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Fashion in Jeopardy

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## **Fashion in Jeopardy: An investigation into ways in which fashion mirrored change in UK Society**

### **KEY WORDS: Fashion, Style, Conflict, Jeopardy, Society, Change**

Glamorous, ostentatious, extravagant, alluring, flamboyant, frivolous! **(SLIDE 4)** The opulence of high fashion is often referred to with these very evocative words. Aspiring to such dizzying heights in the daily construction of appearance is the ultimate dream of the fashion consumer. This conflicts with the every day functionality of dress and the changes in society that fashion often needs to accommodate. The individual consumer of fashion will put together a look that conveys a visual message that can reflect these changes. These could be induced by war, depression, economic recession and political turmoil. The changes can also put the system of fashion and its consumption in great jeopardy. This research investigates and compares how fashion reacted to the deprivations of the Second World War, with similar deprivation, in the economic recession, beginning in 2008. This resulted in many parallel initiatives that have either been revived or have evolved. Whilst the research recognises that the deprivation suffered during war is far more destructive materially, physically and emotionally it emphasises the similarity of parallel initiatives in relation to fashionable clothing that impacted in the dual times of economic shortage. The initiatives discussed often-threatened recognised systems of fashion, design and consumption. It was driven underground only to re-emerge in different interpretations. In relation to this the research also details how final year fashion design students were set a live two day brief, that asked them consider the concept of 'Fashion in Jeopardy'. This exercise introduced students in a practical way to how fashion can mirror conflict in society and how a sense of individual style and fashion can be maintained in a crisis.

### **FASHION IN PERIL – AN OVERVIEW**

“Our lives, our intellect, our religion, our creativity, our sexuality are all the vocabulary of fashion and are open for renegotiation and representation” (Lynch and Strauss, 2007, p.1). **(SLIDE 5)**

This all-encompassing lifestyle quote from Lynch and Strauss, encapsulates the overall language of fashion. In this paper I do not suggest that lives, intellect, religion, creativity and sexuality are threatened by the dangers discussed. The analysis is based upon the subsequent development of individual style that emanates from the renegotiation and representation of fashion and its ensuing relationship to consumption. The development of individual style that evolves from this is a characteristic expression of self through fashionable dress. Mainstream fashion can show our gender, income and profession, individuality deviates from this when the wearer assimilates a fashionable look with a personal twist. This manifested itself through the original 'Make do and Mend' **(SLIDE 6)** trend from World War Two. In the Second World War, the government enforced utility clothing and rationing on the public. This was due to a shortage of cloth and factories to manufacture garments. Import and export of clothing also ceased. Many people however found ways to express themselves through quirky personal interpretations of the look. **(SLIDE 7)** For example, unique fashion statements were made using scraps of material to patchwork dresses together or odd scraps of wool were used up to knit striped sweaters in incongruous colour combinations. **(SLIDE 8)**

During the economic recession that began in 2008, both the fashion and retail industry suffered greatly. Fashion journalist Bridget Foley commented in a Women's Wear Daily article:

"Growing debt and unemployment forces the consumer to shop for needs as opposed to desires. As retailers continue to streamline at all levels, the luxury powerhouses will see orders cut and numerous smaller concerns run the risk of being dropped completely (as Neiman Marcus and Saks Fifth Avenue have already warned)" (Foley, 2009, p.1).

Experian the UK retail specialist, acknowledged the crisis and predicted that there would be 135,000 empty retail outlets by the end of 2009. The retailers who seemed to be doing well were the fast fashion retailers such as Primark, MK and Peacocks, and the supermarket brands such as Tesco and Fred and Florence. In order to cash in on this: "Supermarkets expand their budget lines and two for one deals" (Wilson, 2009, p.1). This initiated a consumer who shopped for needs instead of desires. Many consumers

therefore adopted a 'Make do and Mend' culture in order to develop a more individual product. This was achieved by customising bought items or by making their own.

