

**FROM BRAND PHILOSOPHIES TO CULTURAL CITIZENSHIP: THE  
CASE OF TWO HUNGARIAN FASHION LABELS**

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The topic of my thesis is the fashion creation practice of a few selected Hungarian fashion designers; at the intersection of fashion theory including gender, then social history and cultural studies I examine how market positions, brand philosophies and Hungarian references shape the identities of elite consumers.

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## 1. Introduction

“I’m wearing it tomorrow night.” Pause. “It’s an *original*”, she whispers seductively, eyes  
glittering.”

(Alison in *Glamorama*)<sup>1</sup>

„Az izolált szituáció amiben eddig éltünk - nem igazán van, volt jelen a high street és a luxusmárkák - egy  
sajátos stílust is eredményezett.” (Kiss Tibor from *Je suis belle*)<sup>2</sup>

To say that fashion is sexy or elegant, and so on, is a mere cliché; however, these seemingly emptied words of fashion discourse do purport meanings in connection with fashionable appearances or even visual representation of fashion goods. Now we all might have notions about what is, for that matter, “Italian fashion” or “British style”; however, how do we understand in context of clothing fashion particular features like, for instance, “Hungarianness”? I consider that examining the mechanisms applying these “national” features brings us closer to how particular fashions are branded.

The interesting point for me when first approaching the fashion phenomenon concerned the design of garments, which showed to me the traces of both skilled work and intellectual endeavor on the part of the designers. I was intrigued by the fact that only luxury fashion designers from the so-called fashion capitals, and in terms of

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<sup>1</sup> An American novel written by Bret Easton Ellis and published in 1998.

<sup>2</sup> “The isolated situation in which have been living so far, as the highstreet and luxury brands weren’t really present, has resulted in a specific style as well.” (excerpt from the own interview made with the fashion designer; own translation)

consumption, large and well-known fashion labels with worldwide distribution made fashion design (or rather its products) most visible. This seemed to be typical of Budapest as well. However, I knew that there was a less visible and smaller scale production and consumption of fashion brands from Hungary, which fell outside department stores and shopping malls. By reading the Hungarian fashion press and discovering the fashion boutiques in Budapest selling smaller, independent designer apparel I came across quite a few labels created by fashion designers from Hungary. And, I learned that this seemingly small fashion market has included the products of the few ready-to-wear Hungarian designer owned-labels which were sold not only in Budapest but also in a few big cities throughout the world. This raised my interest first: what and how do the designers of these labels create that makes their collections appealing to a certain range of supposedly fashion-conscious consumers in the competitive neo-liberal market in Hungary and abroad?

Considering that (re-)creating and regulating appearances lies at the heart of fashion design practice, the articles and reports I read in the Hungarian online fashion media described trends in fashion design from Hungary as different from conventional apparels and ambiguous in terms of common understanding of gender (i.e. women wearing womenswear and men wearing menswear).<sup>3</sup> I suspected that the successes among fashion professionals and certain consumer groups both in Budapest and abroad, and the particularities of these small fashion labels from Budapest should be indebted to an increased degree of consciousness and knowledge of gender issues. The initial

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<sup>3</sup>[http://hazaidivat.hu/index.php?q=gallery&g2\\_itemId=93478&g2\\_GALLERYSID=TMP\\_SESSION\\_ID\\_D\\_I\\_NOISSES\\_PMT](http://hazaidivat.hu/index.php?q=gallery&g2_itemId=93478&g2_GALLERYSID=TMP_SESSION_ID_D_I_NOISSES_PMT);  
[http://hazaidivat.hu/divatmagazin/also\\_kezbol/vigh\\_krisztina\\_alkotasaival\\_bovult\\_a\\_retrock\\_delux\\_kirakat\\_a\\_es\\_kinalata\\_061210.html](http://hazaidivat.hu/divatmagazin/also_kezbol/vigh_krisztina_alkotasaival_bovult_a_retrock_delux_kirakat_a_es_kinalata_061210.html) (last accessed March 30, 2009).

research question I set out was the following: what are the positions of fashion designers towards gender, or more exactly, how is gender understood by the selected designers? Further, how do they present gender traits in their collections in order to sell?

I decided to approach designer teams that included both male and female designers. First I selected the *Use Unused* fashion label from Budapest, then, based on the recommendation of this label I contacted the designers of the label called *Je Suis Belle*. The *Use Unused* label has been created by the designers Eszter Füzes, Attila Godena-Juhász, and András Tóth, all three of them around thirty years old. They were colleagues at the fashion (costume) design section of the Moholy-Nagy University of Design in Budapest and began working together during their studies. They made up the label name for a foreign fashion contest (2002) while still being at the university. They started making collections in 2004, and have been creating womenswear ever since then. The *Use Unused* label has been existing as an entrepreneurship since 2006.

The two designers of the *Je Suis Belle* label are Dalma Dévényi and Tibor Kiss; they both graduated at the Moholy-Nagy University of Design in 2007. They are both in their late twenties and have been creating clothes together since 2005. They have been working on a smaller scale than the *Use Unused* designers, with arguably fewer fashion boutiques selling their garments; in Budapest, however, both brands have been sold in the same stores. During the research period womenswear in Hungary was more developed and diverse, a fact purported also by the designers whom I selected as the subjects of my research.

While taking the well-known argument that women in fashion have been presented generally through men's viewpoints the two cases examined here could have been fruitfully explored, as the womenswear collections of the two labels have been

created by the contribution or co-work of male designers with female designers; however, this would have required further psychological perspectives. Then, because of the teamwork and the small size of their market I expected to find gender-bending endeavors on the part of the designers in how and what they created (for e.g. subverting women's apparel by mixing it with more boyish looks or menswear items) which would reveal the progressive attitudes of the designers, i.e. challenging to an extent appearances considered to belong to, for instance, successful career women.

However, during the interviews the designers from both labels dismissed such claims: the womenswear-menswear binary and opposition was fully functioning in the sense that both designer labels rejected any kind of androgynous looks with regard to their creations. This fact, on the one hand made me think that such formulations or characterizations of the labels (as being different from the mainstream fashion) reflected rather the discourse of certain fashion publications, and as such, it would have required an in-depth analysis of the fashion media from Hungary; on the other hand, instead of androgyny, the normative- or other types of femininities envisaged in the label philosophies indicated the labels' positionings in the niche market of „home” designer fashion, which seemed to point right toward well-off consumer groups.

Thus, approaching the theme again, the general starting point has been that the subjects of the analysis appear within a discursive frame, and textual formulations in this regard (the analysis material - articles in the Hungarian online fashion media and interviews made in spring 2007 with the designers - Eszter Füzes and Attila Godená-Juhász from the three designers working under the *Use Unused* label and with Tibor Kiss, the ‘half’ of *Je Suis Belle*) create a specific fashion discourse, which bears first on fashion creation and consumption. While through these and the brand philosophies the clients



have been constituted as subjects of consumption, I have assumed that the acts of creation and wearing blend and influence each other.

Further, the issue of “Hungarianness” as presented in articles about the designers and their labels in various fashion magazines has shown itself worth of study. Although notions like Hungarian or “Hungarianness” relate to ethnicity, and consumer dynamics could be analyzed also by using concepts like “ethnic boundaries and groups” (Eriksen 1993) such concerns fell out from the present inquiry, since the “Hungarianness” as discussed here refers rather to cultural content or the “cultural stuff”, precisely which falls out of current definitions of ethnicity (see for e.g. Eriksen 1993). Further, the relation between “Hungarianness” and fashion hasn’t been addressed so far in research on fashion design. My research question has been the following: what is the relevance of the “Hungarian” specificity in the case of the examined labels?

First I hypothesize that, by associating “Hungarianness” with fashion design/creation and consumption in Budapest, on the one hand local style-conscious consumerism is created, while on the other hand (international) fashion trends are adapted/mapped to “national”, i.e. culturally specific level by practices of the designers and of the fashion media. This, in my opinion, reasons the international appeal of two labels examined, while a (supposed) national, creative/art-like fashion is sustained thanks to these the designers, not irrespective of, and perhaps in a way to counter the non-individualized mass-consumption of fashion.

Then, going beyond the global availability of fashion images two aspects emerge in relation to the cultural particularities of fashion from Hungary: taking such features used in creating clothes as inherent, specifically “national” proves to be much contested and rather imagined (see Dezső 2008). Thus, instead of tracing the origins of these or

purporting the domination exerted by the world's fashion capitals, I have considered that the particular own aspects of fashion (design) have been shaped by parts of collective memory, which are still trying to cope with the postcolonial relation Hungary had with the Soviet Union, and curiously enough, may prove the usefulness of this relation in terms of fashion as well.

Then, based on Toby Miller's insight that citizenship can be constructed by various cultural means (2007) I will argue that Hungarian designer fashion enables not only a fashionable creation/presentation of the (consumer) self, but, understood as a specific form of culture, has identity-shaping potentials in regards to a fashionable form of a Hungarian cultural citizenship-identity or membership, within the frame of both national- and international market appeal. To put it simply, I will explore how cultural citizenship may be created in the frame of contemporary fashion from Hungary. And finally, I will analyze how fashionable appearances and consumption in the frame of womenswear both enable to open up issues of citizenship (which a while ago was privileged by male (white) heterosexual subjects) and reveal its limits.

