

FILM, FASHION, AND THE MODERN WOMAN

WESTERN CULTURAL INFLUENCES IN HUNGARY IN THE 1930S

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To what extent could Western fashion make its way into a traditional society on the European semi-periphery? What were the channels of external cultural influence and how were modernist values transmitted to the domestic population? Why was the popularity of the “modern woman” interesting to a semi-feudal society experiencing increasingly authoritarian policies in the shadow of European fascism? These are the questions orienting the arguments in this paper.

Behind the façade of a multi-party system and parliament, interwar Hungary was ruled by an authoritarian political regime. Elections were held by open ballot in the countryside,¹ and thus it was no wonder that all elections were won by the incumbent authoritarian right-wing party, which consolidated its power over the years. Although the country was nominally still a monarchy, it was a kingdom without a king, where Miklós Horthy – a former adjutant of the emperor of Austria-Hungary, Franz Joseph – ruled the country as regent between 1920 and 1944. The official Christian-nationalist ideology of the regime was anti-Semitic but beneath the official ideology everyday life was multicultural and a certain tolerance was displayed to people of Jewish origin. The ordinary, non-political operation of Jewish-owned fashion salons remained under the radar of official

¹ The secret ballot existed only in Budapest and seven other cities. Thus, there was a clear difference in political preferences in urban and rural areas.

ensorship and propaganda. Films became increasingly the target of anti-Semitic propaganda, but the fashion salons represented an ordinary segment of life and were not considered to be politically sensitive. Therefore, Hungary's political and cultural currents could flow in opposite directions for a certain period of time.

In the following, I shall present the relationship between the trend-setting fashion salons of Budapest and the growing influence of films. Fashion salons played an important role in the early period of sound film, but this connection is still under-researched in historiography. My aim here is to explain how the figure of the modern woman was connected with fashion salons and sound film in Hungary in the 1930s.

The year 1931 marked the beginning of sound film in Hungary. Film production involved actors and actresses, directors, producers, and distributors, but it also required costume designers, dressmakers, and sewers who operated in the background. By doing their job, these latter were introducing and maintaining a previously unknown visual culture. They shaped the enlightened, urban forms of social representation in an era when French and American patterns of life were being pushed into the background by the shadow of Nazi Germany. If we take this aspect into account, the everyday relationship between fashion salons and the film industry can be seen to be special, since sound film was first a powerful tool of modernism but later became an instrument of political change towards a more authoritarian regime in Hungary. In this particular context, the operation of Jewish-owned fashion salons, and the question of their survival, is more intriguing than the operation of fashion salons owned by Hungarians of non-Jewish origin.

The emergence of sound films opened a new chapter in the history of film. The intertitles of silent movies disappeared, thus reading and understanding texts was no longer essential to enjoying a film. From the early 1930s, cinemas, which played mainly American movies, were flooded with viewers and many women became movie-star fans. The modern woman, who was celebrated as the new ideal of the movie screen, wore fashionable clothes, took care of her body and diet, and found beauty care and sports important. Thus she represented the complete opposite of the ideal woman of the previous century, who wore a rigid corset and a blouse buttoned up to her chin. Film overshadowed fashion magazines and women's magazines and became the number one mediator of information on fashion. The fashions that appeared in motion pictures mesmerised the audience; every woman wanted to look like a movie star.

/// The Rise of Fashion Salons

Fashion salons began to be organised in accord with the rise in market demand. From the second half of the nineteenth century, the fashion industry, that is, dressmakers' shops, salons, textile mills, fabric shops and the like, were concentrated in the hands of Jewish owners and the number of salons and employees working there had doubled by the beginning of the twentieth century. Jews were prevented from obtaining jobs in the state bureaucracy, and thus it was natural that they should turn to market activities. According to a contemporary source:

Hungarians have an absolute majority only in certain traditional crafts: among carpenters, wheelwrights, blacksmiths, and cobblers (because the latter belonged to the luxury industry for the nobility).² Among Hungarians, people of the Jewish religion form the vast majority in the new type of service industries, where the greatest mobility is required: for instance, while only two out of 379 Hungarian cobblers are Jewish, almost one quarter of the Hungarian shoemakers, two-thirds of the tailors and dressmakers, and three-quarters of the fashion goods and cosmetics tradesmen are Jewish by religion, and while only seven out of 909 Hungarian laundrymen are Jewish, 40 out of 59 trendy dry-cleaners claim to be Jewish. (Thaly 1895, quoted in Glatz 1974: 254)

According to the statistics, by the turn of the century, people of Jewish origin had come to be over-represented among tailors and dressmakers. Their share increased further until, by the 1930s, 72.8% of the clothing industry, meaning almost the whole industry, was owned by fashion artisans of Jewish origin (Ungváry 2013). The transformation happened due to Act VIII of 1872, which ordered the liquidation of all guilds. The guilds had preserved feudal traditions; they gave way to free industry associations formed on a professional and territorial basis. This made it possible for artisans (Jewish master tailors, furriers, and milliners) who had been operating outside the guilds to become stronger and even, by expanding their workshops, to become the owners of companies.

