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The affect of fashion: An exploration of affective method

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Abstract

Fashion enchants, engrosses, caresses, itches, restrains, liberates, enfolds, reveals, protects and provokes. This article researches fashion's ability to affect, and vice versa, how humans are affected by fashion. The first part introduces the main tenets of affect theory, while the second part of the article focuses on the pragmatics of affective method. We understand affect as both an autonomous force and a neurobiological bodily response to a trigger that offsets feelings and emotions. To practically engage with affective experiences and the bodily sensations, feelings and emotions they evoke, we use Laura U. Marks's affective analysis as a method. We describe our experiments with this affective method using two case studies: a couture dress designed by Dutch fashion designer Jan Taminiau and a simple T-shirt produced by fast fashion giant Primark. The case studies illustrate the affective qualities of fashion by researching embodied responses, feelings and emotions. The affective method aims to circumvent representation by focusing on

the body and how it relates to what fashion can 'do'. It also allows for a sustained focus on the materiality of the fashion object itself. The article argues that affective method is a valuable and compelling tool that can break open material fashion research, by foregrounding the embodied experiences, feelings and emotions that play a key role in our relationship with fashion.

Affect: What fashion 'does'

From the itchy wool sweater to the ego-boosting business suit, human bodies are touched and influenced by fashion almost 24 hours a day. Fashion, material or immaterial, has the power to move and affect humans. This affective power can take many shapes as fashion enchants, engrosses, caresses, itches, restrains, liberates, enfolds, reveals, protects and provokes. Affective encounters with fashion have the power to form and change both humans and matter in a mutual process (Slaby and Muhlhoff 2018: 27).

We understand affect as 'a body's *capacity* to affect and be affected' (Gregg and Seigworth 2010: 2, original emphasis). Many of us remember a favourite piece of clothing we wore to threads, for instance, a pair of trousers we had to let go of with pain in our hearts because incessant wearing destroyed the fabric on the knees and the seat beyond repair. Our bodies are affected by this garment and affect the garment in return by its wear and tear. The emotional connection we establish with the garment is mediated by the embodied affective experience that precedes it. Affects are moments of intensity, where the body – as matter – responds to an experience (O'Sullivan 2001: 25).

It is important to make clear from the start that affect is not the same as feelings or emotions; affect is neither personal nor individual. Affect is in fact a bio-neurological response to an experience, for example, the hairs standing up in your neck when you watch a gruesome scene in a horror movie. Affects are thus expressed in the body or in-between bodies – human or non-human. Affects are located outside the realm of representation and language. Only when an affect becomes processed by the individual does it turn into a personal feeling: fear or disgust in the case of the movie. Feelings turn into emotions when they are expressed and shared with others. For example, when you cry on someone else's shoulder because of love sickness, you not only express your personal feeling but share the emotion. As Eric Shouse (2005) clarifies: 'feelings are *personal* and *biographical*, emotions are *social*, and affects are *prepersonal*' (2005: 2, original emphasis). In this article, we work with the notion of affect as a pre-personal or impersonal force that helps to acknowledge both the relational, constitutive power of affect and the effects of this affective power in humans – the bodily sensations and the feelings and emotions that can ensue.

Working with the notion of affect in fashion studies asks for a dedicated theoretical perspective that allows for an investigation of the non-representational aspects of fashion. This offers a fresh

approach to fashion that takes the role of matter, the body and the senses more seriously (Ruggerone 2017; Smelik 2018). The importance of the body for fashion has of course been recognized by Joanne Entwistle in *The Fashioned Body* (2000), but her focus on fashion as an embodied practice of dressing did not yet take into account what fashion does on an affective level. Affect theory offers a tool to explore the non-representational aspects of fashion, as it seeks to focus on the bodily, non-rational and non-individual processes that shape life (Leys 2011).

Affect has gained some notoriety as an elusive, vague and contentious concept, and reading the introduction of *The Affect Theory Reader* one could understand why: affect is consecutively described as extrusion, impingement, force, encounter, intensity, attunement, atmosphere, potential, bodily capacity, shimmer and in-between (Gregg and Seigworth 2010). In this article, we will first explain the genealogy of the concept of affect and then develop an 'affective methodology' for the study of fashion. This article invites fashion scholars to consider affect theory and affective method as qualitative tools for investigating non-representational manifestations of fashion, i.e., what fashion 'does' to us on an embodied and preconscious level. We hope to show what an affective method can achieve by integrating experiential data into fashion research.

There are several reasons why a theoretical approach to affect is of interest for the study of fashion. First of all, put simply, it helps to bring forward the affective doings and undoings of fashion: why do we love or hate our skinny jeans, a loose-fitting sweater, a formal dress or a double-breasted two- or even three-piece suit? An affective research practice helps to gain a better understanding of fashion's pre-rational workings. Understanding the inherent non-rationality of affect may explain the ambivalent relations that humans have with fashion.

