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## VISUALIZATION OF KSENIJA ATANASIJEVIĆ IN ALEKSANDRA LALIĆ'S FASHION DESIGN

**Abstract:** The proposed paper provides a pioneering interpretation of the Serbian philosopher Ksenija Atanasijević's life, work and image through the framework of fashion studies. As such, it observes the ways through which her struggle with societal prejudices and gender bias of 20<sup>th</sup>-century Serbia, her authentic fashionable iconography and philosophical and ethical thoughts are visually and semiotically transposed – and transgressed – into the medium of fashion. The subject of the analysis will be three fashion collections that visualize the philosopher, by the Serbian fashion designer and art historian Aleksandra Lalić for her designer label LalicA: Comradesses, Wandering Womb and Bruno's Conception on the Three-fold Minimum and Measure. The last, in an act of feminist emancipation, directly quotes Atanasijević's 1922 doctoral thesis defended at the University of Belgrade. By analyzing these collections, the paper will identify modalities through which the designer, both critically and polemically, reconfigures life, philosophy, looks, the feminism and antifascism of Ksenija Atanasijević into her aesthetic habitus. At the same time, Atanasijević's philosophical deliberations are seen as a possible tool in elevating fashion as a critical cultural practice in Serbia and affirming philosophy of fashion as a potential academic discipline within the corpus of national philosophy.

**Keywords:** clothes, fashion, fashion collection, fashion design, fashion history, feminism, philosophy, visual culture

“Women derive a pleasure, incomprehensible to the other sex,  
from the delicate toil of the needle.” –

Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, 1850

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## Introduction: Who is Ksenija Atanasijević? What is she?

Painted in 1912, the portrait of philosopher Ksenija Atanasijević (1894–1981) by the modernist painter Nadežda Petrović (1873–1915)<sup>1</sup> has long remained the principal representation of the trailblazing thinker, not only in the corpus of national history of art, but the entire visual culture domain in Serbia respectively.<sup>2</sup> The painting, executed in an Expressionist manner, portrays Atanasijević as a seemingly pensive, rather fashionable figure positioned against what we can assume is a snow-covered abstract cityscape. Instead of submitting her subject to the common iconographic conventions of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and the early 20<sup>th</sup> century representation of women by *displaying* her in the act of (un)dressing in front of the mirror, Petrović is permitting Atanasijević to think and contemplate outside. As the feminist art historian Griselda Pollock observed in her 1998 essay *Modernity and the Spaces of Femininity*, this *outside* is an unconstrained, open and more importantly, public space of freedom, which opposes and defies the norm of interior spaces as spaces designated for femininity (Pollock, 1998). Tied to this spatial symbolism, yet more intriguing, is the semiotics of the painting's language of fashion, as Atanasijević is depicted in a fashion repertoire common for the late Victorian era and the last decade of the 19<sup>th</sup> century when she was born, rather than the contemporary fashion of the moment of painting. Despite being painted from the waist above, we can see that she is wearing a two-piece day dress comprising a skirt and a bodice with a high boned collar and gigot sleeves pronounced above the shoulders, completed with a hat featuring a large bow.<sup>3</sup> Based on a 1909 photograph of Petrović, it is noticeable that similar fashion was to an extent still present in the 1900s Serbia, yet such fashioning of the philosopher could be, in light of this (un)intentional historical fashion error, interpreted along two lines. On the one side, it could be seen as both Petrović and Atanasijević's constriction as modern women – an artist and a philosopher – by 19<sup>th</sup> century bourgeois moralistic ideology which, to paraphrase Pollock (1998), reconstructs social spaces through the doctrine of separate spheres of public and private, resulting in a gendered division

1 The painting is part of the permanent collection of the Pavle Beljanski Memorial Collection in Novi Sad, Serbia.

2 Less well known is Atanasijević's portrait by the realist painter Uroš Predić (1857–1953) from 1917, belonging to the Fine Art Collection of the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts.

3 The hat Atanasijević posed with for Petrović was brought from Paris by the artist for her sister, Mica.

(p. 67). On the other hand, such a presentation of Atanasijević by Petrović conveys an empowering and emancipatory – even subversive – undertone. Namely, it could be argued that Atanasijević is dressed in her 'uniform': a 'working outfit' worn by many suffragettes at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when women's rights activism was emerging as a notable humanist orientation, as well as a certain form of primary occupation.

