

## **Radical Pedagogies: Right Here, Right Now!**

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### **Biography:**

Caroline Stevenson is a curator and writer, and Head of Cultural and Historical Studies at London College of Fashion. Her curatorial practice focuses on economies of exchange, and has been recognised through several grants from Arts Council England and the British Council. Caroline is a member of the Centre for Fashion Curation at University of the Arts London and co-founder of Modus, an international network for expanded fashion practice.

### **Abstract:**

Fashion education is caught in a moment of intense transformation. While the fashion industry continues along a reckless path of social and environmental destruction, a new generation of students are activating our educational institutions, demanding real and radical change. Meanwhile, the theoretical field of Fashion Studies has rapidly taken a central position in imagining a new vision of fashion in a global context, re-writing problematic histories, challenging Eurocentric dominance and dismantling prevailing ideologies. This article, in the form of a manifesto for educators, calls for a return to the origins of fashion scholarship within the discipline of Cultural Studies. It asks what we might learn from Cultural Studies' intersection with Critical Pedagogy as a way to 'do' fashion politics within our classrooms. By drawing on initiatives pioneered by the Cultural and Historical Studies Department at London College of Fashion, this manifesto explores how the pedagogy of Cultural Studies can be re-articulated for our current times, in order to forge new alliances between theory and practice, and enact radical action beyond the walls of our academic institutions.

### **Keywords:**

Cultural Studies, Critical Pedagogy, Fashion Education, Politics, Institutional Critique

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Fashion education is in crisis, caught between the competing demands of a reckless and powerful industry and a new generation of students with progressive ideas and activist mind-sets, determined to tackle its damaging political, social and environmental effects. The current challenge for fashion educators is this: how can we drive institutional critique of the very system we are training our students to enter? Is a radical, transformative and revolutionary pedagogy, capable of addressing our students' urgent concerns, possible within this context?

While critical debates around the inter-relationship of fashion and society, and fashion and politics have historically remained absent from fashion education they are quickly becoming the context for a new approach. As Angela McRobbie notes, although fashion schools in the UK have traditionally provided Cultural Studies programmes alongside design teaching, explorations of everyday culture and politics have rarely crossed boundaries into real activism or desire to intervene in the fashion industry. Instead, they have surfaced as iconoclastic fashion aesthetics, only to be commodified and re-sold as popular consumer style (1998). That is, until now. The current generation of fashion students are not content to merely re-create rebellious style, they want to overhaul the material conditions in which these styles are produced and the ideologies of the system that produces them.<sup>1</sup>

Perhaps, given this context, it is time to revisit the role of Cultural Studies Departments in relation to fashion design education? While the concerns of Cultural Studies have always provided a space to analyse the wider social, cultural and economic conditions of fashion, maybe it is time to ask, more deeply, how Cultural Studies' longstanding commitment to the dismantling of authority, its focus on the interrelationship of power, culture and politics and its concern over matters of agency and governance can provide us with the theoretical and

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<sup>1</sup> It is important to contextualise this within wider, cultural and social shifts towards political consciousness and activism. It is not only fashion schools witnessing a generation of students who believe in their individual power to make change, however the concerns that our fashion students raise are particular to their field and their lived experience. Fashion's critical engagement with the everyday and its legacy of damaging industrial production raises important, contextual questions around equality, power and justice.

material tools we need to collectively imagine a transformative and more democratic fashion system?

This is not to say that the discipline of Cultural Studies is without its problems.<sup>2</sup> As early as 2004, its theorists noted the fading of the discipline into the ‘shadows of academic interests’ (Giroux 2004, 59), replaced instead by concerns around globalisation and political economy. In the UK, the current Conservative government’s ideologically driven austerity project, which has systematically cut funding to arts and humanities education, has also led to drastically reduced opportunities for the kinds of transformative teaching put forward by Cultural Studies Departments. Even within the UK’s art and design schools, many theory departments have gradually moved away from the disciplinary teaching of Cultural Studies, opting instead for more generic academic terms such as Critical or Contextual Studies, or disbanding the teaching of theory alongside practice all together.