Secondly, an affective approach to the study of fashion may allow us to work with material objects of fashion, until now mainly studied in object-based research with its roots in museology, art history or material culture studies (for the latter, see Woodward 2019). Now that some fashion researchers start to work from a sensitivity to the material world inspired by new materialist and posthuman perspectives (Smelik 2018, 2020; Vänskä 2018; Kaiser and Smelik 2020), there is a need for a material research method that offers a way of investigating fashion objects from these perspectives. An affective method could offer a relatively simple tool that helps researchers to work with the affective qualities of fashion's matter. With its focus on the pre-rational, the pre-social and the pre-cultural, affect theory opens up a space for non-humans and inanimate matter, acknowledging that all of these actants, human or not, are entangled in affective processes.

Finally, affective research is versatile. It can be deployed to study material fashion objects, but it can also be used for the research of representations of fashion in the form of photo shoots, fashion photography, fashion film or digital media like blogs and Instagram. In our view, the theory of affect provides a productive addition to theories of fashion that focus on meaning and the symbolic,

because affective analysis combines experiential, embodied data with a translation of these data into the representational world of language.

In the first part of the article, we introduce the main tenets of affect theory and discuss examples of affective fashion research that makes use of these theories. The second part of the article focuses on the pragmatics of affect theory. To practically engage with affective experiences and the bodily sensations, feelings and emotions they evoke, we selected Laura U. Marks's affective analysis (2018) as a method. We will describe our experiments with this affective method using two case studies, one from high fashion and one from fast fashion: a couture dress designed by Dutch fashion designer Jan Taminiau and a simple T-shirt produced for fast fashion giant Primark. The case studies serve to illustrate how affective method can be used to research the affective qualities of fashion by working with embodied responses, feelings and emotions. The research is set up as an experiment, meaning that the main goal is to try out the method and assess what works and what does not. Moreover, we investigate whether such an affective method has the potential to convey compelling results. We combine these experiential data with different theories of affect in order to interpret what fashion 'does'.

The affective turn

In the early nineties of the last century, the interest in affect surged in the fields of sociology, political theory, cultural studies, literary studies, philosophy, human geography, queer studies and gender studies (Leys 2017). According to Ruth Leys (2011), affect theory can be seen as a response to 'the poststructuralist emphasis on language and psychoanalysis, a reaction also motivated by the view that the body in its lived materiality has been neglected in the humanities and social sciences' (2011: 440–41).

Brian Ott (2017) discerns two major strands of affect theory as well as a hybrid combination of the two. The first is the philosophical approach to affect. This lineage starts with the seventeenth-century philosopher Spinoza and is further developed in the twentieth century by Bergson, Deleuze, Deleuze and Guattari, Massumi and others. The philosophical branch of affect theory is rooted in Spinoza's *Ethics*. In this work, Spinoza distinguishes between *affectus*, an autonomous force that is 'found in those intensities that pass body to body (human, non-human, part-body and otherwise)' (Gregg and Seigworth 2010: 1) and *affectio*, the specific way in which *affectus* modifies the human body, increasing or diminishing the power of that same body (Spinoza 1992).

Spinoza's work on affect was adopted and reworked by Gilles Deleuze. Deleuze moves away from the Cartesian disconnection between mind and matter, presenting a vital materialism in which thinking and matter are always intertwined. Importantly, for Deleuze, affect is immanent

to matter (O'Sullivan 2001: 26). The notion of affect also plays an important role in Deleuze's works written in cooperation with Félix Guattari. In their philosophy, they argue that the essence or being is replaced with 'becoming'. All that is alive is in a constant flux, driven by the generative force of affect as a 'potential for becoming' (Roelvink and Zolkos 2015: 2). Humans and non-humans alike are shot through with forces, intensities or affects, in a continuous process of creative transformations.

Simon O'Sullivan (2001) shows the relevance of the Deleuzian notion of affect for understanding art and aesthetics outside the familiar frame of representation, an approach that can be of interest for researching art-like expressions of fashion. O'Sullivan aims to sidestep representation by asking 'what a particular art object can do' rather than what it means (2001: 130). Art moves us. It may have a meaning too, but art's function is to move, to open up portals to a different world. O'Sullivan argues that the work of art produces affects in the spectator. Shifting the focus to what art 'does' to the reader, listener or spectator does not imply that art has no meaning but rather that art has a meaning through its affect. We will show the relevance of this approach to Jan Taminiau's fashion designs in the second part of this article.

