

A Non-representational Approach to Fashion

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Abstract

Fashion can be a multitude of things, from a business to an art to an attitude. But one thing that is consistent through these various notions is the experience of the body in space and time. This experiential and spatial dimension will be explored and how the current discourses surrounding fashion reduce it to a two-dimensional or worse a one-dimensional representation of what fashion actually is. Semiotic, psychoanalytic, gender, and socio-political readings of fashion, which are necessary and popular, typically provide an account of fashion reduced to a sentence or a photograph. Often the actual garments let alone the body are left unexamined. This leaves a large gap in scholarship on the actual experience of the dressed body.

The development of a 'non-representational' approach to fashion can help overcome this omission. Much of current social theory is revolving around a critique of representational forms of knowledge. This critique emphasizes notions of embodiment, performativity, affect and how the body interacts with objects in space. Non-representational theory's reflection on embodiment allows a consideration of the sensual experience of the entire body, not just the visual. The theory focuses on practice and practical expertise. It is concerned with thought in action and emphasizes the particular moment- that of the present. It is dismissive of many current studies that focus on linguistic, literal, semiotic readings, which tend to ignore the affective practical experience of the body in space. Recovering this affective element demands a more poetic consideration.

Affect, practice, experience, space and time each have a valid and significant relationship to fashion and the body. Understanding these relationships lies at the heart of a non-representational theory of fashion. All of these elements will be addressed in this presentation.

A Non-representational Approach to Fashion

In recent decades fashion design has become the subject of various critiques across the social sciences (Barnard 2007). Yet rarely have these critiques been authored by practicing fashion designers. Instead, social scientists have sought to understand fashion design through

reference to existing theories and ideas, like those associated with semiotics, cultural studies, art history, psychology, sociology, feminism and so on (Griffiths 2000:73-4). Whilst much of this analysis has been worthwhile, this work typically fails to address the art and practice of making clothes, just as it so often ignores the lived experience of the dressed body. Fashion designer Ian Griffiths (2000:89-90) makes the argument this way: “The voices of practitioners, or indeed the practice of fashion do not figure large in (the) academy, and consequently a whole world of information is hidden from view; unlike other fields in art and design, such as architecture, theory and practice remain (for fashion) disintegrated”. Griffiths here highlights the value of both theory and practice in making sense of fashion design. As fashion designers increasingly seek to establish their discipline within academia, this kind of integration of theory and practice is more and more urgent. This paper argues that this integration can be achieved through reference to an emerging body of ideas and practices called “non-representational theory” by the social theorist Nigel Thrift (see Thrift 2007).

Non-representational theory offers a framework for a course of study that is both relevant and essential for fashion designers to reclaim their own discourse. Whilst its primary goal is to seek other ways of understanding the world in which we live, distant from established norms (Thrift 2007), non-representational theory highlights a number of key areas that are relevant to the study of fashion design. These key areas include; a firm critique of existing representational forms of study, in particular semiotic readings, an emphasis on embodiment and practice, new concepts of space and finally affect (Thrift 1996:1-5; Thrift 2007:5-17). In each of these four areas, non-representational theory offers new and insightful ways to think and talk about fashion, but more importantly for creating new fashion design. In this preliminary research paper I will outline each of these key concepts indicating how these ideas can be applied to fashion design. My primary purpose, however, is to highlight a new set of theoretical tools relevant to the study of fashion design, rather than to actually apply these tools to the analysis of existing fashion designers. As Griffiths argues, fashion designers need new theories of practice in the study of fashion design – new theoretical tools, beyond those provided by sociologists, psychologists and semioticians. This paper concludes that theories of space, practice, affect and embodiment offer these new tools.

Existing Theories of Fashion and Society

Existing definitions of fashion typically include both the production and the consumption of clothing. Fashion is almost always guided by the cyclical nature of the seasons and the

emerging styles that accompany each seasonal change as well as various socially and culturally determined stylistic trends and characteristics. Moreover, fashion includes the full history of costume and the richness of art history, accompanied by an awareness of market trends. Wedded to this knowledge, of course, is the ability to manipulate design principles, and the full range of technical skills including patternmaking and sewing, which have their own complex histories.