At the same time, although academic research and scholarship in the field of fashion has consolidated into the discipline of Fashion Studies, its origins are still firmly rooted in the methods and concerns of Cultural Studies, along with Sociology, Anthropology, Linguistics and Dress History.<sup>3</sup> Within this interdisciplinary field, the intersection of history and culture with politics has emerged as a dominant area of scholarship in recent years (see Bartlett 2019). This has occurred in dialogue with the mainstream politicisation of culture, a resurgence of activism, calls to decolonise our academic and cultural institutions, a global pandemic and fear over climate change and environmental disaster. As fashion plays a

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<sup>2</sup> The Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (1964–2002) was a research centre at the University of Birmingham, UK, founded by Stuart Hall and Richard Hoggart. It was dedicated to the study of popular culture, so establishing the discipline of British cultural studies and its exploration of the political dynamics of contemporary culture.

<sup>3</sup> Historically, London College of Fashion considerably contributed to the development of the discipline of Fashion Studies, especially during the time when Christopher Breward was Reader then Professor and Head of Research at LCF (1999–2004), and then a Visiting Professor, in collaboration with the Victoria and Albert Museum (2004–2011). In a wider context, the journal *Fashion Theory*, founded by Valerie Steele in 1997, was the pivotal element in establishing the study of fashion as an academic discipline, related to, but also distinguished from sociology, art history, consumption studies, and anthropology. Prior to these, Elizabeth Wilson’s book *Adorned in Dreams: Fashion and Modernity* (1985) provided the first consideration of fashion and culture, in the context of Cultural Studies.

significant role in shaping - and being shaped by - all of these, scholars have responded by rapidly adopting a new vision of its global context, re-writing problematic histories, challenging Eurocentric authority and exposing labour disparities and exploitation. Fashion Studies has therefore become the central space through which to unpack and understand many of these debates and to propose new methods and ways of doing things. When placed in tension with practice, fashion theory offers an emancipatory politics and helps us see how we can get from here to there.<sup>4</sup> Further afield, however, the fashion industry continues to lag in its ability to tackle the immense environmental and social problems it has created. It seems to be waiting on the new generation of activists and practitioners, equipped with revolutionary intellectual and creative skills, to bring solutions. It is therefore no surprise that our students are placing demands on fashion education, and why they have a renewed interest in theory-led teaching alongside practice. This is their reality and their stakes in the contemporary world are high; they will be the ones left to deal with the carelessness of previous generations. It is up to them to bring about change.

Given this context, rather than moving away, it seems an opportune time to return to the core principles of Cultural Studies and ask what tools it can provide us to make sense of these current times? What knowledge is required to produce active citizens, capable of enacting change? And how can we produce this knowledge collectively, in our educational institutions, so that it becomes a transformative, living force?

As educators, there is much we can learn from the work of cultural theorists such as Antonio Gramsci and Stuart Hall who conceive of culture, as a pedagogical site, where identities are formed and re-formed and learning becomes an opportunity for the acquisition of transformative, political agency (Giroux 2004). For Hall (1997), education is the chief process by which a society indoctrinates its children with prevailing norms and values, in the hope that it will shape future generations in its own image. Antonio Gramsci (1971), whose work also prioritises the location of culture in relation to power, similarly warns of the influence of politics on everyday life, through institutions such as education, social relations and discourses. Both theorists view education as a site of political struggle with great transformative potential to intervene in the material politics of society and culture.

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<sup>4</sup> See Bartlett ([2019b](#)); Gaugele and Tilton ([2019a](#), [2019b](#)).

