

'A Rhizomatic Approach to Fashion'

The following paper was presented as part of the FMMC 'Fashion Continuum: Performance Event', hosted by Nottingham Trent University School of Art & Design on Friday 22/04/2016 at Nottingham Contemporary: The Space [10am to 8pm]

As part of the performances, concepts and ideas being explored as part of the Fashion Continuum event, I want to ask – and suggest answers to – three questions central to the theme of 'A Rhizomatic Approach to Fashion'. These observations offer an introduction to, and contextualisation for, 'The Fetish Moment' live performance by Gary Needham and Amelie Duchow, which will follow immediately afterwards.

What is a rhizome?

The rhizome, as a philosophical concept, was developed by Deleuze and Guattari in *A Thousand Plateaus* (1980) as a way of perceiving the unpredictable changes, both fast and slow, subversive and mainstream, public and private, that shape and reformulate the world around us. It provides a fluid model for thinking about how information and ideas emerge, flow and evolve, by developing a metaphor based upon the botanical development of a mass of roots.

The rhizome as a model of thought embraces multiplicities and rejects the notion of a clear beginning, middle, and end.

Instead it favours the notion of a cultural map where concepts, creations and interpretations shift and develop in an organic progression of ideas – much like a botanical rhizome (or root mass) unpredictably extends and expands in subterranean, underground, spaces without any apparent contingency or pattern. The rhizome does not follow predetermined paths or seek a specific destination. It is not 'predictable'.

These qualities empower the rhizome, enabling it to encourage an image of thought that can freely reflect the changeable nature of creativity, self-expression, identity and cultural endeavour. It encapsulates the multifarious nature of fashion as a sociological and anthropological phenomenon.

The rhizome provides a new approach to engaging with fashion, revisiting and recontextualizing the past to renew and refresh our appetite for fashion, textiles and clothing as we progress into the 21st century.

The rhizome opens our eyes to a new way of seeing.

It provides a conceptual model for mapping the cultural terrain of fashion as a self-defining creative process.

Deleuze and Guattari guide us by suggesting that:

[...] the rhizome pertains to a map that must be produced, constructed, a map that is always detachable, connectible, reversible, modifiable, and has multiple entryways and exits and its own lines of flight. (Deleuze and Guattari, 1988: 21)

Why take 'a rhizomatic approach to fashion'?

Fashion is questioning itself.

Li Edelkoort has indicated that 'for the first time in its history, fashion, supposedly ahead of the times, [...] is unable to react to the period' (EdelKoort in Dewintre, 2015: online).

A preoccupation with creating branded images rather than focussing upon clothes; an outdated affiliation with principles of 'unsociable individuality' in an era of social networks and shared creativity; and a lapse of engagement with the sensuality of fabrics – the touch and feel of materials – present a series of challenges to innovation.

A rhizomatic approach to fashion encompasses a more anthropological and humanist position. It recognizes the creative process as driven by desire and sensuality rather than being dominated by the mechanisms of the marketplace.

As part of this questioning process, we want to challenge how we think of fashion history.

Conventional fashion history tends towards the linear. It follows a progressive model based not upon creativity but upon chronology. And yet, when we speak of fashion it is always as cyclical, non-linear, unpredictable and transgressive.

Why should our approach to fashion history be limited by an imposed system of thought that assumes continual and logical progress, when the reality is driven by serendipity, experimentation and subversion?

Beauty in art and design emerges as a 'pleasant surprise' (Hickey, 2009: 80) rather than from a pre-planned formula.

The most compelling narratives within fashion history – and no doubt the future of fashion – are not found within a conventional chronology but are situated on the periphery. It is on the edge of culture where fashion develops and evolves, idiosyncratically excavating the past to define the present.

Fashion is not linear. It may no longer even be cyclical. Fashion is rhizomatic in its awareness of how ideas blur and cross-fertilize as a means of innovation.

A rhizomatic approach to fashion sees history as a fragmented map – a network of creative associations intuitively pieced together, much like the saccadic movements of the eye construct an image. It is an approach free from the limitations of outdated academic conventions: the rhizome offers an alternate vision of fashion history.

How can we see the rhizome in fashion?

Our work explores the relationship between fetishism and fashion as case study for the rhizome.

Fetishism has been chosen as a case study because:

it is a rich and multifaceted area of anthropological and cultural understanding;
it is directly related to the appreciation of materials, surfaces, colour, texture, fit, style, identity, escapism and fantasy;
it is an evolving and complex subject with multiple discourses and genres, which weaves unpredictably throughout fashion history;
and it is central to fashion and contemporary design.

Increased exploration and engagement with fetishism is highlighted by the extremities of style frequently seen on the catwalk, and it is given definition by the range of concepts selectively explored in Li Edelkoort's *Fetishism in Fashion* exhibition [at MoBA 13] (2013).

Inspired , in part, by this exhibition, we recognise how fundamental fetishism is to human culture and how it is expressed through a broad range of media.

Fetishism permeates all creation [...] Therefore, fetishism in fashion is a given, empowering people with tools and textures to express the psychology of power. (Edelkoort, 2013: 10)

Fetishism taps into the repressed and the animistic; exposes the hidden and celebrates the vernacular; it embraces the sublime as well as the ridiculous; and projects forward into extrovert fantasy and escapist visions of the future.

In an increasingly visual world, even a highly niche area of fetishism can open out a discourse about the nature of subcultural identity.

Gary Needham's article 'Bringing Out the Gimp: Fashioning the S/M Imaginary' begins with a reference to *Pulp Fiction* before rhizomatically pursuing 'the gimp mask' through a series of cultural associations that include (but are not limited to):

Ricardo Tisci's Givenchy collection for spring/summer 2011;
Gareth Pugh's catwalk shows (notably spring/summer 2007);
Walter von Birendonck's fetish-inspired collections since the 1980s;
Robert Mapplethorpe's gimp photographs;
and Madonna's fetishistic *Justify My Love* music video from 1990.

This rhizomatic 'map' of reference points builds upon Linda William's concept of 'on/scenity' (which she defines in opposition to the ob/scene as the off stage or off-scene) to recognise the increasingly visible nature of fetishism, transgression and the perverse within our 'everyday media and cultural landscape'. (Needham, 2014: 150)

So, with these thoughts and ideas in mind, I'd like to hand over to The Fetish Moment live performance...

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