ALGORITHMIC CULTURE AND SARTORIAL PROSPERITY

FROM LABOUR TO COMMUNITY BUILDING

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Abstract

The article defines the term "prosperity fashion" by focusing on the nature of work in contemporary fashion. Our aim here is to redefine the concept of labour by balancing solitary work against collective imagination, creative invention against algorithmic creativity informed by sartorial knowledge, and solitary genius against empathy towards local communities. The paper deals with three main assumptions. First, it posits that in contemporary fashion design there is a newfound interest in tailoring and sartorial literacy. Secondly, it argues that this interest in tailoring is a consequence of contemporary algorithmic culture. Tailoring can be seen as an agency that unites craftsmanship, algorithmic culture, and a spiritual approach to clothing. Thirdly, in the final part of the argument we deal with the case study of a contemporary designer community (Terike from Budapest) connected through sartorial literacy, highlighting how this community embodies the principles of the sartorial turn. The article concludes by advocating for the decolonization of tailoring as a civilizing process (Wild 2014), using the Terike community as an example of local sartorial creativity and of "defashion" (Niessen 2022). This examination underscores the need to recognize and preserve diverse sartorial practices that challenge dominant narratives within the fashion industry.

AGAINST FASHION AS SOLITARY WORK

As Li Edelkoort highlighted seven years ago in her now-famous anti-fashion manifesto, contemporary fashion education continues to produce "single individual star designers for the catwalk" (Edelkoort, 2017). While the industry showed sensitivity to this criticism during the pandemic, the past few years have seen a regression to the unsustainable norm of creating and exploiting solitary stars. This feature is structural, as cultural industries often rely on "symbol creators who become stars – their names promising certain experiences" and who "are rewarded enormously, while most creative workers exist in a vast reservoir of underused and under-resourced talent, picking up work here and there" (Hesmondhalgh, 2013, p. 32). This duality is particularly evident in the fashion industry, where the charisma and glamour of an individual designer are so dominant that fashion houses continue to operate under the name of a deceased creator, whose legacy still guarantees a specific consumer experience.

The extraordinary valorization of the solitary genius is comparable only to the film industry; however, even there, it is rare for a living creator's work to be credited under the name of a long-deceased predecessor. Pierre Bourdieu and Yvette Delsaut employed the concept of magic to illustrate how the symbolic value of a designer's name is fundamental to the haute couture industry (Bourdieu & Delsaut, 1975, pp. 20-21). While they

addressed the transfer of value from one designer to another, they did not underscore how tyrannical, inhumane, and unsustainable this process could be.

Since the 19th century, with Charles Frederick Worth as the first prominent example, the emphasis on the designer's name on the label has contributed to growing inequalities. Although designers like Madeleine Vionnet were committed to fostering humane working conditions for their collaborators (or, in another context, the workers) (Chapsal, 1989, p. 314)[1], the normalization of what is now termed "social unsustainability" (Eizenberg – Jabareen, 2017) began to take hold within the fashion system. While such observations might seem self-evident within the current framework of systemic industry critique, practical actions inspired by these insights remain isolated and rare.

This article builds on these foundational ideas and proposes a definition of "prosperity fashion" that centers on the nature of work in contemporary fashion. The authors—a collective of fashion designers working under the name Terike from Budapest, art management experts, and a fashion theorist—seek to redefine the concept by balancing individual work with collective imagination, juxtaposing creative invention against algorithmic processes informed by sartorial expertise. This approach underscores that contemporary fashion stems not from individual brilliance alone, but from the collaborative and contextual facets of creativity. Recognizing that the mystical notions of creativity and imagination need tempering through speculative realism[2], this perspective is informed by contemporary sociological reflections on work and labor.

What constitutes the work of a designer? Is one still a designer when focusing solely on conceptualizing a new textile piece, while leaving weaving, knitting, tailoring, sewing, ironing, studio upkeep, client interactions, social media content creation and brief interpretations, etc. to others?

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1   The names of all those who contributed to the work can now be found on the film credits. Why don't we add, albeit in very small print, the name of the worker who made the dress under the designer's hand? It's so important for a craftsman to sign his work. On some of the stones of cathedrals, the names of those who carved them are discreetly engraved. However, in Haute Couture, in addition to the couturier, we only pay tribute to the woman who wears the dress, forgetting the chifonnières without whom it simply wouldn't exist! Isn't elegance, unlike other arts, a collective art? (Translation from French by the authors.)

