Fashion Meets Capitalism: Representation of Poverty in Fashion

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The Philosophy of fashion

Fashion studies has emerged in the last decade. Fashion researchers (Hollander, 1993; Vinken, 2005; Joy, Sherry, Venkatesh, Wang & Chan, 2012) try to present the fashion system from a critical perspective and at the same time to develop a kind of critical attitude towards it. There are three main driving forces in the fashion industry that are seemed to be relevant: Capitalism, Trends and Time, which keep its structure in permanent motion. The characteristic feature of Capitalism is producing a continual difference in society. Therefore, I examine fashion mostly from the attitude of the connection with Capitalism. I should like to inquire, how the contemporary fashion and society are able to communicate about poverty, or how the fashion industry tries to reconceive itself as a consequence of it. As Elizabeth Wilson noticed, fashion is the child of Capitalism (Wilson, 2013:13). This approach leads us to one of the most decisive critic of Capitalism, the philosopher Karl Marx’s ideas, who dealt with class inequalities and exploitation which prevail under Capitalism. From his perspective, in this special exploitative system goods are produced to be sold as commodities to create profit for capitalists, those, who own the means of production: raw materials, manufacturing machinery; and also the workers, who make goods, selling their labour power and get wages necessary to subsist. Meanwhile, workers themselves are transformed into consumers forced to buy back the things they made (Sullivan, 2013:29). Anthony Sullivan, in his essay rethinks the term of fashion through Karl Marx. Discussing Marx’s well known terms, like surplus value, special being and commodity fetishism applying them for the fashion industry, mostly for fast fashion. The exploitative system of production
characterizes Capitalism and it is also the central problem of the development of fashion.

Nowadays, many fashion theorists are dealing with an anticapitalistic view and trying to criticize the fashion industry, which trapped people into modern slavery and undermined natural environment. According to Safia Minney, modern slavery is one of the most serious consequence of the dysfunctional capitalistic system including children labour, forced labour and human trafficking (Minney, 2017:7). Above all, the worthmentioning aspect of Capitalism is the continual changing. Fashion theorist Barbara Vinken argues that fashion is also inextricably bound up with ephemerality. She defines fashion as the art of the perfect moment, the Now of the threshold of an immediate future (Vinken 2005:42). One of the prominent features of theatre performance and fashion shows constantly recurring in both theatre studies and fashion studies is the singular and unrepeatable nature of performances. As early as 1970 Richard Schechner has emphasised the ephemeral nature of performance, and reinforcing his views, Herbert Blau also stressed the singular and transient nature of theatrical performances, when he defined theatre as something based on evanescence (Blau, 1982: 94). Extending these arguments, in her The Politics of Performance Peggy Phelan went as far as to define performance as something becoming itself through disappearance. This means that the performance cannot be repeated, since every production of a performance involves its own destruction as well, it can be re-produced, but the repetition will always result in a different performance (Phelan, 1993:146). Erika Fischer-Lichte comes close to this by suggesting that the corporeal presence of the players and the viewers renders every theatrical performance different (Fischer-Lichte, 2008). The fetish of ephemerality has of course made its mark on fashion, too. Fashion researchers Barbara Vinken, Adam Geczy and Vicki Karaminas, mostly relying on Walter Benjamin’s ideas and reflections about the retaining of the past in the present, highlight the transience of fashion. Geczy and Karaminas underline the unique temporal features of fashion products. In their collaborative essay, they show how, through the cycles of fashion, it maintains a dialectical relationship with both the past and the present, since each trend recalls and reinterprets the past, but always in a slightly different manner.
Quick fashion cycles therefore always necessitate a repetition of the past. Therefore, dresses always contain the past in some form, the “bygone” always serves as a stylistic inspiration. So, fashion always seems to be a texture of historical references, while it strives to express the actual moment. Fashion simultaneously creates a false illusion of novelty just like Capitalism, which in Walter Benjamin’s view also tempts with the false illusion of progress, repeats a trend already considered outdated. It draws on the past, but undermines it at the same time, connects to its own passing, destroys itself (Geczy & Karaminas, 2016:87). Adam Geczy and Vicki Karaminas represent a critical view of Capitalism, rethinking Walter Benjamin’s well known essays, The Arcades Project and The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility (Geczy & Karaminas, 2016: 81-96) and emphasizing the connection between fashion and modernity. It is also an instructive statement that fashion loses its uniqueness in the age of mass reproduction. According to Georg Simmel, fashion is a product of class distinction and has got double function: it is revolving within a given circle and at the same time emphasizes the separation from others. He argues that: „Naturally the lower classes look and strive towards the upper, and they encounter least resistance in those fields which are subject to the whims of fashion” (Simmel, 1904). This approach is also based on the division of social classes. Without classes there would be no fashion industry. According to Malcolm Barnard, clothing is a key way for the rich to sign and reproduce their power (Barnard, 1996:107). Giller Lipovetsky has already dealt fashion through the term of Hyper-Capitalism (Lipovetsky, 1994).

