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Les Liaisons dangereuses: The productive tensions among the fields of clothing and textiles,
fashion studies, and cultural studies

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In this presentation, we explore the interplay among the overlapping fields of clothing and textiles, fashion studies, and cultural studies in Korea and the U.S. We note that there are a number of productive tensions at play when considering these fields together: for example, industry profit-making motives versus everyday style and resistance, “fast fashion” versus sustainable fashion, material versus image- or brand-based priorities, and critical-theoretical versus practical needs for individuals and the industry alike.

Historically, emerging from home economics, clothing and textiles has highlighted clothing as a basic human need in the U.S. and Korea since the twentieth century. This highly interdisciplinary need encompasses the material properties of textiles in relation to quality, comfort and performance; aesthetic, cultural, historical and social psychological issues; and the larger context of a global economy, including the industry and merchandising. In cultural studies, street style emerged in the 1970s as a theme through a focus on urban youth culture aiming to break away from the existing social (including the fashion) system (Hebdige, 1979). Cultural studies also highlights the “circuit of culture,” which includes production, representation, consumption, identity, and regulation as interlocking processes (Kaiser, 2012), with a particular focus on “liberating” clothes (e.g., from the oppressive aspects of capitalism) from the margins of the system and fashion-making that resists unsustainable labor and environmental practices. Fashion studies – the most recent entry in this triad of fields – considers issues of aesthetic economy, media fashion, and everyday dress in diverse cultural contexts, as well as material culture. Fashion studies may or may not have a critical lens. We argue for a critical fashion studies that brings together important components of clothing and textiles, cultural studies, and fashion studies in a way that maintains the material and human need aspects of clothing and textiles, and highlights the critical standpoint of cultural studies.

As concepts in and of themselves, fashion and culture can be examined through the spatial metaphor of the centre-periphery (or core-periphery) model (Zarycki, 2007). From this lens, fashion may be regarded as stemming from the center of capitalism, where the abundance of money flows. In contrast, everyday culture (from a cultural studies point of view) emerges from the periphery, where a lack of money exists. To explore the interplay between fashion and

culture as objects of study, we went over titles and abstracts of the *Journal of the Korean Society of Clothing and Textiles (JKSCT)* and *Clothing and Textiles Research Journal (CTRJ)* from 2004 to the April 2016 issue. As a result, when searched with keywords “fashion” and “culture (or cultural)” in JKSCT, we could only find one article about “cultural fashion products” (Lee, Kim & Lee, 2005). It showed the tendency of looking at the products from only one perspective: focusing only on commodifying culture and making profit. Meanwhile, articles in the fields of fashion studies and cultural studies published in CTRJ mostly addressed fashion in European and Anglo-American contexts, scarcely dealing with non-Western or non-hegemonic contexts.

Since the 1980s or so, the field of clothing and textiles has sought connections with industry (E.-Y. Lee, 2006). In order to restore the relationship between the consumer (or citizen) and clothing and textiles, a collaboration with cultural studies, which would provide the work of “soul searching,” “hair splitting,” and becoming “sensitive again” (Latour, 2005) is valuable. Just as fashion studies has embraced cultural studies in recent years (Jenss, 2016), we believe that a collaboration between clothing and textiles and cultural studies will serve as a “fashion detox” (Ruppert-Stroescu, LeHew, Connell, and Armstrong, 2015) that will lead to a more integrative, critical fashion studies.

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