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Fashion metaphors for the city

The discourse of urban representations by fashion phenomenon

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In the search for new urban identities it is possible to use the help of codes and metaphors provided by language structures; thus the city can be described and represented within the instrument of coding and interpreting. One of the possible options to make it is to consider the phenomenon of fashion placed in the contemporary urban environment; fashion obtains its own language as well as social agents to create, diffuse and interpret the metaphors of the urban. Moreover, fashion provides certain techniques and instruments for representations which can deliver certain understandings and codes for the city and urban spaces.

In the proposed paper my aim is to consider the interconnections between the city and fashion in the context of its possibilities to represent each other through certain metaphors. Thus, for instance, in order to represent the urban fashion as a social phenomenon introduces metaphors concerned: i) on the brands and fashion names associating with and symbolizing the cities or urban spaces, so called “branded city” where its image directly depends on its fashion content; ii) on the components of the “city look” representing concrete urbanity, certain place, certain lifestyle and system of values; iii) on the concrete “urban garment” describing the fashion cases where a product influences the image of a city in a certain way. Interpreting the interaction between the city and fashion in the proposed way it is possible to create certain fashion and urban discourses aimed to understand urban spatiality metaphorically performed by the fashion tools. Furthermore, as far as fashion is understood not only as clothing but as a social phenomenon participating in the varied social processes in the contemporary society it is possible to determine its influence on the city fragmentations, on the process of getting new information from the urbanity and on the citizens’ perception of the urban. The fashion representations provide visual understanding of the contemporary urbanity formed by different social issues and aimed to construct common urban identity for the city dwellers.

Keywords: fashion representations, urban identity, metaphors

1. Introduction

In a search for new urban identities it is possible to use the help of codes and metaphors provided by language structures; thus a city can be described and represented within an instrument of coding,



comparison and interpreting. One of the possible options to make it is to consider the phenomenon of fashion placed in a contemporary urban environment; fashion obtains its own language as well as social agents to create, diffuse and interpret the metaphors of the urban. Moreover, fashion provides techniques and instruments for representations which can deliver certain understandings and codes for the city and urban spaces.

In the proposed paper my aim is to consider the interconnections between the city and fashion concerned fashion metaphors produced for the urban representations. As far as a metaphor is understood here as a tool for description an object by the analogy and comparison using specific characteristic of the object, a representation being a creation of understanding of one through another can easily uses metaphors for the construction of notions. In other words, metaphors can work in the process of representation as one of the main instrument highlighting important features of the performed objects. There are several metaphors for the representation of the city through fashion here explained, so called: i) the “branded city”; ii) the “city look”; iii) the “urban garment”.

Fashion as a social phenomenon obtains social agents for creation metaphors and representation objects. Such agents work in the physical space as designers, stylists, fashion journalists, models, and merchandisers or in the symbolic space within the fashion media obtaining power to work internationally and to cover varied geographical volumes online.

2. Fashion and the city under the theoretical perspectives

In order to construct a discussion about the concepts of fashion and the city within a discourse of representations it is necessary to mention briefly the perspectives under which in sociology fashion and the city can be analyzed. Fashion can be considered dually, as clothing, dress and appearance as well as a social phenomenon both connected varied theoretical concepts. Thus fashion can become a way of imitation and differentiation within society in order to share commons or distinguish from others (Simmel, G., 1957), it can regulate the disposition of social structure and reflect the social statuses (Bourdieu P., 1984; Veblen T., 1960). Furthermore, it can express certain identity through the choice of garments (Blumer, H., 1969; Craik J., 2009); under the fashion dimension the age and gender as well as the characteristics of the time can be reviewed (Barnard M., 1996; Crane D., 2000; Lurie A., 1981). Moreover, fashion can be considered as a cultural phenomenon (Craik J., 1994; Breward C., 1995; McRobbie, A., 1997), as an instrument of communication within clothing codes (Davis F., 1992) and finally, as a symbolic system to exchange semiotic codes within dressing (Barthes R., 1983).