Historically the system of fashion, from creation to consumption has been in jeopardy many times, however when threatened it finds interesting ways to diversify. The fashion system as we know it today has been described by Bridget Foley as: "That huge, intricate amalgamation of show dates, multiple seasons, mass international travel, steadfast insistence on early deliveries and an endless stream of new, familiar-looking collections into an already dangerously saturated marketplace" (Foley, 2009, p.1). Significantly during the Second World War, the fashion industry and its established system of design and production ceased. Consumption of fashion became rationed with the introduction of clothing coupons that restricted how many clothes an individual could purchase. The seasonal showing of collections to buyers and in turn customers also ceased, as all production and manufacturing became geared to the war effort. Fashion in effect stopped and from its ashes an interesting new approach to clothing the body emerged. "The result was innovative and more unique clothes on the streets than had ever been seen before" (McDowell, 1997, p.97). **(SLIDE 9)**

The British Government promoted both a utility scheme and a 'Make Do and Mend' initiative that encouraged the public to fill the gap left by the departure of many household items and clothes. The Utility scheme was a series of government restrictions applied to the production of clothes. These needed to be "Basic necessary garments not fashion fads or extreme designs" (Wilson and Taylor, 1989, p.118). The Incorporated Society of London Fashion designers, that included established names such as, Victor Steibel, Hardy Amies, Digby Morton and Norman Hartnell, were commissioned to design clothes that were smart and chic. They also had to conform to austerity restrictions in manufacture and stringent use of cloth.

The 'Make do and Mend' campaign became an immediate success. It was promoted through a series of pamphlets that depicted a 'Mrs Sew and Sew' character who dished out practical advice to the British public. Those with no knowledge of sewing could

quickly make a new coat out of two old ones or even an old blanket. Old curtains could be taken down and made into a dress, parachute silk was made into underwear etc.

**(SLIDE 5)** The magazine Housewife produced a leaflet whose message was:

“Thrift is the fashion and make and mend articles have been a popular feature of Housewife since the beginning of the war” (McDowell, 1997, p.95). ‘Make Do and Mend’ was not particularly concerned with fashion; in fact fashion was ultimately at its peril. This was due to the emergence of many unflattering styles. The early 1940’s look was essentially ugly, square, clumpy, boxy and ungainly, this is epitomised in contemporary fashion photographs and illustrations of the prevailing silhouettes and modes. Clumpy wedge shoes and oversize hats and turbans made from old scraps of fabric completed the overall ensemble.

The economic recession that began in 2008 has seen much resurgence in the thought processes behind utility and ‘Make Do and Mend’. The original ‘Make do and Mend’ pamphlet from 1943 by The Ministry of Information has been updated and republished by the department store chain John Lewis. As Miss Thrifty said: “Now that we’re heading for a recession – a depression, even, if the doomiest of the doom mongers are to be believed – all these pearls of wisdom will be relevant again” (Miss Thrifty, 2008, p.1). Many fashion magazines began to embrace the trend. The November 2009 issue of English Vogue celebrated a frugal approach to fashionable dressing. In editor, Alexandra Schulman’s introduction states:

“In April this year we reintroduced the popular feature ‘More Dash than Cash’. What better time to bring it back to life than now, when we are all looking at how we can make the most of what we have and incorporate new things cunningly into our existing wardrobes” (Schulman, 2009, p.24). **(SLIDE 10)**

The magazine featured various humorous articles that encouraged people to revitalise their wardrobes in inexpensive, yet stylish ways, these included; ‘Make do and Mend’ – ransack the kitchen cupboard for ingenious fashion finds. ‘This encourages the reader to make their own clothes using domestic objects with a surrealist touch and sticking them together with sticky tape and glue. Far more practical articles were ‘45 thrift finds’, Vogue’s selection of essential buys’, ‘Dash cash heroines’ where stars of original

dressing impart their style secrets’, ‘More splash than cash’ – a guide to the beauty products that work hard for their price’. As a high profile and revered fashion magazine, Vogue usually celebrates all that is luxurious, glamorous or edgy. This issue embraced the thrifty approach to fashion promoted by utility, in a humorous, accessible way and appeared to give this approach its seal of approval. As Sarah Lonsdale said in her telegraph article; ‘Restoring the Good Things in Life, A New Generation is on the Mend’:

“There is much to learn from the people who lived through the Forties and Fifties, when the Board of Trade urged women to customise dresses” (Lonsdale, 2009, p.1). **(SLIDE 11)**

A final year fashion student, Natasha Tavangari, conducted her own investigation into the ‘Make do and Mend’ trend and discussed this in her dissertation. **(SLIDE 12)** In one chapter she compared and contrasted the original ‘Make do and Mend’ booklet published in 1943 and the updated booklet published in 2009. Natasha quotes Bill Wilson: “Our lives are far more complicated than they were in the 1940’s and we have forgotten some of the basic principles which can save us a lot of time and unnecessary expense” (Wilson, 2009, p.2). Essentially she upholds this theory and emphasises that: “In the 1940’s it was all about the simpler things in life such as clothing and food supplies, whereas now as technology has moved on so vastly it is about electrical goods and being energy efficient” (Tavangari, 2010, p.15). For instance The original booklet for instance, emphasised issues such as how to maintain your mattress, still relevant today, however the 2009 booklet gives you energy efficient tips such as how to make your i-pod last longer. The dissertation as a whole claims that history has repeated itself in its philosophy towards ‘make do and mend’, in times of economic hardship, yet society has become more sophisticated and technologically advanced. Therefore the idea of thrift needs to be adapted to suit the advances of society. This theory is supported by the fact that the updated 2009 guide was written after the department store John Lewis, consulted 28000 members of its staff.

It is worth comparing and contrasting how fashion has reacted to deprivation initiated by other forms of social change. This serves to highlight and strengthen similarities to the two main issues discussed in this paper for instance, the political climate affects social change and this manifests itself through fashion. The punk rock movement of the 1970's was one of the most visually challenging styles to emerge as a reaction to the political climate of the time. **(SLIDE 13)** The modes of clothing were shocking because punks wanted to rebel against rules and regulations. Emerging from a political environment of strikes and recession it chose to react against all that was decent and proper. The establishment was violated as depicted in the iconic sex pistols t-shirt of the queen with a safety pin through her nose. Clothing styles were therefore used as retaliation to political forces through the visual image of punk. Aggressive, spiky, tartan clad individuals in ripped garments and bondage pants communicated a message of a dissatisfied community of people. The look whilst adhering to some of the principles of 'Make do and Mend' in the assemblage of dress, was more make do and rip apart. Fashion was described by Lynch and Strauss as: "One of the most effective forms of symbolic social response to identity destabilisation through the presentation of newly embedded dress codes" (Lynch and Strauss, 2007, p.73). This implies that identity is what drives fashion forward, when shifted by the external forces impacted upon it by society. Punk rock was an extreme example of this theory. It was initially considered to be an anti fashion look, as punks rebellion against rules and regulations, was reflected in the non-conformist clothing worn. The punk style was quickly appropriated as a commercialised look by the fashion industry. This was perhaps first exemplified in the work of the established fashion designer Zandra Rhodes. Inspired by punk, she designed a black jersey collection with holes and beaded safety pins in 1977 **(SLIDE 14)**, this earned her the name of "Princess of Punk." (Rhodes, 2010, p.1). The punk look has since been revived in both couture and the high street many times. A backlash against ostentation was in progress before the global recession in response to a growing awareness of sustainability amongst consumers of fashion. The opulence of high fashion is often in great jeopardy when it needs to reflect social changes. It does however establishes a new sense of high fashion and individuality as identified in the quirky individualism of 'Make do and Mend' or the aggression of punk.