The fashion industry is seemed to be one of the notable field of Capitalism. It is also interesting that researchers mainly emphasize the class-related aspects of fashion. It is the same in fashion industry, which distinguishes fashion levels, namely the high fashion (haute couture) from the others. Even though the term of “lower fashion” is not used by fashion industry rather it is called ready to wear or fast fashion, in order to generate desire and affect consumer’s emotions.
Representation of poverty in fashion

Fashion studies has a close connection with philosophy, art and theatre. Researchers try to combine several disciplines with it. In this paper I am trying to demystify the fashion system and combine the anticapitalistic fashion view with the perspective of performance studies. I would like to stress a few examples from the world of fashion and point out the dysfunctionality of Capitalism. I am trying to differ three levels of the representation of poverty and inequality in fashion. The first one is, when the community tries to reflect the dysfunctional capitalistic system including children labour, forced labour and low wages and gives voice for their dissatisfaction through the social media platforms (Facebook, Instagram). The second one is, when the fashion industry reflects on their own problem caused by poverty. I would like to analyse Alexander McQueen’s well-known fashion show with the perspective of performance studies. The third level is the academic one, which is close to the first, considering that fashion researchers are also trying to criticize the system, but in the academic fields with other type of discourse, genre, another way of expression.

In the age of social media, it becomes important to take advantage of the opportunities from social platforms, especially from Facebook or Instagram. One of the Instagram movements called Fashion Revolution has got a project: “Who made my clothes”, which tries to struggle with clothes wasting of fashion system and to respond to the underpaid workers in the global fashion industry. It also tries to encourage people, as active global citizens, to make enable changes. The Instagram initiation organizes free live lectures in order to disseminate knowledge about these topics. With the purpose of practising influence on people effectively, uses real stories from the fashion industry. The movement wants to make visible the supply chain and especially eradicate low wages in the Third World. Fashion Revolution was born on 24th April 2013, when the Rana Plaza building in Bangladesh collapsed. More than 1000 people died and 2500 were injured. The victims were mostly young women. The majority of people who make clothes for the global market live in poverty, unable to afford life’s basic necessities (Minney, 2017:15). “Who made my clothes” movement encourages people to use a hashtag
#whomademyclothes in order to ask the brands they buy from. The Instagram movement also launched a hashtag #imadeyourclothes to see workers’ faces and hear their stories through the social platform. The Fashion Revolution tries to connect the wearer with the factory worker, producer, maker. In this situation, the poverty representation tool comes from the power of the social media platform, which encourages people to make changes in industry. The uploaded photos with short real stories about poverty, low wages and child labour take a pressure on fashion brands, which make profit from people’s exploitation. Photos and stories get publicity thanks to Instagram, and fashion brands are forced to react, otherwise lose their consumers. However, analysing the two hashtags #whomademyclothes and #imadeyourclothes we can observe that lot of people use these tags unconsciously. The result will be that the movements are not able to fill their mission, namely to connect the wearer with the garment worker and take a notable pressure on fashion brands. It is also well known, that the rules of hashtaging are flexible and often controlled by personal decisions of users. On the other hand, at least two important facts are forgotten. The first one is, people who lives in poverty and get low wages has no money to buy smart telephones or internet subscription. The main idea and mission of the movement is notable, but the realization can be defective in some points. The concept of the hashtag #imadeyourclothes from the garment worker perspective is also problematic, because bullying in workplace is common in the Third World and workers do not want to lose their jobs.

