

An Elephant in the Room

Fashion theory / Fashion criticism

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The young representatives of the evolving contemporary Hungarian fashion design around the new millennium are digging their way up at an enormous speed to meet the international standards of the industry. At the time of the fall of the iron curtain Hungarian fashion was not close at all to anything that was happening on the international fashion market. Whereas today, thanks to the innovative design approaches, the positive effects of globalisation and the medial openness of the world wide web, the young Hungarian and international fashion design is being formed along an intercultural, accessible and therefore similar cultural context.

A good example could be the fortunate success of young Hungarian fashion designers, who are stepping out to the fields of the international fashion business. They are taking advantage of the global intelligence market as, during the years of their professional development, they do not only base their education on the Hungarian educational system, but are keen on studying abroad in prestigious fashion schools so as to meet the standards of contemporary tendencies¹. Nowadays, the international fashion industry starts to notice Hungary on the map, because, thanks to the developments of the latest years, a number of Hungarian model portfolios have found their way to the most important fashion houses, designers, photographers and magazines.²

Despite these undoubtedly positive developments, there is still a massive gap between Hungarian and international fashion processes, the shrinkage of which would be an essential step toward helping the prospering fashion industry reach a professional context that is worth its enthusiasm and creative potential. One of the most important factors of this process, beside the development of education and the re-creation of the conditions for industrial operation, is the establishment of an active critical context that takes the latest international disciplinary achievements in consideration, and contributes to the formation of a theoretical discourse regarding fashion by the means of criticism.

The large majority of the publications regarding Hungarian fashion is satisfied with a simply informative, descriptive form, therefore addressing the fashion consumer readers, telling them about the latest happenings in the fashion world in a rather superficial, often gossipy manner. This practice is extremely problematic for several reasons. Firstly, it presupposes that the fashionistas and fashion industry professionals are not in need of real and serious critical reflection, nor of a discourse that could put the continuously reflected works and their results in a comparative context to enlighten the possible directions of progress, the occasional mistakes and the means, ways and directions of their possible improvement. Secondly, it restricts the press publications about Hungarian fashion, as it banishes them to the pages of glossy women's magazines and women's online sites that are governed by strict marketing regulations, their topics being mostly determined by PR, commercial or barter contracts.

This practice deprives the Hungarian fashion designers of a competent discourse that could thoroughly apprehend their work, and that could consider their efforts and achievements within a professional discourse, that is equivalent to the secondary literature of other artistic forms (such as literature, art, theatre or music). The current advanced state of Hungarian fashion design shows that, after it had successfully recovered from the still waters of the socialist fashion era, the continuously improving and growing fashion industry is surpassing itself day after day. Its economic and industrial potential is as highly important as its creative qualities.

The active presence of criticism could provide a continuous and high quality professional, competent feedback in a comparative context, where the Hungarian achievements could not only be examined in their isolated micro-community, but compared to contemporary designer tendencies within an international register. Therefore, fashion criticism must be capable of reflecting on Hungarian fashion achievements, with the thorough knowledge of the global scene, together with the consideration of the unique Hungarian cultural and historical perspectives. By pointing out the similarities and differences it could show the possible directions of progress, while it could argue about individual achievements as integral parts of an ongoing, active comparative discourse. This

open perspective seems to be the most sufficient in order to put the work of the Hungarian designers in a quality intercultural context that it is entitled to.

Fashion criticism and fashion theory are two indispensable terms for the adaptation of the international fashion critical context that has been in existence since decades, similarly to the theory and the aesthetics of art that cannot escape to deal with the latest concepts of art criticism. The directions and tendencies of the theoretical approach of fashion determine the concepts of fashion criticism. Therefore, due to their interdependent relationship, fashion criticism is in essential need of a theoretical background.

There is no homogeneous theoretical system in which the meaning or definition of fashion could be simply and compoundly described, analyzed or critically explained. There are different fashion theories, since there are different kinds of disciplines that are dealing with the somewhat different concepts of fashion. They all have their own sets of ideas, conceptual frameworks, which are used in different theoretical approaches of fashion in each different institution, subject or theory³. Since each discipline does not simply examine, but up to a certain point it also produces its own subject, we must notice the reductive notion of such theories. For example, the approaches of the concept of fashion that are coming from an economic or anthropological perspective, have often proved to be too reductive, since they have created the subject of their interest along their unique scientific characteristics and presuppositions.

