

# Fashion fianchettos – text, program, fashion

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## Abstract:

Many fashion theorists have approached fashion as a form of sartorial 'code', signifying meaning and being a system of communication or a specific visual language. From this reading of fashion, semiotic systems of codes define fashion, and consumers learn to decipher the meanings projected through the system. Among fashion practitioners however, the analytical tool of semantic codes does not seem to have attracted much attention, and there are only a few examples where theory and practice share a common applicable approach.

Yet, a literal usage of the concept might offer new action spaces for practitioners, as it could be hybridized with another practice of coding: programming. This was examined during a design workshop the author held at Gallery Room 103 in Auckland in Spring 2009, called *Fashion Fianchettos*.

The workshop used live draping and algebraic topology to experiment with new ways of disseminating fashion, as a set of mathematical functions and minimal codes of new drapings that could be sent between fashionistas. With a handful of bandage clips and an oversized t-shirt, the workshop provided an experimental platform for algebraic notated fashion, as well as a laboratory connecting academic text, social media and practical draping.

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A central challenge and theme for ubiquitous discussions in artistic research is the connection between theory and practice. This challenge is also a paramount theme in design research, and



often the distance between fashion theory and the work in the studio seems miles wide.

To many practitioners academic text in its formality and rigidness, often seem to be difficult to access. In seminars, designers often feel anxious that their use of references and concepts is incorrect, and that the text as material might appear an inflexible substance with which to craft new ideas.

Yet, text can be approached in multiple ways, and its ambiguity can be used as a point of departure for practical investigations. Perhaps we can even say that the research text can be ‘misused’ and extrapolated from a theoretical metaphor to become a tool to generate new practices for design. Such an approach builds on a style of research reminiscent of Deleuze and Guattari, as phrased in Brian Massumi’s foreword to Deleuze and Guattari’s *Thousand Plateaus*; “The question is not: Is it true? But: does it work? What new thoughts does it make possible to think?” (Deleuze & Guattari, 2004: xv)

To many academics who use text as their primary tool of investigation, this approach might not sound very radical, many academics regard their writing a theoretical tool as well as a practice in itself. But for designers, to use text as a tool for agency rather than primarily for reflection moves text into a realm more often called ‘design thinking’. This field of transversal skill application and open problem inventing and solving is home ground for much design practice, and it relieves one of the main petrifying obstacles of academic text: the ‘correct’ or ‘orthodox’ understanding of theory.

Specifically, this text expands on a design workshop the author organised at Gallery Room 103 in Auckland, Spring 2009, called *Fashion Fianchetto*. The workshop’s point of departure was the concept of fashion ‘code’ and its use in texts on fashion theory. The workshop used live draping, algebraic topology and hypermodern chess to experiment with new ways of disseminating fashion. The workshop explored how fashion could be a set of mathematical functions, minimal codes of new drapings, which could be sent between fashionistas as secret codes. Participants explored the contemporary draping tactics of moves like Nf3 or Qh5; the Réti Opening or the Nimzo-Indian Defense; an Elie Saab dress or a Balenciaga cape. With only a handful of bandage clips and an oversized t-shirt, the workshop provided an experimental platform for new dissemination forms for algebraic notated fashion where all new codes ran on the same ‘hardware’ – the ubiquitous everyday t-shirt.



### Codes of fashion

Our everyday experience of fashion is always a coded phenomenon. Most of us, somehow, have an idea of what is on *this season*, whether it be bell-bottom jeans, power suits, or moonboots. More formal dress often has explicit rules, something known as 'dress code'. The dress codes of everyday life are tacit rules which sometimes become explicit, often in a quite quirky ways, such as: 'Dress Your Age', 'Less is More'. or 'Keep it Simple', or more specifically, with: 'Never Mix Green and Blue'. Codes like these can be summed up in the classic 'Clothes Make the Man', or perhaps even better in its expanded version in the quote by Mark Twain: "Clothes make the man. Naked people have little or no influence in society."

