



# Fashioning through materials: material culture, materiality and processes of materialization

DOI:  
[10.1386/csfb.5.1.3\\_2](https://doi.org/10.1386/csfb.5.1.3_2)

**Document Version**  
Accepted author manuscript

[Link to publication record in Manchester Research Explorer](#)

**Citation for published version (APA):**  
Woodward, S., & Fisher, T. (2014). Fashioning through materials: material culture, materiality and processes of materialization. *Critical Studies in Fashion & Beauty*, 3-22. [https://doi.org/10.1386/csfb.5.1.3\\_2](https://doi.org/10.1386/csfb.5.1.3_2)

**Published in:**  
Critical Studies in Fashion & Beauty

**Citing this paper**  
Please note that where the full-text provided on Manchester Research Explorer is the Author Accepted Manuscript or Proof version this may differ from the final Published version. If citing, it is advised that you check and use the publisher's definitive version.

**General rights**  
Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the Research Explorer are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

**Takedown policy**  
If you believe that this document breaches copyright please refer to the University of Manchester's Takedown Procedures [<http://man.ac.uk/04Y6Bo>] or contact [openresearch@manchester.ac.uk](mailto:openresearch@manchester.ac.uk) providing relevant details, so we can investigate your claim.



## **Fashioning through materials: Material culture, materiality and processes of materialization**

Sophie Woodward, Sociology, University of Manchester, and Tom Fisher, Art and Design, Nottingham Trent University.

Fashion is by nature temporary and ephemeral and its mutability makes it a difficult topic to define and to research. In spite of being ephemeral, it is indexed in material forms. Therefore, an empirical and theoretical focus on its material aspects is a suitable means through which to 'grasp' fashion. Approaches to studying fashionable objects in dress history place the material characteristics of cloth at their core, as does the anthropological literature on clothing's meaning across cultures. While these approaches offer possibilities for understanding clothing as material culture, they usually do not develop ways to consider specifically fashionable clothing as material culture. This article, and this thematic issue more generally, aim to address the dearth of research into fashion and materiality. All of the articles in this issue share an emphasis upon the processes of materialization, either through focusing upon fashionable items or upon the materials themselves.

What is at the centre of material-culture approaches to clothing is the crucial importance of the materiality of garments, specifically, how the material qualities of garments impact upon how garments are able to externalize particular cultural categories of identities. This is as true for making as it is for wearing (see, for example, Hoskins [1989] on weaving) and is seen in the diverse anthropological literature on material culture, which describes previous owners being 'carried' within clothing (Bayly 1986), or gender and sexuality being externalized and contested through it (Hansen 2004). The literature offers a variety of approaches (see Weiner and Schneider 1989; Küchler 2005), ranging from a focus upon specific materials (such as O'Connor [2005] on Lycra), personal collections of clothing

(Woodward, S. 2007) and the fibres of which clothing is made, as items are produced, break down and are recycled (Norris 2005).<sup>1</sup>

These approaches connect to some more recent shifts within the theoretical and empirical field of material culture studies, and can be usefully developed specifically in relationship to fashionable clothing. They are discussed in detail in the following sections, but are worth briefly flagging here for their focus upon materials and material transformations (these positions emerge from Norris [2005]). These developments need to be understood in the context of the shift toward the ‘material cultural turn’ since the end of the nineteenth century (Hicks 2010). Hicks shows how ‘material culture studies’ developed during the twentieth century in the disciplines of archaeology and anthropology from the museum-based idea of ‘object lessons’ during the nineteenth century. In the last quarter of the nineteenth century, material things (especially human technology) were used to order human cultures across time and space in a scientific manner. Museum-based anthropology focused on the collection of objects. The evolutionary models of culture described objects as creating civilization in successive stages. The museum-based approach and evolutionary and historical models of technology (stone, bronze and iron tools) were replaced by anthropology based on participant observation and field notes. Between the 1920s and 1950s, material culture came to replace technology as part of the structural functionalist approaches of Malinowski and Radcliffe Brown. Subsequently, the shift away from the study of things to the study of ‘object domains’ derived from practice theory of Bourdieu, Giddens, Hodder and Miller. Miller argued that ‘much of what we are, exists not through our consciousness or body, but as an exterior environment that habituates and prompts us’ (2005a: 5).

‘Material culture studies’ was developed to solve long-standing problems involving the relationships between the social/cultural and the material. Since the 1970s, material culture studies attempted to reconcile both structuralist and semiotic approaches. It offered an

alternative to structural functionalism which was interested in material objects only as signifying economic or social activity.

Central to the contemporary importance of ‘material culture studies’ is the question about what an artefact-oriented anthropology would look like if it were not about material culture (Henare, Holbraad and Wastell 2007). In many disciplines the cultural turn was characterized by a shift from objectivity to subjectivity. However, in British archaeology and anthropology, the ‘cultural turn’ during the 1980s and 1990s was concerned with material culture. These disciplines examined the relationship between cultural subjects and objects. This approach was ‘deployed in order to shelter research into humanistic themes like consumption, identity, experience, and cultural heritage from the accusations of relativism or scholasticism’ (Hicks 2010: 28).

One of the dominant empirical approaches to fashion has been semiotic analysis, following Barthes (1985), wherein the meanings of fashions are ‘decoded’. This approach has been applied to items of clothing (see Lurie 1992). But as Barthes himself notes, it is difficult to apply semiotic approaches to concrete items of clothing, because such approaches seem to deny the very material stuff of fashion if the relationship between signifier and signified is random<sup>2</sup> and meaning arises from free-floating signifiers. As Breward notes, such approaches see clothing as ‘temporary receptacles of floating meanings’ (2003: 63), which attach themselves to clothing transitorily. In part this is due to what Miller (2005a) argues is the dominant understanding of the relationship between immateriality and materiality, that of representation. If clothing ‘represents’ a fashion, a person or an association such as femininity, then the materiality within these modes of thinking is not relevant but merely an arbitrary means of representation.

