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Academic writing in the fashion studies

THE WRITING OF FASHION STUDIES

The theme of writing has particular importance in the context of fashion studies. Roland Barthes noted already in the middle of the last century that 'as soon as we observe Fashion, we discover that writing appears constitutive' (1967: 15). He was referring to the paradoxical phenomenon whereby words play a central role in constructing the meaning of fashion as it is produced and experienced. His consideration can be applied a fortiori to social studies on fashion.

Like all the other disciplines in the system of western academic knowledge, fashion studies too makes claims to a theoretical and empirical rigour that should be reflected in how knowledge is communicated through writing in books and articles. Like other objects of study, fashion requires the capacity to analyse and write about it in accordance with established criteria. This is a principle that is beginning to spread in our sector as well. Particularly current, for example, is the debate on fashion criticism, its forms, and the process of legitimacy that it has undergone in recent decades (Granata 2013; McNeil and Miller 2014).

The theme of writing acquires special importance when fashion is addressed at academic level because the field of fashion studies is structurally interdisciplinary and is effectively multicultural. We discussed these features, and multiculturality in particular, in the editorial for the first issue of

this journal, that sprang precisely from awareness of those features (Mora et al. 2014). At that time, we focused on the paradox inherent to a publication like the *International Journal of Fashion Studies*. On the one hand, its intention is to promote the internationalization of fashion studies outside the English-speaking world, and even more so the western world; on the other, the intention is to pursue, through the system of double-blind peer review, a rigorous 'scientificity' of texts: that is, a form of publication fully compliant with the conventions and values of western science. We also argued that the inherent paradox is resolved to the extent that 'peer review is not only an expression of the cultural framework of western science, but also a condition to break up the cultural closure of western science' (Mora et al. 2014: 9).

For this to be true, a suitable balance must be struck between two tendencies, one towards expository rigour, the other towards respect for a multiplicity of expository cultures. How can one write about fashion in a 'scientifically correct' manner? The question does not arise from an abstract intellectual interest, but rather from the everyday practice of peer review applied to fashion studies in the context of a journal. Peer review, of course, does not restrict itself to aspects concerning the content of the texts reviewed, such as the novelty or methodological rigour of the research reported. It normally also assesses the rigour and expository quality of the text. Scientific journals require their reviewers to pay attention to this aspect in the correct belief that, especially in the social sciences and humanities, the rigorous exposition of a knowledge claim is indicative of the rigour with which that piece of knowledge has been produced. Hence the answer to the above question is not an abstract observation, but provides a benchmark for those who set about writing scholarly articles on fashion.

THE IMRaD MODEL

The system of western science has for some time responded to the issue of scientific writing by developing a model that has gradually become the standard in science's various disciplines. The most common handbooks on 'how to write a scientific paper' (e.g. Glasman-Deal 2010; Hall 2013) teach the so-called IMRaD model, which requires an article to be structured into Introduction, Methods, Results and Discussion. The purpose of the Introduction is to define the research question clearly and then review the relevant literature. The Methods section describes the research design and the methodology used to collect new knowledge useful for answering the research question. The Results section sets out the data obtained by the research. The Discussion section compares the data collected with what is already known to the scientific community, explains how they respond to the research question, highlights the limitations of the research conducted, and suggests avenues for further enquiry.

The IMRaD model has become predominant in many disciplines of the hard and life sciences; and in some cases it is now the only model recognized as legitimate. For example, in medical scientific writing, the model – introduced in the 1940s – was used in 80% of articles in the 1970s and in 100% in the following decade (Sollaci and Pereira 2004). It is also widely used in the social sciences but – and for us this is the first important aspect – not homogeneously. There are disciplinary differences, for instance between psychology and sociology. Whilst since 1957 the American Psychological Association has issued a *Publication Manual* that adopts the IMRaD model as

the standard for scientific publications (APA 2010), the American Sociological Association has refrained from likewise standardizing the format of scientific articles (ASA 1997). There are also cultural differences: that is, differences in how academic systems of different traditions have adopted the IMRaD model. Pontille (2003), for example, showed that in a sample of 373 articles taken from the main sociology journals of the United States and France in the three years 1965, 1980 and 1995, the IMRaD model was used in 50% of American articles, and in 3.4% of the French ones. Perhaps no other finding could demonstrate more clearly how a difference of cultural tradition can reverberate in the narrative structure of written scientific texts – disciplinary content remaining equal.[1]

Among the articles that the *International Journal of Fashion Studies* proposes in this issue there is one that fully expresses this specificity of French academic culture with respect to its English-speaking counterpart. It is the paper by Martine Versel and Joan Busquets on 'Ordinary transvestitism: Imaginary body–real body in contemporary fashion'. This text, which straddles the fields of semiotics and psychoanalysis, does not define an initial research question and, above all, does not discuss a body of literature on the topic that it covers. The citations do not refer to authors who have 'demonstrated' a certain theory or argued a certain thesis. The rich literature that it cites is instead used as a stimulus for the development and extension of thought. Lacanian psychoanalysis or the example of Japanese *onnagata* are tools deployed to produce a new, complex and unusual interpretation of phenomena in the field of fashion. Consequently, there is none of the endeavour to 'ground' a discourse on the discourses of others, which typifies articles using the IMRaD model. Nevertheless, this article and the research fields of French semiotics or international psychoanalysis – which make ample use of this rhetorical style – are definitely able to increase knowledge within fashion studies.

