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FASHION FIGURES

TEXTUALLY MANIFESTING FASHION CODES AS FIGURES IN WILLIAM GIBSON'S *PATTERN RECOGNITION*

> *He wears something like a mailman's pouch, slung across his chest. Shorts, she thinks, drawing abreast of this trio, are somehow always wrong in London.*[1] (28)

Cayce Pollard, the protagonist of William Gibson's novel, *Pattern Recogniton*, is a coolhunter, someone who recognizes the thin line that separates the cool-to-be from the flash fads. She has an extraordinary allergy to trade marks, brand names, and fashion, which makes her an expert of spotting what will become fashionable; a talent by the help of which design firms can decide what to focus on. She is a member of an Iternet community that collects and speculates on a lengthy series of short film clips referred to as the 'footage'. The clips are deposited on the World Wide Web, at unusual places, and there are big debates on deciding how many creators are working on them; whether they show a work-in-progress with a continuously building narrative; or whether they are clips of an already existing film. Cayce is one of the most respected contributors of the footage web discussion on the "Fetish: Footage: Forum". The novel follows her adventures from arriving in London up to the point of giving her opinion on a logo redesign for a company that manufactures athletic shoes. Pollard soon finds herself hired for finding the mastermind behind the footage. The owner of the fashionable advertising agency is interested in the footage because he finds its cult-like expansion to be the key to a new way of product marketing. From this point on, the story follows Cayce Pollard through her quest, which takes her from London to Tokyo, then to London again, and finally to Moscow.

[1] William Gibson, *Pattern Recogniton* (London: Penguin Books, 2003). All subsequent quotations are extracted from this edition. The page number of the quoted lines follows each quotation in brackets.

The novel has a strong emphasis on being contemporary with its reader. One of its episodes explains that the protagonist's adventures take place two years after the 9/11 terrorist attacks against the Twin Towers, near which her father was last seen before his disappearance. The reflection on this event does not come up anywhere else in the story; it stays linked to the memory of the missing father, which means that it is a small, chronological information, by the help of which the reader can locate the story somewhere in his or her recent past. The novel operates with a textual universe that explicitly relies on using functioning references to contemporary material culture, design, and fashion. This particular feature, this intentional referentiality stands in the focus of those negative critical refelctions which argue that Gibson's earlier works, with their plots placed in the future, were much more powerful and intense, whereas this novel, set in 2002, is superficial and shallow. As one of the reader-critics puts it:

> [...] Gibson wants us to believe that his finger is on the pulse of the cultural Zeitgeist, but his pop-art references both "high" (Rodeo Drive, Louis Vuitton, and countless mentions of Prada) and "low" (The Gap, Tommy Hilfiger) have all the staleness of an old issue of Marie Claire found in a dentists office. [...] As a work of literature, it will surely resemble a musty time capsule within a couple of decades.[2]

Namely, the effort to create a discernibly current novel fails to be successful at the point where this kind of up-to-date context is generated by using elements of popular culture such as product names, trade marks, celebrity names, names of famous locations in the mentioned cities, and other reality effects exposed to a sign-circulation along the constant transposition to which we are used to referring to as fashion.

I understand fashion as a discoursive communicational method which takes an active part in the social signifying process while motivating the complex investigation for recognizable marks and features by which we constantly read ourselves through our everyday lives. Following Gábor Klaniczay, I consider fashion to be the self-governing, but never truly independent order of signs, figures, and communication.[3] I am interested in the development of a comparative interpretational methodology that could help in

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[2] Spotlight customer review in *Subzero Blue Store* available:
http://www.subzeroblue.com/store/index.php?Operation=CustomerReviews&ItemId=B0009GIDSQ&ReviewPage=17, access: 31 January 2006.

[3] Gábor Klaniczay, "Miért aktuális a divat?" in idem *Ellenkultúra a hetvenes-nyolcvanas években* (Budapest: Noran, 2003), 55–85.

reading literary texts which have their structures and rethorical strategies influenced by the functioning characteristics of the signifying methods of fashion and by the textual manifestations of fashion codes.

