

Of Women Who Move Forward: Sonia Rykiel's 'démode'

KAREN VAN GODTSENHOVEN

Ghent University
karen.vangodtsenhoven@ugent.be

doi: <https://doi.org/10.62336/unibg.eac.32.521>

Keywords

Fashion
Feminism
Sonia Rykiel
Démode
Transmediality

Abstract

Through the central concept of movement, interpreted in three different ways, this article delves into the life and work of French fashion designer and author Sonia Rykiel, who treated fashion design as a form of transmedial écriture. Rykiel's unruly and innovative concept of the 'démode' was launched in the context of a generational and relational movement of resistance against authority, liberating women from the changing diktats of the fashion industry (breaking out of generational hierarchies and frameworks of fashionable time). Secondly, it was an embodied and feminist movement, a democratization of fashion enabling the physical mobility of women who wore her skirts with undone hems, as well as reversible, adaptable jersey sweaters with exterior seams, central components of the démode concept. The démode also allows for a contextualization of Rykiel's work with regards to the notions of écriture féminine and female pleasure as expressed by French feminists of her day, including Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigaray and Antoinette Fouque of the MLF (Mouvement de la Libération des Femmes). As such it is a breaking free of patriarchal structures, including garment construction, as well as breaking free of the masculinist '68 revolution. Finally, the movement between different media, from garments to writing and "written garments" (transmediality) is analyzed as an artistic statement, expressing a desire to be both naked/ blank page as well as to write and to dress oneself.

Détachées, hérétiques, baroques. Les femmes de la 'démode'. Démesurées, débordées, uniques, magiques. Qui vivent leur corps, leur espace, leur droit. Qui désordonnent l'ordre, qui mélangent, qui débâtissent, qui désorganisent les couleurs, qui ajoutent, qui retirent, qui vont nues, emballées de laines, ceinturées de mohairs, encharpées de rayures, qui décollent. Les femmes qui jugent, qui attendent, qui regardent.

Les femmes qui font avancer.

Sonia Rykiel, *Et je la voudrais nue* (1979: 30).

1. Introduction: Une femme double

French fashion designer and literary author Sonia Rykiel, née Flis in 1930, the eldest daughter of five from a Romanian father and Polish mother, was a pre-Raphaelite beauty born with a flame of red hair. Brimming with passion and creativity, she explains that her mother, since she was a baby, pushed her to make something of herself, to make up for the fact that she was red-haired ("red-haired people are either burned or adored, and I have chosen to be adored"; cit. in Joulia & Moreau, 1969). She internalised this push to become one of the most celebrated female fashion designers of the twentieth century: "Toute petite, j'étais fascinée par le mouvement des bras et des jambes quand je sautais à la corde. Le cercle, le rond, le cerceau, tout ce qui était rond, tout ce qui pouvait agrandir, augmenter ma place dans l'espace, m'envoûtait" (Rykiel 1979: 23). This type of boisterous, energetic movement is hence not just a

central metaphor to the work and life of Sonia Rykiel, it is most possibly its driving force, characterizing her centrifugal personal energy as well her creative work "La femme en marche, je la connais bien. Déjà quand j'étais petite, elle me poussait. Je ne pouvais pas résister" (Rykiel 1979: 61).

As she often pointed out herself, an internal velocity and continuous play with different selves, was her way of being-in-the world. She described herself as an actor, a trickster, a mysterious persona leading more than a double life: "Impudique ou publique, mère, épouse, maîtresse, créateur ou voyeuse, je suis déséquilibrée par ce fou qui habite en moi. Ce double magique qui me poursuit dès mon enfance. Je vis dans l'équivoque, le miraculeux" (Rykiel 1979: 11). She concedes she is both the actor and the director of her own life, the subject and the object, the designer and the wearer, in an ever-oscillating dynamic between inside and outside, occupying a chasm between the private and the public: "Je suis une femme déchirée, une femme-intérieur qui fait de l'extérieur", une femme metteur en scène qui joue aussi sa pièce derrière et devant la caméra. Une femme double. Une fausse femme" (Rykiel 1979: 40).

In her early twenties, she started her autodidactic fashion career by having dresses altered when she was pregnant with her daughter Nathalie in 1955, because she could not find anything that she wanted to wear herself as maternity dress, accommodating her changing body in a fashionable, flamboyant style which did not hide the pregnancy, but followed the body's contour. She continued to work successfully for her husband Sam Rykiel's Parisian boutique "Laura" on collections and garments for "futures mamans" until 1965, when she founded her own company, and divorced Sam in 1968, as well as opening up her own boutique, in a forceful movement of self-realisation: "J'ai d'abord détruit, défait ce que je faisais. Je n'y trouvais pas mon compte. Ça n'était pas moi, ça ne me correspondait pas. C'était la mode, mais ça n'était pas la mienne" (Rykiel 1979: 19). Having her own space as well as her own name on a ready-to-wear label, was something that was mostly not possible for the designers who worked for department stores a decade before. Together with other international female designers including Diane von Fürstenberg, Zandra Rhodes, Betsey Johnson, Rykiel was part of what is called the 'boutique generation', the term used for



Fig. 1 | Clerc, L. "Et Maintenant la Démode" *Elle*, 17 January 1976

women designers in the 1960s-70s who were both the artistic directors as well as the owners of their ready-to-wear fashion empires and boutique spaces.

