is perceived as, ‘new’ is in fact dependent on the observer’s evaluation, that is, whether it can be ‘considered a usable innovation or a Utopia, a fiction, and therefore pushed into the niche of non-usable or – as something enthralling – into the sphere of art’ (Loschek 2009: 90).

In this context it will be argued that, despite their differences, the *tuta* and *prozodezhda*, or ‘production clothing’ (Zaletova et al. 1989: 173–74; Lodder 1983: 147), converge in their innovative intentions, as they break the chronological continuum and at the same time constitute a ‘bridge’, aiming to overcome the discrepancy between the reality of

ordinary life and the ideal future. McCracken (1990: 104) has spoken of objects as bridges to ‘displaced meanings’, which can be understood as a transposition of ideals across the continuum of time or even space. Within the utopian visions articulated by Thayaht and the Constructivists, clothing was imbued with a revolutionary role, representing an agent of change that could let the ideal future break into the present.

Thayaht’s ‘utilitarian outrage’

In the post-World War II period, in times of economic crisis and political instability, Italian Futurism and Russian Constructivism reinterpreted the modern condition, intervening in many areas of creativity. The diversification of the Futurist and Constructivist programmes to all aspects of life promoted a contamination of various artistic languages, which has encouraged among critics frequent comparisons to the Bauhaus, and was ultimately based on a conception of art endowed with a social role. Within contemporary fashion and ordinary life, Thayaht’s sartorial proposal is a tangible reality, having been variedly reinterpreted by designers and adopted by the masses; according to some, it can – not too audaciously – even be considered a forerunner of sustainability or no-logo philosophy (Degl’Innocenti 2007). As similar garments already existed at the time of its appearance, the newness and revolutionary valence of the *tuta* have to be questioned in order to retrace the reasons for its delayed acceptance by the majority of the public. The *tuta* differs in fact from other innovative proposals of the early twentieth century, such as Chanel’s ‘poor look’ – the little black dresses, the ‘little suits’ and sweaters (Wilson 2003: 40) – which utilized the finest materials and were

instances of a ‘disingenuous’ understatement (Davis 1992). It is argued here that both the *tuta* and the *prozodezhda* are anti-fashion projects, in the sense clarified by Wilson, according to whom anti-fashion ‘attempts a timeless style, tries to get the essential element of change out of fashion altogether’ (2003: 184).

The two overalls are symptomatic of the changes within life and society that took place in the first two decades of the twentieth century in Italy and post-revolutionary Russia, and in some cases even tend to anticipate these changes; at the same time, in their projecting a timeless style, they are programmatically a-temporal. The *tuta* and the *prozodezhda* seem in fact to represent early forms of that ‘utilitarian outrage’ that, according to Davis (1992: 168), occasionally bursts through the history of fashion.

In order to understand their oppositional force, the two overalls have to be contextualized within the ‘ideological fabric’ (Braun 1995: 35) they are, or seem to be, woven into.

Thayaht, who is generally associated with the Futurist movement, constitutes an interesting case, since he is the only artist amongst the Futurists to actively participate in fashion’s real productive processes, through his collaboration with Maison Vionnet (1919–1925) for which he designed the logo, the atelier space and several models (Figure 1). Moreover, in the case of the *tuta*, it is important to rethink Thayaht’s position within Italian Futurism emphasizing his ‘unorthodoxy’ (Fonti 2005) and questioning whether the *tuta* can be considered *tout court* a Futurist creation.

Figure 1: Thayaht, study for the Vionnet logo, 1919. Pencil and gouache on paper, 180mm×250mm. Courtesy of Thayaht-RAM Archive, Florence, Italy.