## 2. Methodology

This chapter will focus on the research methods and the scholarly adequacy of the research. Difficulties of the research will be addressed subsequently. First, in line with the objectives of the research (as presented in the *Introduction*) the purpose was not to make a comparative study of two fashion labels, but rather to explore a ‘slice’ of fashion design in contemporary Budapest. The ‘case studies’ provided in what follows may as well be typical of the fashion phenomenon in Budapest, Hungary.

Through the sampling method I intended to take two fashion labels which would be representative of the phenomenon. By paying constantly attention to the fashion design in Hungary (as between 2007 - 2009) and doing an extensive online research in this regard (reading website content, articles and interviews about/with Hungarian fashion brands and their designers) it seemed that the *Je Suis Belle* and *Use Unused* fashion brands would suit the research scope because of showing all three characteristics, i.e. being Hungarian and fashionable/trendy, and dealing with the existing norms of gender. These brands were also recommended by the few boutiques and shops selling Hungarian designer fashion in Budapest. I need to add that my personal preference played a role as well, so the selection was subjective in this sense. Ultimately, I kept the sample consisting of the two labels in order to verify my argument on the new forms of citizenship.

Hungarian designer fashion brands meeting certain professional levels or standards and earning professional acknowledgement at the time of the research (and

even until today) were making by and large womenswear only; I must emphasize that analyzing womenswear brands seemed interesting at the beginning as it was created by designers of both sexes.<sup>4</sup> The research wasn't intended to focus on womenswear as such but only to problematize the genderedness related to *sexed* garments. I have conducted a longitudinal research, as I have considered not just a single seasonal collection but several collections in the case of the fashion brands examined. However, as the scope of research unfolded, the visual component thought to be essential has lost its central place: the clothes themselves and catwalk appearances envisaged through collections gave place to the roles the dresses played for consumers and the enclosing cultural practices of the designers. Therefore I set out neither for a visual analysis nor I used particular visual methods.

I gathered data for the analysis through several methods. In accordance with the scope of the thesis I made topical interviews in spring 2007 with the informants of my research, i.e. the fashion designers of the two brands (Eszter Füzes and Attila Godena-Juhász from the three designers working under the *Use Unused* label and Tibor Kiss, the 'half' of *Je Suis Belle*); although I had reoccurring questions for the designers of both fashion brands, the interviewing process was rather unstructured. Then, in autumn 2008 as part of continuing the research I asked some new online questions from the designers with the purpose to clarify issues related to the "national character" of fashion.

At the same time I made use of articles and interviews made with the designers published in the Hungarian online fashion media. The press material gathered has included articles published online (in the *hazaidivat.hu* fashion portal), fashion inserts in newspapers (*Népszabadság*, *HVG*), Hungarian editions of some mainstream international

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<sup>4</sup> Recently both *Je Suis Belle* and *Use Unused* have created menswear garments as well.

fashion and lifestyle magazines (*Marie Claire*, *Cosmopolitan*, *Glamour* etc.), and the international niche fashion press (*Surface* and *The Room* magazines). They are very diverse in terms of genres, ranging from interviews to feature stories. I followed also the website content of the two labels (*use.co.hu* and *jesuisbelle.hu*). My research aimed to be qualitative, with the implicit delimitations applying to it.

Both interviews were done in Hungarian and tape-recorded, then I translated the answers into English. The interviews took place either in the designers' working environment (the *Use Unused* atelier and showroom) or in a fashion store (in the case of *Je Suis Belle*). The settings obviously enabled participant observation as well though each meeting lasted for about one hour.

My account has been inevitably partial. Overall, I tried to maintain an increased self-reflexivity throughout the research, i.e. being conscious of my positions and aware that different elements of my identity (age, gender, class etc.) would influence both the data collecting and writing processes. In addition, according to Ratner (2002) I was aware that the description and the analysis/interpretation have been also constructed through not only my own subjective perceptions, but also through the relationship formed between my subjectivity and those of my informants.

### 3. Conceptual framing

In this chapter I will present the theoretical basis for my analysis. First I will review key features and definitions which are relevant when thinking of fashion; then, I will seek to problematize fashion in connection with gender and the “cultural citizenship” term. In the second subchapter I will introduce the two Hungarian fashion labels by examining the femininities they have envisaged.

#### *3.1 Fashion, gender, and citizenship*

Fashion is essentially operating with novelty and the continuous search for it, by the quick replacement or outwearing of last season’s products. When talking about fashion here I will refer primarily to dress or clothing, as something that covers the body and may often have adorning functions; however, Joanne Entwistle notes that fashion can refer to any kind of systemic changes in social life, where virtually every object could be qualified “in” or “out of” fashion (Entwistle 2000, 45). Nevertheless, as I stated in the introduction, the subject of the analysis will be clothing fashion.

The key feature of fashion is the rapid and continual changing of styles (Wilson, 1985, 3), thus drawing attention to aesthetics as informing fashion styles. This can be conceived as cross-cutting fashion design practices: in a descriptive manner fashion design is „the application of creative thought to the conceptualisation and execution of items of clothing so that they can be said to display a formal and distinctive aesthetic coherence which takes precedence over function...” (McRobbie 1998, 14). In selecting

the fashion labels for the research this has been an essential standpoint; while designer fashion can be adequately described according to this definition, throughout the research it became clear that other, for e.g. terms of saleability are also much part of the picture. And, the „creative thoughts” and „conceptualizations” of clothings gained a central place in the analysis (see subsequent chapters). Throughout the paper I have considered the designers’ activities as a cultural practice maintained in the relations between design, manufacture and consumption.

First costume historians have dealt with fashion in the frame of art history; however, aesthetics and beauty have been analysed without considering pertaining notions like success and urbanity, which ultimately link fashion to capitalist logic. Fashion styles have been playing an important role in cultural imperialism (Wilson 1985, 9-12), while at the same time their dominance in regards to everyday dress and mass fashion was questioned (Craik 1993). And finally, the conceptualization of fashion cannot disregard the aspects of globalization in the realm of social reality, for e.g. exploiting children and women’s labour in apparel manufacturing.

Thus fashion incorporates various aspects: while its production and consumption include specifically assigned roles, these entangle in the sense that every person could be regarded as both producing and consuming fashion. At the same time fashion is very close to one’s corporeality and appearance and produces meanings in regards to fashion(ability) only if related to other persons’ appearances.

So fashion is obviously contextual, not just floating above and embraced to the same extent everywhere and by everybody. The systematic view of fashion as applied so far cannot disregard imbued differences among its constitutive elements, i.e. body and display, social contexts, etc. Entwistle has emphasized individual bodies as sites where

fashion is produced according to constraints of different social spaces, by proposing the “situated bodily practice” to account for fashion, i.e. not just the representation of the body in the fashion system and discourses on dress, but also “how the body is experienced and lived and the role dress plays in the presentation of the body/self” (Entwistle 2000, 39). This view of fashion will be partly applied for the analysis.

In similar vein, Craik regards fashion as a ‘body technique’, by acquiring *predetermined* sets of demeanors conceived as fashionable (Craik 1993, 8-9). And, one could say, in the Central- and/or Eastern-European (ex-socialist) context the regulation of bodies was much at stake until recently: we consider either the clothing fashion created in line with socialist aesthetics (and with work ethics at the expense of leisure, we might add), or the everyday wearing of specific apparel items (see for e.g. Agárdi 2009). As we will see, also the fashion designers under scrutiny have been dealing with these issues.

Several writings have pointed out the ordering of gender relations; speaking in terms of a heterosexual configuration garments are created as *sexed* (as womenswear and menswear) while gender-specific roles are assigned to and expected from the wearers/consumers. That is, in presenting one’s body/oneself techniques of either femininity or masculinity are deployed. According to the most pertinent feminist claims it is rather an urge internalized which does nothing but reproduces gender relations, and consequently also power relations in societal contexts. Moreover, men’s viewpoints have been dominating in regards to how women are (re-)presented in images of fashion (see for e.g. Evans and Thornton 1989).

According to Jennifer Craik the ways in which bodies are fashioned through clothes, make-up and demeanour constitute identity, sexuality and social position (Craik, 1993, 45). The importance of the three elements mentioned is crucial according to this



logic; however, I would like to draw attention to the process of fashioning: this exerts its effect in the case of fashion brands through „the ideals and fantasies” which are offered to women as points of orientation for the realisation of a gendered self (Craik 1993, 71). While it is assumed that these „points of orientation” prey /call on consumers (of both sexes) through multiple channels (starting with the presentation of collections in the frame of fashion shows, then followed by magazine articles with photos and ultimately through the spectacle of fashion shops including, for e.g. promotional sales also) I would like to explore what lies beyond common meanings attached to the aforementioned and highly gendered fashionability.

For this purpose I will part from a rather narrowing approach to fashion, and imply that when fashion brands address/appeal to consumers they call upon many things amongst gender; in other words, they take up particular issues related to gender as well. For if we take either womenswear or menswear, in the light of any essence-seeking/essentializing view on fashion (see definitions above) it does nothing but generalize the production of fashion (able appearances), and doesn't reveal cultural complexities played out/down in specific contexts, as for instance in Budapest, Hungary.

