

Otto von Busch,
Researcher
School of Design and Craft, University of Gothenburg
otto.von.busch@hdk.gu.se

Fashion Hacking as Shapeshifting

[Paper for ISEA Istanbul, September 19, 2011]

Fashion hacking is a practice where fashion is reverse engineered and tuned to make users "fashion-able", using social media to expand transversal tactics in order to reprogram and shapeshift fashion codes. Other traits address the shamanistic rituality of fashion and how participatory practices can expand the realm of fashion beyond the catwalk and ready-to-wear paradigm. Can technologies express the mythical beauty of fashion?

Fashion is transformation. It is a promise of becoming, a vessel of shapeshifting, a craft with which we can navigate across the currents of the social. Fashion is a medium of transgression from this world into the Other; from the world of flesh to the world of imagination and desire. We use fashion to become ourselves, more or better than before. To journey through the realms of imagination is to use the "technologies of the self", the operations of guiding the process of individuation; the formation of body and soul, matter and mind (Martin *et al* 1988). Yet in this text, the focus is not on the struggle between subject and power, but on the techniques which transmorph flesh to desire and reason to the imaginary. We should explore how the mythopoetic and magical consciousness of fashion help us shapeshift in the realm of the social.

Such magical approach displaces this perspective on fashion a little beside the ordinary academic perspective, which is usually withdrawn and secular. This para-academic position will aim at coming closer to the magical properties of fashion to better see its mystical workings. This would mean to not primarily focus on the secular and comparative "religious studies" of fashion, but rather the engage with the belief culture itself, or the "theology" of fashion (von Busch 2008). Whereas the Scientific Revolution and Enlightenment strived to establish the order of a withdrawn and objective "science of reason", we must, like shamans and alchemists, seriously consider a "science of imagination" (Harpur 2002). Such perspective, taking an unsettling risk of sounding like new age mysticism, might offer us another understanding of how to hack into the inner esoteric workings of fashion rather than stay on the secular surface of style.

To seriously take up a “science of imagination” could resonate well with the recent attempts to establish a methodology for *artistic research* (cf Biggs & Karlsson 2011). Where reason traditionally deals with the actual and analytical, imagination deals with the possible and associative, or even virtual, visionary and holistic. This world of imagination should not be seen as the opposite of the real, or something fictional, but rather it is at the core of human existence and an extension of the real. While still only embracing the mind of imagination, philosopher Jean Paul Sartre puts it like this; “Imagination is an activity in which human individuals create and recreate the essence of their being, making themselves what they were, are and will become.” (Sartre 1972: xx)

Already here we should notice how imagination is not limited in time, to the here and now, but works with an extended moment of relatedness. This world of imagination is a shared social world, including what was and what will become. It is a world of rituals and liturgical protocols. Like a masquerade, imagination is not there to hide us from each other, but to bring us closer to each other: not too unlike fashion. But the shared imagination is also highly material as it is transubstantiated as a shared manifestation of mind and matter. It is an alter-reality and, according to anthropologist Susan Greenwood, operating in this reality requires a “change in the *mode* of consciousness” to an associative “not only, but also” perception of the world in order to be rendered sensible (Greenwood 2009: 149). To see these associative and sensual patterns we need to do a “magical consciousness” and undo the Cartesian split between spirit and body, mind and matter, magic and science (Greenwood 2009: 4). This would challenge the researcher to train an associative sensibility to better trace what Gregory Bateson called “the flow of relatedness” (Samuel 1990).

We could put fashion somewhere along the axis between magic and science to unravel some of its properties that relate to the technologies of the self, and it is through this dimension we might easier spot the connection fashion has with art. To use the words of Paul Klee: “art does not reproduce the visible; rather, it makes visible” (Klee 1919: 28). In a similar vein, if we consider fashion as something of a religion of consumer society, we should investigate how fashion makes this spirituality visible. Yet, we should not take the mechanisms provided by the fashion industry as our only operational tools, but rather we will need to hack into the mythical properties of fashion. We need to reverse engineer the forces and processes at play and use the hack as a “trickery and manipulation of a system” (Cramer 2003) into the spiritual technologies of fashion.

The system of fashion is a *perpetuum mobile*, a machine in perpetual motion propelled by a “self-feeding, self-sustaining, self-propelling and self-energizing process” (Bauman 2010: 55). When we are in fashion we manage to synchronize our technologies of the self with the workings of this *future apparatus*. Like a magic machine of light, fashion renders our prospective selves visible and radiantly bright. In this way, fashion is a spirited prism or kaleidoscope which helps us see beyond our doom of flesh, or a bonfire guiding our lost ships to the shining lands. Or as put in the movie *The Devil wears Prada*: it is a “beacon of hope”.

