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Fashion and Eroticism

Men's Underwear in the Context of Eroticism

Bo Lönnqvist

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What is the process when historically obviously neutral things are becoming loaded with mental meanings, associations and qualities, getting a new turn of expression? The article deals with the changing of men's underwear from garments of pure utility to high fashionable, visible things. The context in which the change has taken place, the language which supports the new meanings, the forms, colours and use of the "unmentionable" are studied from an ethnological viewpoint. The author emphasises the aspects of new adaptations of the meaning of fashion in relation to changing gender roles, new ideals of the body and new mechanisms in consumer culture.

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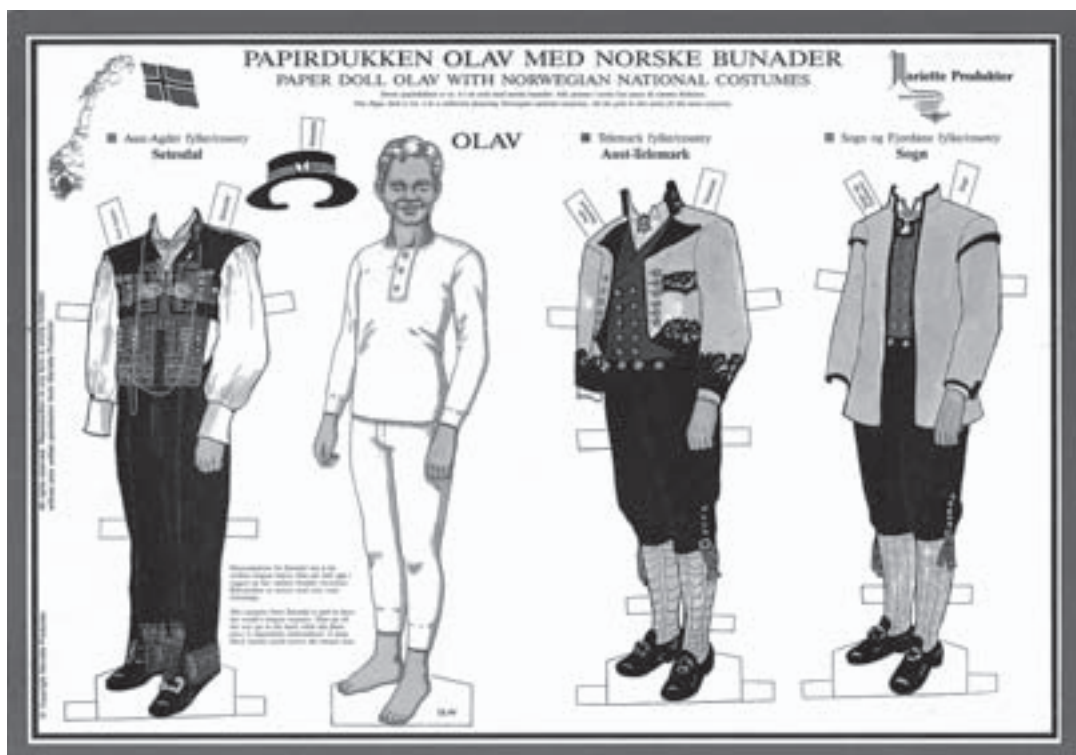
The Invisible and Unmentionable

It is an interesting and indisputable fact, that the underwear of the European man until the Second World War was looked upon and designed mainly from the functional point of view. Pants, drawers and shirts should be durable and comfortable for the public man. Nevertheless, since the beginning of the 19th century the underwear should support manliness as a base for society, whose concrete expressions were health and sports, the sober uniform, and the invisible white underwear. Advertisements showed men's underwear almost as a question of sartorial arts and crafts, supporting the solid, athletic male body as an invisible but necessary counterpart to a stable society (cf. Gall 1993).

After the Second World War, already in the 1950s, there were trends to expose masculinity in the underwear, more and more visible and designed in consideration of movement, body gestures and sexuality. Men also began to be visible as real men with the help of more expressive garments. The trend grew stronger from the middle of the 60s on, when colourful pants appeared, and it has now continued, more and more elaborated, for thirty years. Today there

are more than fifty different trademarks in Europe. The models, colours, patterns, series of sizes, and especially the names express a strong tendency to expose masculinity as something more than "the classic man", as a sexually active, attractive, vigorous sovereign of the land of love. Men's underwear have been highly visible, when at the same time the position of men's and women's dominance and tasks in society have changed. The modern man has been visualised through his underwear! The erotic zone of the male has been the important and central part when men's underwear have been designed and exposed. This is the impression one gets when studying advertisements. We have to look for the *cultural mechanisms* hidden behind this visibility. What is the relation between form and function, utility, sobriety, sexuality, eroticism?