It is no surprise then that Petrović's painting has accordingly served as the visual identity of the conference held in 2019 at the Institute of Social Sciences in Belgrade, symbolically titled *Ksenija Atanasijević: My Deeds Will Talk About Me* (*O meni će govoriti moja dela*). Still, it would take another three years for Serbian academia to, for the first time, address this visually elusive philosopher – both her life and work and her image proportionately – through the lens of visual culture studies. The 2022 conference, *The Philosophy of Ksenija Atanasijević*, organized by Atanasijević's alma mater, the Faculty of Philosophy's Department of Philosophy, and held at the Rectorate Building of the University of Belgrade, it saw the first contributions to the scholarship on Ksenija Atanasijević from the fields of art history and fashion studies. Art historian Lidija Merenik focused on the portrait and the relationship between Atanasijević and Petrović, whereas as a fashion historian, I analyzed how Ksenija Atanasijević's life, work and image not only aesthetically inspired but were semiotically transformed in Aleksandra Lalić's fashion design.

In visual reconstruction of the image and the fashion persona of Ksenija Atanasijević, available sources are, understandably so given her persecution, rather scarce. Nonetheless, Petrović's portrait and several preserved photographs collected mostly from the press and documents in volumes by Ljiljana Vuletić, *Life and Thought of Ksenija Atanasijević* (*Život i misao Ksenije Atanasijević*, 2005) and *Ksenija Atanasijević: Ethics of Courage* (*Ksenija Atanasijević: Etika hrabrosti*, 2011) testify to a fashionable persona of modern sensibility. Hence, Merenik poses the same question as Pollock regarding the Impressionist painter Mary Cassatt, which is: *Who is Ksenija Atanasijević? What is she?* The premise of this question is that history and philosophy of fashion are seen as emancipatory tools which innovatively reaffirm Ksenija Atanasijević's monumental contributions to the culture and civilization of Serbia, including fashion. By focusing on Aleksandra Lalić's fashion design, predominantly collections that, some less and some more, touch upon Atanasijević, this chapter aims to illustrate the philosopher's hitherto unresearched influence on fashion as a critical cultural practice in Serbia. Following minor attempts to establish the philosophy of fashion within the Serbian academic framework, reduced to Eugen Fink's essay on fashion published in Danilo Pejović *New*

*Philosophy of Art* (Nova filozofija umjetnosti, 1972) and Lars Svendsen *Fashion: A Philosophy* (2004) translated into Serbian in 2005, the chapter also aims to diversify the national philosophical discourse by applying fashion studies to it.

## Fashioning Ksenija Atanasijević's feminism and antifascism

Prior to initiating our analysis, it is important to note that Atanasijević, despite producing essays and criticism on other forms of art (most notably criticism of modern Serbian literature) and theorizing the imagination in *Philosophical Fragments I* (*Filozofski fragmenti I*, 1929) as a socially engaging concept able to transform human nature, she did not aesthetically or critically consider the phenomenon of fashion. However, as Agnes Rocamora and Anneke Smelik point out in their introduction to *Thinking Through Fashion*, theorizing fashion is dependent on one's ability to critically engage with a vast array of theories and concepts, often from thinkers who, unlike in some other fields of cultural criticism, have not themselves written about fashion (2016, p. 2). In other words, the lack of Atanasijević's own theoretical approach to fashion does not mean that her ideas cannot serve as the basis for thinking through fashion. Whether we think through fashion academically as scholars or creatively as designers, both orientations (should) intellectually and critically scrutinize fashion as a complex cultural process and, as the French philosopher Gilles Lipovetsky (1994) saw it, a social mechanism. Such intellectualization of fashion, especially with regard to either the historical or current body and gender politics, is not unknown to the Serbian fashion designer and art historian Aleksandra Lalić (Žarić, 2022a, p. 62). Philosophical methods of conceptual analysis, critical discussion and questioning are thus adjacent to Lalić's fashion habitus, consisting of designs that are case studies in deconstructing both traditional and contemporary perceptions of women and their positions within social structures. Visualization of Ksenija Atanasijević in her design should therefore not be taken as a process of mere iconographic transformation, but as one of aesthetic and semiotic argumentation that transposes – and creates – meaning through new visual units. While various questions concerning women's rights and sociopolitical and visual representation of women (primarily in Yugoslavia) permeate the designer's oeuvre since the beginning of her career,<sup>4</sup> the

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4 Lalić's first collection from 2011, *Hair Dress*, was created from felted human hair as a way of challenging beauty standards and body requirements women are subjected to.

collections *Wandering Womb* (fall/winter 2017), *Comradeses* (spring/fall 2018) and *Bruno's Conception on the Threefold Minimum and Measure* (fall 2018),<sup>5</sup> presented at Belgrade Fashion Week, form a reconstructive triptych Atanasijević's life, work, image and above all, her struggle.

