
The Synthetic “Otthonka”: A Piece of Clothing and Cultural History

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Abstract:

A dolgozat az otthonkát, mint kulturális jelentések hordozóját tárgyalja a fogyasztói vonalon vívott hidegháborús versengés kontextusában. A többértékű kulturális jelentések, amelyek mintáit a szovjet típusú birodalmi ideológia a kisvirágokkal együtt nyomta rá a poliészter anyagra, egyúttal azt sugallják, hogy a magánszféra a kétpólusú világ és a sajátos szovjet típusú birodalmi gyarmatosító hatalom mechanizmusaival nagymértékben átítatott tér volt. A nagyhatalmi ideológia ezen működési formái, amelyek, a szocialista fogyasztói kultúrát tekintve, legtöbbször a társadalmi nemek tengelye mentén hatottak, a család/pártállam dualizmusát kérdőjelezi meg. Továbbá, a ruhadarab, mint birodalmi hagyaték, a kulturális emlékezet részeként emblematisztikus szerepet tölt be arra vonatkozólag, hogy hogyan, milyen színezettel emlékezünk az államszocializmus évtizedeire s ez szervesen magában hordozza a történelmi folytonosság üzenetét.

Keywords: colonization of imagination and the private sphere, gendered socialist consumerism, state discipline, aesthetics of sameness, cultural memory, nostalgia

The “otthonka” is a piece of clothing, and a piece of cultural history. In Hungary it lived its heyday in the 1960s, 1970s and ‘80s, and became a popular, almost iconic, item of the readymade textile industry, meant for and worn widely by women of a wide-sweeping social spectrum. As the name suggests, the sleeveless, often hundred-per-cent-nylon button-up was meant for the home to replace the outdated apron, but eventually became a popular item of factory-wear, the female equivalent of blue-collar and men’s overalls (“*munkaruha*”). The peak of the piece coincided with the curve of a working-life of a whole first-generation of socialist working women, who even after their retirement have been wearing it as ‘second skin’.¹ Its popularity knew no limits –or borders– in the countries of the socialist bloc, where

¹ More quantitative and qualitative research would be needed, however, that would map out correlations between socio-economic groups and clothing habits, as it would draw attention to linkages between ‘class’, gender and

after the demise of the system the piece still retained a unique iconic character. It even had its –much more short-lived– Western versions, although there it never really acquired an emblematic character. Elevating the practical significance to the level of the symbolic, I argue, that –at least in Hungary– the piece became an emblem of a whole era, a stuff of cultural memory and a preferred piece of socialist material culture by nostalgic private collectors as well as museums.



1. picture „Otthonka”

It has been –and still is– a carrier of cultural meanings and it is an indicator of some aspects of Hungarian social relations including gender relations and gendered spheres. Studying the production of *otthonka* and the production of what I like to call the ‘*otthonka phenomenon*’ allows us to gain insight into subtle mechanisms of (soviet-type) imperial ideology by looking at how it reached into the sphere of the private through arguments pertaining to culture. By the blurring of the public/private divide it thus disturbs theories that aim at maintaining a strict state versus family dualism and argue for the ‘private sphere as the sole sphere of resistance’.² This way the analysis of correlations among gendered consumerism, aesthetics, fashion and the wider context of power mechanisms as well as the social (including gender) relations it creates add to our understanding of Soviet-type imperialism. Moreover, it allows us to place these imperial power structures in the broader

taste, and would help to understand categories such as ‘elite’, ‘peasant’, ‘worker’ as they are themselves formed by taste in the context of state socialism in Hungary. See for example Bourdieu 1984.

² This has crystallized around the gender and citizenship debate regarding differences between the ‘Western-type individual-based’ citizenship and the ‘East-European type socialist citizenship’ model. See for example Gail Klingman, 1992; Verdery, 1996; Fodor, 2003 and Pascal and Kwak, 2005.

global context of the Cold War thereby shedding light on important processes of the “worlding” of Central and Eastern Europe (Spivak 1985, 247-272).

Secondly, in the context of the ‘historical present’ looking at pieces of material culture enhances further insights into the workings of cultural/collective memory and power relations which we could as well term as the *colonization of the private* (Bhabha 1984, Marchetti 2010). Everyday objects, items of clothing, products of the ready-made industry found their way into the sphere of the home, the private and with this, their memory became organic parts of people’s psyches and mindsets. Therefore this legacy still lingers on sometimes in varied and sometimes in highly schematic forms. Still, the memory of these items is never independent but indicative of how a specific culture positions itself to its own recent past.

