

CREATIVE CUTTING APPROACHES: designing through a method

Author

Corneliu Dinu Bodiciu,
Lasalle College of the Arts, Singapore, Singapore.

Corresponding Author: dinu.bodiciu@lasalle.edu.sg

Keywords

Creative cutting, Body, Method, Investigation, Rethinking

Abstract

Fashion design and making practices follow in most of the times a similar journey which I would call the fashion design paradigm, that starts from the sketch or drape on the stand followed by pattern making, toiling and then the realization of the final garment. In this entire process the human form is central and has the agency to dictate the entire range of design and technical decisions which the designer is subjected to take throughout the creative process. Some designers have started to revolutionise this design process through unique creative cutting approaches as methods like the Subtraction Method, Transformational Reconstruction, Kinetic Garment Construction, Shadowear, just to name a few. Some of these methods radically shift the fashion design paradigm and decenter the role of the body shape from the process, some like Shadowear are even negating it. Bringing such approaches to the specialized fashion design education and revising the curriculum could de-establish the fashion design paradigm and change students' thinking, allowing them to re-imagine fashion. This paper is critically investigating how the implementation of some creative cutting approaches in fashion design curriculum is influencing students' thinking where designing becomes a process of re-consideration of the human body. By employing qualitative methods like semi-structured interviews and visual analysis, this approach seeks to identify if such curriculum shift is enabling students to approach designing in a non-linear process. Unlike the fashion design paradigm this educational model seeks to enable students to articulate own methodologies, parameters, and design tools, and through these to achieve novel and unique identities.

Introduction

Most undergraduate approaches of teaching fashion design and making (Sorger and Seivewright 2021; Faerm 2017) follow a linear process that starts with an initial concept/inspiration that is usually set by the designer/facilitator as a trigger of the design development. Starting from the brief, students are supposed to utilise a range of primary methods like visual analysis, observational drawing, draping and secondary methods (writings, existing creative explorations of the topic, trend forecasts etc.) to underpin and stimulate their creative response. Further creative explorations through experimentations with both construction and textile approaches are then allowing students to expand the field and identify a clear creative position. From this position, the work is then refined and articulated as a range of designs for a clear market sector and customer profile, that form a collection (Renfrew and Renfrew 2016). This collection is then translated into drafts and tested through toiling before being made in the final materials. Although the expansion of new digital approaches (Clo3D, Browswear etc.) have much helped to shortcut the making side of the process, the initial steps leading to the design of the collection remain mostly the same. In this research I will refer to this chain of steps as the *fashion design paradigm*. Although the *fashion design paradigm* contributes greatly in shaping a designer's practice for the fashion industry, I argue that it is formulaic particularly because is regimented by the industry's requirements for production next to the increased financial implications of fashion as a profit- making industry.

The *fashion design paradigm* has also strongly impacted the production of waste, firstly during the creative process, when designers imagine garments without a consideration of pattern shapes or arrangement of the cutting marker and later, during the prototyping stage when toiles are conducted to achieve the perfect fit and desired proportions. And because in the process of prototyping the designer's vision has to be achieved in reality, I see the creative process and the making as an exercise of power and control of the material. Thus, I argue that the fashion design paradigm itself teaches students to control and dominate the materials and the creative tools that are meant to stimulate ideation and thinking.

Context

In my teaching practice I have encountered a range of novel creative methods that have departed from the fashion design paradigm. Methods like Subtraction (Roberts, 2013) or Transformational Reconstruction (Sato, 2011) re-think the process of designing and making. Because both methods rely heavily on draping the design process happened on the body form and allows for unexpected volumes and proportions to form and shift the initially imagined silhouette. These approaches enable the design process to become a discursive practice between designer, body form and material. Whilst very creative and sometimes unexpected the collection takes shape through the consideration of self-discovered articulations of the methods supported by the range of materials used, colour palette and manufacturing details.

