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CONCEPTUAL RESISTANCE OF HUSSEIN CHALAYAN WITHIN THE EPHEMERAL WORLD OF FASHION

Within this study, Hussein Chalayan as a dissimilar figure in fashion industry has been analyzed due to his conceptual attitude which he developed opposed to the operation of the global fashion industry and through the ways and methods that he adopted in order to achieve this.

The structural transformation in the 90s, which laid the groundwork for the deconstructivist attitude, changed conventional understanding of image, technique and meaning radically. This attitude which produces tactics and strategies against global fashion system, reverse the operating mechanism of current system and creates counter-positions to the power. Within this transformation Hussein Chalayan's conceptual resistance towards re-constructing the meaning of the clothes will be examined through his unconventional design instruments and methods which make this resistance possible.

Conceptual Resistance in Contemporary Fashion

Contemporary fashion has been subjected to the first breakage / transformation by the end of 80s with Martin Margiela. Being considered as the pioneer of deconstructivism in the fashion lexicon, Margiela, adopted the philosophy of "In order to say something new you don't have to produce brand new things. Departing from this idea, first, he conceived second hand clothes from used men's suits, and accessories and then, introduced fashion world with the concept of "semi-couture" reflecting a design language with unfinished garments, and aged fabric surfaces. The trajectory which he opened in contemporary fashion remarked a period of structural transformation of fashion system. This transformation has been characterized with conceptual and discursive attitude vs. aesthetical and visual; controversial, destructive and deconstructivist vs. conventional and expected; irritation and resistance vs. compromising and contingent; counter position of the power and guerilla vs. trend and style oriented fashion practice.

To create a resistance to fashion system and to turn the rules of fashion upside down Margiela, adopted a material oriented design language with a modernist approach .On one hand he was marking to a transformation in understanding of luxury, value, quality and essence of thing in fashion industry by bringing the halo of high -end fashion down through his recycled, semi-couture garments. By giving credit to the ordinary and everyday aesthetics instead of precious, precise and unique crafted things, he not only resisted against temporality of fashion by reacting to use new fabrics, but also reflected. His appreciation to reclamation of the old and aged things to give them new lives as he expresses by saying "I love the idea of recuperation. I believe that it is beautiful to make things out of rejected or worn things."(Mears: 2006, p.35)

With his first collection “*The Tangent Flows*”, Hussein Chalayan which he prepared as a graduation project in Central Saint Martins in 1993, he was representing a similar attitude with Margiela. Even before Margiela, for the first time in fashion made the process of design transparent, as he buried the clothes and experimented their chemical reactions and transformations. The difference was he did this experiment in connection with a particular story in which the clothes have been impersonified with particular skills and characters.

Hussein Chalayan as Dissimilar Figure within the Structural Transformation of Fashion System in the 90s.

Hussein Chalayan has called attention in contemporary fashion scene for several reasons. Firstly; he was graduated from Central Saint Martins in London, where most of the avant-garde young designers emerge; second he coincides to the structural transformation which has been occurred in European fashion; and lastly he has contributed to open the conceptual channel within this transformation. In order to understand Chalayan’s dissimilar position in the contemporary fashion, a general analysis of structure of global fashion system during 90s has to be made.

The ephemeral nature of fashion which has been fed by fast consumerism has generated an understanding of fetishists “use and throw away” attitude with rapid changing styles due to continuous demand for the novelty. The first resistance to this system which aesthetically and visually consumes itself will soon lead way to an intellectual channel which has been defined as conceptual and radical fashion, with the influence of deconstructivism. This resistance has been grounded upon such socio-economical structural transformations:

- Transition to new liberal economy (characterized by Thatcherism and Reaganism by the end of the 80s)
- Emergence of the new consumer profile with an expectation prestigious, luxury oriented life styles (Yuppies, the movie *American Psycho*...etc.).
- Urge of individualism due to enthusiasm-excess created by 80s Pop culture-appraisal and construction of differentiation.
- Due to recession following the Gulf War, waning/decline of Haute Couture industry which has been considered as a sign of artistic creativity in fashion, thus search of new ways of artistic expressions.
- Thus, within value transformation in fashion system, the uniqueness of high fashion fed by craft oriented precision replaced by an innovative creativity developed by new technologies and materials.
- Due to this urge of differentiation, prominence of individual design languages instead of collective movements-Zeitgeist
- Visibility of individual design languages thanks to institutionalized designer brands and design schools which give credit to them.
- Evidence of concern to produce meaning to be recognized and to sustain among other differentiated/individual designers, when the new images and silhouettes become insufficient. (Just like the rise of conceptual art when the field of aesthetics reached a deadlock)
- Emergence of a new awareness by consumers for perception and reception of the idea and design discourse through the guidance of fashion media in for self-production and self-construction of identity and individuality, instead of consumer attitude towards mere product/garment.