The second approach to affect proposes a psychological perspective that has its roots in the theory of Sylvan Tomkins developed in the 1950s, brought back to attention by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Adam Frank (1995). Tomkins' theory of affect is centred around the idea that affects are reactions within the biological body that constitute our primary motivational system (Leys 2017: 34). Tomkins discerns nine different affect 'programmes': interest, surprise, joy, anger, fear, distress, disgust, shame and contempt (Leys 2017: 33). When these affect 'programmes' are triggered, they encourage us to act (Ott 2017: 4). The triggers can be both internal and external. Tomkins' affects are reactions within the biological body; they are innate, inherited, non-cognitive and located outside of the sociocultural realm (Leys 2017: 34). Although Tomkins' bio-neurological theory of affect is little used on its own, several of his ideas have leaked into other theories on affect.

The two perspectives, the philosophical and psychological-neuroscientific, have been brought together by theorists from the humanities, such as Brian Massumi, Lawrence Grossberg, Lauren Berlant, Sarah Ahmed and Sianne Ngai (Ott 2017: 1). The complication here is that the philosophical understanding of affect is non-individual, while the psychological notion of affect requires an individual subject. This gap can be bridged by understanding that both notions of affect are in fact intertwined: the non-individual affect as a force is the catalyst for the bodily reactions and the feelings and emotions that ensue. Here we can come back to the earlier discernment among personal feelings, social emotions and pre-personal affect (Shouse 2005). Although not all affects necessarily provoke feelings and emotions, all feelings and emotions are precipitated by affects. Our practical approach to affective fashion research means we work with the signs or traces of affect in humans: bodily reactions, feelings and emotions.

The concept of affect for fashion studies

Affect theory has left its mark on cultural studies, sociology, media studies and many other disciplines since the second half of the nineties of the last century. However, it took a relatively long time for affect theory to gain ground in fashion studies. Although not explicitly using affect theory as a starting point, fashion scholars have investigated the connection between fashion and emotion, often in relation to memory and to daily practice.¹ In recent years, some fashion researchers have introduced affect theory to fashion studies. Eugenie Shinkle (2012) uses affect theory to analyse fashion photography, arguing that biological registers of image perception play a significant role in how meaning is derived from fashion imagery. Roberto Filippello (2018) uses the work of affect theorists to investigate the queerness of fashion photography. Also, in ethnographic studies, the notion of affect has been applied. In her auto-ethnographic approach to fashion design, for instance, Julia Valle-Noronha (2019) underlines material agency as an affective force in the design process. Also, Magdalena Petersson McIntyre (2019) shows how affective research in fashion studies can make use of methods from wardrobe studies; in this case, ethnographic diary and diary analysis. She investigates the affective relationships people develop with their clothing and the complex web of affects that influence behaviours surrounding sustainable fashion consumption.

Some other recent articles have made Deleuze's notion of affect – as a force or intensity of becoming – available for fashion studies. Stephen Seely sees the high fashion of designers like Alexander McQueen, Gareth Pugh, Hussein Chalayan and Rei Kawakubo as 'affective fashions' that harness 'the body's capacities for transformation and provoke the body to become otherwise' (2013: 253). Anneke Smelik (2014, 2016) explains how the Deleuzian concepts of 'becoming', the fold and the Body-Without-Organs, can be theoretical tools to revitalize the study of fashion. She shows, for example, how fashion designers like Viktor & Rolf 'create conditions to actualise multiple becomings' in the play of folds in their designs (Smelik 2014: 53). Lucia Ruggerone sets out to investigate the feeling of being dressed by interpreting the 'event of selecting and wearing clothes' as an 'encounter between a human body and objects that initiates a process of mutual becoming' (2017: 580). Using the philosophical concept of affect, these articles argue that practices of fashion are processual and relational, having the power to change both the wearer and the spectator. In our article, we attempt to bridge the more abstract Deleuzian notion of affect with a more hands-on methodology, as we will develop below.

1. For instance, Gibson (2015), Jenss (2015), Stallybrass (1993), Woodward (2007), Clarke and Miller (2002), Miller and Woodward (2012), Fletcher and Grimstad Klepp (2017) and Klepp and Bjerck (2014).

How to research what fashion does: Affective methods

Now that we have described the main positions in affect theory, clarified our position on affect and explained how affect can be productive for fashion research, we pursue a practical approach by developing an 'affective methodology'. We advocate a practical approach that helps, on the one

hand, explain the affect of fashion and, on the other hand, engage with the materiality of fashion. Our approach to the research is experimental and has two objectives. The first is to test an affective method and assess whether it works for analysing fashion. The second goal is to establish whether an embodied sensibility towards the fashion object can generate meaningful data that inform fresh perspectives on fashion. If we are to practise research that focuses on fashion's non-representational affective powers, we will have to use methods that are suitable to this project, helping the researcher to register, trace and describe processes and relations invoked by affect. In other words, we have tried to develop an affective method to find out what fashion can *do*: how it affects us. Instead of being preoccupied with signification, affective research aims towards a co-creative working in tandem with the subject, acknowledging the subject's agential, affective powers as well as the researcher's position as embedded, situated and embodied. Moreover, affective method allows us to bring the bodily and emotional reactions of the researcher into the research.