Underscoring antifascism and women's solidarity as its main themes, the collection *Comradeses* (*Drugarice*) draws inspiration from Yugoslavia's Antifascist Women's Front (*Antifašistički front žena, AFŽ*) and women partisan fighters in World War II, whose photographs were projected as background behind the runway. As antifascism lies at the core of Atanasijević's feminism and pacifism, this collection acts as a bonding material between the collections *Wandering Womb* and *Bruno's Conception on the Threefold Minimum and Measure*, connecting them on visual and semiotic levels. *Comradeses* could be understood in light of Atanasijević's assertion that the starting point of feminism is abolition of socioeconomically and biologically imposed differences and inequities between human beings (as cited in Vuletić, 2011, p. 46). Translated into Lalić's fashion language, that assertion operates by visually erasing such differences. Women are taking over the men's job of freedom fighters; moreover, their uniforms are then deconstructed through fashion in *Comradeses*. In *Dressing the Resistance*, Camille Benda examined such dynamics, finding that uniforms separate resistance fighters from regular citizens in public space and encode visual cues that differentiate between friend and foe by identifying "the other" (2022, p. 123). By dressing up in uniforms, women are 'de-othering' themselves; by dressing models in uniforms-resembling designs, Lalić is cancelling the gaze which, according to Pollock, works to secure a particular social ordering of the sexual difference (1998, p. 66). Further, we are presented with fashion hybrids: entities that are men, women, fighters, models, beauty objects and agents of political change all at once. Visually and socially fluid and mobile, we are unable to transfix our gaze onto a singular meaning. This subversion, as Benda concludes, plays a key role when taking a conventional piece of clothing from those in power and undermining its traditional meaning becomes a new weapon for dissent (2022, p. 123). We can see this in Lalić's reconfiguration of partisan uniforms and the collar as a singular accessory omnipresent in the designer's fashion semantics that visually designates Atanasijević. A visual signifier denoting the image of the Serbian philosopher, taken from her

5 The collections *Comradeses* and *Bruno's Conception on the Threefold Minimum and Measure* were only ever given Serbian titles *Drugarice* and *Brunovo učenje o najmanjem*; we have translated them here for ease of reading. *Wondering Womb* was originally in English.

most referenced photograph,<sup>6</sup> the collar was introduced in the collection preceding *Comradesses: Wandering Womb*.

Proposed in ancient Greek medical texts and popularized during the Victorian Era, the wandering womb was the belief that a displaced uterus, which often needed to be fixed with forced pregnancy, was the cause of various medical conditions in women (Žarić, 2022b, p. 28). The title of the collection thus criticizes the notion that women's bodies are the bodies of the other and upon which psychophysical (especially sexual) violence is socially permitted. In Atanasijević's case, the symbolism of wandering womb as an attempt of the patriarchy to immobilize women – physically, sexually, emotionally, professionally, socio-politically – is reflected in fabricated affairs and accusations of plagiarism, both lesbian and mistress to a married man, which ultimately ended up costing the philosopher her university position. Lalić accentuates this by placing a red letter 'A' on her creations, referring not only to Atanasijević's surname and struggle, but to Nathaniel Hawthorne's 1850 novel *The Scarlet Letter*, in which the protagonist, Hester Prynne is accused of adultery and forced to wear the letter sewn onto her dress in an act of public shaming. The fact that Hester has to embroider the letter on her own makes this motif socially and aesthetically subversive. The society admires her 'feminine craft' even though it considers it a sin, thus exposing its own hypocrisy. The representation of the embroidering woman, as Laura Powell stresses in analyzing sewing and needlework in *The Scarlet Letter*, not only reveals the 'falseness' of the ideological impositions constructed around her gender, but also suggests that the practice of embroidery in fiction serves to criticize that ideology, opening a space of possibility in which women can negotiate (the extent of) their participation in the ideological constraints of gender (2011, p. 4). *Wandering Womb* is a *par excellence* critique of such ideological constraints, with the embroidered letter and the collar enabling the designer to masterfully carry out such criticism on the runway. In *Comradesses*, the collar of military uniforms is transformed into a stylized neckerchief (often red or blue), with a brooch resembling military orders attached to it. In *Wandering Womb*, on the other hand, the collar is white with embroidered or laced style lines, referencing the same collar in which Atanasijević was photographed. As such, the high boned collar Petrović painted Atanasijević with is abandoned in the favor of a more open and less constricting accessory. Researching fashion in Belgrade in the 19<sup>th</sup> and at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, ethnologist Mirjana Prošić-Dvornić

