

# The Politics of Craft and Aesthetics in South African Fashion

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## INTRODUCING THE FASHION FUSION PROJECT:

The Fashion Fusion project<sup>1</sup> introduced sponsored seminars, workshops and creative exchange programmes that encouraged various cross-cultural transfers of knowledge and skills between South African crafters and designers, providing the participants with opportunities of access to craft communities, retail exposure and media networks. The Department of Arts and Culture<sup>2</sup> (DAC) committed financially to the project, identifying the real opportunities for local empowerment and social upliftment through this creative collaboration with the selected crafters and designers. The DAC continues to recognise the significant potential of cultural industries in general as vehicles for transformation in South Africa, by simultaneously providing employment, representing local heritage, and contributing to national economic and social development.

In *Nine Takes*<sup>3</sup> we see eleven participating fashion designers<sup>4</sup> who are empowered, modern and educated in fashion; who have access, a Western aesthetic and privilege, are urban and white (except for one), and approximately one hundred crafters<sup>5</sup> who are black, considered traditional, mostly rural, disempowered, (previously or currently) disadvantaged, and distanced from the economies and luxuries of fashion. If one takes these statistics as representing a racial divide in South African fashion, one would disregard a number of further factors that have contributed to, and continue to act out in these relationships, and in the fashion system<sup>6</sup>. I will present a brief introduction to some influences that have positioned this project; including diverse histories of taste and power, various marginal or cultural influences within the field of fashion, and current design tensions, that could promote a further understanding of this fusion of fashion beyond the racial cliché of a stereotype divide.

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<sup>1</sup> The funded project intended to fuse local craft and fashion was initiated in 2004 by Lucilla Booyzen of South African Fashion Week and Masana Chikeka of Department of Arts and Culture.

<sup>2</sup> Through the *Investing in Culture Programme*, the Department of Arts and Culture has funded and supported more than 390 projects totalling R285 million since 2005.

<sup>3</sup> *Nine Takes* (2009) was published to showcase the processes, crafted products and individual participants in the 2008 Fashion Fusion Project.

<sup>4</sup> Abigail Betz, Terrence Bray, Amanda Laird Cherry, Colleen Eitzen, Sanche Frolich of Story, Robyn Lidsky of Ruby, Nkensani Nkosi of Stoned Cherrie, Caren and Gina Waldman of Two, and Danica Lepen and Jacques van der Watt of Black Coffee, were invited to participate in the 2008 programme.

<sup>5</sup> All crafters were selected by the designers by showcasing skills evidenced in already-crafted products.

<sup>6</sup> See Yuniwa Kawamura *Fashionology* (2005) for more detail on the role of fashion insiders or gatekeepers within the institutionalised fashion system.

Considering that many South Africans are still confronted with basic needs for education, housing and employment, with the continued threats of HIV, poverty, crime and domestic violence, the world of fashion is a distant (at times, fickle) reality. Although currently contested, fashion is still a predominantly Western capitalist phenomenon; where notions of taste and access to trend, cultural capital<sup>7</sup>, and the media are perpetuated within a hegemonic framework. To investigate some of the politics of this project, it is necessary to identify current global and local shifts in the relationships of dress, power and identity<sup>8</sup>; where globalisation, technology, the impact of cheap fashion imports, new social networks providing easier access to fashion information, and redistributions of wealth, have changed the landscape of current fashion identities.

### **NEGOTIATING THE FASHION MECHANISM:**

Herbert Blumer<sup>9</sup> challenged the limitations existing in conventional studies of fashion in the late sixties as the notion of fashion witnessed profound transformations (with youth and pop cultures, the proliferation of media, and a rise in sub-cultures), which fundamentally changed the social and political nature of fashion. In view of the current transformations within the South African fashion and social systems, Blumer's approach to the fashion mechanism (although one that has received little academic attention) provides the theoretical focus for this paper, rather than the more commonly used methodologies of Simmel's trickle theories, Barthes's structural semiotics, or Benjamin's 'tigersprung'.

