

Dressed and Undressed: A Semiotic Analysis of Manneken Pis

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Abstract

Manneken Pis, the iconic bronze fountain sculpture in Brussels, has been subjected to scholarly examination as a symbol of Belgian cultural identity, yet its distinctive sartorial dimension remained analytically underexplored. This study investigated how the systematic dressing and undressing of the monument produces meaning through material transformation and performative practice. The research employed Roland Barthes' triadic semiotic framework, examining the monument's denotative, connotative, and mythological dimensions. The analysis revealed that the oscillation between naked (original, vulnerable) and clothed (ceremonial, dignified) states generates what Lacanian theory terms a floating signifier a sign whose meaning remains perpetually unstable and renegotiated rather than fixed. The study examined the historical accumulation of over one thousand costumes and traced temporal patterns in costume donations across three centuries. Findings demonstrated that meaning emerges not from either state in isolation but from the irresolvable tension between dressed and undressed dimensions. The research contributes to understanding how contemporary urban monuments negotiate identity and cultural exchange through material practice rather than stable symbolism, with implications for monument studies, material culture scholarship, and fashion semiotics.

Article History

Received 04 January 2026

Revised 26 February 2026

Accepted 20 April 2026

Published 30 April 2026

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Keywords

Manneken Pis, Urban monuments, Material culture, Fashion semiotics

Introduction

In the mediaeval quarter of Brussels, on a sharply curved corner where two streets, Rue de l'Étuve and Rue du Chêne, intersect is figure whose symbolic import exceeds its tiny size. The bronze public fountain sculpture Manneken Pis depicts a naked little boy urinating. It is 55.5 centimeters tall. This crude and childish sculpture, by the Brabantian Jérôme Duquesnoy the Elder, was erected in 1619. It was supposed to be a public water fountain, only that now it has grown to become one of the most notorious representative icons of modern European culture (Authentic Brussels, 2025). Manneken Pis is today a very recognizable local emblem and symbol, not just of the city's (natively cosmopolitan) identity but also of Belgian irreverence more generally, and in particular its (in)famous form of self-deprecatory humor known as zwanze. It attracts an estimated 1,000 visitors a day. Yet underneath this slick acknowledgment there is a complex semiotic territory which, it seems to us, remains largely unexplored by the existing academic literature.

The biography of Manneken Pis is an example of how urban memorials gain meaning through cultural struggle as well as official memory. History There are documents from the Middle Age that refer to a public fountain on this site, but Famous bronze one we see today was made in 1619 by the city of Brussels (Bjerg, 2025). As early as 1616 the statue appears to have been dressed in festivals such as Ommegang (in honor of Archduchess Isabelle) (GardeRobe MannekenPis, 2020). After this, the history of the statue is rife with thefts,



which were also moments for symbolic renegotiation. The statue was stolen by French grenadiers stationed in Brussels in 1747. It resulted in a diplomatic incident whereby King Louis XV of France put the marble within an aristocratic gentleman's suit and ordered that it be decorated with Cross of Saint Louis, such that transgression became transformed into ceremonial spectacle (Authentic Brussels, 2025). This royal apology, in a symbolic language of clothing and given via the medium of an object itself, established a precedent: systematic and ceremonial dressing down of a public monument as a way to make cultural meaning.

The future evolution of dress in the history of European monuments is unparalleled. On May 1, 1698, at the Guilds of Brussels ceremonies, Maximilian II Emanuel, Elector of Bavaria and Governor of the Austrian Netherlands fitted a new tailor-made Livery to the statue. This was MannekenPis' first major gift of official regalia (GardeRobe MannekenPis, 2023). After that, the wardrobe expanded fitfully during the course of the 18th and 19th centuries but accelerated rapidly following World War II. There were over 400 costumes applied to the statue between 1945 and 1994. This figure continued rising throughout the 20th century, so that by 2005 it had ascended to over 750, and by 2018 Manneken Pis had obtained its 1,000th costume (GardeRobe MannekenPis, 2020). The monument is dressed by an official ceremonial calendar and changes between 130 outfits each year. Included in the collection are early court dress, military attire, contemporary sports uniforms as well as national costumes and high fashion from around the world. The GardeRobe MannekenPis was established by the City of Brussels as a museum dedicated to collection, preservation and display of this remarkable garment collection for visitors to admire. This clothing ensemble could be a kind of "second skin" for the statue, one that reports on how symbolic and communicative value in the statue are constantly mobilized.