Originally, the idea of a Futurist piece of clothing was introduced by artists Balla and Depero, under the premise that fashion should follow the same principles as Futurist painting (Schnapp 1997). Being representative of the 'new', dress had to express a drastic rupture with the past, with traditions and with the well-dressed bourgeoisie. The powerful rhetoric of the Futurist manifestoes depicts a 'new' landscape, infused with dynamic force-lines, bright colours and 'geometric splendor' (Marinetti 1914). In their vehement manifestoes, Futurists sought to 'elevate all attempts at originality, however daring, however violent' (Apollonio 2001: 26). The design, cut and chromatism of dress itself were completely rethought and acquired within Futurism a provoking and even nationalistic valence. As propagators of the new, the Futurists saw advances in clothing as a 'signifier for revolutionary modernism' (Chadwick 1997: 245). The opposition between past and future became, in terms of style, an assault on the timid conformity, static symmetry, boring patterns and bodily constrictions that characterized the male garment (Braun 1995). Similarly, female fashion, as stated in Volt's 'Futurist manifesto of women's fashion' (1920), had to 'glorify woman's flesh in a frenzy of spirals and triangles... so far as to sculpt woman's astral body with the chisel of an exasperated geometry' (Cerutti and Sgubin 2009: 236). Sexual difference played a crucial role in how Futurists envisaged fashion, as clothing served to defend men from gender confusion and foreign influences, while the woman was the territory and material of man's desire and creative experimentation, as is evident in Marinetti's poem 'Simultaneous Poetry of Italian Fashion' (De Maria 1968: 1188-89). In general, though, the early Futurist fashion remained mainly a theoretical concept as only a few designs were put into commercial production, being mostly adopted by members of the movement (Braun 1995).

Figure 2: Thayaht wearing the *tuta* and ‘Forte dei Marmi’ sandals, 1920. Courtesy of Thayaht-RAM Archive, Florence, Italy.

Figure 3: Thayaht wearing the *tuta* and Florentine sandals, 1920. Courtesy of Thayaht-RAM Archive, Florence, Italy.

In comparison to the vibrant eccentricity of the Futurist clothing, Thayaht’s *tuta* distinguishes itself for the aesthetic simplicity that renders it suitable for almost any occasion (Figures 2 and 3). Whilst the *tuta* is generally, and perhaps a critically, referred to as a Futurist creation, some critics and historians have questioned this label, insisting that, at the time, Thayaht was not yet Futurist and hence the *tuta*’s artistic roots have to be reconsidered. Its search for simple beauty and elegance, for the perfect cut, as well as the linearity of the model, seems rather to embody the spirit of Art Deco (Pratesi 2005: 29–31; Bossaglia 2003: 11). The essence of the *tuta* can also be understood by drawing a parallel, as Judith Clark does, with artists working in the context of Art Nouveau or the Secession, whose intention was to ‘derive a fixed and rational, even utopian model, as if dress could in some way conform to the demand of modern life’ (Clark n.d.: 4). Thayaht himself declares that the initial idea for the *tuta* was formulated in the torrid summer of 1919 (Bertoli 1958: 6), when the high prices of fabrics and the economic crisis rendered it impossible for the majority of people to dismiss their antiquated, grey and heavy garments in favour of new and much fresher clothes. Having found some affordable pieces of bright cotton and hemp, he designed, with the help of his younger

brother Ruggero Alfredo Michahelles (RAM), a ‘universal’, practical outfit that could be easily reproduced and worn by the masses. From its inception, the *tuta* was an anti-bourgeois project, born as a protest against the high prices of the post-war period and the obsolete stylistic conventions. Thayah’s aim was to ‘initiate a transformation similar to an “industrial revolution” of fashion, making the masses feel well dressed and cultured’ (Michahelles 2014).

Inspired by the concepts of simplicity, functionality and reproducibility, the *tuta* was originally composed of straight lines forming a T-shape, and even in the variant for women was devoid of any ornamentation, perfectly reflecting the modernist aesthetic. In July 1920, the popular Florentine newspaper *La Nazione* supported the diffusion of the *tuta*, presenting this ‘synthetic’ garment and publishing the pattern with instructions for reproducing it at home (Crispolti 1986: 137). Thayah and RAM outlined a campaign that included, in addition to the involvement of *La Nazione*, a short film and postcards bearing the slogan ‘Everybody in *tuta*’ – *Tutti in tuta*. These were designed by RAM and emblematically featured all layers of society, such as the artist, the intellectual, the peasant, the factory worker and a young boy, representing future generations. In a brochure from 1920, Thayah explained the origin of the name ‘*tuta*’:

