

THREADS OF TRANSFORMATION: REIMAGINING FASHION WITH JANE BENNETT'S NEW MATERIALISM

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KEYWORDS

New Materialism, Political Ecology, Thing-Power, Climate Crisis, Sustainable Fashion

ABSTRACT

Since the Industrial Revolution, as human activities utilizing science and technology have intensified, humanity has become a geological force capable of influencing the climate. In this era, atmospheric chemist Paul Crutzen coined the term "Anthropocene" instead of "Modernity." The Anthropocene challenges the longstanding human conception that separated humans from nature and highlights that human freedom is not an absolute freedom but rather a conditional one, constrained by the Earth's resources. It took about a decade after Crutzen for the discourse of the Anthropocene to enter the field of humanities. Dipesh Chakrabarty's "<Climate of History: Four Theses>," published in 2009, is considered the first paper to bring this new era of awareness, the Anthropocene, into the field of humanities. Alongside this, Jane Bennett's "<Vibrant Matter>," published in 2010, is a prominent work illustrating how perceptions of objects are changing in the Anthropocene era.

This paper explores the transformative potential of Jane Bennett's New Materialism in reshaping fashion design practices in response to the climate crisis. It examines how Bennett's concepts of 'thing-power' and 'vital materiality' challenge conventional views of materials in the fashion industry, advocating for a more sustainable and ecologically responsive approach. By analysing current fashion practices through the lens of political ecology, this study highlights the industry's significant impact on the environment and calls for a radical rethinking of material use and design processes. The paper presents case studies where New Materialist principles have been successfully applied, demonstrating their effectiveness in promoting sustainability. Through this exploration, it becomes evident that embracing New Materialism in fashion design not only fosters environmental consciousness but also unlocks creative potential, offering a path towards a more sustainable and ethically responsible fashion industry. This study contributes to the discourse on sustainable fashion and environmental ethics, providing practical insights and theoretical underpinnings for future research and practice in fashion design.

INTRODUCTION

In an era marked by urgent environmental crises, the fashion industry stands at a critical crossroads. Historically, this industry has been a significant contributor to environmental degradation, yet it also holds immense potential

for leading transformative change. This paper delves into the intersection of fashion design and the climate crisis through the lens of Jane Bennett's New Materialism, a perspective that challenges traditional notions of passive materials and advocates for recognizing the vibrant life of matter. Bennett's theory of "thing-power" and "vital materiality" offers a revolutionary approach to understanding and interacting with the material world, one that can radically reshape how fashion is conceptualized, designed, and consumed.

The urgency of this re-evaluation cannot be overstated. As the climate crisis intensifies, the fashion industry is increasingly scrutinized for its environmental footprint, encompassing issues from resource depletion to waste generation. This paper argues that embracing New Materialism in fashion design is not merely an aesthetic or ethical choice but a necessary shift towards sustainability and environmental responsibility. Through this exploration, the study aims to illuminate how New Materialism can provide innovative pathways for reimagining fashion in the climate era, transforming it from a contributor to environmental problems into a catalyst for ecological solutions and sustainability.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

The contemporary fashion industry, a dynamic and multifaceted sector, has long been a significant contributor to global environmental challenges. Characterized by rapid production cycles and high consumer demand, it has fostered a culture of "fast fashion", leading to substantial resource consumption, waste generation, and environmental degradation. This unsustainable trajectory has intensified the urgency for a paradigm shift in the industry, especially in the face of the escalating climate crisis.

Enter Jane Bennett's New Materialism, a philosophical perspective that challenges the traditional hierarchy between human and non-human actors in the material world. Central to Bennett's discourse is the concept of "thing-power" - the idea that objects and materials possess their own agency and vitality. This perspective radically alters the way materials are viewed in the context of design and production. In fashion design, this translates to a deeper appreciation and understanding of the materials' intrinsic qualities, lifecycles, and ecological impacts. However, the application of New Materialism in fashion design is not just a theoretical exercise. It is a practical imperative in response to the growing environmental concerns. The fashion industry, at its core, is about materiality - the fabrics, threads, and dyes used to create garments. Bennett's theory offers a lens through which to re-evaluate these materials, not as passive elements to be consumed and discarded, but as active participants in an ecological system.

