

Fashion as Aesthetic Experience

A Discussion of Subject-Object Interaction

Harah Chon

School of Design, The Hong Kong Polytechnic University, harah.chon@polyu.edu.hk

The study of fashion involves a critical review of its role in producing social phenomena. It involves a circular process of interaction between individuals and society, through use of the fashion object. Fashion elicits social interactions to affect and influence other individuals. In this manner, the experience of fashion and the embodiment of dress allow an exchange of aesthetic values. However, the globalization of the fashion industry has resulted in the homogenization of trends and aesthetic standards, disrupting the symbolic production and emotional experiences of users. Different to other forms of design knowledge, fashion knowledge relies on tactile experience to fulfill both functional and ornamental needs. This knowledge is developed through physical, conceptual and emotional interactions with products. It creates a new code or visual language when rearranged on the surface of the body, inducing emotional responses from users and stimulating physical interactions leading towards the use of fashion objects as a form of social identity. This paper discusses aesthetic experience in relation to the user and the social implications of dress.

Key words: design knowledge, meaning creation, aesthetic experience

1. Introduction

Fashion facilitates social interactions through a mode of communication between members of a community [2]. The fashion object allows individuals to send and receive messages, constructing meanings that are established and accepted socially. Dressing, therefore, becomes a social activity or process wherein an individual affects the behavior or emotional responses of another. This implicates fashion as constituting a transactional exchange of meanings that relies on individual experience to communicate aesthetic values. The fashion object, requiring physical and tactual interactions, conceptualizes design knowledge within its finished form as a representation of the designer's original intent and meaning. As a vessel of meaning, the object becomes interpretive when recontextualized by new interactions and multiple perceptions. This suggests that while fashion standardizes trends to create a homogenizing effect, it reinstates individual freedom through the experience of assessing and interpreting the aesthetic codes embedded within the object.

This paper is part of an ongoing investigation of the role of design knowledge and its impact on the changing lifestyles of Post-80s & 90s Chinese females. Implications made here will be further tested to draw up inferences for how young consumers understand fashion objects and how the intentions of designers are transferred or disrupted through user interactions. Within the scope of the socio-cultural changes affecting Mainland Chinese, the study of aesthetic interaction is seen as a critical perspective to be adopted by local fashion designers. The individual is defined here as an aesthetic subject with the ability to critically evaluate the aesthetic object through interactions supporting the negotiation of meanings. This paper explores and discusses the fashion system as containing knowledge in its process of aesthetic production. The knowledge of the designer is transmitted through

the fashion object, to be read and interpreted by the user. Experience becomes a critical process, through which individuals physically engage with fashion objects based on their own aesthetic standards to establish new values or codes. The interpretive nature of fashion emphasizes the need for its meanings to be communicated, reinstating the social implications of dress. Through aesthetic experience, fashion is discussed as a transaction of negotiated meanings and the affectivity of design is further explored as affording meaning creation and the utility of fashion objects.

2. Subject-Object Interaction

2.1 The Subject

The individual's presence of being-in-the-world triggers the development of a perceived phenomenal world that is conceived as a representation of the physical world [24]. It is through this sense of presence that the individual, or subject, exposes the dualities of what lies inside/outside and between the physical/mental states of being. The subject acts as a filter that generates interpretations of reality by conveying feelings of existence within an environment. Perception and experience reinstate the subject as temporal and spatial beings, producing a point-of-view of the world [17]. However, Zahorik & Jenison [24] question the veridicality of perception, owing to the reciprocity suggested by the relationship between the perceiver and the environment. The environment provides the affordances which allow the subject to directly perceive, rather than relying on the interception of the subject's own mental representations or symbolic expressions.

Perception plays a significant role in affecting the aesthetic configurations of the subject, as each individual develops a system of values influenced by subjective understandings of life experiences. The sensory experiences of the subject relate taste formation to social and cultural contexts [21]. Within the relationship between the subject and external socio-cultural environment, the aesthetic framework takes shape by articulating identity and taste. The subject's physical presence allows for the development of perception, which acts as the lens for viewing the socio-cultural environment and cultivating aesthetic values.