Manneken Pis' significance as a cultural touchstone stems largely from its role in signifying belgitude, a concept that became popular in Belgium around the 1970s and 1980s and was used to help reverse the country's polarization: It's split into a number of linguistic communities with their own regional identities, 11 Catherine Emerson's monograph on the monument, *Regarding Manneken Pis: Culture, Celebration and Conflict in Brussels* (2016), demonstrates that common depiction of it as a representation of the identity of Brussels, and highlights "the array of interpretations to which the statue has been subjected". The existence of three language communities in Belgium, Flemish-speaking Flanders, French-speaking Wallonia and multilingual Brussels traditionally has made a unifying national identity difficult to construct (Emerson, 2016). Since there are no national symbols to unify the country, belgitude is displayed through self-mockery, embrace of the ordinary and disavowal of seriousness. Manneken Pis is the purest expression of this train of thought: a celebration on an enormous scale of bodily function, disrespect for social authority, and even advocacy of anti-social toilet humor that has become so representative of Belgian culture around the world.

The memorial is *zwanze*, a Brussels dialect word for a style of humor, which is "semi sarcastic, surrealist and often self-mocking" (The Brussels Times, 2025). This form of comedy is so essential to the culture in Brussels that UNESCO has deemed it an intangible cultural heritage (Urban Brussels, 2025). The humor-based order the Friends of Manneken Pis was established as an official group in 1954, and the city of Brussels granted it a charter. Its message is that the monument embodies the culture of folk-humor and cultural heritage, which needs institutional protection, and ought to be staged in ritual. In that regard, we can easily see Manneken Pis as the spirit of Brussels. It is a quiet memorial to the city's heritage of strength, its adaptability to new materials and its long record of not submitting to foreign conquest and political subordination.

Although Manneken Pis has been heavily studied in academic literature in historical, cultural and folklore studies there does appear to a lacuna when it comes to analytical work available. Emerson (2016) comprehensive work has explored how “the celebratory uses of the monument and those that surface society’s problematics are linked,” in relation to its contested status as a symbol, and a site where people make civic meaning. Yet scholarship to date has predominantly investigated the mythical underpinnings of the monument, its place in nationalist discourse and its role as a means by which to articulate Belgian cultural identity and urban belonging. Manneken Pis’s distinctive sartorialist, the ritualized and cyclical dressing up and undressing of this statue, has long been recognized as a historical. The rituals at Manneken Pis: Dressing/dismantling. They have not been systematically scrutinized semiotically as an essential act of meaning-making. The clothing tradition is generally presented as an additional superadded decoration, an embellishment that contributes to the statue’s “real” or “original” meaning, not as a dimension of its communicative function. This compartmentalizing analysis fails to recognize that the oscillation of naked (original, denotative body), and clothed (testamentary, connotative meaning) creates a complex series of symbolic communications carried out through material and performative registers.

The current study addresses this gap by employing a triadic semiotic framework based on Roland Barthes' theory of denotation, connotation, and myth (second-order signification) to analyze Manneken Pis as a communicative sign system whose meaning is constructed and continually reconstructed through material and ceremonial practices of vestment (Barthes, 1972). Utilizing contemporary scholarship in material culture studies, embodiment theory, and visual semiotics, which highlight the role of embodied practices and material objects in shaping knowledge, identity, and social meaning, this analysis positions clothing and material transformation as central arenas through which monuments produce and negotiate symbolic communication. The analysis employs Lacanian psychoanalytic semiotics to frame Manneken Pis as a "floating signifier" a sign whose meaning is not fixed or inherent but is continuously redefined through performative interventions, interpretive practices, and collective ceremonial actions (Lacan, 1977).

This study is structured around three analytical dimensions: clothed, undressed, and metaphorical. The nude condition denotes the statue's exposed flesh, representing the actual fact of infantile urination, which evokes connotations of vulnerability, irreverence, and the traditional humor inherent in zwanze. The dressed state includes the physical reality of the collection of more than 1,000 costumes. These costumes, through their physical presence, textile qualities, and the symbolic meanings that have built up around them, create a second order of signification that is used to negotiate and perform identity, hospitality, cosmopolitanism, and transnational cultural exchange. The symbolic dimension incorporates these material states into a more extensive framework of urban monumental significance, analyzing how the continuous fluctuation between dressed and undressed states generates meaning that transcends the monument's physical attributes, arising instead from the dynamic interaction among material form, ceremonial practice, temporal performance, and visitor interpretation.

This semiotic approach also complements existing cultural-historical work on urban monuments and the development of symbols which it never treats as explaining the meaning itself, but only shows how clothes and material body play a little understood role in transmitting symbols. In employing the distinction between dressed and undressed as a heuristic, this paper proposes to demonstrate how contemporary public monuments engage with identity, place and encounter not through static or established meaning of iconography but through dynamic, performative and materially improvised registers of signification.

