towards a common space for research in fashion

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Abstract

This paper aims to identify the characteristics of a future fashion space for research. Not so much future as an imminent space where various scholars and disciplines focusing on fashion can understand each other, and also come to new research ideas and projects. The binary distinctions between creative and non-creative have found their way into academic thinking: left and right brain, visual and textual reporting, quantitative and qualitative; these dichotomies tend to stereotype research approaches. However, the future spaces of fashion must demolish this world view to account for the convergence of designers and marketers, theory and practice, digital and physical. Within the converged space, access, process and content form the essential elements. The content will increasingly be drawn from existing and new disciplines, sub-disciplines or maybe trans-disciplines. The processes will be driven by methodologies and particularly the critical development of methodologies from different disciplines. These diverse scholars however should share a language; that is where we intend to contribute. To follow up on Lipovetsky's democratising power of fashion, in the future fashion space there are no boundaries. We propose a framework for methodological pluralism which foregrounds triangulation and hermeneutics. Triangulation provides the measurement instruments that must be formulated in an objective or neutral way for replicability that combine with the reflection on one's own influence on results. These quite fundamental heuristics can constitute the foundations of the new 'rules' for research and project formulation in fashion.

Keywords: fashion, methodology, epistemology, interpretivism

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1. Introduction

During the past decade, the phenomenon of fashion has gained academic ground. This is evident not only from the proliferation of fashion events - fashion weeks, shows and new places of fashion - but also from the increasing number of conferences, academic journals and articles in mainstream journals dedicated to fashion. Publishers such as Berg and Intellect have been particularly active in this respect, providing outlets for academic studies of fashion in popular culture and through new titles, such as the 'International Journal of Fashion Studies' or 'Fashion, Industry and Education' that recognise the increasingly global dimension of fashion. These trends are not coincidental. The attention given to everything fashionable has combined with an indeterminacy as to what exactly is implied in the realm of fashion studies.

Attending academic fashion-related events can at times be an unusually mixed experience given the very diverse backgrounds of scholars – as witnessed in the journal titles – sharing their ideas and research. That frustration, or at least sense of unease is due to the fact that there seems to be little consensus regarding what is to be considered 'good' research, and what is not. More precisely these concerns arise for the following reasons:

- Ideology is presented as science. Sometimes there seems to be more focus and discussion on 'what should happen' rather than 'how does it work', issues. This tends to be evident for instance in discussions about sustainability and corporate responsibility.
- The problem of visualising, and research as 'showing' for the sake of showing or at worst showing off. Although research must have been undertaken, it is often unclear what exactly the question is, and the relevance. This kind of research is mostly ostentative, with no attempt to any theorising or any formulation of a nomological framework. A number of research approaches have contributed to this situation. They include the development of practice-based and practice-led research, the blurring of boundaries between researcher and participant in participative design research and the place of theory in generative and abductive accounts.

As a result one is more often than not left with the question 'so what?' Sometimes the relevance of the espoused results is limited to who has knowledge of the specific topic, or population, or part of the world, problems of defining its generalisability. This narrow, often contextual approach can be contrasted with one that is managerial, practical. In other cases, conceptual research can be too generally stated. Reference to issues or gaps in the literature has become more variable; indeed the review of literature to establish the state of knowledge in the problem area can be less than thorough leading to issues in accurately defining research questions, propositions or hypotheses. Often a methodological justification is lacking; an explicit account of the methods used is not enough. The epistemological underpinning – considerations about the knowledge claims arising from the research, its reliability and validity, tend to be weak or simply missing.

These observations do not take away from the fact that we have seen very interesting presentations of garments, fabrics, pictures and installations. Nevertheless, particularly in the face of a widening interest for the subject matter, as well as for innovative presentation forms, the question of what constitutes a sound methodological background becomes even more poignant.

