

Materiality, Method, and Mess.

Object-based Research in Fashion Studies

Bachelor Thesis

Maaïke van Tienhoven

s4849183

22 June 2017

1th reader: Prof. Dr. A. M. Smelik

2th reader: Patricia van Ulzen

Index	Page
Introduction	1
Chapter 1: Object-based Research in Fashion	4
1.1: Jules Prown's Method	4
1.2: Pullbacks of the Method of Object-based Research in Fashion	5
1.3: Object-based Research, Material Culture, and New Materialism	7
Chapter 2: New Materialism: Agency, Assemblage, and Affect	8
2.1: Material Culture and New Materialism	8
2.2: Agency, Assemblage, Affect	9
2.3: Method and Affect: The Research Assemblage	11
Chapter 3: Affective Flow Within the Assemblage of Object-based Research	13
3.1: New Materialist Ontology and Method	13
3.2: Assessing a Case Study as an Assemblage	14
3.3: John Law: Method and Mess	16
3.4: Propositions: Subjective and Messy Method	16
Conclusion	18
Works Cited	20

Introduction

As long as I can remember, I relate deeply to the tactility, the materiality of fashion objects. As a child, I sat within a molehill of assembled leftovers from the fabrics my mother and grandmother had used to sew my dresses, and gifts from neighbours who knew about my preoccupation with textiles. I used a simple needle and thread to make little coats and dresses for my dolls and stuffed animals, adorned with fake fur collars and enormous buttons, that were taken from old shirts my father had worn. Fashion and its materials have always been part of my life, and even after saying goodbye to my old profession of fashion designer, I am still greatly fascinated with the touch and feel of fashion.

I picked object-based research within fashion studies as my focus of interest for this thesis after finding out that there is often little physical contact between the Fashion Studies scholar and the fashion artifact. This, to me, was a strange and slightly unexpected discovery; as a designer, being in close contact with the fashion object is what I do on a daily basis. I would not know how to say anything about a piece of fashion without touching its material, looking at the seams, the lining, the cut, the way in which it is finished. My hands and eyes are constantly working together in close contact with the material, a continual dialogue that in the end results in a fashion piece. Never would it even occur to me that I am governing over the process. Designing is in my experience a to-and-fro, an ongoing exchange between material and designer. Decisions are made and reconsidered, sudden inspirations change the whole process, and sometimes there is no true connection established between all different elements, and the piece will literally fall flat in the sense that it will never be worn. I use the passive tense deliberately, as it is a ‘happening’ (or a ‘becoming’), not a singular subject creating an object in the Aristotelan hylomorphic sense: bringing together “form (*morphe*) and matter (*hyle*)”, where form is imposed by an agent with a particular design in mind, while matter, thus rendered passive and inert, became that which was imposed upon “ (Ingold 92) That all different elements within this process have their own agency, their own effectiveness within the process, is, for me, unquestionable. It is how designing ‘works’. This led me to an interest in theories of materiality, and consequently to my theoretical research question for this thesis: can the practice of Object-based research in Fashion Studies benefit from placing it within the context of New Materialism?

When I did my first course in fashion, I expected an emphasis on the fashion piece and its relations to the wearer and producer within a broader cultural perspective. This was slightly naive, and for a great deal the result of my complete ignorance of the field of fashion studies, cultural studies, and its main endeavors. After getting introduced to the different approaches and theories I

understand now that fashion can be seen not only as a material presence, but also a cultural and social bearer of meaning, or fashion as an immaterial manifestation that is mediated in magazines and increasingly the internet (Woodward and Fischer 4). Then there is fashion as “A coded sensory system of non-verbal communication that aids human interaction in space and time” (Eicher 1). An abstract approach towards fashion can be equally important as a direct engaging with the material object. But as Sophie Woodward writes; “there has been very little methodological engagement with how qualitative methods might help us to understand materials and their properties ...” (360). I decided I wanted to investigate material research methods that were used within the fields of dress history and fashion studies.

When reading up about the use of methods within fashion studies, a common thread can be seen. Most scholarly texts I consulted underline the importance of having different methodological and theoretical approaches available for the study of fashion. Lou Taylor describes the development of fashion studies as an independent discipline as a coming together of several fields of study; “Fashion Studies departments indeed are currently based across departments of art and design history and theory or allied to programs in visual culture, media studies, film studies, gender studies, history, marketing and performance studies, business studies, fashion design, and home economics.” (Taylor HoF 25) Heike Jenss elaborates on the consequences for the use of methods; “The development of cultural studies (See Grosberg 2010) and material culture studies (see Miller 2005) are some of the achievements of [such] scholarly migration and methodological ‘do-it-yourself’ practices. The impact of these two fields- along with many others- opened up new questions and modes of inquiry for the critical study of fashion and dress in the 1990s; for example, by beginning to foreground new interests in the social, cultural, and material practices and relations that are part of the production and consumption of fashion and dress ...” (Jenss 3)

In that light, it is not unsurprising that the question of method comes to the fore; with such diverse backgrounds and disciplines working together to achieve a broad understanding of the practices and functions of dress and fashion, where to start? Taylor describes how her own dress history research “has always been based around the close assessment of the actualities of garments themselves” (23), but if a researcher comes for instance from a training in economics, how is she going to benefit from a material analysis of the fashion artifact, and if there is such a benefit, how would she go about without any knowledge of the specifics of fashion? If the study of fashion “includes both abstract concepts and material objects” (Riello 1) a material approach might not always be the first choice. On the other hand, object-based research can be of use as a supportive

method, as Mida and Kim suggest (195). Many scholars emphasize the need for multi-disciplinary studies in fashion, for instance Woodward, Riello, Granata, and Jentsch. As Granata mentions; “This combination of approaches and methods hopes to integrate the empirical work that characterized early dress studies with a more theorized and multi-disciplinary approach” (Granata 78). With this openness to multi-disciplinarity and the understanding that different theories and methods supplement each other, this only reinforces the need for a practical, ‘user-friendly’ way of analyzing the object of fashion.