The technologies of the self help us navigate the continuum between our world of flesh and the Other, or Imaginary. Or rather; they are technologies which help us see how our world is just a fraction of the Other, an ephemeral passage in a vast ocean of the

Imaginary. What we consider the world of reason is the mere shadow of the Other. By wearing the skin of an animal the Shaman becomes the spirit of that *spiritus famaliarii*, using rituals to shapeshift through the passages between this world and the Other. Shapeshifting is one of the many means of travelling from the world of flesh, the world of reason, through the obscure passages of the Imaginary. The skin does not reproduce the animal, the skin renders the spiritual passage of the shaman visible. "Skin-shedding is a variation, rich in metaphor, for shape-changing; for it tells us, among other things, that there is only the softest, mistiest skin between this world and the Other." (Harpur 2002: 16)

Shapeshifting is just one aspect of how to take on journeys through the "daimonic reality" (Harpur 2002) of imagination. It is part of what we can call the *occulture of fashion*, where perhaps the most important asset of fashion is its cathartic character. It is a vehicle of purification, a spiritual craft, both a vessel and ability. In its promise of transformation it is a way of leaving the sickness of time behind, of changing one skin for another, one reality for a new for modes of existence. Just like in the movie *The Craft*, where four teenage girls embrace magic to navigate the strained juvenile and transitional angst, it is a period and position of *in-between*, and a balance on a blades edge. This twilight zone puts attention to the *inter-esse* or the in-between explored by Dutch philosopher Henk Oosterling (Oosterling 2009; Oosterling & Ziarek 2011) where modes of symbiotic integration replace the Cartesian atomization and mechanization of awareness and analysis. As Oosterling notices, to design is to *dasein*, to be in-between, at the inter-being.

The shapeshifting offered by fashion is ephemeral. The combustion of the now, fuelled by desire, is the power that bursts apart the moment to move into the next. In the continuum of time, the continuous shifting character of fashion leaves it active in the time of *Kairos*, of the moment, rather than in *Chronos*, the continuation of time. Fashion is indeed a fleeting moment, a passion, and it helps us escape the chronically actualized suffering of the prolonged persistent. Fashion is the technology of transformation, fuelled by the current of *kairos*, which makes travel to the Other possible.

Indeed, today we live in times where *kairos* is at the heart of everyday passion, where cheap fashion allows our everyday with instant gratification, impulsive change and desire permeates our lives. A desire for that next Other moment, the craving, desire, coveting, or that promising daimonic reality we simply wish for.

To be in fashion means to surrender to the elements of time, but also to affect it, be affected and engage in the shaping of time as it washes over your body and through your soul as a mirror darkly. Fashion is not an issue of identity in a static sense, as fashion is always becoming something else, it is a hybrid shape in transit, or even *a sign of motion*. As we step into the changing cabin of the fashion store the mirror offers us to shift shape – "who do you want to be tonight?"

This is the true shamanist aspect of fashion; it offers us a new skin, a passage through the thin membrane dividing the real and imaginary. The fashionista is a shaman, a ritualistic dimension traveller of "spiritual force in which the dream becomes the world-paradigm" (Aldhouse-Green 2005: 172). Using shapeshifting alters the perspective from the engineer's to that of the alchemist or shaman; "to create fire you don't have to first

build a match factory; the fire is within the wood and all you need to do is to rub two sticks together until they shapeshift into fire.” (Perkins 1997: 25)

The fashion garment is an *objectile*, a product projected into the future, aimed at our aspirations. With the help of fashion, a signifier becoming constantly new and flexible, we can shapeshift into our desired alter ego, liberating the potential of the self, becoming our aspirational representation, someone in our inner wishes, if just for a night. We drape our body in a dream, wordless communication of shared yearnings. A sacrifice of energy to fashion promises inner transformation. It is a continuum; fashion is energy is matter is energy. To shapeshift one “fights fire with fire”, challenge the dog by becoming a dog, change shape, change skin. At least this is the dream; by donning fashion one becomes fashion. “What is shapeshifting? In its simplest form, it is changing shape. And what is shape? Shape is a pattern of energy. Change the energy and you change the shape.” (Levy & Bruce 2010: 46)

Shapeshifting is change from cellular to personal to legional level to transform in order to transform along the continuum between reason and imagination. We transform from unborn to living, from living to dead, and many times in-between, at every occasion via a rite of passage. The shapeshifting shaman guides his community through the transitions “paving the way for the soul-journey between worlds” (Aldhouse-Green 2005: 174).