Somewhat inspired by *Taking a Line for a Walk: Assignments in Design Education* (Paim, Gisel and Bergmark 2016) I developed a range of exercises catered specially for fashion design. These exercises intend to expand the student's understanding of the conventional

features and notion of the body. Such exercises are: *Shadowear*, *Changing the Body/Challenging the Body*, *Writing a Garment*, and I will briefly explain each one for clarity.

Shadowear is a method of designing and making garments that shifts the focus of the designer to the bi-dimensional shadow of the body instead of the body itself. The method uses the shadow as an abstraction of the body. Through this process of abstraction, the image of the body is depleted of any trace regarding gender, race, age and size (Bodiciu, 2020). The shadow also plays as a space for negotiation of garment detailing and construction information, requiring a strong set of knowledge and ability to visualize works tri- dimensionally. The power of control with which the designer approaches the entire process is diminished through this method because the outcome is unexpected (Figure 1.). As this method fosters a new agential exchange between the designer and their work, the designer becomes a spectator of the final result (Bodiciu, 2020).



Figure 1. *Shadowear* (2017) process documentation from the image of the shadow (left) to the final garment (right)



Figure 2. *Changing the Body/Challenging the Body* process documentation from initial padding (left) to final garment without padding (right)

Writing a garment is another creative exercise that engages writing as trigger of the design process. Somewhat responding to Roland Barthés *The Fashion System* (2010 [1967]) the exercise aims to expose the potential of the written word to be subjected to interpretation. Participants work in pairs and each describes in writing a garment (imagined, or existing). It is up to the participant to communicate the garment as detailed as possible or not. In private, each participant then makes a sketch of the garment they described in text, for future comparison. The participants exchange the writing while keeping the sketch secret. Taking the text as guidance each participant develops the described garment up to final fabric. The dialogue that emerges when the sketch and the final garment are compared reveals the subjective ways in which each individual perceives, imagines and represents design data.

Mixing a range of creative approaches for designing and making garments from *Transformational Reconstruction* and *Subtraction* to *Shadowear*, *Changing the Body/Challenging the Body* and *Writing a Garment*, I have shaped a creative fashion cutting course that is delivered at the second year of Bachelors in Fashion Design. The course is delivered after the general knowledge on drafting and draping are taught in the first level of the programme. The course aims to enable students to think outside of the confined approach of designing and making garments as directed by the *fashion design paradigm*.

I started this investigation based on the assumption that such a teaching approach when students are confronted with a wide range of creative making approaches enables them to devise their own methods of working and has the potential to impact their subsequent projects and graduation work. Through this I mean that the confrontation is not with a prescriptive process of designing but with a multitude of unique methods which open a new way of thinking and designing. This way of thinking takes the method as tool for creative development, allowing the designer to negotiate the outcome in a discursive manner with the method they have devised/adapted.

Methods of investigation

After the third iteration of the module in a bachelors' programme in fashion design, this research gathers empirical data through a qualitative investigation that mixes a discussion of some case-studies of the work produced by students which have undertaken this course, as well as insights from semi-structured interviews (Denscombe, 2010; Adams, 2015) I have conducted with some members of the 3 cohorts. I have obtained the right to publish the following visual materials and insights from the interviews in this article directly from the participants which have read prior to the interview a participant information sheet and agreed with the participation by signing a consent form.

I have conducted 7 interviews with participants, some which have graduated the programme and some that were still studying at the time of the collection of data. I have selected the participants based on the fact that each has devised/adapted own method of designing and making that became the cornerstone of their graduation project. I have conducted the interviews in the aim to unpack the role of the creative fashion cutting class in their education, namely how they find it impacting on their own practice. As the participants are familiar with the *fashion design paradigm* as the design approach taught in the first level of bachelors, the interviews also aim to uncover student's opinions on the two approaches in comparison. The third aim of the interviews was to identify which methods out of those delivered have had the most impact on their education and in what ways. Next to the data gathered from interviews I will discuss some of the projects which the participating students have developed in order to sustain the discussion of the data.

