

## FASHIONS AND TRENDS

**BOOM, MANIA AND HYPE****AUTHOR**

Ulrike Prinz conducted the interview. She is a cultural scientist, freelance author and editor.

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**What are the rules that manias and hypes follow? And what does fashion have to do with nation? An interdisciplinary research group at Paderborn University is studying fashions and trends in the areas of literature, art, media and pop culture. Literary scholar Mirna Zeman in an interview with goethe.de.**

*Mirna Zeman, you are the head of the Paderborn University research group entitled Fashions, Trends, Hypes, (Moden, Trends, Hypes) which brings together such diverse thematic areas as street art hypes, the nation branding trend, the country living boom and zombology in fashion. What is the unifying approach in your area of research?*

We are currently being downright flooded with reports about so called manias, booms and hypes about all sorts of cultural products and artefacts. A "retro-mania" and a "zombie boom" are supposedly underway and according to lots of cultural journalists, millions of people had been infected with "Harry Potter Fever" and "iPhone mania." And then there's a whole host of hypes on the march through the media landscape, although what this means remains totally unclear. Our research concept is that these "manias" and "hypes" are variants of a mechanism that is making itself felt in apparel among other places, in other words in fashion.

*So what is the connection with "authentic" fashion? With its nature as a so called surface phenomenon, its cyclical quality, its swarm logic?*



Research Group "fashions, trends, hypes" (from left to right: Timo Kaerlein, Christian Köhler, Mirna Zeman, Monique Miggelbrink) | Photo: Kristina Hollensteiner

In everyday language, fashion stands for the way people dress. Jean

Baudrillard once wrote that we must overcome this convention and “radicalise” the analysis of fashion. Our intuition is that in all the spheres in which norms can temporarily establish themselves, fashions can be at work and no one would be more “authentic” than the other. Fashions of any kind are temporary, short-term phenomena and are based on the principles of accumulation and repetition. Clothing fashion of the 60’s, for instance, accumulated countless variations on bell-bottom pants, which picks up on the funnel form again, and the current hipster chignon fashion accumulates hair-styles bound in similar ways.



The Vampire | Philip Burne-Jones [Public domain], via Wikimedia Commons

Analogous to this, a hype about vampires is making itself felt in a short-term agglomeration of novels, TV series, films, merchandising products and diverse fan practices, all of which vary and multiply the motif of the un-dead blood-sucker. And fashions in science or management follow the same principle of repetition.

*Subculture often becomes fashion and therefore mainstream later on. How exactly do fashions and hypes arise and can one discern specific rules or cycles?*

One useful descriptive model for fashions is the concept of “automatisms” that was developed in Paderborn in the research training group of the same name.

“Automatisms” are processes that run independently of central direction and largely elude the predictability and control of the participants. The fashion in “Wertheriads” – texts, objects and practices oriented on Goethe’s epistolary novel *The Sorrows of Young Werther* – arose through the complex interplay of various actors who composed Werther reviews and imitations independently of each other, wore Werther-style clothing or manufactured Werther porcelain cups. Neither Goethe nor any other instance was in a position to predict or control this fashion in its aggregate. And yet, literary and popular culture fashions follow certain rules: a popular cultural fashion’s “swan song” is mostly evidenced through an accumulation of parodies, or vampire fashions following the logic of cyclical return.



Hipster Chignon



*The concept of fashion always also entails the aspect of feasibility and enactment. To what extent are fashions steerable?*

Suppliers and marketers have been seeking since time immemorial through various strategies to connect their products with fashion trends on the market. In the era of late capitalism, a whole horde of experts is busy steering potentially lucrative fashions, trends and hypes in to predictable channels. After all, PR departments, advertising agencies, futurologists and fashion journalists know that news about fashions – similarly to stock market speculation – can be self-validating as a kind of self-fulfilling prophecy and are continually announcing new hypes. In this way, in spite of the fact that the

gatekeepers influence the rhythm of change and the selection of fashion to be launched, they are able to control potential fashion contents as little as their success.

*What is the role of the new media, specifically the Internet – as a primary platform for information, exchange and coordination – in the development and dynamics of fashions?*

The Internet stimulates the inter-medial dissemination of pop cultural fashions, spatially extends their radius and brings more tempo into fashion changeover. Digital Web media expand the group of professional fashion creators through amateurs and prosumers – in other words, people who write fan fiction – and also pluralise reportage about fashions. New formats, such as blogs, Facebook entries, fan forums, are shaking up the monopoly on communication enjoyed by the special-interest magazines. Ultimately, the no-cost and rapid access to cultural archives via the Internet is an important precondition for the emergence of many retro fashions. Styles of the past are only a few clicks away.

*You yourself are researching how marketing and pop are reinventing the nation – is this an unholy alliance? What can we learn from your results?*

I'm currently studying nation branding, a PR technique that's very hot right now and aims to provide a country or national government with an image comparable to a trademark. Proponents of this concept assume that nations competing for investments, labour, tourists and political influence require marketing departments and advertising agencies that will build up and organise their image. Branding agencies and identity consultants work on creating logos, slogans and "shared values" which are then assigned to the governments and countries – following the "corporate identity" model of private enterprises. My research shows among other things that the neo-liberal storytelling about nations as brands not infrequently stokes competitive economic nationalisms and that this development is anything but harmless.

Articles by Mirna Zeman to be published soon: *Häufungen des Kleinen. Zur Struktur von Hypes* in: Sabiene Autsch, Claudia Öhlschläger (ed.): *Kulturen des Kleinen. Mikroformate in Literatur, Medien und Kunst* (Munich: Fink 2014) and *Schwarz-Rot-Gold der Suppendose. Nation als Marke* in: Martin Doll, Oliver Kohns (ed.): *Die zwei Körper der Nation*, (Munich: Fink 2014).

The research group's results will appear in 2014 in a special issue of the magazine *kultuRRRevolution* under the title *Moden/Zyklen*.

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