Therefore there is a need to explore the boundaries of methodological space for fashion studies. To achieve that, first we give a definition of the phenomenon of fashion. Having done that we present an overview of different methodological approaches to studying fashion related phenomena; each approach stems from a different perspective, and each perspective is based on more or less different, sometimes conflicting, ontological and epistemological grounds. After having discussed these, we briefly comment on a sort of methodological fetishism – the scientific method – that has been permeating discussions on rigour and relevance in academic research, and afterwards we intend to present a more open, realistic and humble view on methodology. These lead to a conclusion about the boundaries of spaces for fashion research.

2. The object of enquiry: ontology in fashion.

As with all sound research reports and projects, first we need to define the very object of our enquiry, fashion, before justifying the different methodological approaches used to study the phenomenon. This brings us to one feature of many speculative accounts: the lack of an operational definition. Speculation however leads to a plethora of possible interpretations and perspectives; this at least encourages discussion and maybe brings about new issues the usefulness of which hopefully shows later in time. Abduction provided a more defined approach albeit one that

is relatively less explored. However once something needs to be looked at, it is of paramount importance to define it, at least operationally.

Given that fashion is a social construction itself, it can be understood from two different perspectives: as a product, and as a cultural, social-economic phenomenon. When the focus is the product, the approaches still are quite heterogeneous: technological and material at one end, for example what does it do to your temperature? And as a medium for the cultural and symbolic at the other end; in so many words, what does it do with your perception of self?   At both extremes the focus is on the clothing and its performative properties. So already here we have quite different questions and methodological grounds. Whereas technical questions mostly include objectively measurable and observable phenomena (heath, resistance, abrasion etc.) The second type of approaches are more speculative in kind, as they refer to social constructs, like Identity or Authenticity[1] and media and cultural studies usually reside in the faculties of humanistics.

In the second perspective, the term Fashion refers to a social phenomenon, (cf. most notably Simmel 1904, and more recently Michel Maffesoli: "Dans le creuset des apparences"[2]). Social studies embraces sociology, anthropology and cultural studies. As with the product perspective, individual and social identity can be observed in fashion. Moreover, fashion can include subjects like general and business economics, and its concern with innovation, marketing, strategy and consumer behaviour. Here fashion is often defined as a system (Morand 2007) of innovation (Jacobs 2007) or of institutionalisation (Lipovesky 1994). According to this last perspective fashion, as seen in the diffusion of trends, can only be understood when looking at interactions between people. Fashion is an activity of continuous but marginal innovation in style. This approach to business is increasingly evident indeed also in the electronics and even in the food industry,[3] where continuous innovation in packaging and taste combinations are often the only source of differentiation , hence understanding the business of fashion contributes to generating strategic marketing and branding knowledge.

The distinction between fashion as a product and as a –social– phenomenon helps us to clarify the object of study, but it does not yet help us to fully clarify the different methodological stances encountered in fashion conferences.

3.   Different fields, different produce

Academic activity, first of all should challenge beliefs, ideologies and the 'taken for granted' conventions, too often embedded in teaching. It should be aimed at de-mystifying, clarifying and reducing demagogy. To challenge the ideological spaces that theories occupy, one must allow for multiple interpretations of observations, and continuously look for new and alternative explanations. This transcends multi-disciplinarity because it does not consider knowledge as consisting of separate disciplines, but suggests a more comprehensive and inclusive interdisciplinary view on knowledge. One might argue however that this stance is ideological in itself, since scholars should start doing research in a 'tabula rasa' mode (without preconceptions), which as the debates around Grounded Theory show, is problematic. It is here that opinions diverge: should a research project start with explicit knowledge to build on (assuming that is indeed knowledge) or should it be solely empirically driven, contextual and non-explicatory? Here for instance we see that the first kind of assumptions, are often considered as scientific, whereas the second are not. In fashion studies these second kinds of research projects however are numerous.