Even though according to most critical reflections, *Pattern Recognition* is not Gibson's best novel, I think that its narrative and rhetorical strategies make it a representative text in this respect. Therefore, I do not intend to form an oppinion concerning its place in contemporary canon; I would much rather like to focus on the tension between the referential and rhetorical potentials of the fashion codes applied in the text—i.e. on how the text can handle, and in what ways it can explicate this kind of tension; on how fashion as a discoursive, social communicational surface and its operational characteristics affect the text that uses its codes.

> He is wearing what Cayce takes to be a Paul Smith suit, more specifically the 118 jacket and the 11T trouser, cut from something black. In London this look seems to be about wearing many thousand pounds' worth of garments that appear to have never been worn before having been slept in, the night before. In New York he prefers to look as though he's just been detailed by a tight scrum of specialists. Different cultural parameters. (9)

Fashion, interpreted as the intertexture of sociocultural distinguishing mechanisms, marks out its own connotative sphere to which it is related metonymically, and it is able to represent the individual embodied in the text by its help as a complex paradigm. To create the image of the person whose appearance is described in the above quotation, one can only rely on the reality effects[4] the text offers. The brand name 'Paul Smith' could be recognized; the item-codes of the jacket and the trousers perhaps; and the oddity of the different looks of London and New York; however, all possible reading strategies must necessarily involve some sort of relation or attitude towards fashion and its textual appearance. The intextextuality of the text creates an intercultural relational system which is essentially connected to the context of fashion.

The interesting contextual feature of the texts that—similarly to the one at issue— operate with popular cultural codes is that they 'pretend' to promise a metonymical substitution while they demonstrate that referentiality is doubtful since their codes are authentic, but not referential, concerning actual reality. These codes become codes only through the rhetoric decisions of a reader. A Paul Smith suit signifies exclusively in case the reader finds it signifying, and its

[4] For the term 'reality effect' cf. Steven Connor, *Postmodernist Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989)

significance points no further than the actual textual universe. Since in culture, everything circulates through communication and discourse, and every meaning formation involves interpretation, fashion—understood in a wider sense than its most visible manifestation, the fashion of clothing—follows the same discoursive pattern and engages pieces of culture in its signifying process just like any other signifying mechanism.

> My God, don't they know? This stuff is simulacra of simulacra of simulacra. A diluted tincture of Ralph Lauren, who had himself diluted the glory days of Brooks Brothers, who themselves had stepped on the product of Jermyn Street and Savile Row, favoring their ready-to-wear with liberal lashings of polo knit and regimental stripes. But Tommy surely is the null point, the black hole. (18)

The most important feature of the protagonist of the novel is that she developed an allergic reaction against trade marks and fashion in general. She escapes fashion by eliminatig its main characteristic, the constant renewal of appearance. Her outfits resemble to some sort of uniform that could have been worn inconspiciously during any year between 1945 and 2000, with the primary feature that they consist of items from which all trade marks have been carefully removed. One of the things she likes in the footage is the caracters' timeless clothing and chronotopical position. From her reality, overdosed with the vibrating circulation of signs of consumer goods, she escapes to a private minimalist world of stability, to a utopia that is safe from the pressures of consumer society. It is quite curious that while she suffers from the torrent of trade marks, she encourages their creation and renewal since her profession (to spot the cool-to-be) makes her activate her illnes.

When approaching the figures of fashion in a literary text, it appears to be necessary to use the conceptions of cultural analysis in a comparative literary discourse together with the consideration of the differences in their approach of the subject and the debatable, if not doubtful possibility of their harmonization.

