

## Introduction: Worn: Footwear Attachment and The Affects of Wear

Ellen Sampson, Bloomsbury, 2020

[Fig 0.2 Here]

I will start by asking you to look down at your feet, to inspect the garments in which they are clothed, your shoes. How does it feel to consider them? A shiver of disgust? A puff of pride? Are they scuffed and worn? Are there creases where toes have flexed, stains from rainy streets? Or are they new and shiny? – manifestations of a fantasy of a self you have yet to become? ‘You can tell a lot about someone by their shoes,’ people say and there is some truth in this, though perhaps not quite in the way that they mean. Shoes are so often task-specific (wellingtons, ballet slippers, steel toe-cap boots) and gendered (stilettos, wing-tipped city brogues), indicative of wealth (£1,000 designer heels and bespoke shoes) or poverty (flip-flips worn by labourers across the globe), of employment or leisure. Yet, they are also records: of the steps you have taken and the paths you have walked. They are imprinted with the weight of your body, the shape of your feet or the traces of those who wore them before you. More than almost any other garment, shoes tell our stories: where we have come from, where we have been.

Looking down at my own feet, I feel a rush of shame at my battered leather plimsolls (a footwear researcher should be better shod, I think). These shoes are shoes at the edge; almost – but not completely – destroyed. I have mended them many times – bought new laces, washed and bleached out stains, polished leather and carefully painted in scuffs – and yet they are explicitly and visibly worn. The vulcanized sole has spilt away from the leather and curls up towards my ankle at the heel, the mid-section is irreversibly creased by the perpetual rocking of my feet as I write. On the left-hand side the sole is nearly sheared, revealing a mess of composite layers within. ‘Well-loved,’

someone might say kindly, but the truth is they are ruined – worn out, broken and old. These shoes, bland and neutral, have travelled with me for years, across continents, between jobs and archives, through interviews and exams. These shoes, which, through daily wear, have moulded so closely to the shape of my feet, are almost gone.

[Fig 0.3 Here ] Author Shoes image

The battered shoe both connotes and denotes: it is layered with meanings and significations. Whilst new shoes may correlate more directly to a symbolic language of fashion (cf. Barthes 1980), wornness renders the shoe ambiguous: worn shoes are simultaneously object-like – inanimate and motionless away from the body – and bodily; inescapably corporeal relics shaped by the body that has worn them. In this ambiguity, wornness – the marks we inflict upon our clothes – confuses subject/object distinctions – the line between person and thing. At the centre of this book is a discussion of these transitions, the shifts from new to used, from commodity to inalienable possession, from thingness to personhood and back again: transitions which typify our relationships with the things we wear. It explores how, in the progressive alteration of garments through use, they come to embody both internal and external experience. In doing so it raises questions about our relationship with imperfect garments, asking how imperfect garments act upon us as both viewers and wearers of clothes.

### [Wearing and wornness](#)

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Imperfect garments sit at the peripheries of fashion research, perhaps because used and imperfect garments are often on the peripheries of fashion itself. The fashion system –

as both a cycle of commerce and of representation – is concerned with newness, with reinvention and transformation through the acquisition of goods. Fashion exists for an audience, it is a process of image making performed on the body and through its representations: films, photographs, illustrations and exhibitions. Fashion and fashioning are visual and performative acts – of identities and outfits constructed and composed through practice and things. Whilst clothing may be manipulated into fashion, often everyday garments are simply worn; wearing clothes is mundane practice. clothes are active objects, busy agents in our networks of things :Most garments are neither static in shops and showrooms nor preserved in archives and museums. Clothing is worn, used, laundered, mended, discarded and exchanged outside the formal cycles of the fashion system. Though the decisions and discourses which structure the purchase and disposal of our clothing are important, a far greater part of our relationship with our own clothes is of wearing (and not wearing); of the bodily experience of becoming and being clothed. These acts of wearing are both performative – the ‘fashioning’ of garments and selves – and habitual daily practice.