Deconstruction of fashion and Hussein Chalayan's role

1. Deconstruction of Aesthetics: Japanese fashion designers (Kawakubo & Yamamoto, 1981. *Destroy* collection)
2. Deconstruction of Technique: Antwerp Six & Martin Margiela (1984-) In 1989 Margiela introduces deconstruction as language in to fashion lexicon.
3. Deconstruction of the Meaning and Process: Hussein Chalayan (1993-)

Production of meaning and Conceptualization

Due to his exceptional position within the world of fashion the works of Chalayan can be considered as a threshold in terms of possibility of construction of a new conceptual and discursive ground in reaction to ephemeral world of fashion. Thus, signed a critical understanding in fashion by irritating and agitating the system, and caused to flourish a new epistemology for fashion which will be sooner defined as “conceptual” (Quinn, 2005 and Kahn, 2000) and “radical fashion” (Wilcox, 2001) to support the field of fashion theory. Thus, following Martin Margiela's contribution as a new way of comprehension and interpretation of design and production process of clothes, Chalayan also expanded the frontiers of fashion theory which has been legitimately grounded upon styles and social and historical phases.

With an awareness of difficulty to stand against continuous change of forms and styles within the ephemeral world of fashion, Chalayan constructs the foundation of his works in order to re-semantify clothes and the objects. In order to construct the meaning (re-semantify) he follows three different routes which he occasionally adopts in his design survey:

- 1- Social/De-facto: First route that Chalayan adopts is the attitude which he re-semantified the clothes in order to create solutions for the social, cultural and political issues of the real world- ontological anxieties of that the modern world causes on human being; socio-political, apocalyptic situations. Due to this intellectual attitude and social awareness Chalayan has been defines as a “design philosopher/thinker.”
- 2- Metaphysical/Philosophical: Second route Chalayan adopts is the fictional understanding which has been expressed/conceived through a symbolical narrative rather than humanist and ontological concerns of the real world. The main constituent that Chalayan could able to transfuse these non-fashion issues into fashion world is the fact that he does not draws any distinction between the world clothes and objects, by crossing the frontiers. In his collections this is conceived as hybrid design solutions such as coffee table skirt, envelop jacket, safe jacket skirt, remote-control dress ... etc. By providing all in oneness of different species, he paves the way for new solutions which will expand the ontology, semantics and the perception of the clothes.
- 3- Phenomenological: The third route Chalayan adopts is the interaction of human body with the physical and the build environment, such as natural events, metropolitan environment and technology.

Interpreting the World of Object-Clothes

In order to conceive Chalayan or evaluate, could only be possible upon his works. On the other hand when concentrated on his works, as these clothes, objects, object-clothes which could be interpreted as “strange but familiar” with their character opposed to the substantial aesthetical values and conventional fashion practice and language , do not give sufficient information about themselves, paradoxically, one has to look at the design discourse which

make these works meaningful . By the end of this cycling process, one can understand that, to interpret Chalayan's works can only be possible through an analysis of the world of discourse which he constructs.

In order to conceive this stratified, as well as individual world which has been donated with an intense symbolic content, could only be achieved by deconstructing his discourse through a visual, symbolic and structural analysis. In other words in order understand Chalayan one has to focus on his works, whereas in order to understand his works one has to focus on his discourse ; that is to say to read the subject and the object simultaneously and reciprocally. In addition to this, design discourse of Chalayan is closely linked to his design process and his performances.

He conceives his clothes as tools/instruments to create "personal environments", by this means to make the wearer interact with their natural, physical, technological and social environments. For this reason the clothes are intensely charged with signs, symbols, messages and stratum of meaning. On the other hand the body as the "fragile and insufficient" is the epicenter of his ideas which has to be empowered against its environment and problematical of the modern world. For him the interaction between the body and clothes, objects, object clothes is the representative of his ideas, fictions, stories and his concepts. He adopts two different ways to conceptualize the themes to realize his ideas into designs:

1. With the prediction of a negative, traumatic situation like war or accident, he develops a chaotic mise-en-scène which the individual could stand; even survive against the intolerable conditions of this situation through the use of clothes.

