

CHAPTER 8

Fashion as a Cultural Intertext

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Abstract: In accordance with Gilles Lipovetsky (2002), this paper explores fashion, its current form and functions, as a consequence of the development of the modern Western world. Although the author points out different possibilities for the discursive reading of fashion in the cultural space, emphasis is put on the discourse led by the rise of an individualized subject, which is a symptom of modern democratic societies. Within this frame, fashion is a proof of individualistic tendencies and autonomous subjectivity, which enable it to function as an important tool of self-expression for both the individual and diverse social communities. In this context, fashion clothes – functioning as a costume – claim authenticity as well as other qualities that strengthen the differentiating possibilities as well as capabilities on the axis me/us, he/you, own/other. Moreover, the language of fashion has been influenced by globalization in recent decades, which encourages the emergence of culturally layered texts and the circulation of various kinds of cultural borrowings. With regard to this issue, the paper focuses on the Japanese street fashion ‘Harajuku’ as a representative example of what will be considered as an intertextually-coded individualized subcultural costume.

Keywords: Fashion, Intertext, Intercultural Loan, Self-expression, Costume

1 Introduction. Fashion as a Text in Discursive Reading(s)

Clothing appears, now more than ever, as a statement with claims to autonomy, which manifests itself in relation to the weakening of many of clothing’s original functions. Its autonomy does not in any way imply that clothing has ceased to exist in the space of cultural, social and economic relations, but the authority of these relations is significantly smaller than in previous developmental periods of fashion. As far as the 20th and in a natural continuance 21st century are concerned, clothing liberates itself from the dictates of taste of the social elite (royal court, nobility, bourgeoisie), while its economic accessibility is increasing. The

obligation of clothing to function as an instrument of identification of social hierarchy is weakened, and its cultural identity is loosened as a result of its saturation with multicultural codes. If we want to correctly evaluate the semantic and value potential of clothing, we need to ask how it actually functions in the cultural space.

Fashion – not just clothing, which is the primary focus of this paper – works as a semiotic system and can be read as a text, i.e. a syntagmatic chain (formed by T-shirt, skirt, stockings, sneakers, cap, jacket) of paradigmatic elements (such as sneakers as one particular shoe style). Clothing presents a statement with a certain degree of intentionality, conceptuality, complexity and semantic value. As a cultural text, it responds to the developmental dynamics of other cultural texts, which it can interact with. Therefore, it appears useful to think of fashion as of an intertext, a text within a network of other texts, and to ask what cultural texts are of interest to us in relation to the examination of the text-forming units of fashion. What discourses¹ organize cultural (inter)texts into semantically comprehensible units? From this point of view there are several discourses that come into play, so that in this paper, we will briefly explore fashion in culture as a space of historical dynamics; national or ethnic dynamics; religiosity; gender perspectives; and the rise of the individualized subject.

Historical dynamics can be exemplified by the presence of Elizabethan elements in contemporary fashion. The characteristic qualities of Elizabethan fashion were defined for subsequent generations at the end of the 16th century by Queen Elizabeth I. Their use, often spectacular, can be found in the collections of Paul Gautier, Vivienne Westwood, Martin Margiela and Sarah Burton.² Although their motivation often resides in the return to the golden age of England and the homage to the queen as a fashion icon, i.e. in the strengthening of the authority of the dominant image of a historical person and time, re-interpretative moments, which demystify this image or mystify unofficial

¹ Discourse is an unconscious order that crosses various structures of cultural space and organizes its particular units/elements in relations which create these structures. The discursive reading determines the viewpoint and the key to the selection of elements which are subsequently put in order or rather layered in(to) a meaning-creating whole. As a result, there is not one single fashion and just one single history of fashion, but there are several 'fashions' as well as several 'histories' of fashion. Discursive reading is always a cultural investigation, which can use semiological analysis, as it is in this case.

