

***The self and the shoes: fashionable curiosities and identity***

**SLIDE 1** / This paper is concerned with an aspect of the material culture of fashion, which also happens to be a personal passion. It focuses on shoes, although I am here looking at a very specific category of women shoes: the extreme, 'impossible-to-wear shoes'. The 'impossible-to-wear' is an arbitrary term, which aims to emphasise their unusual design that does not allow us to slot them into an 'adequate system of classification' (Baudrillard, 2005: 1).

There have been extensive studies on the ways in which clothes and accessories (including shoes) are used to socially represent and empower (or not) women. Furthermore, although the fashion phenomenon of the extreme shoes is not new, it is only in the recent years that they have become more popular both in the high fashion and social scene. This has opened up the opportunity to understand further the postmodern discourse, which tends to simulate and exasperate the values and principles of beauty, power and status.

Throughout the paper I intend to define the 'impossible-to-wear' shoes and consider the visual statements, if any, made through them, about contemporary society, women, their identity and their femininity. I will argue that the extreme shoes are the products of the society of the spectacle and as such are very seductive and challenging objects: they are contemporary curiosities, which consent the shift between the ordinary and the extraordinary and therefore allow women to step into a visually playful (but not necessarily empowering) fantasy-world.

**SLIDE 2/ 2. Defining the impossible- to- wear shoes**

The relationship between women and a new pair of shoes can be very powerful and emotional. As any other kind of objects, also shoes are meaningful symbolic entities. Actually, as Susan Pearce points out, 'as humans we are able to feel strongly and bitterly about the objects around us and the symbolic meanings which they are capable of carrying' (1997: 2). This is because objects tangibly 'stand' for our deepest desires and fantasies or for our everyday needs.

**SLIDE 3/** Choosing a pair of shoes, indeed, is a very personal act, it is almost a ritual: the conscious choice of the right pair of shoes can aesthetically complete an outfit and help us to make a visual statement about ourselves and the way we want to be perceived by our society.

Shoes, in fact, are associated first and most with the notion of individuality, starting from the basic key concepts of individuality: shoes may define, for example, a social class (like in the past the *chopins*) or a style, or personal fashion preferences.

Therefore, shoes not only can be longed for and desired eagerly but once owned, a new pair of shoes - that we feel really 'represents us' - can be jealously kept, carefully packaged it in the shoe cabinet and possibly worn and exhibited only in those occasions considered worth the pain.

Furthermore, shoes can have a predominant practical or decorative feature: their design depends on the emphasis placed on their function or on their style, which are, however, both shaped by the current fashion *diktat*, which

reinforces a contemporary need to not simply to 'find oneself but to invent oneself' in society (Svendsen, 2006: 143).

**SLIDE 4/** Regarding this, a phenomenon emerging in the current scene of high-fashion streets is the one of what I arbitrarily call the 'impossible-to wear-shoes'. I decided to call this typology of shoes as 'impossible-to-wear', not because they are literally impossible to wear, but because their primary feature is not their functionality but the challenging, extreme design of the footwear.

**SLIDE 5 + 6/** Exhibitions, fashion shows and more frequently television and show personalities (above all, the singers Madonna and Lady Gaga; the heiress Daphne Guinness and the characters of the TV series *Sex and the City*), where bizarre and extreme designers' shoes are staged, have become more frequent and customers/spectators are presented with an unusual, almost endless and prohibitive variety of footwear: high-wedged plastic shoes, pure gold sandals, shoes embellished with peacock feathers, shoes without heels, the lobster-claw shaped shoes, shoes with inverted heels; shoes without sole, fish-like shoes or even meaty shoes.

The shape of these shoes is very unusual, because it is different from the conventional idea of shoes: each pair is almost like a unique piece of a rare museum collection. They have been conceived, designed and produced to express the designer creativity, to provide a sort of pleasure (primarily a visual pleasure, which may stimulate also curiosity in the eyes of the stunned spectators) but more specifically, to signal value and ambition of people who

wear them. These shoes are, in other words, a symbol of today's 'conspicuous consumption' (Veblen, 1899).

