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**Fantasy Dressing and its relation to mainstream fashion: an international and cross-cultural exploration.**

**Introduction**

'Street style' is present in a range of fashion media, whether in the form of images snapped outside Top Shop in London, or on the streets of Toyko, and invariably consists of a photograph of a person who stands for quirky individuality or a particular trend or look. There may sometimes be brief information on what is being worn, and a couple of words on what the person likes to where, perhaps hinting at why. The focus is therefore upon appearance; as a result street style is seen primarily in terms of how things look. An understanding of the histories of street style in the popular imagination (and indeed to a degree in academic circles) centres upon a sequence of visually exciting looks (Polhemus, 1994).

However, when one considers that these same styles are worn by people on their bodies, perhaps over a period of time, as they walk, talk and interact in them, these same styles need to be understood in terms of how they feel on the body and to the person. They can be seen as having an intimate relationship to the person's sense of self: whether that is an identity projected everyday, or one that involves creating a fantasy, different identity. This paper will focus upon how such 'styles' or seemingly objective 'looks' relate to a person's sense of themselves, with a particular emphasis upon emotional well-being.

It is based upon a mass observation of street fashion (over the last 4 years) in Nottingham, called the Fashionmap archive; the observation has been international for the last 2 years, as it has also taken place in Hong Kong, and as such, this paper also considers what such cross-cultural observations can illuminate. The research project consists of both a visual record of what is worn, the places where these outfits are worn, how these looks change over time, and also through interviews a person's own account of what they are wearing. In considering how people connect to what is in fashion, the paper will focus in particular upon 2 things: the long term attitudes that people have to clothing as seen in slower moving trends, and also the seemingly opposing area of 'dressing up'. This paper will consider the relationship these phenomena have to 'mass fashion' and 'fast fashion', in particular through notions of 'nostalgia' (Hutcheon, 2002) and the idea of reintroducing 'fun' to clothing.

**Methodology.**

The Fashionmap research project is an ongoing observation of what people are wearing in Nottingham. It aims to interrogation fashion as a lived practice. It therefore does not base its understanding of fashion upon what is presented in magazines or in the catwalks but, since 2004 it has sought to track what people are wearing, and how this changes. The main research observations have been carried out in Nottingham; however over the past 2 years they have also been carried out in Hong Kong. The project is therefore international in its scope. Given the internationalisation of trends, and the global nature of the fashion industry, understanding what people are wearing is also crucially situated within these global flows of trends and ideas. By comparing different sites, this allows an understanding of local particularity and also of potential ideas of sameness; it allows an understanding of how styles and fashions both emerge in particular contexts but also ways in which styles and trends from 'elsewhere' can be appropriated and made local. This paper is the first example of using the data from both observations and as such it also points to the future possibilities for such a comparison and how this can be expanded upon.

The data capture involves a combination of both the taking of photographs, and also carrying out an interview with participants in order to try and access some of the narratives behind why people have chosen particular looks. What is unique about this particular research project is that it is carried out by trained student researchers. In the early stages of the project, when the observations were being

piloted, the first set of photographs that were collected, were the basis of a symposium to discuss the potentials of such research. One response was that the photographs looked remarkably like many of the students in art and design, as when asked to photograph the trends of the time, potential areas of innovation or those that looked interesting to them, they tended to photograph an actual or an idealised version of themselves. This gave rise to discussions of representativeness of the data; as a result, what ensued was the decision that rather than try and make the project a view of all sectors of the population of Nottingham, the project was based upon the students drawing upon their own insider knowledges, as they photographed their own social groups (this is discussed more extensively in Woodward, 2008). The emphasis is therefore not necessarily upon striking diversity within this group, but rather upon the subtle nuances of identification and differentiation.

The aims of the project are explorative and are those which fit within this broader desire to understand fashion as it is worn, and within the context of the life-worlds and relationships of those being photographed. This project is not ethnographic; however by utilising the position of the insider researcher it does allow for many of the insights such as this. As photographs and observations are taken not only on the street, but also in particular bars and locations (and in some instances in people's homes), they are also situated in contexts. As many photographs are taken in the same locations this creates a portrait of a location and an understanding of the 'taste constellations' (Beaverstock and Crewe, 1998) that

cohere around this. As the project has been ongoing since 2004, it has been able to shed light on the rate at which fashion changes, documenting both the swiftly arriving and departing trends, and perhaps more significantly is the longer term shifts in clothing, as they evolve out of previous looks (see Woodward, 2009). This more gradual shifts are less initially apparent, and it has been through the methodology and the understanding of the subtleties of assemblage and location that Fashionmap has been able to reveal these things. Through looking at these subtle changes and continuities, and also therefore the attachments that people have to particular items of clothing, this project is also able to shed light on the issue of 'well-being'. Although this was not initially an aim of the project, it is something which can be well understood through the emotional attachments people have to their clothing.

