



# Darning as a Texture of Processes, a Systemic Interpretation

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## Abstract

Mending is a highly philosophical topic because it questions two major issues of metaphysics: identity and change. This aim of this paper is to examine the processes involved in the act of darning in textile objects through the lens of systemic thinking. Two interrelated components of darning are scrutinized: the thread and the stitches. Their interaction gives rise to a complex theoretical subject that can be equated to an individual for the central role this relationship plays in this textile practice. Finally, the author will show that the processes detected within the textile realm are a valuable tool for the understanding of the reparative practices applied to justice that are also investigated by psychology and law studies.

**Keywords:** Darn; Mending; Repair; Systemic thinking; Thread; Stitches; Reparative justice

## Introduction

The word darn evokes a process: the effort to restore something that has been damaged. Specifically, something is darned when a fabric or other material is mended; generally in the textile realm, this is done by sewing stitches across the whole itself or by applying similar or different fabrics over it. From a philosophical point of view, mending is definitely an ontological operation, because it means rebuilding something, to restore the integrity of an object in a new, different way. On a semantic level, the term darn melts together two ideas, positive and negative. In ordinary language the exclamation 'darn it' it is an expression of annoyance or surprise (Darn it! I missed the train). Both characteristics can be understood by thinking of a mended pair of socks: they are still usable (good thing), despite their being worn and overused (bad thing). In the past, when mending clothes was a sign of poverty because the wearer was unable to buy a new garment, the presence of a darn was a matter of shame for the wearer. Today's fashion, by emphasising the reuse/recycling of worn garments makes a turn towards interpreting a mended garment as an eco-sustainable practice at the intersection of multiple anthropological areas of interest (Spelman 2002; Bialski, Derwanz, Otto and Vollmer 2015). Such a valuable approach to darning is a well-known part of Japanese culture. The folk textile

tradition of sashiko, literally meaning to pierce something (or someone), has been used in Japan for the past few hundred years, particularly to strengthen clothing in the cold winters of the Tōhoku region. As Wada notes «a threaded needle can be viewed as the co-agent of stitches, infusing their materials with properties in a 'processual' and relational manner that reflects the currents of the lifeworld (...) threaded needle provides agency for negotiating between substances and the medium that surrounds textile and people» (Wada 2020: 1, 8). From this perspective, repair is the main path to a renewal that elaborates the concept of novelty in a different way. As a keyword of fashion and being in fashion, the "new" in mending is to be interpreted as a new possibility of being rather than a new object. This concept does not only invites us to rethink the notion of "newness" or the aesthetics of "newness" because it belongs in a profound way to the human condition (Wiens 2013; Reeves-Evison and Rainey 2018). The human being, as Arendt has widely theorized (1958), renews himself every time through action. As we have seen, a mended textile is made of thread and stitches. The interaction between the two components reveals several dynamics that are generally under-theorised or completely neglected by philosophy (Fisogni 2024). Before investigating these, a brief account of systems thinking is in order.