Marks (2018) has devised an affective method that connects an embodied, affective and emotional engaging with cultural products. Marks's affective method was originally developed for the analysis of films, but it can be used for analysing any work of art. She employs a threefold method, Affect-Percept-Concept, which is based on Deleuze and Guattari's analysis of aesthetics (1994). Her approach builds on the notion of affect as a force that does something to the individual from the outside. In analysing what is experienced 'in' the body, the affective force that was the catalyst for this experience is acknowledged, and the sequence affect-experience-feeling-emotion can be put to use for analysing an artefact.

The method consists of three main steps by tracing the Affect, Percept and Concept of an artwork or, in our case, a fashion design or a piece of clothing. First, in the affect phase, the researcher tries to identify affective responses or involuntary thoughts, for instance, autonomic nervous system responses like sweating, goose bumps, arousal, etc. If this yields no results, two extra steps can be introduced by trying to identify 'feelings'; bodily responses that are probably culturally informed, for instance, smiling, frowning, cringing, embarrassment, stepping back from the object, etc. A next step can be to note the 'emotions'.

Second, in the percept phase, the researcher is invited to describe her sensory perceptions. What can be seen, what is audible, what can be smelled and what does an object feel like when it is touched? If this is possible, because Marks notes that 'even our sincerest acts of perception are menaced by habit' (2018: 153). In the act of perceiving, we already started to make assumptions about what is before us. Affective analysis invites us to postpone immediate recognition in order to create a precise description of our perceptions.

Third, in the concept stage, the researcher compares the affects and percepts she has identified and comes up with a 'well-formed concept', which Marks describes as 'an adequate idea that increases understanding' (2018: 155). In case the researcher does not come up with anything, Marks

advises to reevaluate the process, suggesting that this lack of concept can be meaningful in itself. The concept can take the form of an elaboration on the ideas generated by the affect and the percept phase. All phases can be revisited in an iterative process, adding more layers to the concept.

The method is meant to forego on the representational aspect, yet Marks recognizes that ‘perception is, of course, shaped by history and culture’ (2018: 153). She argues that by taking into account bodily responses, the researcher creates a pause to halt the immediate construction of a viable interpretation. This creates the possibility of a research outcome that is less informed by prior knowledge and bias. In the first case study, we make an affective analysis of our own responses to a high fashion design by the Dutch designer Jan Taminiau. In the second case study, we apply the affective method by working with a research participant buying a T-shirt from the fast fashion brand Primark.

An affective analysis of a fashion design by Jan Taminiau

Jan Taminiau is one of the better-known fashion designers in the Netherlands, as he regularly creates designs for the royal family and, especially, for the Dutch Queen Máxima (Smelik 2017). The dress we picked for our analysis was part of a retrospective exhibition at the Centraal Museum in the Netherlands in 2018, entitled *Jan Taminiau: Reflections*, which we both visited several times. We selected this particular dress for our case study because it evoked a stronger affective reaction than the other objects on display at the exhibition. Our bodies reacted with physical sensations when catching sight of the blue dress. We subjected these physical experiences to an affective analysis by following Marks’s three-step affective analysis: we tried to identify affects and percepts in order to develop a concept.

In the first phase – analysing affect – we recorded our bodily reactions, which included for one of us a slight tingling at the nape of the neck and for the other a slight sensation in the stomach and for both an inclination to hold our breath. We then took a seat next to it, allowing for more bodily reactions, feelings and emotions to arise. The object conjured a strange fascination, at the same time evoking awe and a feeling of smallness and unsettlement. In close vicinity to the object, the sense of unsettlement slowly disappeared and a sense of pleasure emerged. We concluded that Taminiau’s fashion design induced a compelling mix of mild fear and gentle joy.

In the second phase – analysing percept – we looked very carefully at the object and saw that this undulating form is made out of many dark blue tulle flower-like forms sewn together. The form is mounted on a frame that is invisible to the eye. It towers over the researchers, fluffy yet massive. A small silver belt is placed at the level of the ‘knees’ rather than the waist, and where the opening for the neck should be there is a huge ‘head’. There are no openings for the arms. We concluded that this fashion design is neither a sculpture nor a dress, hovering in between categories.

