

# Fashion Theory and the Visual Semiotics of the Body



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Edited by

Žarko Paić

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This book is primarily a theoretical effort to view the phenomenon of fashion within fashion theory as establishing a new approach from visual semiotics that I have tried to elaborate on in my understanding of fashion and contemporary art. The lectures I have given since 2008 on the MA course “Theory and Culture of Fashion” at the University of Zagreb’s Faculty of Textile Technology have been aimed at implementing a completely different approach to fashion from the typical disciplinary rigour and habits of the academic framework of humanities. If fashion is a creative body design as I understand it within the relationship of contemporary aesthetics, the technosphere and design, then we must face the changing paradigmatic forms in which fashion appears in the 21st century after realizing that posthumanism and transhumanism are already in the works of artists like Stelarc and that fashion designers like Alexander McQueen and Hussein Chalayan paved the way for radical body deconstruction. Fashion, therefore, emerges as a visual code of contemporary societies and cultures in the networked matrices of hyperreality and visions of that coming time that will determine the combination of cybernetics, fetishism and transgression.

This book brings together the works of academicians from the University of Zagreb, the University of Teramo, and the University of Osijek, comprising art historians, fashion historians, sociologists, philosophers and theorists of visual studies. At the same time, it is a testament to the dynamic and interdisciplinary desire for openness in exploring the essentials of humanities, which necessarily require pluralism in approach, rigour in scientific elaboration, and the desire to gain insight into the creative dimension of contemporary fashion. My thanks go to my dear fellow academics who were eager to enrich this edited collection with their contributions, as well as to our students, to Anthony Wright for his proofreading, and finally to the editors of Cambridge Scholars Publishing.

Žarko Paić  
Zagreb, March 2022

## INTRODUCTION

What applies to the transformation of three forms of culture—humanistic, anthropological and semiotic—is reflected in the transformations of contemporary fashion. We can imagine a continuation of these cognitive-creative games in the coming period in which the technosphere provides opportunities for every further development of fashion as a creative body design. What remains might not be quite reducible anymore to “society” or “culture.” This was clearly the case for the most radical fashion designer Alexander McQueen when, in his last performative event called *Plato’s Atlantis*, he contemporaneously staged a set of digital technologies, an experiment with the transformation of the human body (“third skin”), and a new aesthetic object like women’s shoes with high heels beyond so-called everyday life. Trauma and shock beyond normally comprehended fashion as a service for beautifying reality become new signs in the creative research of contradictions in the making of lifestyles.

In all the research that has been done recently, we may notice the space of experimental games directed towards the transformations of bodies in contemporary art and design, with the greatest aesthetic achievements being found in the works of fashion designers such as Alexander McQueen, John Galiano, Hussein Chalayan, Martin Margiela and Jean-Paul Gaultier. So, we would like to develop an analysis of quite a different discipline named the visual semiotics of the body. If language, according to Roland Barthes’ thought, was the fundamental signifier of fashion change, which is repeated as fashion returns to its origin in the phenomenon of retro-futurism, then for contemporary fashion, the sign of the rule of new information-communication technologies and interactive media transcodes language into an image or a visual code of social forms of the spectacle. Explaining how the image now takes “the logic of language” can only be possible when we try to discuss the definition of visual semiotics. It is a post-discipline beyond the distinction between semiology and sociology. The potential of visual semiotics was only created with the introduction of visual studies and visual culture at the end of the 20th century. The sign implies the meaning of fashion as visual information. That is why the meaning of fashion thus becomes the event of interactive communication of networked bodies as aesthetic objects.



The fundamental assumptions of the considerations that will be carried forward in this book are as follows:

- (1) Design today signifies the emergence of creative thinking and shaping the body in the aesthetic and biocybernetic sense of the complexity of the system.
- (2) Fashion has been established in the global perspective as the *creative design of the body* through the social, cultural and environmental worlds. Only from that viewpoint can the entire tradition of dressing and clothing enter the fashion system. *This order has been stably maintained through a permanent world crisis and societal transformations.*
- (3) *Therefore, contemporary fashion is going on as a media formation of life itself through the labyrinth of "styles" and "tendencies" in the area of development of design, ranging from cultural to creative industries.* All of that bestows a brand new approach to the concept of culture and the meaning of visual imagery (visual-iconic turn) that is reflected in the completely new conception of fashion.
- (4) Thus, *fashion is no longer considered as "applied art," just as design is no longer addicted to so-called beauty immersed in an industrial environment of modern society wherein the aesthetic object (ready-made) means creation beyond the boundary lines.* Instead of that, we are thrown into the development of the techno-genesis of the new worlds of creativity. The consumption of time no longer applies to passive reception but enters into the space of interactive intervention and creates some new contexts and situations in which the human body coexists with others in the global and local areas.
- (5) *The transition from the paradigm of "industry" as a finished product to "industry" as a system of changing and emerging "smart applications" leads to the establishment of the order of the creative economy in the information society.* So, the consequences of these changes are far-reaching. Primarily, they are related to the education system in all spheres. Thinking that unites "inventiveness" and "creativity" has become the basis of the new cognitive or creative-emergent global world order. The technosphere should now be the main force that impacts the limits of productivity of "work" and the methods of using surplus value for capital reinvestment.
- (6) *Fashion design as the construction of the body becomes a creative and inventive practice that has a deep impact on the aestheticization of the life-world.* Therefore, its essential characteristics are derived from the very figures that embody the "creative" individuals in the information-

cognitive world of the speed, control and transformation of (a) the synthesis of ideas, (b) hybrid styles, and (c) the implementation of eclecticism.

- (7) *The transformation of the body—ranging from changes in gender/sexual identity and the figuration lifestyle of managers, entrepreneurs, entertainers and stars of mass culture to the post-human “creature” (robots, cyborgs, androids)—that has been introduced to fashion in the new knowledge economy.* Anything can be rearranged once more; all that has been produced in the new constellations, and the whole was stirred with a completely different regime. This is reliable evidence that the meaning of fashion no longer lies in the theatre of social roles or in the media world of changing cultural identity. Quite the contrary: “society” as a techno-scientific framework and “culture” as the driving power of changing life itself are derived from the genesis of techno-aesthetically produced worlds.
- (8) *Design is no longer even a “function” or a mere “ornament” in favour of the fundamentally constructed world made by technoscience. It just belongs to the logic of contingency and emergency.* Therefore, we need to decisively break all the historically obsolete binary oppositions that governed and mapped the cognitive architecture of modern sciences and arts. The era in which we operate is determined by a set of hybrid concepts and new events. Thus, the event has marked the performativity of the creative body in society, politics, the economy, and culture.