**<u>Personal attachments to clothing:</u>**

This can be seen to dovetail with Woodward's (2007) previous research into women's wardrobes and how women choose their clothing every morning. This research looked at the long term relationship people had to the items of clothing they owned; items that were either passed down by other family members, or given as gifts were seen to externalise the person giving the clothing, and as such come to have meaning in terms of the ways in which an item of clothing can embody a relationship. Other items are cherished as they have been worn on numerous occasions and as such embody particular memories or periods of a person's life. Banim and Guy (2001) note women keep items of clothing that

remind them of a person they used to be (or indeed wish they could be again). The item is therefore cherished for the narratives and memories that the item is associated with. People can have a strong connection and attachment to an item of clothing based upon the act of wearing it, as the item of clothing softens as it is worn, or comes to fit someone perfectly. This attachment comes from how it feels upon the body, but also how the item looks, and the associations that we have with clothing. This is something that the 'vintage' trend taps into; as Gregson and Crewe (2003) have shown, and also Palmer (2005), items here are also valued as people can imagine the narratives behind the items of clothing. Even if they have not been personally owned, it is possible to imagine personalised histories and memories associated with the items of clothing. This can be seen as a form of nostalgia, which Hutcheon (2002) has argued is symptomatic of the current time: whether this is a longing for a particular period of the past, a former period of a person's own life or merely a sense of 'pastness' that the item of vintage clothing evokes.

Throughout the whole of the observations in Nottingham, the tendency for many people to talk of favouring vintage pieces, or wearing them is evident. Often this is paying lip-service to it as it is clearly seen as being something that is of the moment (with vintage being a verbal shorthand for individual in the current UK context), when actually when asked about the source of the outfit they are wearing, what emerges is that the person is actually wearing top to toe high street. However, on other occasions there is clearly a sense that vintage offers

something the high street doesn't. Many people interviewed in the Fashionmap project discuss not liking the high street either as 'everyone looks the same' or that they cannot relate to it. It is not just the items of clothing but the whole experience of going to the high street as some people state liking to feel that they have made a 'find'. The high street is therefore rejected as it is 'mass' and also as it is perceived as sterile. What is interesting is that often it is not the actual items of clothing people are rejecting but more the sense of sameness of it. This also points to the alienating facets of mass fashion; within the high street the seemingly immense amounts of choice presented, yet at the same time the ways that these 'choices' are often choices of the same types of clothing.  What the research here suggests is that instead, people want to reconnect with clothing, and wear items that they connect to and relate to. This is possible through wearing items that they have worn for a long time, or shopping in vintage shops. This is evidenced in the Fashionmap research project as an analysis of the clothing styles over the last 4 years shows that not only do certain trends change more slowly, but also certain items are still being worn despite the fact they are no longer 'in' fashion in the same way. The example of the ripped denim skirt is one that can be seen from 2004 through to 2006; similarly the example of leggings which were stated as being 'out of fashion' in several fashion magazines in their barometers of cool. However, it is clear that once people adapt their wardrobe to certain items, the attachment that is felt means that they don't want to change their entire outfits based upon what is in fashion. The majority of the people that are interviewed in the Fashionmap archive are those between the

ages of 18 and 24, and clearly those who are ones which would be expected to change their outfits with regularity. The fact that there are still certain styles which persist make clear that not only do people have a personal aesthetic, but also that there is an attachment and connection that is important.

**Dressing up and having fun:**

The other side of this long lasting relationship is that of the 'fun' way that people relate to clothing. This is clearly seen in the examples of trends that arrive and depart quickly; however, it is important not to assume that these are generated by the fashion industry as a product of 'fast fashion'. For instance, the 'nu rave' style is documented in Nottingham over the course of a year (2007-8) as it appears and disappears relatively rapidly. There is a clear influence of the, now closed, club Boom Box in London, and similar 'nu rave' nights in Nottingham. As two key figures in the London Club scene (whom many of those interviewed in the Nottingham observation cited as influential) Agynes Deyn and Henry Holland stated ''the internet makes us quite disposable, you have to keep yourself interesting" and "people are dressing up again – as in the 80's, the scene is inspiring fashion again" (cited in Richardson, C. 2007). The bright colours of the clothing and the hair that is dyed brightly is something which marks it as a fun and exuberant style of dressing. It is something which is a clear recycled version of rave in the 90s which was longer lasting as it involved a commitment to going to raves, and listening to the particular type of music. The fact that it emerged and disappeared more quickly this time around makes clear that it was more of a