2.2 The Object

Objects evoke and constitute meanings, embodying the intentions of the individual and building self-awareness [9]. The role of the aesthetic object is to express ideas and stimulate perceptions through its perceivable qualities. Ewenstein & Whyte [12] define the object as key to knowledge development and innovation through its various roles. *Epistemic objects* are abstract, characterized by incompleteness, and defined by plurality in their ever-evolving nature. In contrast, *technical objects* provide the fixed and stable frame for inquiry. The *boundary object* separates the abstract from concrete, emphasizing its ability to mediate knowledge across one dimension to another. Objects act as affects that engage body and mind, reason and passions, to affect the external world while simultaneously being affected by it [15].

The subjective output of emotion is different from the object's capacity to produce affects. Rather than limiting meanings to subjective interpretations, the object accounts for social and collective dimensions to link designers, producers, users and culture within a shared world [1]. The object, when acting as a boundary object, mediates interactions between epistemic communities through its representation of material contexts and social relations [12]. This reiterates the interpretive nature and communicating function of the object, requiring direct interactions in order for the subject to experience its other epistemic or technical roles.

2.3 The Experience

Objects satisfy aesthetic needs through sensory experiences [21] and gain value through aesthetic activities [19]. Following a phenomenological approach, how the subject evaluates a specific object significantly alters the overall experience of the interaction. This implicates the subjective foundations of experience, referring back to the basic schema of human existence and the influences of perception. The experience of consumption is motivated by the desire to create a self-image or personal aesthetic to distinguish oneself from uniform conformity [10]. Fashion is the mechanism by which the subject is allowed the opportunity to express a sense of self and the experience of being. Through affordances, which exist independently of interpretation and interaction, the subject is afforded the experience to perceive the object [1]. This relational interaction reconciles the subject-object divide through the implications of affordances and meanings. The object lends itself to be interpreted by affording the user with the power and freedom to mediate and assign meanings.

Consumption is the preconditioned activity of confrontation between two systems involving the subject and object [4]. The individual's needs are integrated into the social structure of products, where product choice indicates a sign of recognition fulfilling a greater social function. To consume an object is to consume its meaning, satisfying individual needs and actively adopting a complete system of values. Reflecting on the material world of designed objects concerns the circulation of affects, shifting from subject-centered responses towards affect-based experiences [15]. Physical, conceptual and emotional interactions with an object affectively impact the behaviors and values of the individual [5]. The object becomes something to be experienced before it manifests in emotion, as the expression of affective capture. Human experience, therefore, affords the emotional response of affectivity. Before the object can enter into the production, reproduction or circulation of knowledge, it is filtered through the emotions characterizing the subject-object relationship. The consumption of designed objects becomes the emotional and sensorial creation of meaningfulness, monitored by social and cultural contexts.

Concrete objects embody and symbolize complex patterns of emotion and thought, implicating interaction as the means by which they can be experienced and related to [9]. The mode of interaction makes a considerable difference in how the object is interpreted and which aesthetic values are perceived. Objects attain significance when its aesthetic qualities are recognized, as part of the aesthetic experience. The tactile experience of fashion creates aesthetic codes through a visual language conveying a form of identity [22]. Through the functional experience of a product, the aesthetic values can be realized [6]. This transaction shifts from the subjectivity of perception towards a more objective view of aesthetics, relying on the ability to recognize the extrinsic qualities of the object and projecting that knowledge through dress.

3. Design Knowledge in Fashion

3.1 Aesthetic Representation

Baudrillard [4] defines fashion as an abstract, arbitrary exchange of signs to form aesthetic categories. The surface of the body acts as an interface between the sense of self and the external projection of identity, to extend the experience of dress into an open text that inscribes the body with meanings [10]. Bodily decoration becomes a form of cultural production, creating a site of freedom for symbolic communication and the embodiment of beauty [13]. Within the complex network of meaningful exchanges, the object can be seen as signifying meanings [1].