In the same way the city is understood as an urban area with its geographical characteristics and organization of spaces as well as a social institution arranging city life and urban behavioral patterns, city rhythms and attitudes. Thereby the city can be considered in the framework of dominance and space competition (Miles, M., Hall T. and Borden I., 2004; Park R. E., Burgess E.W., McKenzie R.D., 1967), within the concept of the city growth and social, economic, cultural changes accompanied (Sassen S., 1991; Simmel, G.,1980). Moreover, the city is researched as a regulating mechanism of human life within the growth of population and its social influence (Wirth, Louis., 1938) as well as a symbolic system providing social organization patterns and schemes of urban interactions (Miles S., Miles M., 2004). The city represents the time and space dimensions by economic and technical development, progressive ideas and city rhythms (Miles, M., Hall T. and Borden I., 2004) and even gender by determining spaces for males and females and providing identities by the social differentiations (Bridge, G. and Watson, S., 2000; LeGates, R.T. and Stout F., 2011). Finally, the city is researched in the cultural paradigm with its symbolic capital, cultural heritage and multiculturalism (Mumford L. 1938; Zukin S., 1995).

3. First metaphor: “Branded city”

The first metaphor refers to a city “covered” by the presence of fashion in it; the city here mentioned is defined as a geographical area and fashion is concrete garments and brands there located. In this case there are important diversity of shopping areas situated as well as a variety of fashion brands presented in

an urban area, also the branded urbanites and tourists demonstrating and diffusing trends around. Furthermore, as the social phenomenon, fashion brings within conglomeration of brands differences in social and economic statuses (luxury or casual style, for instance), gender dimension presented by correlation of female and male shops as well as cultural component (varied styles and subcultures performed) of the urban space and expressing the cultural capital of the social institution of the city.

The urban representations are based on the references to certain fashion names which construct symbolic value of the city by certain fashion dimension and provide symbolic value to a fashion capital. As far as brands incorporate fashion tendencies, the characteristics of such fashion trends can be extrapolated to the cities establishing an authenticity of a place.

Agnes Rocamora in her book “Fashioning the city: Paris, fashion and the media” connects a representation of Paris with a notion of woman and fashion supported particularly by fashion media today: the fundamental role of French fashion in the whole industry is highlighted by innumerable variety of fashion boutiques and designers in Paris oriented on their main consumer group of glamorous women (Rocamora A., 2009). Thus within the construction of symbolic fashion space surrounding the French capital there is also a representation of physical space of the city where the image of fashionable women placed in Paris is conceptualized by mass media. According to Rocamora, it is possible to consider the city as a discursive reality within words and images that is why Paris discourse can be decoded by fashion representations, especially provided by fashion media. In other words, the city as a social organism organizes its space concerning a social status but at the same time the concept of prestige and luxury sets the social hierarchy and the social life in the city as well.

All of these mentioned above reflect on the social, economic and cultural status of the city, its image within the country and the world providing certain understanding of the urban spaces by fashion branding. Thus fashion names become associating with and symbolizing the concrete cities, where its image directly depends on its fashion content. Fashion media, articles and advertisement and even designers use quite often the big cities in order to promote a product by linking it with the actuality of fashion and culture placed in a certain city or with the image of a place enlarging its symbolic value (for example, the brand “DKNY”- Donna Karan New York, “L’Oreal Paris”). The most obvious example in this case can be the capital of France which is assimilated with haute couture, luxury and famous designers, firstly, with the brand of Chanel; the media by promoting Paris as a centre of fashion was highlighting the huge variety of the best shops and department stores there, in such way constructing a city discourse based on the consumption dimension. In other words, within the media the city can be fashioned in different styles.

4. Second metaphor: “City look”

The second metaphor is concentrated on the representation of the “city look” through the constructed fashioned image belonging to certain urbanity with appropriate lifestyle, consumer practices, ways of urban mobility etc. This metaphor characterizes the city through the outfits of urbanites and constructed by them visuality of an urban reality.

The city look produces and diffuses urban identities covered under the fashion production and fashion trends: any urban space can obtain certain codes and patterns of visual presentation and performance. Thus the fashion capital Paris provides certain French or even “Parisian chic” expressed in clothing style, dressing norms and lifestyle; the other fashion capital London also performs typical “British look” based on elegance and traditions supported by the fashion industry and designers. Nevertheless, a notion of the “city look” can become contradictory considered in the framework of a real geographical location where such style is adopted and in the framework of exported and diffused standards of dressing and fashioning subscribed to a fashion place.