The common technique of ‘representation’ exemplifies the relationship between materiality and immateriality. Miller characterizes an older social anthropology as one in

which clothes are commonly signs of social relations. We often assume that a material form makes manifest some underlying presence which accounts for that which is apparent (Miller 2005a). A focus on clothes for their own sake would be a fetishism of them as objects. Thus representation privileges the immaterial. Miller quotes Keane's critique of semiotics which shows that if you strip away the clothing, you find no such 'thing' as society or social relations underneath. The clothing did not stand for the person; rather there was an integral phenomenon where the clothing and person were entangled. The subject is the product of the same act of objectification that creates the clothing. We are not just clothed but we are constituted by our clothing.

This approach, Miller says, goes against the grain of much western philosophy that puts a premium on depth as genuine in contrast to surface which is fake. He also points out that, in non-western cultures, this ontology is reversed. It is surface phenomena that are considered honest, and depth as secretive and sinister. Thus he concludes by debunking the notion that material signs stand for social relations. Instead he appropriates Hegel's idea of the process of objectification. This process creates our sense of ourselves as subjects. It also creates the institutions that constitute society, but which are always appropriations of the materiality by which they are constituted, analogous to Bourdieu's habitus, and Goffman's frames. 'People' and 'things' exist in mutual self-construction and dialectical co-dependency. Ultimately, Miller argues, the concepts of subject and object always fail to acknowledge this process of objectification, and to transcend the dualism of mind and matter.

Dress historians have focused empirically and methodologically upon analysis of particular items of clothing. Although not always explicitly concerned with fashionable things, they often use object-based deconstruction to look at how particular fashions were materialized through being made and also being worn. Whilst such approaches have been criticized for being overly descriptive, there is much to learn from their material attentiveness,

and in the last ten years there has been a sustained attempt to develop an understanding of cultural categories, such as gender or social class (see Taylor 2004). This attentiveness to material has always been present in anthropological work on clothing, where the materiality of the clothing is central to its cultural meanings. There have also been attempts to bridge the divide between these object-based analyses and approaches based on cultural studies by applying ideas from studies of material culture to clothing (Küchler 2005).

Materials have generally been sidelined in the field of fashion studies, as exemplified by Barnard's (2007) assertion that, although the natural sciences are crucial fore to the development of fabrics and materials, they are less relevant to cultural and personal meanings. We argue that clothing gets its meanings from its materials and materiality. Materials have only been a focus in discussions within the natural sciences or within the social sciences when they have been concerned with innovative fabrics or fibres, as, for example, in Küchler's review of advances in electronic textiles (2005: 212ff.).

Although studies of material culture offer a promising route for studying fashion, critiques of these studies suggest a need to be attuned to the trajectories and transformations of materials rather than just focusing upon objects (see Ingold 2007), such as an item of clothing. When applied to fashion, we will examine whether material-culture approaches tend to 'fix' the fashion moment and fail to address the flux, transience and ambivalences (Wilson 1985; Hall 1977; Davis 1992) that are often attributed to fashion. Specifically, we will examine the role of materials in the creation and dissolution of fashions and fashion as a process of materialization.

These approaches offer a useful way to understand fashion's mutability and transience without presuming that we should either characterize fashion as 'immaterial' or that the materiality of things is just an unambiguous 'carrier' of the meanings of fashion, as semiotic approaches often do (Barthes 1985; Barnard 2007). Nor do we assume that such meanings are

necessarily deliberately transmitted by their wearer (Campbell 1996). In doing so, we build upon recent developments in the field of materiality and material culture (drawing on writers such as Ingold 2010b; Keane 2005; Miller 2007) and the emphasis found in this literature upon transformations of materials to develop an approach to fashion.

### **Fashion, fashionable and fashioning**

#### *Fashion*

Before discussing what we mean by material culture and materialization in the context of fashion, we need to define the concept of fashion. We start by thinking about the relationship between ‘fashion’, being ‘in fashion’ (or fashionable) and ‘fashioning’. As a noun, ‘fashion’ implies the system that arose within, and is specific to, western modernity. It arose as a consequence of the mobility and anonymity that accompanied urbanization and mass production. This system entails particular social and technological infrastructures that enabled the design, manufacture and selling of clothes (Crane 1997; Entwistle 2000; Breward and Evans 2005). The fashion system has multiple levels, including manufacture, design, retailing, catwalk shows, what people actually wear and the promotion of fashion through media, advertising and branding. Technological developments accompany and incite changes in fashions, as supply chain communications such as EPoS (Electronic Point of Sale) technologies, connect consumers and manufacturers. Consumers engage with fashion in new ways through the Internet, buying online and communicating different styles through blogs (Rocamora 2011). Screen-based online technologies have made images of things central to the practices of fashion in a way that is supplementing and perhaps supplanting fashion’s mediation by magazines. These mediations of fashion through images on blogs and catwalk shows form part of the spectacle of fashion, where fashion is something to be viewed and experienced.

This spectacular aspect of the fashion system can be understood in terms of Marxist commodity fetishism, which highlights the way that commodification obscures and mystifies material relations. Unlike glamour fashion that is seen on the catwalk and the red carpet, everyday fashion is far removed from this spectacle but is still one of the multiple different levels that exist within a fashion system.

Fashion, as it is mediated in magazines and increasingly the Internet, has been conceived as an immaterial manifestation of fashion, as it does not involve consumers trying clothes on their bodies, nor designers and manufacturers making concrete garments. However, rather than see this as necessarily immaterial, it is possible to see it as a form of materialization. The fashion show itself is a case in point: it can be seen as an ideal example of the spectacle of fashion. Yet this spectacle is materialized through the lighting, the music and the ways in which the bodies move in the clothing. If we regard light, music and movement as material (Mears 2011; Magaudda 2011), then they all serve to make fashion 'material' in particular ways and the clothing as part of a multisensory mediation of a fashion show. When such an approach to fashion is extended to include the material elements of setting, the mediation and creation of virtual fashion contain material elements such as the computer screens. We explore these ideas further below.