Fashion, as a form of conspicuous consumption, relies on these interactions to fulfill the intended functions or latent meanings. Subjectivity, interpretation, utility and meaning are, therefore, afforded by the object.

Objects contain knowledge and produce knowledge in the relationships between human beings and objects, between systems of objects and in the objects and their components [18]. They reflect the interests of the designer and produce knowledge in their cognizable finished forms, communicating their existence to the perceiver. Designed objects are spatio-temporal, representing the physical manifestations of cultural phenomena. This is particularly true in the case of fashion objects which indicate specific historical references and social movements [20]. The aesthetics of fashion concerns the quality of appearance as the essence of the object.

Within the space of representation, the object serves as a visual representation of its concrete form while conveying its abstract meaning [12]. These representations embody a wide range of knowledge which can establish shared understandings or generate new perspectives. Visual representations, as knowledge objects, embed and inscribe knowledge yet shift meanings when mobilized through forms of inquiry. Both subject and object act as agents of knowledge production, revealing iterative processes that involve the questioning and answering of material conditions and symbolic contexts. The object's affectivity allows the negotiation of knowledge through subjective interpretations [15].

3.2 Aesthetic Knowledge – Interaction as Meaning Negotiation

Aesthetics are a part of everyday life in how meanings are negotiated through life experiences and consumption practices [21]. To assume that aesthetic considerations are specific to life experiences implies that there is no universality in regards to taste. Rather, similarities in taste or aesthetics are culturally accumulated and shared, providing the basic framework for establishing commonalities between individuals. Aesthetic interests can be seen as being cultivated through personal experiences and emotional values, supporting the individual's self identity. Experiences are strongly related to identity construction, effecting a reevaluation of symbolic meanings and personal tastes.

The interaction with objects should be cultivated to better perceive the object's intrinsic qualities and more effectively realize the transactional process [9]. This emphasizes the intentionality of interaction, solidifying meanings as a tangible expression of one's experiences and values. The aesthetic experience of the object results in a final interpretation culminating in an emotional response or connection. While the interpretation may not correspond with the original intent, the object facilitates design as a means for communication [8]. The notion of the object as containing some form of knowledge or meaning is rejected by the power of the individual to reassign and reinterpret the object. However, the effectiveness of a design can be measured by the degree of similarity between the designer's intent and the user's interpretation [14]. This suggests the need for designers to emphasize the aesthetic components of the object by designing the anticipation of interpretation, rather than relying on intention to determine the design's utility [8]. The object is not mediating the transaction of meanings between the designer and user, but mediating between the designers' intentions and users' interpretations.

The sociological perspective of fashion is less focused on the study of dress as object and more on the way that dress, as an embodied activity, is embedded in social relations [11]. Dress, as a social practice, involves individual actions relating to one's situated existence. The individual's presentation of dress is an outcome-based activity of symbolic articulation, comprising both intimate and social experiences. Designers, as subjects, create an aesthetic representation based on their own perspectives and experiences of the world. The finished object represents the

designer’s intention as a visual translation of design knowledge and the meanings corresponding to the designer’s own existence. This symbolic medium of expression becomes a social practice when consumed by the user who dismantles its meaning and reconstructs it with each rearrangement of the fashion object on the body [3]. The act of dressing transfers one perception to another, as each subject presents the body as an object to be read and reinterpreted by yet another subject.

4. Conclusion

4.1 Discussion of Aesthetic Experience

Fashion as a form of communication implicates the object as materializing the semiotic function of producing symbolic representations of meaning [23]. This form of knowledge is embedded within the object through the design process, creating aesthetic codes relating to the designer’s original intent. Fashion objects create a visual language when arranged on the surface of a concrete wearer, creating value through the actualization of meanings [3]. This linking of objects constitutes the structure of dressing as the medium of self-expression to project a representation of the self onto the external world. Barthes [3] defines clothing as representing the human persona and linking the relationships between *man and body* to *body and society*. Therefore, the fashion object becomes an aesthetic code referring to one’s self-identity as a part of a larger social context.