² On the echo of Elizabethan era in fashion see more in [online]. [Accessed: 15.9.2020]. Available at: <https://www.crfashionbook.com/fashion/a27227943/elizabethan-fashion-runway-designers/>.

versions or motifs, are also present. For example, Burton created a collection for the British fashion house Alexander McQueen for the autumn/winter season of 2013 – 2014 conceived as an allusion to Elizabeth I's life. The more intimate optics used in the collection highlights primarily the mystifying moments of the queen's personal story. The designer plays an ambivalent semantic game with motifs of chastity, purity, seduction, power, freedom and non-freedom, which can be understood thanks to the knowledge of historical codes.

If the texts of fashion are considered as part of the space of national or ethnic dynamics, one can observe the relationship of modern clothing to the folklore tradition, or the manifestations of folklore in it. In the 1940s, for example, the growing interest in folk art in the Czech environment was also reflected in clothing culture. Ludmila Kybalová states in one of the volumes of *Dějiny odívání* (History of Clothing, 2009) that, in addition to efforts to preserve the purity of folk costume, there was also a trend recommending the use of folk costume elements in urban clothing. This could be exemplified by the artificially created garment (the so-called 'šohajka') using cuts and decorative elements of folk clothing (Kybalová 2009, p. 155). The tendency to revive ties with traditional folk culture is also evident in the contemporary period. Part of the subcultural aesthetics of hipsters, for example, resides in the revitalization of folklore elements in the context of modern life, often in an urban environment. Examining the relationship between hipster aesthetics and folklore with an emphasis on the Moravian region, the Czech aesthetician Lenka Lee states (2019, p. 47):

Influenced by this vivid folklore tradition, the hipster culture adopted and implemented some folklore influences, elements and motives. We can see it especially in tattoos, fashion and food. I think that this connection between hipsters and folklorism mirrors the phenomena mentioned above – the hipsters preserving the experience of the former generations, the romantic (and naive) yearning for the good old days and the vivid folklore tradition in the Moravian region.

The mixing of chronotopes symptomatic for different generations, social and economic environments, and the like, required, in addition to a nostalgic, loving absorption of folklore elements, playful-ironic codes that release the original ties to folklore elements. This aesthetic openness allows cultural loans in aesthetic practice and stresses, above all, the problem of authenticity, but also of originality, measure, stylization and, in borderline cases, even of intellectual property as a possible ethical

issue in professional discussion. Other discursive readings of fashion can also be discussed: the tension between the covered and uncovered body could be meaningful in a culture as with respect to religiosity, while the weakening of gender distinctions culminating in unisex fashion is relevant in terms of gender codes. As foreshadowed, here my analysis is guided by taking into account the rise of the individualized subject which is to a high extent responsible for the existence of modern democratic societies in the Western world.

2 Fashion as a Tool for Asserting the Subject

The notion of an autonomous subject, progressively arisen over the centuries in the tradition of European civilization, represents the precondition (and consequence at the same time) for modern societies born in the foundations of post-war Western Europe and America. As a point of this development, the 20th century's autonomous subject relates to a completely new sort of experience, described by Lipovetsky (2002),³ in connection with fashion, as a consequence of the development of the modern Western world in the last phase of democracy.

In the rise of an autonomous subjectivity open to the development of critical and tolerant consciousness, fashion demonstrates the role of seduction, transience and even frivolity. In modern democratic societies, unlike clothing/habit in primitive societies, fashion requires a certain limitation of the influence of the past (and tradition *per se*) and devalues to some extent the social order. Fashion sanctifies imagination, originality, and aesthetic initiative. It demands an autonomous aesthetic logic, which is absent, for example, in clothing that is only varied in the historical perspective (for example, the Japanese kimono), i.e. it creates only another long-standing collective norm (Lipovetsky 2002, p. 35).