This makes the codes of fashion a common topic for fashion theory, even if the sentences above are often not considered. One of the primary fields of investigation in fashion theory concerns how clothes create and communicate meaning. To esteemed fashion theorist Elizabeth Wilson, clothes make the body "culturally visible" and are thus heavily coded by meanings. (Wilson 2004:376). Throughout fashion theory the application of semantics has been popular and various 'codes' of fashion have been deciphered as vehicles for various forms of communication, stemming from a "human propensity to communicate through symbols" (Entwistle 2000:66). If we think fashion might be slightly ambiguous as a communication tool, it is because it is *undercoded*, which means reliable interpretative rules are elusive (Davis 1992:10f). Many theorists have followed the semiotic line of thinking, as clearly covered in Malcolm Barnard's *Fashion as Communication* (1996). Most of these interpretations approach fashion from an instrumental position, an approach made famous by Roland Barthes' rigorously semantic study *The Fashion System* (1983), and perhaps taken to its extreme in Alison Lurie's work *The Language of Clothes* (1981). Here Lurie argues that clothes have a specific 'grammar' and 'vocabulary' depending on what 'words' we have in our wardrobe, and wearing uniforms literally means that all shout the same thing in unison



(Lurie 1981: 18ff). Taking this semantic approach too literally might not help us understand fashion and clothing any better, but this does not mean an inaccurate metaphor is useless. Jean Baudrillard states that clothing and fashion display a different form of communication, one that does not aim to transmit meaning, but rather is in constant *play* with meaning (Baudrillard 1993:94). So could we ‘misuse’ and play with the code metaphor as a specific point of departure on a journey to open new room for action? How could we play with the concept of codes to create new modes of fashion?

But before we move into practice, let us first look at the execution of ‘code’. When is code more than a semantic concept of communication, and perhaps more importantly, how does code work? How does it transform reality and what new thoughts could the tweaking of the concept of code make possible, and from that, inform new practice?

Media ecologist Alexander Galloway sees code as more than simple words or signifiers of meaning. This is especially true in the worlds of computer software. For Galloway, code is a stronger text: “code is the only language that is executable” (Galloway 2004:165). Code is not only a messenger, but also a container of activity. Its basic function is to facilitate and control operations. “Code has a semantic meaning, but it also has an enactment of meaning” (Galloway 2004:166). In the realm of computers, code is an executable language of transformation.

The act of transformation is a form of magic, and codes, often involving secret components, are also central features in all forms of rituals. Code is a magical formula, which triggers a metamorphosis, like the ‘hocus-pucus’ of the wizard. Indeed, the magicians’ use of ‘hocus-pocus’ derives from the catholic liturgical formula “hoc est corpus meum” – *this is my body* (Cramer 2005). The hocus-pocus can be interpreted as a magical formula of turning word to flesh (as the opening of the Gospel of John: “In the beginning was the Word [...] and the Word was made flesh”). This is also the basis for the Eucharist, where bread and wine are



ritually transformed, consecrated and consumed by means of liturgical practice. Through religious code, domestic food is turned into a holy body, grape juice into consecrated plasma and words are incarnated.

There exists a similar magical process where we see a piece of clothing manifest itself as fashion. The code then becomes our social body, we temporarily identify with specific garments or moments in fashion, and these become imprinted upon our social skin. Fashion is the cultural intelligence code that ephemeral dreams are made of. We come to dress in time, and we incarnate the magic of fashion as it might change our self-perception and self-esteem. In her text *Magic Fashion* (2004), fashion theorist Elizabeth Wilson explores these types of magical processes, so let us examine this enchantment act a little closer.

Wilson compares the conceptual terrain of the Surrealists and their interest in clothes with everyday ‘superstition’, as “fascination with the occult rife in the allegedly ‘secular’ societies of the West [and] garments play a role in these shadowy realms” (Wilson 2004: 378). Wilson emphasises that:

For many, perhaps most of us, articles of clothing not only affect our mood and self-perception, but not infrequently acquire quasi-magical properties and meanings. (Wilson 2004:378).