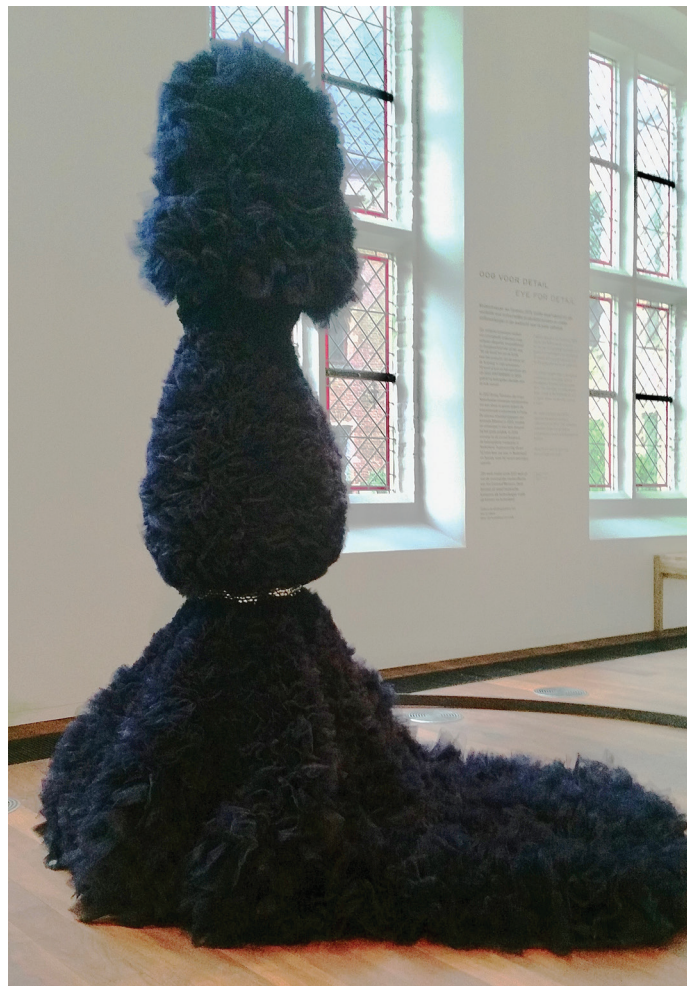


Figure 1: Jan Taminiau, dark blue dress in tulle from Poetic Clash Collection (2012), as exhibited at the Central Museum Utrecht (the Netherlands, 2018). Photograph: M. A. Van Tienhoven.

In the third phase – deriving at a concept – we compared the collected experiential data from the first two phases. Working from the percept back to affect, we agreed that the form alludes to the classic form of the female body, yet deconstructs it at the same time. The dark blue colour makes the object look stern and unyielding in spite of the fluffy material. The bodily experience of awe could be explained by both the larger-than-human size and the strangeness of the object. The quite overwhelming size and the odd, undefined, shape together produced a menacing effect. There was a rather brief affective reaction of fear. Yet, the secondary reaction that immediately followed was an experience of pleasure. The material quality of the design could account for that; the direct threat of the object was diminished by its weightlessness, an assessment we can make due to former experiences with the material of tulle. We concluded that we could not decide what this object was because conventional signs that indicate a dress, such as a neck opening, sleeve openings, a recognizable body shape and the visible presence of a mannequin, were missing. If we were to summarize the concept, we would have concluded that the concept of this dress from the *Poetic Clash Collection* was ambiguity.² By comparing the affects and percepts of this dress with those evoked by the other objects on display we revisit the conceptual phase using a notion of affect that is more social in nature.

None of the other designs on display had such a strong affect, although we were generally impressed with the display of craftsmanship, glamour and beauty. As the difference between our affective response to the blue dress and the other objects in the exhibition was significant, we decided to compare our affective reactions to the other objects on display. Tuning in to our feelings and emotions revealed a sense of pleasure in the intricate craft and the beauty of the outfits. Yet, at times, a kind of irritation set in, because it was hard to connect with the garments as they were literally and figuratively ‘out of reach’. All objects were displayed on size-zero mannequins, and the materials were rich and often intricately hand-embroidered with beads. The designs exuded beauty, glamour and wealth. The fact that Taminiau regularly designs gowns for Queen Máxima of the Netherlands, most notably the spectacular ‘royal blue’ gown for the inauguration of the royal couple in 2013, indicates just how exclusive the designs are. To be honest, an ‘ugly feeling’ of envy made itself felt, of being excluded from this world of beauty that is only accessible to the rich and famous. This in turn made us feel ashamed; after all, feelings of envy are petty and unseemly certainly in the middle of visiting an exhibition in a museum.

In trying to make sense of this affect, we turn to Sianne Ngai’s notion of ‘ugly feelings’ (2004). Ngai explains our twofold reaction: the ‘ugly feeling’ of envy is followed by shame (2004: 10). She argues that the concept of envy has been traditionally described as an internal feeling; as a term describing ‘a *subject* who lacks rather than the subject’s affective *response* to a perceived inequality’ (Ngai 2004: 126, original emphasis). This insight helped us understand what happened. By acknowledging envy instead of disavowing it we admitted to feelings of exclusion; the objects on display

2. Several fashion scholars have argued that fashion is inherently ambiguous as a social sign, for instance, Wilson (1985), Davis (1994), Kaiser et al. (1991) and Kaiser (2012).

