Introducing the Methodology of ‘Critical Fashion Practice’ into Fashion Design Studies in Croatia

Abstract
Since the advent of mass production, where the quantity of clothing reflects the consumption habits of society, fashion has become a reflection of the capitalist atmosphere. The reciprocity of society and fashion begins to occupy and initiate all the intense theoretical discussions that lead to the emergence of new branches of scientific research in the social-humanist field. The two most important scientific fields are the history of fashion and fashion theory, whose analyses focus on the role of clothing as part of material culture conditioned by the political, social, economic and religious context. These two branches of science are increasingly becoming the focus of fashion design students in the education system. As a result, the above disciplines are included as separate compulsory subjects in the fashion design programme, developing strong theoretical skills at the expense of practical production and collection making. This approach represents a significant departure from the curricula of previous fashion design programmes, where the conditioning of the profession by political, economic, technological and social impulses was evident. In 2014, the former Centre for Fashion Studies at the Stockholm College highlighted the problem of a strong dichotomy between theoretical and fashion design courses in fashion design programmes and organised a symposium entitled ‘Fashion Issues: Critical Fashion Studies’. Based on his guidelines, the project ‘Critical Fashion: Reflections in Theory and Practice’ was developed as part of the degree programme at Beckmans College of Design in Stockholm, resulting in a highly discursive internet platform with the symbolic name ‘Critical fashion practice’. The aim of the new approaches was to rethink the importance of theoretical approaches in observing fashion production based on reflection of social relations, media images and personal experiences. This paper analyses the contribution of the platform ‘Critical fashion practice’ in the context of theoretical-practical teaching for fashion design students at the Faculty of Textile Technology, University of Zagreb.

Keywords: fashion design, education, critical fashion practice, concept, fashion theory, fashion practice
Introduction

The first school for fashion design was the Parisian private school École supérieure des arts et techniques de la mode (ESMOD), founded by Alexis Lavigne in 1841 [1]. The educational programme focused on the acquisition of knowledge in manufacturing techniques. After the Second World War, the School of Fashion was founded in 1948 at the Royal College of Art in London to train students with new skills dictated by the increased demands of the industry. At the aforementioned educational institution, graphic and industrial design were introduced at the same time as the fashion programme. The training includes not only all phases of garment production, but also courses in art history and literature to improve the future fashion designer’s communication and presentation skills needed to deal with a prestigious clientele [2].

Over the past decade, major fashion design educational institutions have recognised the need to revise fashion design degree programmes [3]. They have thus organised a series of public forums and discussion groups to address the problems and find new solutions, training methods and pedagogical approaches. Business changes on the fashion market and increasingly strong synergies between design and society, design and politics, and design and culture require academic institutions to rethink their curricula to adapt them to the demands of the market and society. Comparing the American and European fashion design education systems, the American system ('Parsons The New School of Design' and 'Fashion Institute of Technology' in New York) focuses on 'design thinking and process' in its programmes. Their aim is to train a fashion designer who understands the broader social and market context and is able to design innovative products that are subordinate to the dictates of the market. The English model of education ('Central Saint Martin's' and 'The London College of Fashion') bases its educational tradition on the social and historical study of fashion as a cultural phenomenon and a key to creative inspiration. The other model is found in European study programmes. Analytical research approaches are developed mainly during doctoral studies. In Denmark, for example, the programme of the state Kolding Design School is funded by the Ministry of Culture, with the requirement that one third of teaching is focused on market research, with the aim of finding new solutions subordinate to the progress and development of the Danish fashion industry. The director of this school explains that the system trains fashion designers who are sensitive to social issues, so-called 'social fashion entrepreneurs', and not just the suppliers of fashion collections subordinated to a commercial purpose [4].

The education system at the world’s leading academic institutions for fashion design is undergoing a paradigm shift in which preference is being given to a curriculum that focuses on 'analytical thinking' rather than a programme that is subordinate to the 'act of shaping and sewing'. In order to achieve a new orientation, the programme is conducted in the spirit of interdisciplinarity, but in such a way that the theoretical and practical courses, which were previously separate, are linked. The curriculum of the course will set a theme each year, while at the same time teachers from contrasting fields (scientific and artistic) will jointly advise and stimulate individual students to rethink and deepen the concept. The courses aim to develop the skills of collaboration, communication, empathy, the articulation of ideas and strategic planning. To foster such a creative atmosphere, educational institutions and their programmes train fashion designers who
are prepared to operate in the global marketplace, where different business rules apply depending on the country of origin. After their education, future fashion designers are able to design an innovative product, a product of conceptual and critical thinking, subordinated to economic and increasingly significant environmental influences.