An economic and social transformation occurred as urbanisation accelerated the development of small-scale industry and retail trade at the turn of the century. The rapid economic development, and the strengthen-

² The percentage of Hungarians in crafts compared to other nationalities.

ing of the urban citizenry, made it possible for Budapest to catch up with the advanced cities of Europe: Vienna, Berlin, and Paris. The spread of fashion salons in Pest also contributed significantly to the development of the city by shaping its image. Despite the negative impact of World War I and its aftermath, which forced many of the less well-known salons to close, several salons managed to survive the changes. The fashion industry started booming in the early 1930s again. Fashion experts aimed to make Budapest the continent's youngest fashion city not only through new items and reviews in magazines but also via spectacular fashion shows.³ The gap between "Western" Budapest and the "backward" countryside widened.

During the interwar period, social life was buzzing in Budapest, just as in other cities around Europe. Social events abounded. There were theatre premieres, balls, high-society weddings, and sports events (polo, horse and automobile races), for which women had to have ever more dresses sewn. It became increasingly difficult for home workshops arranged in the corners of flats to cope with the growing demands. Tailor and dressmaker workshops operating as home industries had to look for larger spaces. The more talented tailors and dressmakers, who managed to make a living because of the sustained demand, rented business premises. With the increasing number of orders, it was necessary to make further extensions, that is, to hire assistants. All this led to the development of dressmaker shops, fashion halls, and fashion salons.

The larger spaces in salons made it possible to separate the workshops from the customer reception rooms and show rooms. Salon furnishings, full of luxury and splendour, were prepared by the most outstanding masters of the era. The fashion columns of women's magazines also took part in the promotion of newly opened fashion salons, as was reported by *Színházi Élet* (*Theatre Life*), a popular weekly colour magazine focusing on social life and culture:

The elegant furnishings of the salons, their tasteful arrangement and nice interiors convince you right on the spot that sophistication finds an artistic home here. Elegant ladies, well-known figures of social and theatrical life, visit the salons, which produce the most beautiful creations of women's fashion. On the second floor

³ Each year four shows were organised: the autumn fashion was shown in September, the evening dresses in December, the spring fashion in March, and the dresses for horse-racing and summer in May.

one hundred and sixty to one hundred and eighty employees work constantly in thirty spacious, healthy workrooms. (Lubovszky 1923: 64)

The owner, who used to be a tailor or dressmaker before, employed not only assistants but also, starting from the 1920s, models, and from the 1930s, “manageresses” as well. The manageress was the deputy manager of the salon and her tasks included the reception of customers and the recommendation of customised designs. From the turn of the century until the end of World War II, a quantity of fashion salons were operating in the inner city of Budapest, where the attire of Hungary’s modern woman was born, following Western patterns.

/// The Decade of the Modern Woman

In accord with the styles seen in American movies, women cut their hair short and dyed it blonde, shortened their skirts, put on lipstick, and slipped a powder compact into their purse. The modern woman of the 1920s and 1930s expressed her self-reliance and freedom via her lifestyle and clothing. She smoked cigarettes, flirted, and – if she could – went out to dance in the evening, played tennis, and went hiking with her friends on the weekend.

The style of the Budapest woman was shaped by advertisements and women’s magazines but most of all by the greatest influence on representation: films. The self-reliant, purposeful young women of the movie screen became fashion icons and expressed everything a contemporary young woman longed for: independence, self-confidence, and a trendy look. Multitudes of women tried to copy the style of movie actresses in their clothing, hairstyles, and make-up. The modern woman stepped out of the movie screen and started to walk in the street; she appeared on the promenade, in the office, and in the stores. There were many reactions in the media to the connection between movies and the modern woman: for instance, *Az Est hármaskönyve* (*The Triple Book of the Evening*) released a thematic issue with the title *Asszony, Szépség, Szeretet* (*Woman, Beauty, Love*) and discussed women as such. One of the authors made the following remark about the influence of films on women: “The international movie industry makes women uniform. Today women all over the world are preparing their personality in the darkness of movie theatres” (Pálmai 1935: 125).

In the spring of 1932, a new style conquered the film screen: the Letty Lynton dress (Manty 2021). This white organdy gown with large ruf-

fled sleeves, puffed at the shoulder, was designed by Adrian Greenburg, a famous Hollywood costume designer. “Adrian draws a line differently, whereby he has made his mark on the world with this revolutionary innovation. He launched the puffed sleeve dress by designing costumes for Joan Crawford in the movie *Letty Lynton*” (Peat 1937: 37). This style became very popular in the fashion salons of Budapest and a wide variety of Letty Lynton dresses were created for the romantic heroines of new Hungarian films.⁴

The Letty Lynton dress rose to huge popularity in the United States; the fashionistas of the day could buy a cheaper version of the dress at Macy’s, made of less expensive fabric and thus more affordable for middle-class women. In Hungary, the affluent members of society had the dress custom-made in fashion salons for theatrical premieres, soirées, or debutante balls. Those who could only dream about lightweight dresses found help in fashion magazine columns: “Do not spend a lot on altering your georgette dress [...] do not shorten your dress significantly; afternoon dresses are also worn quite long. Make no more than a small, short, puffy sleeve to the dress” (Divatposta 1932: 94).