However, it is through theorists such as Henry Giroux, bell hooks, Peter McLaren and Lawrence Grossberg that we see the intersection of Cultural Studies and Critical Pedagogy. Their work provides us with actual, tangible frameworks for enacting the pedagogy of Cultural Studies: one that is committed to the decentring of authority, the rupturing of disciplinary boundaries and political action that extends beyond the walls of the institution. As Grossberg (1994) explains, it is possible to identify three distinct models: First, breaking down the assumption that the teacher is the authority of all knowledge and understands the true meaning of all texts and practices. Second, foregrounding dialogic practices that enable the silenced to speak and respect the voices and experiences of everyone in the classroom. And, third, a 'praxical pedagogy' that attempts to provide the skills necessary for students to intervene in their own histories, moving beyond the classroom to the broader struggles of communities and the public sphere.

While these might sound like utopian ideals, it is worth asking how we might re-imagine the classrooms of our fashion institutions as critical sites of cultural production. Can we conceive of them as spaces where knowledge and meaning are negotiated through social interaction? Is it possible to dissolve academic authority in today's academic institutions? And, most of all, can our pedagogies become the impetus for action in the real world? In other words, how might we translate the political concerns we share as fashion scholars into actual pedagogical practices? How can we 'do' the politics we have committed to as researchers?

In September 2020, the Department of Cultural and Historical Studies at London College of Fashion decided to run an experimental module, drawing on the legacies of Cultural Studies and Critical Pedagogy. We validated the module, which we titled Critical Issues in Fashion Research, with no thematic content, drawing on no genealogy of pre-existing knowledge and no pre-ordained theoretical framework. Instead, we proposed simply to engage students in critical issues arising through the field of fashion, while supporting them in developing their own personal research inquiry. For context, this particular module runs across the second year of our undergraduate curriculum, and has an annual intake of around 1,500 students - a number that presents significant challenges to experimentation and uncertainty. Nevertheless, we organised our open module around a series of 'urgencies': critical questions asked by our students and new provocations raised through

our own research practices. We did not write the 'urgencies' into any of the module documents, leaving ourselves the opportunity to change them year after year, add to them, and also resolve and abandon them. At the start of the module, students opt for an urgency they want to explore further, which they do through a series of seminars, lectures and an individually written essay. The urgencies we presented covered topics such as diasporic identities, fashion and the senses, 'race' and cultural appropriation, critical sustainability, fashioning masculinities, visual activism, materialities, class and representation, consumption and desire, and protest. As we developed many of the urgencies through dialogue with our students, they did not come with any recognised grounding in theoretical literature. Rather, it was up to the teacher and the students to negotiate reading lists and supporting material together, sometimes over the course of the module. This was a pivotal moment for us: an opportunity to bridge the gap between theory and practice, to undo the accumulation of thematic reading lists and materials we had accrued as a department, and to assemble new critical tools for thinking through a particular moment in time. As Stuart Hall explains, 'The work that cultural studies has to do is to mobilize everything that it can find in terms of intellectual resources in order to understand what keeps making the lives we live, and the societies we live in, profoundly and deeply in-humane.' (cited in Grossberg 1994, 9)

Grossberg refers to such pedagogy as the 'pedagogy of articulation and risk', a practice that does not assume that it knows beforehand the appropriate skills, terms, materials or knowledge, but rather one that is willing to take the risk of mapping connections, lines and articulations between 'different domains, discourses, and practices, to see what will work, both theoretically and politically' (1994, 18). Similarly, Irit Rogoff refers to the kinds of knowledge produced through this kind of pedagogy as 'unbounded' or 'free': '...a knowledge...instead presented in relation to an urgent issue, and not an issue as defined by knowledge conventions, but by the pressures and struggles of contemporaneity. When knowledge is unframed, it is less grounded genealogically and can navigate forwards rather than backwards.' (2011, 183-184)

The seminars are where we carried out this work. Rather than a conventional lecture/seminar format, the seminars were the primary sites where knowledge was

negotiated, formed and reformed. They were co-taught and knowledge shared discursively through the presentation of case studies, close reading of theory, discussion groups, visits and opportunities for quiet, independent thinking. The lectures, pre-recorded, were viewed not as opportunities to transmit existing theories and concepts, but instead as critical tools and methods for enquiry. Topics included positionality, truth, knowledge, ethics, embodiment, activism, critical histories, storytelling, digital worlds and using theory creatively. We delivered the module as an opportunity to generate ideas, rather than the transmission of permissible knowledge and, in return, our students wrote essays articulating their own lived experience, negotiating their subject positions and assembling their own theoretical tools and methods. They were emancipatory examples of what a transformative education can be, when we, as educators, listen vulnerably to the questions of our students and when we prioritise these questions as drivers of our curriculum.