Thus, besides my personal view that fashion is in essence a material phenomenon that needs to be studied in its material form, there are more pragmatic reasons to explore object-based research, its history, its use, and the eventual unexpected possibilities it might contain.

In the first chapter I will explain the method of object-based research as devised by the archaeologist Jules Prown. I will then explore some of the reasons why this method is little applied within the field of Fashion Studies. In chapter two I will introduce New Materialism by focusing on three of its main concepts, namely *agency*, *assemblage* and *affect*. I will look into the consequences of the theory for method in general, guided by the thinkings on method, assemblage and affect as proposed by the sociologists Nick Fox and Pam Alldred. In chapter three I will use a case study by dress historians Mida and Kim to closely look at the consequences of thinking about affective flows within research, and shortly discuss a proposition for a “messy” method by sociologist John Law, influenced by ANT, hoping to find a new outlook on Object-based research in fashion that takes into account the consequences of the theoretical insights of New Materialism. In my conclusion I will wrap up all my findings, and I will finish with some recommendations for further inquiry into the possibilities of Object-based research within the field of Fashion Studies.

Chapter 1: Object-based Research in Fashion

In recent years, fashion theorists have been taken by the renewed interest for the material that has arisen after the “material turn” (Woodward, Smelik and Rocamora), the moving away from the semiotic approach that is based on the idea that all knowledge of our world is mediated through language as a system of empty signs, consisting of a signifier and a signified that also lies within language. According to the linguistic theory of de Saussure, “language is a system of mutually related values, in which arbitrary “signifiers” (e.g. words) are linked to equally arbitrary “signifieds” ... to form signs.” The elements within these systems are defined through their relations to other elements. De Saussure suggested that other “systems of significance (e.g. fashion, cookery) might be studied in a similar way ...” (Hebdige 158) This textual approach towards analyzing cultural objects has shaped the study of culture since the late Sixties. With the new interest for the material qualities of the fashion object, the need arose for a research method that gives room for the specific materiality of fashion (Riello, Granata, Woodward).

1.1: Jules Prown's Method

In the 1997 issue of the academic journal *Fashion Theory* the method for object-based research as developed by the archaeologist Jules Prown was reintroduced. In his article “Mind in Matter”, originally published in 1982, he explained a method based on three pillars; first *description*, “what can be observed in the object itself, that is, to external evidence” (Prown 7). Next comes *deduction*, involving “the empathic linking of the material (actual) or represented world of the object with the perceiver’s world of existence and experience” (Prown 8). The third step is *speculation*; using the evidence gathered in the descriptive and deductive stages to formulate hypotheses about the object, its use and meaning (Prown 9, 10). Several scholars have since implemented Prown’s method for analyzing the object of fashion. For instance, Francesca Granata describes how she makes use of it for her Ph.D research on several experimental fashion designers (Granata 71). But for some reason, Object-based research is not often used in Fashion Studies, as Alexandra Palmer notices: “The seemingly old-fashioned museum-based approach of fashion studies, which begins with the description of the object, is a complex and underutilized approach for new scholars ...” (Palmer 268). This could have to do with its reliance on specialized knowledge: “the scholar needs knowledge of sewing technology, fabric types, various weaving techniques, different kinds of trim, cut of fashionable and other dress throughout history and in different parts of the world” (Skov and Riegels Melchior 10). A more detailed research on the method reveals other issues that could be of influence.

1.2: Pullbacks of the Method of Object-based Research in Fashion

I will try to locate some of the practical hindrances that influence Object-based research by dividing them into three categories; the first one concerning the specific characteristics of the academic world; the second being a reliance on image within the study of fashion; and the third one being the inherent circuitousness of the object-based approach.

Object-based research has its roots in academic disciplines like archaeology, anthropology, museology and ethnography, fields of study that historically have placed great emphasis on the importance of the material object, as it is, according to Prown, sometimes the only available direct source of knowledge: “In certain instances ... artifacts constitute the only surviving evidence, so there is little choice to use them as best as one can to determine cultural values as well as historical facts” (Prown 5).

Another issue that could play a role is the invisible but strong hierarchy of academic fields. The fashion scholar Lou Taylor writes: “there is a strong feeling within the dress history profession that their expertise and indeed their whole field has still not been properly acknowledged in ‘academic’ circles” (Study of Dress History 3). Yuniya Kawamura notes: “... there was and still is a hierarchy among different disciplines; some disciplines have a higher status with more prestige than others in academia, and thus have more research funding opportunities” (92). According to Kawamura, what exacerbates this devaluing of Object-based research is the issue of gender.

The work of many important female dress historians like Anne Buck, Doris Langley-Moore, and Janet Arnold, is spirited away into obscurity, partly as the result of what Taylor calls the granting of “analytical research of the manufacture and function of ethnographic garments ... only a low place in the hierarchical ranking of research interests...” (*Establishing Dress History* 67). Kawamura points out that “when the method is mostly adopted by female researchers, the method in itself begins to lose its value, and object-based approaches were often taken by female historians ...” (Kawamura 92).