For Sonia Rykiel, the process of becoming a designer was a creative impulse that went from a commercial approach which aimed to dress everyone and no one in particular, to an autopoietic approach, an embodied position based on her own needs and desires.

This evolved into an even larger commercial success, resulting in a personal 'écriture' of the designer: "Real direction occurred only later when I began making clothes for me – Sonia Rykiel – and not for other women. I wanted to be the only woman in the world to be dressed entirely in my own way. What this selfish idea did was to give my clothes a unique signature. My customers began to dress the way I wanted to dress and therefore I made them unique in my own image" (Actis-Grande 1968). Like several other female designers, she took herself as a fitting model, everything she made was 'taille Rykiel', measuring 165 cm in length. She writes that she considered herself foolish for creating a gap between other women and herself, other women who had a different body type and build than her. That she had wanted to distance herself as different, opposed to, and other from all those women. Because her ultimate goal was to deviate from the norm, to create an atmosphere for herself, which was different from the uniform system that she was used to, and in which she drowned (Rykiel 1979: 16).

In Saint Germain-des-Prés in 1968, a highly symbolic moment and place in the movement between cultural generations, Rykiel launched her eponymous label and boutique at 6, Rue de Grenelle. She had to close the shop for a few weeks during the height of the student manifestations. Here, she developed the philosophy of the 'démode', an aesthetic based on undone qualities in clothing (no linings, no stitched hems, reversible seams, amongst others), her self-named concept of unruly fashion. The démode broke with the tradition of (mostly, male) designers dictating their female couture customers what to wear, instead empowering women to dress as they pleased, with agency, irreverence and insouciance.

A memorable innovation in the landscape of the 1960s, Rykiel's concept of the démode can also be analyzed in terms of several movements: firstly, it

entails a dynamic, generational and relational movement (breaking out of generational hierarchies and frameworks of fashionable time), secondly, an embodied, feminist and positional movement (breaking free of patriarchal structures, including garment construction, as well as breaking free of the masculinist '68 revolution), and finally, an artistic movement between different media, from garments to writing and 'written garments' (transmediality) in her artistic trajectory.

In what follows, the several 'movements' at the heart of Rykiel's concept of démode will be analyzed, starting from her own statements (interviews) and autobiographical and literary writings, especially in *Et je la voudrais nue* (1979) but also in later works up to 2011, combined with images from the catwalk shows, in which she not only presented garments for sale but also a way of being, of moving, of wearing, and carrying oneself freely, which was related to her concept of the démode. Starting from the macrohistorical lines of the generational 1968 movement, to the more intricate affiliation of Rykiel's work and life with the French women's liberation movement and her emancipation of the female body through fashion, this enquiry will finally zoom in on the personal, artistic movement of the author and creator, her self-described double persona between fashion and literature, expressed in her transcodification between media, between the garment and the written page.

2. The Démode, a Generational and Personal Movement of Resistance

Démode:

- (I). Faire la mode par rapport à son corps, à soi, et non pas à celui des couturiers. C'est une forme d'excentricité puisqu'elle détient l'image du créateur pour inventer une image particulière.
- (II). La démode est une forme d'excentricité: elle détruit l'image du créateur pour inventer une image particulière ou chaque personne se construit, s'invente à coups de pinceau multicolores (Rykiel 2011: 39, 67).

In 1968, three years after founding her own company, Sonia Rykiel opened her boutique of one's own on Paris' Left Bank, during a tumultuous time of student uprisings. Both a personal revolution against



Fig. 2 | A model wearing a knitted dress inscribed with *Mode* for Sonia Rykiel Spring/Summer 1977 © Sonia Rykiel, Photo unknown.

the fashions she was previously creating under Sam Rykiel's aegis for his trendy boutique label "Laura", as well as a larger creative revolution pertaining to the ready-to-wear movement, which broke away from the system of trends and seasons imposed by the haute couture system and its protagonists: "I wanted to destroy the laws, the diktats. I wanted to duplicate, overflow, unmeasure fashion. I wanted to unfold it, unroll it" (Rykiel 1979: 19).

Nearly ten years in the making, only during the presentation for Spring/Summer 1977 did she officially coin her design philosophy of the 'démode', or de-fashion, a philosophical and material denouncement, a generational text and a movement to cast aside fashion's foundations by deconstructing them, from the inside out, with an undone aesthetic.¹ Démode is a fashion made of reversible seams, layers on

top of layers of knitwear, pockets everywhere, garments with unfinished hems, without epaulettes or linings, preferably worn over bare skin.² She reads her programmatic text "La femme en marche ou la démode et le mode d'emploi" during the Spring/Summer 1977 défilé in the Fall of 1976, stating "le pas doublure, le pas d'ourler, le sans longueur, le retourné, l'envers et puis l'endroit. Le reste: de l'ornement, faux changement, la mode. [...] Se mettre quelque chose sur soi, c'est se fondre, se confondre, se prolonger, c'est accepter son mouvement. [...] C'est refuser le commandement, la loi, les diktats... c'est s'inventer, se créer, se signifier seule". Here, she links the stylistic strategies of the démode to the personal strategies



Fig. 3 | A movement of knitted layers, an example of "démode", Sonia Rykiel Spring/Summer 1976 © Sonia Rykiel, Photo Gilles Tapie.