In the introduction to her sociological study, *Dress Codes,*[5] Ruth B. Rubinstein points out the difference in social scientists', fiction writers', and fashion historians' approaches to fashion. Social scientists from the turn of the twentieth century are either interested in an implicit consideration of fashion while trying to cover up and understand the consumption patterns of different social classes, or they are trying to understand fashion as being the latest desired appearance, enabling the individual to pursue competing desires for group

[5] Ruth P. Rubinstein, *Dress Codes. Meanings and Messages in American Culture* (Boulder-San Francisco–London: Westview Press, 1995)

identity and individual expression.[6] Fashion historians usually discuss clothes in terms of aesthetic tastes and style of a particular period or of a particular group in society,[7] and, as Rubinstein emphasizes, in contrast to social scientists or fashion historians, fiction writers typically imbue a specific image of clothing with meaning. She quotes Flaubert's description of Madame Bovary, where the character's clothing described at her first appearance basically revealed all the characteristics of her personality that led to future tragedies. The most important message of her outfit was that she was "fun-loving, frivolous, fashion-conscious and out of place."[8] Namely, when a text operates with descriptions of a character's clothes not just in terms of listing established items of clothing (such as trousers, ties, or shoes), but also reflects on their features (such as colour, cut, material, or trade mark), it lifts these messages into its context as narrative and rhetorical structuring elements.

The early twentieth-century social scientists agree in the fact that the social manifestations of fashion are signs and that their cycle indicates a certain communicational model, a parlance organized along some specific rules; however, their standpoints differ concerning what these rules truly are. The analytical logic of the structuralist theory engaged in the debate at the point where, along with the recognition of fashions, fashion's resemblance to language brought about the intention of developing the system of its signs within the framework of the Saussureian language system.[9] Roland Barthes' analysis is perhaps the most frequently quoted and accepted theoretical work among the theorists of fashion; nevertheless, these quotations are almost always uncritically acknowledgeable and seldom step further, towards a critical reflection[10]. Even

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[6] Cf. Thorstein Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class*. Hungarian edition: Thorstein Veblen: A dologtalan osztály elmélete (KJK Budapest 1975). Also cf. Georg Simmel's "Fashion". Hungarian edition: Georg Simmel, "A divat," in ed. Péter Somlai, *Válogatott társadalomelméleti tanulmányok*, Gábor Berényi and Virág Bognár trans. (Budapest: Gondolat, 1973), (473–507)

[7] M. and A. Batterberry, *Fashion: The Mirror of History* (New York: Greenwich House, 1977); E. Wilson, *Adorned in Dreams* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987); A. Hollander, *Seeing Through Clothes* (New York: Viking, 1978), quoted by Rubinstein, op. cit., (4). Hungarian works with similar approaches: Katalin F. Dózsa, *Letűnt idők, eltűnt divatok (1867–1945)* (Budapest: Gondolat, 1989); Margit Szilvitzky, *Az öltözködés rövid története* (Budapest: Corvina Kiadó Vállalat, 1974); Erzsébet Ék, *Magyarországi viseletek: a honfoglalástól napjainkig* (Budapest: Littoria Könyvkiadó, 1994).

[8] Rubinstein, op.cit., (4).

[9] Cf. Roland Barthes's *Systéme de la Mode, Editions du Seuil*. Hungarian edition: Roland Barthes, *A divat mint rendszer*, Zsófia Mihalcsik trans. (Budapest: Helikon Kiadó, 1999).

[10] One of the few critical works on Barthes's fashion theory is by Jonathan Culler, "The Development of a Method: The Language of Fashion," in Diana Knight ed., *Critical Essays on Roland Barthes* (New York: G. K. Hall & Co., 2000), 168–73.

Rubinstein's cited study is supported by a structuralist semiotical background. Her aim, to establish a systematic analysis of clothing images and meanings in American society, is preceded by the intention

> [...] to define the basic constructs of the communication discourse system. This step entails identifying the language and vocabulary of the images that give shape to the contemporary discourse.[11]

Fashion's resemblance to language is not the invention of the structuralist discourse; in fact, it is a constant element in the discourse of fashion history and theory. To support this, we can quote one of the most widely used fashion history books in Hungary, the *Képes divattörténet* [Illustrated Fashion History]:[12] "Az »öltözék titkos nyelve« kifejezés helyett [...] bátran használhatjuk az »öltözködés ékesszóló nyelve« kifejezést" ["Instead of using the expression 'the secret language of clothes', one can speak about the 'eloquent language of clothing' with perfect confidence."].[13] Some literary theorists have pointed out that fashion's resemblance to language makes it as readable and important to read in everyday life as it is in case of literary texts.[14] Conceding the approach of the category from this perspective, it is easily comprehendable that fashion does not manifest itself directly, but through a figurative replacement or substitution similar to language. This is the kind of resemblance that is highlighted in Nietzsche's following quotation of Cicero (*De oratore*, III.38.155.): "Just as clothes were originally invented for protection against cold; however, later on, they were used for the decoration and the ennoblement of the body, tropes also arose from a deficiency and were used later on frequently

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[11] Rubinstein, op.cit., 6–7.

