

Worn: Footwear, Attachment and the Affects of Wear

by Ellen Sampson (London: Bloomsbury)

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The Version of Record of this manuscript has been published and is available in Fashion Theory <21.06.2021>, <https://www.tandfonline.com/>, <<https://doi.org/10.1080/1362704X.2021.1935494>>

Biographical notes:

Dr. Alexandra Sherlock is a lecturer and researcher in the fields of fashion theory, footwear, identity, embodiment, representation, materiality and affordance theory. She was the postgraduate researcher on the ESRC research project *If the Shoe Fits: Footwear, Identity and Transition* at the University of Sheffield (2010-2013) and completed her doctoral research *'This is Not a Shoe': An Exploration of the Co-Constitutive Relationship Between Representations and Embodied Experiences of Shoes* in 2017.

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The line between the physical and digital world has never been as blurred. The COVID pandemic has meant, for many, professional and personal lives are increasingly lived online and the requirement to

social distance has expedited the development and uptake of immersive technologies. Combined with a push towards a more sustainable consumer culture, virtual and augmented reality are increasingly understood to play an essential role in the future of the fashion industry, where, so the argument goes, the ability to virtually try on clothes reduces carbon emissions produced when travelling to stores and digital couture (virtual clothing that does not exist in the physical world) eliminates the environmental impact of the production process entirely (Roberts-Islam 2020; Hackl 2020). In a culture and fashion system that continues to be preoccupied with newness, the publication of Dr. Ellen Sampson's book *Worn: Footwear, Attachment and the Affects of Wear* could not be more poignant.

In this current cultural context and located within the fields of new materialism and material culture studies, Sampson's book questions "what is the significance of the worn and used garment? What is our attachment to clothes which are marked through wear and why do they have the power to affect us so deeply?" (2020, 11) She argues that attachment is not simply a consequence of consumption but happens through practices of making, wearing, cleaning and repair. Using an unconventional combination of phenomenological, anthropological and psychoanalytic theory she breaks with post-structural studies that understand fashion and clothing as a language or sign system to reveal the psychic, bodily and tactile relationships we have with garments - one that is "predicated on movement and touch" (2020, 67). In doing so, Sampson looks past the shoe as an "overdetermined object", symbol or "conduit for other agencies" to consider it a material agent in its own right.

Methodologically, she takes an innovative auto-ethnographic practice-led approach through which she both makes and is made by the work (shoes, artworks, images and text) in a self-reflexive process.¹ This approach affords the opportunity to identify a "confluence of agencies" embodied by the shoe where makers, wearers and shoes/materials are understood to transform one another, entangle and

¹ Traditionally, fashion and clothing research involves object-based interviews, participant observation or historical research into archival objects. Sampson explains that practice-based research, while an established methodology in the arts, is gaining momentum in fashion studies as a way to explore the tacit and tactile experiences that may be lost when the researcher is interpreting the experience of another (Sampson 2020, 23-37)

“cleave”. Consequently, the research breaks new ground in a number of areas including contrasting the common representation of making and wearing as mutually exclusive or bounded.

The book starts with a methodological chapter that proposes practices of making and wearing as a way of conducting material culture research that overcomes subject/object dualisms. Importantly, Sampson explains that the book is the textual pairing to the artefacts produced through her practice which she describes as “autoethnographic objects” that directly embody experience (2020, 15).

Detailed photographs of her work and poetic excerpts from her wearer diaries are included throughout the book, however she is careful to distinguish the different forms of knowledge; the text does not explain the meaning or process of the artwork and the images do not illustrate the text, since to do so would reduce the meaning of both. One consequence of this approach is that the text often lacks an explicit connection with the work, yet the expertise gained through her practice is evident throughout. This results in an authoritative insight to our relationships with worn garments that motivates the reader to access Sampson’s full body of work.

Following the methodology, seven chapters then trace the relationship with a pair of shoes. Chapter 2 starts by contextualising the research with an extensive account of the multiple ways shoes have become “over-determined”. Sampson argues the representation and interpretation of shoes as objects of fantasy and desire in existing academic and everyday literature, the arts and fairy tales has “de-materialized” them and obscured their agency as material objects. While she makes it clear that it is the material shoe, not our experiences of their cultural meanings that provides the focus of the book, her analysis of worn shoes in the remaining chapters provides a valuable insight to how they become so symbolically potent. This becomes most apparent in her discussion of empty shoes and their capacity to indexically represent the absent body.

