

The Skirt Revolution

Elements for an Immediate History of “Skirt Day”

Christine BARD

With the exception of kilts, the skirt symbolises a woman: scatterbrained, seductive or “feminine”, the wearer is well and truly a member of the weaker sex. The historian Christine Bard analyses the introduction of a “Skirt Day”, which would aim to make the skirt an acceptable garment once more. Could this be a new liberation, following the liberation of trousers for women?

Historically, the skirt is the symbol of femininity constructed as a specific gender, the Other of the “universal” trouser-wearing referent – a pretty gender, but not very intelligent. It has retained its traditional connotation, as can be seen from a comment made by Archbishop André Vingt-Trois, on Radio Notre-Dame on 6 November 2008, with regard to the role of women in the celebration of church services: “The hardest thing is finding women with training. What counts is not to be wearing a skirt but to have something in her head”. His comment was picked up by the *Le Canard enchaîné* newspaper and earned the Archbishop of Paris the 2008 “Golden Macho” award by feminist group Chiennes de Garde (“Watchdogs”); a complaint was also lodged (only for a few days, just enough to extract an apology) with the ecclesiastical tribunal in Paris. In the end an association was born, turning the stigma on its head: le Comité de la jupe (“The Skirt Alliance”). Its view was as follows: “If those words sprang to mind, it’s because someone forgot to close the door on his subconscious and they escaped, the little minxes! And here is the truth: skirt = nothing in her head”¹. The skirt as a symbol continues to have a traditional foundation that cannot be shrugged off as if it were a mere thing of the past.

When skirt equals slut

Women’s trousers as a possible alternative paved the way for this development (for they are thought to be more decent, which is not always the case by any means), and the skirt took on the connotation of an easy woman. This is an outdated term, because these days “slut” is more commonly used, to the point where the vast majority of schoolgirls are unable to wear their gender’s traditional attire, while that same item of clothing is worshipped by the fashion world. In 2006, female rapper Diam’s sang, “In my bubble, romanticism got a slap in the face / Porn actresses became artists / In my bubble, they diss women in skirts / But you don’t need

¹ <http://comitedelajupe.over-blog.com>.

to be from the ghetto to get called a slut / In my bubble, we talk straight, we share, we talk bad / We're easily riled, we do time / In my bubble, love's in custody / No, there's no more love on the streets of my bubble." Fadela Amara has spoken of aggressively feminine, overly made-up "resistance fighters" in problem neighbourhoods. Sexist violence spurred by women's style of clothing has been condemned by the "Ni putes ni soumises" ("Neither Whores nor Doormats") organisation since 2003. The "skirt = slut" equation has become commonplace everywhere, not only in the ghettos.

In 2006, at the (very white, very Catholic) Étrelles private agricultural college in the canton of Vitré, 25 miles from Rennes, the "Libertés couleurs" organisation, which specialises in the prevention of high-risk behaviour, held a workshop on sexuality. Skilfully guided by the teacher-facilitator, the year 12 students came to understand what the skirt now represents: a new taboo. The documentary filmmaker Brigitte Chevet followed their debates with her camera. Adults discovered a cross-class youth culture marked by a mix of puritanism of a generally religious nature, with no single dominant religion, and the influence of pornography and its transmutations².

The skirt, a symbol of which resistance?

The same college introduced a "Skirt and Respect Day", which was repeated in subsequent years³. In 2009, thirty schools decided to use it as an opportunity for expression and creativity through rap, dance and photography shows. Young people have at last found a space in which they can satisfy their profound need to talk about sex, love and gender – to some extent at least.

From 2006-2007, Ségolène Royal surprised people with an unusual clothing strategy: she always appeared in a skirt or dress. She had become a candidate in tune with skirt-wearing "resistance fighters" of every social class, age and neighbourhood, while some feminists asked her to wear trousers from time to time, at least to give the vast majority of women something to identify with. Ségolène Royal, however, was the standard-bearer for the female gender, in a worrying climate of symbolic violence. And when she went to Clichy-sous-Bois during the election campaign, wearing trousers for once, criticisms abounded⁴: had she abandoned her seductive attire because she was going into one of the Republic's "lost territories"?