Kuhn's paradigms as well as Popper's falsification have left us in a situation where we tend to consider scientific endeavour as continuous improvement, as a means – limitations notwithstanding – of progress. For one thing however, the fashion phenomenon teaches us that a new collection is never necessarily better than the old one. Progress means that previous findings should necessarily - although not sufficiently - support new ones. A critique to modernist projects comes during the 70ies and 80ies from critical scholars who later have been labelled as Postmodern, even if many scholars before have had a critical approach towards modernism, notably in Frankfurt after the Second World war. Postmodern thinkers have contributed to the reintroduction of a more pluralistic, contextual 'in the world' and generative way of thinking about scientific enquiry. These kinds of approaches are found in business studies typically in the context of consumer research, and do not always coexist peacefully (Goulding 1999, Solomon 2004).

4.   The return of pre-modern science

It seems that positivistic and interpretive perspectives are mutually exclusive also because the implied ontological assumptions take contrasting positions, fundamentally about objective reality. That is however not necessarily

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1 e.g. as in Smelik, A.M. (2011) *The Performance of Authenticity* Journal for Fashion Writing and Criticism, vol.1, iss.1, (2011), pp. 76-82

2 In occasion of the conference of the international federation of textiles and technology institutes, may 2015. See www.youtube.com/watch?v=SJbUahLQBMQ retrieved on February the 2nd 2016.

3 So for instance the brand Innocent Drinks has special guests, limited editions and 'difficult colours', as well as a new collection every season, with lighter colours in summer and darker ones in winter (Mossinkoff 2012).

so. As Brown (1994: 49) points out, methods imported from Humanistics, like discourse analysis, have their own set of rules as well, aimed at a hierarchical classification of knowledge, since a relation between theory and empirical results is agreed upon. Postmodernism on the other hand, in the words of Linstead (2004: 5) "questions the relation between the theoretical and the empirical" altogether and it "pursues its ends not through homology, the elevation of similarities in the form of unity, but through heterology – a disconnected logic of the fragment". So discussions of methodology could be considered a modernistic endeavour altogether, since it implies a search for a-priori rules stating when a claim can be considered scientific.

A second problem is the relationship between theory and data: the theoretical and the empirical. In scientific enquiry, deduction and induction mostly account for the place of theory in a research design. A postmodern approach may use social constructivism, post-structuralism (Hackley 2003: 152-54) or relativism. This perspective assumes that reality in its totality is 'made-up' and implicitly agreed upon, even if it has 'real' consequences for people. Positivists are aware of that, as methods such as structural equation modeling (SEM) analysis through sophisticated statistical techniques are assumed to univocally measure these social constructions, as if these were really somewhere in our heads. The much used concept of bias, as the probability that one is deviating from an assumed real, is very telling in this respect.

These considerations pertain to ontology and differing assumptions about the nature of reality. Another question embraces epistemology and assumptions about our capabilities to actually perceive, describe and even explain a more or less real, reality.

Critical historic realism teaches us not only that the history and context of the phenomena should be accounted for, but also those of the researcher. As Feyerabend (1975:45) explains:

> …the material which a scientist actually has at his disposal, his laws, his experimental results, his mathematical techniques, his epistemological prejudices, his attitude towards the absurd consequences of the theories which he accepts, is indeterminate in many ways, ambiguous and never fully separated from the historical background.

So, one more limitation of the positivistic, or means-end, modernistic approaches to science, is, the lack of historical consideration (see also Latour 1987). Indeed, longitudinal research is often advocated as a means to find causal relationships that hold for a longer period of time. A causal relationship that holds over different contexts concerns its external validity, a concept which still brings modernistic all-explaining theories, metatheory, to mind. It might however be more interesting to turn from the causality of why something works, to look at the processes, or how it works.

5. Fashion as algorithm

Evolution, the mother of all algorithms, clearly shows us that it is only by looking at patterns in history that we can understand the present context. That does however not automatically imply historical determinism. According to Saad for instance (2007:13) history does not guide human nature, but it is the other way around: human nature influences history. However, in defiance of the conventions of western dualism and polarisation, either or, both ways can co-exist. Genetic factors influence cultural preferences and at the same time cultural factors influence biological evolution; for example Asian people are not immediately attracted to dairy products. Genes and culture co-evolve, so culture also influences genes indirectly, as it where, by influencing natural selection, the 'direct' model is referred to as cultural selection, which finds its origins in social interaction (see also Dennett 1995). Hence we can conclude that fashion as a social phenomenon, or as a cultural product, should be explained using insights from evolutionary theory.