Furthermore, there is a very practical reason for object-based research to have little established grounds within fashion research. For the fashion researcher, there is an abundance of images available. Taylor describes how renowned fashion historians like for instance James Laver, Mary Newton, and Aileen Ribeiro have refined the skilled process of interpreting clothing through paintings, using images as primary sources, thus setting a certain standard (Study of Dress History 116, 117). Since the first illustrated fashion magazines were published in the 18th century the stream of images has only become bigger, culminating in a true explosion with the expansion of internet use. Complete archives of important fashion museums are now accessible online, taking away the need to visit a museum in person, and going through the lengthy process of requesting an

object from a far way storage facility. Access to the “real” fashion object can be limited; the objects are vulnerable, and most of the time they are safely stored away in the depots of museums.

Combined with the prevalence of semiotic analysis as a method that is both convenient and effective for the analysis of image it is no wonder that object-based research became somewhat underutilized: “The descriptive methodology has fallen out of academic fashion ... despite the urging of scholars such as Prown, who wrote that clothing “promises to be a particularly rich vein for material culture studies, [even though] to date little significant work has been done with it.” (1982: 13)” (Palmer 269).

Closely linked to this is the fact that Object-based research is mainly used within the fields of museology and dress history, with a focus on the gathering of data for “description, historical research, scientific dating and characterization” (Pearce 5). Skov and Riegels Melchior write “Object-based research [in fashion] is characterized by description and documentation. Emerging predominantly out of the work of museum curators, its aim is to identify, register, and classify individual garments typically of historical origin (Skov and Riegels Melchior 10). The method of Object-based research is simply not made to analyze fashion in a way that fits into the program of Fashion Studies, which encompasses “identity, materiality, dress history, technology, and globalization, among others” (Black, De La Haye, Entwistle, Rocamora, Root and Thomas 1).

The last factor I want to mention is pointed out by those who apply object-based research; the sheer amount of often detailed evidence that is the result of the deductive and speculative steps suggested by Prown. Valerie Steele noted that many of her students had difficulties with the process, and often ended their essays with “a string of unanswered questions” (331). To use object-based research in fashion in a way that is viable, and expands knowledge instead of only procuring complicating facts and details is a challenge, and relies for a great deal on the expertise and the restraint of the researcher. Prown warns for the gathering of too much detailed information, “to the point of losing an immediate sense of dimension in a welter of numbers.” (8). Taylor mentions how historians Fine and Leopold accuse the “descriptive ‘catalogue’ tradition of costume history, which typically charts in minute detail over the course of several centuries the addition or deletion of every flounce, pleat, button and bow, worn by every class on every occasion” (qtd. in *Study of Dress History* 3).

When looking at the lists that are used for the analysis of dress in for instance *The Dress Detective* (Mida and Kim) it is not surprising that the complaint of an overabundance of detailed data has arisen. To carry out a successful material analysis of an item of clothing the researcher needs to address the bias that Prown sees as a threat to a proper analysis: the fact that the researcher always is pervaded by “the beliefs of our own social groups -nation, locality, class, religion,

politics, occupation, gender, age, race, ethnicity- beliefs in the form of assumptions we make unconsciously”. To circumvent this problem Prown proposes an awareness of “one's own cultural bias” (5). Moreover, he suggests that the study of objects in itself prevents an all too great involvement in the cultural preconceptions of the analyst, as we engage with the object through our senses, and not with our mind, which he sees as “the seat of our cultural biases” (6). Whether this is a realistic expectation remains to be seen. The common notion that we should struggle against our subjectivity in order to obtain greater objectivity (Prown 4) is something I will come back to in the chapter on method.

1.3: Object-based Research, Material Culture, and New Materialism

Object-based research has its roots within the study of Material Culture as a program of research, involving the approaches of, amongst others, archaeology, sociology, cultural geography, anthropology, and social and cultural history (Prown 10). According to Prown, Material Culture has as a basic premise the idea that “objects made or modified by man reflect ...the beliefs of individuals who made, commissioned, purchased or used them, and by extension the beliefs of the larger society to which they belonged” (1) The goal of studying these objects is to reach a better understanding of culture in general (1,2). Since the publication of his article in 1982, the interest in materiality has expanded, and it has included more disciplines. The New Materialism as described by for instance Smelik, Dolphijn and Van Der Tuin, and Woodward has a much broader target than the analyzing of material objects to gain a more complete knowledge of human culture. The discussion has been extended to fundamental philosophical debates; New Materialism questions the Cartesian divide between subject and object, the Kantian notion of the human subject being the 'Master of the Universe', the idea that only humans have agency, and the idea that the world is structured through vertical hierarchies of power (Smelik, Dolphijn and van der Tuin, Deleuze and Guattari).

In this chapter, I have discussed here several of the practical challenges that interfere with the use of object-based research within the field of Fashion Studies, and hinted upon a new direction within the way objects are studied. I believe that these new insights and propositions have consequences for how method is looked upon, devised, and used. In the next chapter I will outline three of the prominent concepts within New Materialism and Material Culture, and how they could influence the method of Object-based research in fashion.

Chapter 2: New Materialism: Agency, Assemblage, and Affect

In this chapter I will discuss New Materialism, by focusing on three of its much used concepts; agency, assemblage and affect. I will start out with describing Material Culture and New Materialism in short, and explaining why I make a difference between the two. Consequently, I will present different viewpoints on agency, assemblage and affect as given by scholars from disciplines as diverse as feminism, philosophy, and archaeology. I will then touch upon the consequences of these new views on the way the world is perceived, and its subsequent repercussions for research methods. I will end the chapter with describing how sociologist Nick Fox and Pam Alldred integrate New Materiality in their discussion on social research as an assemblage.