### *Fashionable*

The state of being 'in fashion' implies that a person wears clothes that are of the moment and has the requisite knowledge and cultural competences to both select the right clothing, and to wear it properly. Being 'in fashion' means assembling looks from a range of different items of clothing which may be newly acquired, or be reactivated from the back of the wardrobe (Woodward, S. 2007). Barnard (2007) has suggested that, because of the pervasiveness of the fashion system, everything that people wear is therefore 'fashion'. This usefully extends our



understanding of fashion to all that people wear. But, it fails to distinguish between ‘fashion’ as a system and the practice of being ‘in fashion’. Indeed, this distinction brings to light certain complexities of being ‘in fashion’, for instance the question of who defines what is fashionable. There is often a gap between what is defined as being ‘in fashion’ by fashion magazines and other media, what people are actually wearing, and what they consider to be fashionable (Woodward 2009), or a gap between being ‘fashionable’ or ‘stylish’ (Tseñlon 1989). A definition of what is ‘in fashion’ at any one moment differs between people, even in the same context. To be in fashion requires that people negotiate both with their own sense of style and that of their immediate social environment, and with the fashion system. The definition of what is ‘in fashion’ also operates over a variety of timescales that are created by fashion as a system and by the personalized histories that intersect with the wearing of fashions, as several of the articles in this thematic issue demonstrate.

### *Fashioning*

The concept of ‘fashioning’, whether in the sphere of production or of consumption, points towards a relationship between an individual and clothes, as either maker or wearer. From this restricted view of the relationship between people and garments in fashioning, the relationship appears to be one-way. Designers bring fashion objects into being; consumers create fashionable ensembles of clothes. While these types of actions on materials, or on ensembles of clothes take place, ‘fashioning’ also occurs in networks of people and garments that produce the meanings of fashion.

Seeing fashion in terms of the relationship between a maker and garments or between a wearer and their clothes, as above, implies that either a designer or a wearer impart their meanings or associations to the clothes. Agency emerges through these material/human assemblages. This mirrors the understanding of agency through materials that is present in a

range of different formulations within the literature on material culture. A particularly useful framework is suggested by Gell (1998) who proposes that rather than agency being an attribute of people, it emerges in a web of people and artefacts. Objects are part of the generation and actualization of the agency of people, and, through their materiality, can carry or thwart people's agency.

Applied to fashion, Sophie Woodward (2007) shows how the clothes in a successful outfit that a woman wears and feels comfortable wearing effectively externalize that person's intentions through their materiality. Conversely when outfits are unsuccessful, the materiality of clothing can thwart women's intentionality. The leather skirt that they hoped would make them look sexy can make them look hot and sweaty instead. This can be extended to the relationship of designers to their work. A designer may want to embody certain characteristics in an item of clothing, but this is in part dependent upon the material propensities of the fabrics, and the styles, as is demonstrated in the case of shoe design in Braithwaite's article in this issue.

To try on a garment and ask 'is this me?' is to interrogate our sense of ourselves. To wear clothes them and be comfortable in them (both physically and in social situations) is to express or change the self. Clothes do not represent us, but rather they 'are' us, because it is through engaging with clothing and their properties that we interrogate who we are or can be (Tseëlon 1989; Woodward, S. 2007). Implicit within this understanding of material culture as objectification is a sense of process and of transformation, equivalent to the notion of 'fashioning', which suggests how we can use approaches of material culture to look at fashionable clothing.

### **Materials and meanings**

Garments are both cultural and ‘material’, which in turn highlights the need to consider the literature on materiality. Like the literature on fashion, research into materiality is multi-disciplinary and encompasses a range of core concepts. Just as we have discussed fashion, fashionable and fashioning, there is a parallel discussion around materials, materiality and material culture. However, unlike the fashion literature where there is some agreement over what these core concepts mean, the materiality literature lacks such agreement. Consequently, we will not rehearse these debates in full, but rather explicate and develop the most useful ways of thinking about fashion in terms of materials, materiality and immateriality.

It is possible to differentiate ‘objects of fashion’ from particular items of clothing kept as treasured possessions and from ‘virtual’ representations of clothes, which are consumed as part of the process of identity formation through fashion. Fashion therefore presents us with degrees of, and different kinds of, materiality, and a process through which fashions, and being in fashion, are materialized through the relational processes introduced above.

Fashion is an aspect of contemporary consumption that is emblematic of its materialism, both in the sense of the acquisition of goods and of the consumption of the physical inputs that make them up (materials, labour, energy). The goods we buy to clothe ourselves embody all these in large quantities. A focus on material, from a phenomenological perspective, has been present in the literature, articulated with a view of materiality as part of a theory of material culture. The most notable instance of this is Tim Ingold and Daniel Miller’s (2007) dialogues on the relative prominence that should be given to matter – material – as against meaning, in discussions of materiality. This parallels the difference between accounts of fashion that concentrate on meaning and the expression of self-identity and accounts that focus on the material properties of fashion objects, as above.

Both Ingold and Miller draw on a rich literature in sociology, archaeology and anthropology including Bourdieu (1977), Gell (1998), Mauss (1973) and Malafouris (2003),

stating a desire to transcend, from different perspectives, the split between mind and matter, material objects and meaningful cultural surfaces. Putting it crudely, Ingold takes an experiential and ecological approach, and Miller a dialectical and ethnographic one. Ingold (2010a) seeks to transcend the hylomorphic approach to objects, traced back to the Greeks, which separates immaterial form from matter. His approach to a critique of the hylomorphic imposition of abstract forms on passive matter is to emphasize the immanent properties of materials and the interweaving of forces that lead them to make up our world (Ingold 2010b). One consequence of this approach is that he replaces a focus on ‘objects’ (which he takes to be passive and closed) with one on ‘things’ that arise through processes that bring together these forces through time and space. Miller’s desire to ‘entirely transcend the dualism of subjects and objects’ (2005a: 3) is also conceptualized in terms of processes – albeit differently conceived to Ingold – particularly the dialectical process of objectification, which he works through in ethnographic examples.