it utilizes ‘the whole piece of fabric’ (in Italian, ‘*tutta la stoffa*’), adhering to the principle of economy in terms of materials;

it is ‘one piece of clothing’ (*tutta d’un pezzo*), featuring minimal stitching and being an example of convenience in terms of workmanship;

it covers ‘the whole person’ (*tutta la persona*) and is extremely easy to wear, promoting economy of time; in few weeks, ‘all the people’ (*tutta la gente*) will wear the *tuta*, which gives maximum comfort to the wearer, allowing a complete freedom of movement. (Chiarelli 2003: 12)

Interestingly, in the brochure, the Italian word ‘*tutta*’, which means the ‘whole’, the ‘entire’, becomes ‘*tuta*’, for the missing consonant ‘t’ can be found in the T-shape of the garment itself. The idea of totality, contained in the word ‘*tutta*’, is thus materialized through the garment, which utilizes the *totality* of the fabric, covers the *totality* of the wearer and introduces the idea of *collectivity* – the *totality* and *similar appearance* of the people dressed in *tuta*.

The special attention to names is typical of Thayaht, who thoroughly studied esoteric art, Oriental philosophies and theosophy (Pratesi 2005: 62) and chose for himself a bifrontal palindrome as pseudonym. In the graphic expedient of the lost ‘T’, Thayaht finally found the baptizing act of his sartorial proposal. Unfolding the various layers of meaning, it is possible to retrace in the three ‘t’s of ‘*tuta*’ an echo of the concept of ‘trinity’, with the *t* also hinting at the Tau, the symbol of the absolute, the perfection of creation and the summary of everything in everything. Since its introduction, the neologism ‘*tuta*’ has permanently entered Italian vocabulary, meaning a versatile garment – either overall or composed of a jacket and trousers – used to practice sports, as well as for casual wear, or worn as work wear by mechanics, factory workers, aviators, etc.

It was reported that, a few weeks after the publication of the first pattern in *La Nazione*, more than 1000 people in Florence had adopted the *tuta*, which was considered the most provocative garment of the summer of 1920 (Chiarelli 2003: 12). In Florence, aristocratic families regularly organized balls ‘in *tuta*’, while Roman and Milanese noblewomen, actresses and socialites, eager to adopt unusual looks, were first to order the *tuta*. Historian Uzzani recalls that in Florence the overnight popularity of the *tuta* caused a significant rise in the price of cloth, with the newspaper *La Nazione* threatening to publish the names of the retailers that were speculating on the increasing demand of the material (Chiarelli 2003).

The newness of Thayaht’s sartorial experiment becomes manifest when it is compared to the formality of the contemporaneous menswear, criticized in the ‘Manifesto for the Transformation of Male Clothing’ (1932) by Thayaht and RAM (Stern 2004: 167–69). In reinterpreting menswear and, more generally, gender difference according to a prominent ‘hygienic’ component, the *tuta* characterized its wearers, both men and women (the ‘*tutisti*’ and ‘*tutiste*’), as pioneers of hygiene and art.

From its origin and inspiration, it is manifest that the *tuta* was designed to realize a significant step forward in the direction of a democratization of fashion, and at the same time was an eccentric creation adopted mainly within artistic circles, by the Florentine aristocracy and by members of the jet set. In its radical newness, it is also possible to retrace the reasons for which it was not immediately embraced on a large scale. The novelty that the *tuta* represented at the time consists in fact in its bridging of contexts that were not originally connected, such as fashion and work wear, and is a prime example of that ‘context-crossing’ that, according to Loschek (2009) and Groys (1992), characterizes

innovations. The *tuta* displaces the meaning of work wear, assuming different connotations and representing something new: a universal garment that could substitute the entire wardrobe, being suitable for both leisure and work, for 'holidays', writes Thayaht, as well as for 'the factory' (Scappini 2005: 180).