Finally, remembering the case of the otthonka can also bring us a closer understanding of contemporary links among issues of globalization, consumption and citizenship. When nowadays the new generation of ‘housewives’ do not wear a ‘housedress’ anymore but go to the “Chinese store” for cheap, lower-quality, mass produced clothes, when the garment industry is one of the largest colonizing enterprises exploiting millions and when even the most ordinary person may look like a celebrity by wearing fake *haute couture*, the question of aesthetics and taste as well as the tension between the phenomenon of uniformity and the “individualist” rhetoric of today become relevant. The neo-colonial context reconfigures consumption patterns therefore “the aesthetics of sameness”, though with a slight shift in meaning, gains even greater importance. Consequently this creates different forms of transnational connections and identifications in subjects and indicates novel forms of community-formation and cultural citizenship.

The “Nylon War” (starting in the ‘50s in the Soviet Union and in the ‘60s in Hungary) was a term coined by an American journalist in the early 1950s meant the ‘peaceful battle’ fought between the capitalist and the socialist camps along gendered lines of consumerism.³ It was a peaceful rivalry and large-scale development that had a huge impact on both sides of the “Wall” in the 1960s, and paralleled the more pronounced competition in military and heavy industries and the realm of hard sciences and space and information technology. The “Nylon War” enhanced the development of Light Industry and its change of profile to the production of synthetics and plastic materials.⁴ The Hungarian light industry thus was to be reformed to fit these new aspirations: foreign trade, the textile industry and the chemical

³ “According to Norbert Wiener, American mathematician, the people of the United States know how to work but don’t know what. Soviet people all know what to do but not all of them know how. In our work there are courageous explorers but also sluggish “riders”. We build outstanding reactive passenger planes but kitchen utensils less so, whereas everybody knows that it is more difficult to build “TU”s than pans.” See Erenburg 1959, 5 (own translation).

⁴ The objective was to produce consumer items in big quantities, products that are cheap, not so long-lasting, widely available for the masses, the treatment of which is easy as they are made of lesser-weight material produced by the chemical industry. See the papers of the “Polyester Program” in Hungarian National Archives (MOL), see for example Mh-L 902/1967, If.35/73/1967.

industry were jointly cooperating to establish Hungarian synthetics production and the manufacturing of synthetic goods. Cooperation among the countries of the bloc was also enhanced for a better supply of demands for synthetic threads and raw materials. Hungary had such synthetic exchange agreement with Poland and Czechoslovakia. In this process the Soviet de-Stalinisation model was to be followed which in the Soviet Union was initiated under the Khrushchev regime in the 1950s and in Hungary became the model to follow after the 1956 revolution under the Kádár regime. This tendency defined the direction the Hungarian light industry was to take up until the 1970s. The ambition to enhance living standards became a way to enhance the formation of a very specific socialist-type consumer culture all across the Soviet-influenced Eastern bloc.

In Hungary a large-scale state investment was launched called the “Polyester Program” by the Ministry of Light Industry as a part of the 3rd 5 year plan, the starting of which was scheduled for 1967. It involved an overall reconstruction of four of the biggest textile factories so that their main profile would be the production of synthetic (and blend) threads. The pronounced aim was that by 1970 out of all materials/ingredients produced and used by the light industry 30% would be synthetic.⁵ A large number of plastic and synthetic goods and artifacts mass produced with the new scientific technology thus bore the mark of the new direction. Along the lines of this trend also, the new type of nylon housedress for the modern working woman and housewife was born, replacing the age-old symbol of domesticity, the apron. The first advertisement of ‘otthonka’ as something to wear at home by the modern housewife appeared in the 1968 September issue of the *Women’s Magazine (Nők Lapja)*, entitled ‘Homely Fashion’ (‘házas divat’) and at the Budapest Autumn Fair, that has just been reopened to the international public, “the Kőbánya synthetic” (‘Kőbányai szintetikus’) lining up clothes made of synthetics was the ‘hit’ of the year.