Strictly speaking, fashion did not appear until the 14th century for several reasons. Also importantly, there is a clear distinction between men's and women's clothing which lasts until the 20th century, and at the same time, change (as a cultural fact in general) is no longer a secondary, rare and accidental phenomenon. It is turned into a permanent rule of pleasure in higher society. Volatility starts to function as one of the constitutive structures of mundane life (Lipovetsky 2002, p. 39). The

³ Here and in the following, the page number refers to the Czech translation of Lipovetsky's *L'empire de l'éphémère. La mode et son destin dans les sociétés modernes* (Lipovetsky 2002).

autonomy of fashion, however, resides in the fact that it creates tension between the norm and personal taste, between the conformism of the whole and the free choice of the details, between mimeticism (in the overall structure of clothing) and individualism in detail. In this tension, a space is created in which fashion becomes an expression of a free subject and individual initiative, while it is historically moving towards a great paradox clarified further.

3 Clothing as a Costume

In accordance with the discourse determined by the individualized subject, in this section, I further ponder on the role of clothing as costume. Here I do not mean just clothing as a set of elements typical of a particular country, historical period or specific activity. I mean a theatrical or carnival costume, the wearing of which evokes a role. A role requires a costume, despite the fact that individualized clothing largely resigns from the role of a stratifier of social hierarchy. With regard to this long-standing role of fashion, Lipovetsky (2002) states that the scheme of social differentiation, which has long been considered the key to decoding the essence of fashion, does not satisfactorily explain the logic of fashion instability. In his view, values that encouraged novelty and the expression of individuality played an important role in promoting the fashion system of the Late Middle Ages.

In more than six centuries, the position of fashion in society has changed dramatically. It no longer represents just an aesthetic congruence or an embellishment of collective life, but has reached the culmination of historical development and transformed society into its image (Lipovetsky 2002, pp. 13-15). It is in connection with the relationship of fashion to social space that the above-mentioned paradox needs to be explained. According to Lipovetsky, the originality and ambivalence of fashion lies in the fact that it functions as a factor of social discrimination and a clear sign of social superiority; however, at the same time it represents a significant driver of the democratic revolution.

On the one hand, the originality and ambivalence of fashion has disrupted the established distinctions and has allowed the qualities to be brought closer and confused, but on the other hand, it has reintroduced – albeit in a different way – the age-old logic of ostentatious display of power, the shine of a symbol of domination and social otherness. The paradox of fashion is that the ostentatious exhibition of hierarchical

symbols contributed to the movement towards equality in appearance (Lipovetsky 2002, pp. 58-59). Fashion clothing thus gained the most precious of its competencies: it became a medium of self-expression. The term self-expression is here understood as a total sum of “typical expressive aspects by which a person (group) reveals their identity and the understanding of reality” (Plesník et al. 2008, p. 45). What is one’s own is transposed into a style that is concretized in the dynamics between stylization and authenticity, or in Lipovetsky’s language, between mimeticism and individualism. What is authentic is a guarantee of sincerity, convincingness, authenticity of expression and individuality is its highest value. Authentic codes usually assume spontaneity that guarantees minimal corrections. Individualized clothing corrects authentic codes in two poles of stylization to varying degrees. It either hyperbolizes them in an effort to strengthen the individuality of the costume or weakens them in favour of certain types of conventions, which the wearer usually chooses voluntarily. S/he is not subject to formal authorities, but natural authorities can change his/her individualized costume (self-expression of myself) into a group costume (self-expression of ourselves).

The matter of authentic codes mentioned above might be exemplified by a subcultural costume in which the individual self-expression intersects with identification with a group. The weakening of the self in favour of ‘us’ happens not only with a clear intention to confirm some communal identity but also to strengthen the self’s uniqueness, its individuality in relation to ‘they’, to make visible the dynamics between inside and outside.

Individualized clothing, especially when it represents a subcultural identity, functions analogously as a costume. And not just because it is so intended, but mainly because it is so perceived. It is a conceptualized medium of information transfer, a tool of semantization and evaluation. In this sense, the costume functions as an extension of the mask, the essence of which I understand in agreement with Vít Erban (2010), as a means of becoming an identity, while the principle of masking (including costume) is based on bodily paradox, i.e. the ambivalence of our bodily experience. It moves between our inner (individual) self and the outer (social) self, and the mask/costume helps us to fix the chosen identity at a given moment (Erban 2010, pp. 134-135). The costume is in this perspective the result of awareness of the choice of identity, and thus the originally spontaneous experience can be ritualized thanks to aestheticization and stylization.