As several testimonies and documents indicate, Thayaht aspired to serial production; interestingly, though, as Thayaht conceived it, the *tuta* is a garment that ultimately questions the fashion project itself, being inherently anti-fashion. It was easily reproducible at home, providing a solution to the high prices of the time. It was a rational piece of clothing, reacting against the need for continuous change as well as providing those who could not afford new clothes with a hygienic solution. The *tuta* was projected for any occasion, for any individual, independently of their social status. It was not a pretension towards pauperism like Chanel's 'poor look', which utilized fine and expensive materials. Davis argues in fact that the little black dress of the late 1920s 'is a classic instance of insinuating social superiority through the device of bedecking oneself in the raiments of penury' (1992: 64).

After its appearance, the overnight sensation of the *tuta* gradually vanished and did not find an immediate response on a large scale. Its similarity and symbolic linkage to the contemporaneous work wear have significantly contributed to its not being adopted, at the time, as casual wear by the masses. It is noteworthy that since the nineteenth century until almost the present day, outside working hours people 'strove for a bourgeoisie appearance' (Loschek 2009: 122), which is particularly true for the Italian context of the early twentieth century. The utilitarian outrage committed by Thayaht consists hence in

transforming an existing garment, which was mainly used for work wear, into a *universal* piece of clothing, created following precise rules and aiming at the perfect cut.

Nowadays, the *tuta* in its innumerable variations has permeated all levels of society, entering de facto ordinary language as well. In this sense it has reached that universality for which it was originally projected. Interestingly, while the male *tuta* did not immediately find ample diffusion, the female *tuta* was in line with the gradual transformation that had informed the female dress since World War I. As repeatedly addressed by Thayaht himself, male clothing was far more rigid and antiquated than female clothing. The *tuta* for women represented in fact a further simplification of the already very linear female clothing, and utilized no costly materials (Crispolti 1986: 116; Gnoli 2005: 46). The feminine version was very similar to the masculine one, with the only difference being that it featured no trousers and was a sack dress (Figure 4). Despite the common elements with the male *tuta* – the strong emphasis on geometric forms, the beauty found in the absolute simplicity (Crispolti 1986:132) – the revolutionary connotations of the female *tuta* were less evident than within its male counterpart. As documented by the enthusiastic letters written to his aunt Alice Mildred Ibbotson, Thayaht presented the female *tuta* and the *bituta* (*tuta* in two parts) to Madeleine Vionnet, who agreed to patent them under Vionnet&Co (Degl’Innocenti 2007: 30). Thus redesigned and reinterpreted by Thayaht and the French couturier, the female *tuta* featured in several Vionnet collections, the first of which was in 1922, becoming part of the fashion system, and losing its anti-fashion valence.

Figure 4: Newspaper *La Nazione*, presentation of the female *tuta*, 1920. Courtesy of Thayaht-RAM Archive, Florence, Italy.

Art and clothing in the Constructivist programme

The angular style emphasizing the bi-dimensionality of the fabric, the geometric abstraction, combined with the faith in the technological progress, was the form in which the ambitions of the Constructivist artists manifested themselves in post-revolutionary Russia. The linearity and geometric synthesis informing Thayaht's *tuta* also characterize the 'production clothing' designed just a few years later by the Constructivists. In comparison to the *tuta*, which was an all-occasions item of clothing, the *prozodezhda* was linked to a specific productive function (Zaletova et al. 1989), and adhered to the norms of convenience determined by the type of work it was destined for.

The organic relationship between art and industry and the edification of life in its material forms are central to the Constructivist programme, with the vehement *V proizvodstvo!!* *Into Production!* being the revolutionary motto of the Russian avant-garde (Conio 1987: 43–44). The slogans outlined in 1921 by Alexander Rodchenko eloquently rule:

CONSTRUCTION is the contemporary requirement for the ORGANIZATION and utilitarian use of *material*. A CONSTRUCTIVE LIFE IS THE ART OF THE FUTURE. ART *which has not entered life* will be numbered and handed over to

the archaeological museum of ANTIQUITY. ([Lavrentiev and Bowlt 2005: 142](#), [original emphasis](#))