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**Žarko Paić**, in his contribution dedicated to the explanation of fashion theory as an assemblage of plural orientations, directions and disciplines, claims in the opening chapter that we should be aware that the scrutiny and method in the analysis of *fashion as a creative body design* require crossing disciplinary boundaries, often at the cost of loss of solid orientation. Strictly speaking, regarding the question of the modern scientific methodology of fashion studies, humanities and social sciences where fashion should be included, the answer is almost unambiguous: between and on the edge of the post-disciplinary approach to the very thing of thought. Here, Paić applies the division of fashion into analytical-structural and historical-genealogical senses, followed by the development of scientific paradigms ranging from modern sociology and anthropology to postmodern cultural studies and, finally, contemporary visual semiotics. He assumes that three modes of the paradigm are at the same time the ways to create a theoretical approach to the topic that is historically articulated as a path towards *total*

*body design*. These are (1) *modern fashion*, (2) *postmodern fashion*, and (3) *contemporary fashion*.

**Tonči Valentić** next aims to provide a concise and clear critical overview of the sociological understanding of contemporary fashion phenomena, starting from the earliest analyses at the beginning of the 20th century until today, i.e. the globalized era of computer network societies as the dominant form of social organization, and to critically question whether sociology today could be a proper discipline of fashion analysis. It is apparent that fashion nowadays occupies the most important areas of aesthetic creativity. Valentić, in his analysis, deals with the legacy of modern sociological discourse about fashion and pays particular attention to the most famous of French sociologists, Pierre Bourdieu, who approached the topic of social differences and the dynamics of separation of social formations using the example of taste criticism from the perspective of the sociology of fashion. In that sense, the emergence of new disciplines such as fashionology or the visual semiotics of fashion could be understood as both a continuation of the classic sociological approach as well as its disciplinary opposition, bearing in mind that they operate with different theoretical vocabularies.

**Žarko Paić**, in an extensive and provocative study dedicated to the problem of contemporary fashion starting from the visual semiotics of the body, argues in the third chapter that we are entering an age that can be explained by the assumption of the end of the symbolic construction of the body. Instead of the logic of representation of fashion in the light of modern society and postmodern culture, contemporary fashion should be regarded as a performative-conceptual turn in the very core of body iconograms. The triad of fashion in the presence of the contemporary age and its superseding has been shown through (1) syncretism, (2) hybridity, and (3) eclecticism. Paić vividly proves how we must abandon all previous essentialist art and fashion theories and try to think about posthuman fetishism through an experimental way of deconstructing the “third skin.” Therefore, contemporary fashion, as the radical “theatre of cruelty” (Artaud) and the “eroticism of death” in its latest transgression, leads to the apocalypse of the body in the mythical act of its creation and destruction. The fetishism of contemporary art and fashion decadence are represented as interactive spectacles of narcissistic subjects/actors in the lives of iconograms beyond sanctity and sacrifice. This life is auto-poetically generated by new digital technology, and it consists of the fragmentation of identity in the networked space of the media world of art and fashion. Alexander McQueen’s show *Plato’s Atlantis* undoubtedly represents, Paić claims, an attempt at a radical change in the overall view of the contemporary body as a transgression.

**Katarina Nina Simončič** deals in the fourth chapter with an issue dedicated to utopian visions of fashion in Croatia since the 1960s. She aims to indicate the diverse approaches of and interests in the production of Croatian artists dealing with garments as utopian visions of digital reality. Miroslav Šutej's fashion design was highly influenced by Space Age fashion and *New Tendencies*, while Silvio Vujičić is spellbound by artificial intelligence and its potential for fashion production, which led him to create a completely new fashion language, a reflection of the digital age. In contrast, Matija Čop's primary interest is the body, which, in the digital age, offers a plethora of possibilities for modifications and re-evaluations. The produced garment is only one means of the artistic expression of its coexistence with the body. However, both Vujičić's and Čop's productions have a strong futuristic character, much like Šutej's sketches in the late 1960s. In addition, Simončič aims to emphasise the social, political and cultural conditions in which the artists work or by which they are moved to work.

**Krešimir Purgar** analyses the semiotics of masculinity in fashion photography and art history in the fifth chapter and argues that we need to try to see the "trivial" images of fashion advertising from a perspective that he preliminarily calls a *transhistorical image system*. Visual studies interpret visual codes as part of a universal system of representation, Purgar claims, as he delves most deeply into the field of pictorial hermeneutics that connects lesser-known areas between the *specificity* and the *generality* of the image. Its methodology starts from the belief that each image frames one part of reality, but it does so while not being isolated from other images, as much as their comparison may seem inappropriate and as much as the proposed semiotic leaps connect temporally, stylistically and thematically distant pictorial representations. Following Gilles Lipovetski's thesis, Purgar concludes that the freedom to choose consumer goods based on pictorial incentives is the lowest form of democratic participation, but he also adds that the freedom to *interpret* these images is a much higher form of consumerist and civic consciousness.

**Marianna Boero** aims to explore the communication trends of the language of fashion in the social universe, with particular reference to fashion blogs. With the advent of social networks, the language of fashion has undergone significant changes, which have led it to rethink and redefine some communication logics. If before fashion was a "closed universe", reserved for a small audience, thanks to social media, it becomes a system based on the interaction between companies and their audience. An example is the possibility of attending high fashion shows through live coverage on social channels, or to participate to social communities dedicated to fashion

events. In a context of this type, fashion experiences a process of democratization, while maintaining exclusivity, increasingly entering the daily life of the public in the social universe. Fashion blogs play a fundamental role in this sense, allowing users to identify with the proposed narratives. Precisely with the aim of investigating the way in which the language of fashion redefines its communication and symbolic methods in the social universe, this article traces the main studies conducted in the field of semiotics of fashion and then focuses on fashion blogs, highlighting the role of the body aesthetics and valorization in the overall communication. The body changes with changing fashions: both are a sign of the cultural and identity metamorphosis of society. The body of fashion is always perennially deformed, it is the mirror of social identity, the eternal return of the new. In this perspective, social semiotics can play a central role for understanding the ongoing scenario.