Fashion design inspires any number of contemporary social discourses from the popular and the mainstream through to more academic and critical inquiries. Many traditional approaches to the study of fashion treat fashion as a sign of the times, a way of documenting social trends and challenging social mores and taboos (Wilson 2007). Fashion is routinely the subject of sociological, semiotic, economic and political discussions, as well as more everyday discourses. Sociologists, costume historians and economists describe the “meaning” of individual fashion designs and their place in global fashion markets (Finkelstein 1996). Indeed, fashioned objects or garments are typically read as manifestations or reflections of important social changes. This approach reflects more semiotic methods in which fashion is re-presented as an object for interpretation and analysis.

Whilst these more sociological and/or political readings of fashion clearly have much to offer by way of understanding fashion and its social effects, it is important to note that such readings are often bereft of a deeper understanding of fashion as a distinct design practice as well as an embodied practice. Most if not all sociological readings of fashion, for example, ignore the fact that fashion is not only a product but also a practice (Entwistle 2000a: 39). Very few commentators talk about what it is like to wear fashion let alone how an understanding of the experiential aspect of fashion may contribute in design practice. Very few commentaries are authored by practicing fashion designers or directed at providing conceptual frameworks to assist in the design process. Very few commentators talk about the clothes themselves, in their lived and material realities.

The absence of such perspectives almost inevitably leads to confusion about what fashion actually is, whilst also over-emphasizing the social or cultural meaning of fashion (Griffiths 2000). This sense that fashion design always stands for something else – that fashion always represents some deeper cultural or political trend – only makes it harder to understand what fashion is. Semiotic readings of fashion, for example, whilst useful in certain respects, also

detract attention from the range of innovative material techniques that fashion designers are today experimenting with. Indeed, all over the world, designers are producing work that reflects a range of new innovative fashion design methodologies, such as Martin Margiela, Commes des Garçons and/or Yohji Yamamoto (see Griffiths 2000:82). This along with a burgeoning questioning of fashion itself in any number of contemporary discourses from the news media to the social sciences has led to a series of critical challenges to older and more established understandings of fashion (Barnard 2007; Wilson 2007; Lipovetsky 2007). This is reflected not only in the work of a broad range of innovative fashion designers but also in the ways people are talking about fashion (Barnard 2007), and more importantly what people are actually wearing in the streets (Finkelstein 1996). Fashion design is now open to various interpretations and choices such that it is difficult to pin down what fashion is. These new challenges to fashion design require the development of new dialogues about fashion not only to enable commentators to discuss fashion's relative merits but also to help designers themselves.

Fashion designers need to lead this process. To do so, fashion designers need some new critical tools for understanding what is happening to fashion around the world, how it is changing and how designers ought to respond to these changes (see also Griffiths 2000). Fashion designers today need much more than a solid grounding in the design elements and principles that make up a garment collection – although clearly these skills are crucial – but more than this fashion designers need to find a language for talking about the fundamental aesthetic, spatial and experiential elements of fashion design practice and process. More important still, fashion designers need to pay attention to recent developments from outside of their field, particularly in relation to new and emerging theories of aesthetics and social theory, in order to better understand the fundamental aesthetic and affective experiences that transpire when one tries on a new piece of fashion (Barnard 2007).

Contemporary social theory can provide these insights particularly in relation to the concept of embodiment (Lock and Farquhar 2007). Discourses on fashion have already begun to embrace this obvious relationship between the body and dress (Entwistle 2000a, 2000b). Papers in the journal *Fashion Theory*, texts by fashion academics, as well as important international conferences such as the annual International Foundation of Fashion Technology Institute meetings have been devoted to the topic. However the focus has been on discursive representations of the dressed body and not the dressed body itself (see Entwistle 2000b:326;

Calefato 1997). The development of a 'non-representational' approach to fashion can help overcome this omission.

