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Fashion as a cultural analysis object

ABSTRACT

I reflect upon working on diverse fashion(-related) cases in the context of the Amsterdam School for Cultural Analysis. Drawing on Mieke Bal's understanding of cultural analysis (characterized by interdisciplinarity, among others), I refer to some fashion and material objects I have looked at (e.g. a contemporary video by a Dutch designer, a wardrobe-suitcase of 1919 or the pandemic mask), while insisting on considering them as theoretical objects through the practice of clothes-reading. Rather than establishing programmatic grids to study fashion, I share my observations and interrogations on working with and through fashion. What follows resembles an ongoing inventory of my fashion interests, aspirations and inspirations as well as choices and doubts that altogether echo the performative gesture of research.

KEYWORDS

fashion research
interdisciplinarity
clothes-reading
theoretical object
textile-object
material culture
suitcase

For this Special Issue, I reflect upon working on diverse fashion(-related) cases in the context of the Amsterdam School for Cultural Analysis (ASCA), a research school that is part of the Faculty of Humanities at the University of Amsterdam, which was founded more than 25 years ago by cultural theorist, Mieke Bal, and philosopher, Hent de Vries.¹ The School purposely brings together a wide range of disciplines and scholars from literature, philosophy, media studies, theatre and performance studies, visual culture, musicology and religion studies. In positioning fashion within cultural analysis, my aim is not to be faithfully coherent with or recall my formative training nor to say that it is the one and only way of studying and approaching fashion, for

1. The other co-founders of the research school are film and media scholar, Thomas Elsaesser, literary scholar, Willem Weststeijn, and religions studies scholars, Burcht Pranger and Peter van der Veer.

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2. See <https://asca.uva.nl/about-asca/about-asca.html>. Accessed 15 January 2024.
3. As Bal says, 'without methodological reflection no scholarship can amount to much' (2012: 19).
4. I currently work on the crucial role of fashion and textile in the context of conflicts and violent displacement of people.

cultural analysis does not advocate for any univocal pathway. On the contrary, cultural analysis opens up all sorts of methodological moves as long as a sense of self-reflection and critique accompany the process. As the research institute insists, it

does not subscribe to any single theoretical or methodological practice, but, rather, is defined precisely by its interdisciplinary approach, in which researchers work at the intersections of core disciplines in the humanities to develop new theoretical frameworks and research methodologies for analysing culture in all its forms and expressions.²

In that sense, perhaps cultural analysis is *prior* to any agreement on methodological toolboxes and sets of rules since it thrives more on the object of research and the (theoretical) questions that emerge from it.

Rather than establishing programmatic formulas and grids to study fashion, in this article I share my observations, experiences and interrogations on working with and through fashion. I am thus contemplating my scholarly journey over the past fifteen years or so and the kinds of methodological annotations I made along the way. In doing so, I will refer to, walk through, and move between different cases and instances of fashion research – a routing that is not straightforward nor univocal but intersected by various queries and detours around what it implies and involves to work on fashion, how to closely approach its objects and ultimately why and how fashion can be studied through the prism of cultural analysis. What follows therefore resembles an ongoing inventory of my fashion interests, aspirations, inspirations and influences that echo the performative gesture of research. After all, embarking on any academic research is necessarily and inevitably traversed by moments of self-questioning, doubts, epiphanies and choices. Cultural analysis is no exception to that for it is 'inherently self-reflexive' (Bal 1999a: 6).³

As a matter of fact, fashion has been for me at once the most fertile and versatile motif and domain as well as the most consistent. Originally trained in philosophy and in film studies, fashion enables me not only to reorient my background and formations into new and challenging avenues but also to navigate through various disciplines, traditions, concepts, issues, questions and objects I have always been interested in. Fashion has proven to be the milieu from which I could discuss numerous diverse topics, such as the (non-)place of the sartorial in continental thought, the fashion film in relation to dance, Armenian fabric-based media practices, costumes in early cinema, Dutch fashion design, the pandemic mask or the relation between clothing and traumatic history.⁴ All of these are certainly very different from one another, but it is fashion (in a broad definition of the term) that brings my research efforts and foci together and even connects the dots.

Writing this article for this Special Issue has created an introspective and retrospective momentum to address my own positionality, combining my disciplinary training and fields together with an 'ethnography' of the (academic) Self.

The interdisciplinarity that is at stake here is not just convenient because it meets and fits my own background but also, and more relevantly, because fashion manifests itself in the most interdisciplinary way. It may sound rather obvious, but it reminds us from the start that fashion cannot be confined to one discipline or to one conceptual framework, as the various articles in this Special Issue demonstrate.

Eventually, I hope to highlight the liberty and rigour that lie at the heart of cultural analysis, which enable fashion to reveal and unlock its vivacity and dynamicity across disciplines, terrains, discourses and paradigms. If fashion is an unending, elastic and flexible domain that is inherently interdisciplinary, I would suggest that the 'spirit' of cultural analysis does justice to, or at least confronts, the very multiplicity and diversity of fashion as well as its critical function in and towards the world we live in. Therefore, cultural analysis seems a suitable mindset for approaching and studying fashion as a multifaceted phenomenon and object.

