

Academic Fashion: System and Practice

Christopher Keep

University of Western Ontario

GOOD STRUCTURALIST that for a time he was, Roland Barthes argues that in order to understand any particular instance of fashion it must be understood in relation to the system of constraints, social and linguistic, technological and ideological, which affords it meaning in the first place. “Every utterance” in a fashion magazine, Barthes writes, “constitutes a system of significations consisting of a signified whose terms are discrete, material, numerable, and visible: the garment; and an immaterial signified, which is, depending on the case, the world or Fashion” (25). It is in this manner that one could speak of academic fashion as a kind of code that supports, informs, and undergirds every scholarly activity, from choosing a dissertation topic to presenting a paper at Congress. It’s the felt presence of such a code, unexpressed yet making expression itself possible, that might make one think twice before putting a word under erasure in the high Derridean manner, much as an earlier generation might have felt equally hesitant about referencing Campbell’s theories of the hero’s quest. And it is this same code that today affords a certain glamour to animal studies, eco-criticism, or the connections between literature and neurology, making such topics seem both “timely” and, in the most overdetermined word in the academic lexicon, “relevant.”

There is, however, another sense of the phrase “academic fashion” that I want to consider here, one that understands it less as a system that allows one’s scholarship to seem either in or out of its critical moment and more as a distinctive ensemble of practices, a characteristic manner of study, and a relation of time to modernity. Let me begin by describing my own practices, or at least those that went into the writing of this position paper. When I received the invitation to participate in this ESC forum, I began with a little etymological research, keying the phrase “academic fashion” into Google Books to see how it had been used in the past. Knowing that the search engine would give me the most recent occurrences first, I tried limiting the results to works published between 1800 and 1900, hoping by that means to dislocate the term from its contemporary association with vestimentary codes and practices. Scanning its database of more than ten million books in less time than it took me to sip my morning coffee, the search engine reported 204 instances of the phrase in the nineteenth century. In many instances, “academic fashion” referred to just that, the academic garb worn by fellows and tutors, most especially when they were attending a college meal or delivering an after-dinner speech. Such garb, of course, meant that academics in the nineteenth century never really had to worry about fashion in the manner we do today; their robes were never strictly in or out of style, though occasionally their facial hair, apparently, was. Mutton chops seem to have been no less of a mistake than the mullet was a century later.

But there was another way in which the phrase was used that struck me as more promising for our present purposes. In several instances, the term “academic fashion” referred to a particular manner of writing, speaking, or acting. In some of these instances, to treat something in an academic fashion was to consider it without practical or real world experience of the matter, to see a problem merely in the abstract. The connotations here were usually derogatory, derived from the assumption that academics are wholly removed from the real-life concerns of ordinary people. But sometimes to treat something in an academic fashion was to consider it at great length, or in a scrupulously detailed way, going deep into the intellectual history of the subject and tracing its philological development over time. It is in this latter sense that J.E. Marr uses the phrase in 1896. In an address he gave to the annual meeting of the British Association for the Advancement of Science, Marr begs to be pardoned for treating his “subject in an academic fashion” but explains that such a manner had been dictated by the complexity of the subject at hand. “As I have paid considerable attention to the branch of the science which bears the somewhat

CHRISTOPHER KEEP is an Associate Professor in the Department of English at the University of Western Ontario. He has recently co-edited a special issue of the *Victorian Review* on disability studies and has articles forthcoming in the *Canadian Review of Comparative Literature* and in the edited collection, *Image, Sound, and Touch in the Nineteenth Century* (Ashgate).

uncouth designation of stratigraphical geology,” he continues, “I propose to take the present state of our knowledge of this branch as my theme” (762). Marr was a prominent geologist of the period and in his usage of the term to write in an academic fashion wasn’t to treat the matter as a mere abstract or problem, or to write badly. It was to treat the matter in an expansive and self-reflexive way; if it required asking for the reader’s forgiveness it was because the matter could not be reduced to pithy statements, or memorable phrases, but would require long passages replete with scholarly references to both the primary texts and the literature and criticism that had grown up around the topic. It required, in short, time, time to research, time to reflect upon, time to write, and it would require, in turn, time to read or to hear.

Such was the connotation of academic fashion as a practice: occasionally arid or given to digressions but wide ranging, thoughtful, and, above all, supported by a close, even laborious attention to the texts at hand. This was a model of academic fashion that I could live with, a kind of fashion that does oppose itself to modernity, with its ever-revolving cycles of tastes, style, and practices of consumption. I can’t imagine Marr objecting to having quicker and more convenient ways of accessing the materials of his study, of being able to use Google Books, for example, to find instances of a particular phrase. Academic fashion in this sense seeks a different kind of encounter with knowledge, one in which the terms are not dictated by what Paul Virilio has called the “dromocratic” exigencies of speed. It is a type, dare I say a brand, of fashion that is willing to test the patience of its consumer, to frustrate his or her expectations of immediacy and utility, if it means offering a fuller and more comprehensive investigation of its subject. If Marr finds himself asking a group of practically-minded, hard-nosed geologists to excuse him for treating his subject in an academic fashion it is, in part, because he knows his audience will, indeed, forgive him.

But is there any place for such an approach among the ever-evolving flows and currents, the rapidly mutating codes of capitalism in its increasingly globalized character? In an age in which the news scrolls ever more quickly across the bottom of the television screen, in which Google scans a million books a month into its databases, and social networking technologies figure a hundred and forty characters, not words, as all that are required to express a single thought, might we, too, imagine a time when we might expect to receive our reader’s ready approbation for being slow and methodical? Is it possible that writing, reading, or watching in what I’m calling an “academic fashion” might become, in a word, fashionable?

Something to be sought after, emulated, even popular? Perhaps. There are, after all, some precedents. The slow food movement, for example, has made a virtue of what its proponents call the gastronomic pleasures of preparing and consuming meals in a leisurely manner while simultaneously seeking “to defend food and agricultural biodiversity around the world” (“About Slow Food”). And then there is the increasingly popular practice of the DVD marathon, where one rents, buys, or downloads an entire season, or two, or three, of a long-format television show, shows like *The Wire* or (my own favourite) *Mad Men* with a single overarching narrative arc and watches each episode in sequence in a single sitting. Each of these practices suggests that there is pleasure to be taken in challenging and adapting the pace of democracy, a pleasure which, in some ways, is made richer and more intense precisely because of its insistent demand for the quick, the new, and the useful. Is there, in this sense, a taste for academic fashion? For the slow, the methodical? For insisting on a works cited? It might be too early to say. One thing, though, is certain: there is a need.

Works Cited

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