Contributions The benefit of the study is to extend the emerging field of fashion semiotics exemplified in how testamentary practice (re. treating as a body surface) such as monumental practices for dressing up on festivals and other occasions, goes beyond individual bodies and consumer identity toward collective and civic transnational communicative practice.

Methodology

Research Design and Theoretical Framework

This study employs qualitative semiotic analysis based upon Barthes' influential model of denotation, connotation and myth (second order signification) (Barthes, 1972). A semiotic reading is a systematic interpretive method for examining signs and symbols in their social, cultural, or visual context that seeks to understand how meaning is produced, circulated and consumed through material objects, images and culturally-affected practices (Smith 2008). According to Smith (2008), quantitative methods are concerned with statistical measurement whilst semiotic analysis is involved with the continued interaction between the analyst, object of study and cultural context in which meaning materializes. This corresponds to the qualitative methods used in studies of visual culture, cultural analysis and the study of material culture disciplines now accepted as critical to arts and humanities research.

Roland Barthes developed a three-tier semiotic model is taken as its primary phenomenological standpoint in this study. The first level, denotation is the actual or literal meaning of a sign that one can see or look up in the dictionary. At this point, the analyst discriminates between actual objective characteristics of the object or image itself that is without interpretation bias (Barthes, 1972). At the denotative level a Manneken Pis is indeed an obvious example of what it says has to be there, namely 'a bronze statuette of a naked little boy peeing and only 55.5 cm high that stands on top of a white stone pedestal in the middle of some square or other in Brussels'. That denotative level is objective, is able to be checked by others, but even here full neutrality becomes impossible because perception always involves culture.

The second level, meaning has to do with the cultural, associative and emotional implications related to the denotative sign. Denotations are objective meanings representing what the sign literally refers to, and connotations are subjective or intersubjective shades of meaning that arise when the sign intersects with the emotions, values, and attitudes of whoever is looking at it or interpreting it (Barthes, 1972). At the connotative level there are: Words Weak, Infantile, Toilet Function, Disrespect of Formal Authority and Brussels Humor (Zwanze) The stuck-to-the-wall "nude" body of Manneken Pis suggests weakness it depicts not power. Physical infancy because more time is spent to learn strength. This sculpture also seems to be an allegory for bodily function. Irreverence towards authority, graphic sexual content scatological humor a unique form of Belgian urban culture known as Zwanze. These meanings have nothing to do with the item per se; instead, they are reflections of a viewer's cultural and historical knowledge and the various senses that have accumulated over hundreds of years of public argument.

The third, myth, is what Barthes terms "second-order signification." "It is when the denotational meanings of a sign are taken as self-evident or common sense, and conceal their contractedness and ideological aspects (Barthes, 1972). In its mythical dimension, the Manneken Pis comes to be not a specific Brussels monument but rather a figure of Belgian national identity, European impudence or human defiance of authority. The mythological sign operates through a process Barthes calls "mythification" whereby, historical meanings

that are culturally specific becomes naturalized and presented as inevitable and eternal. In this analysis of the mythological register, the fluctuation between clothed and unclothed statue serves as a means to naturalize or subvert myths of identity, authenticity, cultural belonging and national-identity for this research.

Data Source and Unit of Analysis

The focus of attention is Manneken Pis itself. It is not something static, a kind of single object that one can check off as complete; it is instead a historically specific and dynamic formation consisting in material form (the bronze statue), performative practice (the pattern of draping the frontal three-quarters covered by a loin wrapper) and social reflection making meaning attached to its monumentality over some four centuries. The secondary, parallel texts employed include the museum's official costume catalogue (kept in GardeRobe Manneken Pis), photographs of past costumes from throughout history, scholarship about the statue itself especially Emerson (2016) and references to gift-giving in historic archives.

It is similar to the way visual culture studies are conducted today. Smith (2008) claims, these precedents do not “pre-determine” the objects of analysis but rather produce them out of “the friction” between historical specificity, material particularity, concept formation and interpretive work. Manneken Pis becomes, in this way, auditorily rendered as an object of research through the active engagement with its materialities, its sartorial habits and theoretical questions connected to it.

Analytical Procedures

The semiotic analysis has an intertwining three analytical stages and the three stratum of Barthes' model:

Step One: Denotative Analysis. This procedure describes all physical, visible features of Manneken Pis when it is unclothed. Through examining its size, materials and sculptural qualities; the action it represents (micturition); the person it represents (a young boy); the place and building it is situated in (Brussels' mediaeval quarter); and how the statue operates (as a water fountain), this essay reads into Manneken Pis as an embodied subject not so much simply what is being signified but rather ‘what comes to life’ through whirling up and reflecting on itself. This would be the transparent, objective foundation on which more abstract meanings are grounded. Denotative analysis, however, unlike connotative analysis, is not merely factual but must also make a selection of which aspects are to be analytic. In Manneken Pis the naked, unclothed body is the primary marker.

