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In 1998, an article was published in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, the American newspaper aimed at those working in universities at an academic level, entitled **Frumpy or Chic? Tweed or Kente? Sometimes Clothes Make the Professor.**¹ In it, the author, Alison Schneider, considered both the role of clothes in daily academic life and occupational attitudes towards dress expressed by academics, some of whom are well known figures, and from a range of disciplines including the humanities and natural sciences.

Schneider noted that, despite being described by the editor of a prominent fashion theory journal, as quote **“the worst dressed, middle classed occupational group in America”** unquote, academics were very much preoccupied with what they wore to work. Whether it concerned what to wear to an interview, how to dress for a non-academic audience, having the appropriate outfit for a lecture or working out what was acceptable garb amongst departmental colleagues, it was clear that not only were their preoccupations based on real experiences but also that clothes played an important role when it came to fulfilling their occupational responsibilities.

According to Jennifer Craik, in her book *The Face of Fashion*, fashioning the body through the technical means offered through clothing, adornment and gesture, is the process whereby we bring ourselves into being. The ‘life of the body’, Craik observes, is played out through clothed ways so that we might produce and reproduce rules and codes associated with people and places. Chin resting on hand, elbow bent, reclining on a chair, leant forward across a desk, straight gaze stood against a large hall or library are the gestures of academics that identify their natural place with the university habitus and their professional responsibility for intellectual pursuits.

Yet, despite this evident body training or the fact that they rarely turn up to work without clothes on, academics seem very reluctant to reflect upon the nature of their appearance and when they do, it’s either apologetic or defensive in tone. The former is embarrassed about their lack of fashionability whereas the latter is indignant at being asked to consider something beneath their field of expertise. Either way, the academic excuses

¹ No idea who Alison Schneider is despite a Google Search so intend to contact the editors of *The Meanings of Dress* for more information

themselves from further scrutiny by way of pointing out that in their line of work, the 'life of the mind' is what counts. The academic returns to their same old shirt and jeans, hoping this is clear evidence of their disembodied position because any more attention to clothes would mean not enough time spent on the pursuit of knowledge.

In Schneider's article, she describes this attitude as pro-frump. While those who shared this view did not deny clothes per se – they wore them on a daily basis – they did not see them as anything more than a necessary protective layer. Academics belonging to this party believed that to see dress as anything more would be a distraction, either from the business of research or from the business of teaching, because students might not be able to concentrate, taken in by the unexpected spectacle on display.

According to Polan, in her analysis of the cultural objects known as 'professors', the refusal on their part to address their own embodiment, to maintain the belief that students see them as neutral subjects, is surely erroneous.

Here is why. The academic Jay Parim described how, as a student, he would spend his time 'reading' his professors, searching for clues regarding their intellectual position and their institutional attitude. Having studied in both the UK and the US, Parim noted how the clothes of the academics who taught him reflected geographical differences regarding class and gender. As he was developing his own career in academia, he referred, amongst other things, to his memories of past professors, disciplinary conventions and geographical climate when it came to presenting his dressed body to colleagues and students.

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In a visual study of what trainee teachers think of when presented with the object 'teacher', their drawings were either based on memories of specific teachers they knew and/or on anticipation of who they want to be in their future profession. One trainee was concerned about short stature so her dressed teacher (they were never unclothed) was in a suit because, for her, this meant serious business. Another trainee was concerned about being too authoritative so presented himself in 'sloppy casual' attire.²

² Weber and Mitchell

Both these examples provide strong evidence that contradicts the claims made that clothes are unimportant to the business of teaching and learning by the frump brigade. There are other arguments to be made that further contest their position.—However, for now, it suffices to say that these examples also support the point made by Polan that any attempt to disembodiment the life of the mind from the life of the body is arguably a form of embodiment. Any suggestion that the same old clothes will do or the ‘I don’t care’ look is a non-statement is a statement of kind. Anti-fashion is a kind of fashion.

And that’s where the other attitude comes in, observes Schneider in her article, which offers an opposing view to the non significance of dress in the working lives of academics. Schneider describes the attitude as pro-fashion, or chic for short. This camp point out that clothes, jewellery, perfume, magazines dedicated to the latest trends and shopping are a critical part of an academic’s personal life. Their interest in appearance is an interest in everyone because academics are people, just like you and me, and they want to, as the academic Andrew Ross says **“meet people where they are rather than tell them where they ought to be.”**³ If this includes wearing fashionable items or admitting to reading Vogue, so be it. But, more than that, academics in support of this view argue that knowledge is inherently subjective so must be expressed through a range of visual forms if students are to really comprehend intellectual complexity.