For our purposes here, both approaches are relevant (and on close inspection their positions are far less opposed than they make out). Ingold’s approach does justice to the sensorially based unfolding of individuals’ relationships to their clothes which is evident in some of the articles in this issue, though it denies distinctions between different degrees of materiality (2007: 6). Indeed, Ingold argues against the entire concept of ‘materiality’, suggesting that it preserves a false distinction between what is ‘material’, which we can touch, and the ‘immaterial’, which is everything else. He appeals to James Gibson’s (1979: 16ff.) distinction between the ways that classes of material address each other as substance or medium, via surfaces. Distinctions between substance, medium and surface are contextually dependent – what is a substance for one organism may be a medium for another. This allows Ingold to demolish the material/immaterial distinction by establishing that

the surface of materiality, in short, is an illusion. We cannot touch it because it is not there. Like all other creatures, human beings do not exist on the ‘other side’ of materiality but swim in an ocean of materials. (Ingold 2007: 7)

Surfaces are central in developing an understanding of the material qualities of fashion. An understanding of surfaces matters in debunking the dominant western ontology which sees surfaces – and by implication fashions – as unimportant, because it is the deep, immaterial ‘inner’ self that is important, rather than the surface which is superficial and transitory. This dichotomy between an inner self and an outer surface is also played out in the distinction between the material and the spectacular – presumed to be immaterial – facets of fashion. If we accept Ingold’s theory, the boundaries between an inner person and outer surface, and between the materials of fashion and the immaterial, are elided.

Miller shares Ingold’s desire to collapse the distinction between mind and matter. However, in his introduction to a major collection of essays on the subject (Miller 2005a), he builds a view of immateriality in a distinction commonly found in religious culture between matter that is temporary and dissembling, and transcendent immaterial truth. He explores the seeming paradox that the more that religions strive for immaterial transcendence, the more they rely upon material things. He argues that a similar distinction can be seen in relationship to clothing and the presumed division between the surface of clothes that is ‘false’ because potentially dissembling, and the ‘true’ interior of an authentic self that is articulated across the membranes of fashion. Miller goes on to argue that, if one is to accept his notion of objectification, then there can be no ‘immateriality’, as the very process of thinking about something entails it being materialized.

Miller defines his task in understanding materiality as to go beyond a ‘vulgar’ account of the artefact, to ‘the ephemeral, the imaginary, the biological and the theoretical; all that which would have been external to the simple definition of an artefact’ (2005a: 4). This leads

him to delineate a processual materiality that can encompass new forms and that also implies questions about the distinction between the material and the immaterial that we refer to above.

One such new form is the screens which are increasingly pervasive as components of the fashion system, and through which the production and consumption of fashion is mediated. The computer/tablet/phone screen mediates the promotion and retailing of fashion as well as the experience of consuming it. Consequently, the materiality of screens that is discussed by Thrift (2005) is particularly relevant to thinking about how contemporary fashion is materialized. Screens could be taken to be simply surfaces for representation, and in respect of fashion, their surfaces simply as part of the mediatizing apparatus that sits between immaterial fashion, and fashions that are worn. However, they have claim to materiality of their own. They are both windows onto a world, or many worlds, and material entities that are part of our everyday accoutrements – and which in some cases such as smart phones comprise objects that we wear. In addition, given the way they both rely on, and generate, light, they function as part of our personal ‘lightsapes’ (Bille and Sorensen 2007; Maffei and Fisher 2013). Screens are both portals to a network of communication and material objects. This dual material/immaterial nature means they mirror some of the qualities of fashion that we are bringing out here. They function analogously as ‘telescopes’, as ‘jewellery’ (Fisher 2013) and also as mirrors. They are things that we see through and things that we look at, and things we see ourselves in.

Rocamora’s (2011) work on personal fashion blogs has developed the idea of the screen acting as a kind of mirror, as bloggers present images of themselves on their blogs and are ‘reflected back’ through the images and comments that followers post. Her ideas can be extended even to consumers who both see their own mirror image in the shininess of the screen and also may be effectively imagining ‘is this me?’ through the images on the screens. Rocamora draws on Manovich (2001) who traces the genealogy of screens from flat ones

designed to be looked at as a screen straight in front of you, to ones that can be moved about and have real-time images and videos on them. This could now be extended to the portability of phones and tablets. Touch screens add a materiality of touch to the visuals of fashion on screens, but this touch is never the touch of the actual clothes. Blogs or social networking sites, and online magazines and stores' own sites present a fashion that is mobile as videos capture fashion in motion, interactive as we can make things bigger and get close up to see something of the materiality of clothing. As such, even the supposedly immateriality of fashion that is reduced to screen-images is in fact a multisensory presentation. It is not the same as the materiality of items of clothing on our body, but nonetheless still material.

It is our contention that, in the context of fashion, an appropriate position on materiality must treat both the cultural and the material elements present in fashion. This follows Miller's desire not to 'enthroned' materialism or objects in place of 'culture, society and representation' but instead to see things and culture as inseparable. In fashion studies the branch which originated from museum studies and costume history was focused on material garments. However, much of the social-science based approach has shifted the focus from the material to the symbolic. Therefore, we advocate following Ingold to ensure a focus on material characteristics, and the practices that materialize fashion. As Carl Knappett (2005: 21) puts it, 'just as archaeologists find it difficult seeing through the material to the social, so it seems the ethnographer or sociologist struggles to see through the web of social relations to materials and their properties'. This implies that a symmetrical approach involving both the cultural/symbolic elements in fashion and the elements of clothes that respond to the agency of the wearer is needed to uncover the cultural implications of the materials that comprise the surfaces that individuals present to the world. The interactions between people and the materials of fashion as they unfold over time, connect to the process of 'fashioning' that we

introduced in the first section. We argue that the latter, constitutes the empirical and theoretical focus for carrying out research into fashion and materiality.

