

Chapter 11

The Contest between

Chanel and Courrèges.

Refereed by a Philosopher¹

If today you open a history of our literature, you should find there the name of a new classical author: Coco Chanel. Chanel does not write with paper and ink (except in her leisure time), but with material, with forms and with colours; however, this does not stop her being commonly attributed with the authority and the panache of a writer of the classical age: elegant like Racine, Jansenist like Pascal (whom she quotes), philosophical like La Rochefoucauld (whom she imitates by delivering her own maxims to the public), sensitive like Madame de Sévigné and, finally, rebellious like the 'Grande Mademoiselle' whose nickname and function she borrows (see for example her recent declarations of war on fashion designers).² Chanel, it is said, keeps fashion on the edge of barbarism all the more to overwhelm it with all the values of the classical order: reason, nature, permanence, the desire to charm and not to surprise; people are pleased to see Chanel in the pages of the *Figaro* newspaper where she occupies, alongside Cocteau, the fringes of polite culture.

What would be the extreme opposite of this classicism if not futurism? Courrèges, it is said, dresses women from the year 2000 who are already the young girls of today. Mixing, as in all legends, the person's character with the style of the works produced, Courrèges is

credited with the mythical qualities of the absolute innovator: young, tempestuous, galvanic, virulent, mad on sport (and the most abrupt of these—rugby), keen on rhythm (the presentation of his outfits is accompanied by jerky music), rash to the point of being contradictory as he invents an evening dress which is not a dress (but a pair of shorts). Tradition, common sense and feeling—without which there is no good hero in France—are tightly controlled by him and only appear discreetly at the edges of his private life: he likes walking alongside his mountain stream at home, draws like an artist and sends the only black dress in his collection to his mother in Pau.

All this means that everyone feels that there is something important that separates Chanel and Courrèges—perhaps something more profound than fashion or at least something for which fashion is simply the means by which it presents itself. What might this be?

The creations by Chanel challenge the very idea of fashion. Fashion (as we conceive it today) rests on a violent sensation of time. Every year fashion destroys that which it has just been admiring, it adores that which it is about to destroy; last year's fashion, now destroyed, could offer to the victorious fashion of the current year an unfriendly word such as the dead leave to the living and which can be read on certain tombstones: *I was yesterday what you are today, you will be tomorrow what I am today*. Chanel's work does not take part at all—or only slightly—in this annual vendetta. Chanel always works on the same model which she merely 'varies' from year to year, as one might 'vary' a musical theme; her work says (and she herself confirms it) that there is an 'eternal' beauty of woman, whose unique image is relayed to us by art history; she rejects with indignation perishable materials, paper, plastic, which are sometimes used in America to make dresses. The very thing that negates fashion, long life, Chanel makes into a precious quality.

Now, in the aesthetics of clothing there is a very particular, even paradoxical, value which ties seduction to long life: that is 'chic'; 'chic' can handle and even demands if not the worn look, at least usage; 'chic' cannot stand the look of newness (we recall that the dandy Brummell would never wear an outfit without having aged it a little on the back of his servant). 'Chic', this sublimated time, is the key value in Chanel's style. Courrèges' ensembles by contrast do not have this fear: very fresh, colourful, even brightly coloured, the dominant

colour in them is white, the absolute new; this deliberately extreme youthful fashion, with its school and sometimes childlike, even infantile, references (baby's shoes and socks), and for which even winter is a time for light colours, is continually brand new and does not suffer from any complexes as it dresses brand new beings. From Chanel to Courrèges the 'grammar' of timescales changes: the unchanging 'chic' of Chanel tells us that the woman has already lived (and has known how to); the obstinate 'brand-newness' of Courrèges that she is going to live.

So it is the notion of time, which is a *style* for one and a *fashion* for the other, that separates Chanel from Courrèges, as does a particular idea of the body. It is not a coincidence that Chanel's own invention, the woman's suit, is very close to men's clothing. The man's suit and the woman's suit by Chanel have one ideal in common: 'distinction'. In the nineteenth century 'distinction' was a social value; in a society which had recently been democratized and in which men from the upper classes were not now permitted to advertise their wealth—but which their wives were allowed to do for them by proxy—it allowed them to 'distinguish' themselves all the same by using a discreet detail. The Chanel style picks up on this historical heritage in a filtered, feminized way and it is this, furthermore, which paradoxically makes it very dated; the Chanel style corresponds to that rather brief moment in our history (which is part of Chanel's own youth) when a minority of women went out to work and had social independence and therefore it had to transpose into clothing something of men's values, beginning with this famous 'distinction', the only luxury option open to men now that work had standardized them. The Chanel woman is not the idle young girl but the young woman confronting the world of work which is itself kept discreet, evasive; of this world of work she allows to be read from her clothing, from her supple suit that is both practical and distinguished, not its content (it is not a uniform), but work's compensation, a higher form of leisure, cruises, yachts, sleeper carriages, in short modern, aristocratic travel, as celebrated by Paul Morand and Valéry Larbaud. So, of all the fashions, the Chanel style is perhaps, paradoxically, the most social, because what it fights, what it rejects, are not, as one might think, the futurist provocations of the new fashion designs but rather the vulgarities of petty bourgeois clothing; so it is in societies confronted with a newly arisen need for aesthetic self-promotion, in

