FASHION, DRESS CODE, UNIFORM

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Abstract*: A significant factor, characteristic for the modern society that would need to be debated and analyzed is represented by the role of clothing in the process of defining individual personal identity within people's social integration. The present essay is a result of my observation of clothing adopted by young generations in various social and professional contexts, action that highlighted the existence of various real mutations and confusions among young consumers considering the perception and adoption of daily fashion, dress code elements and uniforms. Opinion is that this fact may result in rather unpleasant situations and failures in their private life, as well as in the social or professional endeavors. Rather improper use of elements that pertain to fashion phenomenon in situations related more to professional and institutional area (job interviews, academic code of conduct, private life etc), situations that generally impose the adoption of adequate and specific elements of dress code may lead to undesired sideslips and change of meanings in the process of communicating and perceiving the social and cultural status, as well as lifestyle and pursuits of the individuals involved in the actual interaction. In this context, human interaction required for social integration may be affected or interrupted by transmitting symbolic elements that are not aligned to social expectations of the individuals, ultimately this easily being able to lead to a failure at personal level.*

Keywords: *Fashion, Dress code, Uniform*

This essay has derived from a paradoxical circumstance, something which was fortunate and unfortunate alike and that refers to my personal development living and experiencing two paradigmatic and entirely different systems: the communist system, with its social rules and dress code imposed by an inflexible and closed society; and the second one, the contemporary democracy which is defined by an extremely different clothing style and trends. When I say "fortunate", I refer to the unique opportunity that was given to me to be able to scrutinise the structural differences, the resemblances and the impact of the existing dress code during both the years of dictatorship and the democratic society, and when I say unfortunate I mean that I was obliged to live a part of my life in a society dominated by dictatorship and lack of freedom of speech.

I had my share of studying and evolving personally up until 1989, being much impacted by society and perceiving from the inside the dressing rules and all other rules imposed by the communist state. During high school years I was obliged, much like all other students of that time, to attend courses while wearing a uniform and a sleeve tag, a distinctive symbol for the high school I was attending ("Iulia Hașdeu" high school in Bucharest, in my case). A unique number was printed on the sleeve tag and all primary and secondary school children could be identified unmistakably by their tag numbers that were written next to their names in the school records.

Romania's communist regime was defined as a left-wing system extremely and unnaturally fostering and promoting egalitarian ideas. Referring to the effects of

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egalitarianism on clothing, Norberto Bobbio considers that regimes imposing undifferentiated clothing on citizens actually promote inequality because there is no option for the different or the haves to stand out by choosing different styles. (Bobbio, 1999: 121)

Consequently, the communist regime and the egalitarian values imposed forcefully by the regime would generate the uniformisation and the stereotypization of the clothing that was used and that could be identified back in those times.

For the time being, nearly 30 years after the date when Romania undertook the path of democracy, I had the opportunity to observe how students dress while supervising exams and working on other projects with the Bucharest University and I noticed two prevailing trends of the current society. The standardisation of clothing sets the first trend under the pressure of a day's fashion, whereas the second trend is outlined by the style anarchy which is brought about by not following any dress code, in circumstances where the code should - at least in theory - be imposed by the authority inherent in a higher education institution, whatever the institution may be.

Therefore, I do believe that young people's garments, especially the ones that follow contemporary trends, have now gone past the time when society may be democratised by fashion, a moment that Gilles Lipovetsky describes in his *The Empire of Fashion - Dressing Modern Democracy*, and that we are witnessing today a time when society has become more atomised and more anarchic through the agency of clothing.

More specifically, dozens of years after the collapse of communism, while people have had unrestricted access to culture and information and have been able to travel without restrictions in a boundless world, they have had direct access to fashion and to distribution networks expanded globally, we may still note a return to the uniform clothing, which this time is formed of jeans and T-shirt/hoodies, a style to which we can actually refer as "the new uniform".

Referring to the second trend (the one referring to clothing which becomes anarchised by not complying with a dress code), I could see young women who had accessorized their clothes during courses or exams (which are times when clothing is supposed to be defined by a certain dress code imposed by the place and purpose of those activities) using leather harnesses with stud detailing (that have sexual connotations just like the BDSM outfits), mini skirts and leather suspender belts or see-through clothing items which - as far as I am concerned - are perhaps interesting, daring and fit to other social circumstances.

For that matter, in a chapter titled "*Dress for success or dress for se*x" in Fred Davis's *Fashion, Culture and Identity*, the author distinguishes clearly between clothes somebody may wear in their professional environment and the private or intimate dress code; these two sorts of dress code send opposing messages: one suggests professionalism, authority and work, while the other one focuses on seduction, frivolousness and sexuality. (Davis 1992: 46-54)

Actually, a situation similar to the one I have noticed is described by Ted Polhemus who wrote in his *Fashion & Anti-Fashion* about the confusion that female students of an art school in downtown London created back in the 70s when they wanted to act against the fashion, so they adopted a provocative style, just like the one of sex workers walking the

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streets of Soho. Consequently, not complying with socially-established dress codes brings about confusion in society. (Polhemus 2011:48-49)

The logical question that follows in this context is "Can we use any sort of attire in an academic environment or in other social or professional interaction contexts that are implicitly defined by a certain dress code?"