Chapters 3 and 4 turn from the shoe as symbol to consider the shoe as a tool which “affords” (Gibson 1979) or indeed constrains certain behaviours as we navigate the physical and social terrain. Here a process of “giving and taking” between shoe and wearer becomes evident where surfaces and

boundaries are crossed and bodies merge with objects and environments (Sampson 2020, 86). Drawing on Winnicott's psychanalysis (1953, 1971) - a welcome break from the reductive Freudian sexual fetishism so often associated with shoes – Chapter 3 identifies the shoe as an affective transitional (“me and not me”) object that bridges internal and external worlds.² Through practices of wearing, a process of “tactile mirroring” is described where the shoe is shaped and imprinted by the wearer and vice versa, transforming it into an inalienable and continually updated “external vessel for experience” (Sampson 2020, 92). Chapter 4 extends this insight to consider the everyday activities through which shoes and garments may become transitional or transformational. Unlike representations of fashion in the media, she argues, studies of everyday clothes are studies of “wearing-whilst-doing” (2020, 99). Using walking as “a tool for interrogating our relationships to and with clothing” Sampson draws on Mauss (1973 [1935]) to consider footwear and clothing as agents that affect and are affected by gesture and mobility.³ Consequently, Chapters 3 and 4 start to provide a rich insight to the material and tactile ways garments are incorporated into the bodily-schema and become part of one's identity.

Chapter 5, “The Cleaved Garment: The maker, the wearer and the ‘me and not me’ of fashion practice”, perhaps most clearly embodies the spirit and key message of the book: the ways in which objects and bodies become entwined and the maintenance and inevitable impermanence of these bonds. Sampson innovatively applies the term “cleave”, one of Freud's antithetical words ([1910] 1986), to understand the entanglement of the self and garment. Here, the concept of “cleaving together and cleaving apart” is key to understanding a tension between the incorporation of the

² Winnicott's transitional object is explained as an ‘intermediate [object] between me and not me’ or between internal and external worlds, akin to a child's soft toy or comforter . For the child, this toy is used to mediate the separation between the self and mother and therefore also facilitates a process of self-transformation. Similarly, the garment is described metaphorically and literally as a second skin or intermediate boundary between inside and outside. As our relationship with the garment changes it also produces and facilitates self-transformation. (Sampson 2020, 92-4)

³ While Sampson is careful to note that shoes are both materially and symbolically useful (2020, 109), her focus on walking as a particular way of being in the world errs more towards a physical encounter experienced by able-bodied shoe wearers. Considered figuratively, ‘walking’ as a way of moving through one's environment perhaps equally emphasizes the symbolic affordances of shoes.

garment into the bodily schema versus its material frailty, a process where “[a]s an artefact pulls away from the self through decay, it is grasped by the mind and vice versa, a continuous backwards and forwards between selfhood and otherness.” (Sampson 2020, 122) Her analysis of the points when a garment and person cleave, expertly extends theories of distributed personhood, inalienability and the agency of objects (Mauss 1990 [1954]; Strathern 1988; Gell 1998; Weiner 1992; Hoskins 1998, 2006). The chapter identifies and explores the various agencies and selves embodied and extended through the garment, from the maker’s material negotiations when realising an idea or image to the wearer’s experiences using the garment as a transformational object. Ultimately, the term “cleave” does considerable work in this chapter to represent the complex relationships between bodies and materials. One can see how easily it could be adopted into the fashion studies lexicon as the discipline evolves.

The significance of the traces left on the shoe as the body and garment cleave are explored in detail in Chapter 6, “The Empty Shoe: Imprint, memory and the marks of experience”. Here, manifestations of wear such as scuffs, wrinkles, creases, stains, stretching, imprints and smoothness evidence the embodied and material experience of wearing. Consequently, shoes become “records of lived experience” that mark the passage of time. In so doing, they enable repeated practices of remembering and forgetting. Sampson beautifully analogises the shoe’s ability to record gesture and experience with Freud’s “mystic writing pad” ([1925] 1961), a child’s toy consisting of a wax tablet covered with a sheet of both waxed paper and cellophane. Each time the cellophane is lifted, the writing is erased however the indentations left by the stylus remain imprinted on the wax sheet (conscious perception) and wax tablet (unconscious record) below, thereby enabling recollection through the “flickering-up and passing away of consciousness in the process of perception” (Freud [1925] 1961 in Sampson 2020, 155). Inverting Freud’s material writing pad analogy (used to explain psychic phenomena) she considers how immaterial experiences and memories may be manifested in garments, further exploring this concept by proposing the shoe as a type of palimpsest⁴ in which writing is interpreted

⁴ Sampson describes palimpsests as “vellum scrolls which are inscribed and then, when the text is no longer required, scraped clean and used again, so that traces of inscription layer above one another.” (2020, 156)

as “bodily imprint” and “erasure” as a process of wearing away through use. She explains, “experience is inscribed over experience until its form finally breaks down” (2020, 156). The analogies and discussion in Chapter 6 exceed any other studies I have read in articulating the elusive *power* of shoes, which, while shared in many ways by other garments is quite particular.