2.1: Material Culture and New Materialism

The research into Material Culture as it emerged from anthropology, sociology, and archaeology (Miller, Tilley, Appadurai, Latour) is described by Sophie Woodward as attesting “to the centrality of materials and materiality in the constitution of social relations” (359). This approach is more related to a practice of research than the more philosophical propositions of New Materialism. Fox and Alldred describe the onset of New Materialism as follows: “In part, the current 'turn to matter' has been informed by post-structuralist, feminist, post-colonialist and queer theories, which rejected economic and structuralist determinism as inadequate satisfactorily to critique patriarchy, rationalism, science and modernism” (Fox and Alldred 2.1). Examples of scholars who have taken these new directions are for instance Karen Barad, Mario DeLanda, Rosi Braidotti, Donna Haraway, and Brian Massumi. (Dolphijn and Van Der Tuin, Fox and Alldred). In Material Culture on the other hand, “material properties of things are central to understanding the sensual, tactile, material and embodied ways in which social lives are lived and experienced” (Woodward 359). For that reason I will make a difference between Material Culture and New Materialism, even if these approaches have much in common, and often use the same terms and concepts. For the evaluation of Object-based research as a method in Fashion Studies, I will make use more of the tenets of new Materialism than those of Material Culture, as New Materialism as an ontological alternative has “practical implications for social research methodology and methods” (Fox and Alldred 1.2). In the next paragraphs I will cover three concepts that are vital to both New Materialism as Material Culture, namely *agency*, *assemblage*, and *affect*.

2.2: Agency, Assemblage, Affect

Historically, agency has been described as a specifically human characteristic; only thinking humans have the ability to change the course of events in the world, the objects, organic and inorganic matter that surround them are inert. According to Knappett and Malafouris, agency is often confused with *psychological* agency, or intentionality. They argue that agency doesn't have to be seen in this way: "agency need not be coterminous with intentionality, which releases nonhumans into the process of agency" (Knappett and Malafouris xii). But there is a link between non-human agency and human intentionality in the sense that they are interconnected; "...agency and intentionality should be understood as distributed, emergent and interactive phenomena rather than as subjective experiences" (Knappett and Malafouris xiv). The intentionality of the human subject is directly related to the objects that surround her. Bruno Latour explains the notion of object agency as follows: "If action is limited to what intentional, meaningful humans do, it is hard to see how a hammer, a basket (...), or a tag could act (...)", but we should focus on those things that make a difference "in the course of some other agent's action" (Latour 71). In his book *How Things Shape the Mind*, Malafouris goes a step further, and proposes a theory of cognition that is based on the premise that human cognition is directly shaped by objects; it cannot develop without engaging with material objects; "brains, bodies, and things play equal roles in the drama of human cognitive becoming" (Malafouris 2). For the archaeologist Ian Hodder, agency is "simply the ever-present force of things: the life force of humans and all organic things, and the forces of attraction, repulsion, etc. of all material things and their interactions" (Hodder 215). Seen in this light, agency doesn't presuppose an intelligent force, it simply evolves as a process, a point of view he shares with the feminist theorist Karen Barad, who states: "agency is about response-ability, about the possibilities of mutual response ... agency is about possibilities for worldly re-configurings. This means agency is not something "possessed by humans, or non-humans for that matter" (Dolphijn and Van Der Tuin 54).

The idea that agency is distributed within a network, or *assemblage*, has its roots in the philosophy of Deleuze and Guattari. Deleuze describes the assemblage as follows: "What is an assemblage? It is a multiplicity which is made up of many heterogeneous terms and which establishes liaisons, relations between them, across ages, sexes and reigns—different natures. Thus, the assemblage's only unity is that of co-functioning: it is symbiosis, a "sympathy" " (Deleuze and Guattari 69). The sociologist and philosopher Bruno Latour uses this concept of the assemblage in his Actor-Network Theory. Sophie Woodward and Tim Miller summarize: "ANT rejects the ontological splitting of materiality and meaning, and the prioritizing of meaning, instead materials and things are taken to be a pivotal part of the assemblages that come to constitute the social

(Latour, 2005)” (Woodward and Miller). The political scientist Jane Bennett describes the assemblage as follows: “Assemblages are ad hoc groupings of diverse elements, of vibrant materials of all sorts” (Bennett 23). There is no hierarchical order in them, and their properties are emergent, in process, rather than static (Bennett 24). To return to Deleuze and Guattari, the world is an infinite and intricate network of assemblages, a horizontal, non-hierarchical conglomerate of things and beings in process.

Affect is related to agency. Whereas Bennett describes agency as “effectivity of non-human or not quite human things” (Bennett ix), she interprets affect as a process within the assemblage: “Organic and inorganic bodies, natural and cultural objects ... all are affective. They have the capacity for “activity and responsiveness” (Bennett xii). Deleuze and Guattari specify affect as follows: “We know nothing about a body until we know what it can do, in other words, what its affects are, how they can or cannot enter into composition with other affects, with the affects of another body ... These affects circulate and are transformed within the assemblage” (Deleuze and Guattari 257). In other words, affect makes possible that there is movement, change, within the assemblage. Affect is, as Bennett notes, a catalyst. Whereas agency points to the capacity for having an effect within the world, affect is the catalyst for the process of becoming, or as Deleuze and Guattari simply write: “Affects are becomings” (Deleuze and Guattari 256). Brian Massumi refers to the Spinozan origin of affect, pointing out that for Spinoza, affect is the “capacity to enter in relations of movement and rest” (Massumi 16).

