Biographical Wardrobes
A Temporal View on Dress Practice

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Abstract:

Much "Fashion thinking" is concerned with *the new*, the trend leading and the spectacular. Hence, much debate and theorization within this area of research focuses on fashion as a generic, institutionalized and ritualized system that continuously produces and disseminates new trends and ideals. A large body of knowledge has been developed that aims to comprehend how fashion trends emerge and connect to society and subsequently get promoted by a system of trend agencies, fashion designers, or fashion editors.

In contrast to this line of thinking, other areas of research have been looking the opposite way for the last few decades, namely at the down-to-earth everyday routines of people – what is often referred to as *the ordinary*. In line with the development of practice theory, the area of design research has produced increasing inquiries with regard to the way people's daily practices are intertwined with time, space and objects. This paper represents a view on dress practice building on this view, with a particular focus on the issue of temporality. Based on her concept 'the biographical wardrobe' the author points to alternative understandings of dress practice that highlight how *continuity* rather than *newness* plays a vital role in the self-understanding of individual users.

This paper presents a view on dress practice and fashion that dwells on the issue of time. Through my concept of the *biographical wardrobe* I have studied how people interact with their private collection of dress objects, and how they develop taste preferences throughout their adult lives. What emerges is that the objects people store in their wardrobes connect their past, present and future ideas of self, and that even particular types of fabrics, shapes, or style references are repeated in the wardrobe throughout their lives. Thus it could seem that the people I have interviewed are actually using what they wear to establish a feeling of *continuity*, where changes take place in slower phases reflecting larger life changing events such as entering the job market, finding a partner, having kids or changing jobs. In order to qualify my analysis of these findings I have turned primarily to design research. Here, a large body of knowledge has been developed that aims to understand how people interact with design objects, in other words how the physical characteristics of a design object – such as shape, texture, surface, pattern or colour – affect the user in his/her daily life. In particular, I have been interested in the area of so-called user-centred design research, which aims at exploring people's day-to-day routines; the Monday, the mundane, *the ordinary*. Much in line with a few but relevant studies on this issue (Buckley and Clark 2012; Miller and Woodward 2012), I have found resonance for my findings in the wardrobe that actually stands in a sharp contrast to the interest in the spectacular, the trend-leading and the glamorous which has shaped much "fashion thinking" – often ignoring the logics and practices of the majority of people, when they go about getting dressed every day.

The wardrobe method

From 2010-2013 I conducted a series of wardrobe interviews. My sample was adult Danish men between 40 and 50. Registering their age was important, as it enabled me to pursue the issue of time (Skjold 2014). By making qualitative interviews with my informants at their wardrobes I made the actual dress objects the centre of the interview. I made them take out all the dress objects they stored and sort them in heaps on their bed or bedroom floor according to how much they used them and how much liked them. For example, I would ask them to make a heap of more active dress objects next to a heap of more passive ones and describe the difference. Or I would ask them to tell me how dress objects in a certain category differed from one another, or what tied

them together. By having the dress objects present, it became possible to address matters of physical comfort or style, but also how older dress objects were connected to newer purchases. By e.g. asking my informants to place dress objects on a timeline, it became possible to address developments in their taste preferences over many years, since some collections dated almost 30 years back. This allowed me to gain an overview of the developments taking place in people's dress practice over time, leading me to form the concept of the *biographical wardrob*e – a diachronic perspective on dress practice.

The wardrobe method has been developed over the first decade of the 2000s by scholars of fashion and dress from Britain, Holland and Scandinavia. Central to this method is the wardrobe as a space where people manage 'inner' self-understandings and self-perceptions through the act of getting dressed, and yet at the same time they prepare themselves to take part in social life. The wardrobe has emerged as an interesting object of study to a variety of scholarly disciplines, each revealing new insights into how people navigate through societal norms, ethics, morals and values through what they wear. So far the method has been applied in disciplines such as art history (Sigurjónsdóttir, Turner and Langkjær 2011), museology (Turney and Harden 2007), economic history (Ulväng 2013), gender studies (Warkander 2013), material culture studies (Woodward 2007), consumer research (Klepp 2001), and design research (Fletcher 2014). What is particularly interesting about the space of the wardrobe is that this is where people store what they wear. This means that the wardrobe comprises what consumer studies scholars Kleine, Kleine and Allen have called a "museum of self" (1995), thus implying how people use what they wear to understand themselves over time, and how this self-understanding correlates with the outside world and their personal development. This is the reason I placed great emphasis on asking my informants to date all dress objects they stored, and on discussing with them how their wardrobes have developed during their adult lives.