One important feature of evolution -as a paradigmatic approach- is that error and chance are allowed for as major features explaining phenomena, since that is how mutations and thus variation come about. This is opposed to positivistic approaches where error and bias have negative connotations. Moreover positivistic confirmatory statistical methods are aimed at either refuting or accepting an hypothesis; there is no possibility for a third way. Evolutionary explanations 'only' describe and explain, in the sense that they offer a plausible algorithm, a mechanism explaining the process of evolution and mutatis mutandis of a marketing strategy, or of the selection and replication, diffusion, of a style, without necessarily adhering to the search for an ultimate cause; there is no etiology. Positivistic approaches tend to force meaning where there is only contingency.

6. Broadening the space's boundaries

So far we have based our disquisition on a distinction between positivism and interpretivism, and we have also said that interpretive approaches are not necessarily postmodern, in the sense that they are mainly pre-modern, and do not necessarily rule out issues regarding rigour and relevance in research. We have also seen how context and history should maybe be included in every analysis, and not 'controlled-for' as e.g. in experimental research

(i.e. there is no factor or variable that is exogenous to an explicatory model). Finally we found that evolutionary perspectives may be the most realistic ones in that they not only account for history and context, but also for chance and error. Now we only have to put it all together in a pluralist, or anarchistic but not rule-free approach.

We could reduce the positivist-interpretive diatribe to a difference in levels of analysis and focus. This view is most recently supported by the growing literature based on premises from complexity and chaos theory, or non-linear dynamics. Such approaches tend to look at the Whole, instead of at its parts. The interesting thing, from a methodological point of view, is that considerations about rigour in research (i.e. reliability and validity) do depend on the level of analysis: whether particular, reductionist, inferential approaches or general, synthetic, descriptive approaches. Statistics and 'hard', quantitative, or indeed 'scientific' considerations usually refer to the first kind of approaches.

Inferential statistics are the means to find and corroborate relations between distinct variables. That is what most of modern scientific enterprise consists of. This kind of research however adds knowledge on a very particular (proxy) level, since it always assumes the 'ceteris-paribus' condition. Interpretive approaches offer inclusive, domain-independent or multi, or better transdisciplinary and comprehensive explanations.

The output of interpretive research is mainly narratives. These kinds of explanations are thus often not considered as scientific because stories, descriptions, accounts are more adaptable, malleable, and allow for the necessary subjective interpretation that tested theories tend to eliminate, as we tried to show commenting on the concept of 'bias'. In what we can consider a multi-level approach, the idea of bias is conceivable on a level where consensus amongst researchers is possible (we all agree that there is some predictable effect like gravity). But on a more contextual, subjective and maybe explorative level one cannot really give an answer the question: bias against what? But that does not make these kinds of disquisition less scientific; the level of analysis is different, and these different views can happily coexist. This however does leave us with a problem concerning the nature of Theory.

In modern science a theory should accommodate for every observation, it should 'hold' when challenged by subsequent hypotheses to be tested. A hypothesis is by definition accepted or rejected, i.e. there is no option in-between. Nevertheless a 'slight' acceptation, a weak but 'significant' estimation, can have quite large consequences, since a paper gets published only once it confirms existing theory. That is the contribution of Popper: a theory should be eligible to be 'falsified' otherwise we are in the realm of ideology, which, from the illuminist period on, is not tantamount to science anymore. But when is a theory 'really' confirmed? As Feyerabend (1975: 45) notices "according to our present results, hardly any theory is consistent with the facts. The demand to admit only those theories which are consistent with available and accepted facts again leaves us without any theory". Feyerabend's only solution to this epistemological impasse is 'anything goes', although not in the sense of Heraclites' 'Panta Rhei' but in the sense that the more competing assumptions, explanations and data there are, the better. Methodological anarchism is the new mantra, and the only necessary assumption that does not inhibit progress (Feyerabend 1975: 7).