Blumer's major offering to fashion theory is his approach to fashion as a "massive collective selection process wherein choices are guided more by the elusive lure of modernity than by invidious class distinctions as such" (1969: 278). Within the sociological tradition of fashion theories, Ruling compares Blumer, who argued that the elite are not predetermined but constituted through the fashion process itself, with Veblen, Simmel and Bourdieu who positioned the role of fashion as one of maintaining class differentiation (Ruling, 2000). Bourdieu claimed that fashion acted as a code that allowed for the recognition of social distinction and promoted "the forces of differentiation in terms of taste, social identity, and cultural capital" (Bourdieu 1984: 378-382). Kawamura also investigated these judgements of aesthetic taste that are closely linked with social position. The fashion system has generally privileged the dominant discourse and manifested as a distinction among social classes (Kawamura, 2005: 26). The radical social and technological changes that have occurred in the last decade have now demanded redress in these notions of distinction and dominance in both global and local systems of fashion.

### **A HISTORICAL CONTINUITY:**

Blumer identified four key features in the fashion mechanism; namely, *historical continuity*, *modernity*, *collective taste*, and *psychological motives*. On *historical continuity*, Blumer claims that "new fashions are related to, and grow out of, their immediate predecessors" (1969: 283). In an attempt to position the Fashion Fusion project as part of a contemporary

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<sup>7</sup> See Pierre Bourdieu *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (1984).

<sup>8</sup> See projects like *What is your Dress Heritage?* Museum Africa (2009-2010), *Art, Fashion and Identity*. Centre for Contemporary Art (2010) and Pret a Partager. Dak'Art (2008).

<sup>9</sup> Herbert Blumer, "Fashion: From Class Differentiation to Collective Selection", published in *Sociological Quarterly*, 1969.

fashion context, one would need to briefly address the history of South Africa fashion. The impact and legacy of colonisation on dressed identities in South Africa<sup>10</sup>, which resulted in a fairly total re-clothing of the region, is closely linked to the role of the Christian missionisation and education. Throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries the imposed sartorial rules continued to replace all indigenous forms of dress and traditional adornment. The hierarchical meanings associated with Western dress as proper, civilised and highly valued, compromised the significance of traditional artefacts of dress and related practices of decoration and adornment, and it was not unusual for articles of Western dress to become markers of status, and traditional dress and adornment as the definitions of an ‘other’ or inferiority (Ross, 2008: 135-137). Western dress set educated and modern wearer apart, who, by adopting these new forms of dress, made claims towards political equality through a sartorial sameness (Ross: 2008: 124). This positioned the ‘traditional’ in a complex historical trajectory, with radical dialectics that operated around the notion of authenticity<sup>11</sup>, pride, power, resistance and, even revival.

The development of South African fashion throughout the twentieth century closely followed Western styles, with little attention placed on traditional dress identities or influences; at times these were politicised, romanticised, or used as alternatives to mainstream fashion, but, somehow, these mostly remained locked into a past, and unable to translate into a present. Matters were different in much of Anglophone West Africa, where nationalism took the form of African dress, and the political reappropriation of traditional textile and dress forms developed into national fashion identities (Rovine 2001: 100-106). In post-apartheid South Africa<sup>12</sup>, there have been attempts to address the fractured, splintered, and divided past through fashion, with efforts to Africanise clothing<sup>13</sup>, but what these endeavours achieved, is an essentialising of an exotic identity, often incapable of addressing any real solutions in terms of transformation or a renegotiation of South Africa’s recent traumatic past. With the radical shift in political power and its associated hierarchies, South African designers<sup>14</sup> have led a frantic search for notions of tradition and local heritage, which now became favoured in the search for the new. The Fashion Fusion project acts as a reversal to the sewing classes of the early mission stations, here an undoing, re-stitching and re-learning what was dismissed and oppressed from the definitions of fashion for over a century.

### **THIS SHIFTING MODERNITY:**

Numerous designers, exhibitions and projects<sup>15</sup> have in recent years introduced a recognisable shift in fashion’s notion of taste; referencing the exotic, other, and traditional. Brand and Teunissen (2005: 13-19) note the rise of “authenticity as a romantic idea” and the role of

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<sup>10</sup> For an in-depth study of the impact of colonisation on dress see Robert Ross (2008) *Clothing: A Global History*; an investigation into imperialism and a virtually complete re-clothing of the world in standard Western dress.

<sup>11</sup> Notions of tradition and authenticity have been addressed by Polhemus and Proctor in their identification of *Anti-Fashion* (1978), by Brand and Teunissen in *Global Fashion, Local Tradition* (2005), and extensively by writers Rabine and Rovine in relation to African fashion.