Gendered Implications: Female role and Uniformity

“I like clothes, this may not be a sin. If they are cut out I sew them by myself (...) I am a type that finds it difficult to shop (...) I pay close attention to the harmony of colours, I stay away from vivid colours and flashy patterns. And from the short-lived fashion trends (...) everything with everything, that’s my principle. Fake jewelry decorates, it is no luxury indeed (...) I like good food, but I don’t go to extremes (...) Frankly, I am a real woman, I like to look pretty and neat – I think that’s the secret of being well-dressed. From the family budget I never spend one dime more than my share.”⁶

(Mrs. Zoltán Kántor)

⁵ Papers of Hungarian Light Industry, Hungarian National Archives (MOL), XIX-F-7-ttt, 81. d., p. 11.

⁶ The two-page account of Mrs. Zoltán Kántor’s everyday is the first instance that the nylon “otthonka” appears on a woman and on her child(!) at home. The real or fictional piece is an example of a phenomenon that we could call as the ‘education in socialist aesthetics’, which would create proper citizens. *Nők Lapja, (Women’s Magazine)*, 21. no. 4. (Jan. 25, 1969), pp. 18-19, (own translation)

Socialist consumerism, similarly to its capitalist counterpart, was also primarily aiming at women by on the one hand motivating and on the other hand intricately regulating and curbing demands: as the economy was that of a planned economy, still struggling with pressing shortage, the enhancement of demand also had to be tailored to the plan. The housedress was specifically made for domestic use despite its smashing popularity in factories as well. The emphasis thus was laid on the idea of separate spheres, in which the “otthonka” became an undeniable signifier of “the private” which was all the same women’s realm. Thereby it testifies against the image of the socialist emancipated womanhood that only existed in the party propaganda of the times and it tells the story of double (triple) burden that women ‘enjoyed’. The housedress, that was introduced to replace the outdated apron as its modern nylon, colorful and improved version for the “modern woman”, unnoticeably became a part of women’s political disciplining, which made sure that the proper housewife knows her duty also *after* work when at home. In a private recollection made public in the Ethnographical Museum we read, “My mother’s recurrent phrase, ‘A woman should not be in the kitchen without an apron’ in those days changed to housedress.”⁷ It became a symbol of proper domesticity and thereby every women’s proper socialist morality and their seeming equality. As women were regarded as less rational therefore politically less reliable citizens, the loyalty the state hoped to win by the satisfaction of their demands. The party state thus hoped to acquire legitimacy and citizens’ support based on gender-specific strategies (Reid 2002, 211-252).

Although it highlighted the segregation of gendered spheres, at the same time the housedress effectively smoothed out, effaced differences of other nature class, national or ethnic. No matter what was it that one was wearing underneath it, the gown effectively covered it up in the same vein as the school-gown of students. In the spirit of internationalism and egalitarianism it was available in most countries of the bloc from the DDR through Poland to Romania. The “better Western stuff” also was worn in the countries of the Western camp, and sometimes arrived in Hungary in other than legal routes, however it had never gained such popularity and cultural status as in the ‘East’. Thus, it embodied a sort of “aesthetics of sameness” and was worn as a “domestic nylon uniform” by women all over the bloc.

The Housedress and Nostalgia

I.A.: Why do you wear the housedress? Do you like it?

*J.: Yes, yes I do. It’s so very practical. Indeed. It’s easy to wash, never gets wrinkled, no need to iron it, it just dries quickly. And I love these two big pockets, there’s room for the kleenex and also the door keys. Yes.*⁸

⁷ See more on this at <http://www.neprajz.hu/madok/otthonka.html>, own translation

⁸ Interview with “Julianna”, 2 May 2005, Makó, Hungary.

Why does one collect housedresses? Why does one write about them? Why does one still wear a housedress? The housedress has by now become a relic of the recent past that has earned its place in museums as well as an important piece of our everyday history.⁹ It has also become emblematic of the four decades of socialism, as well as of female domesticity, asexuality and proper performance of duties. However women of the generation that came of age in the 1960s still wear it nationwide often justifying this habit by emphasizing its ‘practicality’, the fact that ‘it washes well’, ‘it dries quickly’ and ‘one doesn’t even need to iron it’, plus the pockets are very useful because one can keep things in it. Also, several literary and cultural sources refer to the housedress in one way or another, in which accounts the housedress becomes associated with the ‘eternal feminine sacrifice’ as well as with the ‘flawed socialist era’, which have become narratives, or, rather, dominant cultural discourses in Hungary from the 1990s onwards.¹⁰

