Exploring the Aesthetics of Sustainable Fashion

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Abstract: This working paper is a discussion of different notions and conceptions of aesthetics that may be at play in the development of new design. The empirical cases discussed in the paper derive from the context of design education in a module aimed at developing a new design expression for contemporary, sustainable fashion. In programming the didactic setting for the students’ projects, several types of aesthetics must be considered: the aesthetic codes of the textile and fashion design discipline, both in terms of materials and expression, deriving from within the design practice itself, and the aesthetic codes of mediated expressions seen in, e.g., fashion magazines, which create a frame of aestheticization influencing how fashion expressions are valued. In this field of tension between internal aesthetics and external aestheticization, the students set out to create a new design expression for sustainable design, which brings them close to a third aesthetic mode: an avant-gardist aesthetics in search of the new.

Keywords: Aesthetics, sustainability, fashion, textile design, aestheticization

INTRODUCTION

What is the aesthetic core of sustainable fashion? What should it look like, how should it feel, by what means should it communicate, and what should it communicate? Should it adhere to a specific code and aesthetic convention, or should it search for new possible expressions? If so, how should it do this?

In this paper, we present two cases of students at Design School Kolding working with the challenge of creating and communicating a contemporary design expression for sustainable fashion. We frame the discussion of the students’ projects with a conceptualization of aesthetics which may cast light on the different communicative codes at play in developing new design with new kinds of meaning content, i.e., new ways of conceiving and working with sustainability in design. In doing so, we propose the cases to be exemplary of some of the challenges faced today in working with design: Different types of aesthetic conventions and codes may be at play, some deriving from within the design discipline and others from the outside, e.g. in the media contexts that continuously affect the perception and valuation of design. Thus, a central question may be articulated as follows: how to create a new aesthetic expression for an advanced sustainability on contemporary terms.
In the following, we first discuss some aspects of aesthetics that operate as our conceptual framework for understanding the complexity of the task of designing sustainable fashion. Through this discussion of the different types of aesthetics at play, we point to the various communicative aspects in the design. These may be in conflict but circumscribe the setting for the exploration of a new aesthetics of sustainable fashion.

**DIFFERENT AESTHETIC APPROACHES TO DESIGN**

To address aesthetics in design is to look into different communicative strategies either within or surrounding the design object (cf. Folkmann 2013). Thus, the formative semiosis influencing the design may have several sources and take a variety of shapes. We will state two points: First, it is central for the conceptualization of the aesthetics of design how design objects may appear and whether and how their appearance is founded in either the meaning or the purpose of the design. Second, when employing aesthetics as a framework for the formative semiosis of design, we may speak of several types of aesthetics informing the design, both from within the design practice and from outside the cultural context. We will briefly elaborate on these two points:

1) In a recent article, the design historian Catharine Rossi discusses the question of the aesthetic appearance of critical and conceptual design objects in relation to their formative principle of production strategies (Rossi 2013). She points to the sometimes calculated and polished aesthetic appearance of objects that draw on principles of the homemade and/or avant-garde intervention, that is, where the outer appearance stands in a contradiction to its inner principle. As an example, the principle of the homemade in Tejo Remy’s chest of drawers You Can’t Lay Down Your Memory appears as an aestheticized and symbolic sign referring to conventional notions of the homemade rather than an index (in a Peircean sense) of the process of DIY by means of contiguity and causality. In Rossi’s analysis, ‘visual tropes’ and processes of aestheticization may (too) often be at play, and she makes a plea for an honest design expression ‘in order to avoid the fetishization of process’ (Rossi 2013, 84).

What is at stake in Rossi’s article is not just a question of the outer appearance and inner idea of the design but also of judging the ‘right’ fit. This aspect connects with a long, mainly Modernist tradition in design of creating ‘honest’ design that reflects its purpose (qua ‘form follows function’). Further reflecting the relationship between outer appearance and inner idea, it can also be questioned and investigated whether people evaluate the aesthetics of an object as better if they have knowledge about invisible aspects of the design, e.g. the ethics of sustainable production: If design objects are seen as ‘good’, will they also be regarded as more ‘beautiful’ (da Silva et al. 2014)? Also, conventions of aesthetics may be at stake. In the same way that much of the Critical Design of e.g. Fiona Raby and Anthony Dunne communicates through a polished design language aimed at display in galleries, so certain conventions exist for the appearance of
sustainable design, even if it may also attempt to break free of what Stuart Walker calls the ‘cage of aesthetic convention’ in relation to sustainability (Walker 2006). Still, though, sustainable design does have a specific set of established aesthetic-visual codes which neither the maker nor the audience can ignore but have to reflect upon.