These cultural complexities can be found in many instances; here I will deal with “Hungarianness” as an imagined feature with a content value attached to the fashion brands; and, as such, it is seen to distinguish the two brands in the international fashion market and to appeal to certain range of consumers. Alleged values of fashion brands come to the fore through various techniques or technologies which in my view do „more” to the consumer self. Home fashion brands (Hungarian, in our case) may appeal differently either to native or foreign consumers.

The starting point I take first is that under current economic and market conditions consumerism serves as basis for citizenship status (Miller 2007, 30-34; Stevenson 2007, 258); particularly, I will refer to the cultural dimension of citizenship which concerns access to culture. Cultural rights were described as consisting of the right to know and to speak, and cultural representation through political, economic, and media capacities (Miller 2007, 35, 73). It needs to be mentioned that cultural citizenship has been addressed by these authors as identification possibility of marginalized groups and minorities; however, fashion being both a commercial and aesthetic culture is also much involved in politics of identity.

I regard the clothing fashion creation of the two brands as a cultural “capacity” enabling not just a representation of what is (also) „Hungarian” in terms of both fashion design and wearing, but also the construction of certain particular cultural identities for the consumers, and ultimately formulating a cultural dimension of citizenship.

The aspects of „Hungarianness” identified in relation to the two fashion brands involve references to the Hungarian past and the socialist period; it is attempted to redefine „Hungarianness” at a fashionable, internationally appealing level while maintaining the cultural connections of the clothing fashion created with Budapest, Hungary.

### *3.2 Branding femininities*

Brand philosophies usually seek to position both the fashion brands and their consumers; a general question to be asked in the case of any fashion label should be: what kind of clothes do they make and for whom? Based on the interviews and the brand

philosophies appearing on the websites of the two brands, in what follows I will present the two labels by looking closely at the specific images of femininity presented by the designers of both labels.

There is an imagined and conceptualized relation between the designer and consumers throughout the creative and design processes. In the case of fashion labels making womenswear defining and redefining femininities is at the core of design; then, appearing in brand philosophies confer the label positions in the fashion market and at the same time these textual formulations create a general and comprehensive consumer subject. However, I will point out that this isn't a one-way effect, as fashion design and consumption (the buying and wearing of fashion garments) have influence on each other. In the end I will argue that fashion brand philosophies are very much anchored not only within the boundaries of fashion but in the larger of milieu in which the demeanor or conduct of the consumers appear.

At the time of research the designer duo from *Je Suis Belle* label were creating small collections which were sold mainly in a few shops in downtown Budapest and less abroad (unlike in the case of *Use Unused*). The “philosophy” of the *Je Suis Belle* label with regard to their creations was purported to be “unchanging and of relevance to all their collections” (Tibor Kiss). The leisure-oriented fashion brand of *Je Suis Belle* has been aiming at

“a type of woman who is more of a daydreamer, enjoys her life, likes to feel good and make everyday life a bit strange and funny...at the same time she's like an ethereal creature, not depending on men, but not delimiting herself either. And she's not a feminist...she doesn't want to stand alone” (Tibor Kiss).

At the design level their ideal, he continues, the brand philosophy “gets translated into soft lines and fine fabrics to create feminine, delicate pieces”. The description pretty

much mirrors a blend of individualism with aesthetics (underlined with the label's name as well), and also heterosexual conceptions, as we get obvious misunderstandings of what feminists do and don't. At the same time it's increasingly hard (and it isn't common at all) to address the consumer target groups in new or original way at textual level, but the vocabulary of fashion professionals seems to be not so-well equipped if compared to their visual ideas.

In accordance with their philosophy their 2007 spring-summer collection obviously appeared to dress women who embody the feminine ideal of the label; as formulated in the statement, it is targeting "primarily contemplating, intellectual women who concentrate on their inner world and search for their inner peace". Apart from the apparently similar conceptualization of the collection, as in the case of *Use Unused*, where "the outer world is brought into the inner self" (Attila Godena-Juhász), there's a linkage to the personal freedom in that she is disposing freely over her time, and when the clothes become not of primary importance so as to draw the attention away from the person wearing them, but are there only to set the mood of the wearer and enhance her sense of self. Then, this self-perception is both exaggerated and fragile, much in line with the fashion discourse stressing "modern individualism" (Wilson 1985, 12).

We can assume that designer fashion also plays out the usual game, that is enabling individuality and uniformity at the same time (Entwistle 2000, 39); the *Use Unused* garments were presented as targeting a wide range of consumers: according to the philosophy of the label, the "ideal could suit anyone regardless of her age who couples the harmony of a delicate lady-like woman with sensual grace". While more often than not we meet similar formulations appealing to virtually any consumer, they are meant not only to define market positions and shape consumer groups, but, being

elements of brand identities they serve as well-composed advertisement texts in line with visual representations of the collections (for e.g. with campaigns or look-books of the collections). And, especially in our case, label philosophies are significant because they address the consumers, beside in English (*Use Unused*) and French (*Je Suis Belle*), in Hungarian as well (as opposed to multinational fashion brands); and, as language is essential in shaping identity, they point toward the strengthening of citizenship identities.

The female designer of *Use Unused*, Eszter Füzes brought this ideal of the stylized woman to a more down-to-earth level: “from eighteen year old girls with personality and a sense of style to Ági Pataki and Erika Marozsán, who wear our clothes”. Noted also by McRobbie (1998), the added value conferred by celebrity consumers reinforces the role of fashionable dress to signify social status and distinction while attempts to maintain their availability for those earning enough to afford it.

Compared to the conceptualization of the “woman” throughout the *Je Suis Belle* collections, the *Use Unused* label purports to vary femininities in its collections (which suggests a consideration of changing images and interpretation of femininity in accordance with their different sources of inspiration). According to Attila Godena-Juhász, their first collections (before 2007) were “much more feminine, but didn’t emphasize sexuality as opposed to the big prints, big decoltage, very “sexiness” of Italian fashion”.

Then, according to Eszter Füzes, the female designer of the label, their 2007 spring summer collection wasn’t conceived “sexy, but still feminine, independently from the former”. The certain conscious vagueness of this statement becomes meaningful if we turn back to the description of their dresses which “don’t stress sexuality in the way as Italian fashion does, where the dresses are more open, sexy, hot...” (Attila Godena-

Juhász). On a practical level, Eszter Füzes described the garments of the collection as being "asexual" because of their "small necklines and because of the fact that they aren't taken in at the waist". The "feminine" and "sexy, sexual" as opposites are deployed to distinguish their creations from what is allegedly equated with „Italian fashion”.

While the designers voice the “gently feminine” features of the *Use Unused* garments they seek to differentiate between femininity and sexuality, where sexuality is perceived as attracting, revealing body parts and being heightened through adornment of the body. They don't define femininity in terms of an overt sexual attractiveness; thus it could be regarded as an attempt to uncouple gender traits from sexuality. However, it would be equally hard to dismiss any sex-appeal linked to femininity, given the context-dependency of the ‘clothing-fashion code’ (Davis 1992, 8), for an appearance or look can be viewed as sexually alluring even if it wasn't intended as such (and vice versa).

The designers of both labels envisage how a dress is worn, its wearer feeling comfortable and deriving pleasure from wearing it. The act of wearing is obviously an important episode in regards to success of designer fashion (as well): for Tibor Kiss of *Je Suis Belle* it was important “to meet someone wearing a garment of the label and observing how she's wearing it”. Their clients are portrayed as having an inherent style of their own to match the clothes designed by them; according to Eszter Füzes, “they'll only buy if they love our garments and feel that these are close to their own style”. In other words, the designers imply the sense of self as fashionable by recognizing and wearing the garments of the brands. The connoisseurship of both the designers and consumers are thus connected; or more precisely, there is interdependence between the two, needed for each one to work.

The designers envisage fashion consumption, i.e. the acts of selecting (buying) and wearing through textual and visual means, and thus a body, dress and self relationship is conceptualized. Fashion appears in the discourse of the designers as a phenomenon closely related to the body (Entwistle 2000, 4), where the dress articulates the person of the wearer. The femininities sought by the designers are ultimately either expressed (embodied) or rewritten by the consumers. In either ways, the femininities are to be performed.

These alleged individualizing and meaning-producing potentials are then associated with the relations with customers and the practicing of these – which signal a different positioning from the mass-market fashion brands (though all retail practices actually favor nothing but a customer-oriented approach). The woman ideals of both brands seem to be influenced by the designers' everyday experiences and social networks or relations: during the research I met the *Je Suis Belle* designers in one of the fashion shops (called *Retrock Deluxe* and located near Károlyi garden) selling their garments. In the *Use Unused* showroom the designers even remodel the garments for the clients whose sizes don't fit into the measurement system of the label. This occasional made to measure-service is related to an elevation of the brand image. Overall, the „closeness” or personal connections of the fashion designers with their consumers indicates that they are much part of the same subcultural group and have influence on each other.