<sup>12</sup> Sixteen years after the new democratic government came to power in 1994, issues of political redress are still pertinent within South African social, economic, cultural and philosophical contexts.

<sup>13</sup> Designers Marriane Fassler, Stoned Cherrie, Sun Goddess, David Tlale are some obvious examples of this trend.

<sup>14</sup> Designers would include Amanda Laird Cherry, Black Coffee, Bongiwe Walase, Clive Rundle, Craig Native, Colleen Eitzen, David West, Ephymol, Strangelove, SuperElla, Terrence Bray, and Tiaan Nagel.

<sup>15</sup> Designer John Galliano, an exhibition *Beyond Desire*, and a project *The Will to Adorn*, offer examples of these new aesthetics.

heritage in fashion, which has surfaced recently in the work of designers like Westwood, Wilhelm, Chalayan and Kouyate who refer to their own pasts for inspiration, imbuing their work with local craftsmanship and tradition<sup>16</sup>. These shifts in fashion towards changed aesthetics with strong cultural associations reflect a larger transition in global politics, which Blumer alluded to in his assessment of fashion as it relates to *modernity*; reflecting the "spirit of the times" and "sensitive to the movement of current developments as they take place in its own field, in adjacent fields, and in the larger social world" (Blumer, 1969: 283).

Current interests in cultural authenticity, and by association, in handcraft echo a similar craft revival that was witnessed during the late nineteenth century Arts and Crafts Movement, where the tangible and sensory reprieve offered by crafted products, and imperfection as evidence of a human touch reacted, then, against the industrial age, and now to the dislocation of the individual in a digital world (Chang, 2009: 42-43). Chang claims handcraft embodies notions of time, a tangible aesthetic, the mark of the physical with naive and symbolic associations, and a sense of nostalgia, of a tactile exotic or of a forgotten luxury. This measured thought invested into a cultural product, identified as craftsmanship, offers artistry, inspiration and a reassuring difference through uniquely crafted products, where these qualities of craft offer lasting, more ethical, individual and diverse responses to design. New definitions of luxury indicate that is witnessing recognition of local crafts that express luxury beyond the homogeneity of the super-brands of contemporary fashion<sup>17</sup>. These trends reflect a broader shift in fashion towards an eco-consciousness by providing evidence of a product's cultural traces as ethical, original and honest (Brand & Teunissen, 2005: 19-21).

The desire to incorporate traditional craft into fashion often refers to the traces of a past, which are viewed nostalgically as more culturally pure than the present. Investigating the role of the past in contemporary fashion, both Lehmann and Evans have incorporated Walter Benjamin's 'tigersprung' in recent studies of contemporary fashion. Evans (2003: 6-12) argues that the layering of memory traces manifested in fashion often reflect historical fragments of a trauma, instability or transience from other eras, and that these traces come back under the weight of cultural trauma<sup>18</sup>. Evidence of memory and its traces have impacted on the diversity of South African fashion in the years following 1994. Colonialism and Apartheid left scars of division in the material memories of South African identities. It is through the renegotiation of these various pasts, that the Fashion Fusion project can try effect change and healing.

### **BLUMER'S COLLECTIVE TASTE:**

Although initially relevant to modernist architecture, Adolf Loos's critique of ornamentation<sup>19</sup>, dominated much of the aesthetic direction of twentieth century design, as Loos claimed it was a crime to waste the effort needed to add the ornament when it would

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<sup>16</sup> The Global Fashion/Local Tradition project began as a programme of research, resulting in a symposium, an exhibition and the publication of *Global Fashion/Local Tradition: On the Globalisation of Fashion*, in recognition of important changes in contemporary fashion that reflect cultural shifts in aesthetics, origins and craftsmanship.

<sup>17</sup> See Gilles Lipovetsky *The Empire of Fashion* (1994) for an analysis of the mono-culture of modern fashion.

<sup>18</sup> Evans (2003) expands on Benjamin's 'tigersprung' as the traces of the past that resurface in contemporary fashion as tools that map the modern which, rather than chart the past, are a means to manage the changes in the structure of experience in modern life that is characterised by violent jolts, alienation and dislocation.