Non-representational theory puts the dressed body front and centre by highlighting the limitations of representational forms of knowledge (O'Sullivan 2001). Non-representational theory as outlined by Thrift (2007,1996), throws critical light on many of the studies which claim to re-present some naturally present reality in the case of data or lets say the semiotic readings of an image. This critique emphasizes notions of embodiment, practice, affect and how the body interacts with objects in space (Thrift 1996:6-9). Recovering this affective element demands a more poetic consideration, arguing that the emphasis should be on embodiment and practice to gain a sense of the real. Non-representational theory's reflection on embodiment allows a consideration of the sensual experience of the entire body, not just the visual (Thrift, 2007). The theory focuses on practice and practical expertise and varied notions of what constitutes space (Thrift 2006). This highlighting of the sensational and practical expertise concerns itself with thought in action (Thrift 1996). This in turn emphasizes a particular moment, a moment that can only be described as the affective, practical experience. In emphasizing embodiment, practice, performativity, space and affect, a non-representational approach to fashion can offer some exciting insights. To better understand this relationship and demonstrate the relevance between fashion and non-representational theory, I will outline these key areas in the following sections.

Embodiment and Practice

The study of embodiment begins with the rejection of the natural, essentialised body (Lock and Farquhar 2007). This natural body is the Cartesian body of separate and distinct, mind and materiality: a body that precedes culture and is shaped by its own natural rhythms and processes (Turner 1996). For a long time this natural body has dominated thinking in the natural sciences just as it has informed almost all social scientific studies of human experience (Lock and Farquhar 2007, Butler 1993). It is only in more recent decades that thinkers have begun to radically question this natural body (Turner 1996). Indeed this study of embodiment is almost entirely devoted to uncovering the contingent *mutability* of a thoroughly cultural and temporal body. This view directly challenges the common sense view of the body as exclusively natural and biological (Butler 1993). Whilst the contemporary social sciences provide numerous approaches to the study of embodiment, most draw strong influence from the seminal work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty (Grosz 1994).

Merleau-Ponty's philosophies are concerned primarily with phenomenology, insisting on the importance of the presence of the object and the clarification of its meaning through intuition (Grosz 1994:86-93). This approach serves to break down the subject/object dualism in insisting that both the subject and the object are deeply intertwined in the process of making meaning (Crossley 1995). It is not the case that the subject comes to a fully formed object and then tries to make sense of that object. Rather both the subject and the object are mutually constituted in the process of perception (Merleau-Ponty 1962). Importantly both subject and object are transformed in this perception.

Merleau-Ponty's chief contribution to the study of phenomenology is the analysis of the role of perception and how the body's multiple sensorious abilities to perceive leads to the rejection of the Cartesian duality of separate mind and body (Crossley 1995). In stating that the body senses and that these sensations form the basis of our experience of the world, Merleau-Ponty argues for the importance of meaning in perception as an embodied practice (Thrift 1996).

Crossley (1995:46-47) summarizes the three basic points underpinning Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of embodiment: Perception is not an inner representation of an outer world, complete rejection of the Cartesian duality that the mind is separate from the body and that perception is based in behaviour that is practiced. Understanding embodiment relies on the fact that the body perceives objects in the real world and does not construct them from within the mind (Crossley 1995). For example, visual perception of dress occurs not as a re-presented idea of dress in thought but as an actual object, experienced by the entire body. This is crucial to the next point made by Crossley (1995) in regards to the philosophy of Merleau-Ponty, that the mind is intrinsically linked to the body and that perception is both sensational and sentient. Hence "the body's being-in-the-world is at once mediated through physical presence and perceptual meaning" (Crossley 1995:47). At this point it is helpful to mention Joanne Entwistle's (2000a: 6) statement "that human bodies are *dressed* bodies".

This obvious but often ignored element of the experience of embodiment adds to the discussion here by addressing the fact the body in question is almost always mediated through dress (see also Entwistle 2000a). Thirdly Crossley (1995) asserts that perception is constituted by the constant and repeated active engagement of the body in the world. Getting dressed each day can then be understood as one way the body makes sense of the world. It is also another example of the critical importance of practice.