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## A Systemic Point of View

Complex phenomena, i.e. most of the phenomena of life, can be better understood through a systemic approach (Bertalanffy 1967; Urbani Ulivi 2019; Minati 2019), which allows an understanding on a more comprehensive basis (Urbani Ulivi 2019: VI). Through the lens of systemic thinking, the main question is not about what something is, but how it functions in its inner layers and in relation to other entities and with the environment in which each phenomenon is embedded. Focusing on the processes behind what happens in fashion is the main aim of the current research. As already outlined, the term fashion is primarily understood as the clothing system. Although systemic thinking has become increasingly popular among scholars in recent years, and is by nature interdisciplinary, some explanations are useful for a better understanding of its macro-characteristics. The first idea to keep in mind in this theoretical perspective is that all the objects around us are not simply ‘things’ composed of ‘parts’, but systems and each of them is the result of several interrelations. The second step, in becoming familiar with General System Thinking (GST) emphasises the concept of relation/interrelation, which is based both on the well-ordered dynamics of every phenomenon of life and the capacity to give rise to new, unexpected properties. There is a broad consensus among international scholars that systemic thinking is the more valuable interdisciplinary perspective for dealing with complex issues because of its ability to grasp the interrelationships that link them. Complexity is a term that belongs to a wide range of topics; it belongs very much to fashion whose identity is intuitively systemic by nature, so that it is generally discussed in terms of the fashion system in the economic context. Although we intuitively agree on what a complex phenomenon is, the definitions differ. The problem of complexity is to arrive at a definition. On this premise, it can be understood why «the concept of complexity (...) is strictly related to the temporary state in which the observer finds himself» (Pessa 2013: 75). According to the GST (Urbani Ulivi 2019) objects and events are considered in terms of open systems; this means that they are not mere aggregations or sums of parts, but primarily dynamic units, to which certain qualities are attached that depend on many interactions and processes, internal or external to the system, in the context of a continuous exchange with the environment that gives rise to systemic properties or II type systemic properties. Scholars can rightly speak, of «an ordered of interrelated parts whose characteristics depend both on the characteristics of the parts and on the web of their interconnections» (Agazzi 2019: X). Each system can thus be seen as a simple and complex unit that interacts with the whole. Historically, the idea of a system has been deeply intertwined with modern scientific thinking, since Galileo’s *Dialogo sui due massimi sistemi* (1632), but in the contemporary

era it was revived by the Austrian biologist Von Bertalanffy who developed a paradigm (General System Theory 1968) that also draws on also models elaborated in cybernetics that can be applied to a multidisciplinary field. In short, GST fits a variety of issues to which analytical philosophy, linear thinking and reductionist approaches have generally proved unable to provide answers. Traditional conceptual frameworks have been updated or rewritten (e.g., finalism or radicalisation, as the author will argue in the paper) while new concepts, derived from biology or computational sciences (auto-organisation, emergence, equivalence, dissipation, balance) have been forged and successfully applied. Like a veritable rock in the pond, GST, by virtue of its non-linear approach, offers a valuable key to understanding phenomena that affect multiple levels of the human experience, from natural science, medicine, biology to politics and philosophy. In recent years, scholars have demonstrated that the systemic approach provides a better response to contemporary social phenomena than linear thinking. However, the new approach has not yet reached the core of the problem, as it provides a general, punctual overview of the interactions between subsystems, without addressing the explanation of how these dynamics work. Unlike the ‘first systemics’, which aims in particular to study the organization of complex systems, the ‘second systemics’ sheds light on coherence and dynamics of aggregations (Pessa 2013; Minati, Pessa & Abram 2016), as Urbani Ulivi notes, warning against «the risk of systemic reductionism» (Ulivi 2019: VI). The concept of emergence, within a framework of theoretical incompleteness (Minati and Pessa 2018), is a cornerstone of the systemic thinking. It is primarily concerned with the origin of systemic properties (or second-level systemic properties) that result from the interactions within systems and between systems and the environment. The human mind is a paradigmatic case of this: it cannot be reduced to the chemical processes of the brain, nor its functions and activities, but can be explained in terms of environmental interactions with the neuronal cells (Urbani Ulivi 2013; 2019). Language, as well as many aspects of fashion – the trends or the same idea of elegance - naturally belong to this field. At this point of the paper it is possible to take a closer look at the processes underlying the practice of darning and to show how relevant they are also from a philosophical point of view.