DOING CULTURAL ANALYSIS

Let us briefly recapitulate what cultural⁵ analysis entails. First, as already stressed, cultural analysis favours and relies on interdisciplinarity, on creating and encouraging conversations and collaborations between disciplines for examining the complexity of certain problems and questions. Second, cultural analysis is theoretically grounded, building bridges and affinities between theories and objects. As Esther Peeren stipulates, neither theories nor methods should be 'considered as fixed models, but as dynamic tools that open up important critical perspectives in their engagement with particular cultural expressions. The analysis of this engagement tests and transforms the theories and methods, leading to their innovative development'.⁶ Third, cultural analysis aims at being socially relevant: objects are situated in the world we live in, and cultural analysis seeks to address and answer urgent and confronting matters. Fourth, cultural analysis is committed to detailed analysis of the objects under scrutiny, or of specific cultural forms and expressions and their contexts, through means of close reading and other methodological approaches such as ethnographic and digital ones that gained more interest in the past few years. Last, cultural analysis is consciously situated in the present and operates from a contemporary perspective: it considers the past as it matters in the present, forcing us to wonder 'why now?' Even if, we would investigate and concentrate on a remote past and if we can never ignore what has preceded us, we always deal with the situatedness and presentness of the research itself and the impossibility of its temporal neutrality. The research we work on is thus positioned *in* the now, *from* the now and *for* the now. As Bal articulates, 'cultural analysis seeks to understand the past as *part of* the present, as what we have around us, and without which no culture would be able to exist' (1999a: 1, original emphasis). Or, as De Vries says, we let ourselves 'be inspired by a host of philosophically challenging, yet historically and empirically informed, questions that have come to define' contemporary debates (1996: 3).

In sum, these characteristics of cultural analysis are not only principles to follow devotedly but ongoing challenges that, in turn, mobilize us to continuously reflect upon why and how we do research. In the case of what is discussed here, it sparks the question of how does fashion – as an inherently interdisciplinary field that is always already in tune with the here and now⁷ – produce sustainable and responsible approaches, configurations and outcomes. Therefore, Natalya Lusty's article 'Fashion futures and critical fashion studies' is worth stressing. She pleads for reforging fashion studies vis-à-vis the crucial global changes and pressing problems we are facing in the fashion sector, from production to consumption, aiming at building 'forms of resistance to the mainstream fashion industry' (Lusty 2021: 813). In her words, 'Critical fashion studies positions fashion as a critical and material

5. Undoubtedly, cultural analysis shares a lot with cultural studies; however, they do not have the exact same method. Some of their shared concerns include the resistance against the arbitrariness of disciplinary boundaries, the distance from any essentialist endeavour and the disruption of authority and voices that are tied to the exposed subjects and texts. According to Bal (2002: 6–7), cultural studies paid attention to different kinds of objects but did not fully succeed in 'developing a methodology to counter the exclusionary methods of the separate disciplines'. See also Jonathan Culler (1999).
6. See <https://asca.uva.nl/about-asca/about-asca.html>. Accessed 15 January 2024. These five characteristics have been reviewed by the current ASCA academic director, Esther Peeren.
7. For a comprehensive overview of the different ways that fashion is connected to the questions of time, see Evans and Vaccari (2020).

8. See also Lusty (2021) on this.
9. See, respectively, Baronian (2020a, 2020b, 2023).
10. In my forthcoming book, titled *The Cinematic Life of Material Objects* (Meson Press), I reflect further upon the multiple meanings of that wardrobe-suitcase.

enterprise that works across cultural studies' multi-focused lens of epistemological inquiry and empirical methods but also, importantly, social justice' (Lusty 2021: 814). There is thus clearly a sense of responsibility at stake here. What does it mean to be responsible when we deal with the evanescent and ephemeral world of fashion? Is responsibility only relevant when we touch upon issues of sustainability and environment, oppression and alienation?⁸ Or should we implore, more broadly, responsibility as a methodological gesture and commitment towards any research we conduct?

Tentatively, I outline here a sort of 'check list', which does not follow any specific systematic order and remains purposely elastic and in progress. I certainly do not pretend to model a research plan but more so a 'collection' of notes that has helped me to try to be coherent and consistent towards why and how I embark on certain research paths.

Even if fashion has its own (plural) history, its own terminology, its own items and so on, there is no firm reason to rely on one single or predefined methodological toolbox. Rather, I aim to think through my own positionality vis-à-vis doing research on fashion, which includes referring equally to the practices of writing, lecturing and teaching about fashion. I am referring to a one-minute fashion film on/by Dutch designer, Alexander van Slobbe (2010), the pandemic mask (Baronian 2020b) and a luxurious wardrobe-suitcase that belonged to early Armenian American actress Aurora Mardiganian (1919),⁹ while also considering other cases I have been looking at and some that I have discussed in the context of the classroom.