3. An exception is Miller and Woodward on the humble blue jeans (2012).

were to be looked at in reverence rather than to be possessed. According to Ngai, all 'ugly feelings', the feelings we are supposed to denounce and disavow, stem from the 'predicament of suspended agency' and the experience of 'systemic political and economic disenfranchisement' (2004: 12). Ngai thus puts envy fully in the social world instead of understanding it as a personal deficiency. We can then interpret our feeling of envy as an appropriate evaluation of the inequalities of consumer capitalism instead of seeing these feelings as shameful character deficits.

Our affective analysis has revealed that the fashion objects on display that were recognizable as dresses evoked a different affective response than the more abstract design of the fluffy blue dress. In this respect, Simon O'Sullivan's understanding of the affect of aesthetics is helpful. The dark blue dress in the exhibition behaved as an artwork: 'less involved in making sense of the world and more involved in exploring the possibilities of being, of becoming, in the world' (O'Sullivan 2001: 130). This object created a 'fissure in representation' (O'Sullivan 2001: 128), a moment of instability, of doubt. It was thus able to transform 'if only for a small moment, our sense of "selves" and our notion of the world' (O'Sullivan 2001: 128). The dress defied conventional ideas about fashion and beauty and, in doing so, opens up to a moment of 'becoming'. Smelik has argued that the intricate folds of such avant-garde designs 'push the limits of what a body can do and what it can become', as the shape of the dress undoes the dominant ideal of the female body (2014: 50). Cut loose from its functionality, the object produced in us an affect that allowed for a resonance with the very materiality of the dress: billowing blue fluffs of tulle sending shudders first of strangeness and slight fear but then of awe and admiration down our spines. Of course, we are aware that we are both acquainted with the field of fashion, so that we may have been more open to the strong affect of experimental designs.

When we looked up the collection on the internet weeks later, we could not help but feeling slightly disappointed: the dark blue dress worn by a model is, after all, a voluminous gown ticking all the boxes of conventional notions of glamour and beauty.

'Fearless': Buying a T-shirt at Primark

In fashion studies, the humble high street fashion item is not much researched.³ To add to our analysis of a high fashion dress, we therefore decided to analyse a simple Primark T-shirt. Affective research of popular commercial fashion may help gain more insight into consumer behaviour and the affective processes that shape it.

We decided to work with a volunteer research participant instead of using our own experiential data. We did so to forestall the impact of prior professional knowledge that may have influenced our own affective response to Taminiu's dress. Moreover, we wanted to know if it is possible to 'read' the affective reactions of another person by simply observing. As we had no access to the immediate experiences of our research participant, we merged the affect phase and the perception phase of

the analysis, using both our observations and the affective and perceptive remarks by the participant. Our strategy was to attune to the affective reactions of the research participant by closely observing the physical reactions as well as paying attention to the affective registers of his speech. We sometimes asked questions for clarification.

Our research participant was a 44-year-old man holding a degree in mechanical engineering: someone who had an interest in fashion but no formal knowledge of the field. He explained that he mostly shopped online for branded clothing. We noticed that he had a slight bias against Primark as a cheap high street chain when he told us he had avoided the store prior to our investigation. At the Primark in a provincial town in the Netherlands, we instructed H. to look for a garment that evoked strong feelings, either pleasant or unpleasant. We agreed beforehand that he was only allowed to select one garment. H. reported what he experienced in real time while we took notes. As we took the escalator to the men's department on the second floor, H. looked a little tense. H. started walking around the clothing racks, sometimes touching the clothes with his hands, or looking at a label. H. said: 'This is all really cheap, isn't it?' As he noticed the prices on the tags, he looked eager. H.: 'A lot of stuff looks like it is from the eighties. Look at these denim jackets, I had one like that. Is that a trend right now?' As he made these remarks, he held up a jacket with interest.

After about five minutes, H. made up his mind. He presented a T-shirt, explaining the item made him feel uncomfortable. He called the object 'unpleasant'. Holding up the clothes hanger with the T-shirt, he explained:

Look at the colours. They could have been nice but the combination is just ugly. The proportions of the colour blocks seem to be of the wrong size. And the lettering is too small. Look, it says 'Fearless', but the small typeface signals the exact opposite; it is more like 'Timid'.

From the verbalization of his affective response, he moved on to the perceptual phase, describing sensory perceptions. He touched the shirt and started stretching the shoulder seams: 'Here, this stitching will come apart after washing it a few times'. He then started picking at the transfer lettering: 'See? You can scratch off the lettering with your fingernails. The quality is really horrible, and the design is weird too. A pity, as the colours could have been nice in a way'. We noted his tone of voice was slightly agitated. He was asked how he felt when looking at and touching the T-shirt. Did he notice any bodily reactions? He had to think for a while, then said: 'I don't know, it was not very clear. I felt some kind of heaviness, like my heart was sinking. And some sort of desperation. I remember thinking "Why is this even made?"'.