## **‘FASHION IN PERIL’ - STUDENT EXPERIENCES**

Fashion students who live on very tight funds, are used to creating style on a budget. They are renowned for assembling fashion looks from thrift shop finds. **(SLIDE 15)** For any student worth their salt, this should reflect their innate love of fashion. Therefore fashion scholars are particularly adept at creating garments that capture the spirit of ‘Make do and Mend’ and this often results in the quirky and individual looks that Colin McDowell refers to. These modes form the staple of their own personal wardrobes and help to establish their own personal style. Once established, this style permeates throughout their own design work stamping it with a personal handwriting unique to them. This is crucial in helping to develop a fashion student’s design ability and understanding. A good designer should be able to recognise what their personal design handwriting is and how this can be adapted to meet the requirements of different design briefs and the market place:

“Successful designers have a clear understanding of their customers’ needs as well as understanding their position in a highly competitive market” (Renfrew and Renfrew, 2009, p.13).

It is essential to maintain a rigorous sense of currency within the pedagogy of fashion. Students must develop the ability to grasp and predict the pendulum of fashion change. This enables them to maintain a contemporary quality in their work and prepares them for a fast moving industry. It can be achieved by setting both major and minor projects that encourage students to analyse a contemporary issue and its relationship to fashion. This tests their abilities to alter perceptions towards fashion products, in order to retain their currency and viability. The concept of ‘fashion in peril’ provided an excellent opportunity to consider the comparable issues discussed in this paper, to gain a sense of history in relation to dress and react in a visual and three dimensional way by recycling a product.

Final year undergraduate fashion design students were set a live two day brief. They were asked to investigate historical ‘Make Do and Mend’ garments and the concept of making



something new and exciting from something old. They were then asked to mock up a fashion creation on a dress stand, from a garment or garments they had purchased in a second hand shop. The garments selected did not need to be fashionable which made their resultant transformation into fashionable looks varied and interesting.

Initially Utility and 'Make do and Mend' garments were investigated in the Leeds Museums and Galleries Costume Archives and the University of Huddersfield Fashion Archive. Although the archives were both small collections, they revealed some interesting examples of clothes that retained a sense of fashion in their cut and contemporary style, but were often functional and drab. The utility garments detailed how manufacturers produced fashionable garments within the confines of design and fabric restrictions. The brown coat in **(SLIDE 16)** has a utility label. It is sparingly cut and has pleats, which were not generally allowed. Closer inspection revealed the narrowness of the pleats, which had been added to give a fashionably flared look to the coat. The utility style bra **(SLIDE 17)** appears extremely unflattering and was designed purely for function. The actual bra cups were very wide however the shaping in the cups was extremely small. This bra would have given no shape to the bust when worn underneath garments. The raspberry crepe Utility dress **(SLIDE 18)** flared out from the waist. The tiny belt and shell shaped pockets utilised a small amount of fabric, yet gave detail to the garment. The two examples of 'Make do and Mend' observed were firstly, the knickers made out of parachute silk **(SLIDE 19)**. The knickers were actually a very considered garment. The use of parachute silk was illegal however many people acquired it, as it was a widely available fabric. Here the silk has been dyed to pale blue and salmon. The word 'Anita' has been embroidered onto the left half and the hem has been: "Lovingly finished with scalloped edges" (Personal interview with Natalie Raw, 08/11/09). The garment was made by an Anita Wright for her wedding in 1942. The polka dot dress **(SLIDE 20)** was a flattering garment, with small gathers at the waist, shapeless when worn it can be gathered with a wrap belt around the waist. It utilised the easy to produce, man made rayon, at a time when natural fibres, such as silk were scarce. The Edwardian bodice **(SLIDE 21)** was particularly interesting. It has been taken apart during the 'Make Do and Mend' initiative with the intention of turning it into an evening dress, yet nothing was

done with it. This leaves it to the imagination of the researcher, to envisage its potential use.