Fig. 4 | A model wearing an ensemble with unfinished hem, an example of *démode*, for Sonia Rykiel Spring/Summer 1976 © Sonia Rykiel, Photo Didier Destal.

for women’s liberation. The stylistic elements she describes had been present in her work for years, but it is only now that she invented a term for the whole design philosophy, and she puts movement, self-reliance, self-invention and self-acceptance at its core, rejecting previous patriarchal laws, commandments and fashion’s principles of ‘false change’.

The easy, knitted and sensual garments were meant to be quick to put on or taken off: “Glissant vite pour avancer vite” (Rykiel 1993: 27) Her ultimate goal was to have a “*déshabillé, habillé*”, or a dressed nude, a fusion between the idea of the nude and undone and the dressed. By making holes in garments, not finishing them and layering them, she made the garment into a vehicle for freedom. Her autodidactic

approach helped her to disobey the rules of the garment manufacturers, because, as a non-expert, she refused to understand why certain methods were ‘impossible’ or not done:

Je suis extrêmement dur dans mon travail. Je ne sais pas coudre [...] quand on me dit ce n’est pas possible je dis, tu dois le faire, toujours (Jouli& Moreau 1969).

Ils répondaient: Parce que cela ne se fait pas! Et je re-torquais: Eh bien, à partir de maintenant, cela se fait! (Marion 1993: 79)

From now on, a woman without training imposed her own rules on the garment manufacturing indus-



Fig. 5 | Isabelle Weingarten models a knitted ensemble on bare skin, an example of *démode*, for Sonia Rykiel Spring/Summer 1977 © Sonia Rykiel, Photo unknownl.



Fig. 6 | A model demonstrates the reversible sweater, an example of "démode", for Sonia Rykiel Autumn/Winter 1976 © Sonia Rykiel, Photo Gilles Tapie.

try and the fashion press. Rykiel liberated women by creating garments which adapted to the individual body shape, based on her own way of dressing, in turn based on her embodied knowledge and study of the female body's proportions. However, at the same time, she confirmed the internal ambivalence of these two roles, that of a fashion designer with philosophies ("femme-pancarte") and that of woman-wearer of the garments ("femme-femme"; Rykiel 1979: 39). She realised that by discarding "Fashion" and positing her own philosophy, she was in some ways also declaring a new dictate, and that she was finally also one of those "builders of style":

La démode, [...] c'est prendre la distance entre son corps et les formes inventées par ces "inventeurs de moules", ces "constructeurs de styles" (dont je suis). C'est se déterminer par rapport à la folie, à la force, au savoir de ces "bâisseurs" (dont je suis). C'est jouer, dévier, déplacer, défoncer l'image qu'ils inscrivent en lettres de feu tous les six mois. [...] La démode, c'est l'individualité. La démode, c'est la connaissance du rapport vêtement-corps, l'étude des proportions corps-vêtement, l'alchimie couleur-peau, c'est la cohérence entre cette connaissance raisonnée et le délire. La démode, c'est l'enjeu fabuleux du créateur et de la femme. La démode, c'est un privilège (Rykiel 1979: 20).

Rykiel's definition of the process of the *démode* entails a liberatory, playful movement, a breaking away from rules of sartorial etiquette based on the relationship between the body and the garment, the proportions of the dressed body and the balance between rational knowledge and a creative delirium. By inventing the *démode*, Rykiel placed herself outside of fashionable timeframes, hierarchies and canons ("je construis un espace", Rykiel 1979: 22). Even though she did present her collections in a seasonal way, for commercial purposes,³ the striped jersey pullovers and dresses remained an essential element year-round, and her layered approach was one which allowed the wearer to dress up or down, swaddle herself in layers or go semi-nude with only one layer of the lightest jersey touching the skin. Her proposal for the female wardrobe could be seen as a modular approach, with constant building blocks outside of fashionable trends, adaptable throughout the day and night: "Des choses à mettre le jour que je pourrais subtiliser la nuit. Des vestes qui pourraient servir de couvertures et des couvertures qui pourraient servir de vestes. Je ne voulais pas d'horaires, de calculs, de vêtements pour un lieu ou pour un temps" (Rykiel 1979: 19). With these garments, linear as well as cyclical fashion-time is undone, and one can live intuitively according to the rhythm and flow of the day, reversing not just day and night but also what is appropriate at any time of day and night.

