

THE FASHION CURRICULUM AS IMPASSE: ETHICAL SOURCING VS. THE IMAGE ECONOMY

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Abstract

Fashion design education currently operates within a structural impasse: it prepares students for an industry whose ecological consequences increasingly undermine the discipline's own rationale. This tension remains unresolved because most curricula prioritize "market-ready" aesthetics over environmental costs. In many world-renowned institutions, such as Central Saint Martins (CSM) or the Fashion Institute of Technology (FIT), sustainability is frequently treated as a modular 'add-on' rather than the core organizing logic of the design process. This separation allows studio culture to remain dominated by what this study terms the Image Economy. This logic shapes both orientations in fashion education, commercial ready-to-wear and avant-garde design, as both are built on producing new garments, not on transforming existing ones. The result is a double structural failure: neither track equips students to challenge or escape the Image Economy. To frame this tension theoretically, the paper draws on Choufan's (2024) analysis of the "mediatized designer," a figure whose creative identity is increasingly subordinated to the demands of social media visibility and entertainment. In this environment, students are pressured to prioritize "fast relevance" for the smartphone screen over long-term ecological imperatives. This visual saturation erodes students' critical capacity, creating a cognitive dissonance where the reality of fashion as an ecological villain paradoxically coexists with its digital glamour. Within this spectacle, garments are increasingly produced to be photographed rather than worn; consumed as images before they are consumed as objects. Based on ten years of experimental teaching at Shenkar College of Engineering, Design and Art (Israel), this paper proposes the SSS (Spatial, Sculptural, Storyboarding) Framework as a pedagogical intervention. Central to this framework is the use of the Kenyan dystopian film *Pumzi* (2009) as an affective and ethical trigger. Across multiple student cohorts, the film's vision of ecological collapse and resilience consistently functions as a catalyst for personal value articulation, establishing an ethical point of departure for the design process. Interestingly, an observation from the fashion forecasting sphere echoed this pedagogical direction: *Nova Fabula* (Texworld Apparel Sourcing Paris, 2026–27), a seasonal trend book, identifies sustainable textiles as a central future value within the industry. Rather than serving as a theoretical foundation, this reference illustrates how signals of transformation are already emerging within fashion's own forecasting culture. The study follows a cohort of fifteen third-year students who translated these spatial logics into garments using exclusively deadstock and textile remnants. The final outcomes were disseminated through collaborations with leading Israeli influencers, utilizing the Image Economy's own tools to demonstrate that fashion and sustainability are not a dichotomy.

Keywords: *Fashion design education, image economy, ethical sourcing, material accountability, pedagogical sequence.*

1. Introduction

How can fashion education build values through images that serve a single purpose: to guarantee the endless production of new items? And how can it go against this current?

Fashion design programs around the world are built around the mood board. This is a collection of images used as the starting point for all design decisions: silhouette, fabric, and making. This sequence is rarely questioned, but it has a strong structural effect. When the image comes first, environmental costs are ignored. The excitement of creating something new is simply stronger than any concern for the environmental cost of producing it. This is the core logic of what this study calls the Image Economy.

The Fashion Impact Toolkit (GFA and Deloitte, 2025) shows that up to eighty percent of a garment's environmental impact is decided at the design stage (ECOS, 2021). Global clothing sales doubled between 2000 and 2015, while the average number of times a garment is worn dropped by forty percent (Ellen MacArthur Foundation, 2021). These numbers are the direct result of decisions made by designers, both within studio culture and in professional ateliers across the industry. Both commercial and avant-garde fashion education are built around creating new garments, not transforming existing ones or working with deadstock. The result is a double failure: neither track gives students the tools to challenge the Image Economy.

Students are not unaware of this problem. They arrive divided between ignorance, disappointment, and cynicism, but without the practical tools to act. This paper argues that the problem is not one of values, but of sequence.

This paper asks three questions. First, is the gap between sustainability and studio culture a problem of values or of sequence? Second, can starting the design process with material rather than image produce work that is both ethically responsible and aesthetically strong? Third, can a used garment or textile remnant, one that already has cuts, pockets, seams and other features, become the starting point for real spatial and sculptural innovation, even when its previous shape makes it difficult to imagine something new?