Alchemy is the practice of shapeshifting matter. To transpose the energy of substance into another, guiding the flow of becoming towards transubstantiation. In alchemy this is not only an issue concerning form, as in transformation, but the essence of matter and the correspondence between matter and the transposing will, the soul. The soul of the alchemist had to be purified through ritual, together with the material substances and liquids, otherwise no transition would come to be. Taking on the heritage of Plato’s *Timaeus*, this was the *techne*, the art/science of the craftsman, the *demiurgos* (Mohr 1985). As for Plato, the change does not only happen in the realm of the ideal, but is intimately connected to the material crafts, the daimonic techniques of transubstantiation.

What the alchemist or shapeshifter does is breaking into the code of matter or hack the technologies of becoming. The hacker is a dissident crafter, a *design demiurge*. The descendant disciplines of alchemy, chemistry, mechanics, technology, are all codes and programs guiding the technologies of matter as well as the self. In a similar vein we could understand the alchemy of fashion as a technology of code.

Here code does not signify a computer program, but the operating system of matter itself, not too unlike how Manuel DeLanda argues for the actualization of the virtual properties of reality (DeLanda 2002). Code is the command-based shapeshifter, reassembling parts of the actual. Code is the praxis of matter. As noted by media theorist Eugene Thacker; “Code is a set of procedures, actions, and practices, designed in a particular way to achieve particular ends in particular contexts. Code = praxis.” (Thacker in Galloway 2004: xxi)

Code is the magical formula of transformation, the enactment of material praxis, like the “hocus-pucus” of the wizard, which generates a transposition of material bodies. Indeed, the magicians’ use of “hocus-pocus” derives from the catholic liturgical formula “hoc est

corpus meum” – this is my body (Cramer 2005). The religious ritual is executing the technology of self and purifying the soul by confession and redemption. This makes language a special code of religious practice, it puts attention to transformation, just like in magical manifestations and software: “code is the only language that is executable” (Galloway 2004: 165).

The “computational couture”, where fashion meets technology (often in the form of electronics), can use the fashion code as actor, actuator, instructor and affector. This was my proposition in the project *Fashion Fianchettos*, where oversized t-shirts were marked with chess coordinates and participants draped the fabric and took notes on the sartorial code of the new shapes (von Busch 2010). These programs explored new ways of disseminating fashion as a set of mathematical functions and minimal algebraic codes, similar to that of chess notations. The result was new drapings that could be sent between fashionistas as Facebook status, Twitter or SMS updates. The project was in itself a code, a praxis, a shapeshifting formula of distributed magic, a spell of transformation, a journey of draping through social media.

Fashion, like most other technologies, works with amplification, facilitation, delegation and in the end; pacification. If we like the promise of the destination, what we see in the mirror, we buy the garment and hook on to the flow of transubstantiation. “Be what you can be”. Fashion is a technology that releases new capacities and, user-friendly as it is, leaves us blind to its inner workings. As we use the garment, which is an active choice, we double-click it, yet can’t see the code from which it originates and operates.

As shapeshifters we need to become the element we engage with. Just like the fire is *inside* the wood, fashion is *inside* the technology of the self. We ally with the energy of fashion. Reverse engineer, hack and shapeshift. We trace, delineate and become fashion in order to change fashion into what it can be. With a participation of the senses, a cultivation of attention and engagement of skills we can form an open culture around how to approach wearables through the shapeshifting character of fashion amplifying and intensifying the technologies of the self.

One student at the Fashion and Technology course I ran at K3, Malmo University, Jenny Nordberg, engaged with the stigmatizing processes of fashion. Jenny’s argument was that the worst critique you can get for your appearance is silence from your friends. Thus the “digital bruise” shirt was a shirt reacting on a sudden silence. If the ambient noise level dropped the microprocessor activated a hidden aquarium pump, which started “bleeding” out invisible ink from within the shirt. This caused the fabric to bruise until someone started comforting the wearer, that is speaking and once again raising the ambient sound, thus stopping the process. The invisible ink started fading away after a few minutes, “healing” the bruised social wound. This shapeshifting process used wearables to reveal some of the mythic properties of fashion, using several media to shapeshift the wearer and render some of fashion’s inner workings visible as social skin.