THE MATERIAL OBJECTS OF FASHION

Bal encourages a concept-based methodology in humanities, where the object is not solely central, but primary. If the object always comes first, cultural analysis might not be as estranged from fields and milieu that have been steadily object-oriented (e.g. anthropology and archaeology). In this vein, the standpoints proposed by material culture historian, Giorgio Riello, have been quite foundational and inspirational in my approach to fashion objects. As he explains, '[m]aterial culture is [...] about the modalities and dynamics through which objects take on meaning (and one of these is that of fashion) in human lives' (Riello 2011: 6). What is more, the object is at once the subject of research and the material source and artefact to compose this history. 'Objects should not be used as mere illustrations to pre-established interpretations. On the contrary, artefacts should be used to propose interpretative hypotheses that documents or other written and visual sources are unable to provide' (Riello 2011: 7). This is precisely what I have experienced when I was dealing with the story of early cinema celebrity and genocide survivor, Aurora Mardiganian (1901–94), by focusing on her travelling suitcase.¹⁰ The accessory was originally designed for the promotional tour of *Auction of Souls* (Apfel 1919) – also known as *Ravished Armenia* – a Hollywood epic based on Aurora's true life story and her published memoirs. However, despite its huge success at that time, this silent film, depicting the mass violence inflicted on the Armenian people, has been lost over the years, as have many details surrounding its production. Only a few fragments of the film have endured. And though some contemporaneous visual materials (e.g. press releases and photographs) have subsisted, there is still so much that has been lost and forgotten. Notably, and almost miraculously, the suitcase survived and has been preserved. The *malle-valise* or wardrobe is actually a vertical trunk-closet (one that meets the

functionality and technicity of travel accessories, recalling and imitating Louis Vuitton's invention in 1875) that was originally used to store and transport the various 'exotic' clothes that actress Mardiganian was supposed to wear while promoting the film in order to embody her own role as an Armenian survivor and witness of the 1915 genocide. Today, the suitcase is empty, operating only as a museal object and relic, and thus no longer providing the tangibility of the costumes and accessories that were meant to be tightly organized inside of it. While I was working with this object, several questions emerged: How does the empty suitcase permit us to get closer to a film that has been long forgotten? How does the material afterlife of such a sophisticated suitcase allow us to envision the significant role of costumes in constructing the cinematic persona of Aurora Mardiganian and how does it trigger our (historical) imagination? Such a biographical object¹¹ generates a series of queries that touch upon fashion and costumes as well as points to the uneasy connotative relationship between the *looks* of American celebrity cultures and the heavy emptiness proper to the culture of traumatic migration.

If I had to describe the methodological assemblage that I have conducted so far, it is perhaps at once material culture and textual analysis paired with a bit of media-archaeology¹² and infused by my background in philosophy. Why would I proceed this way? Not just because I am steering between various fields and disciplines or that I am encouraging a 'bricolage' approach but because the object of fashion *speaks* to all those various territories and constellations.

We all agree that there are several ways to define and consider fashion: it is at once material and immaterial; it is an industry, a commodity, a design practice, a social barometer, an (arbitrary) system of signs, an aesthetic mode, a regime of spectacle and a term that is affiliated with other related notions such as clothing, accessories, textile and so forth.¹³ All that said, fashion is first and foremost an ensemble of objects that dress, adorn or accompany the body. Objects that are thus tangible, palpable and wearable, be it for practical, functional reasons or for playful and seductive purposes. After all, fashion exists out of a *grand repertoire* of items and styles that are found in all kinds of spaces such as the domestic space of the wardrobe or in the open space of retail. On my end I will look at the fashion objects not primarily as products of the fashion industry and consumption but as multidirectional material objects. In my research I am probably focusing less on the notion of the material object in the discursive context of globalization (including questions of commodification and fetishization) or of the posthuman turn in humanities than on the object as what materializes a plurality of thoughts that could only emerge because they were affected and shaped by the materiality of the object itself. Even when fashion scholars are indebted to typical theoretical frameworks and terms, the matter of fashion is materialized through ideas and concepts.¹⁴ The object of fashion is not (or at least not limited to) a reified 'stylish' and fleeting thing but a singular force and a tangible agent in itself. Material and sartorial objects are active fuels in the way we affectively experience space and time, how we relate to the past and how it imprints on our relationship to the present. And drawing on Giuliana Bruno's (2002) concept of (*e*)*motion*, material objects move and move us.