This paper situates itself at this critical juncture, where the need for sustainable practices in fashion design is undeniable. By weaving together, the principles of New Materialism and the challenges of the climate crisis, it seeks to explore how a reimagined approach to fashion can contribute to more sustainable and environmentally conscious practices. In doing so, it aims to shed light on the potential of New Materialism as a transformative force in the fashion industry, paving the way for a future where fashion and sustainability are inextricably linked.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The integration of sustainability into fashion design has been the subject of extensive scholarly discussion, reflecting a growing awareness of the industry's environmental impact. Fletcher and Grose (2012) highlight the need for a paradigm shift in fashion, emphasizing the adoption of sustainable practices that go beyond mere cosmetic changes. Their work lays the foundation for understanding the critical role of material choice and production processes in sustainable fashion.

Building upon this, the concept of New Materialism, as expounded by Jane Bennett (2010), offers a ground breaking perspective. Bennett's argument for recognizing the vibrant life of matter challenges traditional views that position materials as inert. Her theory of "thing-power" asserts that materials are not just passive entities but active agents that interact with and influence human behaviour and decision-making. This perspective has been instrumental in

encouraging a rethinking of materiality in various disciplines, yet its application in fashion design remains underexplored.

Recent studies have begun to bridge this gap. For instance, Smelik (2018) applies New Materialist theory to fashion, proposing a more ethical and responsible approach to material use that acknowledges their agency. Similarly, Küchler and Miller (2015) explore how materials can actively shape fashion practices, arguing for a design philosophy that is more attuned to the materiality of garments.

The intersection of fashion design and the climate crisis is another critical area of focus. Scholars like Niinimäki (2020) have examined how sustainable fashion practices can contribute to mitigating the climate crisis. These studies underscore the urgency of adopting new frameworks like New Materialism to rethink how the fashion industry operates in the context of environmental sustainability. There is a noticeable gap, however, in the literature regarding the practical application of New Materialism in fashion design, particularly in relation to the climate crisis. This paper seeks to address this gap by exploring how New Materialist principles can be operationalized in fashion design to create more sustainable and environmentally conscious practices.

ANALYSIS: NEW MATERIALISM IN FASHION DESIGN

The application of Jane Bennett's New Materialism to fashion design provides a novel perspective for addressing the industry's environmental impact. Central to this analysis is the concept of "thing-power", which suggests that materials have their own agency and are not merely passive objects to be molded by human designers. This shift in perspective is crucial for understanding how materials can actively participate in the design process and contribute to more sustainable practices.

To illustrate this, consider the use of natural fibers in garment construction. Traditional approaches often treat these materials as mere resources, overlooking their inherent qualities and ecological connections. However, a New Materialist approach recognizes the vitality of these fibers, their biodegradability, and their relationship with the environment. This recognition can lead to more thoughtful and sustainable material choices, as well as designs that are in harmony with the material's natural lifecycle.

Another aspect where New Materialism impacts fashion design is in the re-evaluation of waste. In the conventional production process, offcuts and discarded materials are often seen as worthless. Yet, through the lens of New Materialism, these materials retain their "thing-power" and potential for reuse. Designers embracing this viewpoint are more likely to engage in upcycling practices, seeing value in what was previously considered waste.

Furthermore, New Materialism challenges the fast fashion model by advocating for a slower, more considered approach to fashion design. This approach respects the agency of materials, allowing for design processes that are more in tune with environmental rhythms and less driven by consumerist impulses. For instance, embracing slower production cycles can reduce waste and energy consumption, aligning fashion design more closely with ecological sustainability.

Finally, the application of New Materialism in fashion design extends to consumer engagement. By recognizing the agency of materials, designers can create garments that encourage consumers to reflect on their relationship with clothing. This might include designs that evolve over time or require specific care, fostering a deeper connection between the wearer and the garment, and promoting longer lifespans for clothing.

In summary, applying New Materialism to fashion design has the potential to transform the industry. It encourages a deeper respect for materials, promotes sustainable practices, and challenges the prevailing consumerist culture in fashion. This analysis underscores the importance of rethinking our relationship with materials and highlights the potential of New Materialism to drive positive change in fashion design.