*Fashion meets theatre studies*

As I have already mentioned above, the perspective of theatre studies has also found its way into fashion theory. Elizabeth Wissinger is rethinking fashion through Judith Butler. In her essay, “Fashion and Performativity”, she pointed out that fashionable body is made and remade in repetitive acts. The starting point was Butler’s well known statement, gender is always a doing, established through repeating iterations or instantiations (Wissinger, 2016:289). In her work she is separating performativity from performance. Butler’s work
became central both in fashion and performance studies and opened up new realms of possibility. This concept is leading us to the second level, the self-reflection of fashion industry. In this case the way of representation of poverty is seemed to be possibly the most diversified. One of the most common example is a Vogue India photoshoot from 2008, which is juxtaposing impoverished people with Fendi baby ribs, a status-symbol Burberry umbrellas and Hermés Birkin bag. The Vogue India’s August Issue presented a 16-page vision of luxury clothes and accessories, modelled not by runway mannequins or the wealthiest people of Indian society who can actually afford these items, but by general Indian people. If we are to believe Tensy E. Hoskins, who refers to the women’s magazine editor reaction, Vogue India wanted to spread a message to the world, fashion is no longer a rich man’s privilege (Hoskins, 2014:132). In this case, luxury clothes and accessories become costumes. Having a huge tenseness between the expensive clothes and this, above mentioned context. Poverty, Indian slum dweller background working as a decoration for this photoshoot. The representation tools are de- and re-contextualization processes. Therefore, I find this example very remarkable, because of the co-existence of poverty and luxury fashion. In this strange, perplexing situation the contemporary fashion is re-interpreted, re-conceived. The Vogue integrated poverty and Indian slum into its own visual world, deconstructing the original context and placed luxury items into Indian slum, meanwhile used its own “Vogue visual codes”. Their mission and intention could be to spread a message to the world that fashion is more democratized, but these deconstruction techniques revitalize the original and the intended extent. According to Francesca Granata, the term of deconstruction came to signify a certain rejection of luxury (Granata, 2017). Many fashion theorists have linked the selected 1990s fashion designs, exposing the labour and techniques of the dressmaker to the deconstruction as a mode of thinking (Vinken 2015, Martin & Koda, 1993). Alison Gill reminds us that the Derridean textual analysis was highly influential in philosophy, psychoanalysis, feminism, film theory and cultural studies in the 1990s, including the creative arts, design and architecture. In her essay she outlines the key features of deconstruction with terms such as text, trace,
double thinking that are shown to be relevant to an alternative thinking about fashion design (Gill, 2016). Gill is mostly concentrating a deconstructive workpiece through the example of a Belgian designer, Martin Margiela. Otherwise, the famous fashion designers, Margiela and Rei Kawakubo were also touched by Derrida’s deconstruction. Deconstruction was a label in these two designer’s work, the paradoxical appearance of clothes that were structurally revealing and unfinished. Martin Margiela’s work is famous for reverse seam and “work in progress” looks. The fashion theorist, Caroline Evans contends that dress’s lining an example of a destabilizing dress that displace the formal logic between dress’s inside and outside (Evans, 2003). Fashion design is like Derrida’s writing, that can underscore an instability in the text or garment to express paradoxically both construction and destruction, making and unmaking. An analogy of double thinking was identified in fashion by Richard Martin and Harold Koda in designs by Rei Kawakubo for Comme des Garçons that expose their structure through holes and unconcealed seams, whereby deconstruction becomes a process of analytical creation (Martin & Koda, 1993:96). In this paper I did not focus on this aspect, rather on the deconstruction of clothing forms, extending to a mode of questioning about the fashion system, the industrial structure and re-thinking of fashion garments.