When I was writing on the indispensable fashionability of the pandemic mask and the ethical orientations that it brings with it, I proposed the notion of the 'textile-object': an object that, by and through its very materiality, textures the way we connect to ourselves, to others and to the world. The textile-object

11. For a rich discussion on biographical objects, see Hoskins (2006).
12. See the pioneering work of Thomas Elsaesser (2016) who forged media-archaeology as an alternative to traditional film history. In a Foucauldian manner, media-archaeology challenges the chronological (and canonical) temporality of cinema by paying attention to the materiality of audio-visual media (e.g. in terms of instruments and tools) that, in turn, enables to recontextualize the historical and technological discourse on cinema and its various cultural and social instances.
13. Even if I often use terms like textile, fashion and clothes quite interchangeably I do not negate their differences. Similarly, in fashion research, the word 'dress' designates a category that refers to 'clothing and accessories, including hats, footwear, jewellery, hairstyles, tattoos, and other forms of body adornment' (Mida and Kim 2015: 12). In the studies on fashion and cinema, Uhlirva (2022) also clarifies some distinctions between fashion, costumes and clothes.
14. We could mention Deleuze's *pli* ('fold'), which significantly materializes thought. And one could see this typical material fashion-related notion as a concept that could only surface because it is first an object. For a reading of Deleuze through fashion, see Smelik (2014) and Rocamora and Smelik (2016).

15. See my forthcoming essay, 'The afterlife of textile-objects: On clothes, memory, and survival'. On affect and fashion, see Filippello and Parkins (2023).
16. I have also suggested this notion for reading the clothes of the contemporary Lebanese fashion designer, Rabih Kayrouz (Baronian 2017b).
17. See, for example, the practical books from Mida and Kim (2015) or from Fletcher and Grimstad Klepp (2017).

animates the body in its physical and reflexive gestures. It is simultaneously matter and text; it is the medium that one wears and handles, but also that one reflects on and contemplates. What is more, the textile-object traces in its weft what happens here and now and also serves as a memory-object as it holds the imprint of the event (Baronian 2020a: 214). Though I coined this definition in the context of COVID-19, it is an elastic notion. Armenian embroideries or a Dutch designer's minimalist dress are also material objects that are textured and fabric-based and are thus equally considered textile-objects. This dense and somewhat versatile definition of the textile-object epitomizes the very tangibility of the object and its resonance in the here and now as well as how it emulates thoughts, ideas, emotional effects and affects.¹⁵ Besides, I seek to stress the connectedness of material objects: how they hold a decisive locus in the way we relate to the world and what constitutes it. I could also paraphrase Sherry Turkle's proposition that objects are 'evocative' as their richness comes from the fact that 'objects as thought companions, as life companions [...] *Objects bring together thought and feeling*' (2011: 9, original emphasis). In other words, as eccentric as it may seem, a pandemic mask, a fashion designer's dress or an Armenian carpet are all textile-objects, even if they carry their own material singularity and operate in very different (cultural and historical) contexts and are thus framed distinctively.

CLOTHES-READING

Playing with the homophonic proximity of both terms – *close* and *clothes* – suggests that when we work on fashion, close reading is a critical practice that is not confined to the factual and graphic description of the sartorial objects, but also touches upon what they generate theoretically through a close engagement with the clothes and material objects themselves.¹⁶ Clothes *speak* because they have a life of their own, and they are embedded in a genealogy and fuelled by multiple forces, influences and relationalities. In that sense, what we usually conceive as text-based is closely aligned with material-based approaches (and here there are several possible guiding propositions that can be borrowed¹⁷). Describing (which includes reading and undressing) the fashion object is a fundamental part of the process, which is to accompany and follow the various contours of the object as it stands in front of us. Clothes-reading is not a once-and-for-all method that functions as an end in itself, but a dynamic, open and singular enterprise that takes materiality closely and seriously.

In the same 'playful' vein, I borrowed the specific language and terminology of both film and textile to anchor and materialize the motions of fashion research: delving into the folds, following the threads, stitching together the various fabrics, zooming in and zooming out, practising close-ups and aerial views. By looking closely at fashion – both as a tiniest object (e.g. a dress pocket) and as a global system (e.g. the market) – the scrutiny, dissection and analysis is in a way analogous to the acts of filming, montage, stitching and sewing. What is more, that language does not solely embody the work of fashion research but can also imply and characterize academic research *tout court*. To continue the analogy, let us think of films where 'garments and accessories either drive the plot or cause it to take unexpected turns and detours' (Uhlirva 2022: 534). This resonates with the way that fashion-related items are the manoeuvring forces of research.