### **Methods and approaches**

A focus upon fashioning entails thinking about how we might progress with research in this field. We are arguing that the material and cultural are not separate but co-constitutive.

Therefore, when we are studying fashion, we are also suggesting that the material is integral to what we are looking at. The focus of such research can take three forms:

1. The characteristics of the materials of fashionable garments
2. The role of materials in the creation and dissolution of fashions
3. Fashion as a process of materialization

These three approaches are not mutually exclusive but overlap and form a useful route into thinking about how the fashion researcher can proceed in adopting the approach that we are outlining in this article. Approaching fashion as material does not restrict research to one domain of fashion, but can be applied to manufacture, design, retail and consumption. The main areas within which we explore these ideas are consumption and design, arising from our own research areas and the themes of the articles in this issue.

### **Materials and fashionable garments**

As O'Connor (2005) notes, most of the literature on fashion and fashionable clothing still fails to engage sufficiently with the materiality of clothing, as if when clothing is part of the fashion system, it ceases to be material. While there are exceptions to this approach,



mainstream writing on fashion is not centrally concerned with the materiality of fashionable clothing.

One exception is the Global Denim Project, which aimed to address why denim jeans are such a widely worn item of clothing in the contemporary world, and ask what this tells us about the world we live in (Miller and Woodward, 2012). To return to the definitions of different facets of fashion outlined earlier, denim jeans themselves may be part of 'fashion' in terms of a system, but may not always be 'fashionable'. Fashion is always material, yet material things are not always fashionable. The fact that denim jeans are such a globally ubiquitous item of clothing means that understanding them allows us to explore the consequences for the fashion industry of them being so widely worn. It has implications for how fashion production is organized materially (Chakravarti 2011), how designers are forced to work 'with' denim as there is no sign of a waning in the desire consumers have to blue jeans, and how consumers are able to buy jeans that will make them feel comfortable. Focusing on one fashionable garment like jeans allows an exploration of the interconnections of the global fashion industry and the different materializations of the generic and personal in different cultural contexts. Although it is an example of a focus upon a fashionable item, several projects within it focused upon the materials of denim as it is broken down and recycled (see Olesen 2012) which fits with the other approaches to fashion that we are suggesting.

Thinking about the meanings of clothing as simultaneously material and symbolic is highlighted in Sherlock's article in this issue. Using the example of shoes as a fashion object through the example of wearers of Clarks Originals, she argues that semiotic approaches are not sufficient on their own, but need to be seen in tandem with material approaches to the 'affordances', that is the ways in which the design and materials of shoes permit particular practices and identities of shoes. Her article effectively manages to combine an understanding

of the meanings and associations of the shoes with the material possibilities of the fashionable object. Through the object, wearers are fashioning an identity, which is both anchored in a particular fashion moment and period, yet simultaneously highlights the endurance of a style over time.

The meanings of a fashion object are therefore in part afforded by the materiality of, in Sherlock's example, the shoe. Her analysis provides an important corrective to semiotic accounts which do not pay attention to the materiality of the fashionable object.

### **Materials: Creating and dissolving fashions**

A key facet of an approach to the fashionable object is to understand its multi-sensorial aspects, i.e. the tactile, the visual and the material (Howes 2005). While there has been a shift towards looking at embodied fashion phenomenologically (in the wake of Tseëlon's work which gave voice to phenomenological accounts [1989, 1995]), there has been a lack of focus upon the ways that wearing and making fashionable things is multi-sensory, where the material is central.

Braithwaite's article addresses these issues in her case study of shoe designers and the process of design as the fashioning of shoes. It is clear from her article that materials, such as leather, are not just a medium for the realization of designer's ideas, but the very catalyst for these ideas and therefore their creativity. The designers in Braithwaite's ethnography are 'imagining with materials' which dovetails with Miller's understanding of objectification: 'to conceptualise is to give form and to create consciousness' (2005a: 21). Looking for materials ('looking' with the hands) is an act of idea-generation for the shoe designers Braithwaite studied. The process of materials being transformed into shoes is both physical and conceptual; it is a process in which ideas and creativity are generated. The article highlights an interesting paradox between the ways in which designers are fashioning shoes (in the sense

of fashioning their identity as fashion designers and also making fashionable things), and their disavowal of 'fashion' as a system. The feature of the fashion system that they are disavowing is its commerciality, which they equate with a lack of creativity, although in practice it is the basis for the availability and circulation of materials through which they form their ideas.

As we have suggested above, there is a need for more research into fashion that focuses on materials. Klepp and Hebrok's article specifically addresses this need. The material at the centre of their project is wool, and they explore the complexities of its material properties in a register that is ordinarily seen to be in the domain of textile technology. However, they highlight the need to remain aware of these properties when we consider consumers' attitudes to wool as it manifests itself in physical engagement with materials because, as their results show, these properties are simultaneously material, experiential and cultural.

Holmes's article focuses upon the materiality of hair. Hair is ambiguous in terms of how it is categorized. We can think of it as a kind of material but we also think of it as part of our bodies, and as a potentially fashionable thing, such as a hairstyle. This ambiguity highlights that the relationship between materials and fashionable entities is not fixed but rather transient and there is much to be learnt by focusing upon the relationship between the two, specifically, the processes that render materials into fashionable things. Her article usefully considers how the materiality of hair makes it an ideal carrier of fashion due to its apparent malleability (it is easily cut and dyed and restyled), but, at the same time, its materiality means that it may refuse fashion (for example, curly hair may resist certain styling practices). She shows that fashions are not just the result of women passively submitting to fashionable hairdressing, but are carried in the 'palimpsest' of hair, where the currently fashionable co-exists with material traces of previous 'fashionings'. The curious temporal stratification of fashion in the material of hair that Holmes describes, which is both part of the

body and carries meanings that are fashioned in its material, brings together a number of the strands and elements we have teased out in our discussion so far. It may be somewhat easier to see the ways these elements cross over through hair than it is in the case of clothes because it is a particular sort of 'fashion object': attached to and part of the body and necessarily fashioned 'in situ'.