The fashion students were asked to reassemble a thrift shop find on the dress stand, in order to create a stylish garment. This capitalised on their ability to create fashion looks on a budget. This revitalisation of garments captured the spirit of the 'More Dash than Cash' initiative, sparked by November 2009 English Vogue. It also produced some surprisingly effective results and some less effective. It challenged the students to alter their ways of seeing garments and how they could be worn on the body. This also enlightened them, both in their approach to design and technical interpretation. For instance **(SLIDE 22)** is a leather blouson jacket turned upside down. When worn the hem becomes the neckline, which is wide and is drawn in by the belt, creating a gathered effect. The sleeve, which was originally cut to curve into the body, falls in a completely different way, when upside down. This creates a drape at the elbow. The collar becomes the waistband but as it is too small and points out over the hip. A pattern and calico toile was made and fitted from this garment before making up in a new fabric. This demonstrates a method of fashion design that adheres to the concept of 'Make do and Mend' and ultimately results in a fresh and interesting looking garment. Similarly the garment in **(SLIDE 23)** as modelled by the student wearing a skinny pair of jeans, is a tailored men's jacket. The hem of the jacket forms an oversize cowl neckline, attached at the back of the neck with the first button of the jacket. The sleeves of the jacket are turned inside out and tied around the back to secure the jacket. The rest of the jacket follows the folds of the cowl neck. The pocket flaps fall down revealing the lining which matches the inside lining of the jacket, in the cowl neckline. The calico toile is inspired by this approach.

The taffeta prom dress in **(SLIDE 24)** has been tightened and twisted asymmetrically around the body and the front button fastening has been fastened to reveal much of the bust. This creates a contemporary look. The reassembled basque and tailored jacket in **(SLIDE 25)** is less successful and resembles fancy dress. The jacket has been cut up and part of it shaped around the bust. The shoulder pads have been placed on the shoulder

straps. Further interesting examples include the tailored tweed jacket in **(SLIDE 26)** which has been turned inside out and the lining removed, exposing the inner workings of the jacket. With the sleeves gathered and draped, the jacket retains a contemporary deconstructed appearance. The oversized striped man's shirt in **(SLIDE 27)** has been gathered up at the neck and the sleeves unpicked and incorporated into the gathers, this creates a new looking shirt dress from a classic garment.

The different examples from the student project demonstrate some good and weak examples of 'Make do and Mend' in a fashion context. This, compared with their research into historical garments enhanced their understanding of how fashion can be influenced by social change, through a live experience. The students were also able to compare their efforts to the high fashion examples suggested by Vogue magazine, by developing their own thrifty approach to creating fashionable garments. As one student remarked: "This exercise not only made us empathise with the concept of 'Make do and Mend' but it made us aware that innovative fashion design ideas can be developed from this way of working" (Phillips, 2009, personal interview). **(SLIDE 28)** Ultimately the project highlighted that developing design ideas through recycling, could be instant and fun and in turn influence fashion trends. The students who laboured over the process often produced more contrived and overworked ideas. Those who worked quickly produced simpler and fresher results.

## **REFLECTIONS AND CONCLUSIONS**

Fashion has been identified as a: "Form of expressive social movement" (Lynch and Strauss, 2007, p.54). This implies that if the behaviour of the mass of society is altered, fashion will follow the change. Fashion therefore appears to be driven by social changes. This creates a shift in the perceptions of gender, sexuality and status, which then creates new niches in the fashion market for products and trends to develop. An example of this is in fashion's emancipated sportswear look during the 1920's. Throughout the First World War, from 1914 to 1918, women had taken traditional male roles in the workforce. **(SLIDE 29)** Much practical clothing such as trousers and dungarees needed to be worn for manual types of work. After the war women were reluctant to return to the styles of

pre-war clothing that were often purely decorative and restricted by corsetry. Fashion designers were quick to capitalise on this shift in attitudes and designers such as Chanel and Patou, developed the easy to wear, luxury sportswear look of the 1920's. This consisted of short skirts, dropped waists and the use of jersey. It was a look that was comfortable and easy to wear and met the sartorial needs of women in their newly emancipated roles in both society and the workforce. In a similar way the punk look, initially established as an anti-fashion look, by the industry via designers such as Zandra Rhodes. The student exercise in making something new and fashionable out of old garments, updating the notion of 'Make do and Mend' by imprinting their own sense of style on to a creation, is an example of how fashion students were introduced, in a practical way to how fashion can mirror changes in society.