Also in Croatia, at the Faculty of Textile Technology, there is a growing need to reflect on the changes and challenges in the education of future fashion designers. Study programmes are determined by the uncertain future of the fashion industry and the new demands of the global market. Interdisciplinary experiences with scientific and artistic practice, and the comparison of fashion design education with education in other design fields (industrial design, product design, visual design communication and interactive design) are of great importance for the formulation of methodological positions and possible orientations in the search for new solutions. At the Faculty of Textile Technology in Zagreb, the five-semester ‘Textile and Clothing Design’ course was introduced in 1983, while the four-year ‘Design and Projecting of Textiles and Clothing’ university course was introduced during the 1993-1994 academic year [5]. In the two-and-a-half-year ‘Textile and Clothing Design’ course, most of the teachers were painters who were trained at the Academy of Fine Arts. They therefore developed their fashion design courses based on their artistic background and skills. A smaller number of teachers came from the social sciences and humanities. In contrast, the four-year ‘Design and Projecting of Textiles and Clothing’ course was more focused on synergistic knowledge from technical and natural science subjects, and had a small proportion of courses from the artistic field and the social sciences and humanities. In accordance with the principles of the Bologna Declaration and study reform at European universities, the Faculty of Textile Technology introduced a new study procedure from the 2005/2006 academic year on, according to which the study of fashion design includes an undergraduate study programme (duration of three years) and a graduate study programme (duration of two years) under the uniform name ‘Textile and Fashion Design’ [6, 7]. In the above-mentioned study programmes, especially in the undergraduate study programme, the art courses and the study of drawing and painting techniques still dominate, while fashion production is neglected due to the potential of small realised collections. The production of costumes and small fashion collections is the focus of the graduate study programme, especially in the ‘Fashion Design’ and ‘Costume Design’ courses. Starting from the first undergraduate course entitled ‘Textile and Fashion Design’, which is characterized by a strong separation of artistic and technical subjects, fashion theory and fashion history have also been developed more intensively since the Bologna reform. While the synergy of the theoretical and practical merging of the courses has been well under way for the last five years at the Faculty of Textile Technology in Zagreb (additional attention will be given to that merging in the next section), it is also necessary to highlight the increasingly intensive efforts of the teaching staff towards a personalized approach. Taking into account the cognitive characteristics of the student, especially prior knowledge, as well as other characteristics of learning and the student’s personality, the teaching staff relies on the theory of experiential learning (the so-called Kolb model) to achieve the more frequent synergy of theoretical approaches and production processes. Contemporary media culture, which prescribes physical beauty as a social imperative, has a powerful influence on students’ creative perceptions. To their detriment, the power of analytical thinking, observation and reasoning is neglected and not encouraged. In today’s modern culture, nothing is controversial or unusual; everything is accepted under the pretext of political correctness. The 2007 historical analysis of the concept of ugliness by the Italian philosopher and medievalist Umberto Eco [8] is no longer at the centre of contemporary aesthetic-philosophical debates. Media culture also accepts everything and feeds on accelerated visual impressions, to the detriment of promoting critical discussions among the younger population. The theme of ‘ugly’ was therefore the impetus for the student work of the undergraduate programme at the Faculty of Textile Engineering in Zagreb in 2019.

2. Materials and methods

2.1 Methodology of the synergy of theory and practice in fashion design

As fashion projects become more conceptual, the history and theory of fashion provide a quality paradigm for discussion and analytical reflection,
Opening up new fields for students’ creative productions. There is thus a need for joint courses or projects in which professors from theoretical and practical work closely together to impart knowledge and translate it into project assignments.

The concept of fashion critical practice helps them in this regard. But what is critical thinking? In the book ‘Critical Design in Context: History, Theory, and Practice’, which deals primarily with industrial design, Matt Malpass describes how critical design preserves the intellectual and creative power of the product, as opposed to the usual purpose-driven product design [9]. It stimulates thought and influences new discourses and perspectives on social reality. Today it is the focus of discussions and the starting point for fashion, but also for environmental and social criticism. It stimulates thought and influences new discourses and perspectives on social reality, and is the centre of discussions and the starting point for fashion, but also for environmental and social criticism. Beckmans College of Design (Stockholm, Sweden) has excelled in this direction of implementing theoretical knowledge, i.e. critical reflection in fashion practice. In their case, the current fashion design course is structured through projects that contrast essays with personal critical assessments of fashion, supported by visual images and commentary on the problems students face. In addition, a significant number of former students and foreign guest lecturers are involved in the delivery of the study programme to stimulate discussion on current and private issues, but in an international context. The new methodological content for the duration of the project of the synergy of theory and practice through critical reflection has been publicly available on the ‘Critical Fashion Practice’ platform since 2020 [10].

