Visual identities: Costumes of Prehistoric and Antique Societies as manifested in Popular Media

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The contribution deals with the question of visual identities, visual design and codes, especially clothing, from prehistoric and antique societies, and how these are used in popular media. The questions we have to ask are:

- What is a "visual code"?
- How do textiles contribute to identity?
- How is visual coding used in popular media to depict prehistoric and ancient societies?

Theoretical framework

Theoretical concepts on clothing and its meaning shall be discussed, looking at the history of garments from different angles – such as archaeology and history (Sørensen, 1997; Wells 2008); cultural anthropology (Mentges 2010), material culture studies (Eicher and Roach-Higgins 1992), social psychology (Sommer 2012), evolutionary anthropology (Gilligan 2016), or modern fashion studies (e.g. Lehnert 2014; Lurie 1981). Discussions include theories of visual coding, body language, fashion theory, gender&age, and social hierarchies.

In general, visual identities and codes are manifested in the various aspects of a person's external appearance. This includes clothing (including shoes and headgear) as well as hair and beards and various accessories that are part of the costume. Thus, it is both the concrete person in his appearance that is examined, but also attributions or taboos. The rules within a society are to be examined, which prescribe, permit or even forbid certain items of clothing, colours, raw materials (e.g. fur, silk), costume components, accessories for a certain social group, for men and women or also for certain age groups. Thus, these visual codes, visible through people's outward appearance, are an important means of communication for any human society.

Reflexion on Popular Media

The design principles of garments of specific prehistoric and antique societies will be discussed on the basis of various sources and compared with films or series such as "Rome", "The Pillars of the Earth", or comics such as "Flintstones", "Asterix" or games such as "Forge of Empires". There will also be a critical evaluation on the visual elements that are used to characterise visual identities and what the intention behind them is. What is portrayed authentically, where is it deviated from, what is overdrawn and how is this supposed to support the storytelling and character design of the corresponding film.

It is also important to consider the different perspectives, such as that of a scientist, a film producer and a consumer. Here we will discuss which "balance" is necessary between these different interest groups and "historical authenticity".

In all these forms of media, clothing is essential for storytelling and characters. For example, in depictions of the Roman period, such as "Asterix", the Galls are shown as wearing very colourful, diverse clothing, whereas the Romans are very uniform in more simple clothing. Furthermore, well-known clichés are incorporated in the clothing in order to clearly depict certain cultures. Though the depicted clothing is far from historically

accurate, these elements are in fact evidenced by historical sources (pictorial, archaeological, and written), but it is still essential in the storytelling of the series, as it underlines the personalities. For example, also the Roman archaeological textiles themselves are quite uniform and simple in their technology, whereas the Iron Age ("Celtic") textiles are far more elaborate, complex, and decorated.

However, in the Netflix series "Barbarians", which shows more historically accurate costume design than "Asterix", the Germanic people's clothing truly represents a more "barbaric" character (e.g. furs loosely worn over the shoulders), especially compared to the elaborate Roman costumes. Interestingly, this representation coincides with the narrative we know from Roman literature.

The interactive nature of video games brings in a further dimension with the player taking control of one or more characters. In many cases, the playable character's clothing and appearance can be changed, representing somewhat of an avatar. Sometimes real-life currency is even spent to change a character's appearance. In some cases, items of clothing offer the player various in-game points, such as armour or protection from cold, but also social points, charisma, or even noise – all changing the in-game experience. These points are an interesting way – although simplified – of representing the visual codes discussed in the theoretical concepts.

Furthermore, regarding video games, it is interesting to discuss who can see the playable character: Only the player or also other players, i.e. multiplayer games. In the latter, the theoretical concepts of self-representation overlap between the online-world and the player. Using their appearance, they can show off how much they have invested in the game – be it time or money –, how skilled they are at the game, which "class" they belong to, etc.

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