How films contributed to identity formation can be traced best in fashion. Fashion salons had the great sense to recognise what Bourdieu described as the transformation of attitudes and the victory of urban values:

Women are usually eager and much faster to adopt urban cultural models, at least in the field of consumption, presumably because they have a greater motivation than men in the same situation to adapt to the lifestyle they hope to achieve and to embrace certain elements of a lifestyle offering them the promise of a new life. The appeal, the possibilities of urban comfort, the patterns of courtesy, the fashion trend of the city and its opportunities for entertainment have for them... (Bourdieu 1978: 141)

The stories that came alive in the moving pictures seemed to promise that all desires would be fulfilled. Films enchanted the audience and took them to a fairy-tale world where everything could come true. Although everyday people appeared on the screen, the film story pulled them out of

⁴ The leading actresses wore a Letty Lynton-style dress in the following films: *Pardon tévedtem* (*Sorry, I Was Mistaken*) (1933), *Eg y új Velencében* (*One Night in Venice*) (1933), *Budai cukrászda* (*Budapest Pastry Shop*) (1935), *Elnökkisasszony* (*Miss President*) (1935), and *Méltóságos kisasszony* (*Miss Ladyship*) (1936). For more about Adrian Greenburg and his inventions, cf. New England Historical Society (2020).

reality. The charm of the moving picture not only swept the audience off their feet but also inspired the designers of fashion salons, who sewed costumes for the films. Fashion-salon owners with savvy business sense joined in film production as manufacturers of movie costumes. The costumes produced for films created a style out of everyday fashion. Feature films thus became the tools of fashion, with movie stars as mediators.

Numerous examples can be found in the magazines to prove that if a film costume gained the approval of the female audience, it would appear on the product list of salons as well. When critiquing the film *Fizessen Nagysád! (Pay, Madame!)* (1937), a critic at *Színházi Élet* also noted the costumes: the modern woman acting in the film wore culottes and an ante-lope-leather vest. The sporty yet elegant look was feminine and modern at the same time. According to the critic, this extraordinary outfit would definitely set a new trend among young women.

In the age of early sound films, slim, modern girls with their ethereal look followed one another on the screen and their wavy bobbed hair, lipstick, and curved eyebrows captivated everyone. During the day they wore women's suits made of fabric which followed the Parisian fashion, with light-coloured Georgette blouses, whereas for evening they chose long, slender silk dresses for dancing through the night. The comedy *Az én lányom nem olyan (My Daughter Is Different)* (1937) presented a vivid picture of modern girls. The main character is an assertive, single-minded, wealthy young woman of tasteful appearance. Her social status and material prosperity are represented by elegant, finely tailored, English-style women's suits and mousseline evening dresses. She is the type of girl who likes to push the limits but will not bring shame on her parents. According to a critic, one of the celebrated authors of the era, Kálmán Csathó, "seized the opportunity" in writing a short story "to give his opinion of middle-class daughters who live too licentious, as if they were only interested in flirting and misleading their parents" (Szélpál 1936: 192).

With modernism, object representation appeared and the costumes and sets were no longer merely mediators but were also verifiers of bourgeois taste. Roland Barthes (1985) described fashion as a system with meaningful content. The visual status symbols of the bourgeois milieu implied a care-free life one had to be born into, or if one hadn't been, it was enough to make a good marriage, regardless of one's social and financial situation. Everything shown in the films was actually part of the fairy tale, since in the neo-baroque society of the age no one could speak of general prosperity. Yet, in the cinema, everyone could be part of the elegant world of

upper bourgeois world of apartments, grand hotels, and nightclubs, which adapted Hungarian luxury to a pattern taken from Hollywood as far as trendy female costumes, fashionable make-up and haircuts, and interiors evoking the spirit of Art Deco and Bauhaus.

/// Types of the Modern Woman on the Screen

After its first uncertain endeavours,⁵ Hungarian film finally found a direction which had Hollywood, European, and Hungarian characteristics at the same time. The Grimm Brothers' *Cinderella* story came alive in the light comedies of the 1930s, in which a poor woman and a rich man or a rich woman and poor man came together after coping with all manner of misunderstandings and obstacles.

