

Gender, Fashion and Postmodern Discourses

In the 70-s last century fashion discourse became an integral part of the Western postmodernism comprising sexuality alongside multiculturalism, gender issues, etc. W. Simon claims that many of the uses of gender and sexuality observable within the context of the rapidly changing present, may in fact be different than any that humanity has previously known [1, c. 3]. Postmodern theorists proclaimed that sexuality is never “just sex”, all discourses of sexuality are about “something else”. In its turn, fashion not only reflects all the transformations of postmodernity, it produces a serious impact on the new sexual meanings that are being formed now. Scientists maintain that fashion is a statement, a stylised form of expression which displays and begins to define a person, a place, a class, a time, a religion, a culture, and even a nation [2]. It is evident that fashion as a concept manifests cross-cultural character.

The representation of woman in the public sphere has always been connected with fashion. As a socio-cultural phenomenon, fashion always represents a certain narrative, a definite “myth image”. These narratives and images are usually well-known and easily recognized. For example, the unisex tendency having been manifested in the female “dress code” since the 50-s is considered to be the epiphenomenon of both style and feminism. Though women enjoyed the labour equality in the former USSR (tractor-drivers, builders, miners, etc.) the unisex fashion was not supported by the state ideology at that time. On the other hand, woman’s dress has always been the reflection of cultural stereotypes. At present the traces of Ukrainian rococo style are vividly represented in the “dress code” of the Ukrainian public women (Yu. Tymoshenko, A. German, and others) who do not wear trousers, whose shoes are always high-heeled, etc.

An interesting example of interconnection of politics and fashion provides the so-called “Berehinya” narrative. Twenty years ago many discourses in

Ukraine were uncertain, the feminist discourse included. Alongside the spreading of Western discourse of gender equality there was a strong appeal to the traditional gender values. The publications show the development of the “Saving Woman” narrative (“Berehinya”), based on the ideas of “home matriarchy” and “feminine mentality” in Ukraine [3]. Julia Tymoshenko, the former Prime-Minister of Ukraine, vividly represented a fashion image of that narrative. By that time she had completely changed her own style and the stylistics of a “woman-politician” image. She began wearing her hair in a braid like a crown in an old Ukrainian tradition, her costumes and frocks were aimed at stressing her femininity, her accessories (necklaces, beads) also represented a component of the ethnic female costume.

It is interesting to observe how much a female image is connected with fashion (dresses, hairstyles, shoes, etc.), especially when speaking about a public woman. The author of the article in “The Daily Telegraph”, while telling about the dramatic events of trial and the possible jail sentence for Julia Tymoshenko adds that Mrs. Tymoshenko “is famed for her sharp designer suits and peasant-style hair braid” [7].

Though the concept of the ethnic femininity and the corresponding image were not accepted by the Ukrainian women, they have become a part of the state discourse. The official document under the title “The Dress Code of State Employees” (October, 2000, № 58) is another good illustration of the state fashion discourse in Ukraine. This instruction gives a detailed prescription of what to wear including fabrics (no jersey, velvet, satin, chiffon, no patterns), decorations (no embroidery, frills, etc), fashion of the costume (no patch details) and general style (no short skirts, no close-fitting dresses, earrings should match the colour of eyes, diamonds should be worn by married women, etc.). Such detail as the sleeve is worth while paying special attention to: in the ethnic tradition the sleeve should be long enough even in hot weather (sleeves covering elbows is a typical gender prescription in the Slavonic female costume being a patriarchal principle of “secretiveness”).

This kind of “secretiveness” can by no means be compared to the Oriental feminine secretiveness (for example, to wearing the hijab) but the underlying analogies may be observed. One of the characters of S. Faulks’ novel “A Week in December” recalls a passage from a Koranic scholar: “The dual nature of what is shown and what is concealed is fundamental to the understanding of God” [4, c. 54]. This interconnection of “hiding” and “looking” has always been considered sexual in both Western and Eastern cultures. Referring to the dilemma “to be and to seem” it is worth while providing one more citation from the book mentioned above: “Rania, for instance, used to wear grey skirts and leather boots, so her dress was modest. There was nothing to distress her parents in all this. But in her eyes... Now [when she took to wearing the hijab] the eyes had no trace of liner or mascara, but when the long lashes were lowered over the dark brown iris there was still a message of invitation” [4, c. 53-54].