The pedagogy of making contexts together with our students points to the aforementioned issue of teaching politicised theory in a practice-based institution, where radical thinking either exposes the sheer scale of issues within the fashion industry, or fades under the incredible weight of action needed to mobilise any significant change. This tension between practice and theory often leads to unhelpful divides where theory sits separate to practice, or alongside it, but never within it. Here, it is useful to remember that the project of Cultural Studies has always approached the use of theory as an intervention in the contexts it seeks to understand, rather than a disengaged accumulation, separate from its application.

Returning to the issue of teaching institutional critique, it is not our role to tell our students they must adopt new positions, because they are already positioned in relation to fashion production and to the wider world around them. Rather, our role as theorists is to help them assemble the tools and articulate the urgencies that will open up spaces of potential within their field of practice, and take them to a place of new possibilities. This is how we can equip our students with the skills to understand their own involvement in the world.

Grossberg refers to such interventions as 'radical contextualism', that reject the idea of applying theory known in advance, as well as empiricism without theory (1994, 5).

Contextualism is a radically interdisciplinary project, drawing from a range of theoretical and methodological perspectives in order to address the urgent issue at hand. As Stuart Hall and David Bailey stress, 'Different strategies [and I might add theories] are right at different

times and at different moments' (cited in Grossberg 1994, 6). The question of culture and power depends upon the situation in which we are attempting to intervene, therefore we, as educators and researchers, must also be constantly open to new areas of knowledge and emerging concerns, so that we can collectively navigate forwards with our students.

It is also worth revisiting contextualism in relation to transnational fashion, the subject of this special issue. The sets of urgencies we developed as Critical Issues in Fashion Research were particular to our moment in time, with our students, at London College of Fashion. They reflect the circuits of experience, fears and dreams of an international cohort of students based in London: an electrifying city that moves at a furious pace, and an established centre within the Western fashion world. Here, I would like to propose that, as fashion scholars and educators, we pay attention to the geographies of knowledge produced within our institutions and by our students. While the international field of Fashion Studies proliferates, let us not forget the specificities and struggles of our distinctive locations. Fashion is an expressive and imaginative cultural form, capable of producing concepts and strategies, articulate identities, desires, fears and dreams through radical visual means. It carries great potential to visualise transformative and lasting socio-political change. If we are educating a new generation of fashion citizens, capable of activating change in their field, then we must provide them with the intellectual tools to act and respond to the issues that are affecting them and help them to make sense of their place in the world. We need to cultivate 'situated and embodied forms of critical and creative engagement that acknowledge epistemic location – knowing *from somewhere* that has political and ethical effects.' (Meskimmon 2020, 1, emphasis author's own) We need to pay attention to cartographies of emerging knowledge, capture them as they arise and provide the correct and specific tools to make sense of them in the here and now.

In closing, it is necessary to point out that the wider contexts we work in as educators are subject to larger configurations of power, culture, ideologies and politics. While my own – and indeed other institutions of fashion education – place value on the teaching of social responsibility and action, their internal structures of accountability often work against any real effort to produce the kinds of radical knowledge required to achieve their aims. They are also accountable to national structures of educational governance and to the priorities



of the fashion industry itself. Critical pedagogy cannot ignore or obstruct these institutions of power, but it is our responsibility as critical educators to pay attention to them, to work within them, and to intervene in them where we can. We must look for opportunities to bring uncertainty into our curriculum, to provide ruptures and spaces for negotiation and struggle. But, most of all, we must listen to our students. We must practice vulnerable and constant listening if we are to create critical and reflective citizens, capable of acting in morally and socially responsible ways, full of confidence that they can enact the changes they so desperately want to see.

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