Practices are ways of engaging in the world, with the particular features of particular spaces and contexts (Thrift 1996:6-9). Whilst practices are learned through habit and repetition, it is the particular way in which practice necessitates an opening up to the world that underscores the value of studying practice in relation to the dressed body. This opening up of the body through practice is one of the key insights of phenomenological analysis (Grosz 1994:90). It concerns fundamentally the rejection of all subject/object dualities noted above. Rather than emphasizing the separate and distinct status of the body and objects in space, phenomenology examines the ways in which the body enters into productive relations with objects in space (Crossley 1995). In this sense it is this relation between the body and objects and the way this relation transforms both the body and the object that is important. Merleau-Ponty uses the example of scratching an out-of-reach itch with the aid of a stick to clarify this point. Grosz (1994:91) notes that for Merleau-Ponty "...the stick is no longer an object for me but has been absorbed or incorporated into my perceptual faculties or body parts". Crucially, the object is *folded into the body* (see also Thrift 2007:8) From this example we can see how dress not only acts upon the body but the body acts upon dress and furthermore how the dressed body acts upon the world with the world in turn acting upon the dressed body. This porous relationship between the dressed body and the world emphasizes the flows and intensities that can be seen in contemporary understandings of embodiment (Turner 1996, Lock and Farquhar 2007).

In particular Deleuze and Guattari emphasize the penetrable surface of the body (Thrift 2007). Deleuze and Guattari's (1988) understanding of embodiment also involves the notion that there is no clear demarcation between body and object. Rather a series of flows, energies, movements and intensities define the body/object relationship, "...fragments capable of being linked together or severed in potentially infinite ways" (Grosz 1994:167), or in potentially transformative ways. This is crucial when understanding the relationship between dress and the body and the potential for variation of experience or "becoming" in the dressed body. This becoming or potential for change that a porous relationship between dress and the body implies, in turn suggests a certain sense of action or performativity. This performativity is also implied in the way that the body understands the world through the repeated action of getting dressed. Not only getting dressed but also the continual, repetitive and diverse act of being a dressed body interacting in the world in space.

Space

Traditionally space has also been understood in a Cartesian manner, a substance to be measured and mapped (Thrift 1996, Buchanan and Lambert 2005). There are many new theories of space that can offer something new to how we understand and theorise fashion. These theories are intrinsically linked with embodiment, affect, practice and performativity in defining space (Thrift 2006). These different concepts of space can be described as immanent, extensive and intensive, virtual and actual, smooth and striated, molar and molecular, derived and descriptive (see Thrift 2007, DeLanda 2005, Buchanan and Lambert 2005, Burkitt 2004).

Drawing from the work of cultural geographer Nigel Thrift (1996, 2006, 2007) we can see that space is a complex and dynamic concept that features the following characteristics: it involves everything being spatially distributed but at the same time having no boundaries; every space being in motion, and finally that there is no one type of space (Thrift 2006:13-15). Thrift's four-fold definition of space helps us to understand both the nature and the limits of space. Similarly, Manuel DeLanda's (2005:80) concepts of extensive and intensive space help us to clarify the different qualities and dimensions of space. Manuel DeLanda (2005:80) describes extensive space as "zones that extend in space up to a limit marked by a frontier. Whether we are talking about the frontiers of a country, a city, a neighbourhood or an ecosystem, in habiting these extensive spaces is part of what defines our social and biological identities". This approach to extensive space has led to theories that identify skin as a barrier with clothing as another surrounded by architecture and so on (Warwick and Cavallaro 1998).

In addition to extensive space, DeLanda (2005:80) talks about intensive space and "zones of intensity". These zones or spaces are bound in a different way, that of temperature, pressure, gravity or tension. Examples are of high or low pressure seen in weather reports, high pressure experienced by deep-sea divers or low gravity explored by astronauts (DeLanda 2005:80). Another way of defining this is when you look at the cumulative effect of extensive space and intensive space. When you add one module of extensive space to another you end up with more ... but when multiplying intensive space you always end up the same temperature, pressure and so on. In other words extensive space is quantitative and measurable whilst intensive space is qualitative and evaluative. These less recognized qualitative zones of intensity are often ignored for the favoured quantitative dimensions of extensive space (DeLanda 2005, Thrift 2006).

If we take the first premise that Thrift (2006) proposes, that everything is spatially distributed, then we can say space extends in dimensions that can be measured - that everything has a point in space in its width, breadth and depth. Everything has its right place that can be mapped or located. But where does the map end, what is the limit? Space is well known to have no boundaries. Here Thrift (2006) is still talking of extensive space, in contrast to intensive space which is mobile and multiform. So the big question is how does this relate to fashion?