In their programmatic reorganization of everyday life, Constructivist artists expressed their desire to ‘reconstruct not only objects, but also the whole domestic way of life... both in its static and kinetic forms’ (Zaletova et al. 1989: 17). Applied arts were therefore the instrument to materialize the Soviet utopian ideals in post-revolutionary Russia. The organic relationship between art and industry and the edification of life in its material forms, as highlighted by Arvatov (1972), were at the heart of the Constructivist programme (Gunther and Hielscher 1973), to the point that art almost ceased to be an aesthetic category and became progressively identified with the process of production. The idea was born of art aiming at the restatement of new forms of life and social behaviour: art identified with the notion of ‘work’ (Zalambani 1997), which was in close connection with production and could reflect the structures of ordinary life. Within the quest for an absolute change, the *prozodezhda*, also called ‘programmed clothing’ (Zaletova et al. 1989: 173–74), was an immediate expression of the Constructivist tendency towards rationalization and uniformity, in which the concept of clothing as ‘artistic work’ succumbs to the needs dictated by the organization of everyday life. In the article ‘Present day dress – production clothing’ (Zaletova et al. 1989: 173–74), Stepanova explains that the worker’s overall is conceived for a specific social action, and is diversified depending on the [duties](#) the worker is called to fulfil. Decorative motifs are abolished, and any detail has to respond to the specific needs dictated by the material realization of the garment and the profession it is designed for. As a consequence of this

rationalization of clothing, the sexual difference becomes irrelevant or even suppressed. A peculiar ‘neutrality’ in fact characterizes not only work wear but also the theatrical costumes designed by Stepanova and Popova, which provided prototypes for the *prozodezhda*, and where gender was indicated only by the alternative ‘skirt or trousers’. In this respect, critics highlight Constructivism’s peculiar ‘egalitarianism’, which stems from the attempt to neutralize gender difference (Tupitsyn 2009: 145). In the

Constructivist world, no place seems to exist for the sexualized and fashionable woman. This, as Bartlett points out, ‘was over-decorated for their functional taste, over-sexualized for their puritanical values, and alienated in an ontological sense because she belonged to a past that they did not recognize’ (2010: 1–2). In discussing new clothes, furniture design and his own creations for the play *Inga*, Rodchenko pondered on the difficulty posed by the rationalization of the female dress, a question that according to him could be addressed only theoretically, as ‘this question needs work and more work, connecting the artist’s search with everyday conditions’ (2005: 199).

Extremely simple geometric shapes and complementary colours soon became the trademark of the practical clothes by the Constructivists, which had to suit the structures of working life. A photo dated 1922 shows Rodchenko wearing an overall, presumably designed by himself and realized by Stepanova (Lodder 1983: 292), and posing in front of various disassembled spatial constructions. The geometric synthesis informs the overalls as well as other Constructivist creations, for the straight lines, ‘the organization of elements’ and ‘the significance of each element’ formed not only the aesthetic vocabulary but the creative ‘laboratory’ of Rodchenko, Popova, Stepanova and Tatlin (Sarabianov and Adaskina 1990: 359). The single-piece overall worn by Rodchenko, in

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particular, is defined by a rigorous geometry that relies on an absolute stylization of the human form; it presents the artist as a worker, dressed in an everyday garment that would be familiar to the majority of people and at the same time embodies the collective nature of Soviet society. Yet the model unequivocally suggests the forward-looking technological agenda of Modernism. The geometric integrity of the working clothes by Stepanova, Rodchenko and Popova, observes Tupitsyn, is in fact just an instance of the broad Constructivist–Productivist aim at ‘geometrising everyday life and people’s movements’ (Tupitsyn 2009: 25). The straight line and the geometrical compositions thus acquire the utopian power to shape any aspect of ordinary life as well as the monumental style of the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.

Despite being created for the reality of ordinary life in a socialist society, the Constructivist overalls remained experimental designs, due to the lack of resources in the difficult economic circumstances of the post-revolutionary period (Strizhenova 1979: 5), and were therefore adopted exclusively by the avant-garde that created them.