## The Thread as a Channel of Processes

The word thread, at the root of the clothing realm, refers to a fine cord of several materials spun out to considerable length or twisted filaments or fibres of any kind used for sewing, knitting or weaving. Furthermore, the origin of the thread is related to several acts that are part of the more complex process of joining. In the world of music, string instruments, or chord phones, are objects that produce different sounds from vibrating strings when

someone plays, sounds or touches the strings. The thread becomes a string when it transmits sounds; in cordophone instruments, the strings are incorporated into the body of the instrument itself. As in the case of wearing, there is a reciprocal, interactive relationship. The human body is also an example of this reciprocal cooperation, with the vocal chords or vocal folds that produce the sounds of the voice. The semantic field of thread is linked to the idea of creating links and connecting together different objects to form a new entity. In general, textile glossaries also consider the thread count in terms of 1) the number of ends and picks per inch in a woven fabric; 2) the number of wales and courses per inch in a knitted fabric. Since the dawn of civilisation, the thread has been associated with organised societies. Next to the body of “Ötzi the Iceman”, the mummified 5,000-year-old man frozen in the Italian Dolomites Mountains was found a string of about 2 meters for his wooden hunting bow, which was still unfinished at the time of the Neolithic hunter’s death. Made from three twisted threads, probably the tendons of an unidentified animal, the string – together with the other items of Ötzi’s equipment – reveals a fine technical craftsmanship. Obtained from plants, string made hunting more successful 20,000-30,000 years ago; Neolithic man applied weaving techniques to a limited number of crafts. The Greek myth of the Ariadne’s thread, which tells of the string she gave Theseus to escape labyrinth of Crete, associates the thread, as well as the processes of spinning and winding, with the ability to solve complex problems. From a systemic perspective, a thread evokes the network of the interactions between systems, creating a map of wires from which energy is released. It is worth noting that in computer science the notion of thread is a core concept for processing information, a basic sequence of programmed instructions. Within the Internet, a thread is a sequence of responses to an initial message posting. It is also a programming technique. In addition to the specific geometrical properties of a straight line, which is equal to itself with respect to the point and is expected to have certain properties (for any two distinct points, there is a unique line containing them, and any two distinct lines intersect in at most one point), a thread is an entity associated with the state of being fluid. This key-trait plays a main role in the systemic processes, which also have relevant consequences for the fashion items, as it will be argued. In short, a thread can be seen as a kind of channel that allows information to flow within, in a constant, continuous way, from point to point. If fluidity is highly relevant in terms of transporting physical qualities (hot, cold, dry, wet) or volatile contents (tenderness, softness, roughness), the channel-like structure of a thread displays its transformative potential. Opacity, originally a physical property of the matter, is a key word in systemic thinking because it represents the vast region of interactions (Vitiello, 2019) and, secondly, it brings to the surface some cognitive activities: more

precisely, the inferences that the mind makes in order to grasp phenomena of which it has no direct knowledge. To better understand this passage, we can imagine the surface of a metal being hit by a ray of light. This event generates series of feedbacks that operate at the most inaccessible, invisible, microscopic level of matter. This domain is the barycentre of a transformative process that occurs between an observable level of description (radicalisation) and an invisible one (the domain of opacity), between input (the beam of light) and output (the response of matter). In spite of its invisibility, this level gives physical observation a certain degree of understanding; it allows hypotheses whose credibility is given by the verifiability of predictions made on the two visible levels of the process: input/output. Focusing on the invisible, but theoretically grounded connection between the ‘possible’ and the ‘effective’ side of any action, means highlighting the passage from a single thread of cotton, silk or wood to a finite object, or understanding why a dress is not simply a garment but it collects and transforms the collective productive / creative effort of a community. From this point of view, it is also easy to see why a systemic approach is needed for a deeper understanding of what sustainability means for fashion. Furthermore, it can be realized why fashion “speaks” and communicates (ideas, narratives) far beyond the story of the garment itself. Nevertheless, the multifaceted and fluid identity of the thread makes it easier to intellectually grasp why the thread carries so many metaphorical issues. I quote some expressions: the thread of thoughts, losing the thread, finding the thread, the thread of reasoning. The meanings they convey are intuitive, even if not superimposable. In the first statement, the idea of the fluidity of mental activity clearly prevails, almost as if the ideas were strung on a hypothetical, imaginary thread, whose elasticity allows for constant readjustments. The second metaphor throws light on a kind of reasoning that can be interrupted when logical coherence is lacking. The lost thread also recalls the myth of Ariadne on Naxos bringing to the surface the idea of disorientation. It is an experience that, on a cognitive level, corresponds to silence or stammering. Furthermore, one finds the “right thread” when everything flows smoothly in the discourse, as in life. On a strictly metaphorical level, however, the thread of argumentation provides something more than the dynamics underlying the thread. In addition to the coherence of the reasoning, good argumentation reveals clarity in thought. It is interesting to note that in the metaphors associated with the thread, the idea that processes of fluidity and linearity tend to prevail over connection. A concept that is typically linked to the thread, especially in the textile field. Furthermore, the thread is also what connects parts and sutures wounds. However, the metaphor primarily captures the thread’s characteristic OAS a channel for the rapid transit of the immaterial. This is the red thread / *le fil rouge* that brings us back to the beginning of the