In my subsequent analysis I have looked at the way my informants connected with particular design parameters such as stylistic characteristics, materials, cuts, colours, shapes, etc. A similar approach can be seen in the Norwegian ethnographer Ingun Klepp's term *favourite*s – dress objects that are particularly cared for and treasured in the wardrobe (Klepp 2010). According to Klepp's findings, people get attached to such objects for a number of reasons, such as matters of bodily comfort or personal taste

preferences for certain styles or colours. Altogether she finds that people get particularly attached to dress objects that provide them with a feeling of *continuity*.

From centre to periphery

It is here that I see a discrepancy between my findings, and a general understanding of fashion that is based on newness and change. It is widely agreed that the phenomenon of Western fashion emerged in the 14th Century French courts, after which it has been increasingly ritualized and institutionalized – as demonstrated by sociologists Roland Barthes (1983) and later on by Yuniya Kawamura (2005). Throughout the 20th Century it has been debated how this process (from garment to fashion) takes place. From Veblen's *trickle-down* theory (1899) other theories have widened the scope of the matter, such as the *trickle-across* theory by Blumer (1986 [1969]), or the *bubble-up* theory by Polhemus (1997). McKinney-Valentin (2010) has showed how fashion trends develop in rhizomatic patterns, in a constant flux. Hence, new trends emerge constantly, most often as mutations or new interpretations of previous ones. According to von Busch (in: Black 2013) these trends spread like an epidemic 'virus of the mind', passing from individual to individual, from grouping to grouping, through the dissemination of fashion imagery. As I see it, these theories all share Simmel's idea that fashion trends are aesthetic markers of social distinction and assimilation (1957), but also that all these explanatory frameworks circle around the phenomenon of the fashion trend, created and disseminated from trend-leading individuals and then spread out, like rings in the water. As Davis describes it the cycle of a fashion trend can be compared to a wave in the ocean; at first, it is high and strong and possesses a lot of power, but then it fades out and loses its energy, only to pave the way for a new wave. Thus the cycles of fashion trends recommence continuously, in ever mutating formations (Davis 1994, 104).

The question I pose through my research on wardrobes is as follows: what happens when this kind of 'fashion gaze' is flipped in the opposite direction? By looking at wardrobes biographically it becomes apparent that individuals select, absorb and transform these trends, so that they match what is already in their wardrobes. A main finding here is how it becomes less interesting to look at what is *new* than what is *old*. Furthermore, general ideas about "fashion thinking" have displaced the interest in fashion's counterpart, what Church-Gibson (in: Bruzzi and Church-Gibson (eds.) 2000)

has coined *the unfashionable*, or Lipovetsky has named *non-fashion* (1994). These two concepts stand as frameworks for the big, open void of people who go about living their lives and get dressed every day and in whom fashion research has not taken much interest.

In contrast there has been a growing interest within design research for people's everyday practices, daily routines and aspirations, centred on what could be called *the ordinary*. Since the 1970s, and increasingly from the early 1990s onward, a research approach with the end user as the focal point for design processes has shifted the focus of the scholarly lens from so-called 'lead users' towards the majority of people. In particular this is the case in the distinction made by Sanders and Stappers called *user-centred design*. It refers to *'creativity of designers and people not trained in design working together in the design development process'* (2008, 2). User-centred design derives from collective creative processes between researchers, designers and end users developed within the last approximately 40 years in Europe, building on the Scandinavian welfare-model (Schuler, Douglas and Namioka 1993), with the basic idea that every single informant is an *'expert of his/her experience'* (Sanders and Stappers 2008, 12). The objective of user-centred design is not merely to develop new and innovative products, but to develop products that better connect design and production with end consumption. With this objective it becomes important to know more about people's everyday routines and practices. Within the field of fashion and dress research, this view is very rare, but still represented in the work of Otto von Busch, who has suggested a *Copernican Turn* in research on fashion and dress at large, and in the industry in particular, from trend-leaders towards the ordinary (2009).