THE CRITIQUE AGAINST THE RHETORIC OF THE SCIENTIFIC ARTICLE

The IMRaD model is an expression of a somewhat stereotyped idea of scientific production that science and technology studies (STS) have disputed for several decades. In the 1970s and 1980s, Karin Knorr-Cetina (1981) and Bruno Latour (1987) analysed and deconstructed the basic elements of the rhetoric of the scientific paper. Knorr-Cetina showed that such rhetoric was in large part a strategy to conceal the actual conduct of research, which is contextual. Latour demonstrated that, in general, the rhetoric of scientific literature performs the crucial function of enabling a text to form alliances that can withstand the assault of hostile texts. The typical form of the scientific article, therefore, is not dictated by requirements inherent to the phenomenon that the article analyses, nor by objective mechanisms to determine true knowledge, but rather by the need to construct resilient networks of scholars willing to come to the article's defence.

Subsequently, a group of scholars especially interested in the reflexive application of the radically constructivist attitude of STS experimented with forms of scientific communication alternative to the traditional ones. Their aim was to apply reflexively to STS writings the critical awareness that this subject area had developed in regard to the output of the traditional scientific disciplines (Ashmore 1989; Gilbert and Mulkay 1984; Woolgar 1988). To this end, they sought to disrupt the normal reading of the text by putting a different voice into the text. This led to the legitimation of dialogue as a rhetorical form

1. Of course, the expression 'disciplinary content remaining equal' should be taken with due caution, since it is well known that in the last century French and American sociology investigated very different issues with very different approaches. Pontille (2003), for example, shows that whilst American sociology of the post-war period was particularly concerned with empirical investigation of contemporary reality and the mathematization of social facts, French sociology developed as a humanities discipline subordinate to the philosophical tradition, from which it drew its themes and method. It is normal for a diversity of cultural tradition also to entail a diversity of typical content.

of the scientific article (Mulkay 1984; Pinch and Pinch 1988). The debate lasted for only a few years, however; and its ephemerality demonstrates the difficulty of the legitimate effort to avoid the standards tied to an inflexible stance on the production of scientific knowledge. If nothing else, the simplifications implicit in academic conventions like the IMRaD model have the advantage of facilitating the inclusion of new knowledge claims in the endless network of references that constitutes the archive of science (Ziman 2000).

In fashion studies, disciplinary and cultural differences are not just routine; they are constitutive of the discipline. Because fashion is a transcultural and interdisciplinary phenomenon, it is usually studied by different disciplines in different cultural contexts. This has been all the more the case since cultural considerations entered the traditional historical study of dress, shifting the attention from the simple product of authorship to the system of which it is part and the expression (Breward 1998). Consequently, a particular challenge is grasping within these disciplines and with respect to these particular cultural contexts the features of rigorous writing, i.e. of a narrative structure able to survive in the archive of science and become part of the collective memory, which alone can ensure the survival of research findings (Mora et al. 2014: 9–11).

Having developed earlier than other research areas within fashion studies, the history of fashion had already addressed towards the end of the last century the question of the different forms of knowledge production (see issue 4 of 1998 of the journal *Fashion Theory*). Following the spread of cultural studies in the study of dress, there arose what Lou Taylor (1998) called the 'Great Divide' between, on the one hand, the object-centred methods typical of curatorial work and more traditional dress historians, and on the other, academic approaches based on the analysis of imagery and the formulation of theories typical of social/economic history and the cultural disciplines. Although the latter tend to reproduce models and standards widespread in academia, fashion history maintains a variety of rhetorical styles that cannot be reduced to methodological canons or instructions on behaviour. Fashion historians had developed already in 1998 a clear insight into the usefulness of a convergence of multiple stances (Breward 1998: 311).