Rykiel hereby 'movements' time itself, by folding it and de-structuring it, letting women unravel, speed up, reverse and alter their personal space-time through her garments. In press interviews, she calls her garments timeless, because "cela ne se démodé pas" (Horizons 1974), however, they are not static,



Fig. 7 | A model wearing a sweater with exterior seams, an example of *démode*, for Sonia Rykiel Spring/Summer 1977 © Sonia Rykiel, Photo.

classic or 'timeless' pieces, but rather ultra-fluid and adaptive to the female body, the mood and the setting of the wearer on a micro-level, due to their layered, reversible and adaptable nature. Even though Rykiel was often compared to the mythical Gabrielle Chanel by the press because of her no-nonsense, liberatory and minimal modernism, her love of jersey and her personal 'gamine' style, she could also be seen as the proverbial daughter of haute couture designers Madeleine Vionnet or Alix Krebs (Mme Grès), whose bias-cut and pleated silks hugged the body whilst bestowing freedom of movement on the wearer. Like these three modern designers, Rykiel asserted her philosophy of freedom of movement through the development of her own methodology and approach towards the body.

The fundamental principle of the *démode* was to support the woman wearer of the garments through the qualities of the garment, rather than imposing any visual or aesthetic onto her: "I do not want women to disappear beneath my clothing". Rykiel would repeat of her design philosophy, "the woman must be more than the garment, for it is not the dress that makes the woman, but the woman who makes herself".⁴

This philosophy transcends the material culture of fashion creation and garments, it is an autopoietic approach, the making of the self, outside of the phallogocentric culture, which resonates with Hélène Cixous statement in *The Laugh of the Medusa* (1976) that "woman must write her self", the first treatise to evoke the idea of an 'écriture féminine', outside of phallogocentric structures:

Woman must write her self: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies – for the same reasons, by the same law, with the same fatal goal. Woman must put herself into the text – as into the world and into history – by her own movement (Cixous 1976: 875).

I wished that that woman would write and proclaim this unique empire so that other women, other unacknowledged sovereigns, might exclaim: I, too, overflow; my desires have invented new desires, my body knows unheard-of songs (Cixous 1976: 876).

Cixous' words, written in French in 1975, just a few years before *Je la voudrais nue*, show the kinship in thought and attitude between these two women, who were also friends and collaborators.⁵ Like Rykiel's *femmes qui font avancer*, Cixous urges women to put themselves into the world and the text through their own movement. She advocates for women to write in a language of their own, an 'écriture féminine', undoing the pre-given structures of phallic language, expressing the ineffable. Similarly, Rykiel dresses these women in an undone, unstructured way, in a knitted, continuous textile which is different from tailored, patterned garments, made to fit the body as a mold. "Je voulais un vêtement qui me suive, qui m'entoure, qui me moule, qui séduise, qui m'ouvre, qui donne envie, qui accepte mon jeu, qui finisse mes gestes, qui éclate mes mouvements" (Rykiel 1979: 19). Her jersey dress is a home for the female body, an envelope for

the flesh, before the inscription of culture and structure: “Knit has real sensuality, it’s the material of movement and granting the freedom to work, to play with children, and in all simplicity, to live” (Rykiel in Sonia Rykiel brand bible).

Rykiel also subverts and deconstructs fashion’s named inscription, the garment label, by advancing and then extracting it: “Je barre la mode. J’invente la démode. Je décolle l’étiquette et je la mets devant. C’est plus beau et ça se voit plus. Puis je renverse l’habit et je retire l’étiquette. Nul besoin d’inscrire. L’inscription du soi, du moi, de l’être est au fond de l’autre”.⁶

For Rykiel, knitted garments and the *démode* were a response to the context of the larger collective mobilisation and student movement of 1968: “Le tricot, c’est une façon de vivre l’époque” (Rykiel 1979: 40). Sonia herself would walk around Saint-Germain, having lunch at Fouquet’s, as one of the earliest women to wear long elegant trousers, a sight which, at the time, still shocked the other customers.⁷ She designed the *démode* for a peripatetic life, fashion made for a handsfree way of life that corresponded with the effervescent, flamboyant multifaceted and extraordinarily mobile woman she was:

Cette femme à enfants, cette femme à hommes, cette femme-maison, cette femme à déjeuners, dîners, théâtre, cette femme-musique-son-lumière-folie-désir. Cette femme-orchestre qui vivait une vie de femme mêlée d’une vie de travailleur. Je voulais une mode-avion, une mode-voyage, une mode-bagage. Je me voyais en femme ‘départ’ entourée de sacs et d’enfants. [...] Les sacs sur l’épaule, sur le dos, en travers du corps, les enfants au bout des bras. Je voulais les mains libres, libres pour attraper les autres mains, pour les mettre dans d’autres poches. J’ai donc imaginé des vêtements-kangourous, empilables, démontables, déplaçables, sans envers, sans endroit, sans ourlet (Rykiel 1979: 19).

For this “music-sound-lights-folly-desire” woman on the go, she created fashion in continuous movement, including kangaroo-garments, without seams and without hems.

Her lifestyle *in movimento continuo*, which was coined ‘Rykielism’ by the brand when she passed in 2016, defined as a “way of life that is chic and off-beat” (Rykiel brand bible). Journalist Claude Berthod



Fig. 8 | A model wearing an adaptable, modular and mobile knitted ensemble with the word “Life”, an example of *démode*, for Sonia Rykiel Autumn/Winter 1976 © Sonia Rykiel, Photo Gilles Tapie.

wrote, “avec ses vêtements, l’élégance se désém-bourgeoiseait” (Berthod 1968). Or, one could say, “sous les pavés, le *démode*”.