To highlight this approach, I make use of the distinction "dress objects" in my research. Though I am referring to the term "real garment" in the sense that I am addressing the physical object of dress – the signified – from its signifiér, the "written garment" or "image garment" (Barthes 1983), I have chosen instead to make use of Eicher's concept of *dress,* as it embraces more broadly what people wear, including clothing as well as accessories or body modifications. Thus Eicher defines it as: *"an assemblage of modification of the body and/ or supplements to the body"* (Roach-Higgins, Eicher and Johnson 1992, 1). By combining it with the wording "design object" I direct my study towards design research, more specifically towards what Buchanan has named "design inquiry," which is in the search of *"an explanation in the experience of designers and those who use products"* (Buchanan 2007, in: Frankel and Racine 2010, 58). My aim is to

highlight how people are affected by design characteristics of what they wear – the bodily sensation of wearing certain fabrics, how a certain cut affects the movements of the body, how certain colours, textures or patterns are preferred by the user, or how certain stylistic references are preferred, regardless of fashion trends. Hence I believe that research on wardrobes seen through the lens of design research holds a potential for contributing a more reflected and in-depth understanding that might include, but might also go far beyond, general ideas about fashion and dress practice. As Fletcher has worded it, wardrobe research points at the *"deep landscape of use practices of clothes experienced in the course of life"* (Fletcher in; Fletcher and Tham (eds.) 2014, 22).

Continuity and change in the everyday routines of the wardrobe

Here I will present two examples from my informants' wardrobes, as seen through the design characteristics represented in their shoe collection. Both are from a project that designer Helle Graabæk and I completed (Skjold 2014), a collaborate venture between Design School Kolding and renowned Danish shoe manufacturer ECCO, on adult Danes and their use of shoes. During all my interviews, patterns of taste preferences would emerge very clearly, as dress objects from various periods of time resembled each other, not only stylistically, but also in terms of certain types of materials or fabrics that would reoccur repeatedly. Similarly, certain shapes and cuts would also turn up again and again. Looking e.g. at the shoe collection of Pia (52 years old), boots of a robust and sturdy character in full-grain leather could be seen as a basic component of her wardrobe, from her teenage years and up until today (see fig. 1).

Fig. 1: A timeline of Pia's collection of boots from 1986 to 2011 (from left to right) when the interview took place. Above the red line are the boots that are often in use, whereas the boots below the line are rarely, if ever, in use (illustration by Helle Graabæk).

When I talked to Pia about these boots, she told me that she started using them because she felt they could help her get the look she wanted when she was a teenager: *"I always wanted to look a bit more cool, and when I was young my biggest problem was that I looked so sweet and really nice. I remember my hairdresser always told me that it was difficult to give me a really cool hairdo because my hair was so thin and fair. It didn't match the style. I wore miniskirts and hot pants and then these kinds of boots. I often wore them with leggings or bare legs, which I still do today."* As she tells me this she goes to her wardrobe and puts on a shirt-like dress, a pair of tight-fitting trousers, and a pair of chunky sandals. She puts them on and tells me this is what she wore for a family party recently. The silhouette looks much like what she has described she wore when she was young, only in a slightly altered version. She still likes to show off her legs, which is why she prefers a dress that stops above her knees, and she still likes to wear chunky, sturdy footwear to make her look and feel less petite and delicate. She says: *"This is really cool. And actually quite nice. And I was really satisfied. And it suited me well. And I thought, this is my way of starting to dress lady-like."* This theme of Pia's development from young woman to a mature woman appeared to be essential to her whole wardrobe. In this sense the 'solution' to her problem of looking "sweet" that she had found as a teenager was not only represented in the many brown boots in her shoe collection, but also in her remaining wardrobe. Only now her wardrobe is much more sophisticated, and she is more daring in terms of feminine dresses and shoes. Still, everything that she finds is too delicate, refined, or ladylike is stored as passive objects in her wardrobe. This not only counts for the shopping mistakes to be found in her boot collection (see below the red line in fig. 1), but also for her sandals and dressy shoes.

Fig. 2: Pia's dressy shoes (illustration by Helle Graabæk).