In this issue, we publish two articles that take a historical approach: Ana Balda's 'Models wearing Balenciaga in the fashion press: A comparative study', and Aziza Gril-Mariotte's 'Children and how they came into fashion on printed textiles between 1770 and 1840'. Both of them contribute to the growth of our knowledge of fashion. On comparing these two articles in purely rhetorical and methodological terms, the marked difference between them is apparent. Ana Balda's article comes very close to the IMRaD model. It analyses photographs of Balenciaga outfits published between 1937 and 1968, placing them against the background of what we already know about the historical evolution of the figure of the model and information on important events in the life of the Spanish fashion designer. It thus furnishes new knowledge about both the historical figure of Balenciaga and the relationship between designers and the world of communication during the twentieth century. From the rhetorical point of view, the article is clearly divided into an introduction in which the problem is formulated, a methodology section, an 'analysis' i.e. discussion of the data collected, and a concluding section summarizing the work's achievements. The same structure is not to be found in the article by Aziza Gril-Mariotte. It offers a consistent interpretation of a particular evolution of fabrics for interior decoration between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. It views this evolution in light of historical and museum sources,

setting it in the context of changing social and cultural perceptions, in that period, of childhood and family. The article's usefulness for fashion studies does not derive from a body of evidence supporting a certain thesis, nor from the logical consistency of a certain theoretical argument, but rather from its capacity to furnish understanding of historical facts in part known, in part unpublished, in textile history.

Through the comparison of these two contributions it becomes clear that the growth of knowledge passes through multiple channels, and it is important for scientific disciplines to keep all of them open.

THIS ISSUE

We want to bring these matters to the attention of the readers of the present issue because the variety of argumentative styles contained within it – partly already pointed at above – exemplifies a question that has intrigued us since the very first issue of the journal. It immediately became clear to us, in fact, that cultivating an authentic internationalization and interdisciplinarity of fashion studies would require an openness to different and sometimes unexpected forms of communication, which would raise the problem of how to ensure both the expository originality and the scientific rigour of a text. The IMRaD model with all its variants is indubitably a useful format for all those who work within the frame of Anglo-American social sciences; but other models, examples, and balances should be found and promoted, with the sole aim of extending our knowledge about the fashion phenomenon in all its aspects and of scholarly practice more generally.

In this issue, the article that most clearly adopts the IMRaD model is Ho-Lun Tommy Tse's 'An ethnographic study of glocal fashion communication in Hong Kong and Greater China'. Through analysis of interviews conducted with senior Asia-Pacific fashion marketers, Tse is able to interpret the difficult position of local marketers as an imperfect and perhaps precarious stage in the tortuous process of fashion's glocalization. The marketers are constantly required to negotiate between the needs and characteristics of the local public and the European or American headquarters of the brands, for which defence of their purity almost always coincides with the replication on a global scale of images and values produced in Europe or North America. This article clearly belongs within the disciplinary context of management and marketing studies, from which it takes not only the basic literature but also a solid and codified argumentative style. Within that context it applies a methodology that relies on qualitative features, if not properly ethnographic technicalities. The outcome is a method to analyse the content of the interviews very different from the one to which sociologists and anthropologists are accustomed, but no less rich with insights for the reader.

The article by Agata Zborowska on 'Deconstruction in contemporary fashion design: Analysis and critique' instead reflects rhetorical models closer to the humanities, in particular philosophy and German *Kulturgeschichte* (history of cultures). In the production of knowledge it privileges the theoretical approach, and conceptual analysis with respect to the use of empirical evidence. The two concrete cases presented, those of the Maison Martin Margiela and Comme des Garçons, are used more as means to verify and refine concepts related to the fashion phenomenon in general (does a deconstructionist fashion exist? what is meant by deconstruction in fashion?) than as empirical evidence on facts, dynamics or causal relations of some kind.

In a similar vein is Paola Colaiacomo's 'Pier Paolo Pasolini and the construction of masculinity in Italian fashion'. Colaiacomo is a senior scholar in the field of literary studies, and for many years she has focused her interests on dress as a descriptive element of literary language, in the wake of the seminal study by Anne Hollander ([1975] 1993) on clothing in the visual arts. This article examines the male figure in the imagery used by Italian fashion; but it does do so not through accounts of interviews and observations, or the extensive analysis of materials, as one would expect from a social scientist, but rather through a re-reading of the literary and filmic work of Pier Paolo Pasolini. Her writing is itself a literary production. Her approach is not that of an outsider who observes an essentially alien phenomenon, but rather of someone who understands and explains a phenomenon from within, in some way also reproducing its mode of expression.

Finally, a very special case is represented by Dana Keren Yaar's 'Perfume as an interpretive key to the Song of Songs'. This text is the one that most clearly, in this issue, manifests the weight of cultural differences on written production within fashion studies. It is very different from the most common forms of academic communication and in some respects resembles the exegesis of sacred texts. Analogies, suggestions, hypotheses, metaphors, hyperbole and other rhetorical devices of various kinds become tools for a reinterpretation of a classic text of western culture able to open new horizons of thought beyond the limits and constraints of scientific knowledge as commonly understood.

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