Polan suggests that this emerging emphasis on performativity and embodiment amongst academics certainly goes some way to challenge the notions upheld by the pro-frump attitude. It provides the means by which those who identify as professors, lecturers, doctors, might start to reflect upon their situated body as the product of cultural texts that dominate popular understanding of higher education.

And this approach to academic work can be seen in the ways in which dress is used as a costume, acknowledging the performative aspect associated with presenting knowledge to students and colleagues. Recently, an academic told me of her decision to wear a full tango costume underneath her black dress at the start of a conference presentation that the organisers, without asking her, had entitled **“Internationalisation:**

³ Schneider, 252 in *The Meanings of Dress*

it takes two to tango!” In this way, dress is acknowledged and underlined in relation to how occupations are a form of role playing, both from within and without.

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Yet, Polan still has concerns about this attitude, given that it could become increasingly a ‘flashy self’, where style and presentation become so overdone that academics end up being clichés or overly ironic. Another criticism raised about the chic attitude is whether too much attention to appearance might obscure economic inequalities or professional promotion, in particular those related to gender politics. As one academic put it, in response to an increasing digital presence dedicated to advice on academic daily dress, quote **“No, if you ask me, the must have accessory for the smart academic woman is a fancy research chair. Pair it with a hundred cents on the dollar and a non-contingent contract for more impact.”** unquote.

Of course, the problem with Schneider’s depiction of two warring camps – the frump and the chic – and arguably Polan’s concerns about being too awkward on the one hand, too flashy on the other, with regards to whether dress should be important in the occupational lives of academics is that it’s purposefully academic in nature. In other words, the interest in what this occupational group wear to work only ever seems to be theoretical, denying both its practical relevance and its educational impact. The debate focuses on a hypothetical question that only serves to maintain an educational status quo where high ideals and the life of the mind dominate their occupational practices. But, more importantly, to speak of dress as both subject and object is to question the very being of academia. Instead, Schneider’s stereotypes or the ironic observation by Caroline Evans in the British equivalent of the Chronicle that if academics are denied the right to dismiss dress, they might end up with ominous sartorial league tables, serve to obfuscate the real issue, which in my mind seems to be what will academia be like in a future increasingly modelled upon corporatisation and consumerism? What will ‘real’ academics look like?

In her book *The Fashioned Body*, Joanne Entwistle alludes to something called a ‘sartorial consciousness’ that we all experience because, for the most part, everyday we all go through the practice of getting dressed, making our bodies presentable to both ourselves and others. Entwistle suggests that in the practice of getting dressed, there is

some degree of future projection, an expectation about where we will be, what we will be doing and who we will be that is based upon both past memories and current experiences. This results in a complex triangulation between expectations, 'nows' and experiences. Clothing serves as the bridge between these three points, culminating in an mind-body awareness of what happens and what could happen in a range of contexts. Moreover, our sartorial consciousness provides a means to maintain, acquire and convey varying degrees of power as an integral function of social relations.⁴

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With this in mind, when we go back to Schneider's stereotypes, we can now see the frump and the chic as emerging sartorial consciousness as they relate to the role of the academic in higher education. The former favours badly fitting suits, scruffy corduroy jackets, no make up, glasses, unbrushed hair and sacklike dresses because they are in the occupational business objectivity. The latter favours dressing up, velvet trousers, dyed hair, colourful shoes, statement jewellery and designer suits because they are in the occupational business of subjectivity. Both expect to find these qualities in the university, their work environment, based upon experience and memory. The problem is, both are increasingly concerned that where they work has started to promote and insist upon another sartorial consciousness that potentially threatens their very existence.

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So, who has entered the ring alongside the frump and the fashion representative? Well, for the sake of alliteration, I will nickname them the formal, given that their appearance draws upon career apparel, maxims like dressing for success, efficiency and conformity. Lupton describes it as the 'corporate persona', the character that embodies the growing corporatisation of universities. As a result, academics are, Parkinson argues, in the throes of an identity crisis whereby their educational understandings and practices are becoming more and more at odds with the managerial understandings and practices of the institutions where they work.⁵ A conflict of values is emerging and, in its wake, creating identity ruptures amongst those who call themselves 'academics'. Lupton posits that the

⁴ Drawing on Foucault here but can't remember exactly what!!

⁵ Parkinson

“academic persona” is being subjugated by the “corporate persona”.⁶ Subsequently, all the idiosyncrasies associated with being an academic are either to be improved upon at best or stamped out at worst. In response, Polan puts out a call to all academics to start questioning their self-representation because higher education is a seriously contested political, social and economic site of production.