Above (see fig. 2) is a timeline of Pia's dressy shoes representing the period from 1986-2011. Below the red line are passive shoes, whereas her favourite shoes are represented

above the line. As is evident she experimented, without much luck, with more feminine shoes in her younger years, whereas she actually prefers shoes that correlate more closely with her boots collection. Ladylike shoes must be chunky and sturdy in character, must be preferably green, black or brown to match her eye colour and must not be too "sweet" and ladylike. Thus her whole shoe collection is managed on the basis of taste patterns she developed when she was quite young. Patterns that might have been altered slightly and refined into an 'older' and more mature version, but still anchors the way she dresses. This is not only the case in terms of the sturdy character of her favourite shoes, but also in terms of her favoured colour palette that is dominated by the colours green and brown – rarely a touch of navy. She tells me how green and brown matches her eye colour, and that this is why she prefers them to other colours. This can also be seen in the timeline of her boots (fig. 1), where all of her favourite boots except for one pair are green and brown.

During my interview with Paul (52 years old) this kind of development was even more striking that in Pia's shoe collection. Looking at Paul's footwear it became clear that he had basically worn more or less the same type of shoe since the early 1980s – ankle boots or dressy shoes in black leather with a small heel that would match the aesthetics of the New Wave movement of the time when he was young (fig. 3).

Fig. 3: Paul's boots collection. As an illustration of the fact that Paul has basically worn the same type of boots since the mid1980s, Helle Graabæk and I made "ghost" boots that date back to 1986, since his use pattern is to wear out his boots, and then find new ones in the same style, colour, shape, and kind of material. Note how his more passive boots have a longer and more round shape, which he does not like, and how he has just started experimenting with more comfortable boots (illustration by Helle Graabæk).

Paul tells me that he is known within his circle of friends to wear this type of footwear in all kinds of weather, from heat waves to snow storms. However, he has had some trouble during the last few years, since his feet are severely damaged after all the years wearing uncomfortable shoes. Now he is starting to experiment with more comfortable kinds of footwear, which displeases him and causes great concerns. He now needs to wear shoes with a round toe and a soft heel which he intensely dislikes, finds uncool and which to him simply feels 'wrong' to wear. On the other hand he takes great care of his

favourite pair of shoes, a black pair of dressy shoes with a very pointy toe and a hard heel. Wearing these shoes he gets the right sensation in his body, and he feels a good connection between who he is and what he wears. They simply feel right to wear. As with Pia, he tells me that his preference for this kind of shoes started in his teenage years*: "There is something 1980s about it, like, we all peak and then, well, the decade you peak, where you find your style, then you carry this style with you. Like, totally 1980s, that's kind of one's aesthetic [...] It's very essential. When I look at my clothes, it is 1980s. It's actually a bit scary. But this is like when you peak as a person. Where you live yourself fully, to the max, and no kids and all that, and where you find out what to do with your life and stuff."* As his favourite shoes provide him with a feeling of continuity that connects his present life with his youth, he is very sad that they are starting to wear out. He has had them mended several times, and wears them with an insole he has cut with scissors so that it fits into the very narrow tip of the shoes. The leather inside them is falling apart, so this is the only way he can still wear them. It is causing him great concern that in spite of his attempts of prolonging their life he knows it won't be long before he needs to discard his favourite shoes.

The way Pia and Paul have developed specific taste patterns in their youth and then refined them over the years appeared to be a defining characteristic of the wardrobes of my other informants as well. I could also tell, both through statements and in the shape of actual design characteristics, how 'solutions' found in the period of youth would be repeated, refined and altered into new and more 'adult' version throughout a lifetime. Pia picked out sturdy and robust boots in order to transform her "natural" and "sweet" look into something cooler and in tune with the style in vogue of the scene she was part of. Still today she conveys the silhouette of her youth into a more mature version. Paul had picked out pointy, black leather shoes and ankle boots from the style worn in the New Wave scene and was really pleased with this for decades, but now he faces the challenge that he needs to find more comfortable footwear that resembles the shape and expression of what he prefers to wear. He tries to maintain *continuity in his wardrobe*, so that the shift does not become too visible, and he can keep on wearing the same shapes that he has preferred throughout his adult life.