It is the evocative capacity of worn clothes when separated and viewed away from the body that provides the focus for a comparatively shorter penultimate chapter: “Encounters and Affects: Garments and the memory nexus”. Gell’s “art nexus” (1998) is translated to conceptualise the ways garments and shoes become indexical and symbolic “memory objects”. Like Gell’s art objects, garments are understood as a “locus of ‘affect’, a site of abductive experience for the viewer.” (Sampson 2020, 168) While the reader must wait until the final chapter for an explanation of *affect*, the argument is compelling. Particular interest is given to the affective encounter with indexical/non-narrative garments: garments which bear an indexical trace of an original event, person or experience yet are unbounded by narrative (either because the narrative is unknown or cannot be recalled). Sampson explains that these bodiless garments, for example the kinds one might find in a museum, “circumvent our capacity to reason with them, to contain [or] control what they do” (2020, 184). Channelling Gell (1992, 1998) she powerfully concludes that when we are “[u]nable to ‘read’ an object, we experience it psychically and physically, we cannot silence its insistent murmuring. We are unable to look away.” (2020, 184)

The final chapter ties together the previous “threads of thinking” into a series of key observations extending upon established academic theories, the first of which firmly situates Sampson’s findings in relation to theories of affect (Deleuze, Guattari, and Massumi 1987). Using Douglas’ concept of ‘matter out of place’ (1966) and Kristeva’s ‘abjection’ (1982) the particularity of shoes as affective objects becomes powerfully evident. The research also speaks clearly to theories of authenticity, so a discussion of the findings in relation to Benjamin’s “Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” (1999 [1936]) is welcome. As maker of her own shoes, one might argue that the artefacts at the centre of Sampson’s research are inherently authentic in a traditionally Benjaminian sense, however, the

case is clearly made that it is predominantly the practices of wear that endow an artefact with an “auratic quality”. Mass-produced shoes, for example, can become authentic and original through their entanglement with their wearers. The often incomprehensible and enchanting distribution of the person into the shoe is then further extended through a discussion of the potential talismanic status of the worn garment which can also function as a fetish. Here she argues that the “tactile intermingling of the self and artefact is what gives the artefact its power” and “the fetish epitomizes the material agency of artefacts and in particular power brought about through touch.” (Sampson 2020, 205) Again, drawing on Gell, Sampson ultimately argues that the complexity of the confluence of agencies embodied by the shoe and evidenced through material trace is indecipherable for the viewer who becomes cognitively “stuck” and captivated. Moving forward, she suggests that the idea of the “obfuscating power of the unknown and unknowable” might be used to better understand the affects of the things we wear (2020, 207).

Returning to the digital zeitgeist in which the book has been published, Sampson argues that the source of our bonds with garments is the un/conscious knowledge they are prone to destruction and decay and the frustrating, at times tragic, realisation that they can never be fully incorporated, finished or understood. While there may be a sustainable case for the immortal digital garment, what do *identity* and processes of identification look like without the impermanence of transitional and transformational objects: the out-grown ballet shoes, the wine-stained wedding dress, the heirloom jewellery bearing the patina of its previous wearers. For Sampson, the affect of garments is rooted in their ability to become “cartographies of gesture and experience” enabling memory, recollection and the distribution of personhood (2020, 209). These bonds are inherently tactile and depend on the material traces of bodies, places and experiences.⁵ Therefore, while Sampson’s research might be used to challenge the viability of digital garments as a sustainable fashion alternative, her research does contribute valuable insights to an emerging understanding of how material garments and other

⁵ Indeed for this reader, who started reviewing a digital publication but felt a compulsion to finish with the physical copy, even the book itself is a poignant reminder of the embodied and tactile experience of engaging with material objects in these digital times. Considering his essay about book collecting (1999 [1931]), this is perhaps a point with which Walter Benjamin would agree.

artefacts might become emotionally durable, an important consideration when designing for longevity and sustainability.

In summary, this research succeeds beautifully in its aim of returning the body and everyday practices of wear to the centre of our relationships with clothing. In doing so Sampson has made an important contribution to the broader project of balancing a persistent semiotic bias in studies of shoes while highlighting the value of studying ordinary rather than extraordinary items of clothing.⁶ Her methodology also further legitimises emerging practice-led approaches in the field of Fashion Studies and demonstrates the unique perspectives they can provide, particularly in relation to *affect* which, by its very nature, cannot be adequately represented in words. Throughout the book, the shoe is frequently understood as a garment like any other, therefore much of the analysis can be applied to clothing broadly, however a convincing case is made for their particularly powerful capacity to tell our stories and affect us deeply. Whether one is interested in footwear or not, this study is essential for anyone wishing to gain a deeper understanding of how we become attached to our clothes and how clothes and bodies make one another.

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⁶ Noting that by the end of the book shoes seem far from 'ordinary'.

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