In Hungarian filmmaking, the top director of this golden age of comedy was Béla Gaál,⁶ who followed the style of Hollywood glamour movies. The movie *Meseautó (Car of Dreams)* (1934) which he directed not only laid the foundations of the genre but also contributed to the creation of the new type of woman. The modern woman appeared on screen in the role of a female clerk, whose decent suits and rakish hats properly showed her social status and financial situation. This flirtatious yet innocent woman became the new fashion idol, and the young women of the audience could see themselves through her eyes. Women working as female clerks could easily identify with the character of the self-respecting, modern woman who could make a living alone, but while sitting behind their typewriters they all dreamt that their lucky day would come and they could change their office chairs for the padded seats of the dream car. The car, symbolising luxury, was an essential element of object representation and a reappearing prop in the movies of the time. A contemporary critique also called attention to the fact: "First of all one wishes to have a dress and a car so as not to walk around in rags and on foot. Then the daughter of this wish emerges: the dress and the car should be beautiful, so that one can sit elegantly in that elegant car" (Laczkó 1934: 343).

⁵ The first Hungarian sound film, *A kék bálvány (The Blue Idol)*, was made in 1931, but neither the movie, nor the character of the brave and self-confident young American millionairess, managed to convince the audience. The main female character of the first sound film that had a great success, Terka of *Hyppolit, a lakáj (Hyppolit, the Butler)* (1931), did not represent the style of the typical modern girl either.

⁶ Béla Gaál (1893–1944), actor, director. He directed his first movie in 1920 and was the most often employed filmmaker in the age of early sound films.

Between 1934 and 1939 almost one hundred⁷ feature films were made based on *Meseautó*, with corny romantic stories and simple, stereotypical characters. In “the golden age of comedy” the naive yet self-confident heroine of *Meseautó* was reborn in newer and newer characters as a female warrior, a flirtatious virgin, a hot-tempered escort, a naive brat, or even as an assertive female athlete.⁸ Resoluteness and self-awareness were her essential characteristics, but she always had a trait that made her typical and was in line with the film story as well. This representation made the characters more obvious and easier to identify with in the given context (Csepeli 1997: 475).

It is worth taking a closer look at what the phenomenon of the modern girl means in these films and how the filmmakers interpreted the image of the modern woman. If we consider the production of the period, we realise that the appearance of the characters in no way differed from that of the characters of other foreign films. Actresses had the fashionable haircuts of the age, and they wore dresses made following the models of Western fashion salons. Women’s day suits were cut according to French and English fashions, evening dresses were bold and clearly decorative, and hats had an elegantly reserved style. The heroines of the movies were determined, self-assured, bravely stood by their convictions, and believed that they could freely choose their own partners.⁹ Some were rich aristocrats; others were schoolteachers, factory owners, or landowners, that is, women who had received a proper education – the daughters of middle-class families, as it were. Still a sort of a duality occurs in their representation, as if to be a modern woman meant being some kind of a minor. The women figures shown were young girls, who socialised, played tennis weekly, and awaited true love. This was a transitional stage, which would come to an end, along with girlhood and girls’ rooms, as soon as the man appeared on the scene. The modern woman then changed and became a homemaking wife and devoted mother, in accordance with the expectations of the time.

The historian Gyula Szekfű, the author of the influential history book *Három nemzedék* (*Three Generations*), called Horthy-era society a neo-baroque

⁷ “75 such comedies were produced based on the scheme of *Meseautó* in Hungarian film studios and many of them (*Budai cukrászda* (*Budapest Pastry Shop*), *120-as tempó* (*120 Kilometers an Hour*), *Havi kétszáz pengő fix* (*Salary, 200 a Month*)) copied this success in terms of storyline and actor-selection. The female leading roles were usually played by Mici Erdélyi, Zita Peczek, Klári Tolnay, or Irén Ágay, or a bit less frequently by Zita Szelezky and Rózsi Bársony” (Nemeskürty 1965: 118).

⁸ *A hölgy egy kisé bogaras* (*The Lady Is a Little Crazy*) (1938), *Nászút féláron* (*Half-Rate Honeymoon*) (1936), *Köszönöm, hogy elgázolt* (*Thanks for Knocking*) (1936), *120-as tempó* (1937), *A kölcsönkért kastély* (*The Borrowed Castle*) (1937).

⁹ *Dunaparti randevú* (*A Danube Rendezvous*) (1936).

society because the way of thinking, the dominant attitudes, and the social structure of the period evoked Hungary's baroque age.¹⁰ In the neo-baroque society of the Horthy era, a woman could be modern as far as her clothing was concerned, which meant the same as being fashionable. A lawyer, István Weis, wrote about this phenomenon:

Those belonging to different social classes follow fashion in the same way, to the extent that social-class divisions cannot be recognised that easily. At best it may be remarked that the use of fashion, its appearance on the individual, is a bit more colourful and gaudier to the east and south of Budapest. (Weis 1930: 52)

The presentation of women in the movies of the 1930s was a stereotype of a certain group of society. By the end of the decade, however, the modern women appearing in movies had acquired characteristics that were based on empirically uncontrollable traits. After 1938, and particularly in the early 1940s, those representations that were connected to the urban lifestyle and middle-class values were increasingly considered immoral. Such representations were condemned and were replaced by the summoning of the historical past and by the presentation of rural life, with its idealized, "pure," unspoiled, and idyllic world.¹¹

/// Women and Fashion Salons

Fashion salons played an important role in the representation of the new feminine ideal. They shaped and formed film fashion through their social status. In the early days of sound films, the emergence of the new-woman ideal also gave fashion salons the chance to play an important role in the development of both civic values and economic life. The relationship between fashion salons and the movie industry in Hungary in the 1930s can be considered extraordinary, because salons managed to create bourgeois taste, in accord with the Western trend.