In her study Elisabeth Wilson⁴ is concerned with the ways in which economic and anthropological theories presuppose the nature of the thing they are to explain. Talking about fashion she draws attention to Baudrillard's concept about the economic account of fashion consumption. She points out that this theory largely depends on the legacy of Marx and Veblen, and uses serious preconceptions about the definition of fashion, that ignores all features of the concept that could knock over the system. Baudrillard uses the veblenian concept of the ugliness of fashion when formulating his critical thoughts about consumer society. He defines fashion as a power of consumer society that can only maintain itself through the radical rejection of beauty⁵. He considers it as a particularly dangerous form of consumerism, because it

„(...) embodies a compromise between the need to innovate and the other need to change nothing in the fundamental order. It is this that characterizes 'modern' societies. Thus it results in a game of change (...) – old and new are not relative to contradictory needs: they are the 'cyclical' paradigm of fashion.”⁶

Wilson points out a strange aspect of Baudrillard's theory, where he seemingly rejects Marxism, while he seems to accept this conspiracy motif of the Marxist critiques of capitalism. She also finds it problematic that at this point Baudrillard seems to accept an authentic 'beauty' concept, while at other places he rejects such rationalistic categories, suggesting that desire, which creates 'beauty' at a certain perspective is essentially contradictory and divided, and that artefacts would reflect this ambivalence⁷.

Since the different scientific approaches fundamentally form the approaches of the theories and definitions of fashion, the attempts at harmonizing theories and the aim of their reading together could only be possible through an interdisciplinarily open comparative perspective. Of course, at this point one should sum up the most important passages of the evolution of fashion theory, starting from the approaches of the modernist social sciences. But, due to its extensional limits, this paper cannot undertake this immense task⁸.

But, undoubtedly there is an urging need to fulfil this need, because it could create a basis for a Hungarian fashion theory discourse. The Hungarian theoretical ground still has only some partial or dissolving fashion theories, that are far away from being in a dialogue with each other. Whereas the international theoretical discourse, especially after the 'cultural turn', is in a very different state⁹.

To spot the major differences, it is enough to compare two student reader books on the subject, one of them in Hungarian, the other in English, that were published in the same year.¹⁰

As the title of Péter Zsolt's book 'Fashion Sociology'¹¹ (2007) indicates, the Hungarian theoretical discourse links fashion essentially to the social sciences, mostly to sociology and anthropology. Fashion is theorised mostly in connection with the research field of production and consumerism staying on the fields of the Marxist theory of commodity fetishism, and/or its afterlife. The

publication of Péter Zsolt has an indubitable intention of gap filling, as the author tries to offer a philosophical foundation, by establishing some basic statements about the functioning methods of fashion, through the scientific filters of sociological study. The bibliography, the structure and the material of the symptomatic book presents a clear 'diagnosis' of Hungarian fashion theory¹². It is quite interesting that the bibliography does not contain any explicit references on fashion theory from the post millenium, although a vast amount of publications have appeared around and since 2000, that laid the scientific foundations of the field.

The Fashion Sociology determines its subject arguing that:

„This book considers not merely the fashion of dress, words, or architecture as the key factors of its examination: it understands fashion in a wider sense as a popular phenomenon that attracts a wider range of the population and whose effects last in medium term periods. Therefore it is interested in questions concerning fashion's influences on human relationships, societies, arts, sciences and inversely: the forms of human relationships, that could be produced by societies.”¹³

The rather summed up definition could undoubtedly be justified from the perspective of social sciences, where fashion does not indeed have to be more precisely or analytically explained, since it is nothing more than a social phenomenon influencing all social registers that operate within the perspectives of social research. But—at the same time— we must also see, that this analysis is not *about* fashion *per se*. It is much more of an examination and description of certain changes that are motivated by similar effect-patterns. This means that the research is not concerned about finding out what fashion *is* and *how it works*, but is interested in the things it affects, and the depth, the directions and the characteristics of this impact.