**Petra Krpan** deals with fashioning the cinematic screen as body transmediality in the final chapter. She argues that fashion photography and fashion film have gone a step further in considering the relationship between fashion, the body and corporeality. The most significant changes in contemporary fashion have taken place in the context of fashion photography, fashion film and fashion performance, all under the visible influence of the media. Therefore, the notion of the media is the basis for understanding the paradigm shift that fashion experienced at the beginning of the 1990s. The most significant achievements of contemporary fashion designers such as Alexander McQueen, John Galliano, Hussein Chalayan, Rick Owens and Iris van Herpen constantly remind us that the magic and power of fashion is realized in the spectacular performance of the body in the event. For fashion, in the end, remains a catalogue of fascinating images, a pure visualization of life as an aesthetic pleasure.



## CHAPTER ONE

# FASHION THEORY: ORIENTATIONS, DIRECTIONS, DISCIPLINES

ŽARKO PAIĆ

### Introduction

The fundamental notion of modern political philosophy and law since Immanuel Kant is represented by the concept of autonomy. We take this word extremely seriously because, without its meaning, we cannot understand why the desire for autonomous fields of research prevails today in the age of the interdisciplinarity of science. Fashion is like other phenomena in its constant search for its purpose and aim. Its autonomy is therefore identical to the desire for emancipation from all obstacles in the constitution of its own subject. This is nothing strange. For the phenomenon to be scientifically experienced, it might be necessary that the theory that gives it credibility reaches a high level of performativity. Autonomy, for us, should mark the freedom of disposition of our mind in modern times. But the mind is not outside the body. That body, thus, appears in the context of contemporary fashion with the reflexive power of realization of the mind and the desire for the eccentric display of the entire world of human sensitivity. This position of unfoundedness, because fashion has very lately become the subject of scientifically relevant research, reflects on the creation of a unique language and speech. The multitude of expressions for changing the style of clothing features point to the impossibility of the uniformity of fashion.

Moreover, unlike other areas of the world of life such as art and architecture, the only way lacks credibility and autonomy. And without that, there is no possibility of recognition. We might be able to explain that phenomenon with the metaphor of bubble foam or of clouds moving in the sky. Both of them are perpetual and transient, almost at the border of a stable order of meaning, without their logic of action. Clothes and decorations

belong to the body as an aesthetic object. By changing the identity of a dressed body, due to the speed of modification, it is impossible to distinguish the “style” from the “trend.” This problem becomes much more complex when fashion from visual arts and architecture takes the notions of “style” and “trend” and leads them to aesthetic-commercial visual communication in the global world of information, services and capital. Speaking of symbolic, communicative and aesthetic meanings presupposes the perceived change in what overlays the term itself as its reference framework. Is it still possible to consider fashion in the categories of linear progress and development, social dynamics, and the complexity of modernity? And, in turn, because it inevitably creates several new conceptual tools with which we will be able to reach multiple changes in fashion at the same time with uncanny speed, should we have a secure viewpoint from which we could know how society and culture in the era of the visual spectacle would transform a networked global communication?

The difficulties faced by the scientific study of fashion in the 20th century stem from the area in which the term refers to two closely related meanings. They are “inclusive disjunctive.” The first one historically arose with the emergence of capitalism towards the end of the Middle Ages in the 14th century in Italy and France. Fashion shows, for example, a way of life or a high culture of perception in the mutual display of bodies within the space of aristocratic institutions of government. The word comes from the Latin *modus*, the meaning of which is related to habit, culture and lifestyle. In Italian and French (*il modo/la mode*), the expression refers to the system of rules and norms adopted. Without acquiring a symbolic meaning of differences in social status and cultural choice, fashion is therefore not just a privilege of an aristocratically shaped society. On the contrary, what also takes place is the beginning of a process of socially individuating the body. Moreover, fashion in this sense rises to the throne of social power. The aesthetic form of communication among people goes beyond political and cultural boundaries. Secondly, the meaning of fashion arose in England, the leading country of modern capitalism, under the reign of Queen Elizabeth I. So, in the 16th century, that concept had its general application in commercial trade and economics confirmed. Malcolm Barnard, in his analysis, examines the crucial changes that took place at the beginning of the modern era in Europe (Barnard 2002, 114) and successfully reveals what is “new,” what has “changed,” and the reduction of fashion to the economic value of goods and the financial manner of reproduction. While the first meaning is oriented towards the norms and ideals of the aesthetic life of a modern man, the second is entirely realistic concerning the essence of capitalism as a new social order—the accumulation of capital in the form of



the natural and cultural transformation of goods. Fashion as a culture and fashion as an economic way to gain wealth in a society based on social inequality, political liberalism and the idea of unconditional progress form the dynamic structure of Western civilization. Regarding its occurrence, its tendency is spreading throughout the whole world. In the age of globalization in the 1990s, one could truly talk about the total rule of the social form of fashion. With the old historical strength and power of capitalism, it is reflected in the desire of all to possess designed objects.

The concept of fashion as a “social form” refers explicitly to the structure and matrix of the essential duplicity of its function: (a) the usable value of the goods and (b) the market value of the exchange in which the fetishism of goods has its origin. In principle, this is a revised concept from Karl Marx’s *Capital*. For sociological theorists of modernity, ranging from Thorstein Veblen and Georg Simmel to Herbert Blumer and Pierre Bourdieu, this concept is largely binding (Paić 2007, 64–71). One cannot omit any of the other meanings of fashion. It would be a shrinking of its historically established “being.” The ambiguity of fashion, therefore, is not only evident in the fact that the Italian-French world of high fashion and style clashes with the English-American anti-fashion world and global industrial production in both its action and in the sales of clothes. What is shown in this twofoldness of the “necessity of opportunity” of fashion as a process of liberation from the laws of nature and tradition, as well as its cultural differentiation within social integration, as determined by Simmel’s famous sociological definition (Simmel 1957), might be a paradox and aporia of fashion in its relationship with modern society and culture. It cannot be determined by any means whatsoever by reaching out to the governing reference framework (capitalism-modernity-the social form of power). Why has that already been formed just like an unchangeable fateful event? The reason should be sought in the fact that a process of double emancipation took place during the 20th century: (1) the human body as an area of freedom for the creative construction of new worlds of coercion, patriarchal order, and associated dominant ideological-political systems of meaning, and (2) knowledge about the origin of new areas of research that combine the ideas of the aesthetic object (*ready-mades*) and lifestyles.