[12] Ljudmilla Kybalová et al., "Mi a divat?" in idem *Képes divattörténet. Az ókortól napjainkig,* Anikó Harmath trans. (Budapest: Corvina, 1974), 15–36.

[13] Perfect examples could be found for the symbolic meanings of certain clothing items by the examination of the strict rules or even the dress laws which determined the dress codes of the Egyptian Pharaohs, the Roman senators, or the Medieval aristocracy. Most fashion histories explain the signifying abilities of costume by referring to it as something that can 'talk' about the individual or can even reveal secrets about the wearer. Although dress is one of the most individual inventions of culture, fashion that motivates its changes makes its individuality go along with a great desire for imitation at all times. The individual's aim, to imitate or copy others, represents the aim of self-stylization and of emphasizing inner emotions, characteristics, and spirit by external tools. Ibid., 15–36.

[14] Cf. John Vignaux Smyth, "Fashion Theory," in idem *The Habit of Lying. Sacrificial Studies in Literature, Philosophy and Fashion Theory* (Durham-London: Duke University Press, 2002), 155–93.

because they were delightful." Nietzsche cites Cicero in his *Rhetoric Course,*[15] the text of which is quoted by Paul de Man in his *Rhetoric of Tropes.*[16] My conceptions about the rhetoric operation of fashion signs, understood as signs that function in a language-like sphere of communication, can be clarified through de Man's, and in connection with it, (metonymically) through Nietzsche's understanding of the rhetoricity of language.

According to de Man, one of the main points of Nietzsche's study of rhetoric is that

> [...] the trope is not a derived, marginal, or aberrant form of language, but the linguistic paradigm par excellence. The figurative structure is not one linguistic mode among others, but it characterizes language as such.[17]

The textually manifesting fashion codes, alike figures in a Nietzscheian sense, are not derivated, but are essentially structuring the texts they are in. During their deciphering, we can ignore neither their figural nor their referential meanings. They enter the texts as reality effects, carrying a relevant referential meaning, but by constantly moving over their textual boundaries, they express their connotative sphere, like figures. By their functioning method, they are able to define the intertextual relationship existing between different cultural layers. The textual appearance of the most discernible field of popular culture favours—by the employment of reality effects—a kind of metonymical meaning formation through which the elements of reality applied in a fictive sphere start to function as the simulacra of the experience of a reality close to the actual reality of the recipient.

Engaging the de Manian rhetoric theory in a reading together with an interdisciplinary and intertextual interpretation that uses the conceptions of cultural analysis is not possible without some reflections on the highly problematical reconciliation of the two aspects. Although rhetoric and a comparative interpretation presume each other, they stand in contradiction as well. On the one hand, reflecting on rhetoric always supposes a comparative gesture; however, on the other hand, the prevailing and inevitable referentiality of a

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[15] Friedrich Nietzsche, "Retorika," Farkas Zsolt trans., in Thomka Beáta ed., *Az irodalom elméletei IV.* (Pécs: Jelenkor, 1997), 5–49.

[16] Paul De Man, "Rhetoric of Tropes," in idem., *Allegories of Reading. Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke and Proust* (New Haven–London: Yale University Press, 1979) 103–8.