Considering all of the matters described above, it is interesting to understand what the underlying motivations of these transformations are, what causes the new standing of the young especially in the academic environment and in their relationship with other institutions.

On one hand, these new trends also derive from the effects of the current fashions that young people see in the mass media, through social networks, music channels and entertainment programmes, and then they adopt these trends and bring them along in their academic or institutional environment.

The second motivation that complements the previous one is also the fact that there is currently no formal basic set of dress code rules which an academic institution dominated by tradition and rigour, whose role is to educate people, should perhaps try to establish more strictly.

An explanation for the lack of a firm reaction of higher education institutions in regulating the dress code that young people should use while on the premises of educational institutions could be offered by the new standing that institutions have in a capitalist society, just like sociologist Lazăr Vlăsceanu explained. According to Vlăsceanu, students are engaged in a new sort of relationship with the institution and that, given the new requirements of the capitalist market, the institution had to reposition the students and turn them into customers. Vlăsceanu went on and stated that:

> A new vocabulary was actually invented, based on which to position the university on the academic market: students are customers, the institution is accountable to the government, but especially to its customers, to corporations, to donors and sponsors; the university is supposed to look for a market niche and promote its brand. The department is a "cost centre", the professor is an entrepreneur and the institution is a business corporation. (Vlăsceanu 2007: 250-251, my translation)

A third motivation that could be considered for the current situation which is described and noticeable as a phenomenon, more specifically the anarchised dress code of students/young people in general, could be explained in the form of a particular context which is only to be seen in Romania, since it is influenced by the social, cultural and economic context, but also by how fashion as a phenomenon is generally understood and perceived.

For an exact perception of how important the relationship between dress code and institution is, we need to understand, from a theoretical point of view, what the dress code is, what the fundamental distinction between dress code and fashion is, and for that matter I would like to bring up what Ornella Kyra Pistilli stated on the topic:

> Taking up a dress code is about respecting the semantic connotation of an environment, its peculiarities, its specific traits, its internal structure. In those institutions having a prescriptive and mandatory dress code, students connect to the

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> corps of the institution. […] The visual impact is a very powerful one. […] The dress code coagulates an ideological cohesion. […] The dress code establishes and imposes clothing and behaviour. (Pistilli 2005: 38-39, my translation)

Under these circumstances, using a dress code that belongs to another institution, to another subculture will exclude young people from the academic environment and will position them closer to fashion, to sexuality, to entertainment, music, minorities of any sorts, etc. Under these circumstances, paradoxically enough, neither the institution, nor the student will enjoy visibility and social recognition and, why not, a personal identity or brand.

I have been exposed incidentally to the effects generated by an incorrect dress code in other contexts, more specifically while working with various advertising agencies, PR firms or international media trusts to broker or organise internship sessions for students within these institutions. During these sessions, management representatives actually communicated to me that they had requested from students, under various circumstances, to change or readjust their garments or personal image. Some of these situations are presented here as an example illustrating how significant the main theme is for the real working environment.

The advertisers told me that young ladies were using a too vivid, too aggressive, even theatrical makeup, so they had to recommend those ladies to give up on that sort of appearance. People from the media trust told me that the female trainees were wearing inadequate garments; sometimes they were too revealing or even transparent. And even in this case, corporate decision-makers came out to female trainees in a straightforward manner and suggested to change their clothes and use something that would better fit the work environment. Not lastly, there were cases when - in the case of the PR agency - I heard complaints about both not wearing outfits compliant with the office dress code and using too much perfume or make-up. So trainees were approached directly and told openly to correct their appearance.

In all of these cases, we can note deviations and failures to comply with the semiotically appropriate dress code that trainees were supposed to adopt during these internships that exposed them to a real-life work environment. At the end of the day, these institutions could actually become the employers of choice for these trainees after graduation.

If the dress code is defined and if it defines the institutions that generated it for marketing, but also for ideological purposes, then its existence outside this construction may not be considered.

In case of fashion, its bond to freedom of expression and sexuality is similar. Fashion is simply unable to exist unless it involves freedom of expression or sexual innuendos. Along this line, Ruth Rubinstein wrote that:

> in his «shifting erogenous zones» theory of fashion (1930), Flugel observed that the purpose of fashion is to create sexual interest and that the phenomenon of fashion requires that a designer shift focus from one part of the female anatomy to another. (Rubinstein 2001: 14)

Consequently, mistakingly using fashion at those times when actually a dress code should be understood and adopted may bring about social non-inclusion or failure for the

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adopters. I consider that mistaking dress code for fashion may be explained by the various mutations that have been obvious and existed throughout the fashion phenomenon along the decades and that have turned the fashion *per se* into an amorphous and stereotyped universe.