In *After Words* collection, with a conception of refugees of the war in Kosovo, he proposed transformable object-clothes in order to enable them to leave their houses with their minimum belongings which they could carry with their body. Thus, in order to rebuild "the nexus" created between the humans, clothes and the objects in the modern world , he translated this nexus in coffee table skirt, table-bag, chair cover dresses.

2. He interrogates the effects, problems, anxieties of modern world on human beings with an ontological, philosophical, social and political events and concepts. The clothes, then, apart from their inherent functional values, are designed as a *heim* or cocoon to empower and protect them against unpredicted dangers, risks and anxieties of the modern world. This protection could be provided by a self-sufficient pod, as well as through a veil or helmet which could protect the wearer from others' gazes.¹

Translating Ideas into Designs

In the very first step of construction of a meaningful and protective world of the human and his/her body he interrogates the capacity and the boundaries of the human body. In order to

¹ Chalayan expresses several times that he re-functions the clothes with an aim to counteract the weakness of modern individual , like the skirt becomes safe jacket in *Kinship Journey(2003)*collection: "The clothing here still had some of the plant forms seen in the previous part, but also referred to elements of salvation"; like the refugees' transformable object-clothes in *After Words(2000)*: " the refugee theme to the idea of hiding and camouflaging valuable possessions or carrying them"; a protective corset against a physical attack during the war in *Nothing/Interscope1996*: "In the show, a surgical corset represented an injured body after a potential disaster"; a kite dress fort he Rapunzel inspired story in *Lands Without 1997*: Notably the story of Rapunzel, trying to make an escape with anything she manages to find in her cell, inspired Chalayan to design a kind of kite that she might use for a safe descent"; chair grafted to dress in *Geotropics 1999* to mobilize human being: "A chair was integrated into one of them in such a way that model and chair appeared to be a single entity and the model could sit down whenever she wished"; and the cocoon like dress in the same collection which creates personal space : "the clothing created an extra-large 'personal space', as extra protection against external influences whilst carrying one's environment from one place to another". (Evans, Menkes, 2005, 136, 80, 16, 16, 52, 52).

empower the body and its capacity to adapt its environment, just like the prosthesis attached to the body, he grafts technology in to body. However this kind of grafting is an assemblage which enables the things to turn back to their origin without losing their specificities, rather than creating a synthesis.

As one of most fundamental dynamics of the modern world the phenomena of “speed” has been used as the main theme (leitmotiv) in Chalayan’s collections. He transforms his clothes which are conceived to empower the human being like a shelter against the risk of modern world, into portable environments which they can carry wherever they want with their bodies. By this means just like the clothes of homeless people, the clothes almost become containers which provide the space for the individual to carry their belongings with them.

In order to make a semantic research on Chalayan’s works , first one should focus on his world, the signs and symbols which he produce, in other words in to the language which he develops. Chalayan’s concentration on the meaning rather than style induces him to use stereotypes and archetypes of fashion library in developing forms. His collections have a radical character due to their a-temporality, and to his design language which he progress through the facts. He enables to re-interrogate these facts through design methods such as abstraction, re-embodiment, increment-subtraction, opposition.....

Chalayan, after enabling these facts/ phenomena to be interrogated, he makes use methods such as *re-structuring*, *de-semantification*, *re-semantification*, *de-formation*, *ambiguity*, *re-functioning* while he transfuses these ideas in to design inputs.²

As stated before, the fundamental design method that Chalayan uses in his works is to deconstruct the body and topography of the garment. While he practices that technique he uses various design concepts and methods to gather such as;

- de-formation
- re-semantification
- ambiguity
- re-functioning
- juxtaposition
- layering
- folding
- presence-in-absence
- morphing
- variations
- alterations
- interconnections
- in-betweenness
- symbiotic
- Increment and subtraction

² “Chalayan highlighted the ambiguity and ambivalence of fashion and of the creative process itself. He looked directly at the process of designing, the adding of detail, the removal of it, the empowering, fulfilling and occasionally agonizing nature of the creative process.”(Anderson, 2000, 386).

As an example of his way of undertaking these facts to look at how he developed the concept of the game and the way he transferred to fashion would be illustrative. Chalayan, owing to the concept of game, aims to fill the gap between fantasy and reality, thus poetizing this tension, aims to anesthetize the reality.³ Chalayan's effort to reply to the violence/ fierceness of reality by the language of aesthetics and poetry carries the idea of realization of the catharsis—as the main ideal of the art- through representation. In other words, it claims to overcome the reality by its own simulation.