Moscow—where she often goes—that Chanel has the best chance of being the most successful.

There is however a price to pay for the Chanel style: a certain forgetting of the body which we would say takes refuge, is absorbed, in the social 'distinction' of clothing. It is not Chanel's fault: from her earliest career something new has appeared in our society which the new fashion designers are trying to translate, to codify; a new social class, unforeseen by sociologists, has been born—youth. As the body is its only asset, youth does not need to be vulgar or 'distinguished': it simply *is*. Take the Chanel woman: we can locate her social milieu, her jobs, her leisure activities, her travels. Then take the Courrèges woman: we do not ask what she does, who her parents are, what her income is—she is young, necessarily and sufficiently so. Both simultaneously abstract and material, Courrèges fashion seems to have assigned itself only one function: that of making clothing into a very clear sign for the whole body. A sign does not necessarily involve exhibiting (fashion is always chastened); it is said, perhaps too often, that the short skirt 'shows' the leg. Such things are bit more complicated than that. What probably matters to a designer like Courrèges is not the very material stripping off that annoys everyone, but rather to provide women's clothing with that *allusive* expression which makes the body appear close, without ever exhibiting it, to bring us into a new relationship with the young bodies all around us, by suggesting to us, via a whole play of forms, colours and details that is the art of clothes designing, that we *could* strike up a friendship with these young people. The whole Courrèges style is contained in this conditional, for which the female body is the stake: it is the conditional tense that we find in jackets with very short sleeves (which show no nudity at all, but register in our minds the idea of audacity), it is in the florid transparency of evening-wear shorts, in the new two-piece dresses worn for dancing that are flimsy like underwear, in this fashion without attachments (in the real and figurative sense) in which the body always seems to be close, friendly and seductive, simple and decent.

So, on one side we have tradition (with its internal acts of renewal), and on the other innovation (with its implicit constants); here classicism (albeit in sensitive mode), there modernism (albeit in mundane mode). We have to believe that society needs this contest, because society has been ingenious at launching it—at least for the last few centuries—in all

domains of art, and in an infinite variety of forms; and if we now see it clearly breaking into fashion, it is because fashion too is also an art, in the same way as literature, painting and music are.

What is more, the Chanel-Corrèges contest teaches us—or rather confirms to us—the following: today, thanks to the formidable growth of the means of communication such as the press, television, the cinema even, fashion is not only what women wear, it is also what all women (and all men) look at and read about: our fashion designers' inventions please, or annoy us, just like a novel, a film or a record. We project on to Chanel suits for women and on to Courrèges shorts everything that is to do with beliefs, prejudices and resistances, in short the whole of one's own personal history, what we call in one (perhaps simplistic) word: taste.

And all this suggests perhaps a way of understanding the Chanel-Corrèges contest (if at least you have no intention of buying either Chanel or Courrèges). As part of this broad everyday culture in which we participate through everything we read and see, the Chanel style and Courrèges fashion set up an opposition which is much less a matter of choice than something to be interpreted. Chanel and Courrèges, these two names are like the two rhymes in the same couplet or the contrasting exploits of a couple of heroes without which there is no nice story. If we want to keep these two sides of the same sign together, and undifferentiated—that is, the sign of our times—then fashion will have been made into a truly poetic subject, constituted collectively, so that we are then presented with the profound spectacle of an ambiguity rather than that of us being spoiled by a pointless choice.

Notes

- 1 Published in *Marie Claire*, September 1967, 42–44; *Oeuvres complètes* vol. 2, 413–16.
- 2 [Editors' note: 'Grande Mademoiselle' is a reference either to the sister of the seventeenth-century French king Louis XIV who was a 'Frondeuse' during the civil war of 1647–1653; and/or to those non-conformist women in early twentieth-century France, such as La Mistinguett, Charléty, Arletty, Sarah Bernhardt.]