Turning back to design/branding strategies, the *Use Unused* designers even purported to separate their collection into a ”more basic and an image-oriented line”, along the concept of demi-couture (half-couture), i.e. situated between haute couture and ready-to-wear; according to another fashion sociologist Kawamura, the concept was introduced in Paris fashion “in an attempt to nurture and welcome younger designers to

the couture group” (2005, 71); the endeavor on the part of the *Use Unused* designers to be part of the small and exclusive fashion group of Hungary was made obvious also by their usual trips to Paris and by the already mentioned links to celebrity consumers. Then, ‘demi-couture’ in design is translated into “pants, shirts and skirts from less expensive fabrics versus superfine, wrought pieces” (Eszter Füzes), and although may reveal the intention of the *Use Unused* designers to be part of a more valuable designer group, as a business strategy, it is related to their new markets (in Japan, Sweden and U.S. at the time of the research) and differing customer tastes.

At the same time Tibor Kiss of *Je Suis Belle* formulated a different understanding of “image pieces” or image-oriented garments, in the sense that these are “intended to show where a particular label is at”, in a way countering the idea of wearability and current trends (which, however, need to be adopted for the purpose of saleability). Ultimately these “image clothes” are pieces of garments not intended for sale; by this fashion designers may retain some of the artist aura. And finally, they condense the very (feminine) ideals of the label with emphasis on the dress (for e.g. in the catwalk context), where the intended meanings are constantly expressed/created at the junction of body, dress and context (Cavallaro and Warwick 1998, 86).

By making use of notions like wearability, style, image etc. in the designers’ fashion discourse on the one hand the body/dress relationship is thematized on the professional level of design, while on the other hand show a fashion savviness of both the designers and their clients (the wearers of the fashion garments created by the designers), which also enables for this particular fashion culture created “from Budapest” to keep up with international fashion and style trends.



Thus the content of the fashions produced and the subjects of fashion trends gain importance; the presentations of femininity need to be complied with; this compliance is then made visible by acts of wearing (consumption). As these occur in various social contexts it requires focusing on the societal culture (or more precisely on popular culture and certain subcultures) in Hungary, instead of narrow understanding of fashion. Fashion styles don't just stand on their own (as clothes on hangers in a showroom or a wardrobe), but are created in-between designers and consumers.

## 4. Contexts of fashion practice

In this chapter, by reviewing writings on Hungarian fashion design I will further advance the view on fashion from Hungary as embedded within society and connected to its past; but first, I will seek to reconceptualize the fashion industry primarily in connection with design and consumption (which have had relevance for the research).

### *4.1 About the industry*

Joanne Entwistle suggested placing the term ‘fashion’ into the ‘fashion system’, which according to a broad definition includes the relationships between the manufacturing, marketing and distribution of clothing into retail outlets, with various agents (designers and design houses, fabric and clothing manufacturers, then retailers and the fashion-consuming public) taking part in it. Several market segments have been differentiated in accordance with different fashion styles in regards to both production (manufacture) and consumption: the generally accepted main categories are luxury designer fashion, mass-market or “highstreet” fashion, and cheaper ranges (Entwistle 2000, McRobbie 1998).

Among these, further differentiations apply, while there are sites where these large market segments intersect each other (see previous subchapter). The subjects of my analysis according to this descriptive approach can be defined as pertaining to independent designer fashion which in my opinion is defined by the following main features: smaller size of entrepreneurship and matching fashion-conscious consumers,

and arguably more limited to particular spaces of creation (these aspects have been dealt with throughout the thesis).

First, we could ask how does a collection come into being? The following processes should be taken into account according to the detailed description of Eszter Füzes *from Use Unused*:

„First there is the fashion fair, because we cannot create a concept, as the fashion fair for the next season’s collections takes place before you actually have presented your collection for the current season. So while you are still into your present collection you actually have to buy the materials for the following season. Right now we have ordered the materials for pattern cutting, and soon we will decide upon which materials and colors we are going to work with (...) the materials already inspire us. You can feel in which order they will come. Right now these comfortable, earth and coffee colours, some striking blue will be the trend we think. And so we sit down to draw and design bearing in mind these. We also decide how many pieces, dress, trousers, blouses, tops, coats will the collection consist of (...) Then we make the pattern cuts, and after that, as the materials arrive, we cut the materials and sew the sample garment. Thus the sample collection is made, which will be photographed and taken to the Paris fashion week in September or October and to Japan in summer, where the buyers will place the orders. Then we come home, look over the orders once again and think about what we could sell at home, which garments the people will love, or what the women would like to wear. After that we order the materials needed to start their manufacture. So if we want the next year’s spring-summer collection to be ready, we have to have the clothing materials no later than in February so that we can arrange for the manufacture in December or January...”

One can easily assume a certain kind of routine in the seasonally regulated activities of the fashion designers, which is characteristic of the whole international industry. Moreover, new related phenomenon occurred since the research (for e.g. “fast fashion” and more recently “fashion recession”) dictate presumably different working rhythms and strategies in the case of most fashion segments. In terms of work the label emerges as the result of collective- or teamwork signaling not only the creative engagement in design activities but also those pertaining to sales. The design working practices of the *Je Suis Belle* are similar to those of the *Use Unused* team; Tibor Kiss stated that:

„The design is totally collective... we look first for moods and inspirations when designing our collection, and then build up the forms and materials. But all of it happens at once, both of us work in the same way and do the design. And, when the design is ready we put together everything (drawings and sketches) for the collection. But even after that we always intervene in each other's creations. So it's a fully mutual sweat which we do almost every day.”

Going beyond a descriptive account, while a motivation for choosing designer duos or teams as subjects of the analysis was to expose gender relations in the frame of common creative working processes, I found greater consensus among the designers interviewed in relation to what they do. Moreover, according to their self-representation, both designer teams projected an egalitarian image about how they negotiated gender relations in fashion design practice. Gendered views on fashion appeared only in the sense of “male designers making and looking at womenswear”, which would re-direct the line of the present analysis; however, I have to mention that I didn't find out more about this issue.

In terms of their markets, the *Use Unused* designers' practice is orientated toward different consumption patterns, where Budapest, Hungary becomes an ambivalent site: Budapest remains the space where *Use Unused* creates its fashion styles although the fashion markets from the well developed countries come first place: the fashion materials fair in Paris and the actual presentation of clothes on runways or in stalls during the Paris and Tokyo fashion weeks precedes the actual seasons when the collections arrive in the stores, and the clothes are sold in Budapest at half price if compared to the prices at which other boutiques sell the *Use Unused* garments in Stockholm for instance (Váczy 2009, 51). However, Budapest as an identity of the label is much emphasized; this fact indicates a conscious decision on the part of the designers about where to connect their

creations culturally and themselves socially (i.e. to the same social group from which their consumers come).

Turning to the “fashion industry” approach a useful starting point constitutes the analysis of Roland Barthes (1983), who distinguished the modalities that clothes assume in the realm of either production, distribution or consumption. While Barthes channeled his theory especially in regards to the „represented garment”, his concept of „image-clothing” exposed the fact that fashion items are presented as image or spectacle. Stemmed from this insight it has been purported that fashion is primarily about image creation and as such it has always had close connections with advertising methods (Hollander in Wilson 1985, 9). In this regard the reporting and editing techniques and genres used in the fashion media were explored in several studies (Evans and Thornton 1989; McRobbie 1998), while the fashion industry was considered as an “image industry” also, or part of the image-making industries including music, film etc. (Kawamura 2005, 35; McRobbie 1998, 151-174).<sup>5</sup>

Receiving the visual spectacle of not only the fashion goods but also the designed spaces of fashion shops and department stores is also consumption (as part of the shopping activity). Although fashion shops function as sites of economic activity/sale, through appealing interior design and distinct approach to the fashion consuming public, these are “culturally embedded” (Entwistle 2000, 228). Attila Godena-Juhász from the *Use Unused* designers stated in this regard that:

„It’s the most important where our collections are sold. The buyers who come and select our clothes to sell already means a certain quality and reveals a taste in design on

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<sup>5</sup> In the previous subchapter I have referred to notions like “image-oriented” pieces or “image collections”, which appear as defining brand image, while at the same time they put an emphasis on the visual or the spectacle-quality. More often than not, ‘image’ garments are unwearable.

their part. It already happened to us that we looked up a shop on the internet which wanted to distribute our clothes; we were excited how it looked like.”

In this regard it would be engaging to carry out a research on shop design, merchandising etc. in the case of either different fashion boutiques or brands; however, this could be explored within the frame of a different study.

Next, also related to both the cultural- and image-making nature of fashion, we have the “culture industry” approach, which has been conceptualized from two viewpoints: on the one hand the creativity, or creative potentials of fashion were claimed to be similar to other sectors of cultural production, i.e. popular music, independent film or graphic design (McRobbie 1998, 15-16), while on the other hand marketing and design activities have been considered “cultural” informed by the insight that culture is also manufactured and economic practices are cultural as well (Entwistle 2000, 228). Depending on our understanding of culture, cultural, etc., viewing fashion as a cultural practice may enrich and meaningfully explain not only a popular but also the scholarly approach to the phenomenon.

While in our days fashion industry is most likely to be imagined in a globally dispersed way (for e.g. designers working in Europe while garments are manufactured somewhere in China then sold in America), where ‘cultures’ and images matter most, the appropriation of these seems to cause the loosening of supposed traditional, “national” roots of fashion(s), at least in regards to consumers. However, instead of asking whether in our days we can speak of actual existence of a “national fashion industry” as such, I am inclined to consider that, concerning the designer segment, particular fashion designers labeled as important by the local and foreign fashion journalists and having multiple connections to certain (national) spaces (for e.g. Budapest) serve to make claims for a “national” or “home” fashion.