If we are to talk of fashion in a conventional way we might say that it is an architecture of the body and therefore concerns the body in extension (Entwistle 2000a). Here one could compare the dressmakers pattern with the map, and in so doing characterise fashion as a practice in and of extensive space. The dressmaker's pattern is a map in extensive space of clothing on the body. The pattern is the diagram or blueprint to do this. The fundamental insight we can take from this is that we don't only experience ourselves in extensive space, as objects orientated in three dimensions. Rather we also experience space as a series of differentiated intensities (see also DeLanda 2005). Intensive space is intensity. What we mean here is that if we only experience space in extension we draw out only objective difference in space, the idea of inside and outside. However in addition to these objective approaches we also make qualitative judgments about space in that we experience space as an affectively charged environment (Thrift 2006). So, for example, we experience clothing/dress/fashion in an intensive space. A space of no fixed boundaries and of no one type. It's not that we only conceive of clothing in relation to our physical body, it's that the fit or the functional aspect captures only a small part of the experience of clothing. Because we experience clothing in an intensive affective space, we need to develop a theory of affect and then apply it to fashion.

Affect

Fashion, as discussed earlier, is almost always critiqued in both popular and more academic debates as a cultural object, shaped by political, sociological and historical forces (Barnard 2007, Entwistle 2000a). This is typically done from a semiotic point of view, where garments are read in relation to their context in search of some deeper truth (Finkelstein 1996). Fashion is in this way read as an object, categorized, and then placed in a museum, gallery or shop. Lyotard argues that this theorizing of objects in order to sort them into appropriate categories is implied in all art theories (cited in O'Sullivan 2001). However thinking about fashion as an "object of knowledge" (O'Sullivan 2001), as a set of signs awaiting interpretation, obscures not only the actual physical and bodily experiences associated with wearing fashion but also restricts the

innovative potential that fashion may provide. This relegation of fashion into the exclusive order of cultural object ignores the fundamentally experiential and affective aspects of fashion. It misses affect.

What is omitted in more conventional approaches to fashion design is precisely these more experiential elements. The experience of fashion and dress is brushed away as ephemeral, transcendental and too hard to define. Yet the experience of fashion is surely what keeps bringing people back to fashion: it is why designers design and it is why journalists follow catwalk shows and why ordinary people return to stores to inspect the latest seasonal range. Fashion design is fundamentally an experience of the body (Entwistle 2000a). This experience is best referred to as affect, for affect is inherent in experience (Deleuze 1978).

In developing this idea and applying it to fashion design theory and practice, it is worthwhile consulting Gilles Deleuze's (1978) discussion of Benedict Spinoza's theory of affect. When describing affect, it must be understood that both Spinoza's and Deleuze's work is dependent on an understanding of the body as a composite relation of forces (Deleuze 1988). Each thinker rejects the Cartesian duality of mind and body, arguing that each is linked in a constant process of reflection and relay (Thrift 2007:178-181). On this view, an affect is not an idea much less an emotion or feeling, but rather a mode of thought, experienced before an idea and as the cause of material effects (Deleuze 1978). An idea has a formal reality, a concrete conscious existence in that it represents something (Deleuze 1978). Affect has no representational quality – it doesn't refer to something else – and is often therefore confused with a feeling. Feelings are actually a byproduct of affect in that they are produced by bodies, and experienced as effects in and on the body after an encounter (Massumi 2002, Thrift 2007:180).

Affect is the mode of thought experienced by a body after that body enters into an encounter with another object or body, but this mode occurs just before conscious thought (Buchanan 1987:79-81). Affect produces transformations in each party to an encounter, shifting both the affective state of each party (either increased joy or increased sadness) but crucially, affects also transform the body's power of acting (Deleuze 1978, 1988). It is in this sense that Deleuze stresses that affect is independent of the receiver-body, yet affect is still dependent on the body in its capacity to promote action. It is precisely the ability to enact or motivate the body in one way or another that makes the study or pursuit of affect worthwhile (Thrift 2007). Affect is only relevant in that it provides an outcome of force. Deleuze (1988) refers to this force as the power

of acting. For example, a positive affect, in that it promotes a happy encounter or pleasant act is often referred to as joy and a negative affect, in that it promotes a harmful exploit or outcome, can be understood as sadness. Moreover, the affect of joy is associated with the active increase in the body's capacity to act and to affect others whilst the affect of sadness leads to a reduction in the body's capacity to act (Deleuze 1988, Thrift 2007: 179-81)

