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ESSAYS

## The Red Frock

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### Abstract

In this essay, I recount my experience supervising a UTS student in Milan during her In-Country Study, where I became a luxury fashion faux buyer as part of her research on luxury shopping. An unexpected encounter in a high-fashion boutique taught me the importance of attentive observation and developing tools to help students make sense of complex global and local interactions. This moment reinforced my appreciation for elevating experiences in teaching and the value of speculative thinking in understanding the interconnectedness of global capitalism, culture, and place.

### Keywords

**BAIS; UTS; International Studies; Fashion Industry; Place-based Learning**

It was because of my career as an educator that I became a luxury fashion faux buyer. I was in Milan, supervising University of Technology Sydney (UTS) students in their year of In-Country Study in Italy, during which their task was to work on an independent research project. Because these students were studying for a range of different professions, my approach was to encourage them to choose their topic freely. For students in Milan, this often meant researching design and fashion.

Melina had zoomed in on the rich theme of luxury shopping in Quadrilatero della Moda—the exclusive, super-expensive shopping district in the city centre.

For Melina, happily oblivious to the thick web of relations among appearances, performance of local customs and her credibility as a buyer, this hypermonied landscape was a playground. She bounced on the rigid high-fashion power geometry of Milan with little squeals of delight, wrapped up in an improbable giant polka-dot trench coat from an op shop in Sydney.

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One day, she took me along on a fieldtrip. Melina's research methodology was a close reading of the material culture of high fashion, the materiality of things being a tiny portion of a business that sells immateriality: brand, lifestyle, and desires. Melina was oblivious to this, too; fashion meant clothes for her. Her research technique primarily consisted of hopping from shop to shop, telling the black-suited shop assistants, read guardians, of the luxury fashion galaxies an honestly unbelievable tale about her imminent wedding and, under their eagle and disapproving eyes, trying on dress after dress. I, in the meantime, was to pretend to be the rich aunty with the platinum credit card. Like Melina and her polka dots, I didn't look the part either, but it was a creative methodology.

That year, 2008, saw Valentino's last haute couture collection after a 45-year career as one of the most celebrated Italian designers. His boutique in Monte Napoleone was a riot of frocks in red, his signature colour. Some were silky and slinky with asymmetrical necklines; some were strapless with full skirts. The one I became perhaps slightly fixated with was made of evanescent layers of red frou-frou, very much like the petals of a poppy, I thought. The craft that built these dresses was a thing of wonder. And I was soon lost in fashion appreciation: a state of flow. It didn't last.

Melina shrieked, hands up, fingers splayed to cover her face: 'ohmygodohmygodohmygodorlando.'

Things went very fast from there, and to this day I have no idea what exactly happened. The guardians of the fashion galaxy descended and very efficiently removed Melina from the shop floor. I followed. Later, it transpired the shriek was due to actor and Pirate of the Caribbean Orlando Bloom—so hot right then—walking into the shop, Melina having a fangirl episode, and the guardians going into high-security mode. Melina thought it was the best thing ever, that she got to meet Orlando Bloom as part of her university assignment.

I also thought it was pretty good, and the image of the young woman from a migrant family in Sydney trying and failing to pass as a rich South East Asian heiress in the most expensive possible shopping precinct in Milan, a place produced by global capital flows encountering local labour, material and immaterial, put to work to produce desire, lifestyle, aspirations—that image has stayed with me. The 'ohmygodohmygod-ohmygodorlando' moment.

The colliding of a historical street in Milan, conspicuous consumption, a film star, a student and a red frock taught me the importance of attentive observation to catch moments of elevation in teaching as much as in fieldwork. I realised that I had to develop tools for Melina and other students to make sense of this kind of encounter. Not that everyone met Orlando or red Valentino frocks every day, but you get the idea.

One thing I took away from teaching undergraduate students the messy process of thinking, planning, and executing an independent research project is the love for articulating techniques and methods to think the global through its worldly grips with the local. Or to develop 'a global sense of place,' as Massey teaches us (1991). One of my favourites is a speculative thinking exercise. What if, starting from the red frock in a boutique (you can start from Orlando if you like, but that red frock was more spectacular), we unravel the trajectories that specifically converged in the here and now of that boutique in Monte Napoleone, Quadrilatero della Moda, Milano, in a mix of global capital flows, consumption practices, supreme craft and local histories embedded in the landscape?

The red frock is the result of hundreds of hours of work by mulberry trees and their leaves, silkworms, silkworms growers, logistic operators, weavers, textile workers, drivers, pattern makers, button makers, sewing machines mechanics, tool makers, cutters, modistes, designers, models, hairdressers, makeup and nail artists, hospitality workers, photographers, interns, fashion journalists, couriers, shop assistants, window dressers, buyers, clients and faux clients like Melina and me. And more. I encountered this red frock in Monte Napoleone, in the heart of Quadrilatero, a precinct marketed as the global symbol of Italian high-end fashion. Its stately palaces, paved streets and muted palette lend the authenticity of Italian heritage to the fashion conglomerates that own most of the fashion brands, sold in buildings almost emptied of

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residents and often owned by international real estate companies (Di Chio & Carrabino 2024). Labour in the fashion industry in Milan, in which retail is one stop in the supply chain, is ‘passionate work’ (Arvidsson et al. 2010). This work follows the narrative of ‘passion,’ of the self-actualising job in a ‘cool’ and ‘creative’ industry. Work that clashes with the reality of precarity, hyper flexibility, lack of autonomy, and low wages, but that participates in the magic of fashion by proximity.

Just like a Fashion and International Studies student from an Australian university trying on dresses ‘for her wedding’ in unaffordable boutiques, meeting Orlando Bloom and participating in that fashion universe for a second.

I tell you this story as an invitation to appreciate these moments of elevation in our teaching life. May you meet many Orlandos and many red frocks.

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