Which often means that a fashion industry is “national” not so much in terms of tools, factories etc. located within the nation-state boundary but because of exposing through the periodic change of gendered (fashion) images its particular envisaged cultural character thought to be national. Next, I will examine the fashion design component of the fashion from Hungary to see to what extent can the fashion from Hungary be described as specific.

#### *4.2 The fashionist side of Hungary*

“The Hungarian fashion tries to connect to the international scene, just like the fashion from the other countries from Central Europe. It cannot assume any trend dictating role, but the important thing is to be present.” (Tibor Kiss)

When examining the fashion creation from Hungary, in my opinion two aspects need special consideration: its past legacies and present actors. Related to Hungary, it appears as an industrious activity of a few designers to create contemporary styles with international appeal.

So far only a few studies (Dózsa F. 1997; Valuch 2002 and 2004) have been written specifically about contemporary Hungarian fashion and fashion design until our days; both authors have dealt with it within a social history frame, but lacking the concerns with the “cultural stuff” (Eriksen 1993) in-between fashion designers and consumers, which could make their accounts engaging on a theoretical level. Therefore I had also the intention to enrich the literature written about fashion in Hungary.

Dózsa F. Katalin presents the fashion in Hungary from the post-state socialist era by highlighting the collapse of the state-owned and managed clothing factories and the disappearance of older Hungarian dressmakers at the beginning of the 1990’s. Simultaneously, consumption practices intensified and diversified in the “transition era”,

and intertwined with the entrance of mass-market fashion brands, i.e. international highstreet or mainstream fashion labels (F. Dózsa 1997, 105). The wider social changes and the introduction of the parameters of the free market economy have changed the conditions for the development of fashion design as a profession as well in the era after the breakdown of the socialist regime.

These changes didn't mean the disappearance of the popular and commercial culture from the socialist era, especially with regard to dress, be it either wearing (Agárdi 2009) or re-designing specific womenswear or menswear garments from the more recent past – if we consider the seasonal collections and inspirations of both fashion brands here. While I don't question the view that the introduction of the new political and economic system(s) in Hungary, together with all the societal changes have supported the much anticipated 'free' developments at multiple levels, fashion (design) in particular has such a (unique) relation to the past that makes somehow irrelevant a delimitation between, for instance ready-to-wear fashion from the past eras and hats designed for the latest spring-summer season. Fashion design always makes use of the past (styles) when creating new garments.

But what is this „Hungarian” past like? Here I will refer to the more recent past starting from the 1960's which I believe is relevant for understanding also the present fashion in Hungary. The socialist period was clearly dominated by ideologies of the Soviet empire especially in terms of taste where mass consumption was favored and fashion was presented first as a vice of the western world (Agárdi 2009). The era meant the establishment of clothing factories and magazines according to socialist aesthetics; Agárdi emphasizes that primarily women consumers were targeted through the specific methods of socialist aesthetics on fashion (Agárdi 2009, 15). While a kind of self-made



(hand-made) fashion was supported in line with the work at home relegated to women, „western” fashion was wasn’t eradicated from the fashion discourse: for instance, Hungarian fashion magazines, at least in the arguably more liberated 1980’s featured articles on Paris fashion weeks (Valuch 2002). Thus the new era saw fashion professionals ready to freely tap into the „western” fashion and at the same time has left the box open for younger generations to make use of the socialist heritage.

The research carried out by Valuch Tibor (2002; 2004) takes its view from consumer sociology and analyses consumption and wearing practices in Hungary from the second half of the twentieth century. While the “Hungarian fashion institute” has been the trend-dictating authority during the last decades of socialism, fashion design in Hungary re-emerged through self-entrepreneurship (though more or less in a niche market position), at the middle of the 1990’s (Valuch 2002, 2004). According to Valuch, two influential Hungarian designers, *Kati Zoób* and *Tamás Náray* seem to have been dominating Hungarian designer fashion, as they have had not just creative talent but the business flair needed as well. Although new talents were graduating every year (F. Dózsa 1997, 106) none of the other labels appearing in Valuch’s description have been successful (or at least the designers work under different labels now), except for the two mentioned above (Valuch 2004, 152).

These sources reveal contemporary fashion design in Hungary as a field with few significant actors only (and by and large practiced in Budapest).<sup>6</sup> Today *Kati Zoób* and *Tamás Náray* represent the more exclusive, haute-couture end of fashion and they arguably don’t target the same consumer groups as either *Je Suis Belle* or *Use Unused*. The annual Hungarian Fashion Awards (promoted as the only valid event of this kind)

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<sup>6</sup>[http://www.hazaidivat.hu/hu/divatmagazin/divatesemenyen\\_jartunk/fashion\\_awards\\_hungary\\_2007\\_0705\\_09.html](http://www.hazaidivat.hu/hu/divatmagazin/divatesemenyen_jartunk/fashion_awards_hungary_2007_0705_09.html) (last accessed March 30, 2009)

held in Budapest has been attracting mainly the same limited number of designers<sup>7</sup>; here the designers of *Use Unused* and *Je Suis Belle* appeared as the latest successes of the Hungarian fashion design scene. The Hungarian fashion media (and not only) has been reporting on both fashion brands ever since they have established their brands. Practically all of their collections caused a stir, thus they have a role in the ‘short’ history of (contemporary) Hungarian fashion design.

During the interviews made with the designers one of the first questions I asked was why they started to create apparel first for women. The unequivocal response was that only womenswear had been taught at the university, meaning that a student in fashion design in Budapest becomes technically proficient in making womenswear.<sup>8</sup> While it could be argued that the university curriculum didn’t recognize the (arguable) innovations and growing interest in menswear recently,<sup>9</sup> learning to make womenswear at the fashion section of the design university might also suggest that its teaching and practice have carried forward the control obsession of the socialist regime (especially with regard to women’s bodies and appearances). Here I am referring to mechanisms and certain habits dealing with women’s apparel items in an abstract way, as training has

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<sup>7</sup> Apart from the designers of *Use Unused* and *Je Suis Belle* the other nominees in 2007 were *Nanushka*, *Dóra Konsánszky* and *Bori Tóth*.  
[http://www.hazaidivat.hu/hu/divatmagazin/divatesemenyen\\_jartunk/fashion\\_awards\\_hungary\\_2007\\_070509.html](http://www.hazaidivat.hu/hu/divatmagazin/divatesemenyen_jartunk/fashion_awards_hungary_2007_070509.html) (last accessed March 30, 2009)

<sup>8</sup> The facts related here are based only on my interviews, and since the main scope of the paper has been to inquire the practices of these particular designers, I haven’t looked up other sources to confirm these statements.

<sup>9</sup> At the time of the interviews (2007) the designers of both labels intended to create menswear; while *Je Suis Belle* presented some menswear items in spring 2008, the *Use Unused* brand introduced a separate menswear line in autumn 2008.

been described as focusing on technical aspects primarily, i.e. on learning the technical background of design.

So the training direction for fashion design students is obviously set by the professional knowledge/craftsmanship made available but also by the international networks in which the university participates. It is important that the designers of both brands were on scholarship at the London College of Fashion, where “creativity was endorsed first” (Tibor Kiss): the experiences gained through these scholarships have obviously influenced their design practices later on.

The evolution in time of the two brands is also telling: while the *Je Suis Belle* label was started just before the interview period and got to present collections on a regular, seasonal basis throughout the research period (2007-2009), the *Use Unused* label had been established earlier and gradually “advanced”: in 2006 they were awarded with the “Best Young Fashion designers” prize, while in spring 2007 they became winners in the higher category called the “Best fashion designers of Hungary”. The following interview excerpt dates before they received the award for the second time:

„So the firm exists since 2005. We didn’t really have a well-structured system until now, things came in an ad-hoc manner. We couldn’t finish everything by the deadlines also. Right now we are in the phase that we are able to set everything up (...) so far everything happened upside down, so that each one of us designed everything. But basically it is a construction in which we have always set the limits within which we should work. But we will surely have to assign or organise the tasks more efficiently (...) Each collection has been a different slice, a different line revolving around the theme, but each one has been different. Probably in a few collections it will be clear what are we exactly.” (Attila Godena-Juhász)

While their design activities correlate to market-orientated brand building strategies it also reveals the search for a market niche of creating fashion goods. The *Use Unused* team started with making clothes and shoes for women only; and, it shows that the (womenswear) brand gets defined through the seasonal collections. For their

menswear line introduced in 2008 they created a new identity elements (the distinct logo of a stylized swallow and a different, new brand philosophy).

Enlarging the Hungarian fashion design scene toward the already presented ‘culture producing industry’ model where fashion professionals operate as producers of popular culture (McRobbie 1998, 10; Wilson 1985, 178) offers more perspectives: during the research I found that the designers of the two labels have been engaging in other activities (though all related to their ‘fashion skills’) targeting cultural consumption (the designer duo of *Je Suis Belle* as stylists, for the *PEP* lifestyle magazine among others, and occasionally selling in one of the shops for Hungarian designer labels; *Use Unused* as establishing *The Room* magazine and making costumes for Hungarian art movies).<sup>10</sup> This indicated the involvement of the designers in what is a wider conceptualization of popular culture including fashion (McRobbie 1998, 10; Wilson 1985, 178).