What did modern fashion mean in Hungary in the 1930s? The inter-war period brought a boom in women's fashion. Modern fashion liberated women as they left behind the age of huge chignons, suffocating corsets, and heavy crinolines. Magazines and moving images (newsreels and feature films) encouraged them to take more care of their appearance, to make

¹⁰ Gyula Szekfű (1883–1955).

¹¹ Cf. the film titled *Doctor István Kovács* (1941).

their dreams come true. Modern fashion gave them the freedom to choose between blonde, brown, or reddish hair, an evening gown cut low in the front or back, a Patou afternoon dress or a Paquin suit. The concept of the modern woman of Pest involved more than just a woman's looking fashionable and following fashion: it included the transformation of the external representation of society; the image of women was commercialised and the woman as such became a cornerstone of consumer society. Fashionable clothing was available to many, as a contemporary writer wrote:

Today, in the age of industrial capitalism, when the world is flooded with standardised goods, cheap products of mass production, fashion is imposing its uniformising stamp on ever larger sections of the population. The peasantry, in countries with culture, is also becoming more urbanised and thus more fashionable. Even blue-collar workers follow middle-class fashion completely outside their working hours. This is the democratisation of fashion. (Szász 1929: 61)

The emergence of modern fashion affected the whole of society, including economic actors – in this case fashion houses and film production – as well as cultural and political development. The fashion salons in Pest, in the city centre, adapted the Western style, which was also conveyed by the figure of the “modern girl” appearing in movies. Laying aside the heavy silks of the last century seemingly meant freedom, but the ever-increasing presence of mass media almost imperceptibly took away the freedom of choice and dictated to women what they should wear for work and what they should wear when going out. The way women dressed and looked was no longer controlled by the corset but was dictated by fashion itself. And fashion was a dictator whose principles and ideas women voluntarily followed as they put on the uniform of the latest trend. The female audience of the cinema wanted to wear the same clothes and make-up their favourite actresses wore on the movie screen, and they longed for the same women's suits they saw in news reports.¹² The movie screen suggested a make-believe reality, but if a bank clerk wore the same hairstyle, make-up, and jacket as her favourite actress on the screen, the difference between them seemed to disappear and the dream became a reality.

¹² Between 1930 and 1939, fashion shows were covered in twelve news reports, six of which promoted Hungarian-style fashion, five dealt with seasonal fashion, and one showed the history of fashion.

Women's magazines and illustrated weekly newspapers caught up with films and covered the work of salons, released reports on fashion shows, and informed readers about the attire of aristocrats who appeared at major social events. Members of high society presented the fashions not only in the pages of magazines or on the promenade in Pest but at social events as well, where the fashion salons were also represented. Baronial weddings, the King's Prize (horse race) and the Opera Ball were events for which the more popular fashion salons always received orders. It was hugely prestigious for a salon if the female members of high-ranking families¹³ wore its garments.

The mass media no longer encouraged readers and viewers to buy but to consume, promoting a view of life in which consumption was a source of pleasure. What they thought was liberation was an approach later criticised by the philosophers of the Frankfurt School. However, women did not perceive the possibility of consumption as the oppression of capitalism but as one of the opportunities of the modern age, where information flowed and mass production gave access to copies of the clothing made by the salons. The author of *Az Est hármaskönyve* outlined the reification of production and consumption¹⁴ in a short essay: "However, mass market goods will rule the near future. Uniform houses, uniform furniture, uniform clothing. Individual distinction has gone, to make way for collective taste" (Lakatos 1934: 347). Modernity liberated women only to make them symbols of mass consumption.

/// Modern versus Conservative

According to *Színházi Élet*, a popular magazine of the time, film helped women's weapons of conquest to evolve at least as quickly as the tools of warfare, after they learned from actresses how to dress, how to do their make-up, and how to present themselves (Forró 1933). However, the new image of women did not fit with the ideological-political approach of the Horthy era, and was in opposition to the neo-baroque, conservative mindset of society. This mindset rejected everything that was modern, and a woman's task was to fulfil the role of wife and mother, and to cherish folk and national traditions, which were also represented externally in lifestyle and clothing.

¹³ For instance, the Horthy, Teleki, Cziráky, and Bethlen families.

¹⁴ Reification is a way of thinking and acting that approaches the surrounding world and the relationships of people in it, as well as human beings themselves, as objects and things that follow principles independent of human will (Lukács 1971: 323–324, in: Kapelner 2018).