**SLIDE 7/**Actually, speaking about contemporary footwear design, Huey and Proctor have explained that because of their unique features, extreme 'shoes have the power to seduce us, move us and empower us. They can fulfil our fantasies and help us to escape from reality, possibly more than shoes that fit within our conventional style and function criteria' (2007:6). Extreme shoes, indeed, are not made to fit the individual. On the contrary, they impose their shape and form on the individuals: they are not necessarily designed to make women looking at their best or visually complement their outfit; they have been designed to make women who wear them to look - and definitely feel and aspire to be - different from anybody else. The original functional features of the shoe (to protect the feet, to allow individuals to walk more or less comfortably on hard surfaces and to visually complete an outfit) become a secondary one and these shoes, as objects of fashion and of conspicuous consumption, acquire new meanings (the 'funny', 'curious' shoe) which allow them to fit into a new cultural, spectacular system.

### *3. The spectacular society and the playful curiosity*

**SLIDE 8/**In 1967, the French theorist Guy Debord published *The society of the spectacle*, a critique of the French society of the time, where he discussed the modern-day capital, cultural imperialism and its role in mediating social relationships. In it, Debord denounced an image-centred society, where the 'appearing' was crucial and where representations had replaced social authenticity and values ('everything that was directly lived, has receded into a representation', 2006: 7).

Central to Debord's work is the idea of the spectacle not just as 'a collection of images', but rather as a social relationship mediated by images' (2006: 7). Through images simulation, the spectacle emulates reality; it generates a fantasy-like world, which supports the creative consumption of images and capitalizes on them by focusing on the new and innovative commodity.

**SLIDE 9/** An additional feature of the society of the spectacle is it's the idea of play, or rather the image/appearance of 'ambitious playfulness' and 'playful competition'. Being playful, a concept older than culture is at the basis of human communication and it helps us, human beings, to negotiate how we present ourselves to others. Hence, it is no surprise that the idea of 'play' - or being playful - has the tendency to be beautiful, enchanting and captivating; play in the society of the spectacle abolishes what is ordinary, since it is driven by those images that entail the 'fun and spectacular element and can largely be derived either from a contest for something or from a representation of something' (Huizinga, 1955: 13). These features (playful, beautiful, enchanting, captivating) are also characteristics of the extreme shoes, like for instance in the case of Benoit Méléard's shoes.

**SLIDE 10+11/** Méléard is one of the first and most significant contemporary and 'extremist' footwear designers and in the fashion scene is known for his eccentric geometrical-themed works, which, according to him are unconventional but at the same time fashionable and wearable. Méléard has created 'bizarre and aesthetically absurd footwear [which however] manage to satisfy the needs of a commercial market' (Huey, 2007: 109). His design involves different experimentation of colours and shapes and refers to the work of the fifties, sixties and seventies of the American shoes' designer, Beth

Levine. Within the fashion and art world, Méléard's shoes are considered as works of art in their own merit, since they are displayed in several art exhibitions worldwide .

**SLIDE 12+13/**The impossible-to-wear shoes are very much one-off, curious museum-like objects, which we struggle to make sense of and classify properly because they belong to a spectacular and playful 'world of objects that changes before our eyes [and hence, it has become almost impossible to] arrive at an adequate system of description (Baudrillard, 2005:1). Furthermore, as Kobi Levi (a Israeli-born footwear designer) explains extreme shoes are like 'a wearable sculpture, [which becomes] "alive" without the foot/body' (<http://kobilevidesign.blogspot.co.uk/>, accessed 02/03/13). Levi's footwear creations 'combine the essence of daily objects with the shape of shoes' (<http://kobilevidesign.com/>, accessed 30/04/13) because, according to him, shoes have to be (and have to be defined as) easy to relate but at the same time 'sexy, creative, funny and inspiring'.