Step Two: Analysis of Connotation. This stage discloses the culturally specific and historically relative meanings of the assigned object. The article examines the connotative associations prompted by the naked body of Manneken Pis, such as vulnerability, irreverence, popular humor, bodily independence and lack of decorum; and how these are ‘activated’ in specific performative contexts of reception. The second is much more challenging here, the analyst must try to draw a map of the monument's rich semantic field of meaning that includes historical sources, visitor testimonies (where they're available), academic analysis and her own expertise. This costume analysis is important to connotations, as each costume through its physical materiality, color, texture and association with a particular role (e.g., sports, military, civilian or ceremonial) and donation context generates connotative meanings that may either strengthen or complicate or contest the primary signification of bareness.

Step Three: Analyzing Myths. The third is a focus on the way that connotative meanings become myths or naturalized facts about culture, identity, and national character

universal and timeless. One of two is the most interpretive and theoretical. It considers how the oscillation between 'undressed' (original, authentic, primary) and 'dressed' (derivative, conventional, secondary) states informs a construction and deconstruction of myths of Belgian identity, cultural authenticity and existential relationship between individual bodies and collective significance. This section also examines the manner in which the concept of Manneken Pis as a stable, unified representation of Brussels' identity obscures the work's actual volatility and that suggested by its controversies.

Analytic Integration: The Triadic Dimension

These three analytical levels, while presented in succession for clarity here, actually operate simultaneously and iteratively. The analyst cannot stop in his oscillation between designation and connotation, examining again and again the indivisibility of the "objective" data of the monument from their interpretation according to a given system. Similarly, the mythical aspect is in a continual process of changing the connotative and denotative since those happen to be what is "evident," or "objective," at any specific time-period by those who tend to dominate society. This cyclic and multidirectional analytical movement is characteristic of what modern qualitative researchers who combine semiotic technique with ethnographic, historical, and cultural lenses refer to as rigorous semiotic analysis (Shivakumar et al., 2020).

Temporal and Comparative Dimensions

The examination is also conducted with respect to time, exploring how the meanings of clothed and unclothed evolve over time. The study identifies costume gifting and dressing behavior across three primary eras: (1) the early tradition period (1616–1698), (2) the institutional development era (1698–1945), and (3) postwar acceleration and contemporary history period 1945 to present. This periodization allows the research to examine shifting significations of costume and embodiment during shifts in Belgian nationalism, European identity, tourism and cultural internationalism.

The comparison is built into the analysis: nakedness is perceived not in or as itself, but played off against clothedness; and so with the other side. The meaning of any one condition is largely determined by being contrasted and related to the other. This form of comparative and contrastive analysis epitomizes a semiotic methodology where meaning is considered as being relational and differential rather than inherent or stable (Barthes, 1972).

Methodological Reflexivity and Limitations

Interpretative and contextual are the words that best describe this semiotic study. Cultural bias of the analyst, his/her theoretical allegiances and interpretative tools inevitably impact on which meanings are recognized, privileged and suppressed in the research. The study does not pretend to "reveal" or "unmask" the true" or complete meanings of Manneken Pis, but strives for an internally consistent, theoretically enlightened interpretation that highlights hitherto unconsidered semiotic functions and effects of the monument.

One crucial shortcoming of this perspective is that it does not ground its argument in any primary investigation into how everyday passersby experience the monument there is no ethnographic fieldwork, visitor interviews or direct consumer research here. The study is rooted in a close reading of the item and its history; it's not statistical data about how viewers responded to it. A fuller treatment may integrate the semiotic analysis with ethnographic methods or visitor surveys to reveal how different perceiving subjects constitute significance for Manneken Pis.

Also, though the analysis here focus mainly on material and testamentary dimensions, other analytic dimensions that are crucial (for example, political economy of tourism, nationalist discourse regarding the statue; gender and embodiment theory in regard to construction of nationhood; colonial histories that comprise its meaning) have to be left out as they would make it possible for a fuller interpretation. Such limitations reflect the necessary selectivity of any one analytical field; they point towards directions for future research, rather than a fundamental flaw in this approach.

