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The well–dressed people of Belarus

Nelly Bekus Goncharova uncovers the social and political function of clothing in today's Belarus: Clothing is used amongst other things to project an image of wealth and glamour that betrays the underlying poverty of the county. Primarily, however, it serves as a way to rework the recent communist past of Belarus.

Clothing can be seen as having a special social function in a human life. Certainly, the nature of clothing has some common features with a buffer: its symbolic visual component has an effect of a braking and smoothing in the relationships with the social environment. Clothing creates the space for the special communicative maneuvers, with its help one can hide and get lost in a crowd, or, on the contrary, expose one's presence.

The subject of this article is the status of the demarcation of the human body in a system of social representation in contemporary Belarus. I will be focusing on observations of the following phenomena: the way in which Belarusian people arrange their appearance through clothing.

Unlike other countries of the former socialist camp, Belarus experiences its own way of existence beyond the usual logic of modern social development trends towards liberalisation and democracy. As a result of the Belarusian "detachment", the economy of the country is undergoing a lack of private initiatives in business, the absence of foreign investments and a high inflation level. Conflicting with the underlying social poverty of the country, the image of people in Belarusian streets creates a rather prosperous picture of the country. Belarusian women's peculiar "dress style" – including high–heeled shoes, intense make up, fur–coats in winter, etc. became "the norm" for everyday activities. It is not unusual to see a woman dressed to the western standard of a nightclubber doing her shopping in dilapidated shops owned by the state. The evident contradiction between the known facts concerning the situation in the country, the statistical data, the availability of Belarusian consumer goods on the one hand and the appearance of people in public places on the other is surprising for most foreigners visiting Belarus. Thus, according to the Belarusian Ministry of statistics and analysis, in Summer 2002, the average salary in Belarus was 183,735 Belarusian rubles per month, which equals approximately 90 US dollars¹. No wonder that the poll, conducted in January 2004 indicated that 51 percent of Belarusian residents could not afford buying basic necessities in 2002. Of those polled, 61 percent frequently could not buy clothes and 44 percent had to forfeit medical treatment. Only 30 percent of respondents seldom did not buy necessary clothes, and 9 percent never experienced problems with clothes.²

The reality of life turns out to be somewhat less glamorous after all. One can assume that the particular appearance of Belarusian people in public spaces is a result of special efforts, which people undertake to fashion their "noteworthy" look. As an effect of this "operation", performed by people in their daily lives, they give the impressions of actors slightly out of place. This is why the picture of good-looking people in Belarusian streets occurs as a psycho-social phenomenon. The main implication of such appearances can be roughly deciphered as a performative statement of prosperity, profitable social fortune and (in reality) unachievable wealth. The artificial image of seemingly "expensive" dress (which is not necessarily expensive but refers to the style of clothing which serves as a "signal" of expense) seems to be a collective mask that hides the true lack of material wealth. In order to agree with the thesis that "clothing makes a commentary upon the ongoing social spectacle, typically by *enhancing* or *amplifying* the distinctive traits of the social happening..."³ one can attempt to decode the logic of this kind of social happening in the Belarusian public space. At first sight, smart dress in Belarusian public places seems to function not as a "direct" semiotic representation but rather as a symbolic "camouflage" of reality. However, behind this function of the simple "concealment of truth" about people's life, a certain complex interaction between different systems of social representation can be revealed.

Indeed, what is important here, is that the discrete elements of clothing used by Belarusian woman are not "products" of Belarusian social reality itself but rather artifacts of a wholly different symbolic order. What can be observed is not the creation of objects and meanings from nothing, but rather the alteration and rearrangement of what is given and borrowed into one configuration, which carries a new meaning, and its translation into a new context.

In the socialist "past" the value of clothing used to be almost entirely reduced to its practical function. The logic of "necessity" and "need" was prevailing within the socialist paradigm as far as people's look was concerned. Besides, any kind of particular attention to clothing, any "distinguished appearance", that it performed occasionally, conflicted inevitably with the ruling principle of the obliteration of class- and other differences in society. The idea of total "social equality" was broadcast widely by the official rhetoric. This kind of "class homogeneousness" on the level of symbolic representation created by socialist ideology did not admit to any "visible distinction" and difference between people to be displayed in social life and in public space. To this ideological portrait can be added the idea of the absolute superiority of social interests over personal one's in people's life. Thus, any kind of even hypothetical "special interest" towards clothing at that time was unconditionally understood as an "exhibition" of "personal" matter, regardless of the design of the social environment.