Interestingly though, the fictional universe of theatre, which had for the Constructivists a fundamental relevance, became the experimental context where prototypes destined for ordinary life could be tested (Pedroni and Volonté 2012: 70). Popova, for instance, in planning the costume and set design for the Meierkhol’d production of *The Magnanimous Cuckold* (1922), declared her intention ‘to find a general principle of *prozodezhda* for the professional work of the actor in connection with the essentials of his present professional role’ (Lodder 1983: 149).

In this way, for the Constructivists, who denied clothing any eccentricity or spectacular valence, the spectacle paradoxically became the privileged testing ground for the less

spectacular reality of daily life. Once Arvatov, describing Utopia, wrote, 'this is the situation of a man on a riverbank who needs to cross over to the other side. You have to lay a foundation and build a bridge' (Andrews and Kalinovska 1990: 76). Within the Constructivist perspective, in which production clothing is just one instance of the broader attempt to structure the Utopia, theatre represented exactly that bridge.

A chiasmatic encounter

According to Wilson (2003: 205), the Constructivist designs represent a 'new style of explicitly revolutionary dress'. In opposing the wastefulness, impracticality and frivolity of the contemporaneous clothing, both the *prozodezhda* and the *tuta* can be considered as forms of that 'utilitarian outrage' that occasionally emerges within the history of fashion (Davis 1992: 168). In these experimentations is manifest the aspiration to design a modern world, finding also a mode of clothing for the new era. Similarly to Thayaht's *tuta*, the Constructivist proposals contributed to highlighting the role that dress played in bridging the divide between art, life and industrial production. In this direction, the Productivist entry into Soviet ordinary life can be understood, suggests Kiaer, as a 'domestication' of the avant-garde, a 'bringing home of the avant-garde' in any aspect of everyday life (Tupitsyn 2009: 154). In eliminating the distance between art and life, both Russian Constructivists and Thayaht followed the path of the geometric linearity, which is evident in their articulation of the human figure in a stylized and almost abstract structure. A major trait though marks the Constructivist project and partly distances it from Thayaht's *tuta*: being conceived on the basis of a proletarian ideology, within which work constitutes the mode par excellence of living and being part of society, the

prozodezhda is linked to a specific productive function. Within the Constructivist perspective, in fact, dress ceases to be a commodity and becomes almost a ‘comrade’ (Bartlett 2010). In this sense, the Constructivist garment lacks, even in potential, that fetishism usually surrounding a commodity’s true worth. Speaking of this ‘fetishlike power’, Kopytoff remarks that it is usually ‘attributed to commodities after they are produced, and this by way of an autonomous cognitive and cultural process of singularization’ (Appadurai 1988: 83). The *prozodezhda*, which put emphasis on the collectivist nature of Soviet society and never became a commodity, instead seems to avert, right from its conception, any process of the singularization that is a ‘constant accompaniment of commoditization’ (Appadurai 1988).

In respect to this, Thayaht’s *tuta* possesses an ambivalent nature: being destined to the individual and immediate consumption as well as to mass-production, it intrinsically represents the dynamics of fashion in its continuous tension between mass and bespoke production. Even though similar garments already existed at the time, and had actually been used in factories since the second half of the nineteenth century (de Marly 1986; Crane 2000), Thayaht proposed an innovative translation in cut, mode of production and modifications in use; through the addition of accessories, such as a belt, hems in different colours for the female version or a hat, the *tuta* could be differently styled and adapted to any occasion. In Thayaht’s vision, it was a universal, creative, freeing solution responding to a new rhythm of life. The particular versatility and symbolic openness of the *tuta* is due to the inner tension between uniformity and individuality: even in its name, the *tuta* evokes the similar appearance of the people wearing it, and yet could be personalized through accessories, aptly called ‘modifiers’ (*modificanti*) (Figure 5).

Figure 5: Thayaht wearing the *tuta* and accessories, 1920. Courtesy of Thayaht-RAM Archive, Florence, Italy.

