

# Fashion and Desire in an Ecologically Sustainable World

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## Abstract

*“Sustainability is an emerging mega-trend” (Harvard Business Review, 2010) and as such, it has become increasingly fashionable to be ‘sustainable.’ Industries have latched onto this emerging mega-trend and have morphed it into a marketing tool, effectively using ‘sustainability’ as a hook for the increasingly eco-aware post-modern consumer. The fashion industry capitalises upon its ability to create new, desirable trends that equally as expeditiously become undesirable. The popularity of sustainability has encroached on the fashion industry and as such, there are currently an increasing number of fashion designers and brands who profit from the sales of “sustainable fashion.” Is an industry whose sole purpose is to create products which consumers desire for a meagre ration of time (before disposing of and purchasing the next emerging trend) ever capable of being truly sustainable? And more so, what fundamental social structures hold consumers hostage to an industry which hegemonically disempowers them through creating a clever and deceptive guise of ‘pseudo-empowerment’.*

## The Oxymoron of Sustainable Fashion

*“Fashion is made to become unfashionable.”*

-Coco Chanel

Often sustainability<sup>1</sup> is confined to the implementation of Triple Bottom Line Reporting, which encompasses a range of indicators in the three factors heralded to be the most important: Social, Environmental and Economic. (Norman & MacDonald 2003 & *Triple Bottom Line Reporting in Australia* [online]).

## Social, Environmental and Economic Impacts of the Fashion Industry

### *Social: Global Hegemony*

The social impacts of the fashion industry range from the hegemonic power that the first world exerts over developing nations, as well as the hegemony of consumerism within the first world itself (Langman 1992). Industries and conglomerates (including, but not exclusive to, the fashion industry) remain powerful by disenfranchising developing countries and establishing the guise of ‘pseudo-empowerment’ by creating jobs (albeit in sweat shops, using child-labour or with other poor and unethical working conditions) that fulfil employees’ basic needs: to provide food, shelter and water for themselves and their families. The employed individuals of the developing world are able to meet their basic needs and remain in a state of perpetual ‘busyness’, where they have not the time, nor the access to the education necessary, to understand their hegemonic predicament.

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<sup>1</sup> For the purpose of this paper, the term ‘sustainability’ is defined as “development which meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.” (Per the commonly cited 1987 Brundtland Report).

In the first world, the same ‘pseudo-empowerment’ occurs, through keeping the masses busy and allowing them to fulfil their basic needs, as well as innumerable socially-constructed wants and desires. This hegemonic process allows the first world to exist within a hyperreality,<sup>2</sup> too busy and too entertained by the simulacra, to question the origins of their products or more importantly, the motives behind the production of such products (Baudrillard 1988). As Paterson explains, “by keeping the worlds separate and concentrating on everydayness, of shopping as just ‘something that we do,’ we are perpetuating commodity fetishism and therefore the inherently exploitive relations of Capitalism - but this time ... on a massively global scale.” (2006, p.218) Fashion, (as opposed to functional clothing used to protect and provide the body with warmth) is a desire which disempowers the first world, by providing an aesthetically pleasing mask of consumer desires under which a face of lack and insecurity may be concealed.

*Ecological: The oxymoron of sustainable growth, meeting a growth-populations’ insatiable desires and the impact of the fashion industry on the environment*

One of the key economic policies bandied about by Australian politicians is the concept of ‘sustainable growth’ (‘Towards a Productive and Sustainable Population Growth Path for Australia’, 2010, *Coalition Policy Directions Paper*). ‘Sustainable growth’ is an ambiguous term often referring to growth in Gross Domestic Product (GDP), and inclusive of a steady growth in population. The discernible impacts of ‘sustainable growth’ result in an increase in consumption demand and a steep rise in the use of fossil fuels, for both power and transport. “Human expansion can be directly correlated with vanishing wilderness, loss of topsoil, species extinction, and toxic pollution. The decline of ocean fish and the increased concentration of greenhouse gases attest to the ubiquity of the impact of human numbers.” (Suzuki 1998, p.109)

Multiplying a society “afflicted with Affluenza<sup>3</sup>” also incurs the environmental costs of meeting the needs and socially-constructed desires of each individual, which are also ever-increasing and rarely satiated, particularly when a society is obsessed with its economic stature. It has become a cumulative desire to appear prosperous and successful, “people look at us ‘through’ our cars and houses” and it is with these commodities that we create our ideal self. (Hamilton & Denniss 2005, p.13)

Clothing is also a lens through which others can view an individual and as such, build assumptions and judgements on the individual through the semiotic representations of fashion items. (Barthes 1967) “Because it acts as a bridge between the self and the world, clothing is perfect for providing the bridge between who we actually are, and who we want to be seen as.” (Hamilton & Denniss 2005, p. 13) The desire to appear wealthy and successful through purchasing the latest fashion, whether that be a luxury brand or a mass-produced reproduction, has a detrimental effect on the environment. The strain on the environment intensifies with an unyielding population increase and the challenge of meeting their desires as they too strive to create their ideal self.