trend than a lasting subculture. However, it raises interesting issues around the ideas of 'fun' and dressing up. Of those interviewed in Fashionmap, one girl for instances dyed her hair blue as she liked the look and thought it looked different. It is clearly about injecting a sense of 'fun' back into fashion. Interestingly towards the end of the year there is an instance of a group of young people dressing up in 'nu rave' as a parody of the style on a night out in a very different sort of bar. This makes clear that the style had come full circle. It also highlights that even those not part of the trend, were injecting the 'dressing up' into their night out. What is documented in our observations can also be seen as present in designer fashion, for Autumn Winter 2008, seen the Alice in Wonderland story book look from PPQ, and Circus Performer from Eley Kishimoto (Harries, R. 2008). Whilst this has filtered into designers, and therefore plays into ideas in fashion surrounding notions of dressing up, it can also be seen as a stepping outside of fashion. That is, a word that was used by many of the people who dressed up like that was that of 'it's fun' to dress up. Character play and dressing up has become part of the unofficial dress code at several club nights in Nottingham, with one girl dressing up as a Bassett's Allsort.

In the examples in Nottingham, there is no official code of fancy dress. This forms an interesting contrast and also continuity with the practices of fantasy dressing in Hong Kong. Emerging from the observations in Hong Kong is the more explicit mode of dressing up; what emerges form the observations is the strong influence of Japanese fashion and street style on what is worn there. For

instance, the Lolita style, is one that has been recognized as an example of dressing up in Japan, is also present in Hong Kong. What the Fashionmap data from Hong Kong shows is the different permutations of the Lolita style Classic Lolita, Sweet, Gothic. One research project focused upon Classic Lolitas (Olivia Leung, 2008). The Classic Lolitas were all Japanese culture devotees, and read a magazine called 'The gothic and Lolita bible', were part of internet forums, and all knew of each other. The use of such 'bibles' serves to standardises what the style is. There is still a slight difference to Japan, as some of the Hong Kong Lolitas mix their clothes with, for example, an item something from high street. There are however still clear codes of dress that have to be adhered to, extending not only to the basic outfit, but also the nails (use of studs on them), and also behaviour. For example, one young woman (seen in figures 1 and 2) mentions going to an exclusive hotel for afternoon tea, with a clear interest and adherence to traditional ideas of etiquette. What this raises is that even if it is a look that is 'fun' and is a form of fantasy dressing, it is also clearly hard work, and rules that have to be followed to get it right.

**Figure 1.** Interviewee Asa at Disneyland hotel Oriental
22.12.2007

**Figure 2.** Interviewee Asa at Mandarin Hotel,19.01.08

There is an interesting relationship to the mainstream; on one level it can be seen as a reaction to the pressures of jobs and everyday life, as a return to notions of 'innocence' and the childishness of dressing up. For example, one interviewee states that she has to dress in a very different way when working, as seen in her outfits for the day, and that she wears to work as a teacher. See figures 3 and 4.

**Figure 3**. Sharon day wear        **Figure 4**. Sharon 'classic Lolita' at tea party.

In this instance the outfits can be seen as a reaction to the constraints of what she wears to work and in the day, yet it is also a continuity. Given the emphasis upon uniform in the Hong Kong context, the way of 'fantasy dressing' can be seen as still being as rule bound as the more explicit forms of uniform. This can also be understood in the wider phenomenon of cosplay, as there is in the Hong Kong context a wider culture of role play, and the ideas of dressing up in particular characters. Even frivolity is uniformed and sanctioned in particular ways.

There is a clear contrast between this and the UK. The area of continuity is however in the role played by the internet and online worlds such as Second Life which involve the creation of a particular character. Playing roles online is more of an everyday part of life for young people in the UK today; what the data from