A costume is able to function as a medium of self-expression. In this sense, it is both a personalized garment and a tool for identifying with the role that its wearer chooses. It is a mediator of personal emotional comfort, also an instrument of social self-confidence, it is an instrument of power. Such a costume is very personal, claiming authenticity, originality and other qualities that strengthen the distinctive communication competences on the axis of binary oppositions: I-he, we-you, inside-outside, own-other. The costume is radicalized clothing, because its main task is to express, to demonstrate an aesthetic attitude. It is not only an expression of taste preferences but also of worldviews, including a possible ideological perspective. The costume, as a medium of self-expression, reveals what the wearer currently considers to be his/her own in the cultural tradition – the costume expresses an attitude and creates: spatial-temporal coordinates of being here and now (it creates synchronous bonds); spatial-temporal bonds in cultural memory (it constructs diachronic bonds). This is done through a communication situation which has the nature of a dialogue.

The concept of the dialogical nature of culture, as presented by Jurij Lotman (1994) in his elaboration of Mikhail M. Bakhtin's theses, will help create a contextual field in which all considerations about fashion take place. I see fashion not only as a synecdochical part of culture, but also from the perspective of its defining logic, which is characterized by the dynamics of mimeticism and individualism and tension between innovation and convention. Lotman (1994) points out that culture is based on at least two communication systems, which do not seek only the most authentic (i.e. the most accurate) transmission of information, but also the creation of new information. He uses the communication situation of a mother and a child to illustrate the natural formation of the laws of communication exchange, in which two subjects are interested in exchanging information stored in differently coded systems. It contains a dynamic alternation of statements, breaks (silence, listening), imitation, translation. It is a situation defined by a double transmission, by an orientation towards a foreign word and an effort to include a foreign word in one's own language (Lotman 1994, pp. 53-55). Thus, a new language is created as a productive encounter of several communication situations, not as a result of a compromise, but as a confirmation of the desire to understand (to lead a dialogue) and therefore to reformulate. Lotman concretizes Bakhtin's⁴ idea of dialogue, which precedes language, in

⁴ Within the frame of Mikhail Mikhailovich Bakhtin's thoughts, the concept of a dialogue is basic, crucial and recurrent. See more in Bakhtin's *The Dialogic Imagination. Four Essays* (1981/1975).

a cultural space filled with many speech genres and methodologically supports this notion of cultural exchange as a parallel between the polyglottic mechanism of cultural semiotics and the two-hemisphere structure of individual consciousness. The key to understanding resides in the alternating activity of competing types of consciousness, one of which is focused on marginal desemantization and free play of signs and the other on their equally marginal semantization and connection with external reality (Lotman 1994, p. 37).

Processes analogous to those that take place between cerebral hemispheres, alternation of hemisphere dominance, states of dynamic changes or, on the contrary, of attenuation and peace, can be also identified in the cultural space. Just as the exchange of stimuli and information between hemispheres ensures a smooth emotional and intellectual functioning of a human being in the world, permanent dialogue in the cultural space is the guarantor of its functionality. Dynamic periods are the result of a dominant update of one (right- or left-hemispherical) tendency, while the other brakes reciprocally. Culture then appears to us as monolithic: we tend to perceive it in its entirety and name it according to its dominant manifestations (e. g. Gothic, Baroque, etc.). The necessary polystructure then moves to the periphery (as an underground culture for example) and forms a dynamic reserve for future stages of development. The dialogue in the cultural space does not stop, it rustles along the edges, languages overlap, transcend, mix, and gradually dissolve the seeming integrity of the dominant culture. The formation of a new language is a result of the disruption of the existing dominant cultural order, which is desirable since it prevents stagnation and regression. Although the exchange of information can also mean a significant weakening for specific manifestations of non-dominant culture (subcultural aesthetics, peripheral themes, value deviations of minorities, etc.), it is regenerative and revitalizing for culture in general.