### **Fashion and the processes of materialization**

One of the aims of this article and the thematic issue as a whole is to start to problematize and probe the assumed connection between fashion and immateriality. By immateriality we refer to absence which is just as meaningful as presence. For example, in Sophie Woodward's ethnography (2007) the clothes that the interviewees discarded and decided not to wear when trying things on in front of the mirror, were as informative as what they decided to put on.

A convincing case for the immateriality of fashion can be found in Kaori O'Connor's work on Lycra (O'Connor 2005). As Lycra products were not made for middle-aged women in larger sizes, this consumer group of 'Baby Boomers' was not able to buy products that might have allowed them to construct their identities in a different way. The fact that these things were not made for this consumer group is significant and O'Connor notes that there is little research on fashionable things that are not made and why they do not materialize.

Fashion here is immaterial as these products could have existed, but did not.<sup>3</sup>

In much of the fashion literature there is an implicit assumption that fashion itself is immaterial, seen in semiotic discussions of the ways in which the meanings of fashion are prior to the clothing itself (see Barnard 2007). Even if this position acknowledges that fashion needs things to exist, the meanings and ideas come before the stuff itself. At the level of fashion design, this is analogous to seeing ideas as immaterial and preceding the fashioned garment. Yet as Braithwaite's article in this volume highlights, material agency can be a key

element in the process of generating ideas, rather than the means through which an immaterial idea is made material.

In the introduction to *The Material Culture Reader*, Buchli suggests that rather than looking at material culture artefacts, we should be focusing upon ‘materialising and transformative processes’ (2001: 15). If we place the process of materialization, at the heart of our understanding, it allows us to understand the complex processes of change and transformation that characterize fashion. Given its ephemeral qualities (even if we are considering longer-term trends), this may be a more useful approach than to think about fashion as ‘material culture’, which has been criticized for implying a false stasis and coherence (Ingold 2007). Focusing upon materialization as a process allows us to incorporate both the longer-term relationships people have to fashionable garments, and also the possibilities of change and fluidity that are part of the ways in which fashion moves with the times.

This also strongly dovetails with the discussions in the first section of this article on thinking about fashion itself as a process – ‘fashioning’ rather than just as ‘fashion’. There has been previous work on fashion-as-process yet less on how this is a material process. Thinking about fashion as a process of materialization rather than discrete fashion objects, is a way to focus upon how fashions come into being, how things are worn, fall apart and are then recycled. It offers a means to connect the discrete fields of fashion. It also allows us to explore issues of temporality that are at the heart of how we define fashion, whether this is seen as being of the current moment, defining a historical era, or a longer lasting burning fashion trend. There are numerous routes where this approach might take. For example, Tseëlon (1989, 1995) interrogated several hundred women extensively about their relationships with their clothes and focused on both material and symbolic aspects. The rich data she gathered helped her formulate, in a 'Goffmanesque' way, the mechanisms which structure the

appearance of the woman and become part of her psychological make-up. Both cultural meanings and personal meanings were materialized in specific assemblages which varied from one respondent to another. However, collectively, they provided a set of 'rules' that facilitate the transfer of meaning. Another example is that of Carole Hunt (in press) whose work on 'materializing memory' focuses on the capacity of textiles to hold and communicate memory, which she explores through an analysis of artists' works that use textile media in their visual practice.

In this issue, however, we would like to suggest three possible approaches to researching fashion as a process of materialization.

### *1. Materialization of a fashioned garment*

This kind of approach is exemplified in Braithwaite's article in this volume, as the genesis of fashion garments is explored as a material process. However, this approach can be extended beyond the genesis of garments in the domain of production or of design, into the sphere of consumption as garments move from being made, to being imaged on the screen as part of the fashion spectacle, to being worn on bodies and sitting in wardrobes. While this is a process of materialization, it is also a process of dissipation as the things wear down, are discarded and amass in landfill or are broken down into fibres and recycled as material. The trajectories are not straightforwardly linear or circular, and cannot just be seen as a shift from being made and therefore made material to gradually falling apart. There are staging points in these paths that bifurcate and cross over under the influence of the myriad potentials in the material and actions by the agents they encounter on the way.

Items of clothing are imaged, transported, stored in a warehouse, ordered by someone on a screen or uploaded as an image onto Facebook. These processes can be understood as different kinds of materializations that follow from each other or that co-exist, rather than as a

switch between material and immaterial forms. At the end of their existence, clothes may enter another cycle of re-materialization as they are re-cycled.

This more complex view of materialization can also be applied to an understanding of fashion trends, which could be seen through this approach as a series of materializations, such as boot-cut jeans, followed by skinny jeans, followed by high-waisted jeans. Seeing fashion as a series of materializations would offer a new way of thinking about some of the implications of fashion production and consumption in terms of sustainability (see below for a fuller explication of this).

## *2. Materialization of an outfit*

Materialization can be approached as a process of material transformation through which a garment goes. We can also adopt materialization as an approach to fashioning the self through consumption. If we see fashion as the assemblage (Woodward, S. 2007) of new items with old items, or even of several new items together, then an outfit is the coming together of different time periods and thus of multiple histories into a temporary fashion constellation. These histories are also material, as Ingold has suggested. Materials are not just ‘attributes’ but also ‘histories’ (2007: 15). As outfits are comprised of different items of clothing, different materials intersect in constructing the fashionable. One outfit may include the stretch of elastane, the lightness of cotton or the softness of cashmere. These attributes of materials are not given, stable properties, but ones that come from how garments are made as well as the cultural and personal connotations they accrue through experiences of wearing and dealing with different fibres and fabrics.

## *3. Material temporalities*

It is implicit in both of the approaches just discussed that a focus upon materialization entails thinking about fashion as a process, as transformation and flux, in order to understand its temporality.