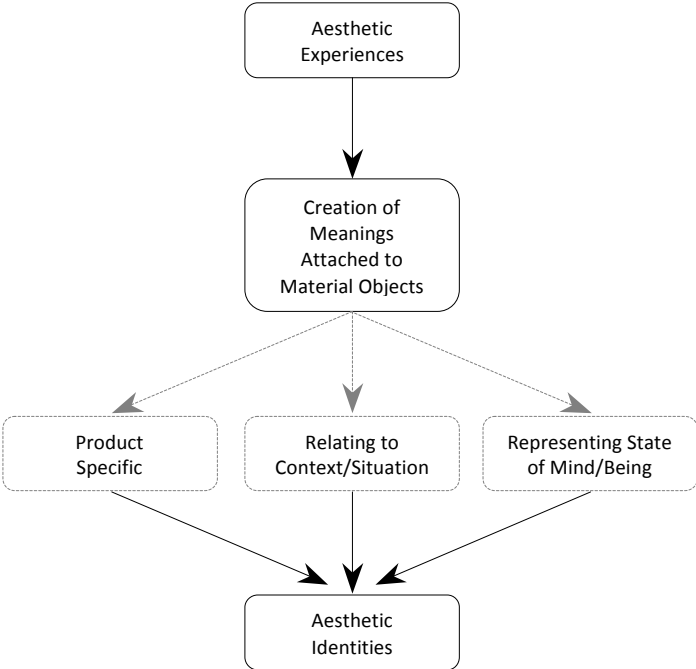


Figure.1 Flow of Aesthetic Experiences

Without an explicit exchange between designers and users, a single interpretation for a design cannot be achieved. According to Crilly *et al.* [8], this raises possible research questions for: (1) how designers might better influence the users’ interpretations of a design object, and (2) how users might effectively infer the original intent of the designer. These questions are particularly challenging in the case of fashion, where objects are involved in an incessant exchange of meanings and signification. The culturally constituted world influences the meanings of

fashion objects, which are consumed and interpreted by the user [16]. This provides an explanation for the collective appreciation of certain objects based on their cultural meanings, suggesting the greater probability for common meanings to exist between designers and users of a shared cultural context. The designer is influenced by perceptions shaped from a specific cultural background that take effect in the process of design. Through the production of material objects, the designer is not only embedding some form of cultural meaning or aesthetic code, but appropriating a framework for meaning construction [14]. Design objects are not transferring or transmitting meanings or design knowledge, but characterized by their open-endedness which allows for a final interpretation to be assigned by the user. The object becomes culturally relevant when interpreted as an extension of the user's identity, taking into account individual experiences and the development of aesthetic values.

The aesthetic experience of fashion is discussed here as the creation of symbolic meanings and recognition of design components, rather than the development and expression of taste. Concrete objects are aesthetic, evoking the emotional responses of the subject. As observers and perceivers, the subject recreates new meanings through the arrangement of fashion objects on the surface of the body. The object shifts from an *epistemic* to *boundary* object, as its physical location on the body separates abstract perception from the concrete expression of personal style. It is through this schema that the object mediates the intention of the designer and the interpretation of the user, to be confronted by other perceptions and reinterpreted when engaged as a social activity. Understanding the relationship between the subject-object and subject-body is to acknowledge that the negotiation of meanings is not a transactional activity between designers and users, but between users and other users. This reiterates the focus of design as shifting away from the insistence of intention and towards the framing of social relations generating multiple possibilities for meanings to be deconstructed and recontextualized through interactions with multiple perceptions.

4.1 Future Work

The focus of this paper presents a discussion on the transference of knowledge to better understand how it fosters co-creative communities for establishing shared meanings and values. Aesthetic experience has been defined through subject-object relationships to establish an understanding of fashion as a visual language signifying abstract meanings. The activity of dressing requires not only an aesthetic understanding of the fashion object but the intentional representation of an aesthetic identity. Fashion objects connect individuals to designers by transferring design intent to provide a means for further exploration of subjective meanings, as part of the aesthetic experience. The framework introduced here will be expanded in future research to build upon the representational levels of meanings that fashion objects undergo throughout the conceptual development, design and consumption processes.