Fashion in jeopardy would appear to be a contradiction in terms. It seems that when fashion is perceived to be at risk, it capitalises on this risk to initiate a look that imprints itself on the fashion consumer's consciousness. In an interview with the designer Betty Jackson she was asked how the economic climate in recession affected her company she replied: "We have to work harder and create better things, it doesn't stop creativity, it makes you more creative and remember what you do best" (Betty Jackson 2009, personal interview). **(SLIDE 30)**

In her dissertation, the student Natasha Tavangari strongly felt that if the revived 'Make do and Mend' trend was advertised more widely, the consumer would be "More aware and more educated" (Tavangari, 2010, p.21). She also put forward the view that the concept of 'Make do and Mend' could be considered a fashion trend that resulted from the economic recession. She quoted Bill Wilson:

"When the recession is over no doubt these booklets, both the updated John Lewis version and the original version will go back in the attic and head for the shelves of charity shops" (Wilson, 2009, p.3).

This supports the discussion in February 2010 English Vogue that described how fashion designers had picked up on the feeling for frugality and re-interpreted it as a fashion trend. As discussed fashion designers have the freedom and ability to reconstruct risk into

opulent and desirable clothing. In other words social change initiates fashion change. Similar to bacteria that become resistant to antibiotics, fashion mutates into something new and ultimately resistant to any form of peril. **(SLIDE 31)**

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### **Interviews**

Jackson, B. (2009) Interviewed by Kevin Almond, University of Huddersfield, November 17<sup>th</sup>.

Phillips, Frances. (2009) Interviewed by Kevin Almond, University of Huddersfield, November 28<sup>th</sup>.

Raw, Nathalie. (2009) Interviewed by Kevin Almond, Discovery Centre – Leeds Museums and Galleries, November 9<sup>th</sup>.

### **Costume collections**

Leeds Museums and Galleries. Costume Collection – curator Nathalie Raw  
University of Huddersfield Fashion Archive.

### **Illustrations**

Fig 1) *Utility overcoat, circa 1943*, Leeds Museums and Galleries, X1122. Photograph by Kevin Almond c 2009.

Fig 2) *Utility bra, circa 1941-1951*, Leeds Museums and Galleries, E/104/1976.  
Photograph by Kevin Almond c 2009.

Fig 3) *Parachute silk knickers, circa 1943*, Leeds Museums and Galleries, 1973.17.  
Photograph by Kevin Almond c 2009.

Fig 4) *Utility wool crepe dress, circa 1943*, Leeds Museums and Galleries E1166/61/6.  
Photograph by Kevin Almond c 2009.

Fig 5) *Utility polka dot rayon dress, circa 1943*, University of Huddersfield Fashion  
Archive. Photograph by Kevin Almond c 2009.

Fig 6) *Edwardian bodice, circa 1902*, Leeds Museums and Galleries, E2009.115.19.  
Photograph by Kevin Almond.

Fig 7) *Upside down leather jacket* by Emma Thomas\*. Photograph by Kevin Almond c  
2009 Fig 8)

*Upside down jacket toile* by Emma Thomas\*. Photograph by Kevin Almond c 2009.

Fig 9) *Re-positioned tailored jacket* by Lucy Blackburn\*. Photograph by Kevin Almond  
c 2009.

Fig 10) *Re-positioned tailored jacket* toile by Lucy Blackburn\*. Photograph by Kevin  
Almond c 2009.

Fig 11) *Taffeta Prom Dress* by Frances Phillips\*. Photograph by Kevin Almond c 2009.

Fig 12) *Re assembled tailored jacket and Basque* by Sophie Brownson\*. Photograph by  
Kevin Almond c 2009.

Fig 13) *Inside out jacket* by Sophie Hudson\*. Photograph by Kevin Almond c 2009.

Fig 14) *Over size mans shirt* by Chloe Cromack\*. Photograph by Kevin Almond c 2009.

\* All final year fashion design students at University of Huddersfield 2009/2010