That being said, one challenge remains and continually keeps returning. Can we do clothes-reading in a way where closeness does not fall into

absorption and annexation, but instead let the object speak in all its otherness (i.e. what cannot be fully controlled and appropriated) while still adopting a rigorous, substantial and solid dissection and excavation of the object? By clothes, I mean the objects of the wardrobe and of the fashion system, but also literally and metaphorically the various fibres, layers and folds that constitute the object. Thus, how can we serve the object in all its vivacity and otherness and therefore avoid the potential pitfalls of mummifying techniques and tactics? That is, how can we do fashion research that allows for what the object has to say while leaving intact (or valuing) the unsaid and the unseen as part of what constitutes the fashion object. The otherness to which I refer here could simply be that a fashion object does not say it all. For instance, I encountered this when looking at Aurora Mardiganian's luxurious suitcase: it left me with many unresolved questions. Nonetheless I argue that the potential ambiguity or indeterminacy and undecidability that can sometimes be an unavoidable part of the research process and of the fashion object is a plus rather than a burden. It forces us to be even more self-reflective, creatively committed and specific about what we do and how we perform research and thoughts. Relevantly, working on Aurora's suitcase has forced me to travel across disciplines, theoretical spaces, histories and concepts in order to show how it contributes to various yet specific cultural discussions. For the suitcase is not only a material object that belongs to the realm of fashion accessories, but, in the very context of 1919, it also has much to disclose about the topics of travel cultures, celebrity cultures and glamour, cinema production and promotion, as well as the concepts and issues of mobility and modernity, technology and transportation, orientalism and exoticism, etc. The object, as factually 'empty' and 'lost' as it stands now, has incited me to not just navigate through fashion and costume studies but also across several disciplinary terrains (e.g. history, media and film, trauma and memory studies and philosophy). Such a realization could be made precisely because of a *clothes-reading* of the suitcase that left me with numerous ungraspable elements while opening up other new angles, outlooks and configurations. In sum, *clothes-reading* the object of fashion can shake and dislocate our comfort zones and expectations and foster alternative paths while, at the same time, confirming one's positionality and commitment vis-à-vis what we study.

Here I would also like to underline the question of singularity which is pivotal as it captures the frontality of the object and its resistance to an overstretched version of generalization and induction. Singularity preserves difference (Bal 2010: 4–5, 11), and analysing the object through its very own singular 'voice' enables to enlarge modes of interpretation. Therefore, as Bal suggests, we should 'consider them subjects' (2002: 45).

The object thus *speaks* to us, and that is why an ex-position of the object – its being-there – is always an argument (Bal 1999a: 5). Singularity should not engender rigid homogenization; however, it does enable us to address questions we would not be able to answer otherwise. Singularity invites the multiplicity of resonances and routes. To be close to the object is to redeem what is elemental and singular. Being close leans towards a sort of a microscopic contact which does not mean that a broader or generic view should be totally abandoned because from that closeness we might deepen, or initiate and open new avenues and questions. As a matter of fact, I have often observed that we might say more from working from a single sentence, one image or a specific sartorial item than to try, from the start, to work from a grand or large corpus or discourse. This does not mean that we have to generalize on

the basis of a particular case (the induction method) but more so that working closely with one object stimulates ongoing back-and-forth movements between diverse perspectives and that it might, explicitly or implicitly, foster theoretical views and directions. I am inclined to think that working from a precise 'isolated' case, dissected, (re)contextualized and thus analysed with the rigour it deserves, will permit us, in turn, to rethink other (comparable) objects. Once more, it touches upon the ongoing self-questionings of why and how do such objects *face* me and *speak* to me? What do I find in a one-minute film or in a travel accessory that I cannot find somewhere else? That is why singularity matters. In the end, what does *that* object say about the fashion and material culture in which it is located and operates?

Dealing with the suitcase that is *there*, speaking to and facing me, despite not being entirely graspable (empirically and epistemologically) did stir and unlock various, often unforeseen, archaeological readings. At once straightforward and elusive, the suitcase has been a multidirectional object as it made me travel, back and forth, through a wide range of territories. That frontal and *close* encounter with such travel accessory might just echo how we handle objects in fashion research.

THEORETICAL OBJECT

I have always been extremely driven and animated by art historian and philosopher Hubert Damisch's notion of the *theoretical object* which is

an object that obliges you to do theory but also furnishes you with the means of doing it [...] it's a theoretical object because it forces us to ask ourselves what theory is. It is posed in theoretical terms; it produces theory; and it necessitates a reflection on theory.

(1998: 8)

For example, when I closely examined one of Alexander van Slobbe's filmic objects, the concept of horizontality in fashion emerged in my research. This one-minute video, very minimal in its form and content and matching the fashion design aesthetic of Van Slobbe, was presented as part of a retrospective on the designer (Centraal Museum, Utrecht, 2010). In the museal and exhibition space where this film was shown on a horizontal screen-table (presumably a sewing table), we only see the depicted minimalistic and monochrome dresses (shown inside out on a table but not worn) that are also filmed in their horizontal orientation and axis. A *clothes-reading* of the video not only stressed the motif of horizontality in the way the clothes are materially positioned on a table (and filmed and then screened on a table in the museum), but it also led me to further investigate what the concept of horizontality could mean for both fashion design and film design. Furthermore, I implied that it was the language of fashion that provided me with the fitting 'materials' to understand some elemental intersections between film and fashion, as I also proposed to read it in terms of a 'flat pattern'. In doing so, I came to the conclusion that designing practices (proper to both filming and making clothes) involving an intimacy with materiality require an axial positionality and gestuality stemming from horizontal closeness. Admittedly I was somehow only able to suggest this *because* of that filmic object.