Consequently, the portrayal of the modern woman, whether in film, literature, or the press, gradually became part of an ideological-political campaign pitting the followers of progressive ideas against those who believed in conservative values.¹⁵ The transformation of women's fashion, and thus the emergence of a new type of woman, in itself played a powerful identity-forming role. However, the social discourse around it went beyond fashion and raised social questions about the role of the Jews in civic development and the development of capitalism. Everything that was modern and progressive became synonymous with the Jews, including the image of the modern woman, which began to belong to the everyday world. As mentioned above, the image of the modern woman became at one point too intertwined with politics and anti-Semitism, and by the end of the 1930s the modern woman was seen as the embodiment of everything immoral and reprehensible.

Provincial Hungarian society, in following tradition and searching for its historical past, found it difficult to accept the modern woman and the fashion style she represented. The new ideal had become an integral part of social discourse.¹⁶ Using the theme of fashion as a pretext, opinions were expressed that in actuality tackled the contradictions between what was modern or traditional, Western or provincial, or between progress or turning back to the past. A journalist of the political daily *Pesti Napló* spoke out against make-up:

And that pseudo-eyebrow tinting! Some of the girls get rid of their real eyebrows – not to mention how painful that must be – and paint a black curve in the middle of their foreheads instead. And that is what they call beautiful! They just distort the harmony of their faces with those lines. How much nicer is a face without any make-up and paint, which shows their real appearance and youth freely! (Radó 1937: 74)

Young girls, however, were not much concerned with what newspaper writers thought was right and wrong. They were rather interested in what their favourite stars wore, where to have their new wardrobe items sewn, and what behaviour they had to adopt to become like their ideals. The de-

¹⁵ A newspaper called *Újság* made a survey which asked the question “Do you like modern women?” to well-known public figures of the age.

¹⁶ In October 1934 the newspaper *Esti Kurír* (*Evening Courier*) started a series of articles with the title: “A modern leány” (“The Modern Girl”), in which well-known public figures (female authors, actresses, sportswomen) were asked about their opinion on modern girls.

sires of young girls are well portrayed in the film *Új rokon* (*The New Relative*) (1934), in which the filmmakers subtly capture the difference between the modern urban woman and the conservative approach of rural society.¹⁷

The opinions expressed in women's magazines and newspapers went beyond the discourse around the modern woman and elevated clothing to a social level that represented the individual, emphasising the differences or the sense of belonging. Simmel (2009) explained this as the constant battle between "elevation" and "integration," which ensures the continuous progress of society, its movement forward. The basic law of fashion is that certain members of society want to look similar, and thereby also to be different, that is, to appear in a different way than others. It is the constant fluctuation of identification and differentiation that drives and changes fashion. The fashionistas of the 1930s, the representatives of the modern woman, were members of the upper-class elite and upper middle class, as well as popular actresses of the age, who followed the latest trends both on the screen and in their private lives. This fashion elite dictated and controlled fashion by virtue of their wealth; the clothes they wore, which came either from fashion salons or their own makers, were reported on in the fashion columns of women's magazines. When their style reached the masses, they changed it in order to maintain their separation from the lower classes (Simmel 2009).

In Hungarian society of the 1930s, the belonging and separation dictated by fashion became a political message. The image of the modern woman did not fit the Christian national ideology, and this fact also led to the transformation of fashion and the emergence of new ideals. By the end of the decade, everything that was considered modern was rejected and society had returned to tradition. Salons owned by Christians (meaning non-Jews) took part in fashion shows; Jews were ousted from the film industry, along with the fashion salons that were involved in the production of film costumes; and the new style was Hungarian attire.¹⁸ The fashion scene was

¹⁷ The heroine of the movie returns home from the US to her countryside relatives. Her way of clothing and behaviour embarrasses her aunts and only Málcsi, a silly, rural girl and member of the nobility, likes her. Málcsi feels that if she can turn into a woman just like her cousin, she will be able to conquer the man she longs for. She even has her braids cut, makes her hair wavy, puts on some lipstick, and starts smoking. Her plan works and her suitor, who had previously only visited her parents' house to play cards, now sits on the veranda of the rural estate for Málcsi's sake all day long.

¹⁸ In March 1934 the Hungarian Clothing Movement was launched, which was initiated by the minister's secretary, Ferenc Ferenczy, but it only became a movement on the national level after 4 April 1938, when the Hungarian Fashion Show was organised in the Opera House. The movement was led by Klára Tüdős Zsindelyné.

taken over by members of the historical aristocracy, the ruling class, and the upper strata of the middle class.