Naturally, divisions between social strata did exist in socialist societies and were accompanied by differences in "style" of public appearances. However, as far as this was not reflected in the symbolic order of social representation, there was no clear system or "language" of clothing, but rather spontaneous and artless expressions. The situation began to change in late socialism when clothing – attributes of the Western standard of life – penetrated socialist societies, setting "distinctive" marks onto the visual monotony of the "surface" of socialist reality. However, these separate items isolated of their original symbolic and social context were not able to create any new relevant "message". Their "message", instead, was contained already in the "Western origin" itself, and in most cases, as a matter of fact, was reduced to it. In addition, one can say that clothes of foreign origins usually appeared in a

public space coming via the so-called "black market of clothes", which, together with books, tapes, etc, created a kind of parallel culture. It co-existed with the official sphere, never mixing with it and having no particular impact on the system of representation itself. As a matter of fact, being limited by the boundaries of this black market culture, they were not able to "budge" the ideological construction that was set up as hegemony of representation".⁴

In *The Cynical Reason of Late Socialism*, A. Yurchak wrote about traditional Soviet ideology that during late socialism "ideological messages became elements of a wider system of the hegemonic representation in reality which were not read literally, but were experienced as immutable and omnipresent."⁵ Indeed, the perception of the social world's unquestionable character was inscribed into the personal experience of the Soviet citizen. They could see then that nearly all mechanisms of representation in the official sphere were centrally controlled. Under these conditions, the official reality was "unconcealed" not because its representation was taken for granted as truthful, or because people were scared to contest it, but rather because it was evident that no other public representation of reality within the official sphere could occur. Thus, the representation system which embraced also such domains of people's life as clothes, furniture, and flat – was never a matter regarding questions of ideology. This is why those separate elements of "Western clothing" had been displayed as aliens, as symbols of the ideological "space invader".

What is essential to the socialist "design" of the social system is that *clothing* was included into an ideological scheme which predetermined the social life. Whereas the concept of the "*human body*", on the contrary, was rather understood as an agent of "individual" dimensions of human existence. People were not supposed to be interested in their bodies as far as it was not connected with any public benefits. In other words, the clothing belonged to the objective reality of social relationships, while the body was possessed by the individual, since any particular attention paid to it by the individual was regarded as a challenge to society.

This ideological version of the relationship between "body" and "society" differs from the idea of the body which "embraced" clothing as an aspect of "social embodiment" in modern societies. (Compare with McLuhan, for example: "The book is an extension of the eye... *clothing an extension of the skin*, electric circuitry, extension of the central nervous system). This peculiar status of the body in socialist representation system will be important in the investigation of the symbolic role, which the "body" plays in the symbolic field of "cross-references", articulated in a style of clothing in Belarusian public places.

The ideological context of the socialist past in Belarus made impossible the creation of individual symbolic dress codes in society, comparable with that in other societies. The elements of "clothes style" which Belarusian women use today are simply taken from another social context. Together with "the dress parts", certain symbolic meanings were transferred and located into the Belarusian social and public context. Although there is no special "grammar" for decoding the message of such clothing used in a new ideological framework, one can try to comprehend and to examine the links between the realm of origins of the symbolic order reflected "by" and "through" the "smart dress" and the domain of the "real" of Belarusian reality where they are relocated.

To characterize human action in a social space and to find such a definition, which would contain both aspects of "following the social rules", and that "hidden" inexplicable feature of the "embodied understanding" Bourdieu introduced into social theory the notion "*habitus*" and resorted to the *habitus* in order to find a middle way between the objectivism of structuralists or constructivists and the spontaneity that "philosophies of the subject" opposed to them. To realize this, Bourdieu writes, we have to "include in the theory the real principle behind strategies, namely the practical sense, or, if you prefer, what sports players call a feel for game, as the practical mastery of the logic or of the immanent necessity of the game – a mastery acquired through experience of the game, and one which works outside conscious control and discourse (in a way that, for instance, techniques of the body do). Notions like that of *habitus* (or a system of dispositions), practical sense and strategy, are linked to my effort to escape from structuralist objectivism without relapsing into subjectivism.⁶ The notion *habitus* embraced a set of core phenomena, which *habitus* may well explain – such as the imposition of form, style and taste. Since the use of clothing one can see as one of the most significant symbolic action in modern societies, one can say, following Bourdieu, that in making selection and "segregation" in the "sea" of clothes production in order to create their individual look people are directed by a certain "practical mastery" of social logic.