**SLIDE 14/**The impossible-to-wear shoes are, indeed, stylistic experiments of extreme innovation, which challenge the functional principles of everyday shoes, by creating a distinct separation between the 'beautiful' and the 'useful'. In this context, designers position women's bodies at the centre of the spectacle, so that the bodies become means of representation. However, in order for this to happen, women's body must first to be re-experienced by their owners and must be considered 'narcissistically rather than merely functionally', so that a new (or different identity) can be assumed. Only once the body is conceived in this way, individuals can freely 'adorn it with objects' and indulge on visual, fashionable representations.

The extreme footwear designers I interviewed in the initial phase of the research insisted that those shoes address also the needs of ordinary women. Therefore, I was interested in finding out the perspectives of ordinary women towards such shoes.

I conducted a pilot study and through a set of interviews (age range 30s; fashion conscious; self-proclaimed shoes lovers/collectors, none of them working in high couture fashion and none of them owners of such shoes) I have been addressing the following questions:

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- How do ordinary but fashion conscious and shoes-collectors women perceive the impossible-to-wear shoes?
- How would they consume these shoes?
- Would they be interested in using or owning such shoes? And if yes, how?

#### SLIDE 16/The fashionable curiosity

From the discussions, it was evident that the extreme shoes were perceived as fantasy-like curiosities, almost as surrealist as art objects that would need a specific and art-educated audience to be appreciated. Participants in this research were, indeed, first and foremost intrigued by the unusual shapes and forms of the shoes: the playful, almost toy-like appearance of the shoes made them questioning the images they had before them. As one of the interviewees pointed out, the extreme shoes were *'like a visual joke'* which she could not grasp; another participants explained that although visually appealing she expressed her difficulty in thinking about those shoes in a conventional manner: *'I like these pair but, to tell you the truth, I would not*

*even know how to wear them!*'. Participants could not find any of the sought fashionable features and they all used similar adjectives (e.g. *curious, weird, bizarre, quirky, funny, happy, confrontational*)<sup>1</sup> to define the extreme shoes.

**SLIDE 17**/*Consuming the images*

Participants felt that these shoes were too eccentric (toy-like) and did not look comfortable enough and that that even if they could afford, they would not buy them because of the extreme bizarre features. However, they all explained that they liked looking at the shoes and felt intrigued by such complex objects, which merged the boundaries of art and fashion.

**SLIDE 18**/*My shoes, my fantasy: the performative identity*

Participants felt that because of their uniqueness, these shoes had almost the 'power' to make them feeling '*cool and eccentric*', '*pretty unique*' and '*not too serious about fashion*'. Most interestingly women associated the use of these shoes to private occasions, where they could act freely, being playful, for a short time, with a restrict group of people. They would be able to step, through these shoes, into a personal, funny but private world, which did not need to be part of the society of the spectacle but which could certainly be unique and playful.

**SLIDE 19**/*4. Conclusions*

When looking at the extreme shoes, we may be confused, perhaps enchanted, but certainly mesmerized by their bizarre extravagance. A new set of curiosities unravels in front of us and we, as the viewers of the first cabinet of curiosities, try to make sense of these new items, by inserting them into a complex choreography of material and social interactions (Sudjic, 2007).



Unlike conventional shoes, the impossible-to-wear shoes presuppose a stronger, more narcissistic re-experience of the female body (imposed by the designers) and they are certainly signs of a cultural and societal transformation. As Daniel Miller has pointed out, 'it is not just the clothing [the material culture of fashion] that is changing, it is the other side of the equation, the concept of the person, the sense of the self, the experience of being an individual, that is changing' (2009: 39).

In the society of the spectacle, we look (or induced to look) for extravagant playful products, like the impossible-to-wear shoes that have the potential to liberate our fantasy worlds. However, although such objects consent a shift between an ordinary situation and an extraordinary, performative one, this does not necessary mean that can make the users/consumers/wearers to feel empowered.

I believe that the charm of the toy-like, curious, extreme shoes lays on a mere visual consumption and satisfaction, which allow women to actively participate in a process of social self-creation, redefinition and stabilization of their performative identities.

Through such shoes, we are in fact exposed to what we may be intrigued to look at, perhaps even attracted to, but what not all of us may want to be.

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<sup>i</sup> Interestingly, none of the women interviewed considered these shoes as 'daring'.

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