Fashion should be regarded as a permanent change in the meaning of clothes depending on the context and the situation in which the body appears. But the change is not made for the mere “sake” of change or by anarchic spontaneity without direction. Instead, it might be necessary to introduce *fashion as a creative body design* into the debate. What is live, stable and steady as the flywheel to accelerate in the 21st century gives new meaning to the circular straightness in the development of something, as

“ghosts always return” (Breward 1995, 115–118; Evans 2003, 19–28; Lehmann 2000, xx). As far as this is impossible, it is inevitable for the true beginning of a new approach to the phenomenon of fashion. That approach has opened up whole different horizons. Fashion finally gave legitimate meaning to the area of autonomous scientific discourse.<sup>1</sup> We start from the assumption that comprehending *fashion as a creative body design* designates the beginning of the most significant 20th-century theoretical book that had far-reaching implications. Of course, this is the book written by the French semiologist and literary theoretician Roland Barthes titled *The Fashion System* (*Système de la mode*) from 1967. For this reason, for the first time, there is a thought that fashion is no longer inauthentic and is not merely the result of the social dynamics of modern capitalism as established in the sociological theory of modernity known as *trickle-down theory*. Instead of such a “traditional” approach starting from the standpoint of social class interrogative factors, a hierarchically ordered society, like a pyramid, encounters an inversion of “being” fashion. Well, it must now be understood as an advanced sign system (signifier-sign-signified). This could be a change in fashion styles and trends from a stable language system and its syntax, semantics, and grammar. All this represents a testimony of the crucial role of the concept of culture in understanding fashion. Culture, which now has the decisive meaning of the new reference framework, must

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<sup>1</sup> The concept of *discourse* is taken from the early philosophical work of Michel Foucault (1994). Its meaning is multiple. Discourse (Fr. *discourse* – language, hearing, communication mode within a given society and culture) always refers to language and power as a general framework for legalization in the historical work of man. Hence, “scientific discourse” differs not only from ordinary language in everyday use, but also from other ways of speech and written communication. Just as Roland Barthes distinguishes language (*langue*) from speech (*parole*) in his semiotics, and so fashion can encompass the difference in what characterizes the possibility of speaking (the body) as such in the human world, so Foucault also articulated that language is always directed to power structures in a particular historical context. But discourse cannot be nothing “natural” and “invariable,” but rather a historically formed relationship between language and speech in the context of socially and culturally coded power. The “scientific discourse” is always a connection between the language of the fashion and the power of social-cultural legalization under which communication processes take place. Discourse thus opens as a field of the constant change of language and speech in institutions and the world of life. When a historically determined “social form of fashion” disappears, as occurred with modern fashion (from the 1800s to the 1960s), then the discourse that gave it its gild and shine also disappears. But that does not mean that terms and language of the past do not remain. They are still present in fashion as historical epochs, but they do not have the power of enactment (such as, for example, language and speech in Renaissance or Baroque fashion).

be confirmed as the mass culture of the consumer society and its fundamental concept of *communication*. Perhaps we should listen to Barthes himself when he introduces fashion into the discourse of post-structuralism as the leading theoretical direction in humanities and social sciences in the 1960s and 1980s. It could be said that this was the way of thinking for the emergence of all the fundamental ideas within philosophy, sociology, and anthropology with the concepts that have linked nature and society, man and God, and history and events in the world. In the place of persistence, there are changes, and in the place of tradition and continuity come postmodernity, discontinuity, and a whole set of concepts taken from cybernetics, informatics, and structural linguistics.

In the Fashion system, the sign, on the contrary, is (relatively) arbitrary: it is elaborated each year, not by the mass of its users (which would be the equivalent of the “speaking mass” which produces language), but by an exclusive authority, i.e., the *fashion-group*, or perhaps, in the case of written Fashion, even the editors of the magazine; of course, the Fashion sign, like all signs produced within what is called mass culture, is situated, one might say, at the point where a singular (or oligarchical) conception and a collective image meet, it is simultaneously imposed and demanded. But, structurally, the Fashion sign is no less arbitrary; it is the result of neither a gradual evolution (for which no “generation” would in itself be responsible) nor a collective consensus; it is born suddenly and in its entirety, every year, by decree (*This year, prints are winning at the races*); what points up the arbitrariness of the Fashion sign is precisely the fact that it is exempt from time: Fashion does not evolve, it changes. (Barthes 1983, 215)

Barthes’ main assumption is extremely significant for the further exposure of all theoretical efforts regarding fashion and, at the same time, for bringing it into the “open system” (language-sign-communication), but we must not fall into the temptation to argue that dressing and fashion are just two different forms of (or the same human tendency for) decoration in all historical periods. Absolutely not! Dressing is a mark of tradition and persistence without change. Quite the opposite, fashion is characterized by a radical cut with the past. In that sense, in a lecture at the Collège de France on “modernity” in which he mentioned Nietzsche and his analysis, Barthes used the term for the modern woman in Paris at the end of the 19th century and appropriated it to the concept of the world: “Elle est contemporaine de tout le monde” (Agamben 2009, 30–31). The problem with the theoretical “founding” of *fashion as a creative body design* might be that fashion cannot be reduced to the social dynamics of power, nor even to cultural differentiation in lifestyles. Why? The reason is that its uniqueness and singularity might be determined as an experiment of the existence of an

individual, rather than as a mere dress of a social group, of the objectified phantom body that Sigmund Freud calls the super-ego area of impacts to all kinds of things. Although sociology is a positive social science that was the first to take fashion into serious consideration, the following should be emphasized. The paradox arises from that matter whereby the sociological concept of fashion can never be sufficiently deeply rooted in the underlying problem that lies on the surface of things. And that is the question of the identity of an individual subject and its autonomous body. In other words, the social analysis of fashion, as long as it is highly valued because it gives us an objective view of the state of things, is scheduled in its own way of saying. Fashion might only be a conditional social phenomenon. It is always distinctive concerning the common tendencies of a society that prescribes the norms and rules of clothing for the individual. Nevertheless, contemporary fashion at the beginning of the 21st century represents a radical emancipation from this way of understanding the body and wants the body to place itself at the centre of the question of selfhood as identity.