Advantages of Semiotic Methodology for This Study

Semiotic analysis is a good tool to understand Manneken Pis and there are several reasons that support this idea. For one thing, the meaning of a monument is not carved in granite; it varies depending on how different cultures view it. The nude body means different things in different circum-stances, while clothing is something whose meanings are accumulated by culture. This kind of meaning is meant to be made more transparent through semiotic technique, which it models on how signs produce meanings through cultural conventions and interpretative processes. Secondly, the thing itself, a monument systematically dressed and undressed, may be interpreted as a semiotic practice proper: that of vesture is actually understood as an act of communication which produces and changes meaning. Semiotic analysis involves signals and the way they function in culture, and so it gives us the right words and ideas to apply when looking at this performance. Thirdly, an analysis of Manneken Pis cannot but take account of material elements (textures, colors and shapes of clothes) which lie on the side of meaning rather than that of visualization. Material semiotics, which extends the concern of Barthes so as to factor in those meanings understood through touch, material heft and sensation provides a way for us to address these questions (Smith, 2008).

Results and Discussion

The Undressed State: Denotation and Primary Connotation

In connotation, Manneken Pis is an image or portrayal of a child urinating. A seated person is 55.5 centimeters tall; this person assumes a vulnerable pose with slightly spread legs, bent torso leaning forward and the main axis of the body slanting downwards to the fountain basin beneath. The anatomy diagram displays a child's genitals without garments or shrouds, with no sense of shame or concealment. This signified level is what Barthes (1972) terms the "denoted message" the referential, empirical world which should be accessible in principle to any observer regardless of culture: a little naked boy pissing.

But to no sooner than this level of de-annotative seeming 'objectivity', interpretation is taking place. The choice of this activity, this age and this physical state has connotational meanings that are not completely detached from their denotative quality. The associations of meaning become myriad and profound when someone is naked. The pissing, exposed body carries many registers at the same time: Humiliation and shame, fascination and disgust, potent eroticism all crowded together.

Being weak and open. Formal nudity, particularly the male child genitalia, represents a state of biological and social defenselessness. The naked body of the child appears defenseless whereas the fully clothed adult male figure is cloaked and insulated from attack even bearing symbols of his authority. The naked child's body has no social markings indicating position, power, or institutional link (Emerson, 2016). This fragility, however, is neither depicted as tragic nor moving; rather it comes across as a simple expression of bodily existence the fact that bodies are needy and do things like go to the toilet, regardless of cultural expectations or public propriety.



Figure 1. Naked Manneken Pis
Source: Author's personal photo collection.

Disrespect and Refusal. When one pees in public, one performs a private act in public. This is a textbook failure of middle-class manners and decency. The monument represents a man who, to change the phrase, "leaves himself no shelter in the hour yet frightens off men with fingers armed to the teeth having only one cause for doing so. It is not a violent or threatening disregard, but an anarchistic one in the intellectual sense that it refuses to subordinate social mores to bodily liberty. Manneken Pis embodies what one might even call a "right to urinate". This argument is not an overtly political one, but rather an implicit claim about how the body's fundamental needs outrank official authority (Emerson, 2016).

Folk Humor and Zwanze. In the cultural context of Brussels, the naked pissing youth is an incarnation of *zwanze* a certain kind of surrealist humor which is semi-sarcastic and mocks authority and simply can't be taken seriously. The small size of the statue, its infant form and public exposure all epitomize to give an amusing impression; but the fact is that it is not for fun- just to make a caricature. Rather, this is the comedy of speaking up and defending yourself, of causing authority to see what it would rather leave unseen (the body, its needs, its material exigency) and taking a perverse pleasure in refusing to be ashamed of itself (Van Istendael, 2019). **Genuineness and Uniqueness.** Within the history of the monument, however, its naked state is one of authenticity, and is the primitive (or original) aspect of Manneken Pis before being clothed; before things were added to it; and even before cultural sense was affixed by ceremonial investment. This sense is etiologically produced: the state of nakedness is connected to authenticity solely by way of its contrast with the state of clothes. This link is ideological: it solidifies the idea that the naked body is more real than the clothed one, when in fact each is a cultural construction.

The Dressed State: Second-Order Signification and the Costume Archive

The dressed-up Manneken Pis operates as a second-order meaning system, myth (Barthes 1972). The wardrobe of more than a thousand outfits for the statue is not simply an addition, or adornment, to the naked body's fundamental meaning; it introduces an entirely different mode of understanding that serves to display identity, cultural contact and social negotiation.

