

Fashion Fictions Worlds Tour

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Abstract

The globalised fashion and textile industry is deeply implicated in the devastation of Earth's life-supporting systems, with negative environmental and social impacts generated at every stage of a garment's lifecycle. Incremental improvements delivered by recent industrial initiatives have been overshadowed by a dramatic increase in the volume of garments produced and consumed. To achieve the radical change that is needed, we must look beyond specific strategies for design, manufacturing and disposal – which remain the focus of much public, professional and academic attention – to reimagine the entire fashion system.

Fashion Fictions is a participatory research project that aims to influence and energise the emergent post-growth fashion movement by bringing people together to generate, experience and reflect on engaging fictional visions of alternative fashion cultures and systems. The participatory process for collective speculation has a three-stage structure, with Stage 1 inviting researchers and laypeople to submit concise written outlines of worlds in which invented historical junctures have led to familiar-yet-strange sustainable cultures and systems. In Stage 2's prototyping workshops, diverse groups of participants add complexity to a selection of these fictions, while Stage 3's 'everyday dress' projects see participants performatively enacting four of the prototyped cultures and systems.

In this interactive workshop, participants will explore a selection of the Stage 1 fictions submitted by UK-based and international contributors. Working in small groups, they will discuss the fictions that they encounter, considering their appeal and possible problems that may arise there, and locate any historical or contemporary real-world practices or cultures that the fictions bring to mind. These real-life parallels are valuable as potential sources of inspiration for sustainable fashion and can also help to identify theories and insights that could be usefully applied to the imagined cultures and systems.

Introduction

At this interactive workshop, participants will explore a selection of 100-word fictions submitted to the Fashion Fictions project in order to spark discussions about alternative fashion systems and examples within the real world that the fictions evoke.

For participants, the workshop offers an opportunity to reflect on their experiences of fashion and explore ideas about radical alternatives and speculative thinking. Those wishing to connect further with the Fashion Fictions project following the workshop will be invited to contribute on an individual basis and/or organise a student Fashion Fictions activity. Guidance and examples are available on the project website: <https://fashionfictions.org>.

Context

The globalised fashion and textile industry is deeply implicated in the devastation of Earth's life-supporting systems, with negative environmental and social impacts generated at every stage of a garment's lifecycle (Fletcher, 2014). As understanding of these issues has

developed in the last two decades – driven by academic research and rising public concern – an array of industry-led sustainability initiatives has emerged, typically focusing on production-related issues such as material choice, traceability and recycling. Yet any positive gains delivered by these initiatives are overshadowed by a dramatic growth in clothing production and consumption: the number of garments sold worldwide doubled from 2000 to 2015 (Ellen MacArthur Foundation, 2017). With the IPCC Special Report (2018) calling for ‘rapid, far-reaching and unprecedented changes in all aspects of society’ in order to limit climate change to 1.5°C, the need to pursue a profoundly different approach could not be more urgent.

Earth Logic: Fashion Action Research Plan, a 2019 publication by internationally acclaimed fashion and sustainability pioneers Kate Fletcher and Mathilda Tham, provides a compelling framework for radical academic work in the fashion and sustainability field. Fletcher and Tham’s argument is simple: sustainability cannot be achieved within the ‘growth logic’ that drives the fashion sector and other capitalist business and thus a new paradigm of ‘earth logic’ – working within the Earth’s capacity to support life – must be created. As they explain, this paradigm requires an uncompromising reduction in resources used in the global North, of between 75% and 95% (Fletcher and Tham, 2019). To achieve this, we must look beyond specific strategies for design, manufacture and disposal – which remain the focus of much public, professional and academic attention – to reimagine the entire fashion system. The ‘post-growth’ ethos of *Earth Logic* corresponds with a broader ‘degrowth’ movement, as promoted by economists including Hickel (2020) and Jackson (2021).