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6 The photograph is kept at the Museum of the Serbian Orthodox Church in Belgrade, alongside Atanasijević's diaries, correspondence and personal library she bequeathed to the Museum.

interprets high boned collars as the relics of false morality, exposing the neck through a round, square or V-cut collar, deemed immoral and even hazardous for women's health (2006, p. 333). Taken within fashion history, and beyond the timeframe of Prošić-Dvornić's study and Atanasijević's life, the collar manifests its full subversion as follows:

Popularized by Coco Chanel, the white collar originates from elaborate ruffled collars of Queen Elizabeth I as the symbol of female power and perseverance. Milena Pavlović Barilli, who was, like Ksenija Atanasijević, accused of being an adulteress and lesbian, also wore it. A symbol of authority and education, the white collar further symbolized obedience in Puritan colonies in New England, while in the US south it connoted not only gender but racial inferiority, as it was part of the uniforms worn by female African American servants. In that regard, the white collar can be interpreted as a symbol of disobedience or rebellion. Around Atanasijević's neck, it becomes a quiet (sub)conscious protest; on Lalić's models it becomes a tool of empowerment and solidarity, of questioning both past and present. (Žarić, 2022a, p. 63)

Through symbolism of the collar, *Comradesses* and *Wandering Womb* visually negotiate Ksenija Atanasijević by reconstructing her (almost erased) image, reviving her struggles as an antifascist and feminist, as imagined on the contemporary runway and in contemporary society. Visually less referential when it comes to the philosopher's image than the previous two, collection *Bruno's Conception on the Threefold Minimum and Measure* expands Atanasijević's struggle and ideas, as we will see, through her primary signifier: her philosophy.

### *On the Threefold Minimum and Measure* (1591–1922–2018)

The collection *Bruno's Conception on the Threefold Minimum and Measure* (*Brunovo učenje o najmanjem*) marks the first (and thus far only) fashion collection in the national fashion system based on a Serbian philosophical thought (Žarić, 2022a, p. 62). By naming the collection after the title of Atanasijević's doctoral dissertation on Giordano Bruno's philosophical poem *De triplici minimo et mensura* (1591), defended in 1922 at the University of Belgrade under the supervision of Branislav Petronijević, the designer is not evoking the philosopher through her appearance or gender anymore (although she does not negate them), but is equating her with her life's work and most important aspect of her identity: her philoso-

phy, education and knowledge. Ksenija Atanasijević should be thought in the context of the social rehabilitation of *Bruno's Conception on the Threefold Minimum and Measure* (Žarić, 2022a, p. 63). Writing on the parallel fates and philosophies of Ksenija Atanasijević and Giordano Bruno, Nada Sekulić (2020) is of the belief that Atanasijević's choice to study this philosopher was driven by his uncompromising ethics, persistence and immense importance in spreading the enlightened Renaissance spirit and overcoming centuries of dogmatic thought (p. 195) – precisely the reasons for Lalić's choice of Atanasijević as her 'muse'. Both Atanasijević and Bruno defied imposed societal limitations and challenged academic norms. For this, they were discredited, persecuted and in the case of the Italian philosopher, burned at the stake for heresy. Due to such profound symbolism, it was the runaway presentation in its own right rather than the iconography of the collection's materiality (as in the collar in *Comradesses* and *Wandering Womb*) through which Lalić channels Atanasijević this time.