Over the past two decades there has been an increased interest in the embodied experience of wearing; the way clothes ‘feel’ as opposed to how they ‘look’. Entwistle’s seminal book *The Fashioned Body* (2000) led a broader move towards a more embodied understanding of wearing clothes. More recently, Sophie Woodward’s (2007, 2015) research highlights the material agency of the garment: its capacity through form – rather than signification – to impact on bodily and embodied experience. Her work is part of a broader shift away from the structuralist and linguistic model of fashion, typified by Barthes’ assertion ‘the tendency of every bodily covering to insert itself into an organized, formal, and normative system that is recognized by society’ (Barthes 2006: 7). An assertion which Carter, writing of the problematic nature of structuralist readings of fashion, critiques highlighting that ‘one of the problems attendant on placing garments

into neat, definitional boxes, for instance protection, modesty, or communication, is that neither the category nor the garment seems to fit easily with one another. Only very rarely will clothing assume a form that is congruent with its designated use' (Carter 2012: 347). That is to say – though we may attempt to taxonomize the garment – users do not abide by these taxonomies; they appropriate, subvert and alter garments to fit within their lives. Wearing is an active process of appropriation, alteration and compromise.

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If the greater part of our relationship with clothing is of wearing, then the majority of the clothing that we interact with is in a state of 'wornness'. That is to say, the majority of clothes we own are neither pristine and new, nor destroyed, preserved or archived. Wornness is a state of impermanence, the worn garment is always in flux. If we are to understand wornness as an intermediate state – an expanse between new and old – then we must also understand it as transitory, impermanent and unstable; unless a worn garment has been expertly preserved, it rarely stays in the same state for long: Decay and use are intrinsically interlinked. Through use, the gradual inevitable destruction of an artefact (its entropy) is accelerated. This wornness is the outcome of wearing; it is the result of the sensual and embodied experience of wear. Transitory bodily experience is made manifest and material in the things we wear.<sup>i</sup> As we use clothes, they become records of our experiences, archives of the experience of wearing. Worn things are the outcome of us 'being in the world'; they are the mediating layer at the confluences of environment and bodily self. As such, our used garments hold a particular place in our networks of things, at once intimate (steeped in sweat, stretched by the girth of our thighs) and public, visible and on display.

This book suggests that, in researching clothing cultures and practices of dressing, we must turn our attention to wornness, to the ways our bodies affect our clothes. Wornness, the intermediate state between new and destroyed, is, in reality, the state of most of our clothes; most garments are on a spectrum between pristine and destroyed. Thus, worn and used clothes are a worthy topic of study; beyond ethical, philosophical or psychoanalytic concerns with wornness, worn things matter through sheer volume alone. Within fashion theory – as within much of the arts and social sciences – there has been a turn towards more materially focused research.<sup>ii</sup> This ‘material turn’ directly engages with the materiality of artefacts and the means of their production. Perhaps most famous is Stallybrass’s haunting essay ‘Worn Worlds’ (1993), in which he explores the personal and historical materiality of mourning. De la Haye, Taylor and Thompson’s book *A Family of Fashion: The Messel Dress Collection* (2005) and Evan’s beautiful essay on stains and damage in Isabella Blow’s clothing archive, *Materiality, Memory and History: Adventures in the Archive* (2014), address accidental damage as evidence of lives well-lived. Similarly, both Davidson (2013) and Crooke (2012) have examined damaged and decaying garments as sources of affect; as powerful signifiers of violence, absence and grief. More recently, papers by Bide (2017) and Mida (2016) have addressed the traces of wear, in relation to social histories and the role of the researcher in the archive. These studies unpick the complex and entangled relationships we have with the materials we wear, bringing the garment’s materiality into focus. Despite this increasing interest in imperfection, the materiality of garments and the material culture of the everyday, our relationship with used garments merits further exploration.