In other words, fashion as clothing compiles from different consumer garments certain look which refers to certain location; at the same time it characterizes the city as an institution constituting certain fashion standards and rules to be accepted by citizens (the processes of imitation and differentiation of trends are

quite allowed yet). Moreover, fashion as a social phenomenon plays a role of symbolic component of the city expressing its cultural capital.

The interconnection and interaction in fashion the global and local segments provides a problem of definition: on the one hand, there are certain brands related to certain country or location, on the other hand, under the globalization process these brands can be easily fabricated and approached anywhere. The globalization mixtures cultural specialties, nations, localities and spread it onto different spaces providing changes and influences. Moreover, the consumers have free preferences between global mass-popular trends and local authentic design achieving metaphorically certain place or location.

For instance, under a notion of “true Brit” we understand not only concrete fashion garments and British brands but also reference to rainy London, English pubs, conservatism, elegance etc. These characteristics are constructed as well mostly by the media promoting certain English fashion as specific only to the Great Britain citizens [26].

The image of “La Parisienne” as an icon of femininity, described and used in literature, cinema, arts, fashion media, of a typical French woman with faultless knowledge of fashion and its creation consists not only of dressing and accessories but of innate style, authentic simplicity and culture or even talent for choosing appropriate clothes. This understanding of “La Parisienne” is provided by certain discourse expressed in many cultural representations of her image where media plays particular role of its provider [25]. The image of “La Parisienne” is strongly connected with the notions of independency, elegance, sophistication and urbanity where Paris is performed as a perfect stage of action for such women. Visualization of the image of Parisian woman by art and media, especially fashion magazines, strengthens the connection between Paris, fashion and women in general.

5. Third metaphor: “Urban garment”

The third type represents fashion cases where a consumer product influences the image of a city in a certain way; thus fashion as clothing works for representation of the city as a location where it appeared or was produced as well as of an institution which manages or regulates such fashion. Such urban garment as a symbolic object manages to represent the urbanity delivering as well social differences for those who purchase it or not, for instance, or possibility for consumer to identify with certain urban characteristics. The cultural component of an urban garment also reflects the culture of the place and correspondent cultural patterns; for instance, the garments which tourists buy in a certain touristic places obtain much symbolic value for them not depending exactly from which brand, quality or price is this product.

One of the examples can be the Chanel’s little black dress which was created by the French designer and referred always to Chanel’s fashion, anyway became a world pattern of perfect style and part of a certain look allowable anywhere but representing fashionable elegant women placed in the city. Moreover, the detailed characteristics (shape, material, length, decoration etc.) of little black dress are not as important as the visual representation of style and fashion patterns connected with the city lifestyle and urban environment of the contemporary fashionable women.

Another example is the case of jeans which were firstly produced in Italy but then became popular as workers uniform in the USA and from there got a world fame and acceptance as a universal garment for any kind of look, purpose and style [5]. Moreover, jeans as common clothes at the same time delete all social inequalities but by its designer, quality and price construct social, economic, cultural differences and provide representations of the urban and the city.

6. Conclusions

In the contemporary society it is possible to consider the city aside from the social, cultural, economic and other approaches under the perspective of fashion representations: by producing expressive metaphors as comparative descriptions of objects fashion emphasizes different characteristics of the cities and urban spaces. Such metaphors can construct the image of a city by highlighting brands’ names connected with and placed in the city area with symbolic fashion space created, by describing the images of urbanites with



certain outfits, lifestyles, value systems attached or by providing the cases of urban garments transforming the understanding of the city and urban spaces within its functions or symbolic meanings.

Moreover, the perspectives under which as the city as fashion are investigated can be extrapolated to each other within the common representations. The most important social agent for creating and diffusing such metaphors is the mass media which constructs and diffuses such representations and delivers city images and identities as far as fashion trends to the consumer audience.

For the further investigations it makes sense to take into account the opposite dimension where the city can represent fashion and fashion trends. For instance, the possible research perspectives might be certain metaphors on the global and local levels, metaphors concerned the fashion establishment and institutionalization in the city space or metaphors onto locating and hosting certain fashion events.

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