The collection consists of aestheticized voluminous baggy forms that erase the conventional fashion silhouette, cover models in a protective layer of cloth and, like in *Comradesses*, hybridize the gender binary: pants/men/mobility – skirt/women/immobility (Žarić, 2022a, p. 63). This approach to design perfectly aligns with Bruno's belief that organic forms, including the human body, constantly change in their transition from one condition to another, as Atanasijević remarked in her dissertation (Atanasijević, 1922, p. 7). Following that remark, visualization of Atanasijević by Lalić is in this case entirely semiotic. In *Comradesses* and *Wandering Womb*, we read the meaning from the image; in *Bruno's Conception on the Threefold Minimum and Measure*, we visualize the meaning without the tangible manifestation of the philosopher's image. As such, the collection is also hybridizing Roland Barthes' three structures of fashion: technological (real clothing), iconic (image-clothing) and verbal (written clothing; Barthes 2010), with the designer resorting to visualizing, even conjuring Atanasijević by inviting us to engage senses other than sight through a multimedia spectacle becoming feminist performance. The dramatic text on Atanasijević's public persecution entitled *Ksenija A: Biodrama* by activist and author Marija Ratković was read aloud by the actress Vesna Paštrović, while the unconventional soundscape of the event was composed and performed by violinist and sound artist Manja Ristić. When fashion is presented as spectacle, radicalism lies in the behavioral implications of what is being shown (Clark, 2001, p. 17): we are hence seeing, hearing and *feeling* what it is like *to be* Ksenija Atanasijević.

Ksenija Atanasijević is therefore Bruno's minimum of Lalić's collection: the basis of everything, as the subject and object of nature and art;



furthermore, every fusion and fission start from the minimum and return to it (Atanasijević, 1922, p. 7). Bruno claimed, as the Serbian philosopher observed in her thesis, that all the opposites are cancelled in the minimum: odd and even, many and few, definite and infinite are all the same (1922, p. 8). The capacity of the minimum to erase all the differences provided Lalić with the opportunity to reveal Atanasijević as the subversive and fluid figure that she was, and to give her agency and mobility on the 21<sup>st</sup> century runway by addressing her immobility in the social reality of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. As ethics in both Bruno's and Atanasijević's philosophical systems pertains to a coherent metaphysical conception of the universe (Sekulić 2020), it is paramount, as Aleksandra Lalić (2018) stated in an interview discussing the runway show, to observe the collection in the context of local social currents. Seen this way, the runway performance presents a reckoning with public (lack of) taste, both aesthetic and ethical. Consequently, the collection becomes an aesthetic and socio-political tool for critique of past and present repression and hypocrisy, revealing them to be spaces in which Ksenija Atanasijević's philosophical contributions and her fight for human rights have been scandalized and almost entirely marginalized (Žarić, 2022a, p. 62).

## Conclusion

In her book *Worn: A People's History of Clothing*, Sophie Thanhauser writes that in any historical period or region, to study a culture's conflicts and debates about clothes is to watch them approach the basic questions of civic life, including equality and power (2022, p. 292). The dynamics of clothes become narratives of our selfhoods, both private and public, as they enfold and contain our bodies and selfhoods in the most intimate of ways, and also manifest them to society which, in return, perpetually attempts to mold us to its liking. Applied to Atanasijević's life trajectory, Thanhauser's statement allows us to observe the visual and semiotic power of fashion, narrating both the oppression and perseverance of one woman's lived experience in 20<sup>th</sup>-century Serbia. Translated into the contemporary fashion design of Aleksandra Lalić, the philosopher's struggle remains relevant even in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, as she still has not received satisfactory rehabilitation in Serbian universities (Sekulić, 2020, p. 192). However, the transformative potential of Lalić's artistry is nonetheless positive as it creates a discourse of artistic (and academic) novelty and societal change by rendering Ksenija Atanasijević current through an unlikely practice of fashion design and its often sidelined intellectual capacities. As such, Lalić's collections inspired by Atanasijević do not simply summarize

or conclude the philosopher's life and reality. They restore her struggle to the present moment, as they draw both from fashion history and ongoing social inequalities, becoming a case study in affirming philosophy of fashion. Positioning Atanasijević within and against the primary visual sources of two paintings, several photographs, three contemporary fashion collections and the backdrop of fashion history allows a diachronic reading of her life and work through fashion. It is, however, important not to fall into the cliché of romanticization of Atanasijević when it comes the meaningfulness of her clothes, as fashion history (just like any other history) often does. Without actual preserved garments – an uncanny symbolism for a person whose mortal remains were destroyed along with her tomb – our contextual reading must be rather careful. To read clothes mindfully and accurately, Thanhauser continues, is to read the world itself: its systems and its system-level failures (2022, p. 293). Approaching Atanasijević through fashion studies exposes the failures of the system she lived in yet rebelled against, leaving us with the hope that, even if history has failed her, fashion history will not.

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