At the same time the designers’ continuous collaboration in the case of catwalk shows and promotional materials (for e.g. the “look books” of the collections) with distinct models, successful stylists, photographers and well-known musicians points to the dynamics and size of the independent designer segment and its network-like character. It shows that a particular generation of creative individuals from different fields are involved in creating the same cultural products, with each other’s help (or rather services), much resembling McRobbie’s account of the editing practices typical of the now defunct *The Face* fashion and lifestyle magazine.

From here it can be well concluded that fashion designers don’t just create clothes, but rather maintain a specific culture revolving around what is fashionable. My argument here is that on the one hand fashion in (national) context (of Hungary) cannot

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<sup>10</sup> For e.g. *A fény ösvényei* directed by Attila Mispál (2005).

be dealt with satisfyingly if only the strict fashion manufacture and purchase are taken into consideration, as all participants of the fashion creation process have to be recognized. On the other hand, contemporary fashion design has been evolving, with few exceptions, from the socialist heritage of fashion design training. Ultimately, the arguable continuity of fashion creation from Hungary might be sustained through womenswear in general: womenswear is not only taught at the design courses and subsequently created by most Hungarian fashion designers, but it represents fashion creation from Hungary as well (as opposed to menswear). Further, because fashion is embedded in larger societal contexts, by making womenswear, efforts can be made to comment on gender order of both the present and past, as we will detail in the following subchapter.

## 5. The case of two Hungarian fashion labels: *Je Suis Belle* and *Use*

### *Unused*

#### 5.1 *Design inspirations or made to inspire*

So far we have seen how the fashion designers of the *Use Unused* and *Je Suis Belle* by blending artistry and entrepreneurial skills create fashion styles which, created in line with international trends, target consumers both in Budapest, Hungary and also abroad to a certain extent. My hypothesis in the research has been that these brands are appealing because of both the stylish garments they create and the added value of „Hungarianness” attached to them. Before examining this “added value” I will first explore what lies at the basis of these styles; or more exactly, the sources of inspirations which make use of the realms of collective memory about the recent Hungarian past.

But first, how does a fashion designer keep up with the current and ever changing trends?

„ This means that you always keep an eye on what is happening in the world, how is the weather like, etc., or, what kind of exhibitions are organised, what books are published and what kind of movies are screened...” (Tibor Kiss)

This description is relevant not in the sense of thinking of fashion designers as “keeping their finger on the pulse of the society” at large, but to argue that in terms of design, anything new is to be valued as much as, say, a dress from the sixties. If we look at the so-called ‘traditional or ‘Hungarian national fashion’ we find clear and obvious connections with what Hungarians wore in the past, how this tradition is still kept and

promoted today by specific designers, etc. The two examined fashion brands however don't subordinate current fashion trends to traditional costumes or art, but rather vice versa; and that seems the most obvious reason why they belong to a different segment of the fashion market, without having much to share with the 'national Hungarian' fashion. The preparations, concepts and creations of their collections show a rather different pattern.

As Tibor Kiss stated,

„We are here but only to travel and stay for a while in an European environment which is fresher, wittier, and more daring than ours. But, when we come home we shape our collections by reinterpreting this environment, the result of which is a trend-free albeit international collection.”

Being in tune with international styles remains essential, although at the same time a different approach to fashion creation is applied here, which supposes that the garments created under the *Je Suis Belle* label appeal to customers and buyers outside Hungary as well, in spite of not embracing the fashion styles of the current season. While questions of trend-freeness might be hard to sustain or prove (especially if we consider the fashion media coverage on the label) it signals nevertheless that the label positions itself in the different segment of the independent designer fashion.

While fashion design is said to take inspiration from virtually anything (for e.g. French influences or contemporary streetwear in the case of *Je Suis Belle*, and Japanese horror movies in the case of *Use Unused*), in line with my research I will deal with specifically Hungarian references which define the brand positions (at an objectivizing or impersonal level), while at the same time also speak of the designers' subjectivities.

At design level the designers of both *Use Unused* and *Je Suis Belle* claimed to make use of various practices and habits connected to popular or national culture Hungarian', Tibor Kiss stated that:

“We often reach toward traditional popular craft technologies or search for pattern cuts either from national costumes or everyday wear from the socialist period.”

In the case of *Je Suis Belle* one cannot help but notice the ‘retro’ or vintage elements throughout their collections, for e.g. the sandals and frock dresses in their latest, 2009 spring summer collection. While I wouldn’t dwell on an aesthetical analysis in this regard I believe that these images reveal not only the usual practice among fashion designers to take inspiration from the past (Evans 2000, 106), but they play on *images* of nostalgia (i.e. as “represented garments”) without the “used garment” (Barthes 1983) pertaining to the material culture of the era.

While the brand philosophy of the *Use Unused* label is much indebted to “classical” fashions, two of the collections have had documented references about aspects of “Hungarianness” (although mixed with other influences, noted previously): first, in their autumn winter 20007/08 collections the *Use* designers reworked elements of Hungarian national costumes but still kept the flair of current fashion styles (Surface magazine 2008). Second, their previous sources of inspiration (for their spring summer 2007 collection) were frock dresses (gowns) worn by women in Hungary in the 1970’s. According to Attila Godena-Juhász,

“The socialist womenswear of the era was clearly anti-western: it made women look uniform, with the purpose to deprive them from their secondary sexual (gender) traits. The frock dress concealed the woman, so that that she wouldn’t look sexy, or too fashionable, like western women did.”



While the socialist “aesthetics of sameness” as governing women’s social life and presence has been noted by Agárdi as well (2009), and thus it can be argued as having entered collective memories (which is informed by common present beliefs of communist repression) about gender relations of the era, I believe that the designers have only touched upon the (episodes of) history and representations of the women from Hungary. They exposed (or interpreted) the oppression and regulating practices of the past era, offering contemporary, liberated femininities instead; nevertheless these still needed regulated “performance” within, for instance, the context of the catwalk presentations.

It is interesting in this regard the way the *Use Unused* designers have been re-imagining recent history. Instead of comparing these fashion designers to historians we can suppose that, much likely to be informed by present common beliefs, their understanding of the recent Hungarian past (be it either the social or costume history of Hungary), being in stark opposition to the socialist ‘governmentality’ and regulation, embarks on a sort of liberating project on women.

The preoccupation with the Hungarian social past needs a closer look; analyzing the present relations to the material culture of the Eastern socialist bloc the historian Paul Betts claims that the old objects (or apparel and accessories, in our case) “are sites, surfaces which provide for the making of new memories and thereby play a significant role in the formation of new collective identities.” (Betts in Agárdi 2009). While it is important to note that any individual can have her/his own special (nostalgic or whatsoever) reminiscence of the past and simultaneously collective memories may articulate elements from the same past for identity-shaping purposes in general, the fashion designers do something similar in the name of fashion.

According to another interview excerpt, the designers from *Je suis belle* described their clothing fashion style as (..) “a nostalgic one that gives an overview of the whole 20th century.” Designers usually raid the past for ideas, and the ‘fashion’ or style essence of their creations makes attractive the re-created womenswear items from the past era for their consumers (who are most likely not to fit into the groups excited by or collecting objects from the socialist bloc, as in the cases listed by Betts). The designers’ interests in the socialist period in Hungary and their reinterpretation/using of collective memory-parts means acknowledging the past regime (with all its gender relations and material culture) as a valuable source of inspiration while at the same time commenting on it in terms of “politics of fashion”, i.e. signaling what’s “fashionable”. After all, consumers are rather spared from any much too political investments. To put it differently, the consumer, „(...) is guided by aesthetics rather than ethics, and is not so much concerned with political ideology as by an individualised „right to enjoy, not a duty to suffer” (Bauman in Stevenson 2008, 258-259). Although it may be either pattern cuts or motifs from national costumes, or even women’s dresses from the socialist era, the ready-to-wear garments in both cases are rather ambiguous if trying to categorize them as specifically Hungarian features, and thus linking it to the “national Hungarian fashions” and consequently, to nationalist politics seems irrelevant. However, the designers themselves must have considered these sources as values and which have been important in positioning the labels in the market; thus, similar to the femininities envisaged, they require that the consumers acknowledge these same values.

So while the individual fashion consumers become (target) groups due to commonly shared aesthetics or taste, we are dealing with both politics of identity and a new material culture based on new (fashion) goods instead of old objects; in other words,

everyday home- or workwear has gone ready-to-wear fashion at international level. Consumer motivations thus it can be grasped not so much in terms of nostalgia but as looking for the future or to the next new fashion styles while still keeping a flavor or memory of the old days.

## *5.2 Fashion defined as national business again*

Here I will explore the mechanisms which enable to speak about a sort of “national” fashion in Hungary in the context of globally acclaimed fashion trends. I will start from the observation that international fashion trends get localized through the pastiche work of “fashionists” (both designers and consumers) and I will hypothesize that the techniques used by fashion media professionals reiterate “national fashions” amidst international styles. Finally I will argue that the locally creating and succeeding designers serve to shape a “national”, or, in our case a “Hungarian” fashion.