In examining our attachment to our own garments and response to the used garments of others, this book attempts to uncover the ways that, through use, garments and wearers become entwined. Through a focus upon a single garment – the shoe – it

seeks to address broader questions about the embodied experience of wearing and the affect of worn and used clothes. Fusing anthropological and psychoanalytic theories of attachment, value and exchange, this book investigates wearing as a reciprocal relationship between two agents – the wearer and the worn. In doing so, it explores the ways that, through tactile engagement, they become incorporated into our bodily and psychic selves. It explores how through use the mass-produced is made unique and powerful; the particular affect of the marks of use and wear. This book seeks to put use and the user at its centre, addressing shoes not only as objects of desire or as commodities for consumption, but as objects of wear<sup>iii</sup>. It is a shift in focus away from the point of acquisition and towards the material, tactile, habitual and bodily. In use the commodity is subverted, personalized and made active. It is no longer an object of exchange but something 'inalienable' which becomes 'entangled'<sup>iv</sup> with the self. This 'entanglement', the transition of experience from material to immaterial and back again, is at the centre of this book; the ways that persons and artefacts may entwine over time.

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This book is concerned with object relations in both a literal and a psychoanalytic sense. In addressing our relationships with our clothing as a form of object relations, it draws upon both psychoanalytic and anthropological theory, examining the sites where internal experience and material culture intersect. In particular, it draws upon the work of psychologist Donald Winnicott (1953) and anthropologist Alfred Gell (1998). Winnicott's concept of the transitional object, an artefact – such as a soft toy or blanket for an infant – capable of mediating and maintaining the boundaries of the psychic (and physical) self. This idea of an object which is both 'me' and 'not-me' is applied both to the relationship between wearer and garment and between artist and artwork. This book is equally indebted to the work of anthropologist Alfred Gell. Gell's formulation of

an 'art nexus',<sup>v</sup> which mapped the agent-patient relationships embodied in artworks, has been fundamental to this research. Here I suggest that one could easily apply Gell's art nexus (1998), in which he outlines the multiple agencies at play within the art object, to the complex agent-patient relation embodied in a garment and to the particular affective properties of the worn and used. Finally, this book is deeply informed by the works of phenomenologists Paul Schiller (1935) and Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1962), in particular their development of the ideas of a 'bodily schema', a conceptualization of the bodily self which included not just the body or mind, but the habitual material culture of the self: glasses, garments, furniture and tools.

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### The shoe as subject

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Shoes are among the most ubiquitous items of material culture, and among the most symbolically and culturally loaded. Across multiple cultures and societies shoes are used as metaphors for behaviours, moralities and lives, becoming signifiers of social status, rites of passage and different forms of enfranchisement. Shoes and their representations are pervasive, from the shoes on our feet, to those standing empty in shops, museums and memorials. From fairy tales to advertisements, the image of the shoe has multiple iterations and forms. The shoe is, to borrow Freud's (1900) term, an 'over-determined' object, the bearer of a multiplicity of meanings. Yet in spite of its ubiquity, the everyday and used shoe is under-represented in current writing on clothing and the body.

This book explores our relationship with and attachment to shoes. Focusing upon the shoe as an everyday object, and on the embodied experience of wearing, it examines how through use we become entangled with the things we wear. Though it

focuses on footwear, this book asks broader questions about the garments we wear, calling upon the reader to consider wearing as a transactional relationship and to reconsider the value of things which are marked and worn. It asks, in a culture preoccupied with – and a fashion system predicated upon – newness, 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? How are our relationships to clothing produced and maintained through the embodied and bodily practices of wearing, cleaning and repair? With the dominance of fast fashion, and the prevalence of semi-disposable garments, this book asks the timely and important questions: Why do we hold on to a well-worn sweater, or a pair of shoes we no longer wear? Why might the abandoned shoes of a stranger evoke such pathos or an infant's shoe compel us to reminisce? What, in a culture of mass consumption, is the affective power and value of the worn and used?