We can find the real residence of fashion in the space of the bodily construction of identity beyond “nature” and “culture.” Our research concerning this space of experimental games with the transformations of bodies in contemporary art and design—the greatest aesthetic achievements of which are in the works of fashion designers such as Alexander McQueen, John Galliano, Hussein Chalayan, Martin Margiela, and Jean-Paul Gaultier—should call this matter *visual semiotics of the body*. If language, for Barthes, was the fundamental signifier of fashion change, which is repeated as fashion returns to its origin in the phenomenon of retro-futurism, then for contemporary fashion, the sign of the rule of new information-communication technologies and interactive media transcodes language into an image or a visual code of social forms of spectacle (Pać 2007, 217–262; Pać 2011, 367–427). To explain how far the image takes on “the logic of language” is only possible if we introduce a determination of *visual semiotics* into the debate. It should be noted that this is a post-discipline beyond the distinction between semiology and sociology. Language was suspended and neutralized with the introduction of visual studies and visual culture at the end of the 20th century.

However, the sign is shown as fashion information on clothing related to new fashion trends. We can argue that the meaning of fashion, thus, becomes an event for the interactive communication-networked body as an aesthetic object. Just as art, after the movement of the historical avant-garde of the first half of the 20th century, caused beauty to vanish and “sucked” in being like in Marcel Duchamp’s famous “Bottle Dryer,” so fashion no longer finds the archipelago of beauty as the ultimate consolation of a

classic aesthetic. Instead, we are dealing with processes of *aestheticizing the world of life*.<sup>2</sup> That is how fashion “enrols” into the lifestyle of an individual as his changing identity. Nothing is persistent and perpetual. Everything is transformed into a multitude of forms. In this consideration of fashion theory concerning the multitude of orientations, directions and disciplines that deal with such a fluid phenomenon scientifically, it is necessary to find a logic of *how* it could be possible to understand why fashion was so late in establishing the area of overlapping tendencies in retrieving a complex life-span and why it is not self-evident today that its autonomy, in conjunction with science, art and technology, has become a question of the design as the construction of new worlds, not just a decoration of the existing or long-obsolete understanding of “applied art.”

The logic of the turn begins, therefore, with Barthes’ semiotic approach to fashion as a sign of cultural change. Undoubtedly, we are aware that the very notion of culture is represented by a set of concepts just like media, communication, and the spectacle. Unlike the modern notion of culture, we should be immersed in a quite strange context when many interconnected things become a new assemblage that can be determined by cultural (in)determination. Among them, fashion stands in the midst of the “language games.” However, since the question of the unsparingness of fashion disappeared from the horizons of traditional scientific approaches, as we have seen, might also be a kind of “lack” that differentiates fashion from all other areas of human creativity, then it seems reasonable to start no longer from the simple question of what fashion is but rather from how it is produced/created as an aesthetic object, practically as a field of performance in fashion design, and ultimately as a symbolic-communication event of interaction between the participants of the process of creating a “new” beyond the traditionally understood society, culture and body. It should immediately be added that what Barthes’ semiotic approach opened for the

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<sup>2</sup> “Today, we are living amidst an aestheticization of the real world formerly unheard of. Embellishment and styling are to be found everywhere. They extend from individuals’ appearance to the urban and public spheres, and from economy through to ecology. [...] *Individuals* are engaging themselves in a comprehensive styling of body, soul and behavior. *Homo aestheticus* has become the new role-model. In *urban areas* just about everything has been subjected to a face-lift in recent years – at least in the rich western countries. The *economy* too profits largely from the consumers’ tendency not actually to acquire an article, but rather to buy themselves, by its means, into the aesthetic lifestyle with which advertising strategies have linked the article. Even *ecology* is on the way to being an embellishment sector favoring a styling of the environment in the spirit of aesthetic ideals like complexity or natural beauty. *Genetic engineering* finally is a kind of genetic cosmetic surgery” (Welsch 1997, 18–37).

understanding of fashion seems to have an identical value to the theory of media and communications of the Canadian theorist Marshall McLuhan in his main work *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, which highlights that *the medium is the message* (McLuhan 1994). Both are introduced into a completely different view of the world, starting from the idea of a construct of reality, but they are not based on a so-called objective existence independent of human consciousness and action. Fashion represents, thus, a media in the embodied structure of life. In all its transformations, it appears as the subject of its performance in the mirror of the public. Therefore, it has to be considered in the same way as other creative imagination products. If the novelty of a new fashion is different from clothing and custom in everyday life, then the concept of the sign is the source of all further attempts to dress and decorate the body from the structure of human communication. None of this, however, is yet sufficient to inspect the complexity of the theoretical discourse of fashion. It systematically evolves on the traces of the traditional disciplines of social sciences, such as sociology in Thorstein Veblen's and Georges Simmel's works and semiology or semiotics in the works of Roland Barthes and Umberto Eco (Barthes 1983; Eco 1976).

Contributions to the study of fashion in the 20th century were mostly directed towards the social and cultural function of clothing. It is not surprising that the concept of functionalism led to the sociological theory of Talcott Parsons, but also in the theory of architecture and design to the formation of the *linguistic turn*. In any case, this is self-explanatory given that the leading direction of architecture and design in modernity was influenced by Le Corbusier and *Bauhaus* with the idea that the form follows function, so much so that the emergence of scientific contributions to fashion within social and cultural anthropology, psychology and psychoanalysis practically focused on how and by which methods the human body in society and culture is aesthetically shaped to preserve its primary collective identity. Clothes are necessarily reduced to carriers of meaning in the binary logic of the modern world with the separation of work and leisure, town and village, gender/sex differences, generational divisions, and factors of social integration. Of course, it could not be ignored that within the psychoanalytic critique of the repression of society over the desires of an individual, the eroticism and sexuality of the female body is a condition of the possibility of creating extravagant fashion clothes. With the emergence of cultural industries and the spectacle—a film by staging the event—new limits emerge in the relationship between strict prohibitions and the conquest of free space. It should be recalled that film and television productions in Europe and America from 1920–1930 created several