7. The Rules of methodological anarchism

Methodological anarchism does not imply a total absence of method. The main difference between the two consists of the fact that a methodological stance regards a-priori believes, whereas method merely refers to the process of doing research. Just like with evolution, a shift from methodology towards method implies a shift from defining ontological (and etiologic) assumptions to describing a process, akin to a shift from etiological to algorithmic approaches. If we look at evolution, trial-and-error can be considered as the most natural of research methods. In this respect Beinhocker (2006) uses the term about 'deductive tinkering', which allows for both rationality and purpose. More precisely: "evolution is an iterative process of experimentation, selection, and then amplification of things that work" (Ibid: 249). That iterative process is the deductive tinkering process which simply means that generating knowledge happens through some deduction from mental models and at the same time experiments that may be totally arbitrary. Arbitrarily looking for empirical data is what Feayerabend also referrers to as 'counterinduction' (Feyerabend 1975: 56), that is how "ideological ingredients of our knowledge and, more especially, of our observations are discovered with the help of theories which are refuted by them". That means that according to Feyerabend, advances in science do not occur by using data to confute theory (cfr Popper), but rather to use data to confute the ideological foundation on which theory rests.

The iterative, trial-and-error kind of approach (aimed at confuting ideological foundations!) is very much akin to what goes under Design Thinking in research (Johansson 2011). In the recent years, design thinking in research has gained a lot of attention, especially because of the emerging need for an academic, scientific justification (or better legitimisation) of an increasing body of research coming from professional universities, as are most universities of the arts where design and related fashion studies reside. The reflection phase in the experimental, or design, process should be tantamount to what we have named theoretical instead of statistical generalisation. In this sense it is very much similar to the approach that goes under the name of grounded. A grounded approach is characterised by: data-theory iterations, methods, samples and data sources change during the research process, intersubjectivity instead of objectivity (Goulding 2004).

In summary, the method as process that we propose for studying fashion – at its most generic – should in most cases be non-linear, iterative as well as arbitrary, but one that does not necessarily make more conservative claims about academic research obsolete.

8. Conclusions

In this paper we have tried to expand the boundaries of a common space for fashion research that both contain and enable methodologies within its spatial boundaries. First we concluded that, as Feyerabend (1975) observed, 'everything goes…', a principle resonating with the pragmatists, that all methods are welcome as long as they demonstrate their contribution to knowledge. Everything adds to a juicy stock. Knowledge generation (being in the first instance a biological, evolutionary phenomenon) is an inevitable human trait that goes through continuous iterations. Second, the role of ideology should be clarified, not least in prescribing the norm in contrast to prescribing assumptions (ex-ante versus ex-post norm). Third, prediction and control are the tenants of the modernistic scientific tradition. However in the realm of fashion these tenants do not hold, at all. The fashion research space welcomes approaches that allow for, and answer questions about complexity, evolution and chaos (chaordic structures) in social phenomena. Fourth, design thinking is basically a 'grounded' approach. Debates on the status of such an approach abound, and the fashion space should see their adaptation and development. However the researcher cannot be considered as a as 'tabula rasa', as Glaser appears to imply, there are always some pre-conditions.

Two questions should inform academic rigour: What is the unit of analysis? And what is the aim during that particular phase of the research process? The unit of analysis can consist of consistently identifiable elements, like a garment, a fabric or more generally a technique, buy also comprise continuous ever-changing interactions within a complex system of agents, as in the case of branding and marketing. These different levels of analysis imply different degrees of possible claims about the validity of the findings. Moreover, given objectivity is in itself a social construct, neutrality is maybe a better word. Triangulation and hermeneutics should provide a desirable level of neutrality.

These quite fundamental heuristics can constitute the foundations of the new 'rules' for research and project formulation in fashion studies to facilitate mutual understanding and fruitful collaborations. In considering the proliferation of places and spaces of fashion, we address an appropriate broadening of research boundaries, and the possibilities that these considerations can be extended to the more general realm of cultural – symbolic – production and consumption.

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