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Fashion Matters

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FASHION MATTERS. MATERIAL AGENCY IN FASHION STUDIES

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ABSTRACT

This work seeks to explore and expand the notion of material agency in practice-based and applied ethnography fashion studies. It is carried through a literature review of publications in the field, including foundational literature in fashion theory and more recent publications in journals and doctoral dissertations, following a tabular comparison analysis (RIDLEY 2012). The findings of the study point out to new spaces of investigation, and how can the field of fashion studies benefit from a broader and less human-centred approach. This work is grounded especially on theories of affect (DELEUZE and GUATTARI 1987), theories of more than human agency (BARAD 2007, BRAIDOTTI 2013), and their applications to the field of design (WAKKARY et al. 2019, BRASSET and MARENKO 2015) and fashion (VALLE-NORONHA 2019, BRUGGEMAN 2018).

Despite the lack of agreement around the ontology of fashion (ALMILA and INGLIS 2017), there is widespread consensus that fashion encompasses both material and immaterial entities. As material entities we can think of clothing itself, as well as all tangible aspects of fashion, including fashion weeks, the bodies that wear and produce fashion, amongst others. Intangible entities, on the other hand, include matters of identity, lifestyle, culture, belief systems, amongst others. Previous studies on the intangible dimension have for long prevailed, a phenomenon started with the seminal work of Barthes (1990)

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on fashion's symbolic system and which continues until today. They support a certain human-object dualism as they investigate clothes as something onto which we project our cultures (cf. SMELIK 2018; RUGGERONE 2017). In this way, the notion of experience, interaction or engagement—that understand both parts as active entities—has been shadowed in fashion studies. The shadowing of experience and how relationships develop between wearers and clothes is also clear in practice-based research publications. A literature review (VALLE-NORONHA 2019, p. 35-51) showed that nearly half of the publications analysed included wearers in their studies. Additionally, when wearers were taken into consideration, the great majority focused on short and medium assessments.

But what lies between the wearer and the worn, beyond the momentaneous experience in a fitting room? What other things can fashion do other than dressing the body?

At the turn of the century, western researchers in the field began to consider the material and engagement dimensions of fashion, starting with the work of Entwistle (2000), where she took a philosophical and sociological approach to look at fashion as something that affects our bodies as wearers. More recently, though, with the overcoming of the Cartesian approach to science, together with the emergence of more than human discourses, novel approaches have surfaced (SMELIK 2018; SEELY 2013; TIAINEN et al. 2015).

These works look at clothing, or fashion, as active. Entities able to affect the ways we relate with them, as things, or to the world—more generally, and highlight experience as a space to be explored. They require that novel and experimental approaches to research methodologies are established. In this way it becomes possible to look at clothing from a non-human centered perspective able to consider beyond human agencies.

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Limitations to this work must be considered, especially concerning the scope of the literature review, as it includes only publications in English, Portuguese and Spanish, leaving an enormous myriad of works aside. Another limitation regards the length constraints of this contribution. However, this study aims to serve as a call and motivation for further studies, explorations and provocations, and is sought to be explored towards more responsible futures in clothing, fashion and textile design.

Keywords: fashion matters; material agency; wearer-worn engagements; fashion studies

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