To date, Adam Geczy and Vicki Karaminas, Peter Jakobsson, Andreas Nobel, Marco Pecorari and Mathilda Tham have presented their reflections on critical fashion practice in the form of essays, while Ann-Sofia Back and Göran Sundberg, Caroline Evans and Susanna Stroemquist have presented themselves in the form of a conversation between a fashion designer and a theorist.

Emil Balesic, Jose Forselius, Matilda Ivarsson/Jeremiah Whitmore, Alexander Krantz, Alecander Rothschild, Ada Swärd exhibited their creative reflections through photography. The most important factors for a critical fashion practice were presented by lecturer and curator Maria Ben Saad, who stated that "without the connection between theory and practice, it will be difficult to connect design practice with critical thinking” [11]. The first synergy projects from 2014 focused on the current issue of gender identity. Over the years, critical engagement with social issues began to include a more intimate perspective of the author. For example, the project ‘Freedom; Isolated’ (2017) by Emil Balesic, a visual communications student at Beckmans, explored gender expression through moving portraits of people behaving independently of norms regarding masculinity and femininity. In this project, he decided to explore queer masculinity from his own perspective, focusing on the bulge, a well-known symbol in this context. For him it represents an all-encompassing masculinity and he was looking for a way to invite the viewer to see what he sees [12]. Fashion designer Ann-Sofia Back’s next project, for example, explores the concept of ugliness and is presented in conversation with Göran Sundberg, a theorist, journalist and designer [13].

Ann-Sofie Back explored issues of failure in practice, then cracks and misunderstandings in the construction of women’s identity. She gave new value to certain garments that she considered ugly or too ordinary, transforming them into a fashion commentary on societal expectations of women and the dictates of perfection that suppress the possibility of weakness. In her reflections, Sundberg applies French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu’s theory of the intertwined cultural spheres (politics, economics, religion, sport, art, etc.) that make up society to her collections, combining elements of street fashion with reflections on social issues, such as the consequences of climate change, questions of identity and consumerism.

However, the issue of ‘ugliness’ in contemporary culture, which is dominated by the dictates of beauty and perfection, is a very challenging topic. This was also evident in the assignments given to students of the undergraduate programme in Textile and Fashion Design at the Faculty of Textile Technology in Zagreb (2019–2020 academic year, winter semester). The students were asked to choose three ‘beautiful’ fashion items (clothes, textiles, fashion accessories, etc.) from the everyday life surrounding them according to personal criteria. They were then asked to select three ‘ugly’ items. They found it very easy to name ‘beautiful’ items, while it was difficult for them to identify ‘ugly’ ones. They tended to say that “nothing is ugly to them, that everything is acceptable to them” instead of identifying certain fashion
adjectives as ugly. It is as if the term is already ugly and inappropriate, and they only apply it with difficulty and a little embarrassment to the object they have designated by their choice. This raises the question of the source of influence and impetus on perceptions and attitudes towards the concept of ugliness. Is it due to familial, socio-cultural, ideological, media or educational influences? Ugly is a term that has not been accepted as a paradigm for research concepts, nor is it a common starting idea for creative projects. It is a term that is avoided because it evokes negative feelings, such as squeamishness, and it arouses in us the need to criticise it and distance ourselves from its use. However, the task was designed to make students think about the feelings of disgust and the aesthetics of ugliness that garments, fashion accessories or decorations evoke in them. After choosing an ‘ugly’ object, they tried to become aware of the influences and sources of their own aesthetic canon. The next step was to give the object a new discourse and presentation value in a practical-creative approach with the help of the medium of photography, transferring the object from the category of the ugly to the category of the ‘acceptable’ for the author. At the same time, the object was not allowed to be cut or painted. By playing with styling and photography, changing the purpose or juxtaposing it with other trends, accessories, textiles or garments, a ‘new image’ of tolerable aesthetics emerges for the author (Figures 1 to 6).

3 Results and discussion

3.1 The results of the assignments from ‘ugly’ to ‘acceptable’:
First example: starting point Capri trousers in fluorescent yellow-green colour, a trend from the 1980s. 90% polyamide, 10% elastane, 60 dtex.
Second example: brown socks, a common assortment for older women. 100% polyamide, 40 dtex.
Third example: knitted potholders by grandmother from the 1970s, cotton and wool thread. The exercise presented here is part of a series in the theoretical course of the undergraduate programme ‘Textile and Fashion Design’ at the Faculty of Textile Technology in Zagreb, with the aim of confronting and solving repulsive tasks and breaking the aesthetic canon imposed by contemporary media culture. The exercises develop the senses necessary for critical observation and the identification of current social issues, conflicts, tensions and doubts, which are the starting points for conceptual approaches to fashion projects at the graduate level of fashion design studies at the Faculty of Textile Technology in Zagreb. In the graduate course ‘Theory and Culture of Fashion’, methodological approaches to the study of contemporary fashion phenomena are deepened, while in the course ‘Fashion Design’, creative production is imbued with theoretical background.