With an aim of producing a new environments and extensions for the body, Chalayan *re-functions* the clothes and reconstructs the substantial world of meanings of clothes. In order to produce “the new”, he deconstructs forms as well as structures, in other words creates *deformation*. To transform the actual one with an unconventional attitude can be considered as a method of *ambiguity*. The works of Chalayan incorporates the characters of *juxtaposition* of different facts which are subjected to *transgression* with their different ontology and *in-betweenness* as togetherness of these facts. The importance lies behind the strategy of bringing these facts together. The strategy of assembling, entirely different from “the synthesis” of modernist approach. Here, the things/ facts / species which have different roots and ontology, are brought together / assembled as fragments without losing their specificities. On the other hand these fragments have a structure which allows transitions, rather than having sharp borders like collage. At this point, these transitions as *interconnections, variations, alterations, morphing* become important. The possibility of assembling different facts, types without losing their specificities, and the contiguity between them, represents Chalayan's logic of *symbiotic* association.

Re-semantification in Chalayan's work can be conceptualized as an attempt to redound the clothes their lost meanings and their ontological value which have already become the “things of consumption”. He re-semantify the clothes through increment-subtraction methods in order to produce memory for the clothes. The process which can be defined as “production of memory of the cloth” is become evident in Chalayan's collections as the fragments of clothes which don't know them as a whole through the use of contours of form and traces of sewing (“Memory Denim” in *Echoform* and leather vest in *Geotropics*). These fragments which Chalayan develops by incrementing and subtracting the lines, pieces and cuts in deconstructivist manner, have been transformed in to traces of the memory, signing to the unknown, undefined whole which we will never be able to define/ know. That is why, in his clothes there are the traces of almost lost, dreamy archetypes. As another channel to produce the memory, Chalayan adopts the method of “presence-in-absence” in a similar manner to 20th century modernist artists' practice.⁴ Through this, the pieces, elements of clothes which have been reduced in to contours, recall absence rather than presence, and the lost archetype or “the memory of archetype”

There is an integrity between Chalayan's design process which he develops towards the conceptual framework of his collections and the performances that he develops towards their thematic construction. Within this context, Chalayan, reproduces the theme with its subthemes to create variations, and he transforms a group of outfits which highlights the core of his conceptual framework in to a theatrical performance as the peak point of the show.

Art historian Rosalind E. Krauss, invents the concept of “presence-in-absence” by making a semiological analysis of Picasso's cubist painting series with “Violin” theme between 1912-14. (Kraus, 1989).
³ “(...) Blending the real with the fantasy, and poetizing and idea or an image...In it there is the real world, but this world is adorned with the images belonged to the world of fantasy.” (Chalayan, 2004, 53).

⁴ Chalayan adopted this attitude with his video art “The Absent Present” which he presented in 51 Venice Biennale which is concentrated on “the memory of material”.

These outfits could be considered as the leitmotiv of the collection with their complex structures which have a trans-disciplinary character.

Conclusion

The radical and critical channel which Chalayan pioneered appears as a sign of a new era in fashion history in terms of the possibilities of incubating a critical role and discourse apart from aesthetical and form oriented concerns in the fashion sector.

Owing to the attempts for transgression to challenge the boundaries of his position and his resistance against any kind of mechanism which constructs categorical ways of thinking, Chalayan adopts a role of a deconstructivist-intellectual. This position of Chalayan represents to create a discourse within the ephemeral world of fashion can only be possible through the demand for his new “intellectual role” which can create a resistance to the system.

The conceptual attitude of Chalayan, who gives priority to transmit the meaning without any deformation within the fashion media, leads him to manage the diffusion of the selected images of his performances. Within the global fashion system in which the images are circulated in an unmanageable freedom, this kind of will of control which he developed to preserve the meaning of his clothes is displayed as another means of mechanism of his resistance against the system.

Finally, within the world of Hussein Chalayan, and his practice of meaning production a conceptual attitude has been observed which he constructs from inspiring social/de-facto themes; metaphysical/philosophical arguments and natural events and phenomenon. Consequently his multi-layered, intense and in-depth works can only be interpreted through understanding this conceptual framework. The attempts of Hussein Chalayan to develop the implicit performances of the clothes ,can only be interpreted pallelly and reciprocally through his Œuvre (clothes, object, object-clothes, collections), design discourse (press kits, interviews, critics on his works), design process (design and production processes of the collections and varied design methods of Chalayan) and ways of presentation (performances as he develops to stage his collections and other ways of visibility in fashion and design media).

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