On the side of the fashion industry’s hierarchy and official organizations, by liberating herself from her husband’s brand and creating a brand and boutique of her own, Rykiel rocked the waning haute couture industry, who saw that a named (female) designer could be successful with a ready-to-wear brand. In that sense, Rykiel was a torchbearer for the democratization of fashion, and for the movement from the elitist system of haute couture into the mass production of designer fashion. She was named Vice-Président of the renamed *Chambre syndicale du prêt-à-porter des couturiers et des créateurs de mode*

(previously *Chambre Syndicale de la Haute Couture Parisienne*) in 1973, after having been allowed entry together with five other 'créateurs', the word replacing 'couturiers'.⁸ Rykiel was more than a dressmaker, she indeed created a whole lifestyle, linked to the political zeitgeist: "Je ne fais pas de la mode, ce que je fais, c'est un mode de vie. Ce que je faisais c'était de créer un style de vie, pas lié à une image mais à la politique du jour" (Rykiel in Fouque, 1988).

The political ramifications and consonances with what was happening in the wider world were clear. Sonia Rykiel spearheaded the fashion industry into the future, all the while proving the feminist credo that 'the personal is political', by crafting her own way of life amidst historical r/evolutions: "Impalpable, insoumise, rebelle qu'il faut dépister, j'ouvre le cortège de femmes remuantes" (Rykiel 1979: 14).

3. Démodé as a Gesture of Liberation of the Female Body

On devait se libérer de la libération, qui était un mouvement viriliste (Elisabeth Nicoli, MLF)⁹

Rykiel's 'démodé' did not just break with fashion's hierarchies, but also with the gendered hierarchies of the day, and the gendered dress codes for women. Her closeness to several feminist thinkers and authors of her time on Paris' Left Bank, like Antoinette Fouque of the MLF (*Mouvement de Libération de Femmes*), feminist author and publisher Régine Deforges and feminist writer Hélène Cixous, influenced her own way of thinking about the embodied position of women. She sees women's experiences as privileged, undefinable and interconnected: "Un autre privilège: être femme. Indéfinissable, inclassable. Femme fatale, femme fœtale, femme-désir, femme-combat. Femme entre toutes les autres, mêlée aux autres, imbriquée aux autres, suspendue aux autres" (Rykiel 1979: 21). Although Rykiel was not a (militant) part of the feminist movement, since she mainly focused on her fashion career, she did participate in the protests, open letters and theoretical symposia organized by the MLF. Rykiel befriended and corresponded with Fouque and Cixous and there was a mutual admiration for each other's work.¹⁰ Rykiel utilised her public persona and cultural role to support the work of the MLF, which, amongst others, strived to correct the



Fig. 9 | Sonia Rykiel and Hélène Cixous at the retrospective "Sonia Rykiel, vingt ans de mode" at the Galeries Lafayette, September 1987 © Courtesy of Sonia Rykiel archives, Photo unknown.

patriarchal values underlying the generally progressive May '68 movement. The MLF was founded by her friend Antoinette Fouque, who founded the feminist group *Psychanalyse et Politique* ("Psych et Po") and the publishing venture *Des femmes*. Fouque made the documentary *Rhapsody in Black* about Rykiel in 1988 as part of the feminist documentary series *Une femme à l'œuvre*.

Rykiel's multiple identity and personal journey towards liberation is mirrored in the feminist movement of her generation. In Braidotti's words, the movement from the private to the public, and back again to her persona, is "a sort of ontological leap forward by which a politically enforced collective subject, the 'we women' of the women's movement, can empower the subjective becoming of each one of us 'I, woman'". Rykiel's break out from both her marriage as well as the rules of the fashion industry moves in tandem with her growing public allegiance to feminist causes. Her friendship with Fouque and support of the actions of the MLF is like "an act of self-legitimation whereby the 'she-self' blends her ontological desire to be with the conscious willed becoming of a collective political movement" (Braidotti 1994: 191).

Elisabeth Nicoli, Antoinette Fouque's right hand for over thirty years at the MLF, today connects the larger feminist idea of 'se déprendre', of not being taken by any structures ("ne pas être prise"), propagated by Fouque, with the creative practice of Rykiel: to undo the hems and the linings, to deconstruct the

stereotypical structures that women were caught into, is a way in which Rykiel's fashion practice expressed in knitted garments what the larger movement expressed in words: "Défaire aussi l'ourlet pour dé-finir (ne pas finir)" (Rykiel 1979: 56).