2   A philosophical approach that critiques the tradition of Western philosophy, drawing inspiration from Immanuel Kant's emphasis on the primacy of the relationship between consciousness and the world over any presumed objectivity of 'things in themselves' (Mackay 2007: 4). In fashion studies, this approach has been adapted and translated through new materialist perspectives (Smelik 2018).

Or does true design encompass all these diverse forms of labor, encapsulated under the broader term "sartorial prosperity"? This discourse aims to illuminate these questions and propose a balanced vision for the future of fashion.

FASHION DESIGNERS AS TAILORS

Our investigation began by referencing Katja Praznik's feminist conception of 'unpaid work' (Praznik, 2021). Praznik's notion is shaped by her research on the nature of artistic labor in former Yugoslavia. The study argues that artistic work shares significant similarities with reproductive labor within the capitalist market. During socialism, discourses on creativity and artistic autonomy were often deemed bourgeois, prompting socialism to reframe artistic labor as exceptional and unique work that was rewarded, in contrast to the often invisible nature of reproductive work. According to Praznik, a crucial aspect of her argument is that this association of creative work with exceptional labor ultimately contributed to the exploitation of artists following the dissolution of Yugoslavia after 1991. Similar arguments concerning the precarity of the workforce in the neoliberal market were addressed by Angela McRobbie in relation to the British fashion system, which was celebrated by the government without implementing a protective framework. The cultural theorist underscores how the gender pay gap and differing gender perspectives were significant issues at play in this context. McRobbie highlights that this lack of systemic support allowed the creation of a precarious labor market where workers, particularly women, faced economic and professional insecurity. Moreover, the glorification of creativity masked underlying inequalities, perpetuating cycles of underpayment and limited career advancement (McRobbie, 2002).

The process described by McRobbie coincides with the moment when the manual work required by fashion creation had already disappeared from the creative process. The productive turn in the field of design can be interpreted as a rebellion against misconceptions surrounding the nature of the creative work, which is often viewed as intellectual, white-collar work. This shift reinvigorated the recognition of the dirty, arduous, precise, and manual labor necessary for creating garments and design objects. It sought to reframe such labor as an essential component of creativity, challenging the undervaluation of

hands-on craftsmanship within the industry (Adamson, 2011; Auther, 2010).

As a consequence to this, we can assist in contemporary fashion design to a newfound interest in tailoring and sartorial literacy. As a striking example to this, we reference Demna Gvasalia's SS2024 Balenciaga collection (the famous return of the designer after his social media scandal) where he referenced tailoring as core value of his credo as a designer[3]. Tailoring serves as the crucial link between the body, textiles, and technology, acting as a primary driver behind the object-oriented ontology of contemporary fashion defined by the formerly referenced new or speculative materialism.

Tailoring is not simply a direct return to materialities. Cutting the fabric is already an act imbued with hegemonic penetration, yet it is guided by a deep understanding of the fabric's and the body's agency. The tailor possesses the knowledge to interpret the voice of the fabric and contemplates the ontology of the body. The power of the tailor resides in being positioned in the in-between—informed and educated by this intermediary space where conceptual thought and material practice converge. Cutting on the straight or against the grain necessitates an intimate knowledge of the fabric and a profound understanding of its properties.

Regarding the understanding of the body, the tailor is not only a professional in recognizing the flexions, proportions, and balances of the client's body, but also a specialist attuned to the comfort and wellbeing of his own body. As Liberty's tailoring book from 1933 states, the position of the tailor defines not only his craft but the harmony between his work and his physical form, that's why learning the tailor's pose is the first step in the life of a tailor apprentice:[4] "When sitting cross-legged the weight of the work is around the tailor on the board, and there is no need to hold the work up as well as holding it for sewing. It is a position which, after a little practice, will come quite naturally, and should certainly be adopted by the beginner. It must be remembered that comfort and convenience are a great asset to a happy existence, and when loss of time, however small, means loss of wages, it behoves the artist at his craft to introduce as much time-saving method as is possible" (Liberty, 1933, p. 3).

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3 https://www.balenciaga.com/en-us/summer-24?srsltid=Afm-BOoqiKplfhrw-X1VrpoC7Su-Xp2I2fwX57AfGXyOXgP0zL4UZ44uv

4 On the importance of this pose cf. Matthews Davis 2005: 262.

TAILORING AND ALGORITHMIC CULTURE

Our contemporary culture is often described as dominated by algorithms. Algorithms function as methodologies for creating systems, categorizing, establishing order, shaping perspectives, and forming patterns of thought. We argue that the renewed interest in tailoring is, in part, a response to this algorithmic culture, as the precision and technique inherent in tailoring align with the logic of pattern making. While it is easy to view tailoring as an algorithmic framework within the contemporary fashion system, it is crucial to engage with cultural critiques of algorithmic culture to better understand the nuanced role of pattern cutting in fashion.