First, I don’t plead for the interchangeability of the “national” and “local”, but rather emphasize a conflation of the two, as I consider Budapest the site of Hungary where the “international” and the “national” blend to the highest degree. Moreover, the designers themselves mentioned Budapest only as the relevant site of Hungary in terms of fashion.

Further, I will not problematize often used opposite pairings like global and local, east and west etc., but concentrate on how the small-scale designer fashion and consumption can be grasped again within the frame of the “Hungarian” or “Hungarianness”. To put it differently, in the words of Tibor Kiss, „the isolated situation in which have been living so far, as the highstreet and luxury brands weren’t really

present, has resulted in a specific style as well.” So, what does this specific style consist of?

As Tibor Kiss stated,

„We are here but only to travel and stay for a while in an European environment which is fresher, wittier, and more daring than ours. But, when we come home we shape our collections by reinterpreting this environment, the result of which is a trend-free albeit international collection.”

Being in tune with international styles remains essential, although at the same time a different approach to fashion creation is applied here, which supposes that the garments created under the *Je Suis Belle* label appeal to customers and buyers outside Hungary as well, in spite of not embracing the fashion styles of the current season. While questions of trend-freeness might be hard to sustain or prove (especially if we consider the fashion media coverage on the label) it signals nevertheless that the label positions itself in the different segment of the independent designer fashion.

“Western” fashion has (always) been present in Budapest to varying degrees at different times, just the availability to it was limited because of almost inexistent boutiques and the small social strata who could afford it. Then, according to Dózsa F., the global flow of the fashion phenomenon in contemporary context has resulted in the appearance of countless international fashion brands aiming either at the mass-market or at a more exclusive clientele (1997). Which then alludes to the fact that according to the ‘value-system’ or ‘fashion scale’ of the independent designers fashion as such hasn’t got much to do with mass-consumption but only with the relative „isolation” of those who can afford it but suffer from the lack of variety in goods.

I consider that observing fashion generally goes into two directions: first at the consumption level we may notice people in the street or in various public spaces dressed

according to the latest season's fashion aesthetics; thus one might conclude the marriage of Hungarians and fashion. Indeed, Tibor Kiss noted „a better change in the way people started to dress in Budapest lately, especially the youth (...) the present street image is permanently inspiring us.” The importance of interactions between designers and consumers has been dealt with in third chapter.

Topics like Hungary and the way people dress in Budapest compared to the “western”, allegedly more fashionable cities, the possibilities for making fashion in Budapest, etc. re-appear in English articles written about the collections of the *Use Unused* brand, where Budapest becomes a site of new fashion thanks to the designer label (Surface magazine 2008). While this may well be a journalist technique because, for e.g. saying only that they make stylish clothes doesn't lend the individualizing potential for the label and ultimately won't be appealing, the city of Budapest is presented as a new exciting place to discover new fashions and styles.

The space of Budapest town in this regard needs special consideration. Here I am referring by no means to shopping malls or to any similar consumer extravaganza, but rather to spaces where the fashion professionals sense fashion, i.e. presented most usually with images including fashionably dressed people cruising downtown streets, exclusive fashion events, etc. Then, still under the spell of Budapest, its downtown streets appear as the defining background for presenting in photos promoting the creations/collections of the *Je suis belle* brand. In my opinion this shows the preference for a certain geographical space (and limited financial possibilities to choose locations we might add), which remains the defining context of *Je suis belle*. While the *Je Suis Belle* brand at the time of the research wasn't developed in such a straightforward business-manner like the *Use Unused* (the two designers behind the label were graduating and establishing the label at

the time of the research so they were at the start of their entrepreneurship), at present they have opened their atelier and showroom in downtown Budapest (in Párisi udvar – Paris court on Ferenciek square), close to that of the *Use Unused* (which is located in Szervita square). Naturally both places can be visited by appointment only, to avoid agglomeration in case of sales but also pretend an exclusivist image. Within the frame of a different study these ‘fashion geographies’ could be further explored.

The *Use Unused* designers claimed to pay attention to the more conservative, reserved taste at home when creating the collections, as some of their most outstanding creations didn’t sell at all in Budapest; however, these consumers from Budapest at the same time were praised for their own style:

„Every situation is a bit different, for instance in Stockholm we sell different garments than in Budapest. The taste at home is much more conservative than that in Stockholm, which is probably more alternative. Look at this coat: this was re-ordered, while at home we sold only a single piece of it (...) At home people don’t dress so courageously, they prefer wearing rather more simple garments.” (Attila Godena-Juhász)

It doesn’t take much to link the conservative taste, the few shops in exclusive locations to the social elites where the acquisition and display of fashionable goods has been connected with the domain of prestige. Addressing consumers will be analyzed within the following subchapters.

Next to the consumption the fashion is its creative component: fashion professionals regularly give prizes to designers for innovating or reinventing fashion, etc. (see the Hungarian Fashion Awards event referred to previously). Though designers may be high-flying cosmopolitans, they are always relegated to a sort of national background as a matter of belonging or origin. In any case, it’s essential that certain designers have to be named, to be distinguished from the mass fashion followers, from the consumers/consumption. Designers are needed to draw the face of a fashion linked to a

national space. It is as if fashion that really matters is not worn but rather designed. So if one thinks of fashion and, for e.g. Hungarians or Hungarianness, the designers are relevant for the equation.

And finally, we should note the missing of the third factor from the fashion picture, namely the manufacture of fashion goods. The fashion presented in the media enables not only the designers but also their creations to ‘speak’ (as, for e.g. in a fashion snapshot/photo sessions featured in a magazine the models are wearing a *Je suis belle*–skirt amongst other pieces of luxurious and worldwide recognized fashion brands elevates their image and confers prestige). The fashion valued almost exclusively is the small-scale fashion, be it either haute-couture, or just independent designer fashion, precisely because of its culturally acknowledgeable potentials.

Even if there might be (and there are indeed) several Hungarian fashion brands, the authoritative fashion media professionals neglect these<sup>11</sup>, leave them out of the fashion discourse due to supposed lack of creativity in mass-market fashion (i.e. for adopting international trends without making any individual and “original” change). As such, there is hardly any information available about the persons/designers behind such brands.

In my opinion there are multiple reasons for this: there is the belief that on the one hand workers in clothing factories aren’t exploited due to small ordering quantity requested by these smaller fashion brands, while on the other hand the small-scale fashion creation retains some of the pleasures to be found in creative, aesthetical hand-

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<sup>11</sup> Recently even the state authorities have turned to fashion: the already mentioned luxury fashion designer Zoób Kati has been given a sort of lifetime achievement award by the Hungarian government, a fact which signals a policy concern and state-level acknowledgement of luxury fashion as part of the „national” culture.

made (art)works. Which, then, confers prestige and pride to the fashion creator: and this goes well with a sort of national pride also, even so when they get on successfully with their businesses. Thus national fashion entrepreneurship appears as efforts to be valued.

### *5.3 Fashion citizens*

We have seen so far that the fashion media serves as/becomes a means for the designers to present themselves and their creations in certain ways. But, how does the fashion of the two brands emerge in this constellation composed of design practices and Hungarian inspirations, Budapest fashion locations, clothes, consumers, and fashion press coverage?

Both Toby Miller (2007) and Nick Stevenson (2001 and 2007) pointed to the intertwining of consumer and citizen statuses, concluding that “politics of citizenship and questions of consumption cannot be opposed in any straightforward way” (Stevenson 2007, 262). These authors emphasize the connection between citizenship and cultural rights; but, apart from “the right to buy”, how can we link fashion to citizenship in our case?

Dress and garments deployed in different historical contexts by power regimes and empires as a political means to construct nation and citizenship has been already analyzed (Parkins 2002); here I am proposing a rather different trajectory, namely that in contemporary context, by acts of addressing the consumers (and consumption) through (fashion) images and texts not only consumer identities are being made but cultural citizens as well. While I don’t purport any kind of consumer triumph either, I will argue



for using the “cultural citizenship” notion instead of vague cultural identities of consumers. More precisely, I ask how does cultural citizenship appear in the framework of the fashion created by the *Je Suis Belle* and *Use Unused* labels?

The cultural dimension of citizenship gets defined as follows:

“Citizenship has always been cultural (...) The meaning is generally a double one, blending artistry and ethnicity. Concerns with language, heritage, religion, and identity are responses to histories structured in dominance through cultural power and the postcolonial incorporation of the periphery into an international system of “free” labor (...)” (Miller 2007, 51)

In a previous chapter I have pointed to the relations of contemporary Hungarian fashion design to the Soviet-dominated, socialist recent past; and, articulating cultural concerns through consumerism has been a general approach of this paper as well. In exploring the connections between consumer identities and citizenship I took two starting points: first, conceptualizing fashion as a cultural form I suspect that, through the “Hungarianness” as (a) content value attached to the fashion labels, the Hungarian independent designer fashion scene becomes a specific (fashion) culture (following also the logic of the article from the *Surface* magazine referred to previously). Second, I apply the fashion definition of Joanne Entwistle (2000), according to which fashion is a “situated bodily practice” due to embeddedness in specific social contexts, the role dress plays in the presentation of the self and the feeling of the self by being dressed up. This is relevant in the sense that the self and site-specific contexts matter also if we are speaking about “Hungarianness”.