When looking at agency, the assemblage, and affect, it becomes clear that within the scope of New Materialism, the common dualisms like subject-object, mind-matter are undermined. It shatters the traditional Cartesian divide between the rational, thinking subject and the mute and inert object. Ian Hodder writes about the consequences of Latour’s theory: “The aim of ... Actor Network Theory (ANT), is to focus on relationality rather than on apparent fixed and essential dualisms such as truth and falsehood, agency and structure, human and non-human, before and after, knowledge and power, context and content, materiality and sociality, activity and passivity. It is not that there are no such divisions but that the distinctions are effects or outcomes” (Hodder 91). Dolphijn and Van Der Tuin summarize the premises of New Materialism while focusing on affect and agency: “Not primarily interested in representation, signification, and disciplinarity, new materialism is fascinated by affect, force, and movement as it travels in all directions. It searches not for the objectivity of things in themselves but for an objectivity of actualization and realization. It searches for how matter comes into agential realism, how matter is materialized in it. ... New Materialism argues that we know nothing of the (social) body until we know what it can do” (113). According to sociologists Fox and Alldred, “these foundational questions about reality affect what

can be said about the social world, and define the relationship between researcher and researched, and the status of data gathered in empirical studies” (Fox and Alldred 1.2). This has consequences for the way in which research and method are used (*idem*), which I will evaluate in the next paragraph.

2.3: Method and Affect: The Research Assemblage

Fox and Alldred describe New Materialism as an alternative ontology that has implications for epistemology, or how things can be known, by “displacing the human researcher/observer from her/his central position (and hence as key arbiter) in the interaction between the world of events and the processes of research” (1.3). This means that what they call the ‘realist’ position, which aspires to a “knowable reality independent of human concepts” (1.2) loses ground. Following Deleuze and Guattari, they propose to look at research as a machine. Within the assemblage as a network of relations, these relations “develop in unpredictable ways around actions and events, ... , and work like 'machines' (Deleuze and Guattari 4) that do something, produce something” (Fox and Alldred 2.4). Like physical machines that have been devised to work in a certain way and produce certain outputs, Fox and Alldred regard the relations within “a research-assemblage as engineered to achieve their objectives as a consequence of the particular affective flows between event, instruments and researchers that a methodology or method requires” (3.3).

Now what does this mean? A research assemblage could be constituted of for instance a particular method, an object or event that is researched, an institution where the research takes place, a researcher that collects data on the object, a body of theoretical knowledge, policies that regulate a discipline, and so forth. Between all these elements an affective flow exists; the relations are in a constant flux.

According to Fox and Alldred, research assemblages comprise few relations and affect, in contrast to the complexity of what they call the ‘spontaneous’ assemblages of life. This means that the affective flows within the assemblage can be assessed and picked apart: “it will be possible to assess how a change of data collection or analysis method, or of design (for instance, from survey to ethnography) alters the affective flow in the research-assemblage, and hence what kind of 'knowledge' it produces” (3.4). If it is possible to gain insight into the processes that shape how a research machine produces knowledge, it becomes possible to ‘re-engineer’ the affects in research machines in order to alter the way in which they perform (3.4). This point is essential for the answering of my research question; can the practice of Object-based research in Fashion Studies benefit from placing it within the context of New Materialism?

In this chapter I shortly described Material Culture, New Materialism, and the difference between the two. I then gave an overview of three concepts that are essential to understand the basic assumptions within these two fields. I then used the propositions by Fox and Alldred to have a closer look at the research assemblage, and its affective flows. I concluded by underlining the importance of these views on method inspired by New Materialism, to assess and possibly alter the affective flows within the assemblage of Object-based research in Fashion Studies. The objective of this endeavor is tackling the issues with the method I described in Chapter 1. In the next chapter I will use a case study by Mida and Kim to find out whether the theory on method by Fox and Alldred is of help to unpick the assemblage of Object-based research.

Chapter 3: Affective Flow Within the Assemblage of Object-based Research

There is some consensus over the course the use of method within fashion research should take, as many scholars propagate multi-disciplinary tactics as the way to move forward. (Granata, Woodward, Jenss, Kawamura). In this chapter I want to explore what the New Materialist ontology could mean for a research practice, by investigating two proposals to look at method that make use of the New Materialist concepts of assemblage and affect. First, I want to explore whether the insights from Fox and Alldred I discussed in the previous chapter could be used to assess Object-based research. Secondly, I will discuss some ideas on method by the sociologist John Law.

3.1: New Materialist Ontology and Method

I mentioned in chapter two that the tenets of New Materialism create a break with the subject-object divide, and with the idea that there is a hierarchy in science that places the subject above the object. These ontological stances have practical implications for “research methodology and methods” (Fox and Alldred 1.2). Non-hierarchical, non-anthropocentric thinking is not new; one of the seminal texts that had a great influence on the theories and ideas of New Materialism, namely *A Thousand Plateaus* by Deleuze and Guattari, was first published in 1987. Although the question of method is addressed within the field of fashion studies by several scholars over a reasonable period of time, starting with the special issue of the journal *Fashion Theory* dealing with method in 1997, a series of articles over the years (Woodward, Riello, Granata) and the recent publishing of books dedicated to the question of method in Fashion Studies (Kawamura, Jenss) a discussion on the fundamental issues of method is rare. To evaluate the suggestions by Fox and Alldred concerning method I will use a case study from the book *The Dress Detective* by dress historians Ingrid Mida and Alexandra Kim.

Mida and Kim employ the method for material analysis as devised by Jules Prown, with some slight moderations. Where Prown uses the terms *description*, *deduction* and then *speculation*, Mida and Kim use *observation*, *reflection* and *interpretation* to describe the different phase of the analysis. Their first step, observation, is similar to Prown’s deduction phase, and focuses on the obtaining and recording of factual evidence (Mida and Kim 28). The second phase in their translation of Prown’s method is reflection; “considering embodied experience and contextual material” (27). It is based on a personal, sensory engaging with the fashion object. Like Prown, they emphasize the importance of being conscious of personal or cultural biases in this phase. The third step is interpretation. It concerns “the synthesizing of descriptive information with the emotive and sensory information gathered in the deductive phase, into a hypothesis that explains the

evidence at hand” (31). In Prown’s method, this phase is called speculation. To analyze their case study I will use the theory I described in the second chapter.