Theory is not an instrument, it is not about convenience – you use it, you leave it – or an opportunistic tool. At the same time, an object does not merely

serve to illustrate theory. Rather, one should think of a productive and challenging way of working with theory, through it, from the inside out. In the same way that *clothes-reading* reveals the various layers and 'tensions' of the object of study, it might do the same for theory.

I am pleading for creative (poetic?) theory, in its mobility, dynamicity, its ongoing challenges and its exposures to multiple readings, re-evaluations, transformations and reinventions. If fashion is a creative industry, the research approach might be just as creative. That is why, once more, the assemblage that fashion research inspires is an opportunity to excavate the objects of fashion (the ones that compose the visible world of fashion as well as some of its more 'niche' or forgotten objects) and to 'play' with and confront, consciously and carefully, theory.

The theoretical object, in turn, also confirms and accentuates the great versatility in approaching fashion. Moreover, it reminds us that theory and practice are not in opposition but can bring together designers, scholars, journalists, curators and so on.¹⁸ And as we should emphasize, research and theory are part of what fashion entails in the first place. There is something in the language and phenomenon of fashion that gathers rather than separates. Scholars and practitioners may use different formulations and discourses, but they all work with the same object. Besides, research is not the prerogative of scholars only; research is inherent to fashion (think of archive research sections and departments within museums and fashion houses, or the type of quantitative studies that are conducted within consumer research offices). Therefore, considering the (material) object as a theoretical object is never meant to abstract it but to reveal its own dynamicity and multiple resonances. Or, we could simply say that the theoretical thought draws from objects.

With the emergence of critical fashion studies, the necessity to decolonize fashion and the reality of the global fashion market, together with the increasing number of international students and international fashion studies programmes, there is a pressing need to take into account a broader geographical context. In my seminars on fashion, for instance, more than half of my students are not Dutch, and many of them were not trained within western frameworks. Such facts epitomize and reinforce the need and responsibility to rethink the paradigms we are using and referring to when we approach and study fashion. What makes fashion research dynamic is, once again, that there is no consensual way of looking at it, no strict homogenization; such polarization is not only socially and ethically undesirable but also scientifically inaccurate. Fashion is thus inexorably intersecting and entangling – operating between and rooted within different cultures, disciplines, practices, theories, between the industry and the university and so on.

On my end, I would even go so far as to admit that fashion (in its broad scope and definition) is what connects my different axes of investigation. When I worked in the field of Armenian studies, I was concentrating on the cultural practice of weaving. In philosophy, I was exploring the marks of fashion in the continental tradition, which, by the way, also includes my continuous interest and expertise in ethics, which is evidently another aspect at the heart of contemporary fashion discussions and debates. In my seminars on fashion and cinema, I am discussing their multiple (historical, conceptual) intersections and affinities; I remain, after so many years, astonished by the variety of angles and topics that has come up to which students (from all around the globe) significantly contribute.

18. I have been co-organizing or participating in such gatherings and events that purposely brought together academics, professionals and practitioners. I am thinking of 'La Semaine de la Pop Philosophie', founded by Jacques Serrano (Marseille, 2014; Brussels, 2015 and Amsterdam, 2016), the 'Archaeology of Fashion Film' project initiated by Caroline Evans and Jussi Parikka (London, 2018), or 'Culture(s) de Mode' founded by Sophie Kurkdjian (Paris, 2018).

19. I have proposed to read it with the ethical metaphysics of Emmanuel Levinas in mind – a philosopher on whom I have extensively worked on.

The interdisciplinary nature of fashion means that fashion manifests itself everywhere – in all kinds of spaces: intimate, public, mental, imaginary – and if it can be an object of discussion and research in several disciplines (next to those represented at ASCA, we can think of sociology, anthropology, law, psychology, the list goes on), it is not surprising we need several tools and ‘tips’ that can transfer across disciplines. Fashion is thus at once monographic and plural, and our role is to conscientiously acknowledge it. How to deal with interdisciplinarity in a way that it does not become a fuzzy patchwork or a hasty and naïve juxtaposition. Therefore, we should not assume that interdisciplinarity is not an addition or accumulation of competences, aptitudes or procedures proper to each discipline. It would be not only a chimaera but also counterproductive. Instead, we could think of interdisciplinarity in a dialectical sense: it stimulates dialogues –and disputes – where final resolutions might not always be the most sought-after results; instead, it provokes curiosity and a nourishing disparity through exchanges and perspectives that consolidate the object of fashion. Interdisciplinarity accepts the meandering while holding tight to its object and question. Once the object and the question that emanates from it are lucidly delineated, the research does not have to be all encompassing and pretend to reach some epistemological wholeness. It is an ongoing struggle for researchers since we have to constantly ask ourselves why and how we study certain things. I remember a student (with a background in media studies) who was so eager to work on fashion photography from the 1960s but felt paralysed about how far they would have to go either in the history of photography itself or in the context of the 1960s in a certain geographical territory etc. Looking closely, and *en détail*, at one specific photograph, *here* and *now*, proved to be the most illuminating and efficient approach. Yet such a choice does not only serve its methodological instrumentalization, it needs to be justified and hold its *raison d’être*. In that sense, my essay on the pandemic mask is an attempt to capture the very contemporaneity of such fashion objects: it is *in* fashion – it is located within the fashion industry (in terms of its production and circulation) – yet the mask is also an object that can be traced and looked at without borrowing or depending on a grounded discourse on fashion. For instance, I have suggested thinking of the pandemic mask as a means to contemplate the ubiquity of material objects in the way we inhabit the world and the way we relate to one another, and thus to ethically read such accessory for it crystallizes our contemporaneity and tackles and seizes instances of alterity.¹⁹