The Louis XV Dress Waste of a Beginning. The oldest and most symbolically loaded garment in the collection is the one from 1747, a gift from King Louis XV of France. It was made after French grenadiers swiped the statue, stirring up a diplomatic storm. This garment is made of "brocaded silk lampas blue and adorned with gold and silver thread" has "passementerie buttons, embroidered legwarmers as well as white leather gloves" (GardeRobe MannekenPis, 2020). It has a lot of meaning. The gift does many communicative things at once: it is a diplomatic apology (formal, as between kings in which the king pays for the crime); it honors the statue (it becomes a Knight of the Royal and Military Order of Saint-Louis); it makes the little naked boy elegant at court; and it sets an aesthetic benchmark that ceremony, costuming and elaborate materiality are exemplars of cultural meaning.

The materials used for the Louis XV costume extravagantly figured silk, gold thread, knightly insignia offer a philosophical shift. The human body naked is a sign of vulnerability and exposedness, while those materials are emblematic of wealth, power, formality and status. The garments are comical because the small figure in these fancy aristocratic get-up is still so tiny and identifiable as the naked little boy. This costume creates an active conflict between the naked meaning (of exposure, rebellion, defiance) and the clothed meaning (of honor, formality and integration into formal histories of power). This tension plays out across the history of the costume collection.

Growth in time and quantity. Vestment has been made here, and costumes from the previous three centuries display how that occurs. After Maximilian II Emanuel first dressed it in 1698, the statue was rarely clothed and for special ceremonial or diplomatic events. From 400 in 1945 to 750 in 1994 and more than one thousand by the year of our observations (2018) (GardeRobe MannekenPis, 2023). Arguably, Manneken Pis dressing as a form of cultural communication developed in conjunction with postwar internationalization, the rise in tourism and cultural globalization.

Manneken Pis gives a continuous message, as he wears 20–30 different costumes a year. Unlike historical monuments, the costume of Manneken Pis is referred as official ceremonial calendar (GardeRobe MannekenPis, 2023) and it changes every events, seasons and commemorative days. Thanks to this routine rotation and renewal, the import of the statue is continually evolving.

Costume Collection Categorical Meanings. The costume categories of GardeRobe MannekenPis are geographical/national origin designer/fashion house celebrity associated trade/profession uniforms sports team uniforms folklore/carnival and charity/civic association outfits (Museozoom, 2024). Through analyzing these categorical divisions, the message that a clothed monument might portray becomes apparent.



Figure 2. Manneken Pis in the Tradition of Dressing Up in Costumes
Source: GardeRobe MannekenPis (2023)

National and Cultural Identity. Foreign dignitaries, embassies and cultural institutions donate costumes to Manneken Pis as a form of national identity performance and negotiation. Manneken Pis was temporarily a symbol of Thai national identity after Thai royal officials clothed him in Thai traditional clothes to honor the late King and Queen of Thailand (Nation Thailand, 2025). Manneken Pis became a symbol of Philippine culture in Brussels after then-Vice President Doy Laurel had the statue wearing a Philippine costume back in 1986. Here are those gifts made tangible, making the Brussels monument cabled into a global signaling system that records and acknowledges many national and cultural identities.

Professional and Trade Identity. The meaning of Manneken Pis ranges from the aristocratic or ceremonial, as in Salamone's were confections meant to provoke joy, to everyday work and physical exercise through costumes of judo gi, bullfighter dress, street sweeper clothes and industrial worker wear. These garments suggest that the statue's significance is not limited to ceremonial or diplomatic situations but extends out into its everyday material existence. The street-sweeper or factory-worker attire links the sculpture's original meanings (vulnerability, exposure and rejection of pretense) to those elemental daily identities.

Popular Culture and Celebrity. Costumes of Elvis Presley, Mozart, James Bond, Obelix (Asterix) and Spider-Man give an eclectic air to Manneken Pis a blend of high and low culture. The Elvis costume, for example, links the statue's role as a cultural ambassador for Brussels with the global entertainment industry. These clothes have "democratic" meaning: any cultural signifier, however far from the pole and no matter its origins, can put them on. I met an airport security guard who found out about fashion shows in a museum. This is in stark contrast with the tightly regulated rules of formal dress in diplomatic costume displays.

The Oscillation between Dressed and Undressed: Rupture and Meaning-Making

It is in the oscillation, contrast and interruption of clothed/undraped status that significant are produced, and may signal this research's most significant finding. From clothed to naked, from formal ceremonial dress to kitschy pop-culture costume, the identity of the statue is always in flux.

Here is oscillation with meaning in a number of registers:

The Productive Conflict. The naked, unashamed and defiant baby versus the well-dressed who is held in proper esteem two irreconcilable concerns. Memory, photography and material evidence reveal a nude body beneath the costume. Getting dressed is simply no substitute for getting undressed. This paradoxical irritant of the imagination prevents Manneken Pis from becoming a permanent symbol of national pride, democratic virtue or cultural identity. Lacan (1977) instead refers to the statue as a "floating signifier" a symbol whose signification remains constantly in flux across many different and even contradictory registers.