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The Stage 1 fictions are framed as parallel presents, rather than speculative futures, and are guided by some loose parameters. These parameters specify that the fictions should describe sustainable and satisfying cultures and systems; explore social and cultural factors, rather than technological change; and focus attention on use and associated practices such as loaning and sharing, rather than production and conventional consumption. The scope for these imagined worlds is broad: they could be inspired by personal daydreams as much as academic research or accounts of historical dress practices, leading to scenarios in which, for example, the fashion-conscious use foliage to dress up for a night out; commercial trade in clothing is as unthinkable as that in human organs; or a highly eclectic garment library is the shared wardrobe of an entire city. These outlandish – though not physically impossible – fictions enable the exploration of diverse approaches to sustainability in fashion, conceptually liberated from the constraints of the status quo.

A post-growth approach requires the social and cultural functions of fashion to be decoupled from the system’s current economic configuration. Some theoretical perspectives would

question the viability of this strategy: Briggs (2005: 81), for example, suggests that fashion's economic and cultural processes are 'mutually constitutive to the extent of being analytically inseparable'. Yet if we look beyond the globalised fashion system, we can find evidence that alternative economic modes are possible. Welters and Lillethun (2018) argue that fashion has occurred in diverse cultures throughout history – far beyond the reaches of consumer capitalism. Other scholars, while challenging the universalism that Welters and Lillethun propose (Niessen, 2020), similarly identify dynamism in dress cultures outside the globalised fashion system.

A plural perspective not only supports the post-growth fashion movement's call for alternative ways of 'doing' fashion, but also indicates the existence of specific historical and contemporary practices and cultures – outside the scope of normal fashion discourse – that could inspire new alternatives. Transition design co-founder Tonkinwise (2018) emphasises the value of such non-capitalist practices to inspire sustainable ways of living in the future. Although there are isolated examples of such work within the fashion sphere, such as Aspinall's doctoral research (2019) into historical acts of refashioning, there is still much for the sustainable fashion field to learn from diverse fashion cultures. Fashion Fictions aims to draw out practices and cultures that have not yet been recognised in the sustainability field via the involvement of participants from diverse backgrounds in project activities – including this workshop.

Workshop plan

The aims of the workshop are to elicit reflections on the alternative fashion systems proposed in a range of Stage 1 fictions and to identify examples of practices and cultures within the real world that the fictions bring to mind. These real-life parallels are valuable as potential sources of inspiration for sustainable fashion; they can also help to identify theories and insights that could be usefully applied to the imagined cultures and systems.

The workshop will be facilitated by the founder of the Fashion Fictions project and the project's Research Fellow. The workshop can run online, in person or in a hybrid online/offline mode, to suit the needs of the conference.

To date, over 150 fictions have been submitted to the Fashion Fictions project by UK-based and international contributors. A content analysis of the first 120 worlds (Twigger Holroyd, 2021) has highlighted the diversity of ideas represented within these fictions, from characteristics of the clothes themselves to consideration of consumption patterns, place, culture, economics, law and geopolitics. Using this content analysis, sets of ten worlds will be compiled for use in the workshop. The fictions in each set will represent a variety of key ideas.

The workshop will start with an introduction to the Fashion Fictions project as a whole; an outline of the Stage 1 activities that have generated the worlds to be explored; and an explanation of the workshop task (20 minutes). Participants will be placed into small groups (three or four people per group) and given a unique set of ten worlds to explore. If working online, the worlds can be accessed via the Fashion Fictions website (fashionfictions.org); if meeting in person, printed texts will be provided.

Working in their groups, participants will be asked to:

- 1) Read some or all of their set of worlds (10 minutes).
- 2) Discuss the worlds they have read, considering their appeal and any problems that they think may arise there (15 minutes).
- 3) As a group, decide which one of the worlds they would most like to live in, or least like to live in, and why (5 minutes).
- 4) Identify any historical or contemporary real-world practices or cultures that the fictions bring to mind (15 minutes). These examples might be based on the participant's own experience or research, or be informed by a paper from the conference. These real-world parallels will be briefly described and geographically located.

We will then join together to share insights and real-world examples from each of the small groups and then reflect on the value of speculation as a strategy for sustainability in fashion (25 minutes). Participants will be invited to provide informed consent for their responses to be documented as a contribution to the ongoing research.

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