Despite Thayaht's attempts to obtain a patent for its diffusion in Europe, the United States, Canada and South Africa (Chiarelli 2003: 13), the *tuta* did not find an immediate industrial response. In the following years, several specialized magazines, such as *L'Arte del tagliatore moderno* (1924), advertised the *tuta* and published the instructions for its cut. Especially in its early versions, as the thermal model designed by aeropainter Mino delle Site (1932), the *tuta* was characterized by aerodynamic shapes, with the basic model being worn by parachutists, aviators, motorcyclists and skiers (Figures 6-7-8). There are several designers whose work, directly or implicitly, echoes Thayaht's innovation. In 1940s, for instance, Elsa Schiaparelli designed a 'shelter suit', a jumpsuit that allowed one to dress quickly during an evacuation, whilst in the post-war years, aristocrat and pilot Emilio Pucci found fame through the skiing suits immortalized by Toni Frissell for *Harper's Bazaar*. Through the decades and its innumerable variations, the *tuta* has found ample diffusion not only in sportswear, but in all aspects of everyday life as well as in fashion, where it has been differently interpreted by Yohji Yamamoto, Krizia, Norma Kamali, Derek Lam, Etro, Salvatore Ferragamo, Marc Jacobs, Bottega Veneta, Chloé, Stella McCartney, Sophia Kokosalaki, Stefano Pilati for Yves Saint Laurent and Alexander Wang. The exhibition 'Thayaht: An Artist at the Origins of Made in Italy' (Museo del Tessuto di Prato, Italy, 2007) even launched the 'European TuTa Award', inviting young designers to reinterpret Thayaht's *tuta* using new materials, techniques

and colours, and re-contextualizing it within contemporary fashion. Traversing different historical, social and cultural contexts, the *tuta*'s symbolic power has gradually expanded and taken on new properties, becoming an example of casual wear, haute couture, sportswear and work wear. In this sense, the *tuta* has been 'culturally redefined and put to use' (Appadurai 1995: 67), being progressively reinterpreted according to modern and postmodern sensibilities.

Figure 6 and 8: *Tuta* worn by specialists working on World War II planes, 1941–1942, Italy. Personal archive.

Figure 7: Winter *tuta* worn by plane specialist, 1941-1942, Italy. Personal archive.

At the time of its appearance, the *tuta* was an innovative garment, different from the contemporaneous fashions and aiming to overcome class distinctions. Despite their striving for equality, the sartorial projects by Thayaht and the Constructivists were challenging for the 'collective taste', which is indeed 'an active force' (Blumer 1968; 1969), or rather, the actual catalyst of the fashion process. Within contemporary fashion, occupational clothing is a constant source of inspiration, as addressed by the exhibition 'Workwear: Work, Fashion, Seduction' (Leopolda Station, Florence, 2009), exploring the aesthetic exchanges and mutual influences between work wear and fashion, and featuring creations by Christian Dior, Comme des Garçons, Elsa Schiaparelli, Giorgio Armani, Hermès, Jean-Paul Gaultier, Louis Vuitton, Maison Martin Margiela, Prada, Walter van Beirendonck and Yohji Yamamoto. However, the adaptation of work wear into everyday

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wear was a gradual and long process that started in the United States and was then echoed in Europe, starting in the 1950s (Loschek 2009: 121).

Looking back at their first appearances, the overalls by Thayaht and the Constructivists were radically 'new' and, especially in the case of the *tuta*, might have been imbued with connotations that did not reflect the creators' original intentions. As Davis observes (Barnard 2007: 149–50), within clothing the relationship between signifier and signified, already rather ambiguous, is particularly unstable at the beginning of any fashion cycle. The *tuta*, according to Thayaht's intention, was a 'universal dress', similar though to the worker's overall that for the masses was inevitably associated with manual labour. The meaning and connotations of an item are not simply a product of the creator's intention, as 'the signifiers with which [the designer] would construct and communicate it are always part of a heritage over which s/he can have no control' (Barnard 2002: 88). Any innovation therefore needs to be observed within the syntagmatic and paradigmatic relations, which are the contexts in which 'things exist and from which their meanings derive' (Barnard 2002: 94).