The composition of the book follows the sociological pattern that considers the socially symptomatic systems of most frequently mentioned terms and features relating fashion. Thus, for example, it deals with imitation, the dichotomy between differentiation and assimilation, the spreading methods of fashion values, the links and parallels between ethics, power and ideology, and

the analysis of functions of fashion. One of its most important achievements is that it draws attention to the delicate nuances of the subject, who—in Hungarian theoretical discourse—is usually the signifier of superficiality, understood in an over-simplified pejorative sense. It shows the system of wide-ranging social influence, for which it is compulsory to examine in every single discipline, that tries to understand the events and phenomena of current times. Therefore it is definitely a worthy continuation of the theoretical endeavour of the eighties, that tried to lay the foundations of the conceptual consideration of fashion in Hungarian theoretical discourse¹⁴. It carries out an important task, when it tries to reveal most perspectives that were potentially influential in the history of thought about fashion, and does this in a clear and easily understandable form. It creates a good basis from where the scientific discourse could move on towards the recognition and the reception of the latest theoretical views.

While the volume by Péter Zsolt only tries to introduce the basic aspects of discourse on fashion in the social sciences, the Routledge Student Reader, also published in 2007, invites us to an embarrassing time travel.

The Malcolm Barnard edited *Fashion Theory*¹⁵ manifests itself from the perspectives of the pluralistic scientific context of the recent decades, the emergence of which was actively supported by many theoretical or scientific turns that came about within a short period of time. Such was the 'cultural turn', the sudden advance of the examination of visual culture, the appearance and the establishment of university departments for cultural criticism from departments of literary theory, history and comparative literature and the growing importance of research in popular culture within the human departments.

In the series editor's preface Chris Jenks points out:

„[Thus], even though the term *fashion* has come to be regarded as a particular hyperbole of contemporary Western capitalism its broader remit can be applied to all demonstrations of either collective or individual identification and differentiation. Fashion is, of course, a modern industry but that huge enterprise itself is, in turn, merely one more realisation and formalisation of humankind's infinite range of capacities to adorn, to decorate, to present, to membership, to belong, to eroticize, to both artfully stabilize and de-stabilize. We can begin to

regard fashion as not merely the prerogative of celebrity and footballer's wives but as an expressive playground for creative social practice."¹⁶

When discussing fashion theory, Malcolm Barnard refers to those complex sets of ideas that lay behind our thoughts, statements and decisions concerning the items of clothing that we wear. He tries to define the word *fashion* in his introduction, before explaining what *theory* is, and after this, he tries to give the meaning of the phrase *fashion theory*, that is also the subject of this collection of essays.

His approaches of defining what fashion is, come from various angles. He compares the common, everyday use of the word to the diversity of the meanings listed in the dictionary, and to those definitive approaches, that arose from different scientific fields that tried to explain fashion as part of their own specific theoretical field. Thus, for example, he stresses the differences between the meanings of the English word 'fashion' as a verb and as a noun¹⁷. He furthermore stresses, that the word is often used as a synonym for 'clothing', or 'style' but the 'consumer goods in the latest mode' could also be listed here. Polhemus and Procter¹⁸ are adding the phrase 'adornment' to the list, that subjects the meaning of fashion to another turn. As Joan Entwistle puts it, the conceptual relationship between 'fashion' and 'adornment' has an anthropological background, that came in use because anthropology needed an

„(...) all-inclusive term that denotes all the things that people do to their bodies."¹⁹

According to another approach, due to the confusion of 'fashion' as a verb and as a noun, fashion is often understood as 'being in fashion'. Although, in this diversity of meanings, none of them offers a reliable and complex closure to the debate of defining fashion, they are still able to support the process of conceptualizing. That is to say, Barnard understands that the term 'fashion' slips out from the influence of any concluding or complex definition the way that it still lets us gain an understanding about it. But this concept could never become static or closable but stays in constant movement.