fashion styles like neo-historicism, decadent glamour and avant-garde with icons like the femme fatale of *The Blue Angel* Marlene Dietrich and the great seducer Rudolph Valentino in the silent film era. Jacques Lacan's basic psychoanalysis, which he unconsciously structures as a language in the theories of the second half of the 20th century, belongs to the continuation of Barthes' semiotics by other means. But speaking of a psychoanalytical theory of fashion as an established scientific discipline would indeed be wrong. It is better to say that there are traces of attempts to synchronously—combining new orientations in philosophy and theories of culture—find a way that approaches fashion in its indeterminacy. In that sense, Lacan's psychoanalysis is one of the assumptions that an individual subject is a meeting of imaginary-symbolic-real traumas in the construction of a new identity, then the object's fetishism is inevitably attributed to fashion clothing that shocks, provocatively and experimentally surpassing the moral boundaries of the conservative society (Fernbach 2002; Wilson 1985, 91–116).

The next consideration will offer reasons why the science dealing with fashion essentially must perform interdisciplinarily and why it cannot exist without a necessarily open space for the emergence of an autonomous profession of fashion studies. We should be aware that the scrutiny and the way in the analysis of *fashion as a creative body design* require crossing disciplinary boundaries, often at the cost of the loss of a solid orientation. Strictly speaking, regarding the question of the modern scientific methodology of fashion studies, humanities and social sciences where the fashion should be included, the answer is almost unambiguous: between and on the edge of the post-disciplinary approach to the very thing of thought. Here, we would apply a division of fashion into analytical-structural and historical-genealogical senses, followed by the development of scientific paradigms ranging from modern sociology and anthropology to postmodern cultural studies and, finally, contemporary visual semiotics.<sup>3</sup> I assume that three

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<sup>3</sup> We comprehend the term paradigm (Gr. *παράδειγμα*, example, pattern, matrix), as a particular circuit in which assumptions and rules appear to be necessary for a meaningful notion of reality. This term was developed in the theory of science by Thomas Kuhn in his book *The Structure of Scientific Revolution* (1962), and it became generally applicable thereafter. As it relates to the models and frameworks in which the scientific way of thinking builds up its explanations of the world, it is obvious that with each change of paradigm, the perception of the world is rapidly changed. In the case of fashion, what has been paradigmatically determined in the course of the historical process since its creation in the late 14th century to the present day is that there exists a mutual relationship of permeation and mutual action

modes of the paradigm are at the same time the ways to create a theoretical approach to the topic that is historically articulated as a path towards the *total body design*.<sup>4</sup> These are (1) *modern fashion*, (2) *postmodern fashion*, and (3) *contemporary fashion* (Paić 2007, 20–36). All theories of fashion within the first paradigm, except for Simmel and the conditional limit of validity of his ideas, are related to the social class hierarchy (*trickle-down theory*). According to that insight, fashion indicates the function of the social stability of the capitalist order. Within the framework of the second paradigm, the realm of the concept of anti-fashion and of all that is what the most significant postmodern theoretician of fashion, Gilles Lipovetsky, called the “marginal differentiation” process in his book *The Empire of Fashion: Dressing Modern Democracy (L’Empire de l’éphémère: La mode et son destin dans les sociétés modernes)* (Lipovetsky 2002, 131). Finally, the third paradigm form is based on the image shift (*iconic turn*). Now its fashionable facility and the network of its meanings can decode an act of interpretation forms and the methods of construction of the object itself. The concepts should be applied in visual semiotics, visual anthropology, image science (*Bildwissenschaft*) and post-phenomenology. Three levels of this discussion will prove that fashion theory includes everything that belongs to the openness of the perspective and facility with which the image might

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between the reality and the thinking of the mode. No new fashion paradigms are created without influencing thoughtful changes in the understanding of the world, as is the case in art. The framework for the functioning of concepts and the categorical apparatus belonging to a certain paradigm is not closed to some impenetrable forms but is about transitions and changes of varying intensity.

<sup>4</sup> This term implies something extremely ambivalent and at the same time contingent. As is well known, the concept of total (totality) belongs to the inheritance of classical metaphysics and rises to the notion of the entity that controls its parts in Hegel’s philosophy of the absolute spirit. The historical avant-garde in the first half of the 20th century, in its demands for changing the status and sense of art, already sought to bring disunity into the concept of totality. With the emergence of modern design, architecture and fashion, it moved in the direction of the limited autonomy of its own action. Why? Precisely because it wanted to serve the external purpose of its autonomy by taking the concept of function to explain the cause of movement in the circle of the all-round aesthetics of everyday life. Let us remember that the struggle between minimalism and the luxurious surrealistic tendency to blend metamorphic forms of radical art with a consumerist lifestyle, as seen in the case of the differences between the designs of Coco Chanel and Elsa Schiaparelli, was at the same time a struggle between the two faces of the same coin: avant-garde Jesuit purity and surrealist fantasy about bizarre and extravagant fantasy worlds. The total body design therefore means the utopia/dystopia of the life itself that aspires to become an artistic event in which fashion takes the role of the creative design (Paić 2011).



be understood as a presentation (*mimesis*) and representation (*repraesentatio*) of some already existing reality as its description. Fashion within visual semiotics shows the sign of the new identity of the liberated body without any reference to society and culture. How must this be understood? Visuality is not just a feature of the media-constructed reality. The whole set of cultures that we call visual culture today is based on the conceptual turn from language and text to image. But the image here might be derived from the technological way of processing information. The visual culture of modern fashion determines the social status of the subject and the object of fashion change. The body image, thus, defines the manner of its meaning-typing field. It is endless as it is the world that fashion creates as a result of the absolute freedom of the construction/deconstruction of life. All this has been witnessed in the fascinating and extravagant works of contemporary fashion designers.