The regent's wife, Magdolna Horthy, also expressed her preference for Hungarian attire and in a radio address she said, among other things, that

Where there is a traditional folk costume, the people of the countryside can also parade in their beautiful, heart-warming clothes. Only the dress of women and girls of the urban bourgeoisie does not show that they are Hungarian. I am sure many of us have wondered why there is a need for folk costumes borrowed from abroad, when the clothing of Hungarian women offers much more appealing forms, both in colour and line, than most foreign dresses.¹⁹

For them the great women of the seventeenth century were to be followed, thus they considered that this period should be reflected in dress and fashion. The new trend also made its mark on women's magazines, periodicals, and the cinema. *Magyar Világhíradó* (*Hungarian World News*), almost the most important news service of the era, made a special news report on the new fashion:

Long ago, when the empire of the Hungarian Holy Crown was surrounded by the snowy Carpathian Mountains for a millennium, the daughters and sons of the nation, the Ilona Zrínyis, wore the ancient Hungarian dresses of the Bocskays and the Rákóczi.²⁰ The Hungarians remained true to their ancient traditions even amidst the invading devastations of the Tatars and the Turks. We, the children of today's Hungarian schools, want to be faithful to the customs of our ancestors even in these difficult times of new ordeals. We will proclaim our Hungarianness in our sad hearts, in our resounding language, and in our simple Hungarian attires. Hungarian mothers, fathers, Hungarian schoolmates, welcome our example with love! (*Magyar Világhíradó* 1934)

¹⁹ Magdolna Horthy's speech was published in several daily papers.

²⁰ Figures of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Hungarian history, rulers of the Principality of Transylvania: István Bocskay (1557–1606), György Rákóczi I. (1593–1648), György Rákóczi II. (1621–1660), Ferenc Rákóczi I. (1645–1676), Ferenc Rákóczi II. (1676–1735), Countess Ilona Zrínyi (1643–1703).

Hungarian attire expressed a sense of belonging, but it also meant exclusion. It did not move society forward but rather backwards into the historical past.

/// Changing of the Guard

The political changes of the late 1930s had an impact on social life too. The social pattern changed, the distribution of American films was scaled down, and regulations imposed by the Chamber of Film Arts²¹ reshaped film production, changing the representational value of fashion and making it a means of expressing national sentiment. Films and fashion salons adapted to the new expectations, which integrated them into the traditional Hungarian world of taste. By the end of the decade, the iconic figure of the modern woman disappeared from the screen. The dramatic heroines who took their place dressed fashionably but wore costumes in line with the new ideological trend of national folk ideology. Fashion salons dressed actresses in folk-style costumes and encouraged movie-goers to embrace the new style. The designers used authentic solutions to make the European fashion of the age more Hungarian: for example, they designed a vest decorated with *sárközi* embroidery for a mousseline evening dress,²² or a furred waistcoat-like jacket with beaded embroidery;²³ they decorated a tennis dress with appliqué lace²⁴ and designed home leisurewear by mixing a petticoat with a pinafore dress and trim.²⁵

In society, which followed a Christian-nationalist ideology, Hungarian style turned more and more towards the historical past, whereas Western fashion followed the new ideal of women. Hungary moved away from Western Europe both ideologically and at the level of social representation, which meant fashion here. Cosmopolitan patterns were replaced by nationalism and America's Hollywood by the rise of the Third Reich.

In melodramas, the folksy and sentimental style required a new type of woman, the angelic woman, the newlywed girl dressed in Hungarian attire, or the *femme fatale* wearing a pantsuit. The behaviour and appearance of role

²¹ In accordance with Section b.), Paragraph I, Article 2 of Act XV of 1938 the Chamber of Theatre and Film Arts started its operation on 1 January 1939 with the aim to ensure the proper balance of social and economic life, which actually meant the exclusion of artists of Jewish origin.

²² *All a bál* (*The Ball Is On*) (1939), *Bercsényi buszárok* (*Bercsenyi Hussars*) (1940).

²³ *Erdélyi kastély* (*Transylvanian Castle*) (1940).

²⁴ *Karasszék* (*Armchair*) (1939).

²⁵ *Balkezes angyal* (*Left-Handed Angel*) (1941), *Gyávaság* (*Cowardliness*) (1942), *Fűszer és csemege* (*Spices and Delicacy*) (1939).

models was controlled not only by the critics²⁶ but also by the state machinery. In 1943 the Minister of Culture entrusted Irén Barthus Zomboriné²⁷ with controlling the appearance of actresses.

/// Conclusion

In the history of film, the era of early sound films offered several opportunities for fashion salons, which were at their peak when they were actively participating in film production. This study has examined not only the relationship between fashion salons and film, but also the social impact of salons via the emergence of the modern type of woman as such. Fashion is a seemingly apolitical field which expresses the relationship between the individual and the community. But if politics interferes in its management, fashion can become an ideological mouthpiece. After 1938, following anti-Jewish legislation, film production became a political issue, and the policy of social discrimination also affected the fashion salons that produced film costumes. Jewish-owned fashion salons were not only excluded from the film industry, but they were also gradually expelled from major fashion events.

Yet it cannot accurately be said that the Horthy era fully rejected all Western influences as far as fashion was concerned. Women of the aristocracy (by birth or marriage) or upper middle class, and famous actresses of the age, ordered dresses based on Parisian designs from the salons. Movies were also adapted to Western styles, and the costumes designed for productions might have appeared in the fashion shows of any major European city. But a woman should not only be able to wear the clothes, she should also be able to behave a certain way in them. Western chic supplied the type of the modern woman, who expressed herself through her dress.