After the introduction, twelve parts of the book typologise the basic aspects of the theoretical approaches to fashion in the past decades. Barnard adds a small introduction to each part, in which he sums up the key points of the cited papers and puts them into context. Nearly all of the chosen texts are composed from some sort of a critical perspective. Since their aim is to cross the borders of their context and critically question a seemingly clear concept, they do not support a homogenizing interpretation of fashion.²⁰

For example, instead of creating a simple shortcut between the theory and its subject, the two papers of the first part *Fashion and fashion theories* raise a large number of questions that encourage further critical thinking. The reader book does not aim to give a homogeneous disciplinary framework to fashion theory, nor to provide it with an academically established scientific basis. It is much more keen on showing to what degree was the subject—problematised in so many fields so far, including social sciences, art history, aesthetics, philosophy, economy and even literary theory—deformed by the established methods, regulations and strict rules of reading of those certain fields of study. It is also interested in finding out about the extent of dialogicity between these scientific fields, when talking about fashion. This part contains the already cited paper by Elisabeth Wilson, in which she demonstrates the reductive nature of the economic and anthropological interpretations of fashion. The other paper in this chapter is a part of a study by Gilles Lipovetsky²¹, who engages in the debate from a philosophical angle, and whose text could be read as a critique of Wilson's paper. Barnard intentionally tries to sketch an interdisciplinary context, since it is the one that could somehow escape the accusation of a reductionist reading.

The book of Péter Zsolt on the other hand, depicts fashion from a scientific viewpoint, where it seems to be the monolithic and clearly definable spectacle of sociology and nothing else. In other words, his examination deals with fashion as something (some event or phenomenon) that *exists* from a certain historical date (14th century), and *affects* the formation of Western societies. In the same time it does not raise any questions about the different readings and the complicated understanding of the relationship between *fashion* and *history*, since these approaches could lead towards a phenomenological meta-reading, and could easily direct the logic of the book towards problems that could

fundamentally question the merely sociological or anthropological approach to fashion. But it is obvious, of course, that, in this current rudimentary state of Hungarian fashion-research in 2007 the time has not yet come for a study raising such complicated questions. We, however, sincerely hope that this is going to change in 2009.

There are many reasons, why Hungarian theoretical thinking must take fashion in consideration. On the one hand, there is the quick progress of the creative register, that was already mentioned above, and—on the other—the urging need of thinking together with the international tendencies. English academic circles began to be interested in the research of fashion history at an academic level in the sixties. They have realised about five decades ago, that the research of fashion history does not mean the ignorance, nor the damage of high culture. Thanks to the emergence of postmodern theories, the theoretical disciplines have changed their points of view about the interpretation of social issues, which has led to the birth of cultural studies, whose findings were quickly embraced by Comparative Literature Departments. Today's global tendencies show, that Comparative Literature Departments have transformed into Departments of Literary and Cultural Criticism. Why is that? Because similarly to the research of literature, the examination of culture could only be carried out through the reading of language and interpretation of texts. And this scholarly practice possesses the comparative interdisciplinary and critical perspective, from where it does not refer to itself as a discipline and its subject as some monolithic, homogeneous whole, but rather constantly questions the possibility of their static maintenance. Since comparative literature is, first of all, the ground of crisis, it could permanently be open towards new critical approaches and doubtful concern about its own discipline²².

The most widely accepted opinion in Hungary still is that sociology is the discipline that is 'in charge' of dealing with the subject of fashion. But this point of view must be seriously reconsidered in reflections of the theoretical changes of the past couple of decades. Thanks to the emergence of the cultural turn, literary theory has embraced theories about body, gender or feminism that were previously only examined by social sciences. And what else could demonstrate the urging need of the Hungarian close up in terms of adapting fashion theory and fashion criticism than the fact that a large number of

Hungarian theoretical schools have started cultural and cultural criticism studies along with examinations of the theoretical inter-relations between contemporary culture and media.²³

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¹ Such a designer is Szandra Sándor, the owner of the label Nanushka, who received her degree in the London College of Fashion, and is currently running a successful fashion label, that is marketed in all major European fashion capitals as well as in cities of US and Japan. Another great example could be the USE Unused label, that has an equally professional and serious international business reputation and is a regular exhibitor of the Paris Fashion Week. Dóra Szilágyi, the graduate of the KREA Art School could also be part of the list. After finishing her professional education in Hungary, she got another degree in menswear design at the Royal College of Art, and is now one of the leading designers of Jean Paul Gaultier's Jeans line in Florence.

² The most famous Hungarian models of the emerging young generation are Enikő Mihalik, Kinga Rajzak, Sophie Srej and Adina Forizs.