Ingold argued for the need to focus upon flux and transformation in materials and, in turn, the ‘things’ in which they reside. Given the temporality of fashion, there is a disjuncture between the material life of an object, which is longer, and its fashionable life. From this perspective, the relationship between clothing, fashion and temporalities are as follows:

- The life of a fashionable object (broadly conceived as a trend)
- The material life of the object before and after being fashionable
- The dynamic ways in which things may move in and out of being fashionable over time

These points highlight the need to consider temporal durabilities of the material as well as constantly shifting fluxes in fashions. The complex intersection of material and fashionable temporalities is a focus of two of the articles in this issue. First, in Botticello’s article, fashion is not a system of rapidly changing styles that replace each other, but instead is seen in terms of long-term shifts that intersect with individuals’ biographies. By focusing upon the materiality of clothing through these long-term shifts, Botticello is able to offer an understanding of fashion not as ‘surface’ but as depth, that is how people are able to articulate a sense of who they are through fashions. Their ‘re-purposing’ of material ‘materializes’ their biography.

The relationship between personal biography and the slow-burning, long-term temporalities of fashion is one that is explored in Slater’s article. She looks at the relationship between items that in one instance have been kept, and in another only exist in memory, in



two women's lives. In one case, things are kept to make a memory possible, as the material index of it, and, in the other, the clarity with which material details are recalled are what allows the memory to last. This example of fashion existing for the memory of an individual demonstrates a further level of the complex relationships between fashion temporality and materiality. It is not a simple equation that things that are kept and last are material and those that have been discarded or that have fallen apart are not. Here there is an agency in memories of materials, as well as actual materials that allow memories. Thinking about 'fashioning' through materialization confirms the agency and intentionality of consumers.

### **Conclusions: Consequences of fashion and materiality**

This article has navigated the complicated relationship between fashion and materiality. Although almost entirely separate fields of literature exist for material culture and for fashion (with some attempts to explicitly consider fashion and materiality), we have argued that fashion is always material. There is a quite deep-rooted assumption that fashion is immaterial, yet fashion requires material things, i.e. clothing. However, rather than see fashion as an immaterial force that temporarily resides in items of clothing, we have argued that fashion is always materialized. Instead of seeing some facets of fashion as 'immaterial', we consider fashion as consisting of different kinds of materialization (such as the images on a screen, the way clothing in a fashion show catches the lights of the cameras, as well as an item of clothing).

This approach is important to understanding fashion, as fashion is not singular. We have developed a framework to think about this, by seeing fashion as a noun, a verb and a state of being. We have put particular emphasis in our article upon the processes through which fashion is materialized. By focusing upon fashioning as materialization(s), it is possible to see those processes across production, consumption and disposal (re-use). It makes it easier

to see the relationship between subjectivity, fashion objects and the life course and the diverse temporalities of fashion more broadly. This approach is important for an understanding of fashion as it allows us to move beyond semiotic analyses. It has allowed us to develop a symmetrical approach to both the cultural/symbolic elements in fashion and the elements of clothes that respond to the agency of their wearers. We argue that this is necessary in order to locate the cultural implications of the materials that make up the surfaces that individuals present to the world.

Thinking about fashion in this way has consequences for how we study it. It also forces us to think about the consequences of fashion in terms of sustainability. Fashion as a system requires new items and the production of more items that are fashionable. It has clear consequences for materiality as it produces a mass of things that are no longer fashionable. These are either discarded or re-used. If we shift our attention to think about fashion through its materiality, we are also forced to consider the implications of the stuff that fashion leaves behind.

### **Acknowledgements**

**We would like to thank the journal editors, Efrat Tseelon and Diana Crane, and the anonymous reviewers for their constructive comments on the draft of this article that allowed us to develop it into the current version.**

### **References**

Barnard, Malcolm. (ed.) (2007), *Fashion Theory: A Reader*, London: Routledge.

Barthes, Roland (1985), *The Fashion System*, London: Cape.

Bayly, Chris. (1986), 'The Origins of Swadeshi: Cloth and Indian Society, 1700–1930', in Arjun Appadurai (ed.), *The Social Life of Things*, Cambridge: CUP.

Bille, Mikkel. and Sorensen, Tim. F. (2007), 'An Anthropology of Luminosity: The Agency of Light', *Journal of Material Culture*, 12: 3, pp. 263–84.

Bourdieu, Pierre (1977), *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, Cambridge: CUP.

Beward, Christopher (2003), *Fashion*, Oxford: OUP.

Beward, Christopher and Evans, Caroline (eds) (2005), *Fashion and Modernity*, Oxford: Berg.

Buchli, Victor. (ed.) (2001), *The Material Culture Reader*, Oxford: Berg.

Campbell, Colin (1996), 'The Meaning of Objects and the Meaning of Actions: A Critical Note on the Sociology of Consumption and Theories of Clothing', *Journal of Material Culture*, 1: 1, pp. 93–105.

Chakravarti, Laila. (2011), 'Material Worlds: Denim on the Globalised Shop Floor Authenticity', in Sophie Woodward and Daniel Miller (eds), 'Unravelling Denim', Special Issue, *Textile: The Journal of Cloth and Culture*, 9: 1, pp. 62–75.

Crane, Diana (1997), 'Globalization, Organizational Size and Innovation in the French Luxury Fashion Industry: Production of Culture Theory Revisited', *Poetics: Journal of Empirical Research on Literature, the Media, and the Arts*, 24, pp. 393–414.

Davis, Fred (1992), *Fashion, Culture, and Identity*, Chicago: UCP.

De la Haye, Amy (2013), 'Introduction', in Sandy Black, Amy de la Haye, Joanne Entwistle, Agnes Rocamora, Regina Root, Helen Thomas(eds), *The Handbook of Fashion Studies*, London: Bloomsbury, pp. 231–34.

Entwistle, Joanne (2000), *The Fashioned Body*, Oxford: Polity.

Fisher, Tom (2004), 'What We Touch Touches Us: Materials, Affects and Affordance', *Design Issues*, 20: 4, pp. 20–31.