Data and discussion

A first case study is a graduation project by student Joshua Ng whose motivation to find new ways of minimizing waste production for casual forms of dress uses a combination of creative cutting approaches with zero waste thinking (Figure 3a.-3c.). The method he invented is titled *Spaghetti Cutting*, and is named after the very long panels that make the garments cut through this method. Based on a mathematical formula he identified that most fabrics used in the industry have 7 inch as a common denominator. Taking this measurement as the width of each panel, the garments are produced through a spiraling process that minimizes the production waste with up to 20%. After testing the method on staple wardrobe pieces (Figure 3a & 3b), the student further explored the method in creative ways to explore new volumes and proportions, as seen in Figure 3c.



Figure 3. *Spaghetti Cutting* (2020) by Joshua Ng (3a) Technical drawing; (3b) garment in final fabric; (3c) creative interpretation of the method.

Another example of a work that was developed based on a unique method devised by the student was aiming to generate a certain sense of closeness between the wearer and the designer through the medium of fluid garments. Through fluid garments, student Kimberly Lintungan understands a range of engineered wearables which through fastenings enable the wearer to approach each piece in multiple ways. To stimulate this dialogical interaction between the wearer and the garment the entire range was designed based on basic geometric shapes like circles, squares and rectangles, as seen in Figure 4.



Figure 4. *Fluid garments* (2020) by Kimberly Lintungan: Technical flats (left) final garment (center and right)

A third case study is the work of Simrita Dass who investigates the abstraction of the body through a combination of photography and collage for the production of flat garments. As seen in Figure 5, the student generates a series of collages from self-taken photographs which become the stimulus of design development. Strongly inspired by Shadowwear method, as highlighted by the student in her sketchbook and during the interview, the approach of abstraction is meant to enable the wearer to playfully interact with the garments and take own decisions in terms of how the pieces could be worn. The designer attempted to decrease her power to control the act of wearing allowing a great space for negotiation between the wearer's body and aesthetic drive and the garments.

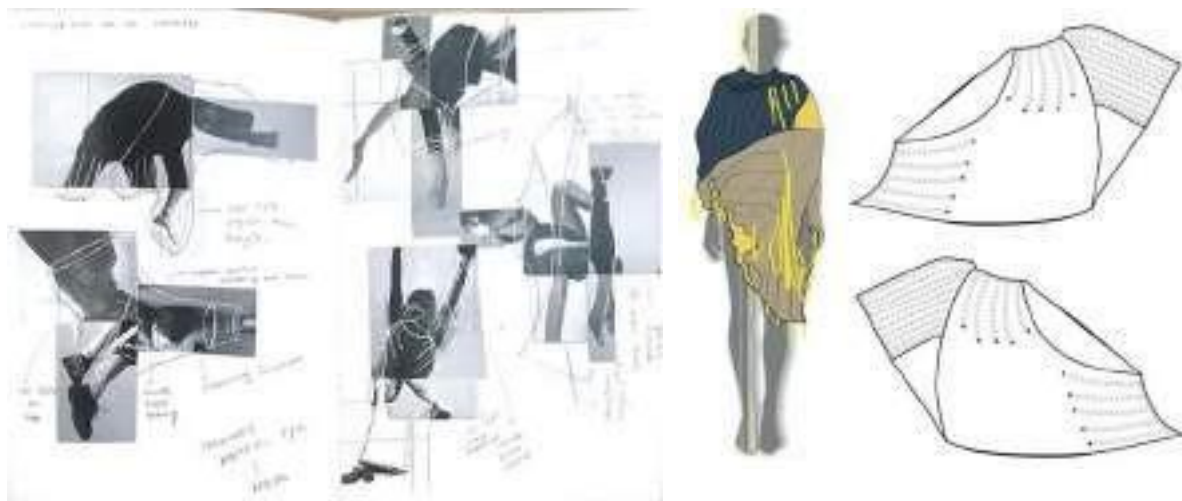


Figure 5. Work in progress by Simrita Dass (2021) Inspirational collage (left); fashion illustration (center) and technical flat of the same garment (right)