Temporal Results. Manneken Pis has an articulated temporality: he is garbed in a new outfit every two months according to a predetermined ceremonial schedule. The appearance of Manneken Pis varies depending on lead time, seasonal influence, occasion, and cultural background; but unlike typical monuments it is not static. The ones doing so were visitors in Thai traditional dress, who realize that this is a fleeting state of affairs which will not endure. This transient visibility makes it difficult for the statue to be mythologized and sedimented. Instead, what it means is always dependent, performative and materially shifting.

The Inauguration as communication. Each incoming costume is "handed" over to the city's officials in a City Hall ceremony and actor wherever it will then be "put on" the figure at his fountain (GardeRobe MannekenPis, 2023). Through these occasions, Manneken Pis becomes a social actor within a network of ceremonial, diplomatic and civic relationships. Costume donation is transformed into an institutionalized cultural communication practice through the event. These events are the only ones in which donor countries, companies and civic organizations all formally recognize the principles of Brussels, Belgium and Manneken Pis.

Discussion

Theoretical Implications: Beyond Binary Symbolism

A semiotic analysis of the dressed/undressed flux of Manneken Pis weakens the fixed meaning of monuments. Nationalist historiography typically assumes that monuments have natural readings (such as memorization of material events, representation of the nation's myths or ideals, and glorification of its illustrious personages or epiphanies) for viewers. It is a durably written that carries meanings across time, and the monument reproduces ideology.

Manneken Pis upends this model. The statue has no substantive significance. Costume change, time-based performance (the ceremonial calendar) and interpretative practice (of the many kinds of visitor who interact with) keep rewriting it. Sculpturally too, the statue actively prevents mythology from congealing because it cycles between its naked (real) and robed (derivative) states: The bare-armed gremlin doesn't now become an armored hero.

The expressive power of the statue is not in its blemishes but in its instability. Manneken Pis, according to Emerson (2016), matters because of how it can reflect "the breadth of interpretations to which the monument has been subjected" and host "both celebratory uses of the statue and those that articulate tensions within society". The dressed/undressed oscillation gives a formalism for this multiplicity.

Material Culture and Embodied Meaning

This research contributes to the emerging field of material culture studies, an interdisciplinary arena which argues that meaning is created through material practice, embodied engagement and sensory encounter with things (Smith, 2008). The clothes of Manneken Pis are material objects with properties: texture, weight, color, durability, formality; they mean something in and through sensory and tactile as well as visual and symbolic registers.

The Louis XV costume, constructed of “brocaded blue silk lampas and set off with silver and gold thread,” is an object that can be touched and felt for its texture, gleam and heft. Formal leggings, passementerie buttons, white leather gloves: These are material things that achieve a status of dignified formality though the very qualities of their materials flyer than-thou pressed silk; heaviness of stitched-in threadwork; an angled geometry to the ranks of buttons. It is “material semiotics” or “sensory semiotics” that are needed to fully represent this material register of meaning (Smith, 2008).

Contemporary costumes donations judo gi, sporting uniforms, labour wear constitute a dialectic of material communication. The judo gi encourages the discipline of the physique and martial art because of its loose yet fast movement which is why those training jiu-jitsu prefer to wear them when doing their routines. The opposition between these various forms of materiality demonstrates that costume meaning is situated in the material, embodied powers and relationships of individual clothes themselves, not just iconic or symbolic.

Belgitude and the Politics of Anti-Heroic Symbolism

The inquiry reveals that Manneken Pis may be the most peculiar national icon in the world. Most national monuments honour some hero, or victory in battle, or moment in history Manneken Pis honors the bodily function, and child-like irreverence towards those who wield authority. This anti-heroic symbology is a manifestation of belgitude, a sense Emerson (2016) describes as: that “perverse Belgian identity predicated on its embrace of self-deprecation, absurdism and refusal of grand narratives.”

The stripping and dressing of Manneken Pis is belgitude. The nude statue is a representation of the bare un-pleasantries of embodied life; the refusal to be dignified by it, body autonomously giving society (a political throwback in itself) the bird. Dressing returns hyper-nudity to ritual, diplomacy and institutional recognition. So belgitude is the continual rock’n roll between disdainful rejection and formal abidance, anarchistic individuality and civilized integration, rude truth and elaborate decorum.

Those swings mirror the paradoxes of Belgian national identity. According to Izquierdo (2014), Belgium is a nation-state with no real past or culture. Belgitude invites fragmentation, skepticism and irreverent humor to explore cultural identity instead of resolving this issue through nationalist mythology (one single story of Belgian glory). Manneken Pis is the representation of this indecision of whether we are naked or not.