Wilson compares these magical garments, something often developed among sports players, with the ‘transitional objects’ discussed by psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott, such as the ‘security blanket’ of a child which gradually separates from the symbiotic relationship with the mother (Winnicott 1971). To the players, these magical or ‘lucky’ garments of sportsmen somehow imbue the ‘hand of God’ into them, thus transforming a chance object into a fetish object, “and fetish objects are, of course, highly magical.” (Wilson 2004:379)

Wilson further compares these magical properties with the commodity fetishism and desire production of contemporary society:

It is because we live in a society dominated by capital and consumption that we commandeer material goods for the symbolic expression of values remote from materialism. This includes ideas of superstitious, magical and spiritual nature. The objects expressing or embodying them become something like secular fetishes. (Wilson 2004:379)

But whereas Marx describes commodity fetishes as disempowering and involves the alienation of human actors, Wilson sees them as something more. She suggests “that the fetish, including fetish garments, may also stand in for other, more nebulous, desires: for power, for social affirmation, for spiritual certainty.” (Wilson 2004:381). This means that dress acts as a “vehicle for enchantment” powered by the accumulation of the “dream energy of society” by which we can escape into re-enchanted worlds. (Wilson 2004:382f)

The code of fashion not only signals material goods (incarnated into the materiality of the fabric), but also the methods, or ‘manners’ of wearing a standard outfit (which through modernism, has been the fashion for men). ‘Dress codes’ not only signify *what* to wear, but also *how* to wear it, especially apparent in formal attire. The ‘hocus-pocus’ of fashion is a process of transformation, executing formal codes that turn the everyday magical.

Could we take this ‘dress code’ approach literally and actually write and communicate codes for garments that could turn them into fashion? This was a question explored in the *fashion fianchetto*s workshop.

### Workshop

We can say ‘dress code’ is a set of situated and formalized instructions: how we should look in a specific situation; or as situated instructions (action scripts) that says “how-to-act-to-look”. If we follow Lurie’s approach and take Barthes by his word in *The Fashion System*, (where he speaks of fashion as multiple layers of codes), we might approach fashion as a set of almost mathematical rules. Not as cultural or tacit expressions, but rather as numerical and executable algorithms. Here, fashion expressions are not allowed to have any ambiguities, but rather be read as lines of formal information. However, if fashion runs like a small program written for a command interpreter, we could also ‘reprogram’ the operations of clothes with simple changes in the execution of code, a simple shift in numbers, scripts or commands.

One could argue that fashionable expressions are constantly ‘reprogrammed’ and also long-lasting dress codes change over time, such as the disappearance of the men’s hat as formal attire through the Nineteen-Sixties. But what I am aiming at here is how by using a literal approach to dress ‘codes’, we could imagine fashion being simple codes, transmitted as algebraic notations, sent as messages, perhaps encrypted to the chosen few, or widely diffused as open data. Fashion as topologic code.

As an explicit stance, the workshop used chess connotations, as the chessboard and the strategies of the game have a long tradition of being notated with algebraic codes. The *fianchetto* (little flanking), a specific pattern of development during the opening sequence, could inspire new design perspectives. The *fianchetto* are tactical moves in chess where the bishops are moved to the flanks of the board to control the centre, rather than depend on formations of pawns in the centre of the board, which many classic strategies have been built upon. Strategies emphasising moves along the flanks, and with not too much reliance on pawn formations, have been developed and conceptualized in a school called hypermodern chess, considered an addition to classical chess theory. The *fianchetto* can be a fruitful metaphor for rethinking the way fashion today is disseminated throughout new fashion ecologies, which moves on the fringes, advances transversally, and is spread



virally through ‘social media’ rather than disseminated in a linear process by mass media. A fianchetto of fashion can be a shift of tactics from central command and top down domination, to a series of outflanking and distributed measures developing unused assets in the fashion game.

The workshop took place at Room 103 gallery in Auckland and was visited by about twenty participants, consisting mostly of artists, designers and fashion students. Using oversized t-shirts as the basic ‘hardware’ of fashion, the workshop, participants experimented with creating draping codes, or ‘software scripts’, with which to easily update clothes through simple instructions. By connecting various parts of the garment with bandage clips or pins, a new draping could be made *ac hoc* and its coordinates notated as a set of code instructions.