CASE STUDIES

To illustrate the practical application of New Materialism in fashion design, several pioneering case studies are worth examining:

Biodegradable Fashion by Stella McCartney:

Stella McCartney's fashion line, known for its commitment to sustainability, serves as a prime example of New Materialism in action. Her use of biodegradable materials like mushroom leather and organic cotton aligns with the principles of "thing-power", acknowledging the life and agency of materials. These materials are chosen not only for their aesthetic qualities but also for their ability to decompose naturally, reducing environmental impact and promoting a cyclical view of fashion.

Zero Waste Design by Daniel Silverstein:

Daniel Silverstein's zero-waste approach to fashion design is a testament to the potential of seeing value in what is traditionally considered waste. By designing clothes that utilize every scrap of fabric, Silverstein challenges the norm of material wastage in the fashion industry. This practice embodies the New Materialist perspective by treating all materials as possessing inherent worth and agency, leading to innovative designs that are both stylish and sustainable.

Upcycling Practices by Eileen Fisher:

Eileen Fisher's Renew program is a ground breaking initiative that embraces upcycling, resonating with New Materialism's emphasis on material vitality. The program transforms gently used garments into new, unique pieces, thus extending the lifecycle of materials and reducing waste. This approach not only showcases the creative potential of existing materials but also fosters a more sustainable and responsible fashion industry.

These case studies demonstrate how New Materialism's principles can be practically applied in fashion design to address environmental concerns. By acknowledging the agency and vitality of materials, these designers are pioneering a shift towards more sustainable and ecologically responsible practices in the fashion industry. Their work highlights the potential for a paradigm shift in how materials are perceived and utilized in fashion design, offering valuable insights and inspiration for future sustainable fashion initiatives.

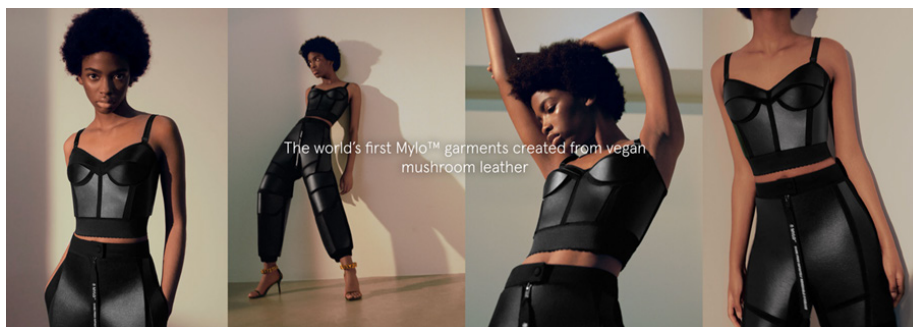


Figure. 1. Stella McCartney's the World's first "Mylo" Garments created from vegan mushroom leather. Black bustier top and utilitarian trousers do embody the potential of this next-generation material pave the way for future commercial offerings.

FASHION DESIGN'S ROLE IN THE CLIMATE CRISIS

The fashion industry's role in the climate crisis is multifaceted and significant. As one of the most resource-intensive and polluting industries, fashion's environmental footprint encompasses a wide range of issues, from greenhouse gas emissions to water pollution and waste production. The traditional model of fast fashion exacerbates this impact through its emphasis on rapid production, high volume, and disposability, leading to increased carbon emissions,

excessive consumption of water, and the generation of vast quantities of waste.

Carbon Footprint:

The global fashion industry is a major contributor to carbon emissions, primarily due to its reliance on fossil fuels in manufacturing and logistics. The production of synthetic fibers, such as polyester, is energy-intensive and relies heavily on petrochemicals. Additionally, the transportation of garments around the world contributes significantly to the industry's carbon footprint.

Water Usage and Pollution:

The fashion industry is also a major consumer of water. The cultivation of water-intensive crops like cotton, along with dyeing and finishing processes, requires large quantities of water and often leads to water pollution. The discharge of untreated wastewater from textile factories into rivers and seas is a common practice in many manufacturing countries, posing serious threats to aquatic ecosystems and human health.

Waste Generation:

Fast fashion's business model, which encourages rapid consumption and frequent turnover of clothing, leads to significant waste. The majority of discarded clothing ends up in landfills or is incinerated, with only a small percentage being recycled or reused. This not only represents a waste of resources but also contributes to environmental pollution.