For the first phase – analysing affect – we had to rely on our observation rather than what the research participant H. told us. We perceived a tensing of the subject's body, a surge of interest at seeing a particular object that evoked memories and a slight arousal when he looked at the price



Figures 2 and 3: 'Fearless' T-shirt, Primark, 2018. Photos: M. A. Van Tienhoven.

tags. These bodily signs were subtle yet unmistakable. This brought us immediately to the second phase – analysing percept. From listening to the research participant we noted that he shifted from irritation to eagerness and was moved by memories to feeling uncomfortable and heavy-hearted after his material inspection of the T-shirt. We could deduce this from his tone of voice and from the affective register of the words he used. Here we remark that affective bodily reactions were almost immediately mixed up with feelings and emotions and that it takes effort to keep them apart for the analysis. We were also impressed by the affective power of the material properties of the T-shirt for the research participant. This case study showed us just how important material characteristics of dress are and how they play a role in triggering, in this case, negative feelings and emotions.

When we compared affects and percepts to reach the third step of formulating a concept, we observed that there was one affective reaction that seemed incongruous. Even though the research

participant said he was repulsed by the very low prices of the clothes on display, his reaction to the price tag betrayed something different: there was a noticeable 'lighting up of the eyes'. We arrived at a summarizing concept: inconsistency of affect.

We revisit our concept by again using Sianne Ngai's explanation of the immediate disavowal of ugly feelings to account for this effect. H. briefly showed an affect of eagerness if not desire but repressed this immediately and instead expressed disgust. When prompted further, he told us he was brought up with the notion that money should be saved and not spent. While it is common to understand an affective reaction as personal and psychological, in fact, we witnessed here an affect (happiness at low prices) as cultural and ideological; i.e. as Dutch thriftiness and middle-class parsimony.

To further expand our concept, we decide to turn to Sarah Ahmed's notions of 'sticky affect' and the 'happy object' (2010). Ahmed introduces the term sticky affect to describe how objects can get imbued with happiness through causality, making them happy objects. We expect objects to do certain things to us based on earlier experiences with that same object: 'we apprehend an object as the cause of an affect' (Ahmed 2010: 40). This attribution is done retrospectively: 'Once an object is a feeling-cause, it can cause feeling, so that when we feel the feeling we expect to feel we are affirmed' (Ahmed 2010: 40). Obviously, in the case of our research participant, the 'Fearless' T-shirt was an 'unhappy object', to rephrase Ahmed. The sticky affect in this case was a negative feeling of disappointment and heavy-heartedness, which was reinforced by the subject's expectations of a Primark shopping experience. For H., this negative affect will probably stick to Primark as a brand.

The reactions of our research participant may not be shared by other customers: sales numbers suggest that for many customers, Primark offers an abundance of happy objects. To rework our concept once more, we turn towards Primark's affective marketing strategy. Where other high street retailers struggled in 2019 (pre-COVID-19 lockdowns), Primark saw its sales numbers increase in the United Kingdom in that same year (Jahshan 2019). Primark hardly uses advertising, but they have an active and cost-effective online strategy, making use of Facebook, Instagram, Google Plus and Pinterest (Caffyn 2016). The official Primark account on Instagram is filled with images made by enthusiastic customers. The social media turn Primark products into happy objects by the suggestion of being part of a worldwide network of happy Primark customers buying Primark's trendy clothing and home products. Because of the low prices, access to this network of happiness is not just for the happy few: one can buy a Primark T-shirt starting from three euros. Even though our affective analysis of the Primark T-shirt shows that its material properties can exude unpleasantness, we suspect that for most customers, the promise of happiness takes over, overriding possible material signs that this object may not bring happiness on a sensuous, bodily level. There is thus an affective clashing of bodily discomfort caused by material properties and the promises of happiness 'stuck' to the fashion product. This could account for decreasing garment lifetimes (Niinimäki et al. 2020).

This hypothesis can be tested by doing affective research on a greater scale with different groups of research participants.

Our affective analysis of the 'Fearless' T-shirt has revealed that, again, the affective response to a fashion object was ambiguous. Both joy and disgust played a role in how the research participant responded to a Primark T-shirt: a short-lived elation at the low price and a more sustained disappointment in the material qualities of the object. We also saw how the research participant immediately translated affects into feelings and thoughts, repressing the first affect of joy and explicitly verbalizing disgust at the poor quality of the product while implicitly condemning Primark's politics of selling cheap clothes to a large number of customers.

Assessing affective method

The two experimental case studies show that Marks's method of analysing affects for the study of fashion is feasible and workable. The amount of experiential data acquired through the analysis was not overwhelming yet proved to be enough to work with. By letting the fashion objects 'talk' instead of forcing interpretation on them, the affective analysis brings to the fore affects, feelings and emotions that often stay hidden. Without the affective analysis, we would have approached the object from a cerebral starting point, ignoring any bodily sensations. What an affective analysis does is guiding the thinking process through the body, by taking affective bodily reactions as the starting point for the research.