What would these codes look like, and how can a simple t-shirt, or any everyday garment, be reprogrammed or draped so new looks can be easily reproduced and distributed among users and co-creators? The workshop participants set off to investigate how their oversized t-shirts could be reformed, starting from very simple draping, which after some attempts quickly became more daring. By the end they also tried codes for other garments.

Throughout the workshop we tried different forms of notations and a sketchy program could look something like this:

```
/*
 * code example 1
*/
garment = (t-shirt);                                // this is a t-shirt program
gridFront =                                         // 9 rows and 7 columns of front
gridBack = (1,9/a,h); //                                         9 rows and 7 columns on back
wear (normal);                                     // wear the shirt as you would normally
connect gridFront (g3,h3); (d5,b5); (g9,e9); (d3,a3); // connect these coordinates on front
connect gridBack (d5,c5); (b3,a5); (b8,a5);           // connect these coordinates on back
```

The formal aspect of this code, the first column, is almost a draping ‘machine code’, directly aimed at the materiality of the garments, and could easily be imagined to run on garments already prepared with coordinate snap buttons to make new draping patterns easily executable. The second column is the comments, which aims to help the human reader understand and expand on the code. The first, formal scripts of instructions could be simplified or ‘refactored’ to shorten their structure without changing the results, and then sent through SMS or twitter, with a maximum of 140 characters. Through these type of channels the latest draping styles could immediately be disseminated by means of digital code and telecommunication technologies.

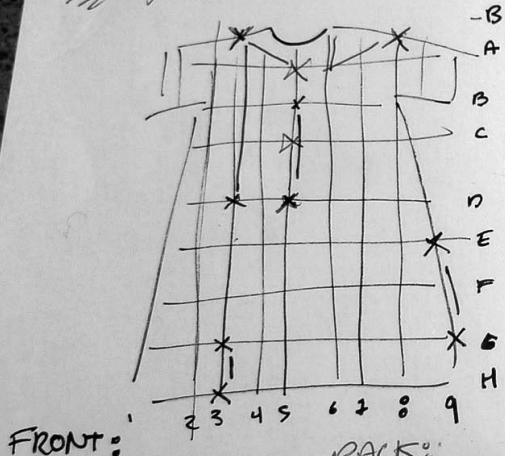
# OTTO WORKSHOP

Grid tee exercise

w = Front  
b = Back

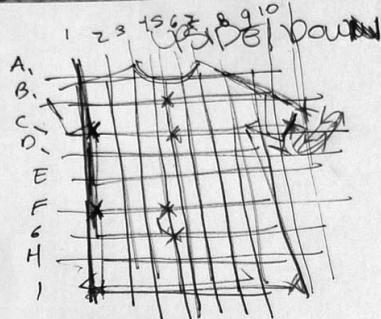


connecting coordinates.



FRONT:  
G3 + H3  
D5 + B5  
G9 + E9  
D3 + A3

BACK:  
D5 + C5  
-B3 + A5  
-B8 + A5



1 Put on tee with arms through sleeves, and hem around back of neck then under arms

2. Pin side seam hem coordinates together at the front

I1 + I9

3a

F4 + G4

B5 + C5

F1 + C1

C10 + B11

A more brief version of the code above, ready for SMS, could be:

```
/*
 * machine code (SMS-Tweet) of code example 1
 */
g=t-s, gF(1,9/a,h); gB(1,9/a,h); w=n; gF(g3,h3/d5,b5/g9,e9/d3,a3);
gB(d5,c5/b3,a5/b8,a5)
```

The next step would be to give a set or sequence of commands a name, like chess strategies, such as the *Réti Opening* or the *Nimzo-Indian Defense*, which in turn opens for larger sets of data to be developed and spread.

Codes like this could also exist as image captions, explaining complicated drapes with simple instructions. People relaying the information could make quick modifications or interpretations of the latest haute couture drapes, elucidating the zeitgeist by adding instantly updated action scripts to everyday garments, sampling and remixing codes. Such an approach to fashion could outflank the classic strategy of controlling the centre

of the fashion game board. A designer would neither aim to use a pawn storm to move ahead in formation, nor depend on strong pieces in central positions, but rather move sideways and allow room for *ad hoc* changes. Social media could move on the flanks, among users, where new appearances would travel in a transversal manner and increase the connective potential of dress codes.