Frequently the shoe is framed as both everyday (and therefore vulgar or mundane) and superficial (a site of spurious feminine desire or of capitalism gone mad). When the shoe is addressed, it is usually interpreted as a signifier of identity, or as a marker of cultural or social capital<sup>vi</sup>. In fashion studies, footwear is often addressed in terms of its symbolic function or the narratives ascribed to it: for what it represents rather than for what it is. Whilst no artefact is ever free of its role as a signifier, this focus on the shoe as metaphor, signifier or symbol obfuscates the shoe's material presence. Though shoes undoubtedly do function as symbols in the language of fashion, they warrant further study as material objects in themselves. Frequently, there is a confusion between representations of shoes and shoes as material artefacts; literary or pictorial images of shoes are often discussed interchangeably with real shoes. Footwear has multiple representations within literature and the visual arts, from fairy tales and folklore to painting, sculpture and film. However, it is important to make a distinction between

representations of shoes and the shoe as a material artefact (and, I would extrapolate, between representations of clothing and garments themselves more generally). The shoe described within a fairy tale or painting has no material form; it is an image of a thing rather than a 'thing' itself. This image may allude or refer to the real or material shoe, but equally it may not. Though our interactions with the material may be mediated by the symbolic, and the symbolic may create a framework through which we read or interpret artefacts, the material shoe and its representations should not be confused.

As garments, shoes are unusual in that the same pair is often worn day after day for extended periods of time. The shoe, unlike a shirt, a dress or a pair of trousers, is not laundered between wears, but instead becomes increasingly bodily and individualized with each wear. The shoe as a structured garment does not enfold and wrap the foot, as a softer fabric garment might,<sup>vii</sup> but, over an extended period of time, stretches and alters to accommodate the foot. One has only to think of blisters and bloody heels from wearing-in new shoes to know that the shoe is not always an altogether accommodating artefact. Importantly, shoes impact upon – and occasionally determine – their wearer's ability to walk. The shoes we wear often impact upon our mobility and motility, the experience of our bodies in motion. Footwear affords us the ability to walk, just as a chair affords us the chance to sit. This book seeks to address the shoe as a material and bodily object, as a garment that mediates the boundaries between the self and the world. It explores the relationship between the wearer and the worn, between the shoe and the foot – footwear as a vessel for the body, and also as a vessel for the self, carrying the wearer through the world.

## The research process

This book draws upon my doctoral practice-based research undertaken at the Royal College of Art, London. The research sought to examine the embodied experience of wearing and how the material outcomes of wear – the marks of use – embody experience. In doing this it sought to make explicit our intimate, and at times uncomfortable, relationship with the material and worn shoe, and to highlight the materiality of our relationships with the things we wear. In doing so, this research sought to position our relationships with clothing, the ways we acquire, wear and dispose of them, as a form of social relations, suggesting that clothing should be understood as an active agent (rather than as a conduit for other agencies) in our entanglements with it. It asked what methodologies could be employed to examine a commonplace but over-determined artefact – a thing which is simultaneously fetishized and mundane? How might one bring into focus the experience of artefacts, which are obfuscated by their everyday nature, and what, in turn, might that focus reveal? Rather than drawing on a social science methodology of object-based interviews or participant observation, or historical research into archival objects, this research utilized processes of wearing and performance to examine our attachments to, and relationships with, our shoes (see Chapter I for a lengthier discussion of my research methodology).

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This research interrogated our bodily and embodied experience of shoes through the act of wearing. In selecting wearing as a research methodology, I sought to untangle the way we, through touch and use, become attached to our clothes. It utilized walking both as a way of being in the world and of meeting the other bodies (human and non-human) which affect us and that we, in turn, affect: exploring the ways we are changed

in our encounters, as are our clothes. By placing myself at the centre of my research, making my body the means through which it was enacted, it sought to emphasize the enagled nature of our relationships with the things we wear.. These experiences were recorded both in 'wearing diaries' and in the marks of wear, marks which were then photographed<sup>viii</sup> and filmed.