"Everything was a trap, also in the garments", Nicoli says, "so we had to deconstruct the stereotyping of women".¹¹ For Fouque, creation is never finished, because a finished product is a patriarchal construct. In the same sense, Rykiel's dresses remain unfinished, and are always in movement, "à continuer": "Je voulais commencer puis finir mais maintenant je sais que je ne voulais pas de fin. Comme dans le vêtement, pas d'envers, pas d'endroit, pas d'ourlet. Rien qui puisse terminer. Mourir" (Rykiel 1979: 10). Nicoli states, "Le travail est interminable. La matière est interminable. La révolution est interminable".¹² It is a work without end, a repeated process, revisited and reworked, in continuous movement, so that it cannot become a cliché, an idée-fixe, a standstill. Knitwear is its best expression, its interconnected, uninterrupted loops always being able to come undone, to be remade. After some back-and forth with Fouque, Rykiel titles her 1993 book *Collection terminée, collection interminable*, after Freud's 1937 psychoanalytical concept of "l'analyse terminée, l'analyse interminable" (Freud 1939).

With regards to women's posture, the body language of the models in Rykiel's catwalk shows always had a gayness of spirit, a spirited, nonchalant movement: evolving from more modest and giggling, dreamy walks of young girls in the 1970s to more extraverted, dancing, roller-skating and biking spectacles in the 1980s under the art direction of Nathalie Rykiel, Sonia Rykiel always imbued her models with a positive attitude which was expressed in the movements and free-flowing gestures of the women. They are seductive, not because they are trying to please the male gaze, but because of their freedom and self-assured movement, often moving along as a band of women or sisters, rather than alone.

The *démode* tuned into a woman's own bodily, haptic and sensual pleasures, her auto-erotic capacity for evoking and feeling pleasure: "Un vêtement-époque, un vêtement-amant. J'ai écarté la "mode" pour faire la "démode". Plus grand, plus vaste, plus large, plus fort mais surtout à côté, du côté du corps, du côté du plaisir, du côté de l'envie. De son

corps à soi, de son plaisir à soi, de son envie à soi" (Rykiel 1979: 20). Here, we find the *raison d'être* of the *démode*: it is not just fashion made for the body, but for the side of the body's desire, and pleasure, of and for itself. The garment is a lover.

This idea was translated most visibly in the unrolled or the visible hem, which went from being a maligned feature of the skirt, always coming undone and 'betraying' the wearer, to a kind of 'love child' of the designer: simply by moving it to the front, by making it visible instead of hiding it, by zigzagging or criss-crossing its outlines, it becomes a shooting star, a "dazzling, absolute hem", indicating its trace and assuming its space (Rykiel 1979: 56).

Similarly, seams were no longer hidden or invisible, but placed on the outside, so that they could talk about the touch of the skin, the odour of the flesh, the undressed, the hand of the lover between skin and garment. Rykiel could no longer bear to hide them, instead celebrating them as signposts of beauty and liberty, or even instruments for tactile *jouissance*, echoing Luce Irigaray's words in *This Sex Which is Not One* about the female body which always touches itself, and has the capacity for sexual pleasure all over its surface (Irigaray 1977: 28). Rykiel compares the reversed seam to the clitoris, to be touched for pleasure, as well as to a stem, to be worn on the outside as well as the inside of the garment:

Couture, couture à l'envers, taisez-vous, ne racontez pas. [...] Vous êtes la liberté, le bourrelet qu'on touche doucement puis plus vite pour jouir. La raie de lumière que je poursuis indéfiniment. Rêve ou réel. [...] J'aime que vous soyez à l'extérieur de mon corps comme une tige parce que je sais que je peux aussi vous retourner et vous mettre à l'intérieur (Rykiel 1979: 35).

Finally, the *démode* features wholly reversible garments, turned inside out, whereby the inside of the garment is the more privileged, because it touches the skin. Like the structural elements of columns in architecture, visible seams underscore the beauty of the construction (Rykiel 1979: 17). The symbolic value of this reversibility, is that one can lead a double life, on both sides, a life that is 'not one':

Je l'ai chargé d'une valeur symbolique. "Tu as mis ton pull à l'envers, tu auras sûrement un cadeau". Le cadeau, comme

l'envers, c'est la fête, c'est vivre double quelques instants, le double étant à l'intérieur du paquet. (Rykiel 1979: 17).

In the unison between garment and body (vêtements-corps), Rykiel surpasses the patriarchal dichotomy of the active designer who dictates a shape to the passive material (body-garment). From a position of power and even violence towards the garment, she moves towards one of connivance, alliance, peace, pleasure and joy.

4. Démode as Transcodification Between Text and Garment

J'ai une immense tendresse pour l'écriture, un désir. Si je fais des vêtements, je me suis exprimée en vêtements car je voulais être écrivain. Écrire déjà c'est quelque chose de plus violent que la mode. Écrire de la mode c'était presque comme s'arracher les mots du cœur. Exprimer sur le dessus ce qu'on avait à l'intérieur (Sonia Rykiel in Fouque: 1988).

Elle savait que je savais que la façon dont elle travaille est un montage- qui est un des gestes de l'écriture. Sonia pensait son art (Hélène Cixous).

