‘Retro Government, Retro Clothes’

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Between 2007 and early 2010 the prevalence of deck shoes, Barbour jackets, and more latterly Hunter brand Wellington boots could be easily observed in art schools in Britain. This served as a concentrated view of a phenomenon that has permeated high street fashion in the United Kingdom. At the same time, the almost teenaged New Labour government was arguably losing its footing with the voting youth, whose previous counterparts in the party’s own triumphant first flushes of youth, had been a focus for their ‘Cool Britannia’ campaign. This fashion, associable with upper class British sporting pursuits, is still to some extent visible in the UK high street today. However its consumption tends to be by those considered followers rather than setters of trends. In this talk I aim to discuss the historical relationship between trends in political and popular culture using a wide range of sources from the worlds of design for print and high street fashion.

My own practice, as a designer specialised in analogue typographic print has rudely provoked an exploration of cultural trends and the political and economic contexts in which they occur. This rich subject, necessary to understand as the context of my applied work, became increasingly relevant as I observed a culture shift. This was embodied by the trend towards a perceived authenticity of analogue printing processes in graphic design, set against the backdrop of growing mistrust of the then government. This was a governing party associated with a slick, well-marketed digital era whose reality had become all too apparently flawed. The physical tangibility and perceived imperfection of letterpress printing served as the antithesis of such a culture.

As a practicing designer, working within the Glasgow School of Art, I believe myself to be in a particularly good position to witness and analyse trends in the making, as new waves of art and design students make their way through education every year, each one in a uniquely changing political and economic landscape. Such trends within visual culture can serve as excellent windows into wider political fashions and economic realities and can help us to analyse and hopefully begin to understand some of these facets in our history.