Then in March 2009 came Jean-Louis Lilienfeld's film *La Journée de la jupe* ("Skirt Day"), which had considerable success. The project had begun in 2006, with a title containing a statement that was "somewhat kitsch but symbolic", according to the director. For actress Isabelle Adjani, the teacher who takes her class hostage "wears her skirt as a symbol of revolution, because trousers have become an armour, a veil for girls in the ghettos". Sonia Bergerac, the French teacher played by Adjani, goes so far as to ask for a "Skirt Day" to be

² Brigitte Chevet, "Jupe ou pantalon?", documentary film, 2007, 52 min.

³ <http://lajupe.site.voila.fr/page6.html>.

⁴ On 28 February 2007, the Union for a Popular Movement (UMP) website "Agora elles. Paroles de femmes" opened a debate on the clothing worn by Ségolène Royal for her visit to Clichy-sous-Bois. Many women would have been shocked. "Are there territories in the French Republic where one's usual attire must be left in the wardrobe?" The online responses were enlightening, and Raoul's reaction deserves a mention: "The problem is that the UMP candidate, even in trousers, cannot set foot there without sparking a riot. Perhaps Nicolas [Sarkozy] should try wearing a skirt?" <http://www.agora-elles.com/index.php?2007/02/28/22-une-polemique-sur-le-pantalon-noir-de-segolene-royal>

introduced at the school, by which the State would be affirming that a woman can wear a skirt without being a whore. Fiction meets reality.

Trousers under skirts

Wearing a trouser suit, the Interior Minister exclaimed, “And why not a g-string night?” With a kind of basic feminist reflex, Skirt Day bothers people: has it not taken women years, indeed centuries, to win the right to wear trousers? Those who are better informed would also know that the ruling issued in 1800 by the Paris Préfecture de Police, preventing women from dressing like men, has never been revoked. Was it a matter of decency, because breeches and trousers were too revealing of the female form? Rather, it was a matter of principle. The principle of the symbolic differentiation between the sexes has been sanctified by religion. It is written in Deuteronomy (XXII, 5): “A woman must not wear men’s clothing, nor a man wear women’s clothing, for the Lord your God detests anyone who does this”. Confusion between the sexes, a sign that the end of the world is nigh, is among the West’s greatest fears.

In different corners of the world, and under the empire of the three major monotheist religions, women are victims of violence because they transgress the dress codes imposed on their gender. “A young man killed his sister yesterday in Batman, a half-Kurdish city in the south-east of Turkey, because she had worn a pair of trousers to attend a wedding. After shooting and wounding her, he threw her off the roof of their building to make it look like a suicide”⁵. Dozens of women in Sudan (in the south, a Christian area) were beaten by the police and imprisoned for a day because they were wearing “tight” trousers⁶. In June 2008, in ultra-orthodox neighbourhoods of Jerusalem, campaigners using shock tactics tried to force women to wear “modest” clothing: long skirts, covered arms and a closed neckline. They targeted a divorced woman wearing trousers, beat her up and threatened to kill her⁷. In France, the staff of politician Valérie Pécresse submitted a petition demanding that she stop wearing only trousers⁸. The minister for Higher Education promised to make an effort. The incident, which might sound like an April Fool’s joke, is revealing. These examples show that trousers provide a tremendous opportunity to analyse sexuality, sexual identity and gender relations, because they are an old symbol of power. The expression “to wear the trousers” says it all.

Long live the skirt for men!

Even if the victim turns the stigma “on its head”, she will continue to be singled out and seen as an ‘other’. Is this not still the case for Ségolène Royal?⁹ And for the teacher in a skirt? In order to weaken the entire symbolic gender system, it is vital for men to play their part. There is a well-known asymmetry which causes the masculinised woman, even if she is

⁵ *Libération*, 10 January 2005.

⁶ *BBC News*, 8 October 2008.

⁷ *Libération*, 15 December 2008.

⁸ *Courrier international*, “Du bon usage de l’élégance”, n° 911, 17 April 2008, p. 58-59.