Discussion

Such findings could emerge through the wardrobe method, simply because the dress objects stored represented such a long time span – up to 25 years. I understand the temporal development of my informants' wardrobes through the idea of the psychologist Erikson (1956), who has looked at how people do identity work throughout their lives. Erikson's theory is based on the hypothesis that in a person's teenage years, a major 'identity crisis' occurs, where he/she draws back from parental influence and form individual ideas of self. Later smaller phases of crisis occur that reflect life changes, such as starting on the labour market, finding a partner, having children, starting life as a pensioner, etc. Such phases take place over a longer period of time in which people make identity adjustments. As such there is a strong continuity in people's development of self throughout their lives, but phases of change in life situations make them form 'older' versions of self. Looking at the wardrobes of my informants and the way they have developed their taste preferences, I believe that they follow much the same pattern. In their younger years they form more or less fixed ideas of how to dress and what kinds of shapes or colours they like to wear. They even start forming preferences for specific fabric qualities that they keep pursuing throughout their adulthood. Hence I suggest the emergence of the *biographical wardrobe* as displayed in fig. 4:

Teenage years; a period of transformation from child to adult; people start to form their own ideas of self, and search for ways to dress as "themselves"

Multiple phases of transformation as life goes on: various life changes can affect people so that they adjust their wardrobes. This might be in relation to bodily changes, or exterior changes such as having a new job, getting a divorce, children moving away from home, etc.

Adulthood: People adjust their wardrobes to a more "adult" version for reasons such as starting work life, meeting a partner, having children etc.
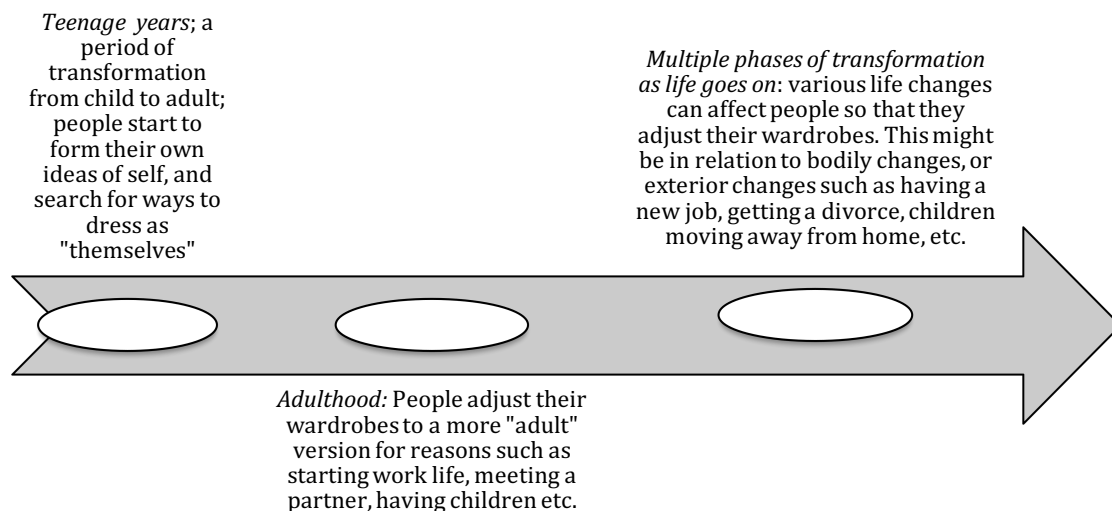
Fig. 4: Model displaying the development of the biographical wardrobe as it was represented in the dress practice of my informants; while major changes might occur during people's teenage years, more phases of transformation might be caused by inner or exterior changes during a life time in which people adjust already established taste patterns for dressing.

When undertaking this analysis it became clear to me that my findings do not correspond very well with the whole concept of fashion, since in much fashion theory

issues of temporality primarily address how new trends emerge. Conversely the wardrobe method points at the way these trends are critically filtered through various personal criteria by every single person, criteria that are related to e.g. issues of bodily comfort, dreams and aspirations, local norms and values, or societal structures and with the timely span of a life that affects all these measures.

Within design research, there have been various attempts to explain how such mechanisms might be understood. For example, a basic aim in *Design and Everyday Life. Matters of Consumption* (Shove et al. 2007) has been to establish an understanding of the correlation between subject, object and time; through the ontological standpoint that *"consumers' actions and aspirations are somehow structured by the objects with which they share their lives"* (2008, 23), the everyday humdrums and routines of a set of informants are studied as they go about doing e.g. DIY projects in their homes or re-designing their kitchen interior. As a consequence of their findings, Shove et al. suggest their model of "having" and "doing", which demonstrates that the relationship between 'having' ('needs') and 'doing' ('practices') is temporal and dynamic, anchoring the relationship between subject and object in the past, present and future (Shove et al. 2007, 36). The reasoning behind this model was the way the authors found that their informants re-designed their kitchens on the basis of future dreams about how to be a family, which did or did not correlate with the past and present realities. In some cases it was clear how future dreams and present reality collided, whereas in other cases there seemed to be a balance between what people "had", what they "did" and what they dreamt of having or doing in the future. Such balance, according to the authors, provided feelings of continuity and wellbeing, whereas if the balance was missing, people became distressed, felt guilty, or even ashamed.