2) It has for some time been debated what is to be understood specifically as the aesthetics of design. Recent approaches aim to circumscribe the aesthetics of design as the experience of function (as opposed to the non-interested experience of art, Forsey 2013) or as designers’ use of sensual means to create sensual and emotional appeal (Stockmarr 2014), an approach that aligns with the trend in recent years of investigating how the appeal to emotions and pleasure may be made applicable in design practice (Jordan 2000; Norman 2004; Hekkert 2006; Desmet 2010).

In the context of design practice, this would lead the aesthetic focus in the direction of how to work with the sensually communicative inventory of, e.g., materials, colours, forms etc. in order to investigate what constitutes the right expression of the design object in the sense of appealing to the user’s appreciation. The act of designing is framed by certain aesthetic codes, which are communicated by the design objects and so may become part of the user’s experience. In the case studies below, this regards how the students work with different materials and techniques in order to investigate what constitutes the right expression of the design object in the sense of appealing to the user’s appreciation. The act of designing is framed by certain aesthetic codes, which are communicated by the design objects and so may become part of the user’s experience. In the case studies below, this regards how the students work with different materials and techniques in order to communicate their ambition with clothing design. Prior to the construction of clothes, the design and production of textiles make up an important phase where the aesthetic effects of the fabric are considered. The aesthetic appeal of textiles is related to the sensory mechanisms of the human body and the degree of pleasantness we perceive by eye, hand, ear and nose (Hatch 1993, 44). In the design of garments, the sensory experience of the whole body and its movements is essential for the user experience of both garment fit and fabric feel.

As the case studies illustrate, other kinds of ‘aesthetics forces’ are at play, which calls for a broader view of aesthetics. What is regarded as ‘aesthetic’ is highly culturally dependent, and the criteria for aesthetic evaluation are formulated in a cultural context, which in the context of design is strongly influenced by mass media, especially the visual media. In a sustainable fashion context, this has been discussed by the fashion scholar Else Skjold (Skjold 2014). We may even state that cultural meaning in late modern societies is articulated in omnipresent ‘media environments’, where things turn into and are engulfed by media expressions, which in turn condition our experience of them (Lash and Lury 2007). To take the argument further, we may state that the media aestheticize when they circumscribe the aesthetic experience of things. In this sense, aestheticization can be seen as a ubiquitous cultural process of distributing and designating sensual meaning (cf. Rancière 2004; Oldemeyer 2008) and of positioning objects as ‘aesthetic’. With reference to our case studies, the visual expression of fashion magazines affects the experience of what the students consider ‘aesthetic’ in the design. Even if this may seem to be an external influence, it informs the actual design work and is thus internalized in it.
Thus, the case studies illustrate different kinds of aesthetic approaches to design: the work with sensual aspects in the design and the process of aestheticization in media images of fashion, which influence the design.

SUSTAINABLE FASHION – IN SEARCH OF NEW AESTHETIC EXPRESSIONS

The following examples are from a course module on sustainability with 5th-semester textile and fashion students from Design School Kolding in Denmark in 2013. The assignment brief was fairly open to interpretation, but the focus had to be on sustainability and on finding ways of prolonging the lifetime of textiles and garments in order to save resources and encourage users to adopt more sustainable consumption patterns.

To undergraduate students, the current fashion system is rather abstract, since they have not yet done their internship with a company, and a typical initial reaction to this assignment is that they do not want to design something that looks sustainable. So what sort of expressions do they have in mind? When asked, the students mention clothes that are ugly, unattractive and boring, whereas they are determined to create ‘original’ and fashionable garments to include in their portfolio. We may interpret this as the desire to be part of the current fashion system, which they admire, as they display no or little critical awareness before they begin working on the assignment. Over the years, however, there has been a gradual shift towards a genuine interest in sustainability among the students at Design School Kolding, sparking a curiosity to explore what sustainable fashion might be and a search for what kind of aesthetic expressions might be considered desirable – a trend that may ultimately lead to a new aesthetics for sustainability. A key didactic concern here is how to make the students more aware of the aesthetics they aim at and of the historical references that are always at play when one designs something new. In this paper, we leave out the institutional and didactic discussion about how to encourage fashion & textile students to engage more directly with user experiences during the design phase and simply mention an ongoing research project with the aim of developing new dialogue tools and methods for our students to support such dialogues (Riisberg et al. 2014).