5. References

- [1] Almquist, J., & Lupton, J. (2010). Affording Meaning: Design-Oriented Research from the Humanities and Social Sciences. *Design Issues* , 26 (1), 3-14.
- [2] Barnard, M. (1996). *Fashion as Communication* (2 ed.). London: Routledge.
- [3] Barthes, R. (2006). *The Language of Fashion*. (A. Stafford, Trans.) New York: Berg.
- [4] Baudrillard, J. (1988). *Jean Baudrillard: Selected Writings*. (M. Poster, Ed.) Oxford: Polity Press.

- [5] Bertola, P., & Teixeira, J. C. (2003). Design as a Knowledge Agent: How Design as Knowledge Process is Embedded into Organizations to Foster Innovation. *Design Studies* , 24, 181-194.
- [6] Bloch, P. H. (1995). Seeking the Ideal Form: Product Design and Consumer Response. *Journal of Marketing* , 59, 16-29.
- [7] Bourdieu, P. (1984). *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*. Harvard University.
- [8] Crilly, N., Good, D., Matravers, D., & Clarkson, P. J. (2008). Design as Communication: Exploring the Validity and Utility of Relating Intention to Interpretation. *Design Studies* , 29 (5), 425-457.
- [9] Csikszentmihalyi, M., & Rochberg-Halton, E. (1981). *The Meaning of Things: Domestic Symbols and the Self*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- [10] Emberley, J. (1987). The Fashion Apparatus and the Deconstruction of Postmodern Subjectivity. *Canadian Journal of Political and Social Theory* , 11 (1-2), 39-50.
- [11] Entwistle, J. (2000). *The Fashioned Body: Fashion, Dress and Modern Social Theory*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- [12] Ewenstein, B., & Whyte, J. (2009). Knowledge Practices in Design: The Role of Visual Representations as 'Epistemic Objects'. *Organization Studies* , 30 (1), 7-30.
- [13] Faurschou, G. (1987). Fashion and the Cultural Logic of Postmodernity. *Canadian Journal of Political and Social Theory* , 11 (1-2), 68-82.
- [14] Kazmierczak, E. T. (2003). Design as Meaning Making: From Making Things to the Design of Thinking. *Design Issues* , 19 (2), 45-59.
- [15] Marenko, B. (2010). Contagious Affectivity. The Management of Emotions in Late Capitalist Design. *Swiss Design Network Conference*, (pp. 134-149). Basel.
- [16] McCracken, G. (1986). Culture and Consumption: A Theoretical Account of the Structure and Movement of the Cultural Meaning of Consumer Goods. *Journal of Consumer Research* , 13 (1), 71-84.
- [17] Merleau-Ponty, M. (2004). *The World of Perception*. Oxfordshire: Routledge .
- [18] Narvaez, L. M. (2000). Design's Own Knowledge. *Design Issues* , 16 (1), 36-51.
- [19] Ritchie, B. (1945). The Formal Structure of the Aesthetic Object. *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* , 3 (11/12), 5-14.
- [20] Simmel, G. (1957). Fashion. *The American Journal of Sociology* , 62 (6), 541-558.
- [21] Ventakesh, A., & Meamber, L. A. (2008). The Aesthetics of Consumption and the Consumer as an Aesthetic Subject. *Consumption Markets & Culture* , 11 (1), 45-70.
- [22] Vieira, V. A. (2009). An Extended Theoretical Model of Fashion Clothing Involvement. *Journal of Fashion Marketing and Management* , 13 (2), 179-200.
- [23] Weller, S. (2007). Fashion as Viscous Knowledge: Fashion's Role in Shaping Trans-national Garment Production. *Journal of Economic Geography* , 7, 39-66.
- [24] Zahorik, P., & Jenison, R. L. (1998). Presence as Being-in-the-World. *Presence* , 7 (1), 78-89.