What are the relations between fashion and the images of man in society? What are the different masculine "roles" expressed in underwear? The analysis is focused on the expectations on man as an erotic being and the changes in the function of underwear at the mental level, from invisible, useful, neutral garments to fetishistic, secret, highly symbolic, also auto-



The paper-doll Olav with Norwegian national costumes. Postcard from Mariette Produkter, Kristiansand.

erotic extravagant and expensive, highly visible iconography equipment. – The material consists of collections of items, advertisements, fashion magazines, declarations of trademarks, interviews with men and the role of underwear in the gay culture. The theoretical viewpoint is a cultural anthropological one.

Roles of Masculinity – Advertising, Trade and Industry

From a historical point of view we can look upon men's underwear in relation to consumption, class and gender. The opposition male modesty – female flamboyance, dominant in England since the end of the 17th century, turned in direction to an upper-class masculinity exposed in refined taste. This entailed a clear distance to fashion, which was associated with effeminacy, women and lower classes. Gentlemen should be modest, and this aristocratic masculinity, meaning disinterest in fashion, was also a question of

morality. Displaying masculinity, for example in sartorial restraint, had a political legitimacy, but displaying femininity, in fashion, was a way of political exclusion.

So men's underwear, embroidered and tailored still in the 1680s, had at the beginning of the 1800s got a simply utilitarian function, with no masculine and fashionable connotations. Although underwear sometimes had a frivolous and humorous detachment, the Victorian era enshrouded the garment in a moralistic and hygienic masculinity expressed in superiority, sobriety, industry and activity. Men of the new bourgeoisie/middle-class demonstrated public virtue as their private property. There was no place for underwear, for erotic fashion at all. As invisible, underwear had no relevance for showing the social and biological gender. The "body linen" just consisted of short drawers worn under breeches and long drawers worn under pantaloons and trousers (Kuchta 1996, Griffin 1991).



Underwear for men is mainly a thing for the wives washing them. Classical Finnish trademark in the 1960s.

The masculine identity models, developed during the 19th century, have been reproduced in the 20th century. A German study on “Männerunterhosen” 1993 characterised men’s drawers as “pertinent and unerotic” (Gall 1993). In the 1980s the underwear at last changed in a radical way through the collections shaped by the Greek designer Nikolaos Apostopoulos (Niko 1985), who displayed a male model in black pants riding on a white horse in a park in Paris.

A Finnish study on sex in advertisements (from the 1960s to the 1990s) defined four different aspects on fashion and sex: 1. Eroticism, 2. Scarce clothing, 3. Hint to nude, and 4. Nudity. In the erotic pictures in advertisements the main point seemed to be the relation between man and woman. The man as an erotic being seems to have appeared at the beginning of the 70s. In the 60s the man was still only showing underwear and physical strength, but no erotic attractiveness. The garments for men in the 70s appealed to the women. With the help

of attractive things the man would be successful in his relation to women. The role composition was still very traditional, the man being strongly masculine and active, the woman more passive, both sexes free and loose. On the whole the garments functioned as supporting eroticism between the sexes. In the 1980s and 90s the underwear was presented not only as a sexy garment but as sex in itself, strongly supporting the masculine sexuality.

At the beginning of the 1990s the electric machines (for example coffee percolator, hair dryer) were sexually strongly loaded, stressing the manly activity and sexuality – a parallel to the advertisements of underwear. The sexual appeal in advertisements is nowadays connected to all kinds of products, from jewellery to cleaning powder, and not, as still in the 1980s, products for body and health only (Kontula-Kosonen 1994).

On the basis of the analysis above we have to conclude that fashion and eroticism seems to be a question of advertisement, where the woman

Fashion and eroticism. It is the meaning of fashion that has changed, not the garments. Sloggi, one of the most successful trademarks in Europe. *Helsingin Sanomat*, February 1997.





The winter in Finland is in a humorous way called “the night of the long Johns”. With the help of the Finnish trademark “Black Horse” men can hold out, at least mentally. *Seura* 1993.

and the man are presented with different profiles for each other. With the help of underwear the advertisements emphasise the difference between the sexes, supporting the traditional gender roles and the hierarchy between the sexes. The everyday use of underwear has very little or no connection at all to that.