<sup>19</sup> Adolf Loos's *Ornament and Crime* (1930 [1908]) pronounced the immorality of ornament; describing it as degenerate and no longer serving the expression of culture, with no potential for development, and its suppression as necessary for regulating modern society.

cause an object to date. Fashion followed a similar course, where minimalism was favoured and branding became the only chosen form of decorative detail. Many local handcraft practises are based on symbolic decorative embellishment; whether Mongolian embroidery, Scandinavian block printing, Massai beadwork, Peruvian appliqué. Fashion collectively denied these languages, instead communicating in Dior, Chanel and Gucci. Consequently in the last decades of the twentieth century, ornamentation came to epitomise this loss of meaning in design; thereby the decorative began to regain an emotional appeal (Gleiniger 2009: 13-24). Research around the impact of technology on design has exposed ornament as a core to meaning; replacing abstraction with cultural significance.

The focus of the Fashion Fusion project was the symbolic exchange that occurred on the surface of the cloth: designer garments were cut from embellished textiles, or crafters applied decorative finishes in the form of prints, appliqué, crochet, felting, or beading onto finished garments, or added accessories, jewellery, shoes, bags or scarves. The tensions that exist in these finished garments carry the duality of the meanings embedded in the distinctly global silhouettes and styling, and the applied, crafted local aesthetics. Fashion here begins to express a South African diversity, embracing its multiplicity in an effort to offer new cultural fusions. Blumer stated that “fashion depends on and reproduces *collective taste*, which functions as a selector for the acceptance or rejection of ideas, and as a formative agent for innovation” (1969:283). In this case, South African designers were encouraged to engage with traditional craft aesthetics, and crafters offered a platform of acceptance, resulting in local alternatives to the branded dominance of world fashion.

#### **PSYCHOLOGICAL MOTIVES LOOKING FOR HEALING:**

The final component to Blumer’s analysis addresses individual and group responses to fashion that promote, support and reproduce the fashion process. Appadurai identifies nostalgia as key to underline the inherent ephemerality of fashion, using images and techniques of the past, as a way to create “a relationship among wanting, remembering, being, and buying, linking these practices in a systematic and generalised mode of valorisation of the ephemeral” (1996:75-85). South African designers and crafters currently deal with a problematic past: remembering a divided Apartheid past, with histories that contain a fractured memory archive. Much recent visual art has addressed these negotiations with the past<sup>20</sup>, and similarly fashion begins to look for redress. Could the *psychological motives* in this new appreciation of what was considered unacceptable, underlie a reversal, as reinvention of tradition, and a reconstruction of equality in an attempt to wipe out the past wounds? As Evans argues, fashion designers portray instability and loss, and locate memory traces in the context of historical rather than personal trauma, by relating to larger questions of society (2003: 199).

#### **SUSTAINABILITY AS A CONCLUSION:**

Fashion operates as a system that uses social agents, as Bourdieu claims “to acknowledge, legitimate and reproduce the social forms of domination and the common opinions of its field as self-evident, often preventing the acknowledgement of other possible means of production” (1984: 100-102). In a crafter’s success, it evidences a confrontation of Bourdieu’s boundaries of power. Crafter-designer Given Nkuna who started with the Fashion Fusion project in

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<sup>20</sup> Exhibitions *Trade Routes: History + Geography* 1996, *AfricaRemix* 2008, and individual artists notably Kentridge, Siopis, Searle, Rose and Williamson continue to deal with the politics of history and memory.

2004<sup>21</sup>, has since developed his own business Le2 Designs, been nominated as Entrepreneur of the Year, and manages the Green Footprint Education Intervention Project. Using the experience and exposure to this closed industry Nkuna has successfully managed to confront the fashion system with craft. Similarly a number of designers have continued working with the craft groups developing *sustainable* commercial products independent of the sponsored project, encouraged by the initial dialogue which dealt with some original logistical difficulties of distance and language, and concepts of urgency and quality.

The borders of taste have become more flexible, perhaps, less strictly defended in the postmodern politics of fashion and culture as McRobbie suggests where the centre and margin, and the elite and popular have been blurred (1994: 177-185) and the political power of minor cultures within hegemonic cultures have experienced “a curious reversal where the margin becomes the centre”. South African fashion has witnessed some shifts in taste, with new definitions of identity in fashion, and starting to make an international impact through projects which contain the potential for political redress and healing, where the negotiations are being made through a decorative aesthetic.

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<sup>21</sup> Starting with Soda Productions, attending various workshops and working closely with Amanda Laird Cherry.