Fashion instructions, such as those explored by the workshop participants, could be parsed by wearers, constantly updated without changing the ‘hardware’, or garment, on which the scripts ran. True Fashion minimalism, even somewhat environmentally sustainable, and Fast Fashion could not be much faster. But this fashion would only exist as digital code, and technically anyone could be a broadcaster, sampler and remixer.

### Research code?

Today, it might be easy to deride Barthes’ approach to fashion as a purely written phenomenon, but we must remember that his research was made at the peak of the linguistic turn and the formation of structuralism. *The Fashion System* was written in 1967, during the last decade of Paris being the unquestioned epicentre of fashion, the place from where the code of the fashion system *originated*. Paris was the paradisiacal Garden of Eden, where every season an original ‘Fiat Lux’ was uttered which illuminated the dark surrounding world. Indeed, Paris was the epicentre from where the ‘original code’ was disseminated. A pre-Babel language spoken by the sons of Noah, who had not yet dispersed to other fashion capitals around the planet. This was a time when an ‘original code’ existed, ‘the real thing’, it was literally an executable code that was then imitated across the globe. As Umberto Eco illustrates in his text *Languages in Paradise*, in the Latin Vulgate version of the Bible, Adam call the various animals *nominibus suis*, (by their own names), which when translated to the King James version (Genesis 2:19) became “Whatsoever Adam called every living creature, that *was* the name thereof”. (Eco 1998:24)

Scientific research code ideally aims for the same accuracy as the pre-Babel languages spoken by the sons of Noah. Indeed, the ultimate aim is to transcribe the ‘Fiat Lux’ gesture itself to decode the wonders of Nature. This approach becomes a central question concerning design and artistic research, a systematic inquiry aiming to approach the wonders of Artistic Creation.

To illustrate a research process we might return to the draping programs from the workshop. As mentioned, the point of departure for the workshop was ‘code’ on a level of metaphor, as a tool for widening horizons and creating new action spaces. But in programming, code consists of two complementary layers: the *code* itself or the executable commands which communicates with the machine, and a row of *comments*, used by the user/reader which communicates with readers who in the future want to further build on the code. There exists one code of creation (of execution), and one code

of communication, for others to build upon and understand the thinking and intentions of the programmer.

Text as programming code resonates with the use of text in design and artistic research. One level of text exists as artistic metaphor, a virtual tool for expanding attention and action spaces and allow for new processes of becoming, another is comment or reflection. This distinction might evoke strict academic research texts from the natural sciences: the text that encourages *precision* and *reproducibility*, similar to the programming code of executable code and comments.

A fertile concept for the middle ground, or the unity of these two aspects could be the intuitive thinking and poetic imagination that Japanese philosopher Koji Take calls “poetic exactness” (Bunchoten *et al* 2001:26).

Poetic exactness executes the code and comments of the research process as one work of art, indeed as in Christian theology where divinity and humanity is united, not mixed, in Jesus. Indeed, just like theology, artistic research does not aim to resolve mystery, but rather build upon a body of knowledge with which to develop faith as a social reality and as a social experience that can be shared and amplified among believer and practitioners. The studio practice at the academy can, just like the monastery, be a laboratory for shared exercises and experiences, spiritual or in other ways transcendental, with the specific intention of passing on practical knowledge and developing a sophisticated language among the community.

As a tool for ‘poetic exactness’ new lines of practice can actualise new possibilities by riding along the intensities of lines, and play with metaphors, rather than build walls or try to solely relate to the ‘correct’ use of Barthes’ concepts. This could be the arena for playful and magical engagement with fashion, praxis and reflection. Here, the question would not be: Is it correct? But rather: How does this play inform new practice? And just like the concise, effective and artful code of the programming guru being ‘beautiful’ because it activates new processes, so will even the most formal aspects of well executed artistic research.

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