### **1. Modern society or the function of fashion: sociology, psychology and anthropology**

What encompasses that assemblage that we call a modern fashion? The answer seems as unambiguous as the definition of the notion of modernity. It is a way of life in an industrial society where the body serves as a means of presenting the power of capitalism and its social hierarchy. Fashion denotes a part of the modernity of the theatre of social roles precisely because it is not explicitly centred on the problem of the construction of individual identity as a subject of *lifestyle*. After all, fashion has only begun to spread in all directions since the emergence of a massive mode of commodity production that encompasses the entire social space of control over human behaviour. It was therefore not unusual for the first scientific study of “modern fashion” to simultaneously be a criticism of capitalist modernization to restrain the excessive and resourceful consumption of the high class. The sociology of fashion at this juncture determined the fundamental settings of the American anthropologist, economist and sociologist Thorstein Veblen. We will emphasize some significant remarks here from his *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, which was first published in 1899 (Veblen 1961). For Veblen, fashion represents a result of (1) *conspicuous leisure*, (2) *conspicuous consumption*, and (3) *conspicuous waste*. It should be particularly interesting that fashion is defined by the anthropological need of man for the admiration of the symbolic money-power system in the conditions of the competitive nature of capitalism. At the centre of Veblen’s criticism is the aristocratic way of life of the ruling

elite or bourgeois class and consumption above the morally permitted measure of wealth (Davis 1992, 110–115).

We must not deny that his analyses of early consumer capitalism were abundantly served by Lipovetsky in his book. In this way, they show the kinship and the differences between the two paradigms of fashion and their theoretical explanations. In the first case, it is obvious that consumption can only have the exclusive character of the ruling high-class style. But when the 1960s triumph of consumer culture emerged, and when postmodern culture was elevated to the cult of spectacle and the passage of fashion, it became clear how the subject/actor of late capitalism changed radically with the rule of media and communication. Consumption was then democratized. In the place of the decadent style of life, there was the elite fashion turn. Now, the logic of spending in signs of frivolity and the ultimate luxury of the new aristocracy is no longer important, but there is the possibility that fashion appears in the availability of the very act of a different cultural differentiation. Everything that Lipovetsky in his analysis of postmodernism in the culture of late capitalism that leads to transparency by introducing categories and concepts of fluid character is revealed in the sociological-anthropological works of Veblen and Simmel. It should be emphasized, in particular, that Simmel's theory of the individualizing lifestyle in the context of the creation of the landscape of mass culture breaks the boundary of the so-called *trickle-down theory*. Simmel was the first theoretician of fashion who, within the paradigm of modernity as a closed matrix of stability and change, noticed that the idea of fashion as a social form transformed itself. Along with Walter Benjamin, a philosopher and theorist of culture who is extremely important for understanding the new spirit of capitalism built in the eclectic mix of "arcades" and "boutiques," the aura of high art and grand tastes prone to photography and film as new media (Benjamin 1969), Simmel precisely shows the internal tendencies of the development of fashion in the core of the construction of a new man as refined and a subject devoted to the decoration and the aesthetic design of one's own life. Perhaps there is not such a sophisticated tendency to balance the modern man in choosing his cultural preferences, as Simmel represented in his thinking about the role and being of fashion:

Perhaps Goethe, in his later period, is the most eloquent example of a wholly great life, for by means of his adaptability in all externals, his strict regard for form, his willing obedience to the conventions of society, the attained a maximum of inner freedom, a complete saving of the centres of life from the touch of the unavoidable quantity of dependence. In this respect, fashion is also a social form of marvelous expediency, because, like the law, it affects only the externals of life, only those sides of life which are turned to society.

It provides us with a formula by means of which we can unequivocally attest our dependence upon what is generally adopted, our obedience to the standards established by our time, our class, and our narrower circle, and enables us to withdraw the freedom given us in life from externals and concentrate it more and more in our innermost natures. (Simmel 1957, 554)

The emergence of modern fashion from the spirit of the function corresponds to the emergence of fashion design as a vocational-disciplinary approach to the creation of clothing. Of course, this was happening at the same time as the historical movements of the avant-garde, particularly constructivism, surrealism and the first school of modern design of *Bauhaus*, in the 1920s, when design became a new feature of aestheticizing life in industrial capitalism in clothing and the practical performance of fashion. Coco Chanel and her “little black dress” innovation perfectly match the idea of pure form as a function. This was happening in the context of the emancipation of a woman’s body from Victorian torture in the name of “morality” and “virginity.” Fashion cannot be exempted from the “spirit of the times” of the 1920s–1930s, and it is associated with the logic of culturally determined progress and the development of the social form of capitalism in which there are mutually exclusive tendencies. It seems to be the “destiny” of a fashion as a contingent event. After all, nothing in history occurs according to the cruel law of linear development. We have seen Roland Barthes precisely split fashion trends from technological advancement. Fashion is changing and not developing. It is, therefore, its “logic” to include a mass reproduction of the new industry in its codes, as well as the uniqueness and unparalleled news of a uniquely created aesthetic object tailor-made for a personalized customer’s clothing. However, what the sociology of modernity with anthropology has undoubtedly opened up as a problem points to the impossibility of creating fashion by the autonomous and independent subject of the modern paradigm of science with its conceptual apparatus of “dynamics” and “movement,” the social class verticals and the functional order of a society with a series value. The problem, then, was with the cognition or theoretical rank of the first order. It had the same trouble as the design theorists had with less difficulty in the 20th century. How can one possibly talk about fashion and design if their features are passivity and mere phenomena, pure objects, and the aesthetic form of the world?

Sociologically speaking, it must be recognized that, in this respect, we still do not know which deviations measure how fashion always appears to mean something else, serving another purpose, and whereby fashion, as Simmel would say, becomes a “social form” and not an autonomous field of insurmountable meanings. In other words, fashion in the classical

discourse of modern sociology, anthropology and psychology cannot go beyond the threshold of entry into the empire of autonomy of its field. This is attested in an encyclopedic article of 1931 by the American sociologist and anthropologist Edward Sapir. According to Sapir, a fashion tries to “expand” into cultural areas as a dynamic category of social development, and its effects on society appear as well as many other similar social strengths. Sapir mentioned three such effects: (a) sexual symbolism, (b) social interaction, and (c) the cultural code of distinction according to socio-social and gender-sex criteria and the aesthetic principle (Sapir 1931, 141 in Paić 2007, 42). However, all that is mentioned does not emerge from the paradigm of functionalism. The reason lies in the fact that fashion is understood from the reference framework of “modern society.” This means that it comes from the idea that there are necessary distinctions between “being” and “appearance” and between “symptoms” and “phenomena” (the latter being characterized by psychoanalysis), and that something else determines the status and function of the fashion beyond the autonomous form of the fashion as such.