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Yet, when faced with the formal battlecry, both the frump and the fashion join together because while they may disagree on to what extent appearance should play a role in pedagogical approaches and scholarly practices, what they do agree on is having the autonomy to decide what to wear to work, whether they see clothes as ultimately prohibitive or transgressive. Being able to self govern, to not be dependent upon others ideas, to improvise, are, undoubtedly, vital functions of an academic’s occupational life. Craik reminds us that clothes are still very much used as political tools, particularly in the workplace. I am sure that’s why I keep coming across statements made by academics like ‘even we have had to make an effort with our clothes’ or ‘even academics care about looking good in public’. This must be evidence of that sartorial consciousness I mentioned, where academics express awareness of their occupational selves as movable subjects between experiences and expectations, either fears or hopes. Are we not witnessing here that identity crisis Parkinson described? Academics seem to be thinking ‘Will I have to be a different kind of academic to the one I remembered being or imagined becoming?’

So, now is when I realise that I said I would describe how academics use dress creatively as an aspect of their pedagogical and scholarly practices at work.

Well, I will make the obvious observation that characteristics of creativity, such as risk-taking, individuality and autonomy, clearly reside in the sartorial approaches taken by the pro fashion brigade. But, my intention here is not to judge who is more creative than others but to suggest that creativity, like power, is a permanent feature of our sartorial consciousness so this means it is present in the pro frump gang, arguably also in the pro formal gang too, and, for me, potentially elsewhere in the dressed lives of academics, something that I am very keen to explore further.

⁶ Lupton, 2013

When thinking about the relationship between creativity, academic daily dress and occupational practices, I came across an interesting article by Tony Bleakley called *Your Creativity or Mine?* Here, he points out, that given there is no one definitive description of creativity and they vary in terms of locating it within a person, a product or a process, a pluralistic model seems more appropriate. Bleakley argues that having multiple definitions as the definition means acknowledging that it is possible within a range of cultural and material forms, realised through different educational practices. He then goes on to suggest ten rough types of creativity, that really struck me in their resemblance to the different dressed academic bodies touched upon today.

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Take, for example, the creativity described as absence and withdrawal. As a pedagogical approach, this favours suspending judgment, introducing a degree of distance between the creator and the created or the creating. Paradoxically, absence becomes a form of presence. Bleakley could be speaking personally to the frump crew, providing evidence that shapeless attire and a disinterested style is a potential way to encourage students to become independent learners. But, I think this goes beyond the frump stereotype. It encompasses those who adopt but subvert uniformity, whether it be wearing all black or always wearing dungerees.⁷ Similarly, Bleakley identifies creativity as spontaneity and originality, where in reordering an experience for students, the whole becomes more important than the individual parts. I wondered if he had been speaking directly with Jane Gallop who said of her lecture themed outfits quote **“anyone who comes from a literary sense of things knows that style is often the best way to convey complicated things.”** Unquote

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⁷ I recall an interview with Louise Wilson, who led the MA Fashion course at Central Saint Martins for many years before she passed away in 2014, in which she explained her choice of a wardrobe of replicas, all in black, was an attempt to partly obscure her from the students view so that they would only focus on her comments about their work.

I could go on about the clothed reflections found in Bleakley's types but I want to end with one other type of creativity that deserves a mention. The seventh one, he calls this creativity problem stating. The key features are complexity, ambiguity and reflection, all of which play a role in reordering perceptions and creating conditions for transformational learning. In his description, I saw an explanation for what happens when academics who arrive at work already aware of being seen through the eyes of others, whether it be sexuality, ethnicity, disability, age or gender, and understand that their occupational authority is not yet a given. Ways to address this double consciousness, interestingly, include both sartorial conformity and subversion. Witness how some African American professors adopt dress associated with dandyism or how punkademics wear ripped clothes and punk band t-shirts in a deliberate way to draw attention to the complexity of academia, and in spite of the pressures surrounding them professionally and personally.

Polan also suggests that professors start to see themselves more as a subculture, intentionally marginalised so they can constantly question the status quo. Subcultural identities offer academics a creative device, realised through dress, to reflect upon and radicalise their daily working lives in the face of an institutional culture that feels oppressively obsessed with creating corporate personas. I also believe that it provides the best rationale for why, as academics, we need to not only reflect upon our dressed occupational presence but also to believe they are worth capturing before, some might warn, the 'real' lives of us are lost forever.⁸

⁸ Churchman and King