My research – like the object of its study, the shoe – was paired, resulting in two distinct but interdependent manifestations of knowledge – the written and the bodily material. Though the text and the artefacts were designed to sit alongside one another, they are not analogous. These different forms of knowing informed each other, each building upon the knowledge developed by the other. The two bodies of knowledge may complement and contextualize each other but do not attempt to describe one another. Goett, writing of the relationship between text and artefact in her research practice, articulates a similar position: 'Its task is neither to describe ... nor to explain the artwork and thereby reduce its meaning, taking away from the receiver a multitude of potential links to be made beyond the stated and verbalised intentions of the artist' (Goett 2009: 82). The artefacts are auto-ethnographic objects, objects which directly embody experience. This writing does not describe their making through wear, because it is manifest within them, visible in the marks imprinted upon their form. These non-verbal records, embedded in the artworks, do not require translation into words, because they themselves embody a form of knowledge, which is apparent and available for those who view them. The text here is not a theoretical framework designed to shore up ambiguous artefacts, but is an alternative manifestation of the same ideas and processes. Neither are the artefacts and images designed as illustrations to the text. Word and object complement one another, each saying something the other may not.

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## Book structure

The book's structure follows a relationship with a pair of shoes: leading the reader from acquisition through walking and wearing to maintenance and repair. It then explores the material outcomes of wear, the creases and scuffs which are records of use. Finally, it explores the shoe away from the body, the empty shoe in archives, galleries or memorials. The nine chapters start with a methodological discussion which foregrounds wearing as a means of doing material culture research. Next 'Objects of desire' – a chapter which presents the shoe as an over-determined object, one capable of conveying many meanings. This chapter first seeks to contextualize this discussion within the multiple ways footwear has been interpreted and read. It gives a brief overview of some of these approaches to footwear, to think about the shoe as an object of fantasy and desire. It looks at the ways that the shoe is presented as an object of desire both in everyday life and in literature and the arts – with a particular focus on footwear in fairy tale. The chapter also provides an overview of current literature about shoes, looking at the way schools of both fashion and folklore studies and psychoanalysis have interrogated and interpreted footwear. Finally, it highlights the power of empty shoes, the capacity to function as both symbolic and material stand-ins for absent bodies. The next chapter, 'Wearing', addresses the experience of new shoes, of the foot encased in the shoe and the tactile experience of wearing. The chapter commences with the purchase of new shoes and a brief overview of the cultural significations frequently assigned to footwear. It positions the maintenance of clothing both as an act of restitution, of making amends for the damage done to garments, and as a form of self-care, of tending to the distributed parts of the self which constitute the 'bodily schema'.

Next, it considers the experience of wearing shoes, the tactile and reciprocal relationship of touch and counter-touch between the shoe and the foot. The third chapter, 'Walking', examines footwear's ability to mediate our relationships with the world: to help or hinder the way we walk, move and interact. Walking holds a particular place in culture; not only are our movements learned, but they are also socially and culturally specific. Walking, almost more than any other activity, renders us social beings. Taking a phenomenological approach to our relationships with clothing and the environment, this chapter positions our interactions with the material world as meetings of bodies, encounters with other agencies than our own. In walking, the body, the self and the personal accoutrements that make up our material culture are placed on display.

The 'Cleaved garment' interrogates the intimacies of these relationships, exploring the ways that the self and the garment may become entwined – the processes of entanglement and intermingling that occur through making and wearing clothes. How through making and wearing clothes, the garment and the self become cleaved, to and from one another. It presents the processes of making and of using garments as both a negotiation with the garment's materiality and the projection of the user's fantasy on to their material form – a process through which the maker or user's agency becomes entangled with the material agency of the garment. It draws upon the work of anthropologists Strathern (1988) and Weiner (1992) to present wearing and making clothes as interlinked forms of entanglement- the displacement and distribution of persons into things and things into persons. Next 'the empty shoe: imprint, memory and the marks of experience', examines the material traces of this relationship, the ways they are embodied within the materiality of artefacts themselves. This chapter considers the manifestations of wear: the scuffs, wrinkles and creases which make apparent the relationships of wearing. Over time, garments become records of lived experience,

covered with the marks of use. Our garments are simultaneously signifiers of identity, participants in and witnesses to our embodied experience. How do these traces of use become manifestations of the passage of time, and how they might be viewed and read? It asks, if cleaning garments is an attempt to restore the symbolic order (cf. Douglas 1966), what might the erasure or reduction of the marks of experience mean?