Affect cannot therefore be understood as an idea, as it is a mode of thought or more accurately experience (Thrift 2007). It is considered unconscious and yet is dependent on an idea, a recognition of the affective nature of experience (Deleuze 1978). Affections are the relations observable between bodies because of affect. Affections are the products of affect where we choose to interact or to disengage because of our encounters (Deleuze 1978). If we have a positive encounter we like and we engage or if we have a negative encounter we don't like, we decide to walk away. Effects are also the result of affect in that we experience the effects of our encounters. Our consciousness only understands effects, which are the final outcomes of an encounter (Deleuze 1978). Affects are possible because of these continuous encounters in our daily lives. Affects are not feelings, they are becomings (Deleuze and Guattari 1987).

This focus on becomings, experience and the flow of affect offers a number of insights into the lived experience of the dressed body. Experience and by extension affect, are paramount in the discussion of fashion precisely because what semiotic approaches to the dressed body tend to deny. Indeed, more conventional approaches to understanding fashion have no real way of accommodating this interest in experience and no way of describing how fashion is lived, and what types of affective encounters fashion might make possible. A non-representational approach to fashion offers a way out of this bind.

Conclusion

Applying non-representational theory to the problem of fashion design offers a range of compelling insights. This paper has argued that the current dominance of semiotic and historical approaches in recent debates about fashion necessitates the affirmation of the conceptual framework outlined in non-representational theory. The emphasis provided in non-representational theory on the body, practice, space and affect provides new ways to think about fashion for designers for commentators and critics and this can only have a positive impact for fashion design. I am not convinced that fashion designers are ignorant of these concepts of space, practice, affect and so on. To be honest I think they are an inherent part of the unspoken knowledge acquired through the practice of making fashion. Fashion designers

are just not used to giving a language to these considerations. So in a sense fashion designers are the perfect example of non-representational theory, which valorizes an inarticulate learnt knowledge (see Thrift 1996:7). However practical expertise is not enough and the inability among most fashion designers and critics to clearly articulate these concepts hinders the developmental possibilities available from rigorous discourse and further application of these ideas in practice. These ideas when taken into consideration by fashion designers have the potential to open up their practice to new and innovative techniques resulting in potentially new fashions and new affects. These concepts are intertwining. They include recognition of the entire body in a myriad of spaces and acknowledge the importance of the practical expertise and the affects of the fashion designer, not just the practical and affective aspects of the dressed body.

Encountering dress not only entails a perceived or re-presented idea; it concerns what you are wearing now. Experienced through your entire body, your dressed body mediates the world you inhabit (Entwistle 2000a). You make sense of your world through the practice of getting dressed each day. This productive, porous relationship between dress and your body, where fashion becomes an extension of your body, opens the body up to flows and intensities that are transformative and performative in nature (see Butler 1993; Thrift 2007). This is in stark contrast to conventional notions of fashion which tend to conceive of fashion and dress as a model or map of extensive space around the body. The map is the dressmakers-pattern. Yet what does such an understanding of the extensive space of the dressmakers' pattern miss? It misses the intensive space of the body – the space of the body with no boundaries, existing in multiple types of space.

And so what might happen if we were to extend the edges of the pattern, or if we remove the pattern all together? What might happen if we incorporate intensive space into the extensive space of the dressed body? Critically, designers need to begin taking into consideration the intensities and experiences of the dressed body. Where this approach might lead is anyone's guess.

O'Sullivan provides a glimpse of this exciting future. Consider the following definition of successful art: O'Sullivan (2001:42) argues that effective art "transforms, if only for a moment, our sense of "selves" and our notion of the world". But doesn't great fashion do exactly the same thing? For fashion at its best shifts our sense of identity, our place in the world just as it

transforms the types of encounters we have in the world. Non-representational approaches with their focus on the body and practice, space and affect offer up a more poetic approach to how fashion designers go about their design work, but also to how fashion should be talked about and critiqued. We must consider the lived practical experience of fashion and the types of affective encounters fashion makes possible. This more poetic approach endorsed by non-representational theory holds out the promise of actually expanding our understanding of what it is to be human, to exist, and what we are to become.

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