According to Tibor Kiss, “our clients – both Hungarians and foreigners - love that we are a Hungarian brand, though it’s not their most important criteria.” Here we need to draw attention also to the fact that labeling these brands as “Hungarian” hasn’t been a

one-way effect, as the designers themselves have also applied this tag to both themselves and their brands, which suggests rather a “self-colonializing act” with appeal to foreign, non-Hungarian fashion followers. However, the present inquiry didn’t set out to examine specifically either consumer or citizen attitudes; this would be necessary as a possible continuation of the research.

In exploring how the selected Hungarian fashion designers construct their fashion brands and products to appeal consumers doing so they make use of cultural models, which in our case have been largely termed as references to “Hungarianness” and Budapest. These models, then, require “decoding” endeavors on the part of the consumers, for garments have to be understood and interpreted so as to be appealing. These activities correlate with the already noted attainment/realization of the self through consumption. I consider that the identity forming potentials of dress or any other fashion goods in the case of fashion brands having particular national origins or ties are to be found in this binary (while the aforementioned cultural models might be appealing irrespective of the societal gender of consumers, it is essential that we don’t forget that we have been dealing throughout with garments targeting a single sex, women).

We are speaking about more than just the potentials enabling the constitution/reinventing of the self by wearing fashion garments; she, the wearer becomes not just informed and allegedly stylized, but also aware of the multiple connections with what was/is a fashionable approach “Hungarianness”, which in turn depends upon the acquisition (and display) of new style commodities. As both brands attract both Hungarian and foreign consumers it is important that “Hungarianness” or Hungarian features can be grasped rather as cultural specificities than national/ethnic ones – due to mixing diverse sources regardless of their (supposed) origins.

Then, linked to consumer identities, we can say that this vague cultural content of Hungarianness (including design practices, brand philosophies, particular shops selling the brands' clothes, etc.) basically constructs/contributes to the formation of citizenship identities, and appears as something which is more serious than plain, undisputed consumerism. Consumer identities as such are appealed rather by international highstreet fashion (by the likes of H&M, Zara etc.) as designer brands (either luxury or small-scale, middle- or high priced ones) tend to keep their character connected to particular spaces shared by both designers and consumers.

Hungarian designer fashion brands offer access to parts of national culture re-created within the realm of fashion culture. Thus, the creation/presentation of the (consumer) self through fashion garments while it doesn't necessarily mean the preference for such content it might explain the success of (wearing) these brands, or at least shed light on their alleged success as stylish fashion creators within a national context. Somewhat similar to the grounding of citizenship identities through pop culture products (Hermes in Stevenson 2001), through a different "medium" however, it shows a possibility to become a fashion citizen in Hungary.

And, cultural rights as such can be put in terms of fashion connoissance and fashionable presentation of the consumer self; they ultimately point to an exercising of economic citizenship. Access to fashion commodities is obviously depending on financial possibilities of the consumers, which is in line with Miller's insight with regard to citizenship, i.e. the freedom to act via political, economic and media capacities (2007. 73). However, the preference for Hungarian fashion labels here is thought not so much in the sense of supporting "native economy", but as having a sense of aesthetics: then, this connects back to the concept of cultural citizenship, where according to Stevenson „good

taste” becomes a sign of and a means towards a better citizenship (Stevenson 2001). But, in our case, who has „good taste”?

We are dealing with a certain elite fashion signaled pertinently also by the designers’ connections with such fashion capitals like Paris or London. It can be assumed that certain social positions correlating with appropriate financial reward need to be attained so as to afford the high-priced designer garments of the two labels. This indicates access to all sorts of capitals (in Bourdian terms); a comprehensive approach, then, would require an analysis including class issues as well (consumers’ social positions, lifestyles etc.). The *Use Unused* designers have said that “mainly those people come to buy our clothes whose profession is connected in some ways to creativity; for instance interior designers, advertising agency executives, and fine artists and musicians” (Váczy 2009, 51). The professions listed here and described with creativity as a sort of catchword serves to multiple ends: it is essential that these are rather well-respected and sought-after professions among certain strata of the aspiring youth, and, we could add that the designers’ activities are very much similar to those of their client group: beside the entrepreneurial skills (needed for executives) they have to have artistic approaches as well, like fine artists.

Being a fashion designer is rather a privileged and often praised position in itself, and which is transferred to the consumers (who receive personalized e-mails informing about season-end sales and gain access to the showrooms of the brands by appointment) – by their relations with the designers, by possessing the labels’ garments and by entering and inhabiting the same spaces (fashion stores, showrooms or catwalk shows). The designers appear as being part of the same group for whom they create clothes. It is much resembling cultural citizenship in that the designers essentially provide representation for

this loose group of “creative women intellectuals” who not just afford the designer garments but share the same values.

If one maps the fashion shops selling the garments of the two brands in Budapest there are a few and quite exclusive locations: fashion boutiques on Andrásy street (*Use Unused*) and near Károlyi garden (both brands). Provided that one is familiar with the ‘social geography’ of Budapest it can be easily deduced that these locations do not target mass consumers. Moreover, it still shows the relevance of the influential and reconceptualized “conspicuous consumption” term (see for e.g. Davis 1992, Kawamura 2005, etc.), here confined to a few but carefully chosen spaces of display or performance.

So far it has been assumed that particular well-off women consumers valuing current life-styles, arts, etc. become members of the brands’ selected target groups; on the one hand this group identification has been linked to the femininities envisaged by the designers through brand philosophies and the garments created; then, if femininities/attributes of gender are achieved, in part, by mastering the consumer competencies (Craik 1993, 202) and the same „consumer competencies” enable cultural citizenship, we are witnessing that issues of cultural citizenship attempt to regulate tensions between the two genders: after womenswear, menswear also claiming its position on the consumption ladder. In this sense, in terms of cultural rights, fashion in our days serves as a reverse means, since women’s share for not involving/participating in political and economic fields to the same extent as men now is being asked for by men, as they claim rights to fashion, bodycare, leisure etc., fields associated traditionally with women according to the „men earners vs. women spenders” paradigm.

At the same time this view enables to dismiss women’s singular interest in aesthetics of fashion. The key argument has been that this particular fashion is appealing

not just because it is plain fashion; on the contrary, it is invested with meanings, signs and appears/is presented in contexts which point beyond the simplistic approaches like the “right to enjoy” or “pleasures found in consumption”. Between traditional national fashion related to conservative elites of Hungary and brand-conscious fashion followers celebrating the globally available, say, Vuitton bags, there remains a space to be negotiated. By implying that internationally competitive fashion can be done also in Budapest, Hungary and simultaneously stating “the right to be different” amidst dominating trendy fashion styles the two brands make finely tuned selections which are believed here to dress both the fashion-conscious, intellectual, artist women taking their time to investigate and discover the enduring fashion by occasionally enlivening the past.

## 6. Conclusions

Throughout the thesis I have endeavored to treat contemporary fashion design at the intersection of fashion theory including gender, social history and cultural citizenship. Therefore several issues related to the subject of the thesis have come forward: seen as a cultural practice, fashion and its design can serve as a new angle when discussing issues like „national” culture, cultural memory; and, it may be useful to expose the gender order of past, historically constituted regimes as well.

On their turn, consumers don't just wear fashion; they do a lot more, as fashion styles don't originate from the designers only but are created in the interactions between the designers and consumers; as such, larger societal contexts, outside the realm of „strict” fashion consumption must be taken into consideration.

According to the basic direction of the research, I gave special attention to the “Hungarianness” as a tag attached to the stylish garments and functioning so as to redefine „Hungarianness” at a fashionable, internationally appealing level while maintain the cultural connections of the clothing fashion created with Budapest, Hungary.

I have pointed to the fact that the clothing fashion creation of the two brands doesn't just represent what is „Hungarian”; but, similar to the feminities shaped by, for instance, brand philosophies, it plays a role in the formation of subjectivity, for clothing fashion can be grasped as engaging intertwined elements of identity (gender, and both consumer and cultural components). Related to the cultural dimension of citizenship it can serve as a cultural means to assert identities. Then, cultural citizenship imagined as emerging through fashion is a double-barreled load: while it offers possibilities to rethink

relations to women's position and state-regulation not just in the present, but also related to past, it is rather universal in its essence, and thus applicable to men and menswear also. Then, the introduction of distinct menswear lines and items by the two brands can be seen as reinstating the gender order. With little hope, a question to be asked would be the following: to what extent can the cultural representation potentials of the two labels work not solely through masculine views, but as alliances between men and women fashion creators?

Taking into consideration Hungary's relation to "western" fashion during the socialism, further research could address the following: what is the relevance of differences between the fashion culture in Budapest and other capitals of either the former Eastern bloc states or those of Hungary's neighbors from the "west"? Or, taking a more personal approach, what is the stance of Hungarian fashion professionals working in both the past era and in our days toward the issues presented here?



## **Annex: list of interviews**

Interview made with Füzes Eszter and Godena-Juhász Attila from the *Use Unused* label on April 26, 2007;

Interview made with Kiss Tibor from the *Je Suis Belle* label on May 12, 2007.

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*Je Suis Belle* homepage: <http://jesuisbelle.hu>

*Use Unused* homepage: [www.use.co.hu](http://www.use.co.hu)