2. Theoretical framework: The Image Economy and its inversion

The term “Image Economy,” as developed by Choufan (2024), describes a condition in which the designer's primary output is not a garment but an image of a garment. This image is optimized for the smartphone screen, calibrated for algorithmic circulation, and valued above all for its ability to be understood immediately in a crowded visual field. This condition has migrated into fashion education with largely unexamined consequences: studio culture increasingly rewards students who can produce visually arresting digital lookbooks, while the capacity to make, to construct, to resolve, and to work materially through a problem, is subordinated to the capacity to represent. Within this spectacle, garments are increasingly produced to be photographed rather than worn, consumed as images before they are consumed as objects.

The SSS Framework proposes a different origin point, one that begins before the image. Its central trigger is *Pumzi* (2009), a science fiction film set in a world of total ecological collapse. Although the film offers powerful visual imagery, students are not permitted to draw on it directly. This is not a stylistic restriction. It is a structural one: by closing the visual route, the framework turns each found fabric into a white canvas, a material that carries no predetermined aesthetic direction, only its own inner accumulation. The result is collections that look nothing like each other, and nothing like the film. The course *Re-Starting Fashion* was built on exactly this premise.

3. Methodology

The course, *Re-Starting Fashion*, runs over fourteen sessions. Before the first session, students watch nine films on fashion and ecology and arrive with a personal manifesto, printed on recycled paper, the first material decision of the course.

The first session begins with students presenting their manifestos to the class. After the presentations, students are introduced to the work of Dr. Lea Ettinger of the Heschel Center for Sustainability through a short film, whose definition of sustainability as “a way of discovering the value of the things that sustain us” (Ettinger, 2007) consistently produces not guilt or anxiety, but clarity. From this foundation, the class watches *Pumzi* (2009) by Kenyan filmmaker Wanuri Kahiu.

As homework, each student watches *Pumzi* alone and selects five frames. Each frame is given a title. In the following session, students bring their insights, a critical step that builds personal value. A slogan is then chosen: a single sentence that will govern all subsequent design decisions.

Students are then asked to choose their raw material: surplus garments or deadstock textiles. To support this choice, they study the 7 R's of sustainability and decide which principle will guide their project, deconstruction, zero waste, mono-materials, or others. Students are also required to work with AI tools to develop their conceptual theme, using an association map expanded through AI to support cross-referencing and research.

At this stage, *Nova Fabula* (Texworld Apparel Sourcing Paris, 2026–27) enters the process. This is a seasonal trend book whose imagery is AI-generated, used not as a source of inspiration, but as a professional calibration tool to test whether emerging material choices align with broader industry directions. Unlike most trend books, it positions ecological thinking as a core design value.

The SSS Framework proceeds through four phases: Heart (values), Head (manifesto and slogan), Eye (spatial analysis of Pumzi frames), and Hand (making with found materials only). No new material may be introduced. The found object is not a limitation. It is the brief. When that object carries cultural or religious significance, the designer must ask ethical questions before aesthetic ones.

The course is supported by a partnership with Dizengoff Center (Tel Aviv). The final collections were assessed by an external panel of four industry practitioners, operating independently, against a structured rubric.

4. Pedagogical evidence: Four cases

The course was conducted with a cohort of fifteen third-year students. Four works were selected for in-depth documentation on the basis of the diversity of their material choices, conceptual approaches, and reflective processes. All four met professional standards of both aesthetic quality and material innovation, as assessed by an external panel of four industry practitioners operating independently against a structured rubric. These four students did not arrive at the same place by the same route. They arrived at the same place by entirely different struggles, and that is the point. Post-course, each student was asked three reflective questions: Did you arrive at the spatial understanding that Pumzi proposed? Did this happen after the toile, or during it? Do you now have a stronger understanding of the role of silhouette design in the preliminary stages of collection-building?

Bar Persi approached the task with the precision of someone who had already decided what she believed. Working from five selected frames of Pumzi, she produced hand-drawn storyboard sketches and digital three-dimensional volumes, each named according to her own reading of Asha's journey: Crisis, Purpose, Journey, Act, Outcome. The forms carry no illustration: Crisis is two displaced cubes; Outcome is a single closed sphere. What she built was not a representation of the film but a spatial argument extracted from it. Her manifesto, written before making began, already carried the framework's central inversion: "I want the idea to grow from the material itself, and not the other way around." Her material choices were equally considered. She dismantled gobelin tapestries from their frames and deconstructed a trench coat, using its pattern as the foundation for a second garment onto which she applied leather remnants and fragments of the gobelin. Nothing was added from new stock. Everything was already something else.