Fashion Semiotics and Vestimentary Practice

This study demonstrates how social, civic and institutional action brings clothes into meaning making processes which is an essential contribution to fashion semiotics. Fashion semiotics has also considered issues such as how individuals perform identity, negotiate social hierarchies and conform/not-conform through clothes (Barthes, 1972). Manneken Pis demonstrates how the act of vestimentary practice can be a communicative communal performance, where countries, organizations and publics participate in the process of

meaning making through the ceremonial dressing of a public monument.

The gifts of costumes to Manneken Pis represent “monumental fashion,” using attire to signal civic and national identity, diplomatic acknowledgement or cultural affiliations. Manneken Pis has a wardrobe that is the shared depot of cultural signification produced by institutions in ritual and public ceremony, not one consumed by privileged individuals or armies of disaggregated customers as auteur fashion or mass fashion are.

As the costume archive puts it, fashion is one of history’s primary ways of creating record and cultural memory. From 18th-century aristocratic silk clothes to postwar professional uniforms to contemporary pop-culture outfits, clothing offer windows onto material culture, professional identity, global cultural circulation and changing aesthetic taste. Textile, color, shape and garment-tales recount the history of the last three centuries in the collection of costumes.

Monument Studies and Urban Commemoration

This article demonstrates that contemporary monuments can be both dynamic sites of ongoing renegotiation and performance of recompositing, offering insights for monument studies. Mainstream monument scholarship, following Anderson (1983), has considered monuments as tools for creating a nation – they materialize fissured narratives regarding moments of national importance in stones that fight over and through memory.

An alternative perspective can be found in the Manneken Pis model. Rather than a monument of past greatness, the statue performs “open-ended commemorative practice,” an ongoing invocation and renegotiation of meaning through material change, ritual appearance and disappearance and participatory oversight by various actors. By dressing, undressing, photographing and visiting (and interpreting), the statue comes to mean something.

This is a profound practice approach that informs how cities and countries now understand civic symbols and remembrance. Urban leaders need to design monuments of the kind with which everyone can agree and whose meaning remains open, ever transforming. Musee GardeRobe MannekenPis, the 2017 museum salutes progress throughout history, it preserves numerous reproductions and calls for the support of contributors and visitors.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

This semiotic analysis elucidates Manneken Pis’s signifying structure, but it has limitations. The study is based first on close readings of the monument and its history but it does not incorporate interviews with visitors, anthropological observation or empirical research into how different viewers perceive clothed and naked bodies. A further analysis would use a semiotic interpretation and ethnographic methodologies to describe how tourists, citizens of Brussels and foreigners visitors perceive the monument.

Secondly, the analysis highlights vestimentary and material dimensions while omitting tourism’s political economy, gender/embodiment theory, postcolonial perspective of the statue’s global circulation/mimicry as well as irreverence and capitalist commodification (Manneken Pis merchandising). These issues need to be explored in future research.

Third, the study traces the chronological growth of costumes in the collection but does not consider whether meanings associated with states of being dressed and undressed may have changed over time or if current costume donations are interpreted differently from 18th- or 19th-century ceremonial gowns.

Cross-semiotic analysis of other perpetually evolving monuments, ethnography of tourist and local interpretants of/below Manneken Pis, historic periodization of the

meaning(s) associated with costume across historical eras and an account for how the plentiful representations/copies/ merchandise that constitute Manneken Pis impact on the symbolic use or users collocating this inter text all these can conquer these limits.

Conclusion

The semiotic analysis of the clothed and unclothed Manneken Pis shows that in itself each states does not produce a meaning, instead the sense is produced by the endless change between these different states. To be naked is to open oneself up to attack; it's disrespectful and a loss of control over your own body. Naked has nothing to mean but have there be a second-order meaning of which identification, diplomatic recognition and cultural exchange are carried out. The intractable contradiction between these states prevents mythification the closing down of meaning around a single, fixed point: Manneken Pis remains, as Lacan would say, a "floating signifier," perpetually reinterpretable.

This finding has implications beyond Manneken Pis. It suggests that monuments need not provide for defined meanings or narrate clear historical stories. Instead, it contends that monuments can be sites of constantly changing cultural transmission. They also are capable of being interpreted in many ways, resistant to mythification and amenable to constant renegotiation through public engagement, material practice and ceremonial performance. At a moment of fractured identities, contested historical narratives and complex processes of cultural globalization, Manneken Pis offers an indication to how monumental practice might work in these contemporary times.

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