Rykiel's childhood dream was to become an author, coming from an intellectual family, she felt embarrassed that she had chosen fashion as her main expression. In total, she authored and co-authored as many as fourteen books in her life, the first one, *Je la voudrais nue*, at the insistence of her friends Régine Deforges and Antoinette Fouque. Whether expressed in words or garments, her écriture is palpable in her books, diaries, garments and even in her self-authored, mythological persona. The text is what moves her, as she calls herself a writer, actor, film director and poet. When she transposes the word 'femme' or 'sensuous', 'étrange', 'artist' or 'être' from the page to the drawing and onto the garment, it is not as much a transition or transcodification between paper and garment, it is a synchronic expression of her mood onto different media. In her world, words and threads are affiliated, always in- becoming: "écrire un roman ce n'est pas juste avec le stylo c'est aussi avec le fil" (Rykiel in Fouque, 1988). Her dress featuring the word



Fig. 10 | Two models (Nathalie Rykiel on the right) wearing knitted dresses with the words "Étrange" and "Femme" for Sonia Rykiel Spring/Summer 1977 © Sonia Rykiel, Photo Gilles Tapie.

'sensuous' was the first time she knitted a word into a dress, in 1971, which was readily picked up by the American press.

When Rykiel knits the word 'mode' with a strike-through (dé-mode) into the fabric of a dress, the letters are knitted into the jersey of the dress, they are not placed on top of a fabric, like an application, but are integral to it, they are the form, the woven thread, of the textile. This writing comes from within and happens with violence, a sense of destruction and expulsion, of turning oneself inside out: like the literary writers' process, the fashion designer takes her insides, and turns them outwards, the feelings become written on and worn on the body: "Je voudrais

tant t'impressionner, t'écrire dans le corps. Quand j'écris sur mes tricots, c'est comme si je voulais qu'ils sortent de tes entrailles comme un manifeste: beau, belle, toi, moi" (Rykiel 1989: 27). Writing on the body of a knitted jumper is a form of eroticism, continuing the libidinal energy between mind, body, garment and hand, "le corps-parler-érotique-public" (Rykiel 1979: 105). Her writing and world-building, her expression of self, happens between the flesh of the body and the fabric of the dress.

In her homage to Rykiel, Hélène Cixous writes, "that the seams should remain apparent is the immodesty of writing", continuing her vision about the entanglement between dress, body, text and self: "This garment is native, its model: the body's internal sensation of itself, the secret of the body. Sonia Rykiel designs this sensation. I go to Sonia Rykiel as one goes to woman, as one goes home. With my hands, with my eyes in my hands, with my eyes groping like hands, I see- touch the body hidden in the body. ...there is continuity, everything is continuous. It brims over the edges, the garment does not stop short, doesn't declare its boundaries, does not gather in its frontier" (Cixous 1994: 96). Writing as a form of performing and becoming the self, refusing to take on old shapes or words: the montage of words into a phrase is similar to the montage of garments into a silhouette, and silhouettes into a collection. Writing the self becomes dressing the self.

Rykiel writes about the resistance of words, and garments, to be put into a phrase or a look, admitting that ultimately, what counts is her deep, innate desire to write, to be exposed and nude, maybe not even understood, but to be naked on the page. It is here we find her calling, both as an author of text as well as textile, to write in a language (écriture) of her own, not to appropriate someone else's words or shapes, but to bury deep within:

J'ai rêvé seulement être un auteur, rêvé seulement j'ai dit. Comme pour la robe, je ne voudrais pas prendre l'enveloppe d'un autre, je voudrais me confectionner à moi-même des mots différents, trouver un passage inconnu, me couler, me graver dans une forme neuve, m'entendre absolument avec ce papier qui m'attire comme un homme, comme l'amour. (Rykiel 1979: 108-109)

In conclusion, Rykiel's importance as an intergener-



Fig. 11 | Models wearing knitted sweaters emblazoned with the words: Ready Steady Go for Sonia Rykiel Spring/Summer 1983 © Sonia Rykiel, Photo Francis Kompalitch.

ational 'motor' and catalyst for cultural and political change can be diffracted into the several movements she generated and was a part of: from the macro-historical and political, to the generational, to the artistic and the individual, gestural movement. Hers is an outward movement into many different directions, a capriole into the sky, a visceral movement from the inside to the outside. It is also a forward movement, as she defined herself as the woman who marches, who moves forward. A forward movement by looking laterally beyond the fashion industry and philosophy of her time. Her *démode* concept transcended fashion, it was a forward movement into a new, liberated and feminist way of living, an ever-ongoing process of becoming-woman, of becoming-otherwise, as expressed in writing and in dress: "Moi, je ne fais pas de la mode, je fais un mode de vie. C'est très intéressant, mais c'est plus difficile. C'est plus facile d'avancer dans tous les sens, et c'est plus difficile d'aller tout droit. Mais je suis ce fil car je ne peux pas faire autrement" (Rykiel in Massenet, 2006: 198).

"Ready. Steady. Go!"¹³

Notes

¹ Whilst not using the word 'deconstruction', in an interview with *Elle* magazine, Rykiel explains that the 'dé' stands for "démessuré, départ, désir, dérouté, détour ou déviant" (Rykiel in Clerc, 1976: 37).

² As in the title of Rykiel's book *Et je la voudrais nue*, 1979.