Case 1: An Aesthetics for Upcycling

In the first case we look at the work of Dora Szentmihalyi, Tobias Jørgensen, Ronni Aakermann and Stephanie Lundby – in the following referred to as Group 1. Their main idea in regard to sustainability was to design for upcycling old textiles.

They set out by sketching ideas and creating a mood board – a common process that serves to visualize a project’s aesthetic expression; in group work, this process further
serves as a necessary step for negotiation among group members. While the fashion students were sketching 3D form, the textile students experimented by heat pressing different materials into sheets of PLA – a bioplastic made of maize. Sealing fabric in PLA radically changes the haptic sensation from a soft, textured and pliable material into a hard, ridged, smooth and transparent biocomposite. This material appeals to the visual sense and sparks surprise and curiosity due to the recognizable ‘frozen’ textile inside the plastic, which challenges former experiences of soft fabric and hard plastic.

Out of several samples they chose old lace tablecloth for the biocomposite material, primarily because they liked the visual aesthetic expression. Second, they argued that it had the potential to evoke nostalgic memories, and third, they chose it because it was made of cotton, which in combination with PLA would make a product that belonged to the ‘natural biological system’ (McDonough and Braungart 2002).

Once the biocomposite sheets had been produced they were laser cut and assembled into two fashionable ‘showpieces’ – a woman’s dress and a man’s suit. Looking at these garments, a fashion connoisseur would most likely be reminded of the works of the famous haute couture designer Paco Rabanne; on closer inspection, however, he or she would probably be somewhat puzzled by the slight misfit of aesthetics. The plastic materials used by Rabanne are thinner, glossy and monochrome, often in silver, gold, bright primary colours, black or pure white. The students’ garments have a very different appearance with their cream and beige colours, matt surface and lace ornaments. Also, the partial use of traditional textile in the garments creates a distinctive visual appearance as well as a particular sound when the wearer moves.

Figure 1. Laser cutting and first fitting on model.
Group 1 deliberately chose the visual ‘language’ of high fashion with its tradition for showpieces that are rarely comfortable to wear but are created for branding on the catwalk and for presentation in fashion media and at celebrity events. For the photo shoot they used a professional photographer, a sleek styling and a location suited for a high fashion magazine. However, if provided with information about the materials, the process and the assignment brief, the knowledgeable and alert observer would likely experience a different set of connotations.
The field on the students’ images here (Figure 3) is a maize field. As the biodegradable plastic is made of maize – a renewable resource – the image points to the environmental aspect of the material. The question of materials and sustainability has become an important issue, which is taught and emphasized in a course module during the second year at Design School Kolding. In the third year, however, when this course is offered, the students are also expected to build on their prior knowledge and consider what else designers can do to promote sustainable behaviour (see e.g. Grose 2013, Leerberg et al. 2010). This is challenging, since in fact the students are asked to question the underlying values of our consumer society. Thus, the school does not expect the undergraduates to come up with fully fledged answers but to engage in reflections and offer suggestions. This group offers a more environmentally friendly material solution: for aesthetic reasons, however, they insisted on using metal rings to assemble the garments. Knowing this would pose a problem at the end of the lifecycle they suggested that the user would have to take apart the garments and sort the two materials for recycling. If, on the other hand, the students had been willing to forego the aesthetics of the metal rings, they could have proposed assembly by 3D-printed PLA rings, thus promoting a mono-material solution that is more easily recycled or biodegraded. Thus, the students have taken steps towards sustainable design, and they have an idea about activating the user at the end of the lifecycle, but they are not willing to abandon a recognized aesthetics of the current fashion system, namely that of high fashion designer Paco Rabanne.

Case 2: An Aesthetics for Prolonging Use

In the second case, we look at the work of Anne Sofie Væbro, Julie Als, Stine Søgård Jensen and Sunna Ástþórsdóttir, in the following referred to as Group 2. Their aim was to prolong the lifetime of three styles through 1) the use of quality textile materials with natural biological properties and 2) possibilities for the user to change the look of the garments. Here it should be noted that the school always asks the students to relate the word ‘quality’ to product context, purpose and function. This is illustrated in a mood board with images and a brief text describing the intended users. Sometimes, the students carry out field studies to create the mood board, interviewing and photographing potential users.

In this case, the students’ mood board described the user as an adult woman who makes conscious personal choices about her clothing style. ‘She does not follow trends but signals personal values through her clothing. Her wardrobe consists of both “timeless” items and more spontaneous silhouettes that stand out from the norm’ (Project description Group 2, 2013).
Group 2 drew inspiration from form experiments with old clothes to create three styles that could be altered by the user: a pair of trousers to which the user could add a form of ‘apron’, either on the front or the back; a simple blouse with extremely long sleeves that could be pulled up to form decorative pleats; and a combined coat/jacket with four sleeves.