Tal Zohar did not understand first. The transition from a selected Pumzi frame to its spatial abstraction, seeing it not as image but as pure form, as volume without detail, as structure without story, was, for her, impossible. Not difficult. Impossible. The visual culture into which she had been trained as a student had taken from her the cognitive capacity to abstract: to see a shape without its surface, a tension without its narrative. She could not do it. At one point during the Eye phase, it was her fellow students, Bar and Ya'ela, who held her, who said: stay, it will come. And then, in the toile, it came. "The shapes suddenly became patterns, the tension became real." She does not describe understanding a concept. She describes a physical event, something that happened to her body while her hands were working. "A process that is very, very difficult to convey, but after I fought to understand, suddenly it happened. Like magic." What the Image Economy had taken from her, the capacity to see form before image, the SSS Framework returned. Not through explanation. Through making.

Ya'ela Azran's found material, a tallit, a Jewish prayer shawl, was not chosen for its symbolism. It was chosen because it was there, and because its structure spoke. A garment of simultaneous enclosure and exposure, its tensions already mirrored the spatial logic of Pumzi's world. Her Eye phase documentation shows five frames annotated with geometric overlays, rectangles, circles, ellipses, extracting spatial rules that governed the collection's silhouettes without reproducing the film's imagery. Five digital mannequins, each wearing a silhouette derived from one of the film's structural moments, made the translation explicit. She then dyed the tallit, retaining its fringe in the final garments not as decoration but as material memory, a visible record of the object's prior life. The final collection, five looks in white, black, and dark charcoal, is traceable step by step to its origins: a frame, a geometric annotation, a property of the weave. The image arrived last. Her chosen material carried cultural and religious weight that demanded reconsideration mid-process. This led her to return to the inspiration board and find a way to honour the material's significance without displaying it directly. The tallit is a wool garment with a very specific woven stripe pattern and strong visual markers. Ya'ela chose not to use any of these. She dyed the fabric, removed its characteristic appearance, and kept only the fringe as a quiet reference to the object's history.

Noa Netzer's found materials were tailoring remnants: wool crepe, silk satin, and the deconstructed components of existing suits, pockets, belts, pleats, and buttons, dismantled and reintegrated into new garments. Her reflective account introduces a concept absent from the other three: the unconscious. She describes the spatial influence of Pumzi's frames as something that filters through gradually, shaping formal thinking without the student being able to identify the moment it happens. Spatial understanding, in her account, is not a single event. It is a slow accumulation.

5. Conclusions

The first question this paper posed was whether the impasse between sustainability and studio culture is a problem of values or of sequence. The answer is clear: it is a problem of sequence. Students who arrived cynical, disillusioned, or indifferent were not changed by argument. They were changed by a different order of doing. Across all four cases, a shared gesture emerges: each student dismantled her found material before rebuilding it. Tapestries were removed from their frames, suits were taken apart at the seams, a tallit was stripped of its ritual markers. Deconstruction was not a technique. It was the first design decision, and the most revealing one: it forced each student to decide what the material was allowed to keep of its former life.

The second question asked whether starting with material rather than image can produce work that is both ethically responsible and aesthetically strong. The external panel's assessments confirm that it can. The third question asked whether a found material can become the basis for genuine spatial and sculptural innovation. The answer is conditional: yes, but only when the designer listens to what the material already knows. Across all four accounts, spatial understanding became available only when the hands were already at work. The body, in each case, arrived before the mind.

The Image Economy is not merely an aesthetic condition but a disciplinary one: it does not only reflect what students desire, it produces what students are capable of desiring. The SSS Framework is, in this sense, not only a pedagogical intervention but an act of resistance, a refusal to let the image arrive first.

This study was developed and tested within a single institutional context. Its replication across different cultural and educational environments, and the persistence of its outcomes into professional practice, remain open questions that the author welcomes exploring collaboratively.

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