systemic meditation on the potential of the thread. Three dynamics are separable.

**Flowing:** A passage of information, content, energy made possible by the linear structure of the thread grounds the transcendental conditions for dissipative events. Each point of the thread can therefore be seen as a unit of flow feeding the entire whole string.

**Input / Output:** Signals from different sources flow into and out of the fibres of the thread giving rise to a balancing process between the energy of S (the thread) and S1 (the fabric), or between the energy of S and S2 (the wearer). A continuous change of the components of the thread is part of this process.

**Connecting:** A thread is the basic feature of a network system where information flows very quickly due to the linear, elastic, fluid network of interrelations. A vivid example of this process is the neural network. Each thread has a high organisational potential due to its ability to give a unified identity to multiple things/parts/bodies.

**Unifying:** The thread not only connects, it unites. The two processes seem similar, and in part they are, but they involve different dynamics. To unite means to make one of the many parts. Let's try to think about the work of the tailor, who uses thread to sew together the main fabrics, those used in facings, buttons, etc. Without the use of thread there would be no individual being in any way – the individual – jacket, dress, and trousers. Clothes made without the use of thread, i.e. without seams, resemble the "veil of Maja", which is capable of constantly changing its identity with its form. A maxi scarf of 140 cm x 140 cm, for example, becomes a long women's dress when tied around the neck or a cloak, or a sarong or a sheet.

### Stitches as Attempt at Coherence

As a principle of coherence for textile objects, a stitch is basically a deliberate turn of the thread with the aim of joining different parts into a new coherent object. Since the Neolithic Age, the art of stitching was enhanced and applied to many fields of life, from building shelters to clothing, and to surgery. It is precisely the medical use that sheds light on the more intimate systemic process associated with sewing: it was intended to restore wealth, through a thread. Sewing has a relevant metaphysical function, which is to give form to a garment. This term does not simply refer to a certain profile given to an object, but to a form: it implies a dynamic principle that holds together the multiple parts of which an object is made. Giving shape to a stitched garment is not the same as styling a seamless garment. In the former case, an autonomous entity is created, even if it is a bespoke garment, made to measure for its owner. Clothes made from a single piece of fabric – a very common type of dress in ancient Egypt – are modelled on the body of the person wearing them and, once removed, they return to their original characteristics. The stitches are therefore a process of identification; the sewn garment is an individual that speaks the language of the fabric with which it is made of, of the stitches that make it, and of the design that

animates it. Another important feature of embroidery is the message it conveys, using the thread as an information carrier. A thread naturally speaks the language of the material it is made of; it reveals the degree of humidity of the environment in which it is kept. A coloured thread adds colour information. The thread used to sew a fabric also speaks of the skill of those who used it, both in hand and machine sewing. The style and taste of a historical period can be grasped immediately by analysing the stitches. In a way, the stitches reveal the opaque material that is the essence of the thread, as discussed in the previous paragraph. In addition, a creative process takes place in which the thread is seen as the key factor in the identity of the garment, no longer simply a "set of pieces of fabric", but a dress, a pair of trousers, a bag.