The last case study follows the same approach in developing a unique method of work. Adeline Biancha Gunawan invented a board game (Figure 6.) to enable designers and not only to approach the act of designing and making garments as a game. Adeline has designed game that has multiple option of play from single to multi-player or from fresh fabrics to upcycling existing garments. This approach opens new directions for fashion design, where the creative process becomes subjected to a set of uncontrollable actions and tools. The game also reveals the subjectivity of each player driven by individual pre-requisites that highlight fashion as a social and cultural phenomenon situated in space and time.

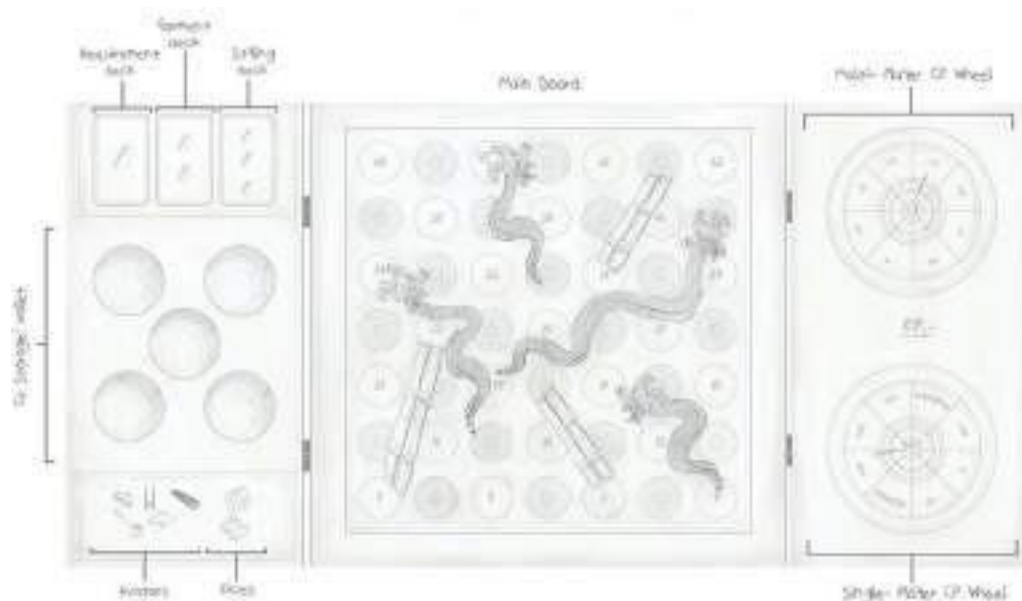


Figure 6. Adeline Biancha Gunawan (2021) Sketch of a board game designed to enable fashion designing

As briefly introduced, the 4 examples of methods devised by students to produce fashion-related content next to other examples of work which have not been discussed here have each very clear and unique features that follow a creative cutting approach rather than the *fashion design paradigm*. By devising a unique method of designing and making students develop a clear identity that reside in the method itself and furthermore, if the method would be approached by someone else with a new set of moods and materials the method will remain to be visible in the final products. These examples enable me to assume that the way students approach design has been strongly influenced by the creative cutting course undertaken and to verify this assumption I have conducted a range of semi structured interviews to unpack the students' perceptions on the taught curriculum.

I have conducted 7 semi-structured interviews amongst which 4 participants are the authors of some earlier discussed works. I have organised my questions in 3 main directions, first to understand the relation between the *fashion design paradigm* and the creative fashion cutting course, second to unpack the impact of the creative fashion cutting curriculum on their own practice and understanding of design process, and lastly to find out which methods taught have impacted the most their thinking.