In response to these challenges, there is an increasing call for the fashion industry to adopt more sustainable practices. This includes a shift towards more sustainable materials, such as organic and recycled fabrics, and the implementation of circular economy principles, where the lifecycle of a garment is extended through recycling and upcycling. Designers play a crucial role in this transition by choosing sustainable materials, employing eco-friendly production methods, and designing garments with longer lifespans.

The role of fashion design in the climate crisis is, therefore, both a challenge and an opportunity. By reimagining fashion design through the lens of New Materialism, designers can contribute to a more sustainable and environmentally conscious fashion industry, mitigating its impact on the climate crisis.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The exploration of New Materialism in the context of fashion design, particularly in relation to the climate crisis, yields several critical implications for both the industry and broader environmental sustainability efforts.

Redefining Material Relationships:

The application of New Materialism in fashion design encourages a redefinition of our relationship with materials. By acknowledging the agency of materials, designers and consumers alike are prompted to consider the lifecycle, origin, and ecological impact of the materials used in fashion. This shift in perspective can lead to more responsible and sustainable material choices, fostering an industry more in harmony with environmental needs.

Challenging the Fast Fashion Paradigm:

New Materialism inherently challenges the fast fashion model, which is predicated on rapid consumption and disposability. A New Materialist approach advocates for slower, more thoughtful fashion that respects the agency of materials and the environment. This could lead to significant reductions in waste and pollution, as well as a cultural shift towards valuing longevity and sustainability in clothing.

Innovation in Design and Production:

Embracing the concepts of New Materialism can drive innovation in fashion design and production. Designers are encouraged to experiment with sustainable materials and eco-friendly production techniques, leading to novel and creative fashion solutions. This innovation is not only beneficial for the environment but can also provide a compet-

itive edge in an increasingly eco-conscious market.

Educating and Engaging Consumers:

A New Materialist approach to fashion design also has implications for consumer education and engagement. By designing with the material's lifecycle in mind, designers can create garments that educate consumers about sustainability. This can increase consumer awareness and demand for sustainable fashion, creating a market that supports environmentally responsible practices.

Policy and Industry Implications:

The findings of this study also have implications for policy and industry standards. There is a need for policies that support sustainable practices in fashion, such as incentives for using eco-friendly materials and stricter regulations on waste and pollution. Industry standards could also evolve to prioritize sustainability, influencing the entire supply chain from material sourcing to production and distribution.

In conclusion, the integration of New Materialism into fashion design offers a promising path towards addressing the environmental challenges posed by the fashion industry. It compels a fundamental rethinking of how fashion is produced and consumed, aligning it more closely with the principles of sustainability and environmental stewardship. The implications of this shift are far-reaching, offering the potential for a more sustainable and ecologically responsible fashion industry.

CONCLUSION

This paper has explored the transformative potential of Jane Bennett's New Materialism in the realm of fashion design, particularly in the context of the climate crisis. The discussion highlighted how a New Materialist approach could significantly alter the fashion industry's trajectory towards greater sustainability and environmental responsibility. By recognizing the agency of materials, fashion design can move away from the unsustainable practices of fast fashion, towards a model that values material longevity, sustainability, and ecological harmony.

The case studies and examples discussed demonstrate the practical application and benefits of this approach, showing how a shift in perspective can lead to innovative, sustainable design practices. These examples not only serve as a blueprint for future initiatives but also as a source of inspiration for designers, consumers, and policymakers alike.

However, the journey towards a fully sustainable fashion industry is complex and multifaceted. It requires collective effort from designers, industry leaders, consumers, and policymakers. This paper contributes to the ongoing discourse in sustainable fashion and environmental ethics, underscoring the urgency for change and the pivotal role of design philosophy in this transformation.

In conclusion, the integration of New Materialism into fashion design presents a compelling solution to the pressing environmental challenges faced by the fashion industry. It offers a pathway for reimagining how fashion is created and consumed, aligning it with the principles of environmental stewardship and sustainability. As the world grapples with the realities of the climate crisis, such innovative approaches in fashion design are not just desirable but essential for a sustainable future.

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