Another narrative worth speaking about in connection with fashion is the so-called “girlpower”. “Girls” themselves claim descent from the “ur-Girl”, Madonna, who has been said to have launched the new stereotype in “The Girlie Show”. As G. Greer observes, it is probably true to say that they are descended from “Buffalo Girl”, Vivienne Westwood. In Westwood’s collection for spring 1990 Sara Stockbridge wore tights decorated with the commonest kind of lavatory-wall drawing of a penis, with the title “Half-Dressed City Gent”. The next heroine of girl culture was Courtney Love, whose bleached hair straggled over a raddled face scarred with lipstick [5, c. 400]. Madonna’s “mouthiness” was at least as important as her muscles in placing her as the figurehead for succeeding generations of young females who have got younger with every passing year. These new “young” women are indoctrinated by new narratives through a new group of commercial magazines, whose contents are consumed over and over: “Bliss”, “Minx”, “Mizz”, “More”, etc. The manufacturers keen to get into this market were Nike, perfumiers, cable TV, record companies, makers of sanitary protection, mail-order suppliers of jewellery and clothing, Wella hair-colouring products, T-zone skin care range and such like.

In the old “world” where the rich buy the clothes, the poor make them and the models get down the catwalk the image of that top model has changed a lot too. There aren’t any “names” any more. Since the death of the supermodel and the demise of those real beauties like Helena Christensen and Amber Valetta “bland” is the new beauty: simple, flawless and unremarkable. As the author of the novel “Fashion Babylon” puts it, “they [advertisers] don’t want an old, household name, they want some sixteen-year-old Nikita fresh from the taiga” [8, c. 323].

It is important to stress that at the end of the Millennium the “Cybergirl”, “Madonna”, played a special role in establishing a new fashion and a new narrative. She has gone through a Marilyn Monroe period, a pastiche of 70’s images in the “Deeper and Deeper” video, the incarnation of classic stars from Lauren Bacall to Marlene Dietrich for the “Vogue” video, and recreated herself as a sadomasochist “alley cat” for her book “Sex”. For some, Madonna is indeed a cyber-model of the “New Woman”. As commentators put it, Madonna specializes in the very thing that so many feminists have condemned in advertizing – the dismembered “part object” fetishism of the female body [6, c. 149].

For example, Tamasin Doe says, that fashion’s most romantic story has been the rise of the corset. Dolce and Gabbane and Christian Lacroix both caught up with Vivienne Westwood and John Galliano who have long been devotees of the garment. In fact “the corset” is a narrative of the Victorian Britain. Still the problem is that this garment used to symbolize figure fascism does symbolize it even “worn over a simple slip skirt” as “the alternative to bias cutting for evening” [6, c. 149].

Advertising remains one of the most powerful creators of fashion narratives. The object of advertising is not merely to create dreams and desires but to engender a new commodified reality. We consumers are trapped in the symbols of that reality, and fashion is one of the most influential among them. As ever fashion is connected with customs, religions and so forth.

New York has its big advertising brands – Ralph Lauren and Calvin Klein. The same is true of Milan with Prada, Versace and Dolce, but Paris is the mother of them all – it has Chanel, Dior, Galliano, Valentino, Balenciaga, Lacroix, Louis Vuitton, Ungaro, Givenchy, McQueen, and others. In the end, everyone just looks to Paris.

Speaking about the idols of the fashion and the image of the public woman it seems perfectly correct to conclude that “this public woman” is feminine but strong, she knows where she is going and she is not afraid to say who she is, she is in control and she is powerful.

Coming back to culture, it is obvious that in fashion differences of culture seem to be doomed to levelling. A single universally homogeneous fashion culture reflecting a few homogeneous narratives seems to be a fact of postmodern reality.

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2. <http://www.inter-disciplinary.net/critical-issness/ethos/fashion/>.
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4. Faulks S. A Week in December. – London: Vintage Books, 2010. – 392 p.
5. Greer G. The Whole Woman. – London: Black Swan, 2007. – 452 p.
6. Appignanesi R., Garratt C. Introducing Postmodernism. – Cambridge: Icon Books Ltd., 2003. – 189 p.
7. Osborn A. Ukraine is a gulag, says Tymoshenko. – The Daily Telegraph. – July, 16, 2011.
8. Edwards-Jones I. Fashion Babylon. – London: Corgi Books, 2007. – 379 p.