The Importance of the Body

During the 1980s men’s underwear were more and more presented in a context where the male body in an erotic-provocative pose appeared attractive. The movement of body-building, fitness studios and a highly consumption-oriented leisure culture have made the man in his underwear visible. When still in the 1960s underwear were shown in advertising only as separate garments, the change in the 70s and 80s meant exposing *the male body itself dressed up* in attractive underpants. From this on underwear has been sold not as fashion, but as a

second skin, supporting the male body. The models are exposed in movement, in action, in joyful situations, the garments in luxurious boxes. The attraction of the male body can be raised with the help of garments covering the genitalia, the erotic zone.

In reality the garment in itself has not caused any change. It still functions as a support of the man, not any more for the man as a symbol of society, but for the man as a symbol of bodily power. On the other side, the opinion of tradesmen is that although underwear is a great article of commerce it is not a fashion. The criteria for good underwear among common people are fitness and cleanliness, i.e. practical qualities. Extravagant underwear appeals mainly to the generation under 30. Underwear for men is still mainly a thing for the wives buying

The ecological movement has brought the white, durable and useful long underwear “back to basics”, with no associations to the sinful fashion. The short silk boxers are remaining one-coloured. Anttila catalogue, December 1995.





Nuke Collection. It's a boy! Riksställningar, Stockholm 1993.

them. The Swedish trademark Salming [the ice-hockey player] pants was sold in 1994 mainly during the time between Father's Day in November and Christmas, the buyers were wives and they preferred one colour garments (65 %) to white pants (only 10 %) (Gall 1993).

There is some kind of contradiction between the image and the advertisement of men's underwear in newspapers and the opinion that underwear is nothing more than a practical equipment, far away from fashion and eroticism. Agents for manufacturers emphasise the importance of marketing men's underwear with the help of humour and sex, the names of sportsmen (Björn Borg, the tennis player) and manliness (no size Small!). A Finnish female designer of men's underwear says that her design is for the wives buying the pants for their husbands. When she tests the different new models on the men working in her firm she only gets short comments like "it's okay", but no useful criticism! The patterns are based on both women's frocks and men's ties and the most

popular combination of colours is blue-green. A Swedish designer mentions that the inspiration for the models has to be found in antiquity. So the Greek designer Niko Apostopoulus designs his manly underwear as a "tribute to the Man, as Man, Sex Symbol and Demigod". The collection represents not fashion, but a life style, a philosophy, a kind of art, exposed also in the photos for marketing (cf. Versace).

In Finnish newspapers there are repeatedly every winter humorous discussions among politicians, pop stars and sportsmen concerning the necessity of long pants, the opinions for and against.

As objects of masculinity men's underpants are manifesting collective power, rationality, normality, instrumental action, utility. The instrumentalised masculinity has also transformed sexuality into a shape of reason, individuality, will, need or demand, performance, conquest, as an opposition to desire, sin and shame. Emotions and feelings, seen as externally produced, can be controlled, as man believes he can

control as well nature, as the woman. The body is managed as a kind of machine. So far men's underwear still preserve the first quality in their history, from Enlightenment, and the radical division between reason and emotion: sobriety.

Men's underwear shall be warm, elegant and funny! Despite of this fact underwear preserve a trait of unfamiliarity, although the garments belong to the standard Christmas gifts. The material shows that men's underwear reproduce current models of male identity only to a limited extent, namely the sportsman and the bodybuilder. What other associations are connected to underpants?

Men's Underwear as Missiles – Nuke Collection

In 1992 some Norwegian and Swedish artists made an exhibition called "Nuke Collection", with the help of the art philosopher Tom Sandqvist (Stockholm). The idea was to analyse the language of war expressed in the trademarks of war industry, but also in the manufacturing and advertisement of men's underpants. What were the forms of war as an alluring sign and language? The artists stressed the sexist character of this language. Through the missiles as fetishes, through photos the war was visualised and its parallels were in exclusive man's fashion, namely underwear in the Western world, designed by famous fashion creators as Niko Apostopoulus and Gianni Versace. The pants are named after the types of nuclear missiles, such as "Bullpup", "Lance" and "Buck Passer". Through the sexist character of the language nuclear weapon is given an aura of harmless, common and attractive – war as an erotic adventure. A quotation from the introduction to the exhibition catalogue:

"Walk the walk. Talk the talk. Read my lips. Load my tongue. A is for Atom. B is for Bomb. You know what I want to talk about? I want to talk about nuclear delivery systems, men's underwear, legacies of the Cold War, clean bombs and clean language. I want to talk about fat men, little boys, and long johns. I want to talk about permissive action links, verbal con-tricks

and high-tech erotic excitements. I want to talk about wet dreams I've had about sexuality and post-nuclear survivability. I want to talk about thrust-to-weight ratios, soft lay downs and serious drippage problems. I want to talk about the weight of gender in the world of the strategic intellectual set. I want to talk about having the ability, but not the staying power, and why using a missile twice is like using a condom twice. I want to talk about machines in the language of the human body. I want to talk about the pornography of destruction, about power through superior blast, and about the vulgar display of power. I want to talk about monocoque aluminium cylinders, graphite/epoxy casings, and latex rubber. I want to talk about the body language of states, the softening of hard facts, the public propaganda face. I want to talk about what consideration determines the size of the Minuteman ICBM. I want to talk about our nuclear weaponry as a semi-permanent collection. I want to talk about no-lone

Fashion and art? Versace.



zones. I want to talk about bra factories, four holers, and other possible targets of nuclear attacks. I want to talk about fire and forget, shoot and scoot, catching them with their pants down, knocking their balls off, hitting them hard with everything we have. I want to talk about what is neither skin, nor dress. I want to talk about things not normally exhibited publicly. I want to talk about business-as-usual as far as nuclear weapons and extra-marital sex relations are concerned. I want to talk about the laundry, the reduction, the shit duty. And I want to say that today, when everything is shit duty, all we can ask for is an underwear collection that's hard, rough, and takes no shit. A collection that holds no risk of emotional fallout, and no risk of being intellectually off-base. That's it. That's that" (Nuke Collection 1993).

Men's Underwear in Gay Culture

Although underwear usually are not the most important garments in the context of gay eroticism there are some aspects to notice concerning both the form and the material. More common objects are: leather pants (black leather), jackets, boots, rubber garments, uniforms, military look, broken jeans, corsets, socks, ice-hockey shelts, sports- and swimwear, workers' gear and so on. Also dressing up in ladies' underwear and stockings is not an uncommon trait in gay sexuality, increasing the attractivity between men (cf. Steele 1996: 127–131). But there is also the importance of exposing the gay body in underwear, in little tangas in combination with open jeans. Male sexuality, virility, is visualised for other men with the help of underwear.

The most special function of pants in gay culture is as a concretisation of sexual copulation. In gay magazines there are sperms damped, unwashed or sweated pants for sale. In the sexual situation wet underwear, licking the pants, is an important part of eroticism, also auto-eroticism. A gay informant told me that he is especially attracted to the white cotton material before it has been washed. To dress or to strip the male partner is a ritual of erotic tension.



Unmentionable – unnecessary. Armani package from 1999.

The System of Things – How can Underwear be Erotic?

In his work *Le système des objets* the French sociologist and media theorist Jean Baudrillard (1968) emphasised that when we are studying the rapidly changing world of industrialised objects we have to enlarge the functional, formal and structural analysis (production, consumption) in the direction to study the processes shaping *relations* between man and objects. Objects then are seen as evidence of human attitudes. – I will add, that our method, as ethnologists, will be more fruitful if we are proceeding not in a finalistic way, having already defined the thing we are studying and then trying to interpret it, but on the contrary – in an operationalistic way – that means using the strong anthropological methods, interpreting the things by harsh light in soft focus just as unknown objects but ending in a deeper definition where – in this case – masculinity and

eroticism are only some of the dimensions of the objects, and just and only expressively in the relation to the *female* world. Things are not masculine or feminine, but objects with unlimited possibilities to satisfy both sexes as cultural products (artefacts).

Baudrillard emphasises the modern free circulation of objects from total order to continuous organisation (investment, commercialisation, and personalisation). Applied on the case of underwear it means that colour and material are moved from the concrete functional level to a mental level of associations, feelings, autonomy, and authenticity. One form takes over the role of another. Function means adaptability to a system of signs, styles, combinations, calculations and marks. Also articles of clothing are parts of a universal play with polymorph associations.

Conclusion

It is the meaning of *fashion* that has changed not the garment – underwear – in itself. Man's underwear is not only an implement incorporating masculinity with its wellknown characteristics, making also the invisible garment visible, mentally loaded with associations about body and sex. But in form and advertisement men's underwear today bring the garment closer to the feminine erotic world, diminishing the border between the sexes. Fashion and eroticism are not gender-fixed. They are body-fixed, which also explains the function/attraction of underwear in cross-dressing and gay fetishism, as auto-erotic garments. In the sexual situation between man and woman pants are not necessary at all! Men's underwear are indeed fashionable and erotic in marketing, but just unfashionable and unerotic in use. Masculinity (body, sex, eroticism) is only a complementary dimension to the patriarchate, when underwear incarnate self control.

Notes

The primary material consists of interviews, advertisements in newspapers and magazines, a collection of about 200 items, garments and photos in the possession of the author.

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