In Nordberg’s example, a microprocessor was used to uncover an everyday feeling of discomfort caused by fashion, revealed through shapeshifting, and also the social rituals that recover the face of the wearer. Every culture has specific social ceremonies connected to appearance and the social skin. Rituals of welcoming and departing, protection against the weather, curses and bad luck. Often they also have specific craft

objects to safeguard the wearer. Take for example the evil eye, the gaze of envy, the magical and malevolent gaze (so common in fashion); “The opposite of the gaze of love is not the gaze of hate, but that of envy, passive, unliving in itself, vampirically attracted to the life in others.” (Bey)

The Evil Eye is a jinx called forth by the sin of envy – protection can come from symbolic talismans projecting the “good eye”, sometimes called the “eye of Abraham” (Ulmer 1994: 11f). With what craft of imagination do we render the good eye visible today?

Here local crafts can play a central role. Not in an exotic sense but with the tracing of the migrations of skill we can find new patterns of relations, new *inter-esse* in the occulture of fashion. For this we should not only be embracing the techniques of craft but also the folk belief, cottage worship, rural base communities and the local cultivation of esoteric imagination. What does the local demiurge do? What daimonic reality does he conjure through his craft? What does the witch craft?

If we take on the exchange of crafts seriously, not only in simple techniques, but the sorcery of sensory of imagination, we can truly enrich the toolbox for exploring the potential of wearable electronics and “smart textiles”. These are the forces and codes we can hack, plug-in, and intensify into new empowering technologies of the self. This local engagement with mythopoetic craft can be the alter movement to the hackerspaces; a distributed heresy similar to that of the Movement of the Free Spirit and a cultivation of the human spirit towards the true “alchemy of the self” (Vaneigem 1998).

Turn passive believers into engaged users; leave no hands idle. Show the fashionistas there is only the softest, mistiest skin between them and their manifested imagination. Release the open culture, share the code and educate the mechanics of the self how to surf on the flow of fashion and become fashion-able.

Shapeshift. Become a warlock of vogue, an enchanter of fashion, a *magus à la mode*.

References:

- Aldhouse-Green, Miranda & Stephen (2005) *The quest for the shaman*, London: Thames & Hudson
- Bauman, Zygmunt (2010) "Perpetuum Mobile", in *Critical studies in fashion and beauty* 1 (1) 55-63
- Bey, Hakim (aka Peter Lamborn Wilson): "Evil Eye" at www.hermetic.com/bey/evil_eye.html [accessed June 7th 2011]
- Biggs, Michael & Karlsson, Henrik (2011) *The Routledge companion to research in the arts*, Oxford: Routledge
- von Busch, Otto (2008) *Fashion-able: hacktivism and engaged fashion design*, Gothenburg: ArtMonitor
- von Busch, Otto (2010) "Fashion Fianchettoes – Text, Program, Fashion" in *ArtMonitor* Iss 8
- Cramer, Florian (2003) "Social Hacking, revisited" at: http://cramer.pleintekst.nl/essays/social_hacking_revisited_sollfrank/social_hacking_revisited_sollfrank.pdf [accessed June 7th 2011]
- Cramer, Florian (2005) *Words made flesh: code, culture, imagination*, Rotterdam: Piet Zwart Institute
- DeLanda, Manuel (2002) *Intensive science and virtual philosophy*, London: Continuum
- Galloway, Alexander (2004) *Protocol*, Cambridge: MIT Press
- Greenwood, Susan (2009) *The anthropology of magic*, Oxford: Berg
- Harpur, Patrick (2002) *The philosopher's secret fire; a history of the imagination*, London: Penguin
- Klee, Paul (1919) "Creative Credo" *Schöpferische Konfession*, Berlin: Erich Reiss Verlag
- Levy, Robert & Bruce, Eve (2010) *Shamanism: the book of journeys*, Hants: O Books
- Maartin, Luther, Gutman, Huck & Hutton, Patrick (eds) (1988) *Technologies of the self: a seminar with Michel Foucault*, Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press
- Mohr, Richard (1985) *The Platonic cosmology*, Leiden: Brill
- Oosterling, Henk (2009) "Dasein as Design, Or: Must Design Save the World?", Premsel lecture April 1st 2009, available at www.premsel.org/sbeos/doc/file.php?nid=1673 [accessed June 7th 2011]
- Oosterling, Henk & Ziarek, Ewa (2011) *Intermedialities: philosophy, arts, politics*, Lanham: Lexington Books
- Perkins, John (1997) *Shapeshifting: shamanic techniques for global and personal transformation*, Rochester: Destiny
- Samuel, Geoffrey (1990) *Mind, body and culture: anthropology and the biological interface*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
- Sartre, Jean Paul (1972) *The psychology of imagination*, New York: Citadel
- Vaneigem, Raoul (1998) *The movement of the free spirit*, New York: Zone
- Ulmer, Rivka (1994) *The evil eye in the bible and in rabbinic literature*, Hoboken: KTAV Publishing House