Alexander McQueen’s fashion shows have their own connection with theatre and performance studies through dressed and aestheticized body and with the special atmosphere of space created by the designer. In academic field, according to Erika Fischer-Lichte the realization of performance is also the destruction of it, at the same time. Barbara Vinken draws our attention to the same nature of fashion (Vinken, 2005:42), for example fashion shows are not able to repeat themselves, the time of fashion is the moment. In this sense, most of the fashion shows can be analysed from the perspective of theatre studies. We can observe, that fashion mannequins are comparable with Edward Gordon Craig’s “übermarionette” concept, namely they just execute the director’s idea and will. Craig himself was a director, and he thought that theatre could not be regarded as art, because neither the actor’s performance was always a subject to his/her own emotions, nor the human body could serve as an artistic
material. The actor’s performance cannot become a piece of art; it is more like a series of confessions. The production itself, on the other hand, is determined by its very nature transient. Craig thought that production could reach the status of art only through permanence (Lyons, 1964). If we try to analyse Alexander McQueen’s fashion shows, we could observe that he creates a theatrical space from the catwalk, including music, material, light, clothes. Mannequins are not only walking through the stage, they have to perform a role. In Bellmer la Poupée fashion show, McQueen composed a rainy city street, the stage covered by water and models were walking through. Relationship are created between the viewer and the performer, the feedback were applause and scream. Space are constructed by space-users. Viewers can feel themselves uncomfortable, focus can be moved from the designer clothes for the whole performance. The black model, Debre Shaw had to perform, walked uneasily in a metal frame, which was attached to her wrists and above the knee. My assumption is that McQueen was romanticizing slavery and connected the black model’s body with stereotypes. Her exotic body is hypersexualised, the function of the metal frame is to lead the viewer’s eyes to her genitalia and hip. A part of the academic literature specifies and calls the practise of fashion industry Modern Slavery. It is also a self-reflection and the criticism of the fashion system. The representation is taken place by romanticization, however it is also observable as a kind of de- or re-contextualization. A body is enclosed into a cage or a stock, appearing in a totally different context, in the substance of catwalk. As a matter of fact, it is the opposite process comparing with the case of the above mentioned Vogue India. In the case of McQueen’s fashion performance, the rich dress up as the poor. Due to McQueen’s collection such classes of society will wear torn clothes, who would never think of it by themselves. The fashion designer, Franco Moschino’s role, is also notable. He spent much of his time to criticise fashion industry, producing jackets with these slogans: Expensive Jacket or Waste of money. The inequality is emphasized by making it the subject of humour. In these cases, fashion industry reflects on its own condition of existence, namely to reach high profit from the dysfunction of the capitalism.
Ultimately, we can realise, that the above mentioned problems are diversified, and rich of examples. Analysing the representation of poverty and inequality in the context of Capitalism, it must be kept in mind, that the original intention is often misunderstood. The sensitiveness of this topic must require wariness.

References


Fashion can be a powerful, feminist force when it comes to lifting women around the world out of systemic poverty. Exhausted by exploitation and infuriated by injustice, there is a wave of small businesses taking large strides to operate better. For many ethical fashion companies this starts with paying producers living wages. When they are paid what they deserve, women statistically spend more on health, nutrition, and education. Just as Isabel’s mother did. They invest in the well-being of their families, creating pathways out of poverty for more than just themselves. For every additional year of education women achieve, child mortality decreases and future earning potential grows. And that education helps to slow population growth, which decreases the strain on the environment. Their book Sociology, Capitalism, Critique is not just fashionable: instead it resuscitates critical theory for new times, and takes the side of the losers in the financial crisis. Our analyses here may be best understood as a critique of the self-debasement, self-disempowerment and self-destruction wrought upon society under capitalism. In our age, to be sure, anyone reviving critical theory needs a sense of irony. Among capitalism’s losers are overworked, underpaid staff in China, ostensibly liberated by the largest socialist revolution in history, but driven to the brink of suicide to keep those in the west playing with their iPads. The proletariat, far from burying capitalism as Marx predicted, are keeping it on life support. Yes, free market capitalism lifts billions of people out of poverty. Let’s look at how. Every trade creates wealth. In free market capitalism, you get to trade whatever you want for whatever you want with whomever you want. Economics taught me that two billion of my brothers and sisters had escaped poverty in my own lifetime. This was a modern-day miracle. I had to find its source. Of course, if people don’t have the means to buy enough food to meet their basic caloric needs, let alone take care of health care, housing, transportation and the like, then we cannot say they have been lifted out of poverty. Period. Still, Matthews has a point: On the whole, things have at least gotten better for the global poor since 1981.