Focusing on people’s reminiscences, and continued cultural production provides valuable insight into the connections of individual and collective memory. Objects, artifacts that became popular in the period from the 1960s to the mid-1980s, not only the housedress but the so-called “Sokol” radio, or “Rocket” vacuum cleaner, throughout the former bloc, in Hungary certainly, all evoke some sort of private memory in people. However, the mode/tone of that memory is varied and not without emotional charge: it can range anywhere in between negative dismissal or overtly positive idolization. This emotive component is what however highly intriguing for scholarly attention. Writing about a strange sense of “retro” nostalgia for everyday objects and items of clothing apparent in Eastern Europe from the 1990s on, Paul Betts claims that it is not only an escapism from the disillusionment of the post-imperial (post-socialist) period but it is “part of our historical consciousness” (...) These objects 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 2002, 731-765) Consumer goods thus play an important role in identity formation and therefore the memories of these artifacts are certainly indicative of the shapes of cultural identity of a community.

It is therefore crucial to look at the *modes of memory* and the factors that might have defined them. The socialist rhetoric on the duality of functionality and aesthetics becomes relevant at this point as “rational aesthetics” and “rational taste” formed the cornerstones, the

⁹ It has become part of the collection of present-day history in the Folklore Museum (*a Néprajzi Múzeum, Ma-Dok programja*).

¹⁰ To quote a prominent contemporary writer, “One day perhaps Traveler will write something about the “otthonka”, about the thing that here and there can be classified, as subspecies, for “otthonka”, at the moment he lacks a better word for it, the “otthonka” equals “otthonka”. I’m talking about that front-buttoned, flower-patterned, domestic and running-around housewife-garment, which according to its status, is a comfortable full-apron with arm-holes (...) One may say that the career of the “otthonka” is although not more spectacular, long-lasting or deeper than that of jeans, perhaps one can compare it to the jogging, probably. Although Traveler has seen real “otthonka” stores, it is difficult to make him doubt in his conviction that the “otthonka” is not bought, it just is, it comes to existence by itself, it is born out of regrets, surrender, obligation, resignation, and on one morning it is there as an attribute of the long process of auntification.” See Parti Nagy Lajos, *Mattersburg leírása (diktátatok egy bédekkerhez)*, (Mattersburg’ Description) in *Lettre*, No. 47. (Winter, 2002), <http://epa.oszk.hu/00000/00012/00031/>, (own translation)

governing principles of socialist morality and one of the important building blocks of the “socialist person”/citizen.

The reinforcement of the socialist conception of “taste” was crucial exactly because of its intricate connection to identity that was already known and taken advantage of in socialist consumerism from the 1960s on. The aims of the regime were obvious: if 1956 was not to be repeated then the initially Soviet “puppet government” had to ensure its legitimacy at home as well as abroad. In order to gain citizens’ more sincere support, a relative increase in living standards were to be accompanied with softer disciplining strategies directed towards citizens rather than outright threat and control. In such an environment where citizens were slowly encouraged to consume not only produce, the conceptualization of aesthetics and taste in connection with proper morality and the ideal socialist gendered citizen was inevitable. From then on aesthetic and tasteful was that which was however also rational and reasonable (=reasonably priced), simple and useful. The ideal socialist consumer consumes in a way that enhances the growth of the community as well.

*“... our clothes should be chosen in a way that its physical and moral wear-off should more or less coincide (...) [and] no matter how much individual it is to decide when one evaluates something un-wearable, **there are socially and economically rather promptly circumscribable laws that prevail.** These should be born in mind in production, in trade and no less when influencing consumer demands.” (Fabricki 1961, own transl., emphasis original)*

The contemporary press drew a sharp line between the socialist and the capitalist aesthetic values and does that always intertwined with issues of morality. Aesthetics and utilitarianism together was what was a guiding principle for the growingly popular applied and industrial arts as well. Industrial artists were regarded as engineers of taste, the ones responsible for the enhancement of collective taste as well as the ones who created the visual language of economic prosperity and progress. As Betts also argues, socialist consumer goods (colourful, plastic everyday objects, designed machines) were the material expressions of the socialist present and its utopian vision of prosperity in the future.

When one remembers today and explains why one likes, collects, wears the housedress that is no longer in fashion (“because it is practical”, “reasonable”) but on the contrary it is in sharp contrast with today’s fashion trends, and the ideals of health and beauty industry, all these discourses are present in that individual’s reminiscence shaping, informing and justifying it. The individual/unique in this way is in close interaction with the collective, the macro, therefore the relational analysis of these two levels is of the utmost importance. The above analysis has been a necessary exercise of zooming onto a micro-site of power and memory in order to tease out larger mechanisms of both.

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