The environmental impacts of the fashion industry include not only the production of the actual clothing, textiles and accessories, but also the maintenance, end of life disposal,

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<sup>2</sup> Hyperreality: Baudrillard’s concept that we no longer live in reality, we exist in a world of ‘simulated realities’ (1998).

<sup>3</sup> Affluenza: a term coined by Clive Hamilton to describe Australia’s obsession with economic growth, an affliction where one has no comprehension of when enough money, status and luxury goods is enough to be satiated (Hamilton & Denniss 2005).

transportation, shipment, design, advertising and marketing and the myriad complexities that emanate from the retailing of the products (Slater 2003).

*However, the greatest environmental consideration when analysing the sustainability of fashion items is the problematic concept of fashion itself. That is, clothing and accessories designed to be desired for a limited time frame; this is an industry reliant on one's ongoing desire for the new.*

What becomes of the old, less-desirable clothing and accessories when the new stock arrives? “After the season ends, it is currently fashionable, in a kind of lip-service to planetary well-being, to ‘recycle’ the articles via alternative outlets, such as second-hand clothing stores or factory shops selling designer clothes at reduced prices.” (Slater 2003, p.92) Slater confers that this is not an altogether altruistic gesture, as this ‘recycling’ is a façade for the overarching industry goal of profitably (though unsustainably) removing the less desired, to make room for new, more-desirable garments (2003, pp.92-93).

#### *Economic: Factors Impacting on Social Wellbeing*

“Calculating, industrial society is obliged to form consumers who don't calculate; if clothing's producers and consumers had the same consciousness, clothing would be bought (and produced) only at the very slow rate of its dilapidation.” (Barthes, 1967) If the fashion industry were to only produce clothes in a sustainable manner (limiting mass production and consumption as Barthes explains) the majority of businesses within the fashion realm would become redundant, creating the social issue of unemployment and the countless challenges that accompany individuals and families living within low socio-economic circumstances. Charities, which assist those who would be affected by the mass redundancies in the retail trading sector, are also stakeholders in the economic impacts of the hypothetical down-sizing of the fashion industry. Charitable organisations collect a considerable portion of revenue from operating second-hand clothing stores, which would no longer exist if clothes were produced as needs instead of wants.

## **Structures that House Hyperreality**

### **Sustainability within ‘The Spectacle’**

“In societies where modern conditions of production prevail, all of life presents itself as an immense accumulation of spectacles. Everything that was directly lived has moved away into a representation.” (Debord 1967, p.1) The post-modern condition comprises of a disconnectedness with reality; through the media, industries, retail outlets and other structures, we are bombarded by representations that we subconsciously accept as reality and truth. For example, ‘masculinity’ or what one believes to be the physical ‘man’ has become a creatively designed representation of what corporations have presented to society as a ‘man’.

A flâneur<sup>4</sup> need only to stroll through the spectacular spectacle of a shopping centre, to be saturated by contemporary representations of reality. The spectacle, as Debord explains, “aims at nothing other than itself” (1967, p.14) and furthermore, “the spectacle subjugates

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<sup>4</sup> Flaneur: one who strolls through cities and other spectacles to experience it from an outsider's point of view.

living men to itself to the extent that the economy has totally subjugated them. It is no more than the economy developing for itself. It is the true reflection of the production of things, and the false objectification of the producers.” (Debord 1967, p.16).

It is within this spectacle that we find ourselves living in cities, driving in cars, working long hours and striving to reach the elusive and spectacular ‘Australian dream’ of a large house, a \$10,000 pay-rise, a luxury car and annual overseas holidays (Hamilton & Denniss 2005, pp.3-10). The spectacle is the bubble of hyperreality in which we exist, avoiding life on this Earth in any ‘real’ or ‘natural’ state. This disconnectedness from reality manifests the Cartesian dualism between man and nature, disabling us from ‘seeing the bigger picture’ when it comes to sustainability and the future wellbeing of the planet.

*In order to reach sustainability goals, society will need to be emancipated from the vast spectacles with which we are consumed and experience reality outside the hyperreal.*

### *Spectacular Spaces: The Crystal Palace*

The world’s first shopping mall, The Crystal Palace, is a symbol of the emergence of modernity. The Crystal Palace was built as a space to house purchasable, mass-produced desirable items, with a focus on fulfilling elitist wants, as opposed to maintaining basic human needs. Whilst being built exclusively for the bourgeoisie, it was kept as a secret from the working class for fear that they would revolt and destroy the beautiful building out of sheer envy and spite. When the working class finally discovered this prolific structure, they rushed to see it. Far from destroying The Crystal Palace, the workers were mesmerised by the collections of aesthetically-pleasing though functionless items, and they did not destroy anything; contrarily, they worked harder with the goal of accumulating the necessary wealth to also be able to purchase the desirable commodities on offer at the spectacular Crystal Palace (Crouch, Lecture at Edith Cowan University, WA 2004).

The story of the Crystal Palace is important in relation to sustainability and the developing third world which, like the oppressed working class of the 1850s, is also beginning to desire what the bourgeois first world is indulging in. The difference between the 1850s and 2011 is that in 1850 the world population stood at an estimated one thousand, two hundred and sixty-two million, in comparison to United Nations estimates of a current world population of over seven billion people (International Database).