This practical mastery deals with the conventional conceptual classifications of dress with the meanings of the "language of fashion". That language "is connected to the semantic fields of the culture: the idea of "elegance", "formality", "casualness", "romance". This wider meaning, as Stuart Hall says, is where we start to deal with "social ideology – the general fields, conceptual frameworks and value system of society".⁷

From this perspective, the manipulation of public appearance through the use of clothes clearly display the link between the "new message" with the ideological, cultural frameworks of the original context. The creation of a particular "message" through the re–location of symbolic elements of clothing into the new context necessarily require the relevant ideological and semantic background which enable us "the reading" of such messages.

Historical examples of such manipulations display that close linkage between the "new message" with the ideological, cultural frameworks of the original context. In the book "Resistance through the Ritual"⁸ one finds profound investigations of the various youth movements in a post–war Britain, one can see how the groups had been creating their "distinguished look" in order to perform a public action and how they were dealing in fact not with the clothes themselves but rather with the primary social meaning of dress. Tony Jefferson examined the group of so called Teddy boys "...the Edwardian Look" (an upper class and student revival) borrowed by Teddy boys, re–combined with extraneous items, emerged with a new and previously uncharacteristic meaning".⁹ What they tried to do is "to buy status, since the clothes were originally worn by upper–class dandies. Much of the money goes on clothes."¹⁰ The definition of Teddy boy's subculture portrays them as "a near–lumpen" group, who were extremely sensitive to the distinctive dress and appearance, who borrowed from the dominant culture and reworked "Teds" elements into a distinctive style of their own."¹¹

A similar case were the Mods. They were "working– class teenagers who lived mainly in London [...] and who could be readily identified by characteristic hairstyles, clothing etc. They were dedicated to clothes [...] and accumulated

some distinctive identity symbols like the scooter, the pills, the music."¹² "The Mod combined previously disparate elements to create himself into a metaphor,"¹³ wrote Dick Hebdige. "They seemed to consciously invert the values associated with smart dress, to deliberately challenge the assumptions, to falsify the expectations derived from such sources."¹⁴

The main semantic cultural field of the ideological system representation, or as John Clarke calls it in an essay "Style", "a basic form of discourse – that of fashion", to which the subcultural "*bricoleur*" refers, must be apparent and observable in order to provide the symbolic support for the meaning of a new message.

"The practitioner of subcultural bricolage is constrained by the existing meanings of signs within a discourse – the objects, the "gear" used to assemble a new subcultural style must not only already exist, but must also carry meanings organized into a system coherent enough for their relocation and transformation to be understood as a transformation. The objects adopted by the subcultural *bricoleur* are physically appropriated – worn and used – and they are commodities, produced originally for specific markets. That is, their pre-transformation existence was posited on the existence also of other groups, most frequently subsections of the dominant class, who would originally have bought, used and expressed their own life-style through these objects signs."¹⁵

This excursion into the cultural history of youth subcultures shows that the creation of a particular "message" through the re-location of symbolic elements of clothing into the new context necessarily requires the relevant ideological and semantic background which enable us "the reading" such messages. Otherwise, if the objects are placed within a totally different ensemble, they lose their meaning and a new discourse is constituted.

What we observe in the Belarusian public place is a new discourse being created within the ideological framework of the postsocialist (or "neosocialist" in Belarusian case) society.

First of all, a certain re-arrangement of the design of the relationship between the body and its inscription into the image, the social and the public occurs in this politics of public appearance. People who are still deprived of many of the material goods manipulate their images not merely for the sake of appearance itself, nor for the simulation of wealth or false prosperity. They rather create their distinguished look in order to stress, to make visible the "private" status of the body.