Another example is when one of my students wanted to work on the motif of the dress in the cinema of contemporary Hong Kong filmmaker, Wong Kar-Wai. You do not need to be a hardcore film theorist or a sinologist to do this, but it might be useful to be well informed about the cheongsam and about Kar-Wai’s filmic world. In the same way that if you are a philosopher who develops an interest for fashion, a preliminary and groundwork knowledge of fashion’s history and discourse would be more than welcome. In other words, the questions of expertise and legitimacy often emerge when you work across disciplines. Yet interdisciplinarity does not mean that being discipline-specific is outdated. Quite the contrary; working from and within a discipline while closely analysing the object enables us to recalibrate and refresh, sometimes in unanticipated ways, our relationship to our home discipline(s). Bal argues that ‘inter-disciplinarity is not the opposite of discipline-specificity, but rather a deepening of the possibilities that disciplines harbour, but are unable to fully exploit because of their conventional methodological hang-ups’ (2012: 16).

I would say that what matters is the moment of introspection and retrospection in the process of disciplinary choices and assemblage. To repeat, far from being a weakness, I prefer to see it as a strength that forces us to ponder positionality (and decentralization) and argument. To be as close as possible to the object without producing totalizing absorption through back-and-forth movements. That is why I wonder whether the label of fashion scholar might be the most applicable one (e.g. Am I a media studies scholar? A philosophy scholar? An Armenian studies scholar? A memory studies scholar?). In the end, doing research on fashion does not automatically mean that we are an expert on fashion, but that we have come to specialize in a specific aspect by offering a precise perspective and argument. Interdisciplinarity forces us not to defensively excuse ourselves or to hide behind a set of disciplines and discourses. We might repeatedly notice that once we want to please a certain disciplinary terrain or satisfy a certain field, we get stuck and unproductively confused or apologetic. Of course, what I am sketching here should not be taken as a directive or amount to some dictatorial blueprint, but rather it should recall and point to some observations and encounters for the sake of the diversity that fashion so vividly propels.

I found another example of interdisciplinary navigation and dialectical movements when I was working on the audio-visual archive of Alexander van Slobbe. (Incidentally I have been working for a long time on the concept of archive in a different context.) The archive is here particularly relevant as it often pops up in our research trajectory. The work of professional archivists (within fashion museums or fashion houses) cannot be limited to conservators and technicians as if their work were not oriented by a specific discourse and vision. Underneath the work conducted by archivists, there is a real question (though oftentimes implicit) about the archive itself: as a document, a monument, an object, a concept, a metaphor, an historical repository or a political force. In a Derridean sense, we assume that every archive constructs its object.²⁰ In other words, a neutral archive does not exist. Why do we decide to preserve and archive this or this piece of clothing (beyond, of course, any economic constraints)? What is the latent narrative behind archives and archiving? When I was confronted with the archive of audio-visual documents akin to a Dutch designers' work, we had to dissect and autopsy all the materials that would be part of that archival ensemble. The apparent heterogeneity had to be transformed into a distinctive and coherent whole. One can also think of the type of research at stake when a new creative designer comes to join an established fashion house and is asked to work from pre-existing archival materials. Does the designer prolong the past or reinvent it? In reworking the archive, in digging into it, the newly appointed designer imprints their own identity and adds a surplus – an identity that inextricably relies on selections, segmentations and translations.

And this brings us again to the choices and commitments we make in fashion research: why do we choose to look at and investigate this object and not another one? We know that its canonization or its historical significance is not enough. (Similarly, to say simply that nothing yet has been said or written about a certain object might not be enough either.)