4 Harajuku Style - Japanese Street Fashion

Harajuku, Japanese street fashion, can be regarded as a representative space of intense intercultural dialogue. Undoubtedly, clothing functions here as a costume, i.e., as a demonstrated materialized desire for an aestheticized statement. Harajuku was continuously mapped by the Japanese photographer Shoichi Aoki in the monthly magazine *Fruits* from 1997 to 2017. Thanks to this professional focus and systematic documentation, harajuku can be now regarded not only as a fashion

wave, but as a distinctive cultural phenomenon, even as a subculture. Although subcultural identity is often associated with a symptomatic appearance of its members, clothing rarely serves as the main defining element. Undoubtedly, harajuku can be labelled as a subculture of fashion. When Lipovetsky (2002, p. 58) states that the style of clothing does not only serve as an indicator of social difference, but its function is ritual, there is no better example than harajuku. It represents ritualized seduction in the whole complexity of semantic possibilities – from socializing, through erotic aspect, from power to a purely poetic play of loose semioticity. A literally fascinating internal tension is created by the chronotopic uniqueness of this subcultural scene that ties to a specific time and space, in relation to its globalized (spatially, diachronically eradicated) aesthetic codes.

The name itself reveals its spatial ties to a city district of Tokyo, Japan, known as the centre of youth culture (predominantly in its teens), with galleries, museums, cafes and especially boutiques presenting everything from the work of new domestic fashion designers, through cosplay costumes to luxury collections of world fashion icons. To a large extent this part of the city functioned as a magnificent pedestrian zone with a myriad of attractive streets; a change in the organization of transport a few years back partially affected the atmosphere of the place, which may be one of the reasons that weakened the subcultural manifestations associated with harajuku fashion.

It is worth mentioning that the scene chronicler Shoichi Aoki at some point quit the publishing of the print magazine *Fruits*. The media often linked the end of the golden age of Japanese street fashion with commercial reasons, the success of clothing chains with cheaper clothing and with adapting elements of alternative, often original DIY fashion, to a fashion of commercial nature. Harajuku street fashion concretizes the dynamics between the mainstream and the periphery in a specific way. It is usually the mainstream, dominant culture that draws from the periphery, colonizes it, and thus revitalizes its language (themes, values, etc.). From the beginning, harajuku has drawn on the codes of global popular culture, which is defined primarily (but not exclusively) by the American or Euro-American environment. In our cultural context, much of it can be considered the culture of the centre. In Japan, however, many popular culture forms are peripheral influences, and so in my optics there is an inverted coding of both the mainstream-periphery relationship and the exotic-domestic relationship.

The absorption of Western cultural codes in Japan does not have a long tradition. Japan has long resisted the seduction (and the pressure) of economic contacts with foreign countries. Only in the second half of the 19th century, the United States managed to break their economic isolation. The Japanese welcomed the news of the foreign Western world, one that they considered progressive, with immense interest. Japan has started a period of the so-called double life at that time that lasts to this day. Western clothing influenced men's fashion first, in women's fashion the kimono resisted European dresses longer, since it was more suitable for the slender figures of Japanese women, and it was more comfortable and more suitable for Japanese interiors (Winkelhöfer 1999, pp. 222-226). On the one hand, the 20th century brought a more significant cultural mixing to Japanese culture, but on the other hand, it introduced uniforms in some organizational units of social space. This change also affected the school environment at various levels of study, and although in the second half of the 20th century the obligation to wear a school uniform was abolished in many schools, culturally the uniform remained associated mainly with the iconic image of the schoolgirl. The school uniform thus identifies the teenager primarily as a member of the group. However, as Joseph Heath and Andrew Potter recall in *The Rebel Sell* (published in English in 2004),⁵ the uniform serves a dual function as a legitimizing symbol of membership. On the one hand, it distinguishes the members from other groups and the rest of the society, on the other hand, it introduces conformity within the group. The uniform is thus paradoxically elitist and democratic at the same time. Moreover, it often provides an important and desirable social distance, such as a monk's robe or a nurse's uniform (Heath and Potter 2012, pp. 174-178).