The origins of this intention can be found in a socialist ideology, which has dominated this territory for more than 80 years. This ideology was based on the practice of total state property. As a result, the Belarusian people, like all former citizens of the socialist countries, had been experiencing a radical lack of any private ownership for this time. Ownership which can be seen as the element of the "human extension" not only in terms of "possession", but also as a practice of the "taking care of" and personal involvement. As a matter of fact, the lack of the experience of any ownership was probably one of the most essential features of the "mythology" of everyday life. From this perspective, the human body became a synonym to define a private reality. The notion of the personal status of the human body was also implied through social ideology. One can say even that it was the body that marked out the margin of "an unshared property" and became the substitute of this experience of

ownership. Consequently, clothing became the main language, which people could use to express their individuality in public spaces, a type of "body treatment". However, during the Soviet period this language could not be used in practice and existed only in the social imagination: the clothing itself functioned as part of the ideological mechanism. What distinguishes the present-day situation in Belarus from the recent past is that the frameworks of ideology have become more flexible. Though the neosocialist rhetoric still defines the state ideology in Belarus today, separate spheres of the social life were released from the ideological domination, among others clothing. The abolition of the special uniform in the Belarusian schools in the early nineties was one of the first signals of this symbolic liberation.

Thus, the main implication of the clothing style in Belarusian public places can be defined as a performative statement of the private status of the body. People strive for evidence of this radical transformation of the body into the visible symbol of the "self" instead of being hidden behind the visual order of the cultural and ideological product. To achieve this, they appeal to the fashion code of society not so much as to the archive of patterns of their imaginary.

At first glance, Belarusian people seem to act in an extremely "anti-socialist" way, stressing their privacy and individuality, exposing the practice of particular "body treatment" in public places, as if responding to the former Soviet prohibition. In doing so, they undertake an effort to leave behind the territory outlined and controlled by the socialist system of representation. But what they actually accomplish in this fashion is rather the opposite: they display a certain socialist *habitus*' viability:

Habitus should be understood not as the mere participation in a social order through the internalization of norms, but as what happens "through the "inculcation" of dispositions that comes not only from being socialized into culture generally, but into a particular subordinate or dominant position within it." One of such dispositions of the social space in a socialist society concerned the relationship between the social and the private domains. The human body marked the margins of privacy. What can be observed in Belarusian public places is that this main disposition was preserved in people's behavior, even if they seemingly changed and nowadays wear smart, elegant dress. In fact, they still remain under the spell of the socialist idea of the body as the only private matter in social life, as the margin which marks the limits of the private domain.

¹ Belarusian General Daily *Zviazda* N149, 26 June 2002

² Report of BelaPAN Informational Agency, *Belarus today*, 24 February 2003

³ Finn Collin; *Social Reality*. London and New York Routledge, 1997. p. 171

⁴ The notion of the "hegemony of representation" was invented to describe the particular ideological construction of late socialism. See Jean and John Comaroff "Of Revelation and Revolution" Vol.1 Chicago: University of Chicago press. 1991. Jean and John Comaroff in the book suggest seeing hegemony as the space of the misrecognized, which can not be debated, as "that order of signs and practices, relations and distinction, images and epistemologies...that come to be taken for granted as the natural and received shape of the world." Jean and John Comaroff; *Of Revelation and Revolution*. Vol.1 Chicago: University of Chicago Press. 1991. p.23

⁵ Yurchak Alexei; "The Cynical Reason of Late Socialism: Power, pretense, and the Anekdot" *Public Culture* Vol.9 N2 Winter 1997. p.165

⁶ Bourdieu; *Outline of a Theory of Practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University press, 1977. p.76-77

⁷ *Ibid.* p.39

- 8 The book with this title was published in London 1975 (First publication). Ed. by Stuart Hall & Tony Jefferson.
- 9 Tony Jefferson; "Cultural Responses of the Teds." *Resistance through Rituals*. ed. by Stuart Hall & Tony Jefferson. p.81
- 10 John Clarke Style; *Resistance through Rituals*, p. 178
- 11 Tony Jefferson "Cultural Responses of the Teds". p. 81
- 12 Dick Hebdige "The Meaning of Mod" in: *Resistance through Rituals*. p. 87
- 13 Ibid. p. 94
- 14 Ibid. p. 88
- 15 Ibid. 177–178

Published 2004–05–26
Original in Belarusian
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