Something comparable can be mentioned vis-à-vis the canonization of certain texts and subjects. No doubt that reading the 'five Bs' – Benjamin, Baudelaire, Barthes, Baudrillard and Bourdieu – is extremely inspiring and formative, and it feeds our perception on fashion. And then what is the next step? What do we really do with these classics? Referencing them as an

20. I also touch upon this aspect in the essay 'Archive, memory, and loss' (2014), where I discuss the concept of archive according to Jacques Derrida's *Mal d'archive* (1995).

implicit excuse of intellectual capital is obviously not promising. It would be even ineffective to artificially substantiate our work on fashion by invoking the Grand Theories as a sort of defence mechanism. The same could be said about the Grand Couturiers who have gained a comparable canonical establishment and role in the history of western fashion. Looking elsewhere, excavating and exploring unexposed terrains, beyond some comfortable intellectual and epistemological zones, are also part of what creative critical research entails. But once more, it is not a matter of abandoning the canonical actors of (western) fashion theory and history but of recalibrating them into a productive and dynamic analysis that opens up rather than encloses alternative paths and directions.

A WORLD OF FASHION OBJECTS

Each of the fashion objects I worked on – e.g. a one-minute film that shows some dresses horizontally, the pandemic mask and a wardrobe-suitcase from 1919 – is a specific, delineated, singular, petit object. Yet all of them capture and undress a plurality of meanings, senses and orientations that mirror the very plurality of what fashion entails. At the same time, the object is not a mere case study ‘which has been overly inflected by exemplarity and comprehensiveness, and [...] by generalization’ (Bal 2010: 7).

When I did an interpretative reading of Van Slobbe’s work (Baronian 2017), my analyses were certainly indebted to fashion history and fashion theory, as these were also oriented by Riello’s (2011) study of fashion as material culture, calling attention to the objects that constitute and make fashion, and that bring with them personal and affective meanings. Therefore, I conceive the fashion items and designs as theoretical objects that are open to interpretation and similarly take place within specific histories of personal and collective contexts. In that sense, even when the research on fashion is conducted ‘outside’ of the proper disciplinary field of history, fashion is always already framed within its own history which reminds us, once more, that when we work on contemporary fashion it inevitably involves a sense of historical positionality.

This is in a way what happened when I was confronted with the object of the suitcase – an object (despite being factually empty) that ultimately activated way more stories, questions and paths than I could hope for. Because so much of the film in which Aurora Mardiganian played was lost or unpreserved (film reels, costumes, production notes etc.), I had to *face* what the object could actually tell, what sorts of prospects and configurations it could offer; in a way, I had to *imagine* what it did back then while taking new routes of interpretation *today*. This resonates with Bal stating that

after returning from your travels, the object constructed turns out to no longer be the ‘thing’ that so fascinated you when you chose it. It has become a living creature, embedded in all the questions and considerations that the mud of your travel spattered onto it.

(2002: 4)

One of the most beneficial aspects of cultural analysis is thus the (unexpected) diversity that it can incite. Nowadays, if we should eagerly, and urgently, agree on adopting a more critical and inclusive way of enquiring into fashion, the diversity could also permeate the various approaches we are working with.

Thus, any methods could be mobilized and taken on board, as long as the object paves the way for it. While we all strive to provide the field of fashion with solidity and rigour to stimulate its value and legitimacy in both humanities and social sciences, there is no homogenization of how to do it. That is, we create spaces and opportunities for objects, theories and methods to meet, to 'test' one another, to complement one another or to agree to disagree.

21. See also Bal (2010: 2) and (1999b: 121).

The *field* of cultural analysis is not delimited, because the traditional delimitations must be suspended; by selecting an object, you *question* a field. Nor are its *methods* sitting in a toolbox waiting to be applied; they, too, are part of the exploration.

(Bal 2002: 4, original emphasis)

This also explains why the so-called intention of the author is not the most decisive and conclusive path to take. 'It is not the artist or the author but the objects they make and "give" to the public domain that are the "speakers" in analytic discussion' (Bal 2002: 9).²¹ In a way it is comparable to what I was experiencing with the 1919 suitcase. As an 'orphan' object, I could describe it with what is materially left of it, but I was not able to trace its full genealogy and trajectory. At the same time, the lack of factual information at my disposal enabled me to consider more broadly and learn about fashion travel cultures and celebrity cultures in that period, as well as the role of costumes and orientalism in early American cinema. Elements of uncertainty and speculation force us to integrate working hypotheses and not to count irreversibly on 'intentions' or prescriptions and recipes. It attests to the importance of embracing what is speaking to and facing us, be it lacunary, and which keeps fashion on the move. Again, it signals the potential of the fashion object to produce plural ideas and results and to reach out beyond its own grounding.

Eventually, even if cultural analysis does not advocate for one circumscribed or identifiable ready-made method, it may provide a mindset to study fashion through encouraging dialogues and disputes between various disciplines and fields, as well as between various times and (cultural and national) spaces, between various texts and contexts and between various concepts and traditions. Ultimately, acknowledging the fact that fashion does not have one disciplinary discourse, or one single history, nor does it produce uniformed outcomes, it does – and actually should – retain a certain otherness and dynamic ambiguity which is precisely what stirs and activates the work of fashion scholars and practitioners. If the object of fashion is considered a creative practice I would also like, by extension, to insist on fashion as what stimulates and produces creative critical analysis.

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