And if “purposefulness is worthy of admiration,” as Simmel says beautifully, what if this is something intrinsic and insensitive to the metaphysical stories of the interior reception in front of the outside, the depths in front of the surface? Does this not undermine the entire building of modern science that finds its cause in causative determinism, that is, in the idea that everything has its cause and purpose and that anything beyond that does not happen in reality? All of the established disciplines in the scientific institutes of universities and research institutes until the 1960s were based on that assumption. The phenomena remain phenomena, part of the logic of scientific research. But since some thinkers such as Benjamin have considered it with extreme seriousness, giving it the hidden place of the phenomenon of the cultural constellation, that is, the montage and allegories of modern capitalism with its movement towards the conquest of an individual’s desire, it has meant that a new way of thinking has been revealed within the discourse of sociology, anthropology and psychology. When Benjamin saw contingency and not necessarily a quiver of development in his “dialectical images” and the idea of “the tiger’s leap” in returning to the end of the late 19th century would be demonstrated by suggesting a different approach and ways of thinking. From that perspective, the design was no longer merely decoration, ornamentation and “applied art” (Lehmann 2000, 203–206). It should not be at all surprising that a special place of interpretation is paid to the contributions of Benjamin in many readers and textbooks concerning fashion today, although it is quite clear that his style of writing and thought tendencies do not strictly belong to

philosophy, sociology, anthropology, or psychology. Writing about ways presupposes a shift away from the “spirit” of objectivity and the “demon” of the quantitative methods of the fictional reality description.

Modern fashion, therefore, is framed as an image of a society that in principle is still closed, despite its aspirations to reach a new space of freedom. If such fashion is always determined by a strict set of rules and norms, and if its “social form” matrix moves to different parts of the world without major difficulties, as shown by the history of global capitalism in the 20th century (Japan and China), it can be concluded that its purpose and aim is to create something derived from the logic of goods fetishism, as Marx did in his critique of the political economy, which is itself the subtitle of his *Capital*. The fetishism of goods and aesthetic objects might be a hidden secret of modern capitalism. Why? Simply because there is the possibility of an ideology that uses the metaphor of the advertising image for its symbolic power of rulership over people. Nothing is left beyond this. Just as in the show by the contemporary fashion designer Martin Margiela from 2014 (Artisanal collection of autumn-winter garments), in which the models’ faces and heads were covered with masks and glamorously designed covers because the true identity of the human lies in the impossibility of identity, so the end of modern fashion denotes the announcement of the period in which sexuality, social interaction and gender-sex discrimination criteria will be summarized as a common denominator in the identity of a singular individual. This question can no longer answer the paradigm of modern science with its great narratives of “objectivity,” “function,” and “social form.” What remains is part of the fragment and openness of the project, which in the 1960s would have led to the starting point and the logic of the fashion. The “social form” of fashion as a trademark of modernity has broken into debris. What is left behind? There is nothing else to do with the subjects/actors of the fashion, like the dreaded wild grove of Orpheus, for otherwise the outline has its own identity.

## **2. Postmodern culture or the purpose of fashion: Cultural studies, theoretical psychoanalysis and feminism**

What is the difference between fashion’s orientation, direction, and the scientific disciplines that deal with it? We have seen how the paradigm of modern fashion scientifically belongs to the centre of the set term of society as a frame of reference without which it is not possible to understand why the social class stratification becomes a condition of the possibility of the occurrence of a fashion as a high fashion (*haute couture*) and the phenomenon of imitating the lifestyle of the aristocratic elite at lower levels of “social

taste.” Let us recall that the artistic view of what is said in Thorstein Veblen’s *Theory of Leisure Class* is brilliantly derived in F. Scott Fitzgerald’s 1925 novel *The Great Gatsby*. The screening of this epic depiction of the “American Dream” as a film was equally as successful as the acting of Robert Redford, who played the title role in the 1974 movie. Without its luxurious costumes, which is to say the fashionable clothes of the 1920s, it is impossible to spot the traumas and dreams of the aesthetic shaping of the “new dandy” in the context of capitalism with the art-deco style and the beginnings of the ingenious consumption of a “parasitic” class. However, society in the era of modernity cannot “prosper” and “evolve” if, metaphorically speaking, the watches of economics, politics and culture are not subtly set and designed. After World War II, and especially in the 1960s, the big narratives of modernity and *fashion as a theatre of social roles* were faced with the question of the end of ideology and the end of history. All this happened when American and European consumer capitalism faced the challenge of colonial wars (the Americans in Vietnam and the French in the Algerian War) and student “revolutions” in the streets of Paris in 1968. The context of the disintegration of the “social forms of fashion” and the emergence of the “society of the spectacle,” as highlighted by the neo-Marxist theoretician and neo-avant-garde artist Guy Debord in his 1967 work *La société du spectacle*, opened the fundamental question of the reintegration of society with the concept of multiplicity, creating new possibilities in the interpretation of a complex reality (Paic 2007, 243–248). We cannot particularly highlight that culture as a spectacle and culture as a struggle for “its” identity (*Kulturkampf*) proves that the concept of ideology has to be revisited. But this can no longer be done without influencing the media image of the world in which fashion has the almost decisive role of enchanting and fascinating the observer with what is no longer hidden behind the surface. Everything is so transparent and so visually impressive that there is no reason to argue for theories that assume that hiding behind a media event is a somewhat foreign and deep “essence” whose symbolic meaning needs to be read in the critique of the world of fashion, media and communication. Nothing is ever behind the scene. Everything might be immersed in hyperreality without depth and surface too.

Fashion in the abyss of rebellion, counter-cultural movements, anti-aesthetics, and the search for new meanings designates just anti-fashion clothing that crushes canons of beauty and tastes imposed by its power in the construction of human identity with the underlying categories of contemporary art—*shock*, *provocation* and *experiment*. Instead of the “little black dress” designed by Coco Chanel in the centre comes a cultural rebellion, located between anarchy and social protest, which was the main