These features resulted in garments with a strong visual and tactile appeal, which evoked curiosity and surprise. However, if the black woollen gabardine trousers are worn without the ‘apron’ they have a classic look that can easily be combined with the wearer’s ‘normal’ wardrobe.

The ‘apron’ is double-sided and may spark associations to cowboy chaps when attached to the front of the pants. One side of the ‘apron’ is a matt material in dark grey, the other a shiny silk with a discreet digitally printed motif in grey tones and tiny pieces
of copper foil added on top. The coordination of the ‘apron’ colours and the black woollen pants makes a very coherent entity.

The blouse has extremely long sleeves covering the hands with possible connotations to traditional costumes from a number of cultures, e.g. Burma, China and Egypt (Tilke no year). The colours are pink and straw yellow, and the material – loosely felted wool applied to a stiff open plain weave in linen – conveys a feeling of candyfloss and gives the impression of a handmade artisanal product.

![Design by Anne Sofie Værbro, Julie Als, Stine Søgård Jensen and Sunna Æstþórsdóttir. Blouse, trousers and ‘apron’.

The jacket/coat is knitted in fine grey wool with an unusual grooved texture on the outside, while the inside surface is smooth in an off-white tone. The seems are sewn together on the outside, leaving a raw look, and the construction with four sleeves makes the garment ambiguous since it does not fit into normal categories.

The neutral photo studio setting lends a feel of ‘non-place’, also known as look book images in the fashion industry. The styling of the garments and the model’s hair covering her eyes convey a fashion and avant-garde aesthetic that creates a sense of ambiguity in the images. However, there are no signs indicating sustainability, except for the different ways in which the wearer can arrange the garment. To pick up on the sustainability aspect, therefore, one has to be well informed about the discourse of sustainable fashion, where one approach to prolonging the product’s lifetime is the category of modular garments (Fletcher and Grose 2012).

Group 2 thus tackles the assignment in a different way than Group 1, although the sustainability aspects in relation to the choice of materials was handled in much the same
way, with the choice of recyclable and biodegradable fibres. In regard to form and aesthetic expression, however, Group 2 discussed considerations about both functional and symbolic attributes, even though the language the students used was perhaps not that conscious and clear, since the creative process was fuelled by mood board images, sketching and prototyping. The result also invites the user to play with changing the look of the garments, and in this sense, Group 2 could be said to have created a more radical suggestion, pointing to a new and different approach to fashion thinking, than Group 1, which subscribes to a well-established symbolic fashion expression.

Figure 7. Design by Anne Sofie Værbro, Julie Als, Stine Søgård Jensen and Sunna Ástþórsdóttir. Coat/jacket in knitted wool with four sleeves.

DISCUSSION AND REFLECTION

This is a working paper in the sense that we explore the consequences of the students’ work, in the same way as they explore a new aesthetics for sustainable fashion. More cases may lead to the same findings as the two cases described above. The students may have an initial resistance to the perceived notion of sustainable aesthetics and may be seduced by images of the current fashion system and precursors in high fashion. The students, then, aim for new expressions. Interestingly, the results do not imply a misfit between an outer ‘false’ appearance and an inner ‘true’ idea, as implied in Rossi’s Modernist notion of ‘honest’ design, but instead reflects a search for a new aesthetics of sustainable design, which bears traces of the more or less established aesthetic-visual codes of sustainable design (the natural look and the downplayed colours) but also employs the visual and historical codes of the wider fashion system. In this process, the
design also becomes more reflective and aware of itself as a site of meaning, obtaining a link between outer appearance and inner idea.

The students also explored the possibility of creating a new aesthetics by working with the effects of the fabric. The fabric is not only a medium for creating the design but also a design object in itself, where aesthetic appeal is achieved by means of the tactility, form, colour and decoration of the fabric. In the collaboration of both textile and fashion students, the aesthetics of sustainable fashion ranges from the fibre to the final product; hence, both functional and symbolic features of the design are created in a dialogue between the two design disciplines.

In their search for a new expression, the students come close to a third aesthetic mode besides the one that is found in the design objects themselves and the one that lies in the contextual aspects informing the design: an avant-gardist aesthetics in search of the new. The students test what sustainability looks like, how the outer appearance may fit the inner idea, and how it should be perceived and, further, how the obtained expression may challenge given conceptions and understandings. Seen within the context of the course module on sustainability, the new aesthetics has not yet found its right shape – but it is on a promising path.

**REFERENCES**


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