³ Unlike, for example, her contemporary, Azzedine Alaïa, who went a step further by not adhering to the calendar of Paris Fashion Week, stating he would only show a collection when he deemed it ready.

⁴ Televised Sonia Rykiel interview on Régine Deforges' program *Femmes et libertés*, aired on March 20, 1978.

⁵ See, for example, Cixous, 1994, and Cixous' tribute in Rykiel, 2008.

⁶ According to the canon of fashion history, fashion designer Charles Frederick Worth is at the origins of the history of haute couture, because he put a named label in his creations, thereby elevating it to an artwork. This could also be seen as the birth of the myth of the solo artist genius in fashion.

⁷ As she describes in the video "Je provoque et je veux", Joulia, P., Moreau, S. (1969).

⁸ Sonia Rykiel, Emmanuelle Khanh, Kenzo, Jacqueline Jacobson for Dorothee Bis, and Karl Lagerfeld for Chloé.

⁹ Quote from an interview of Elisabeth Nicoli by the author, August 2023.

¹⁰ See for example, *Hélène Cixous*, "Sonia Rykiel in Translation", 1993, Antoinette Fouque's "Sonia Rykiel: Rhapsody in Black" documentary of 1968, and the tributes to Sonia Rykiel by Cixous, Deforges and Fouque in "La Femme Rykiel", 2008. Sonia Rykiel wrote about Fouque: Antoinette is a part of my life. We have seen each other, listened to each other talked to each other and listened to each other. She attended all my collection presentations. She asked me to write a text for her journal *Des femmes en mouvements. We have recorded Et je la voudrais nue* and she edited "Celebration." See: <http://editionsdesfemmes.blogspot.com/sonia-rykiel/>

¹¹ Recorded oral interview of Elisabeth Nicoli, conducted in Paris, August 2023.

¹² Recorded oral interview of Elisabeth Nicoli, conducted in Paris, August 2023.

¹³ Three sweaters of Sonia Rykiel's Spring-Summer 1983 collection were inscribed with the words *Ready, Steady & Go*.

References

- ACTIS-GRANDE R. (1968), "A Talk with Sonia Rykiel", in *Dépêche Mode*, n.p.
- BERTHOD C. (1968), "Sonia Rykiel: Ses robes sont faites pour les hommes", in *Elle*, 29 April, pp. 144-153.
- BRAIDOTTI, R. (1994), *Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory*, Columbia University Press, New York.
- CASTILLO C., PISIER E. (2001), *Sonia Rykiel. Quand elle n'a pas de rouge elle met du noir*, Librairie Arthème Fayard, Paris.
- CIXOUS H. (1994), "Sonia Rykiel in Translation", in BENSTOCK S., FERISS S. (eds.), *On Fashion*, Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick 95-99.
- CIXOUS H., COHEN K., COHEN P. (1976), "The Laugh of the Medusa", in *Signs*, 1:4, pp. 875-893.
- CLERC L. (1976), "Et Maintenant la démodé", in *Elle*, 17 January, pp. 36-37.
- FOUQUE, A. (1988), *Une femme à l'œuvre. Sonia Rykiel, Rhapsody in Black*. <https://www.antoINETTE-fouque.com/fiches/une-femme-a-loeuvre/>
- FREUD S. (1939), "Analyse Terminée et Analyse Interminable", trans. A. Berman, in *Revue française de psychanalyse*, 11:1, pp. 3-38.
- HABIB S., STROBEL-DAHAN A. (2019), "Hélène Cixous", in ACTUARTS, 176, n.p.
- "Horizons: In Focus: Sonia Rykiel", in *Journal of International Textiles*, May 1974, n.p.
- IRIGARAY L. (1977), *Ce sexe qui n'en est pas un*, Editions de Minuit, Paris.
- JOULIA P., MOREAU S. (1969), "Je provoque et je veux", in INA Archives. <https://www.ina.fr/ina-eclair-actu/sonia-rykiel-en-1969-je-provoque-et-je-veux>
- LAFOSSE DAUVERGNE, G. (2003), *La Mode selon Sonia Rykiel*, Editions du collectionneur, Paris.
- MARION S. (1993), *L'école de la vie, ou la France autodidacte*, Editions Jean-Claude Lattes, Paris.
- MASSENET A., MASSENET B. (2006) *Mères et filles. Ce que je voulais te dire*, Aubane Editions, Saint-Martin-Boulogne.
- RYKIEL N. (2021), *Talisman à l'usage de mères et de filles*, Flammarion, Paris.
- ID. (2008), *La Femme Rykiel*, Editions Textuel, Paris.
- RYKIEL S. (1979) *Et je la voudrais nue*, Grasset, Paris.
- ID. (1988), *Celebration*, Editions des Femmes, Paris.
- ID. (1989), *La Collection*, Editions Grasset & Fasquelle, Paris.
- ID. (1993), *Collection terminée, collection interminable*, Flammarion, Paris.
- ID. (1996), *Les Lèvres Rouges*, Grasset, Paris.
- ID. (2005), *L'envers à l'endroit*, Librairie Arthème Fayard, Paris.
- ID. (2011), *Dictionnaire Déglingué*, Flammarion, Paris.