In its deepest essence, a uniform contradicts the complexity of the subcultural costume, although both are a tool for demonstrating social identity. A uniform (like the army uniform) often aims to create an identity that Nathan Joseph calls a total uniform. This reduces the individual to a member of the system with clearly valid norms; it is perceived as a representative of an authoritarian, conformist, or repressive society, and naturally evokes a protest in various countercultural movements (Heath and Potter 2012, p. 174). The subcultural costume always takes into account the individual in the group, while the very tension between uniformity and individualism

⁵ Here and in the following, the page number refers to the Czech translation of *The Rebel Sell: Why the Culture Can't Be Jammed* (Heath and Potter 2012).

represents a legible signal of many relationships and values of a particular subculture. The costume of a skinhead is much closer to the uniform than the hippie costume, which is highly individualized, and this is probably why we find its revitalized versions in Japanese street fashion.

Harajuku style, although externally perceived and reflected as a compact phenomenon, focuses on an individualized style in which several symptom groups can be identified (Lolita, Gyaru, Ganguro, Kogal, Decora, Visual kei, Angura kei, Cult party kei, Dolly kei, Fairy kei, Peeeps, Kimono style, etc.). Thanks to the accumulation and condensation of a number of diverse cultural stimuli, motifs, stylistic elements and expressive qualities, it functions as a laboratory of intercultural relations. The Harajuku costume combines elements of traditional Japanese clothing (such as geta clogs and tabi socks) with typical elements of American culture (cowboy hat, leather rock'n'roll jacket) in an often seemingly completely free combination of partial motifs. Many costumes are more compact in terms of their expressiveness and even on the paradigmatic axis they choose details that present predominantly, for example, the Victorian era, often iconizing it in direct relation to the image of an innocent schoolgirl, thus creating a Victorian version of Lolita. Although members of the Harajuku scene do not use their clothing to express demonstrated resistance, they are not a revolting counterculture, but rather a culture of possibility (or possibilities); their subcultural costume certainly does not refuse the subversive potential of style, which Dick Hebdige (2002, p. 26) sees as a natural part of subcultural character. The used multicultural features acquire a symbolic potential, their value naturally multiplies in the eclectic costume, while their formal sign is often strengthened at the expense of semantics. The processes of appropriation of cultural phenomena also involve the risk of a high degree of formalization, which may lead to the emptying of their original meanings, or to their complete dissolution in the new context.

However, the circulation of cultural loans – in the form of paraphrases, pseudo-citations, allusions, systemic continuity, aesthetic abbreviations and the like –, can mean the re-emergence of the forgotten, the hidden, as well as its revitalization and appreciation in new cultural chronotopes and especially in currently experienced existential ties. I am convinced that they legitimize the right to cultural loans in an individualized costume, in which adoption and appropriation of the other is a manifestation of a desire to understand. Moreover, it is often

used as evidence of a willingness to understand or comprehend in itself. The right to a cultural loan is confirmed by the very authentic processes of semantization, which re-evaluate it, literally sanctifying its meaning existentially.

5 Conclusion

Complications connected with the right to a cultural loan begin where the individualized costume ends. If one is interested in its use in the costume from an authorial collection, one has to address it considering the degree of originality that such a fashion collection, as a text with artistic potential, will have. One must consider the extent of authentic appreciation against the trivial principle of making something more special and exotic, and observe its transformations in the processes of consumption. One can participate in its meaningful appropriation and prevent it from an autotelic expropriation. Thanks to the permanent circulation of cultural loans in various cultural environments, in the most diverse speech genres described by Bakhtin, the semantic layers of intercultural loans multiply and their value is affected. Fashion is therefore a process of a natural cultural exchange, the results of a dialogue, which does not know the limits of regions, nationalities, ethnicities, and applies the rules of natural dialogue of two people who try to understand each other.

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