⁹ On (at least) one occasion during her campaign, Ségolène Royal created a symmetry between the sexes when she answered a man who had just complimented her on her beauty at a public meeting: “You’re not bad yourself”. However, this type of male “misconduct” toward a female presidential candidate speaks volumes about the new rules of the political game (the importance of one’s image and the obsession with celebrity) and the trap that the gender laws set for female politicians, who are always *too* something (either masculine or feminine). Éric Fassin, Catherine Achin and Elsa Dorlin provide a thorough analysis (<http://www.cairn.info/revue-raisons-politiques-2008-3-p-19.htm>)

in a state of transgression, to ascend through the hierarchy while the effeminate man descends. It is this very system of hierarchy that the sartorial innovations of the 21st century cannot overcome. Women have won (relative) freedom, which should offer them the choice between closed garments and open garments. A form of masculine identification can enable them to escape their female role. Men, however, do not yet have the choice. They inherit the bourgeois clothes model – uniform, grey or black – which makes them free, equal and fraternal if one goes back as far as the original meaning of trousers for the *sans-culottes* of the year II. In fact, trousers make them “men” above all, holders of privileges pertaining to their gender.

One might ponder what was lost when the aristocratic dress code was rejected, having survived with the dandies of the 19th century, and reflect on what men have to gain by extending their sartorial freedoms. The seductive creations of haute couture, ever since Jean-Paul Gautier’s famous 1985 collection, only reach a limited public. Queens’ frocks, gay kilts and drag queens’ furbelows (and the habits of the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence) are also part of the minority. Skirts for men are homosexualised, just as the figure of the trouser-clad woman was in its time. The Hommes en Jupe (“Men in Skirts”) association¹⁰, established in 2007, tries to heterosexualise and trivialise the skirt. This is no easy task, but their line of argument is convincing and the proliferation of commercial sites proves that “skirt attitude” has the wind in its sails. Just like those who dared to wear trousers, a vast informal club of non-conformist women who made a decisive contribution to art, culture and the life of ideas, the male skirt pioneers may produce something new, or will at least avoid repeating what has gone before. This is summed up by Bruno Loodts, who designs skirts for men and has a gothic background: “I can’t really see American soldiers attacking Iraq dressed in skirts. [...] Skirts don’t make people aggressive. They make you more gentle”.

Skirt Day: a demand but not without conditions

If Skirt Day is just another trick to make women “accept their femininity”, to use the traditional expression, it will set new limits without doing much in the way of emancipation. What actually is this femininity that must be accepted? The model presented in teen magazines? The pornographic model? Which body should women cover up or subtly show/hide? A slim, muscular, sculpted, fit body? The no-frills sportswoman, the lesbian who never played with dolls, the modest asexual woman who fails to see why she should show her legs – there are many women with no inclination to put on a skirt, even for one day, in the name of “respect”. The historical constraints placed on “femininity”, which have relaxed since the 1960s, have had enough of an influence that young girls today are allowed to discover their own style and inspiration. Sartorial plurality guarantees inner freedom: long live skirts and trousers, skirts over trousers, culottes, short and long dresses, shorts, and so on. And long live Skirt Day, provided it is mixed and bi-gendered, in other words de-gendered first. What has been done for trousers can also be done for the skirt – and that would be a true revolution.

Further reading

- [Le printemps de la jupe](#) (Young people set out to change boy-girl relationships with a “skirt spring”)

¹⁰ <http://asso.i-hej.com/>

- A virtual exhibition at the Musea: [“Femmes au masculin”](#).
- Christine Bard, Nicole Pellegrin (ed.), [“Femmes travesties : un “mauvais” genre”](#), *Clio. Histoire, femmes et sociétés*, n° 10, 1999.
- Christine Bard, *Ce que soulève la jupe. Identités, transgressions, résistances*, Autrement, 2010.
- Christine Bard, *Une histoire politique du pantalon*, Seuil, 2010.
- Laurence Benaïm, *Le Pantalon, une histoire en marche*, Paris, Les éditions de l'Amateur, 1999.
- Andrew Bolton, *Men in Skirts*, London, Victoria and Albert Museum Publications, 2003.
- Brigitte Chevet, “Jupe ou pantalon ?”, documentary film, 2007, 52 min.
- Guyonne Leduc (ed.), *Travestissement féminin et liberté(s)*, Paris, L'Harmattan, 2006.

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