The same kind of reasoning lies behind Walker's definition of 'good design'; to him 'good design' is multi-facetted, but what I notice in particular is that he describes its ability to evoke personal emotions in the shape of memories or other feelings of connection with ideas of self, and with physical and aesthetic experiences that are positive. Walker proposes three parameters that characterise what he calls 'enduring objects'. First there is the aspect of functionality: to be durable an object has to be considered useful, safe and effective by its user. Second there is a social aspect, whereby an enduring object is characterised by its aesthetic and positional qualities. Third there is what he calls an 'inspirational and spiritual aspect' about an enduring object which reflects the user's expression of beliefs and provides the user with religious, magical, and talismanic

associations (1995, 39). As an illustrative example Walker describes that a prayer mat can be seen as *"an object that ties the physical or outer person with the inner, contemplative and spiritual self"* (ibid, 44). Similarly James Hunt (2003) suggests that design objects 'freeze' time in the dialectic process between consumer practices (being) and space, which means that given societal norms, values and structures are passed on to consumers through design. Departing from a co-design perspective, Elizabeth Sanders perceives consumer experience with design objects as *"a momentary flash, taking place in time, triggered by previous experiences and future dreams"* (Sanders in: Mattelmäki 2007, 46).

What I find particularly correlating with my own findings is that these approaches explain how people's relationship to design objects are effected by their daily practices, and how these practices evolve over time driven by personal dreams and aspirations, as well as mere practicalities or societal norms. As in my own study it was clear that such a balance helped form continuity and wellbeing in people's lives, as in Pia's case, where her preference for chunky shoes and certain colours tied together past, present and future feelings and ideas about her own femininity. Or Paul, who tries to hold on to his idea of looking cool, even if he needs to make adjustments in his shoe collection because of practicalities (his feet are damaged).

Conclusion

I see wardrobe research as a possible starting point for beginning to grasp the richness and complexity of people's dress practice. I believe this kind of research opens up a more reflected discussion about what it is people do when they get dressed, and what kind of role the system of 'fashion' actually plays in these practices. Thus I displace fashion as an overall explanatory framework for dress practice, because what I find is that once one starts turning the gaze from the centres of fashion, towards the periphery of people's everyday practices, it becomes clear that the logics of 'fashion' can only partly explain what is going on. Instead I have pointed to design research approaches that embrace a more holistic perception of dress practice. By looking at what people wear as design objects, which I truly believe is what they are, I argue that there is a possibility to form more deep-rooted understandings of what takes place when people get dressed.

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In addition I need to point out that, not only within design research, but also in material culture studies as well as in the area of practice theory, there has been a turn towards the everyday and *the ordinary*, where similar arguments are made. From a material culture studies perspective, Daniel Miller (2009) suggests that there is an intimate connection between people and objects that is related to communal values and norms rather than economic structures; there is a relationship between 'being' and 'having' which is at play in all types of societies, not only in Western post-industrialist ones. What is interesting in Miller's understanding is how 'being' is related to the unfolding of time on the one hand, and the space we inhabit on the other. Miller suggests that the relationship between humans and objects has a universal character which might be practiced slightly differently in different societies but is basically the same. This interest in human-object relationships intersecting in time and space is also addressed within practice theory. In the 1990s, when user-centred design research started to develop, there was similarly a 'practice turn' taking place within organizational studies that addressed the need of seeing work practices as activities in time and space in order to fully understand organizational practices. Thus, Gherardi states that *"PBS* [practice-based studies] *work against the dualisms of mind/body, knowing/doing, micro/macro, nature/culture"* and instead builds on people's *"dwelling in the world"* (2009, 354).

However, while apparently more areas of research have been directing their interest towards the diversity, richness and complexity of the everyday or the *ordinary*, this does not seem to have happened within fashion theory with its focus on the new, the spectacular, and the out of the worldly 'dream' of fashion. What I call for is not to abandon this focus, but to complement it with a broader perspective.

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