3.2: Assessing a Case Study as an Assemblage

The proposition made by Fox and Alldred, namely that it is possible to assess method as a “machine-assemblage” which produces “a textual or other output that will form the research ‘knowledge’” (4.2) allows for a New Materialist way of looking at this specific method. To do so, I will use a case study by Mida and Kim. In the book *The Dress Detective*, they present as a case study the material analysis of a red velvet jacket by Christian Dior. They start off with Prown’s *observation/description* part of the analysis by writing down in great detail the material characteristics of the jacket; “The front panels of the jacket are constructed from single pieces of fabric, folded to create a peplum effect to the lower edge, with no front waist seam” (184). Construction of the jacket, inside and out, is discussed in great detail. Measurements of center back, bust and waist are included in the description, as well as a mentioning of the textiles and labels used, and a short description of signs of use and wear (188). The descriptive phase comes down to a rather dry enumeration of data. This brings into mind the remark by Valery Steele about her students ending up with stacks of detailed facts but “a string of unanswered questions” (331). Looking at the case study as a machine-assemblage in the way Fox and Alldred have described might give some indication on why it is that the lists of facts gathered in the descriptive phase often feel rather indiscriminate and random. In their terms, this descriptive phase would qualify as a research-assemblage with little affective capacity, leading to a research process that “becomes a machine whose outputs are trivial or anodyne rather than analytical; descriptive or journalistic rather than critical” (4.5). The lack of affect is what causes the machine-assemblage to falter; there is no real knowledge produced. The next stage of the analysis however might show something different.

In the reflection phase, Mida and Kim note down an overall impression of “luxuriousness, wealth and prestige” (190). They discuss the fabric and the color; the deep red is associated with expense, an extra warp in the weave of the velvet makes the fabric very expensive. Shape is mentioned; the hourglass figure is “suggestive of ideals of feminine beauty” (190). The reflection phase is kept short, and does not contain examples of the personal, sensory engagement that Mida and Kim as well as Prown suggested. In their article, Fox and Alldred specifically describe the Material Culture analysis as an assemblage which produces the evaluation of an artifact. The affective flow within the assemblage “causes the organizing and interpretation of material culture”, and the unwanted effect this has is the imposing of “cultural meanings on selected cultural

artefacts” (5.13). The meanings are not derived from the artifact, but imbued on them.

This is what I felt while reading the case study of the Dior jacket. Prown’s implicit advice to stay close to the object is deserted for a seemingly random set of reflections. Mida and Kim convey the impression that they deny the object its agency by devising a theoretical strategy that reflects *their* interests, instead of engaging with the fashion object in a more subjective way. They miss out on a possibility to produce knowledge through intersubjectivity, an option that Prown is very aware of: “These subjective reactions ... tend to be significant to the extent that they are generally shared. They point the way to specific insights when the analyst identifies the elements noted in the descriptive stage that have precipitated them” (Prown 9). The observation in itself may not be of great interest, but it can lead to an unanticipated hypothesis in combination with the other outcomes of the analysis, or with data gathered on the same object by a different researcher.

In the interpretation part of the case study by Mida and Kim, several theoretical concepts are connected to the data acquired in the first two steps. Whereas Prown suggests that theory and hypothesis are formed as the result of “internal evidence of the object itself” and the subsequent “turning those data over in one’s mind, developing theories that might explain the various effects observed and felt” (Prown 10), the extensive list of concepts and theories that Mida and Kim come up with seems to be superimposed on the object, just in the way Fox and Alldred described. Generating a better flow of affect within the research-assemblage could possibly obviate this shortcoming. According to them, this could be realized by altering the research design, using a powerful analytical ‘machine’, or a stronger theoretical basis (4.5). How this would look in practice they do not mention, as their focus lies on “imposing the materialist ontology of assemblages and affects to reverse engineer the machine and disclose the affective flows that make it work” (5.1).

Analysing the case study as a research assemblage in the way Fox and Alldred suggest shows that affective flow does have influence within the assemblage, resulting in an outcome that could be seen as slightly haphazard, privileging the researcher’s account (Fox and Alldred 4.5) Strengthening the affective flow within the assemblage could also be attained by using a greater emphasis on subjective interpretation; Prown’s emphasis on an unbiased, multi-sensory engaging with the material object may have been inspired by his wish to “circumvent the investigators own assumptions” (Chong Kwan 5), it also seems to focus more on the material agency of the fashion object, and the non-hierarchical nature of the relations within the assemblage (Bennett, Latour).

3.3: John Law: Method and Mess

Another interesting take on method that has its roots in a New Materialist approach, in this case ANT, could help to reinvigorate the practice of object-based research in fashion and create more affective flow within the research assemblage, namely the musings on method by John Law. Law is a professor in sociology who has been writing on Actor-Network-Theory since the early Nineties. He is concerned with broadening method, to make it more imaginative, to try to get rid of “the obsession with clarity, with specificity, and with the definite” (2) that permeates current practices in social studies and science. In his article “Making a Mess with Method” he writes:

“I am interested in the process of knowing mess. I’m interested, in particular, in methodologies for knowing mess. My intuition, to say it quickly, is that the world is largely messy. It is also that contemporary social science methods are hopelessly bad at knowing that mess. Indeed it is that dominant approaches to method work with some success to repress the very possibility of mess” (2).