### Processes

**Joining:** Joining is the process by which two or more parts are brought together using different material synergies (heat, pressure) to create a new entity. A common feature of joining is the demonstration of the steps necessary to achieve the final goal. A valuable example of how to approach the essence of joining comes from the EU's policy of integrating new members into the Community. It consists of three stages: 1) When a country is ready, it becomes an official candidate for membership. 2) The candidate country enters into formal membership negotiations, a process that involves adopting existing EU law, preparing to apply and enforce it properly, and implementing the judicial, administrative, economic and other reforms necessary for the country to meet the conditions for membership, known as the accession criteria. 3) When the negotiations and accompanying reforms have been completed to the satisfaction of both sides, the country can join the EU. If we go back to the EU procedure for enlarging the community of states, the accession phase precedes the connection of the new members. Furthermore: «In logos (from legein, to connect, to link) we are confronted with the idea of a profound connection that binds things together, that can be grasped by human beings according to an immediate mental act, the noesis, which organises the world scenario without any mediator. It becomes dianoia when the noesis is expressed in discursive or propositional form and finally regimented in logical arguments» (Urbani Ulivi and Fisogni 2021: 190).

**Uniting:** The idea of joining parts that can be related to each other is what distinguishes the verbs 'to join' and 'to unite'. Both refer to a connection of elements/parts, but a connection also indicates the efficiency of the connection: it highlights a further step that enlarges the semantic space. We can think of the synaptic connections between neurons or the web-like structure of the Internet.

## The anthropological texture of darning

The act of mending establishes a profound relationship between the individual and the textile, imbuing it with a metaphysical character. The processes involved in repairing textiles, detected before, can provide valuable insights into anthropological dynamics related to psychological, behavioral, and environmental restoration. By referencing the two components of textile activity, namely the thread and the stitches, these processes clarify the opaque content of spiritual restoration that inhabits restorative justice. Restorative justice aims to repair the harm caused by a crime and involves both the victim and the offender. Unlike retributive justice, which solely focuses on punishing the offender for violating a legal norm, restorative justice acknowledges that a crime causes harm to the victims as well as the community. Therefore, this approach to punishment seeks to address the consequences of the crime and provide redress to the victim. The mediator has a crucial role in facilitating, coordinating, and verifying the effective repair of the damage. The restorative path aims to meet the needs of the individual who has been harmed, rather than treating the offense as an abstract case. It involves creating a precise network of interactions between the offender, the victim, and the civil community. A systemic environment in which the mediator plays a central role in facilitating, coordinating, and verifying the effective reparation of the damage. The experience can be compared to a(n intentionally) damaged fabric, where the threads have been broken, resulting in a laceration. Restorative justice presents processes that overlap with those discovered in the previous scrutiny of the processes that especially inhere thread and stitches dynamics. Similarly to the cut fabric, the victim suffers from the loss of his/her systemic integrity with consequences that also affect the social community as a whole. The judge's recommended course of action for the offender is not primarily a punishment. Instead, it involves comprehensive repair of the harm caused and benefits to the victim. This course of action is analogous to a wire, which serves as a conduit for transmitting content. Similarly, in the textile industry, a thread serves as a channel for inputs that are transformed into outputs. In the process of reparative action, a range of values, experiences, and messages are introduced to the affected parties with the goal of facilitating change in both the victim and the perpetrator of the crime. This connection is achieved through multiple threads and the use of an expertly operated needle. The restorative justice process involves connecting separate parts, similar to stitching damaged tissue with expert care. In the restorative dynamics of a crime, the mediator plays a crucial role in bringing together the two parties and ensuring compensation for the harm caused to the victim. The process of restoring coherence is similar to mending, where each tear is unique and requires a customized approach. The

relationship between textile practice and restorative justice is demonstrated through the 'Visible Mending' initiative that has been recently implemented at Bassone prison in Como, Northern Italy. This program offers prisoners the chance to mend worn items, deliberately leaving visible alterations.

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