In the 1920s, the similarity that the *tuta* bore to work uniforms did not immediately resonate within the taste of the masses. Crane observes that, starting in the nineteenth century, 'uniforms and occupational clothing were used to express social distinctions that could no longer be expressed as blatantly in regular attire' (2000: 87). The *tuta* is a *rational*, timeless garment that anyone could have reproduced and which would have made everyone look similar. In this sense, even though Thayaht allowed the possibility to style it in different ways, imprinting an individual mark on it, the *tuta* was not aspirational for manual and factory workers. In its levelling action, it is similar to another

ubiquitous garment, blue jeans, which rapidly achieved what the *tuta* aimed at, expressing democratic values, with ‘no distinction of wealth and status’ (Davis 1992: 68). It has been argued that blue jeans are the very first case in which ‘middle class people adopt working-class style’ (Polhemus 1994: 24) and enacted a real revolution. However, blue jeans, which started to be adopted outside the working environment in the late 1930s and 1940s, were also met with resistance: ‘no sooner, then, had jeans made their way into the mass marketplace than myriad devices were employed for muting and mixing messages, readmitting evicted symbolic allusions, and, in general, promoting invidious distinctions among classes and coteries of jeans wearers’ (Davis 1992: 70–72). Generally, though, blue jeans mark a critical juncture in the seemingly unstoppable shift from formal to casual and – as stated by Polhemus – also constitute the first important example of ‘dressing down’.

Both the *tuta* and blue jeans are inclusive and yet ambivalent garments. The *tuta* was an inclusive garment par excellence as anyone could reproduce it, and was intended to emphasize the dignity of every social class, of both manual and intellectual workers. Blue jeans are marked by a tension between two opposite forces, Davis argues, that is, ‘one pole continuing to emphasize and extend blue jean’s “base-line” symbolism of democracy, utility, and classlessness, the other seeking to reintroduce traditional claims to taste, distinction, and hierarchical division’ (1992: 73). This ambivalence is also somehow present in the *tuta*, although to a much lesser extent, as the original programme by Thayaht was prescriptive in terms of how the *tuta* should and could be worn. At the same time, the *tuta* is an expression of Thayaht’s peculiar dandyism (Pratesi 2005; Crispolti 1986), which suggested ‘the care of an artist that loves to be noted also as an

individual' (Garavalia 2009: 151, my translation). The photos of the time feature Thayaht modelling the *tuta*, with his gestures, poses and the overall construction of the image reflecting the rhetoric used in the brochures and alluding to a performative dimension. The *tuta* expresses egalitarian ideals, aiming to address the economic difficulties experienced in Italy immediately after World War I; at the same time, in rethinking dress and appearance within the evolving urban space, it was presented as a proper symbol of modernity that was to relieve the wearer from a grey anonymity, and as a product of genius. This performative valence is completely absent in the rationalization of clothing proposed by the Constructivists. Although tested in theatre, the Constructivist models did not have any spectacular connotations; the utilitarian nature of their proposal was in fact explicit in their programme, within which the overall responded to a specific productive function. The *tuta*, as an all-occasions garment, was hence even more outrageous. In their modernizing attitude, the *tuta* and *prozodezhda* represent one of the avant-gardes' most radical attempts to give form to everyday life, disclosing new meanings and tangible solutions. Pondering on clothing as a fundamental component of life, these experiments were a means to transpose ideals across the continuum of time. They represented a break from the past, the 'new' era, a practical solution that could bridge the 'real' and the 'ideal'. However, an intrinsic tension seems to animate them. They are in fact examples showing how clothing can serve as an 'agent of history', an agent of change aiming at 'giving cultural form and order to a highly innovative, dynamic historical moment' (McCracken 1990: 61). However, the radical programmes by Thayaht and the Constructivists intended to mark a 'new' beginning, a start from zero. They aimed at universality and timelessness by taking, as Wilson puts it, 'the essential element of

change out of fashion altogether' (2003: 184). It is precisely in this attempt at a-temporality that their iconoclasm and outrage can be retraced.

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