Fashionmap shows is that this is starting to become more everyday. Starting off with more explicitly sanctioned ways of dressing up such as burlesque, this has now mutated to a more fluid idea of fantasy dressing.  The fantasy dressing in Hong Kong remains more explicit and based upon particular predefined roles and looks. In the UK is more fluid; seen in an example of one young man who changed his look with great regularity, 3 different ones are shown in figures 5, 6 and 7 (the photographs are all taken within a period of 6 months).
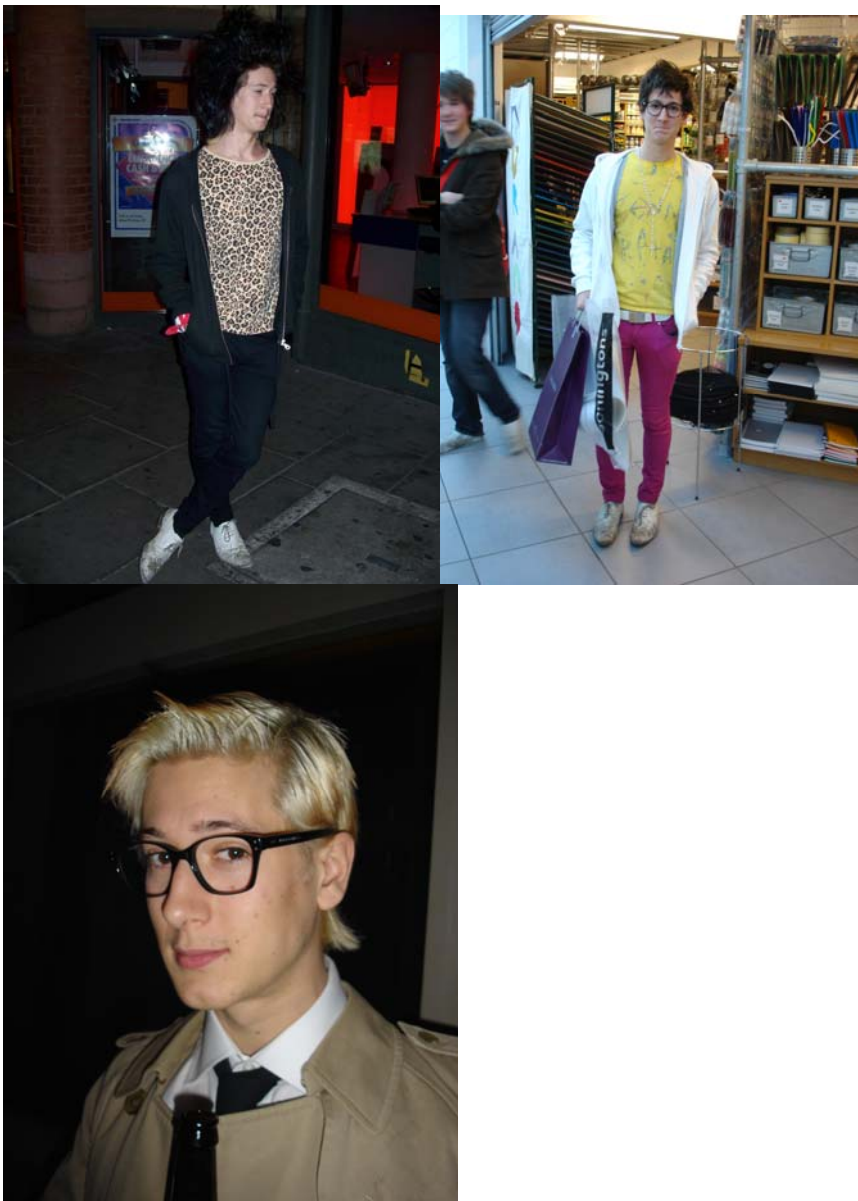
**Figures 5 – 7**. **Changing looks**. September 2007 to March 2008.

This relates to Ash and Wilson's (1992: 136) idea that dressing involves playing a role as we invent 'our costumes for each successive appearance'. However, what is important to note is that this constantly changing way of dressing is not following fashion, but rather a different form of reinvention as one other person interviewed in Nottingham stated "I can't afford to keep up with fashion so if I create my own style then it's never out – it's just my own". Fantasy dressing involves a clear stepping outside of fast fashion. It is still not totally 'free for all' or individualized, indeed as becomes apparent from Baker's research project (2008) is that these means of dressing up tends to cohere around particular club nights where everyone tends to dress up, and also interestingly where people dress up

like their friends (see figure 8).

**Figure 8**. Two young men posing.

They are given the safety of not standing out too much as they are dressing like their friends, yet are still able to have 'fun'.


**Conclusions:**

This paper has considered two seemingly opposing trends: that of the long term attachments people might have to their clothing, and the dressing up in 'fun' seemingly frivolous clothing. What has emerged from the paper is that these tendencies are in fact linked, in that in both instances this allows for a connection

to clothing. In one case this is about a strongly personalised attachment to clothing that arises out of wearing an item or a style over a period of time, that it comes to effectively externalise the self. In the other instance, it involves dressing up either in looks that are rapidly changing, or as the examples from Hong Kong show, taking on a predefined look and sartorial code, and trying to adhere to it as closely as possible. Even if the fantasy clothing is a stepping 'outside' in some instances of fashion and the pressures of everyday life, it is also about a continuity; for example in the case of Hong Kong, it links to the tendency towards wearing uniforms and of cosplay. Whilst the examples are clearly different, both can be seen as a way of stepping outside of 'fashion', whether this is through a rejection of the definitions of what is 'in' at any one time, or through fantasy dressing. There is also an interesting link through the notion of 'nostalgia' which Hutcheon (2002) defines as a longing for a feeling, rather than a particular place or time. This is clearly relevant to both the Lolita style and also to the examples of dressing up in the UK.  This paper has only started to sketch out the continuities and differences between different sites and examples, and demonstrates the future potentials for international and cross cultural collaboration.

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