Law assesses method as “always more or less unruly assemblages” (11). His call for a ‘messy’ research style is a proposition, not an attack on current methodological practices. He sees objectivity as a fiction; even if the researcher is devoted to the highest possible degree of objectivity, this is an epistemological and ontological impossibility, although this is not readily acknowledged within the field of science (3). His point is not that mess is a choice, but that it is a reality the researcher has to deal with. Reality is messy, so this messiness will some way or another, creep into the research. His question is what will happen if the researcher accepts this mess: finding ways of living with and knowing confusion, and of imagining methods that live ... with disconcertment” (3).

3.4: Propositions: Subjective and Messy Method

Both Law and Fox and Alldred are concerned with method from a New Materialist perspective. Fox and Alldred relate to the ontological approach of New materialism, whereas Law is versed in ANT. What connects their views is an understanding of research as an assemblage, and the realization that within a non-realist approach towards doing science it is necessary to be very aware of the processes at stake, of the affective flows within the research assemblage (Fox and Alldred), and to be aware of the limits to an ‘objective’ approach (Law).

What this could mean for the development of a more ‘materialist’ practice of Object-based research in fashion is for instance a greater emphasis on subjectivity, and making use of intersubjectivity as a way to generate knowledge. Law gives an interesting example of doing

research based on a very subjective description of as many elements within the assemblage of research as possible, using a literary technique. His suggestion is that while it may not be possible to create a ‘true account’ of a reality that is “definite and singular” (11), it is feasible to at least try to gather data in a way that does justice to the messiness of reality by writing an “allegory” that seeks to represent part of this mess (Law 10).

In my opinion, the benefit of relating of Object-based research to the concepts and ideas of New Materialism lies in allowing for a more direct and personal engaging with the object by the researcher. Jules Prown suggests this possibility, even encourages it as part of the deduction phase of his method. If it is not possible to handle the object of research, we can still imagine what it would feel like if we did; “If the object is not accessible then these things [engaging with the object in a sensory way] must be done imaginatively and empathetically” (Prown 9).

If we let go of the notion that we have to be as objective as humanly possible in order to come up with data that are of use, we might find other results than just a mass of dry facts and data. This asks for an unconventional, “messy” approach, that does not shy away from great subjectivity. As this thesis only leaves room for a preliminary research into the issues that hinder Object-based research, and the possible benefits of a New materialist way of looking at and devising method, designing and testing such a subjective, messy, or maybe even literary approach will have to wait for now.

I will now conclude my thesis by summarizing the finds from the previous chapters, and end with some recommendations that could be of help to place Object-based research within Fashion Studies firmly within the concepts of New Materialism and Material Culture, the goal being the developing of a method that is practical and productive.

Conclusion

In the first chapter of this thesis I evaluated several of the issues that can explain why the practice of Object-based research in Fashion Studies is only sparsely used (Taylor, Woodward). As contributing factors to this situation I mentioned specific characteristics of the academic world, for instance hierarchy of academic fields and questions of gender that according to some, play a role in placing Object-based research on a lower rank than for instance more theoretical approaches to fashion that focus on its *immateriality* (Woodward and Fisher 4). I also mentioned several practical reasons for the method to be relatively seldom used, from the difficulties to engage with well-protected and conserved fashion artifacts that are stored away in museum archives, to the abundant flow of images that are readily available, thus making a semiotic analysis of fashion images more accessible than the material analysis of the object. I then moved on to explain some difficulties that reside within the method itself; the “gathering of too much detailed information” (Prown 8), and the pitfalls of the cultural and personal bias of the researcher (5).

The next chapter focused on Material Culture and New Materialism, describing its main tenets by exploring the terms agency, assemblage, and affect. I then discussed the propositions on assessing method by adopts the ontology of New Materialism as devised by the sociologists Nick Fox and Pam Alldred. This chapter formed the background to move on to the investigation of a case study that makes use of Object-based research in fashion in Chapter 3, namely an example from Mida and Kim’s *The Dress Detective*. This examination brought to light an internal issue within Object-based research that Fox and Alldred would describe as a lack of affective flow within the research assemblage, resulting in the production of factual data with little meaning (4.5). To strengthen the affective flow within the research assemblage I proposed a deliberate emphasis on subjectivity, in order to deal with the unwanted randomness that can color the outcomes of an Object-based analysis. I then looked into the recommendations on method by John Law, who advocates for a thorough awareness of the inherent ‘messiness’ of reality, and its consequences for doing research. His scenario for a method that makes use of an allegorical, literary description of the object or event that is researched could be promising, but it needs to be tried using a case study. For that, the range of this thesis is too limited. A greater focus on the agency of the fashion object, its ability to make a difference “in the course of some other agent’s action” (Latour 71) opens up another way of looking at the fashion object that I have not mentioned in this thesis, but which is interesting enough to explore as another possible vantage point. Joanne Entwistle’s assumption that fashion is an “embodied and situated practice” (138) is based on the notion that fashion is foremost a bodily experience; dress “forms part of our epidermis -it lies on the boundary between

self and other” (138). The way she describes understanding of the relation between dress and body by acknowledging “the very private and visceral nature of dress which imposes itself on our experience of the body’ (138) leads to recognizing the agency of the fashion object. We are constantly in close bodily contact with dress, but it also imposes its agency upon us, by for instance constraining our movements, or changing the way we behave (Miller). Applying this theory in method could for instance take shape in researching dress on the body, an option that might be possible in the case of relatively modern or contemporary objects of fashion. Due to the background of Object-based research as a practice often used within the field of dress history and museology (Skov and Riegels Melchior) this possibility has not been used much, as the historical objects mostly are too vulnerable.