It is along that track that I actually pointed out in 2013 in my *Semiotics of fashion. Gender Mutations in Contemporary Fashion* (original title *Semiotica modei. Mutații de gen în moda contemporană)* that:

> *[...]* we are the contemporaries and witnesses of a sort of fashion whose authentic value goes through a de-structuring phase. We should also note that there are some fashion trends out there that have stopped making any clear-cut distinction between genders, while generating the current neutral and androgynous styling. What we are witnessing inter alia is a diluted distinction amongst generations, since youngsters and seniors wear identical or similar garments nowadays, while garbs defining a certain social standing or belonging with a certain social class are dimming out. (Podaru 2013: 72, my translation)

Obviously, a society that lived for decades under the pressure of an aggressive dictatorship could become sensitive about uniforms as something which is inherent in an ideology and something which levels people out, the way the communists used it as a coercive tool; and Pistilli supports similar assumption when she says that:

> Uniform, whoever wears it, the military, the school-goers, the civilians (just like those tunics that the Chinese used to wear in Mao's times) will always tell the story of an institution and will also be the reflection of a structured and hierarchical society. (Pistilli 2005: 39, my translation)

Young people born in the post-communist era experienced nothing of the communist-type clothing uniformisation, but only encountered the liberties that fashion has pushed into the foreground and the spectacle that fashion is able to create, so it is really impossible for them to perceive the role, meaning and subtle differences that separate dress codes from an ideologically-imposed uniform. Maybe also due to the fact that institutions never wanted to call to mind that uniform may actually be something positive that could really point to traditions and elites (considering positive examples of the prestigious universities such as Oxford and Harvard), young people are reluctant or even feel repulsion to such a clothing trend, since they may consider it a form of constraint and a clampdown on the personal liberty.

This sort of permissiveness and the lack of involvement in educating the good taste of young people in matters of clothing and dress codes puts them - once they graduate - in an impossibility to integrate and to comply with the dressing and behavioural rules that are imposed primarily by international corporations. For example, in the banking system, the financial institutions that operate internationally allow employees to only use casual clothing (jeans, casual trousers, polo T-shirts) on Fridays or on other days when the context allows it. Usually, all employees are supposed to comply with the dress code that such an institution imposes.

In circumstances where school and institutions playing an institutional role have lost some of their force and the role that they used to play in the past, the taste of young people is educated with and through the agency of the values coming from the pop culture, while the educating role of the elite culture wanes off.

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For that matter, Debora Viviani stated that in the contemporary society which is dominated by capitalism and by permanent changes, an individual's social underlying pillars collapse, leaving the individual to survive in a vulnerable and unsafe position. (Viviani 2010:59)

Moreover, the life of individuals is marked every step of the way by moments/traditions that impose their compliance with a proper garb, a dress code laden with symbolism, for example, private events, christening of babies, marriage, funerals are all as many rituals marked by the rigorous usage of a specific dress code. It is still in this way that we should construe other moments such as somebody's participation in a job interview, opera performance, internship interview, that are all described by the adoption of a specific dress code which involves style, elegance, professionalism and reliability, and not at all a focus on sexuality or on using somebody's own body as an item of consumerism, as Jean Baudrillard described it. (Baudrillard 2008: 171)

As far as I am concerned, reality as we see it today and reality as described by this essay goes counter Goffman's "front stage behaviour" perspective.

Should young people/students perform for the others, this self-introduction to everybody by means of a dress code which is expected to support social integration should also be meeting the expectations of viewers (teaching staff, employers, co-workers, etc.), whereas clothing and the symbols of the accessories should comply with the minimal norms of a proper dress code.

In spite of all that, as far as I am concern, what we are looking at right now is a new mutation, more specifically a performance for one's self only, a circumstance that the universe of contemporary fashion brings into the foreground, since it is contemporary fashion indeed the one that – after becoming the central element of the contemporary society – has managed to invalidate the value and symbols of the institutional dress code. In this particular case, the one of the performance for the self, the clothing of the young people / students is individualised and sexualised without meaning to catch somebody else's eye, but just to satisfy one's personal hedonistic perspective. Under such circumstance, the clothing of the young slides from the area of the institutional dress code to the fashion area, which brings about a number of confusions in what concerns both the symbolism of the outer appearance and these people's social standing.

At end of the day, just as I stated in the past, nowadays we are looking at a new mutation triggered by the universe of fashion and by the chaotic consumption of fashion, and we are witnessing an exposure of fashion which is being dominated by "[…] a new and uniformed type of garment, the new costume era." (Marinescu, Podaru 2015: 276, my translation)

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