'Encounters and affects: garments, and the memory nexus' maps the multiple relationships between memory and the things we wear. This chapter shifts to focus on the encounter with the worn and used garment away from the body, exploring the different ways these bodiless things may affect us as viewers. The mnemonic functions of clothing have become an increasingly important strand of research in fashion and dress. Many different mnemonic and recollective processes and experiences are grouped under the umbrella term of 'clothing and memory': from those that relate to our own clothing to those that involve the clothing of others. This chapter seeks to identify the different means through which clothing acts upon us as viewer, through the construction of a 'memory nexus' of the ways that clothing, experience and affect intersect. The final chapter 'Worn: imprint, attachment and the affective encounter' seeks to untangle the particular affect of the worn shoe as a record of lives lived and paths walked. It begins to unravel the web of connections and affordances that produce our relationships to our own clothing and that of others; it uncovers the ways that the worn garment may act upon us, to explore how garments and people may become entwined. This chapter seeks to highlight the particular affect of viewing the used and worn shoe; to examine how the traces of intermingling might impact upon the viewer—how are the marks of an absent body understood? What is the affect of this absence of presence, this trace? Interspersed between the chapters are extracts from the wearing diary that I kept as I wore and walked in the shoes I made. These notes are auto-

ethnographic field-notes on the experience of the body in clothes: a reminder that this research was performed and lived, as well as thought, written and made.

[Fig 0.12 here]

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<sup>i</sup> There is an unacknowledged violence in wearing which, I think, unsettles us; in wearing, we destroy our clothes.

<sup>iii</sup> This shift, from the subjectivity of desire to the subjectivity of experience, is one which, I suggest, makes a considerable difference to the understanding of the things we wear.

<sup>iv</sup> See Miller 2005, Ingold 2013, Connor 2011, Hodder 2012 and Sennett 2008.

<sup>v</sup> The art nexus was for Gell (1998) a means of mapping the ways that artworks act upon us (their affect or aura) and the agencies which those artworks embodied. Taking the viewer as the 'patient' upon which the artwork's agency is enacted, Gell maps the relationships between the different agents and agencies that went into the artefact's production.

<sup>vi</sup> Fetish shoes (Steele & Hill 2013), hip-hop trainers (Heard 2008, Turner 2018) and fairy-tale shoes (Davidson 2006, 2015, Sampson 2016) have all been examined for their symbolic function and cultural capital.

<sup>vii</sup> Clearly not all garments enfold the body; a garment that is too tight, too loose or cut wrongly for the body upon which it is placed will constantly remind (and discipline) the wearer. Though traditionally undergarments have served as disciplining garments (bras, girdles, corsets and the like), stiff materials like denim may have a similar effect. Eco, in the essay 'Lumbar Thought', writes of the bodily experience of being gripped by his jeans: 'As a result, I lived in the knowledge that I had jeans on, whereas normally we live forgetting that we're wearing undershorts or trousers. I lived for my jeans, and as a result I assumed the exterior behaviour of one who wears jeans. In any case, I assumed a demeanour. It's strange that the traditionally most informal and anti-etiquette garment should be the one that so strongly imposes an etiquette. As a rule, I am boisterous, I sprawl in a chair, I slump wherever I please, with no claim to elegance: my blue jeans checked these actions, made me more polite and mature. I discussed it at length, especially with consultants, of the opposite sex, from whom I learned what, for that matter, I had already suspected: that for women experiences of this kind are familiar because all their garments are conceived to impose a demeanour – high heels, girdles, brassieres, pantyhose, tight sweaters' (Eco 1986: 192).

<sup>viii</sup> Over the course of this research, image making emerged as an integral aspect of my research practice. Initially the images were documentary (see Fig. 11 Images from Archives), their aim being to record or highlight aspects of wear (see Fig. 10). The intimate and enlarged images serve to highlight the marks of wear in a manner that was affective: taking photographs as a means of looking closely. The image making became a process of uncovering the intimate and hidden parts of the shoe, making these spaces unavoidably present.