I started writing his thesis to acquire a greater understanding of Object-based research in Fashion Studies, and the consequences of placing the method within the context of New Materialism. The next step will be testing my findings on a case study, a project I look forward to develop in the next year.

Works Cited:

- Appadurai, Arjun, ed. *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986. Print.
- Barad, Karen. *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2007. Print.
- Bennett, Jane. *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2010. Print.
- Braidotti, Rosi. *Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2004. Print.
- Chong Kwan, Sara. "Drawing on Jules Prown's Material Culture Method of Object Analysis to Investigate Sensory Engagement with Everyday Dress." Ed. Rachel Lifter. *Working Papers in Fashion Studies 2*. London: London College of Fashion, 2012. *Academia*. Web. 24 March 2017.
- DeLanda, Mario. *A New Philosophy of Society: Assemblage Theory and Social Complexity*. London and New York: Continuum, 2006. Print.
- Deleuze, Gilles, and Félix Guattari. *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. London: Bloomsbury, 2004. Print.
- Deleuze, Gilles, Claire Parnet, and Gilles Deleuze. *Dialogues II*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2002. Print.
- Dolphijn, Rick, and Iris van der Tuin, ed. *New Materialism: Interviews & Cartographies*. Ann Arbor: Open Humanities Press, 2012. Print.
- Entwistle, Joanne. "The Dressed Body." *The Fashion Reader*. Ed. Linda Welters & Abby Lillethun. 2nd ed. Oxford: Berg, 2011. pp. 139-149.
- Fox, Nick J., and Pam Alldred. "Inside the Research-Assemblage: New Materialism and the Micropolitics of Social Inquiry." *Sociological Research Online*. 20.2 (2015): n.pag. Web. 12 June 2017
- Granata, Francesca. "Fashion Studies In-between: A Methodological Case Study and an Inquiry I into the State of Fashion Studies." *Fashion Theory* 16:1 (2012): pp. 67-82. Web. 22 February 2017.
- Haraway, Donna. 2008. *When Species Meet*. Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 2008. Print.
- Hebdige, Dick. *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*. London: Routledge, 1991. Print.

- Hodder, Ian. *Entangled, an Archaeology of the Relationships between Humans and Things*. Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012. print.
- Ingold, Tim. "The Textility of Making." *Cambridge Journal of Economics*. 34.1 (2010): pp. 91-102
- Jenss, Heike, Ed. *Fashion Studies: Research Methods, Sites and Practices*. London: Bloomsbury, 2016. Print.
- Kawamura, Yuniya. *Doing Research in Fashion and Dress: An Introduction to Qualitative Methods*. London: Berg Publishers, 2011.
- Knappett, Carl, and Lambros Malafouris. *Material Agency: Towards a Non-Anthropocentric Approach*. Berlin: Springer, 2008. Print.
- Latour, B. [1991]. *We Have Never Been Modern*. Trans. C. Porter. London: Prentice Hall, 1993. Print.
- Law, John. "Making a Mess with Method." *The Sage Handbook of Social Science Methodology*. Ed. W. Outhwaite and S. P. Turner. London: Sage, 2007. pp.595-606.
- Malafouris, Lambros. *How Things Shape the Mind, a Theory of Material Engagement*. Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 2013.
- Massumi, Brian. *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2002. Print.
- Mida, Ingrid, and Alexandra Kim. *The Dress Detective: A Practical Guide to Object-Based Research in Fashion*. London: Bloomsbury, 2015.
- Miller, Daniel. *Stuff*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2010. Print.
- Prown, Jules. "Mind in Matter: An Introduction to Material Culture Theory and Method." *Wintherthur Portfolio* 17:1 (1982): 1-19. Web. 25 January 2017.
- Riello, Giorgio. "The Object of Fashion: Methodological Approaches to the History of Fashion." *Journal of Aesthetics and Culture*, 3.1 (2011): n. pag. Web. 25 January 2017.
- Palmer, Alexandra. "Looking at Fashion: The Material Object as Subject." *The Fashion Handbook*. Ed. Sandy Black, Amy de la Haye, Joanne Entwistle, Agnès Rocamora, Regina A. Root, and Helen Thomas. London: Bloomsbury 2017. Print.
- Rocamora, Agnès, and Anneke Smelik, ed. *Thinking Through Fashion*. London: I.B. Tauris, 2016. Print.
- Skov, Lise, and Marie Riegels Melchior. "Research Approaches to the Study of Dress and Fashion." *Creative Encounters Working Papers*. 19 (2008): pp. 1-18. Web. 30 May 2017. 2006.
- Smelik, Anneke. "New Materialisms: A Theoretical Framework for Fashion in the Age of Technological Innovation." Forthcoming.

- Steele, Valerie. "A Museum of Fashion is More Than a Clothes-bag." *Fashion Theory* 2.4 (1998): 327-335. Print.
- Taylor, Lou. *Establishing Dress History*. Manchester U.K: Manchester University Press, 2004. Print.
- Taylor, Lou. *The Study of Dress History*. Manchester U.K: Manchester University Press, 2002. Print.
- Woodward, Sophie. "Object Interviews, Material Imaginings and 'Unsettling' Methods: I Interdisciplinary Approaches to Understanding Materials and Material Culture." *Qualitative Research* 16:4 (2016): pp. 59-374. Web. 22 February 2017.
- Woodward, Sophie, and Tom Fisher. "Fashioning Through Materials: Material Culture, Materiality and Processes of Materialization". *Critical Studies in Fashion & Beauty*. Vol. 5, Nr. 1, (2014): pp. 3-23