Assessing the method, we note that the affect phase of the analysis is very short; affects move quickly through the body and wane easily. This part of the analysis may take less than a minute, depending on the affective reaction. For this reason, recognizing and verbalizing affects can be demanding. The transitional step into language further complicates things; we cannot always put an exact name to what we feel. The percept phase is relatively easy. Revisiting the affect and percept phases can be necessary to become attuned to the more hidden affects. Affects and percepts had to be compared several times to come up with an adequate concept. We learned that paying special attention to inconsistent affective reactions proved to be the most productive strategy, because this yielded the best way into formulating a concept. The concept part of the analysis can be repeated several times, by reassessing affects and percepts. In this way, more layers of the theory are added to the prior concept.

We are aware that the use of experiential data means risking that knowledge production becomes 'too local and subjective' (Knudsen and Stage 2016: 17). Keeping the balance between personal data and evidence-based knowledge can be challenging, but by connecting the data with several theories on affect, we tried to avoid the 'all too personal' interpretation. With the help of the different theories of affect, we were able to re-evaluate our affective reactions to the Taminiu dress and those of our

research participant to the Primark T-shirt as embodied, non-rational and pre-personal instead of seeing them as personal and private. Moreover, the reproducibility of Marks' affective method can work as an intersubjective counterweight, because the analysis can be done by other researchers and experiential data can be compared. Combining affective analyses with complementary research methods such as surveys, ethnographic interviews and material analysis will anchor the outcomes, tackling the issue of excessive subjectivity.

Yet another challenge of working with an affective method is that we have to convert affect into language. Interpretations and conclusions inevitably take on the form of language, diminishing or changing the affective power. We see it as inevitable because when we translate affects into representation by using language, the affective charge is changed and possibly diminished. We realize that while the affective analysis helped us to 'think through the body', the concept phase tends to overwrite the initial bodily affects, pushing the analysis towards more conventional modes of interpretation. However, the approach does make us better attuned to the way in which our bodies react to fashion and how affects set off a cascade of, sometimes conflicting, feelings and emotions that play a key role in our relationship with fashion.

A final remark about affective method pertains to the tendency of limiting the affective analysis to the realm of humans. But affect is in itself not bound to the human body. In our case studies, the affective flows and manifestations of affect that linger in matter or in the 'in-between' remained out of sight. At the same time, our affective method actually did bring forward the affective power of matter. In future research, we would push the affective method further by allowing the material object as a fully fledged participant in the research, by searching for a 'dialogue' between the human and the non-human through affects that evoke bodily responses, feelings and emotions.

Conclusion

In this article, we discussed the use of affect theory and affective method for fashion studies. Based on our short discussion of affect theory, we gave a two-pronged definition of affect as being both an autonomous force and a neurobiological bodily response to a trigger that offsets feelings and emotions. Working with affect as an autonomous force that is an embodied, preconscious precursor to feelings and emotions, our pragmatic approach is intended to investigate how affective powers are at play in our engaging with fashion. Affect theory and affective method serve as ways of gaining more insight into our affective and emotional relations with fashion. We argue that affective analysis can be an effective tool for studying what fashion 'does' by focusing on the body and what it can 'do' or feel, while allowing for a sustained focus on the materiality of the fashion object itself.

For an analysis of fashion, the elusive notion of affect needs to be turned into a doable method. In our research, we therefore devoted our time and effort to developing an affective method that was also effective. To that end, we proposed the use of Marks's affective analysis (2018), which suggests a three-step analysis of affect, percept and concept, followed by an interpretation grounded in affect theory. The second part of this article was dedicated to two experiments with this affective method; one for a design of high fashion (Jan Taminiau), which we found to have an 'ambiguous' affect of both fear and joy, and one for a T-shirt of fast fashion (Primark), which we considered as having an inconsistent and even contradictory affect of both eagerness and disgust. We described the research in detail to show how working with embodied data and affect works in practice and to point out the difficulties and advantages of working with such a method. One of the main benefits of using affective analysis is that it guides the thinking process and the process of interpretation through the body. In our case studies, we made use of mostly visual inputs, but affective analysis is also particularly suited for researching the tactile experience of fashion. It facilitates the investigation of the bodily experience of trying on and wearing fashion. Because affective analysis 'incorporates' the haptic experience of fashion in the research, it is a welcome addition to other methods of researching the practice of wearing clothes such as (auto)ethnography and document analysis (Ruggerone 2017: 586). We hope to show that affective method is a valuable and compelling tool that can lead to unexpected research outcomes. As affective method pays attention to the affects, feelings and emotions evoked by fashion, we argue it is a helpful addition to the manifold theories already used in fashion studies. We particularly like it because it allows to bring together theory and analysis. The affective method also circumvents representation. Affect theory and affective method break open material fashion research, by foregrounding the embodied experiences, feelings and emotions that play a key role in our relationship with fashion.

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