³ Malcolm Barnard: Introduction, (1-14.) In: Malcolm Barnard ed.: *Fashion Theory. A Reader*. Routledge Student Readers, London and New York 2007. (7.)

⁴ Elisabeth Wilson: *Adorned in Dreams: Fashion and Modernity*, Virago Press London 1985. (53.)

⁵ Jean Baudrillard: *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*, Transl. by Charles Levin, Telos Press New York 1981 (79.)

⁶ *ibid.* (51.)

⁷ Wilson, 1985. (53-54.)

⁸ On the other hand, I am dealing with the subject in a prominent part of my PhD dissertation, since it is a particularly important aspect of my work, and will therefore be thoroughly overviewed at that point.

⁹ For the international background of the cultural turn and its Hungarian reception see Sándor Hornyik: *Kulturális fordulat(ok) az irodalomtudományban és művészettörténetben (Az Intézményesség és kulturális közvetítés című kötet kapcsán)* [*Cultural Turn(s) in Literary Theory and Art History. (Thoughts in connection with the volume 'Institution and Cultural Mediation')*] http://balkon.c3.hu/2006/2006_2/03hornyik.html Accessed: october 2008.

¹⁰ Since I am basing my argument on the comparison of two student reader volumes, hereby I shall not mention, nor compare all the fashion history books, articles, studies and other texts that have been published on the subject on Hungarian. Nevertheless, it is important to list some of the outstanding works, such as G. Klaniczay G. and K. S. Nagy (ed.): *Divatszociológia I-II.* [*Fashion Sociology I-II.*], Tömegkommunikációs Kutatóközpont Budapest 1982.; G. Klaniczay: *Ellenkultúra a hetvenes nyolcvanas években* [*Counter Culture in the seventies and eighties*], Noran Kiadó Budapest 2003.

¹¹ Péter Zsolt: *Divatszociológia* [Fashion Sociology], Pro Toto Kiadó Budapest 2007.

¹² It is an interesting contribution to the fact of the absence of fashion theory in Hungarian language, that the word 'divatelmélet' (that is 'fashion theory' in Hungarian) typed into Google search, finds only 19 references and none of them are directly or explicitly relevant. (Latest date of checking: 25.09.2008. É.Z.)

¹³ (10.) Zsolt, 2007.

¹⁴ Example: G. Klaniczay G. and K. S. Nagy (ed.): *Divatszociológia I-II.* [*Fashion Sociology I-II.*], Tömegkommunikációs Kutatóközpont Budapest 1982.

¹⁵ Malcolm Barnard (ed.): *Fashion Theory. A Reader.* Routledge, Taylor and Francis Group, London – New York 2007.

¹⁶ (xi) Barnard, 2007.

¹⁷ The Hungarian word 'divat' does not share this dualism, since it is mainly used only as a noun. Only the more ancient word 'mód, módi' points to an early understanding of the word as an adjective, referring to 'a way of doing or posing sg'.

¹⁸ T. Polhemus and L. Procter: *Fashion and Anti-Fashion: An Anthropology of Clothing and Adornment*, London, Thames and Hudson Press 1978.

¹⁹ Joan Entwistle: *The Fashioned Body*, Cambridge, Polity Press 2000. (40.)

²⁰ It is important to note the difference between the two books, since the Routledge Student Reader is a collection of essays, while Péter Zsolt's publication is his own essay. Their comparison is therefore only relevant due to the same year of publication and the similarity of their subjects and targeted readers.

²¹ Gilles Lipovetsky: „The Empire of Fashion: Introduction” In: (25-32.) Barnard, 2007. (original publication: Gilles Lipovetsky: *The Empire of Fashion: Dressing Modern Democracy*, Princeton University Press 1994.)

²² For more on this subject see Jonathan Culler: *Whither Comparative Literature?* In: *Comparative Critical Studies* 3, 1-2, (85-97.) 2006.

²³ Such Hungarian university departments are for example: the Department of American Studies, the Department of Communication and Media Studies and the Department of Comparative Literature at the University of Szeged, the Department of English Literatures and Cultures and the Seminar of Cinematographical Science and Visual Culture at the University of Pécs, the Department of Comparative Literature and Cultural Studies at the Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest.