All the participants have identified that the way the content is organized and delivered in the first level of the bachelor', when they learn the basic knowledge on design and construction, the curriculum follows a prescriptive model. I identify very much this model to follow the *fashion design paradigm*. As some of the participants observed, in the "traditional way from sketch to toile there is a clear step by step process" (Kimberly) which is very different to the creative fashion cutting course. The participants also observed that while very different in content and delivery, the two courses should not exclude each other as the traditional way (*fashion design paradigm*) establishes the foundations for the design students. This means that

the *fashion design paradigm* is relevant at the early stages of design education to enable the students to understand basic principles of design and processes of making as the key parameters of the industry. Once grounded in a discipline, in the second year of the bachelors' the basic knowledge could and should be challenged by novel and creative approaches that broaden the students' understanding of body, garments, and implicitly fashion because "the creative cutting classes really change the way I perceive garments" and "the way I view design and the way I approach design becomes different" (Kimberly). It is important to highlight that these insights confirm that the two design pedagogies should not exclude each other but be complimentary, and addressed at the right stages of fashion design education.

Moving further, in terms of impact of the creative cutting course on student's practice and perception of fashion design, all participants have observed that the course "changes the way I perceive garments" (Kimberly), it "made me question the way that a garment can be constructed" (Shi Jie) and furthermore it enables the students to "create own ways of designing" (Justin) and thinking. As the creative fashion cutting course does not follow the established methods of draping or drafting and some of the workshops are not requiring measurements or even a tridimensional body form, the participants admitted that it is a very disruptive teaching approach which "brakes" (Simrita and Kimberly) established knowledge and approaches of design. Some participants observed that the way curriculum pushes them outside of their comfort zones and it enables them to explore directions that they never imagined before or would not have been achieved through traditional methods (Shi Jie).

Next to the observations articulated by the participants it is evident that the creative cutting curriculum enables students to approach design from unforeseen and unexpected perspectives thus shifting completely the prerequisite understanding of the body, garment and processes of making. The process of design becomes an experiential journey, a form of embodied practice of the designer. Furthermore, all the participants also observed that because they have been exposed to a diverse range of methods of design, each supporting the production of a very distinct final outcome, their further practice has been strongly influenced by this way of thinking (Joshua). Based on these observations I argue that design in general should be understood as a large and rhizomatic (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987) range of methods rather than a linear set of actions. This understanding is enabling the student to realise their own agency in proposing their own and unique methods or re-interpretations of existing methods. Thus, seeing fashion design as a method of negotiating between body and other material entities and ways of embodiment releases design thinking from framed education paradigms.

The last aim of this investigation was to identify which workshops from those delivered in the creative fashion cutting course have impacted the most students' thinking and practice. The majority of the participants considered that Shadowear is strongly shifting their understanding of body and garments and enables them to feel free and liberated from the pressures of designing and producing something that has to fit and dress the body in an expected way. Other two workshops, Transformational Reconstruction and Changing the Body / Challenging the Body have been mentioned to impact the participants' understanding of body and garment construction. I observe that the 3 workshops have in common a certain power to abstract the body, either through the reduction of its' tridimensional features or through an active distortion

of its' shapes and volumes. Through this abstraction perhaps the students experience (in an unaware manner) a certain distancing from the familiar, from the established features of the human body. Through this distancing the sartorial politics of the body can be overridden much easier in the design process. In established design practices like the *fashion design paradigm*, the designer is trained to follow the body' shape and enable the body to be presentable in public, thus the paradigm itself is subjected to the social discourses and politics of the body.

As this research is in development and will continue to be conducted for more data and insights from participants, I will refrain to conclude at this point in time. Some directions that will lead to the later conclusion section have started to already form in this section. This discussion will also serve as new strands of dialogue with future participants to test newly formed assumptions.

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