[17] De Man, op.cit., 108.

comparative examination is bound to pass by rhetoric understood in the de Manian sense to be able to validate its logical-grammatical procedures and methods.[18]

> CPUs for the meeting, reflected in the window of a Soho specialist in mod paraphernalia, are a fresh Fruit T-shirt, her black Buzz Rickson's MA-1, anonymous black skirt from a Tulsa thrift, the balck leggings she'd worn for Pilates, black Harajuku schoolgirl shoes. Her purse-analog is an envelope of black East German laminate, purchased on eBay—if not actual Stasi-issue then well in the ballpark. (8)

> Dorotea may have attempted to out-minimalize her this morning, Cayce decides. If so, it hasn't worked. Dorotea's black dress, for all its apparent simplicity, is still trying to say several things at once, probably in at least three languages. Cayce has hung her Buzz Rickson's over the back of her chair, and now she catches Dorotea looking at it. (10)

The tension between the two approaches actively govern the reading of fashion's textual appearances that function as codes and figures at the same time. The above quotations, describing the outfits of the protagonist and of a 'negative' character, use some codes that can be read referentially, and according to the semiological reading of these signs, they are open for denotation and understanding within the clear and decipherable system of fashion. Nevertheless, a "fresh Fruit T-shirt" or the "Harajuku schoolgirl shoes" signify only if a recipient finds them signifying, and even if so, they signify solely in the way the recipient, who finds these codes being parts of his or her reality, understands them.

The transformation of these codes into signs is a result of an extremely long and complicated process of interpretation within fashion, which is intentional in as much as it is subjective. The participation of even the most common and obvious-seeming element of the actual reality as a sign in a literary text is always preceded by a series of tropic *de*placements and *re*placements; therefore, its interpretation must necessarily involve a rhetoric approach. Consequently, if a reality effect enters a text as a code, it cannot necessarily be clearly and unambiguously decoded as well. Fashion is a discoursive communicational method that appears through a language-like significational

[18] I would like to thank András Müllner for drawing my attention to the lack of self-reflection of the actual discourse, which is trying to create some sort of balance on "the see-saw of textuality contra referentiality".

process. Its ontologically rhetorical manifestation through constant substitution is another feature that makes it a signifying system similar to language. However, it could be useful to reconsider the comparative interpretational approach of fashion from the aspect of the de Manian comprehension of the immanent rhetoricity of language. Since the comparison to language forms part of the theory of fashion from the earliest times, it can be easily understood that their resemblance most obviously appears in their tropological manifestation.

"Harajuku schoolgirl shoes" does not only refer to a certain part of a school uniform that is worn by Japanese schoolgirls, but it is also a trope that stands for the large, abstract, connotative sphere of the 'Japanese schoolgirl' as the icon of most sexual fetish-fantasies of Japanese men. As a trope, it also stands for an exotic turist-attracting spectacle in Harajuku, Tokyo, where these girls gather in small groups, and they change their uniforms to the most shocking and artistic outfits that Japanese gothics, punks, or surreals can imagine. Through these metonymical references "Harajuku schoolgirl shoes" suggests unusual simplicity in this text. It motivates a different code-reading from the one that identifies clothes by trade marks and designer names since its connotations create a methonymical link to a special subculture of Japanese popular culture and to a subculture that idealizes Japanese popular culture. The quoted text uses this particular item of clothing in a context that stresses the damaging psychical effects of fashion on the protagonist, who tries to avoid it by wearing clothes that are not in connotative relationship with the fashion surrounding her. All the same, her aspiration to escape fashion cannot be successful and is crowded with contradictions. First of all, as it was mentioned earlier in my paper, the protagonist herself contributes to the constant development of fashion, which has damaging effects on her psyche since Pollard herself makes her living from the ceaseless trade-mark expansion. Apart from this, it is quite apparent that the character cannot ever escape fashion in dress since the term 'fashion' does not only refer to the serial-products of commercial culture, but it also stands for the constitution of distinguishing features, the two basic components of which are the imitation and exploration of new signs of differentiation. From this perspective, it is not at all surprising that clothing-ideologies, avantgarde art-movements, or anti-culture programmes, all of which proclaimed themselves as alternatives for the popular or the commercial, have ended up as fashion.[19] According to the emphasis of the text, by her choice of outfits and other parts of her material surroundings, Cayce Pollard has an endless desire to differentiate, and thus, implicitly, she is always in the phase of *making* fashion. As the text ironicaly reflects on it, "She's a design-free zone, a one-woman school of anti whose very austerity periodically threatens to spawn its own cult." (8).

[19] Klaniczay, op.cit. 55.

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