

Agnieszka Jezyk, University of Illinois at Chicago

Fashion and Self-Fashioning in “Diary 1954” by Leopold Tyrmand and “Beautiful Twentysomethings” by Marek Hlasko

Close encounters of politics and fashion are not a novelty to the postmodern societies. Vivienne West had probably more influence on the rebellious youth of the 1970s than some of nonsensical lyrics wheezed on stage by Johnny Rotten. Alexander McQueen’s controversial “Highland Rape Fall/Winter 1995” show was aimed not only at the social issues, such as misogyny and objectification of women, but was also deeply politically involved and read as an allegory of Britain’s colonial politics towards Scotland. More recently celebrities of the fashion business like Kate Moss or Shayne Olivier wear balaclavas as a sign of solidarity with the artists (Pussy Riot) and the ordinary people (anti-gay laws) prosecuted in Russia.

But what if this story was rewritten from the Eastern European margins? How different was the attitude towards the dangerous liaisons between fashion and politics behind the Iron Curtain? It should go without saying that Polish, Hungarian or Romanian fashion business was clearly political not commercial, since all elements of everyday life, even those most private, were soaked to the bone with politics. In my essay referring to, among all, Baudelaire, Simmel and Barthes, I would like to talk about different approaches to fashion and self-fashioning in the idiosyncratic context of the communist state. I will focus on the excerpts from the two semi-autobiographical works: “Diary 1954” by Leopold Tyrmand and “The Beautiful Twentysomethings” by Marek Hlasko that discuss "bikini boys" subculture, to show how differently the term “politics” could be understood, and, in consequence, how fashion can be “politicized” in different manner, to then propose that this “politicizing” of fashion in Tyrmand’s case may actually be a reaction not to the influx of politics, but to a haunting lack of it.