

Designing for future adults: what's going on in contemporary children's fashion?

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Abstract

Despite the vivacity of the children's wear market over the last decades and its ability to reflect the current debates on education, children's fashion remains a marginal topic in Childhood Studies. This could be partially due to the fact that, usually defined by a physiological and sociological immaturity, and analysed through the relationship with the adult and the capacity to engage with the world, children are hardly ever considered as technicians. The interaction between children and the material environment conceived for them is not questioned in the anthropological research. Moreover, the lack of interest for the everyday equipment used by children and their educators especially in contemporary society, leads to the neglect of a major aspect of our technical culture and, as a result, the partial understanding of childhood.

Children's education consists of the socialisation of future adults who, in constant interdependence with their educators, have to be brought into history and imbued with the habits defining their social belonging (Quentel, 1997). The deconstruction of this socialisation process can help the analysis of the appropriation of fashion by children. Through the study of children's fashion mostly defined by the capacity to dress the identities and to echo the habits of a society (Balut, 2014), this paper will analyse the ability for children's clothing to act as an education tool and to shape future adults.

This paper will also question the responsibility of the fashion industry in the socialisation of children. As a technical handling kit, a set of sensations and an object of desire, clothing is an adoptable system by the child. The creative child, as modelled by Maria Montessori (Montessori, 1909) and stimulated by Nordic design from the 1950's onwards, is not only playing with an adapted equipment but also interacting with an everyday wardrobe created by a paradoxically rarely aware industry.

Based on an original anthropological methodology aimed at interpreting the material culture to inform the society, this paper will present the outcome of a research focusing on the material culture from a designer's, an educator's and a child's perspectives. The importance of developing

a specific toolkit for a more sustainable children's wear market, respectful of the devenir and agency of the child and supportive of their need to negotiate fairly their place within the society, will therefore be addressed.

Keywords: children's wear, education, agency, design thinking, anthropology

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