

Critical Essay

Presented here are a creative and critical essay intended to respond to a call to action around the heavily reported topic of sustainability in the fashion industry, and the incurring detriment to the environment. Despite the media coverage there currently seems to be little anthropological research in this area. This critical element theoretically analyses and justifies the themes and written techniques presented in the creative component using references from the module outline, as well as outside references, gathered independently. The research methods and choice of participant are explained with relevance towards the works outcome, with a summary on the possible achievements of the project, from an anthropological perspective.

The creative project presents ethnographic research as a form of public anthropology; 'One is 'writing' for the public – making our work more accessible and also more accountable.' (Scheper-Hughes 2009: 1). It opens the discourse of the impact of the fashion industry on climate crises to a wider audience. The use of ethno-science fiction enables imagined futures to become lived futures, transporting the reader to a strange time, making them question the paths that led there, Schwab elaborates on this - 'imaginary ethnographies do more than write life stories; they also rewrite cultural narratives.' (2012: 2), literature can then be 'transformative' in this sense.

[T]he most fundamental role of literary knowledge consists less in providing information than in facilitating the emergence of new forms of being in language, thought, emotion, and ultimately life, including the emergence of new subjectivities, socialities, communalities, and relationalities. (Schwab 2012: 5)

In exploring possible futures new ways of thinking can emerge, questioning current, arguably destructive, cultural modes.

I attended a talk by the research participant, Sara. It included a wealth of knowledge on current fashion industry practices, sustainable business models and a fashion-led version of Extinction Rebellion's (climate activist group) 'Heading to Extinction' commentary. The creative component combines ideas from this with notes from less formal conversations between Sara and I. The namesake character in the first future is described exactly as she appeared the first time we actually met; she is a sustainable fashion entrepreneur and activist, as outlined, so it

made sense for her to be the point of contact in a future based on her own ideal performance economy model.

Elephant and Castle underground station was always the start point of research trips to meet Sara and became a place associated with her, which is why it was chosen. It is hinted as the point of travel, but never fully disclosed. I tried to do this as much as possible throughout, to avoid too many 'info-dumps', trying to hook the reader. Having a disused stairwell as opposed to a time machine or portal was inspired by Murakami's *1Q84* (2011) - the protagonist stumbles into a different world via concrete steps, to one side of an overhead highway. I also employed this technique to avert having to specify an exact year for either future. The dystopian characterisations were borrowed from classic science fiction writers - the fearful uniformed militarism of *1984* (Orwell 1949) combined with speculative fiction and adventure elements of *Oryx and Crake* (Atwood 2003).

Although it is fictional there is an emphasis on using as much of Sara's imagined futures and real business model as possible. There are invented historic explanations, based on current political and ecological uncertainties, allowing a scene to be set for the possible futures to have happened.

Ethnographies have always been written in the context of historic change: the formation of state systems and the evolution of a world political economy. ...[E]thnographers of an interpretive bent—more interested in problems of cultural meaning than in social action—have not generally represented the ways in which closely observed cultural worlds are embedded in larger, more impersonal systems. (Marcus 1986: 165-166)

The cultural meaning and social action reflect one another in the attitudes, environments and presentation of individual identities in each future. The fashion climate is set by a wider politically charged system; one does not exist without the other.

In the interdisciplinary exercise of combining literature and anthropology, De Angelis notes the need to 'look at reading material within social, political and historical contexts and to see texts not as isolated artifacts, but rather as parts of a larger global and cultural matrix.' (2002: 2). The influence of personal interests here and the wider implication of social impact through those interests, have led to the imaginative exploration of possible futures as part of said cultural matrix.

There could be an argument made to trivialize the creative piece as intended only for those interested in fashion, with an entire paragraph dedicated to an in depth description of one persons outfit.

‘It is one which most of us face every day, but which we seldom treat with any degree of intellectual seriousness. That is the problem of what to wear. It is generally considered a rather trivial problem, more suitable for discussion in women’s magazines than anthropological treatises.[...] However, if this problem is examined more widely and with greater intensity, it can reveal much about society, history, politics, culture and, above all, the way in which people seek to manage and express their own identity.’ (Tarlo 1996: 1)

For this reason it is ethnographically important to know the details of what she wears and how she uses that outfit. Sara expresses not only her visual identity through those clothes, but her moral and ethical identities as a person leading by example against the fashion that is contributing to a failing planet.

According to the Quantis report last year, the fashion industry accounted for around 8% of global climate impact in 2016, not including the energy and water used to clean and maintain clothing after purchasing, or the micro-plastics washing new garments releases into the ocean. Earlier this year the House of Commons Environmental Audit Committee published a report - *Fixing fashion: clothing consumption and sustainability*.

The fashion industry’s current business model is unsustainable, especially with growing populations and rising levels of consumption across the globe. Over-consumption and climate change are driving widespread environmental damage. (EAC Report 2019 - emphasis in original)

Current fashion industry canons exemplify commodity fetishisation (Marx 1887) - transient objects of desire, discarded at the whisper of the next big thing. It can be seen as the ultimate example of Benjamin’s postmodern artwork (2008), endlessly reproducible at less and less economic cost, losing ‘authenticity’ through duplication. There has been a defacement of what was considered ‘high culture’ (Bourdieu 1984), where we now have mass-produced fast fashion. Miller insists that ‘consumer culture is indeed culture’ and that it be regarded as such,

but also rejects 'the assumption that it is necessarily individualistic, materialistic, competitive or, indeed, capitalistic' (2012: 62-63). The first future can be seen to both support and negate this theory – the demand is still there for fashion (and other goods) and the desired access to a never-ending stream of choice for self expression, but the performance economy model has transformed the act of consumption into a post-ownership cycle of hiring. There is still hegemony but it has been forced into environmental awareness. The second future, I would argue, also still has the markings of 'consumer culture', if wealthy enough, and as Miller points out, his consumer culture is not necessarily beneficial.

What we call culture is commonly a process that demands conformity, conservatism and, indeed, oppression. Culture being normative is in many respects illiberal, although it may strive to be consensual. (2012: 63)

Based on the theoretical evidence I can infer that whether action is taken or not things will inevitably change, that is the nature of culture. Whether we work together or not may be the difference between us heading towards future one or future two. Writing creatively and then theorising that writing has been a more difficult task than I had even expected. The science fiction element has allowed me to explore the future in an otherwise impossible way, and as an imaginary ethnography I think there has been an element of success in the creative component. I am yet to find out whether it makes for successful public anthropology.

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