*We have been mesmerised by the spectacle of a ‘Consumer’s Wonderland’ since at least 1850 and are only beginning to stand outside the spectacle and view the sobering reality one hundred and sixty years later that the Earth is not (unlike our desires) limitless.*

### **Desire, Identity and Underlying Social Dysfunction**

Within the hegemony of an amusement society, spectacles are invented to create pseudo-experiences that fulfil the desires of the individual. Through the experience of fashion retail shopping, one is able to momentarily fulfil the desire to feel empowered and express one’s identity. This experience is as fleeting as it is false. Like all experiences within the spectacle, they are socially constructed to *represent* the experience of empowerment and identity, when

in actuality the hyperreal experience of shopping is disempowering the individual through distraction from reality and the possibility of finding an authentic and satisfying identity within the natural world. As Langman points out, “everyday life in amusement society proceeds within a dialectic of enfeeblement and empowerment.” (1992, p.43)

### *Pseudo-Empowerment*

*“There are a number of ways that people experience freedom, power and control that mask a deep powerlessness. As Baudrillard observed, to flip a light switch is a God-like act: let there be light. But this act is at the end of a complex technological chain of dependency on fuel, generators, transformers, distribution lines and the manufacture of light bulbs.”*

(Sheilds 1992, p. 63)

One of the lynch-pins of contemporary hegemony is the ability to disempower individuals whilst simultaneously allowing them to feel empowered. This, among other hegemonic paradoxes, is achieved through the act of purchasing fashionable items at retail outlets. The act of purchasing the clothing allows the individual to express his or her identity through the various brands on offer and the symbolic connotations associated with such brands. For example, if the individual desires approval and to be seen as an energetic person who completes tasks and achieves goals, the semiotic device of Nike’s “Swoosh” tick, combined with the slogan “Just Do It” would provide the pseudo-identity necessary to fulfil the consumer’s need and also contribute to the creation of the ‘ideal self’.

Fergusson sees this purchasing for identity as the act of attempting to fill a deeper void within oneself: “We then seem, in consuming such objects, to incorporate an idealized (sic) self, to make the self more real, and to end the inner despair of not having a self.” (1992, p.28). However, it is not lone individuals who are indulging in this self-gratifying act of shopping for a pseudo-identity, but more problematically an entire society, unable to escape the emptiness of life within ‘amusement society’, ‘the spectacle’ or ‘hyperreality.’ Langman asserts that “there are a number of ways that people experience freedom, power and control that mask a deeper powerlessness... (however) none do it with as much fun and panache as the ever more fantastic malls.” (Langman 1992, pp.63-64).

Amusement society, consumed by the spectacle of consuming, is kept distracted from the deeper social and environmental concerns of the world, constantly bombarded by products and services that appeal to the fears and desires of the individual. This focus on the individual’s wants and desires has created a society where vanity and narcissism conceal a deep-rooted insecurity. “The working lives of Australia’s best-paid psychologists are not devoted to treating the distress of people with psychological problems: they are devoted to developing ways of increasing consumers’ insecurity, vulnerability and obsessiveness.” (Hamilton & Denniss 2005, p.36). “While the expressions of consumption-based displays of self provide gratifications and indeed realms of personal power and meaning, in so far as desire and selfhood have been appropriated to secure certain social arrangements, the costs may very well be a deeper malaise and abandonment of concern for the collective good.” (Langman, 1992) This self-obsession, unique to a Neo-Capitalist, consumer-driven society, is another social obstacle in the effective integration of the sustainable practices imperative to the future wellbeing of the planet.

## From Personal Desire, To Desiring the Collective Good

The ideologies of the fashion industry are paradoxical to those of environmental sustainability, and as such the two systems cannot successfully coexist. The turnover rate for attractive, fashionable items and the necessary progression of evolving from mass consumption to environmental sustainability creates the polarity of ‘aesthetics versus ethics.’ To phrase it another way, David Suzuki asks: “Would you have felt that the cornucopia of consumer goods was a reasonable trade for the breakdown of neighbourhoods and families, the pollution of air and water, traffic congestion, the disappearance of wilderness and species?” (1998, p.91)

The personal desires that are transitorily fulfilled through retail shopping, yet leave the individual empty and hungry for more purchased pseudo-fulfilment, hide the innate human desires of belonging to and contributing to a community: being needed and appreciated, and thus building self-identity (through community involvement) and feeling empowered through helping others. Balakrishnan’s approach to progressing from the selfish to the selfless involves what she described as “reflexive modernity” whereby the individual is displaced from the centre of the decision-making process and the focus is shifted to the shared interests of humanity and the environment. “The individual no longer rests at the center (sic) of the universe, the central point of reference from and towards which all economic and ecological considerations are directed. Her wants become merely one of the considerations (albeit major in that human beings make the decisions) in the process of making decisions based on sustainable development.” (2003, p.310) With a focus on the needs of all human beings and the eco-system of which we are a part, the empty, lonely and ultimately unsatisfying lifestyle of the individual has the opportunity to be replaced by a lifestyle of belonging, contributing and caring for one another and the world in which we share.

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