3.2 Results with discussion: ‘critical fashion practice’ of the graduates of the Faculty of Textile Technology in Zagreb

Just as ‘fashion critical practice’, which analyses historical turns and contemporary productions, draws attention to discourses on fashion, sexuality and identity, so too has the ‘Polari’ collection by Dominik Brandibur, who graduated from the Faculty of Textile Technology in 2020. Brandibur critically examined clothing as a medium of non-verbal language, focusing on the symbolism and dress dialect of the LGBT community throughout history. He captures the fragmentary echoes of this identity and translates them into his collection. In doing so, he explores the subversive charge of the language of dress and the act of dressing as an act of costuming that transforms the body into a performative medium. To stimulate a discursive dialogue with the viewer, he builds the collection from striking fetish elements, combining contrasting materials (gentle cotton, camouflage military fabrics, etc.) and patterns (classic lines, pop art motifs, etc.), but also deconstructing classic dress forms. He plays with gender identity (body and clothes) in a fascinating way, but also with the ideal body canon imposed by the media, using models whose appearance does not correspond to the standard look of mannequins. In addition to manipulating classic dress forms, Brandibur does not omit textile patterns. He uses the historical reference of the paisley motif and transforms it into an eggplant motif, a symbol (emoticon) of fertility and male sexuality in the virtual world of social applications. These woven diminutive codes, which include peach and drop symbols, become a new fashion language called ‘Polari’ (Figure 7) [14].

In contrast to Brandibur, Josipa Fostać’s collection, also a final project at the Faculty of Textile Technology in 2021, critically examines the contemporary potential of a fashion item that has an element of national identity woven into it. Can the fashion signature of autochthonous expression still be maintained in the broad spectrum of contemporary trends? On this path of critical reflection, Fostać draws inspiration from the Zagreb football fan group ‘Bad Blue Boys’ of the Dinamo club and specifies the name of the men’s collection with the diminutive ‘Blubači’ (Figure 8). It retains the symbolic blue colour of the group’s identity, and plays with other signs and the graphic style of the fan...
signs. The group, very warlike and territorial, but at the same time modern in their humanity (during the earthquake in Zagreb on 22 March 2020, they were the first to appear in front of the KBC Zagreb hospital to help pregnant women and newborns during the evacuation), expresses their belonging with a visual identity. In the spirit of globalisation and accelerated changes in fashion trends, the wearer’s spatial affiliation or signature woven into the hem of clothing no longer has national characteristics. However, smaller groups with common goals and values cultivate analogous clothing expressions, in which the already forgotten historical role of clothing can be found, which was not only a status symbol, but also reflected national identity, especially in the period from the 16th century to the Industrial Revolution, i.e. mass production in the 19th century. In the sea of Croatian street trends adapting to Western dictates, the ‘Blubači’ men’s collection explores the role of clothing as a distinctive sign of spatial belonging and thus as an autochthonous fashion expression. While the role of the bearer of autochthonous expression fell to the man as a modern warrior, the female body apostrophises its fragility with the ‘Become Human’ collection and critically engages with the limits of technology’s influence on human existence and production as a medium of historically conditioned roles [15]. Clothing as a second skin, or more precisely as a litmus paper of social reality and change, with the surface inscription of a topological network of cuts of organic forms as a motif and in a range from soft tonalities to intense colours, updates the question of humanity in the age of digital technology and virtual reality (Figure 9).

4 Conclusion

With this paper, we have tried to show current approaches in the education of fashion designers, motivated by fashion critical practices, and informed by theoretical and creative considerations. In contrast to the early 20th century, which was based...
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on collaboration between artists and craftsmen (Wiener Werkstatte), today’s aspects of education focus on collaboration between fashion theorists and fashion designers. At the same time, the process of insight into the sources of inspiration and creative stimulation begins with a concept that focuses on delicate and problematic social phenomena that indirectly affect the individual. In today’s society, the space for free, unconditional and critically grounded action is lacking in the prevailing media culture, which is confronted with strong visual, ideological, economic and technological stimuli that are woven into the human mind at an unconscious level. Through the process of deeper questioning (of social fractures, i.e. current issues) via the critical practice of fashion woven into the educational process, we sensitise future fashion designers to an activist, creative response that brings progress in a personal, social and market context.

References


Figure 8: Josipa Fostač, models from the ‘Blubači’ collection, 2021. Mentor: Jasmina Končić and Duje Kodžoman. Photo: Zvonimir Ferina

Figure 9: Josipa Fostač, model from the ‘Become Human’ collection, 2021. Mentor: Jasmina Končić and Duje Kodžoman. Photo: Mina Pavlović/Fotosofia
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