The figure of the modern girl appeared in sound films made between 1931 and 1939. Her fashionable women's suits and elegant evening dresses had a great success among the female public. The heroines of the films not only followed Western fashion, they also imitated the modern behaviour of the West. The neo-baroque society of the Horthy era found it increasing-

²⁶ As was the case with the film *Európa nem válaszol* (*No Answer from Europe*) (1941) too, in which Mária Fekete Tasnádi played the owner of a fashion salon and thus many more costumes were designed for her role. One of the authors of the periodical *Élet* (*Life*) even remarked, when praising the film, that "Mária Tasnády appears again as a delicate personality, and the only thing that can be criticised is her bold clothing" (K.E. 1941).

²⁷ Irén Barthus Zomboriné was a known figure in fashion design between the two world wars. She was the clothing design lecturer at the National College of Applied Arts and chair of the Committee of Clothing Design of the Hungarian Film Office.

ly difficult to tolerate the combined influence of the modern woman and Western style. The image of the modern woman slowly merged with the metropolitan way of life and bourgeois values. These factors increasingly alienated modern women from the backward-looking society in search of its historical past. Films almost imperceptibly juxtaposed opposing images of renewal and constancy, unrest and harmony, which gradually became part of an ideological-political campaign. Movies typified female characters and thus brought the message home to the audience. Movies successfully stereotyped the social strata represented by the metropolitan woman and the country girl. The metropolitan woman followed Western fashions, but the country girl could be recognised by her “true Hungarian” clothes. Yet fashion could not completely break away from the Western world, so the ornamentation of traditional Hungarian folk attire was revived on modern clothing designs.

In February 1939, in accordance with Decree No. 2240/1939. M. E., the National Film Committee was established, which judged film scripts both on artistic and nationalist bases. The vivacious figure of the modern girl disappeared from the screen, to be replaced by the idle city girl who adapted to Western fashion. Film fashion retained the fashionable lines of the period, but the ornamental sewing and embroidery evoked a traditional folk style mixed with motifs from seventeenth-century clothing. Another form of emphasising nationalist sentiment was the use of folk attire as film costumes.

Hungary joined the war on the side of Nazi Germany in late 1941. At the beginning of 1943, Minister of Religion and Education, Jenő Szinyei Merse²⁸ announced that censorship was being extended to the control of film costumes. As he said,

A recurring complaint is that the modern clothing of actresses in Hungarian films, which are now becoming increasingly perfected, is not always directed with sufficient skill. [...] modern dress designs for actresses in future Hungarian films shall be made available to production companies, which must certify that Irén Barthus Zomboriné found the dresses of the actresses playing in the film impeccable. (Magy. Tud. 1943: 4)

²⁸ Jenő Szinyei Merse served as the Minister of Religion and Education between 1942 and 1944.

Just as in Germany and Austria, the extended control of clothing was a further step towards central monitoring of the relationship between fashion salons and film production (Kremer 2006; Westphal 2019).

The nearly ten years that I have covered in this study represented a curious period in Hungarian social history. The transformation of the traditional female figure at the turn of the century was heavily influenced by the early days of sound films and the cultural power of American cinema. Fashion salons reformed and re-dressed the elite of the Monarchy after the style of film stars and Western fashion. The modern woman had conquered the movie screen and the film audience within a decade. The type of modern woman that appeared in Budapest and in the larger cities of Hungary between 1931 and 1939 indicated an identification with Western fashion and its cultural values. The clothing, hairstyle, make-up, and lifestyle of the new type showed a woman who embraced and emphasised her individuality. But the image of woman in the Christian-nationalist ideology of the late Horthy era was very different, as were its reflections in fashion. By the beginning of the 1940s, fashion and its representational value had become a means of expressing nationalist sentiment in the shadow of the new world war.

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/// **Abstract**

This paper takes a novel approach to exploring the relationship between fashion salons and sound films in making the image of the modern woman in the 1930s. In this period, liberal cultural tendencies contradicted the increasingly authoritarian political trends in Central Europe. In Hungary, sound films transformed the fashion industry, and fashion salons were quick to respond by creating new clothing for the modern women. This paper investigates the figure of the modern woman as it appeared in newspapers, fashion magazines, and sound films. The type of independent, purposeful woman shown in the films, with her confidence, fashionable costumes, and romance, became an ideal for young women. As dressmakers for film actresses, fashion salons played a significant role in conveying the Western style of dress. They influenced the collective representation of a generation through the representation of film actresses. However, the popularity of the “modern woman” turned out to be temporary in society, which was increasingly subjected to authoritarian policies in the shadow of European fascism. After 1938, the film industry was transformed; film directors and actors or actresses of Jewish origin were forbidden to continue their profession. Curiously, the discriminatory legislation did not touch the fashion salons, which continued to exist and started to produce traditional clothes. This paper puts these contradicting processes in context.

Keywords:

modern woman, sound film, fashion salon, social representation, 1930s

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