Ted Striphas in his seminal article on algorithmic culture made a distinction between algorithm (a set of mathematical procedures aimed at uncovering truths or tendencies in the world) and algorism (coding systems that may reveal but are equally likely to obscure)[5] (Striphas 2015: 404-405.) Pattern cutting closely relates to mathematical procedures, as it is based on a system of proportions and idealized measurements linked to a geometrical vision of the human body. With the first manuals published in the latter half of the 16th century, tailoring has often been seen as a form of technicized knowledge about the body. However, we argue that, while tailoring may appear to be a purely mathematical operation, the system of garments created by tailors—for both the upper and lower body, with symmetrical and structural variations—functions more as a coding system. Through this system, the human body is encoded into idealized textile constructs.

This interpretation becomes especially relevant when considering AI-assisted fashion creation. Here, algorithms engage with elements of fashion's coding system (algorism - e.g., trousers versus skirts, soft versus rigid materials, textured versus smooth surfaces), producing unexpected combinations. Rather than relying on the mathematical operations of pattern cutting, the algorithm responds to the structural oppositions inherent in the garment system. The transla-

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5 So, on the one hand, we have algorithms – a set of mathematical procedures whose purpose is to expose some truth or tendency about the world. On the other hand, we have algorisms – coding systems that might reveal, but that are equally if not more likely to conceal. The one boasts of providing access to the real; the other, like an understudy, holds its place. Why in the early 20th century did algorithm become preferred over algorism, so much so that the latter form is now all but an archaism?

tion of a design into a pattern—a mathematical process in itself—is left to specialized pattern-cutting programs that handle the technical precision of garment construction.

Historical research on the labor of tailoring has shown the significance of heritage and historical entitlement within this industry. Anne Kershen demonstrates that, by the end of the 19th century, tailoring workers in two historically distinct cities—Leeds and London—were differentiated based on their rootedness in a tailoring tradition dating back to the 17th century. According to this logic, non-English workers (referred to as "aliens") were often excluded from the highest levels of bespoke production (Kershen 1995: 5). Mastery in tailoring is not achieved solely by learning techniques, procedures, and coding systems; one must also be deeply imbued with the spirit of this specific artisanal knowledge. In this context, tailoring can be seen as an agency that unites craftsmanship, algorithmic culture, and a spiritual approach to clothing. While algorism plays a central role in tailoring, particularly when confronted with mathematical data on average and proportional bodies, a strong tradition within this craft emphasizes an element beyond operational data: heritage and authentication through patrimony. This tradition underscores the importance of legacy and the cultural validation that comes from a deep connection to historical practices.

TERIKE FROM BUDAPEST. WHAT'S IN A NAME?

case study of a contemporary designer community in Budapest (Terike from Budapest - which I co-founded) connected through sartorial literacy, highlighting how this community embodies the principles of this newfound interest in tailoring. The presentation concludes by advocating for the decolonization of tailoring as a civilizing process (Wild 2014), using the Terike community as an example of local sartorial creativity and as a case study for "defashion" in the sense proposed by Sandra Niessen (Niessen 2022). This examination underscores the need to recognize and preserve diverse sartorial practices that challenge dominant narratives within the fashion industry, promoting a more inclusive and multifaceted understanding of fashion as both situated bodily practice, algorithm and labour.

DEFASHION – RETAILOR

To bring together the elements of our argument: in the age of deFashion, redefining the designer as a tailor—or "reTailor"—can serve as a form of activism. For Sandra Niessen, deFashion represents a critique of the colonial, exploitative, Western-centric, and designer-focused paradigms in garment creation and body covering. Tailoring is a form of labor within the creative process that not only engages with technology and algorithmic logic but also remains deeply embedded in the materiality of fabrics and the human body. Unlike the simplified approach to upcycling and recycling—often seen as merely combining preexisting garments by cutting and sewing—tailoring integrates sartorial culture, craftsmanship, and mathematical precision. Tailors act as agents who transmit tradition, embodying a nuanced skill set that bridges technical knowledge with cultural heritage. This reimagined role positions the tailor as a crucial advocate for sustainable, thoughtful, and ethical fashion practices in a world increasingly aware of its ecological and social responsibilities. In contrast to an overly harsh critique of contemporary fashion and textile ideology, the respect for tailoring preserves and honours not only the community of fashion consumers but also that of garment creators - individuals deeply engaged with the fundamental algorisms of textile culture.

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