Fisher, Tom (2013), 'The Death and Life of Plastic Surfaces: Mobile Phones', in Jennifer Gabrys, Gay Hawkins and Mike Michael (eds), *Accumulation: The Material Politics of Plastic*, London: Routledge, pp. 107–21.

Gell, Alfred. (1998), *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory*, Oxford: OUP.

Gibson, James. (1979), *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception*, New York: Houghton Mifflin.

Hall, Stuart (ed.) (1977), *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, London: Sage.

Hansen, Karen Tranberg (2004), 'Dressing Dangerously: Mini-skirts, Gender Relations and Sexuality in Zambia', in Jean Allman (ed.), *Fashioning Power: Clothing, Politics and African Identities*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Healy, Robyn (2013), 'Immateriality', in Sandy Black Amy de la Haye, Joanne Entwistle, Agnes Rocamora, Regina Root, Helen Thomas (eds), *The Handbook of Fashion Studies*, London: Bloomsbury, pp. 325–43.

Henare, Amiria, Holbraad, Martin and Wastell, Sari. (eds) (2007), *Thinking Through Things: Theorising Artefacts Ethnographically*, London: Routledge.

Hicks, Dan. (2010), 'The Material Cultural Turn: Event and Effect', in Dan Hicks and Mary C. Beaudry (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Material Culture Studies*, Oxford: OUP, pp. 25–99.

Hoskins, Janet. (1989), 'Why Do Ladies Sing the Blues? Indigo Dyeing, Cloth Production and Gender Symbolism' in Annette Weiner and Jane Schneider (eds), *Cloth and the Human Experience*, London: Smithsonian Institution Press.

Howes, David. (2005), *Empire of the Senses: The Sensual Culture Reader*, Oxford: Berg.

Hunt, Carole (in press), 'Re-Tracing the Archive – Materialising Memory', *Critical Studies in Fashion and Beauty*, 5: 2. (Accepted for publication 2014.)

Ingold, Tim. (2007), 'Materials against Materiality', *Archaeological Dialogues*, 14: 1, pp. 1–16.

Ingold, Tim. (2010a), 'The Textility of Making', *Cambridge Journal of Economics*, 34, pp. 91–102.

Ingold, Tim. (2010b), 'Bringing Things to Life: Creative Entanglements in a World of Materials', *Realities*, Working Paper no. 15. Manchester: Realities ESRC centre for research methods.

Keane, Webb. (2005), 'Signs are Not the Garb of Meaning: On the Social Analysis of Material Things', in Daniel Miller (ed.), *Materiality*, London: Duke University Press, pp. 182–205.

Knappett, Carl. (2005), 'Materials with Materiality', *Archaeological Dialogues*, 14: 1, pp. 20–23.

Küchler, Susanne (2005), 'Materiality and Cognition: The Changing Face of Things', in Susanne Küchler and Daniel Miller (eds), *Clothing as Material Culture*, Oxford: Berg.

Lurie, Alison (1992), *The Language of Clothes*, New York: Random House.

- Maffei, Nicolas. and Fisher, Tom (2013), 'Historicizing Shininess in Design: Finding Meaning in an Unstable Phenomenon', *Journal of Design History*, 26, pp. 231–40.
- Magaudda, Paolo. (2011), 'When Materiality Bites Back: Digital Music Consumption Practices in the Age of Dematerialization', *Journal of Consumer Culture*, 11: 1, pp. 15–36.
- Malafouris, Lambros. (2004), 'The Cognitive Basis of Material Engagement: Where Brain Body and Culture Conflate' in Elizabeth DeMarrais, Chris Gosden and Colin Renfrew editors), *Rethinking materiality: the engagement of mind with the material world*, Macdonald Institute: University of Cambridge. pp 53-62, In
- Manovich, Lev. (2001), *The Language of New Media*, Boston, MA: MIT Press.
- Mauss, Marcel (1973), 'Techniques of the body', *Economy and Society*, 2 (1) : 70-88
- Mears, Ashley. (2011), *Pricing Beauty: The Making of a Fashion Model*, Berkeley, CA: University of California University Press.
- Miller, Daniel and Woodward, Sophie (eds) (2012), *Global Denim*, Oxford: Berg
- Miller, Daniel (2005a), 'Materiality: An Introduction', in Daniel Miller (ed.), *Materiality*, London: Duke University Press, pp. 1–51.
- Miller, Daniel (ed.) (2005b), *Materiality*, London: Duke University Press, pp. 206–30.

Miller, Daniel (2007), 'Stone Age or Plastic Age', *Archaeological Dialogues*, 14: 1, pp. 23–27.

Norris, Lucy. (2005), 'Cloth that Lies: The Secrets of Recycling in India', in Susanne Küchler and Daniel Miller (eds), *Clothing as Material Culture*, Oxford: Berg.

O'Connor, Kaori (2005), 'The Material Culture of New Fibres', in Susanne Küchler and Daniel Miller (eds), *Clothing as Material Culture*, Oxford: Berg.

Olesen, Bodil. (2012), 'How Blue Jeans Went Green: The Materiality of an American Icon', in Daniel Miller and Sophie Woodward (eds), *Global Denim*, Oxford: Berg, pp. 69–86.

Rocamora, Agnès (2011), 'Personal Fashion Blogs: Screens and Mirrors in Digital Self-Portraits', *Fashion Theory*, 15: 4, pp. 407–24.

Simmel, Georg (1971), *On Individuality and Social Forms*, Chicago: UCP.

Sykas, Philip A. (2013), 'Investigative Methodologies: Understanding the Fabric of Fashion', in Sandy Black, Amy de la Haye, Joanne Entwistle, Agnes Rocamora, Regina Root, Helen Thomas. (eds.), *The Handbook of Fashion Studies*, London: Bloomsbury, pp. 325–43.

Taylor, Lou (2004), *Establishing Dress History*, Manchester: MUP.

Thrift, Nigel (2005), 'Beyond Mediation: Three New Material Registers and Their Consequences', in Daniel Miller (ed.), *Materiality*, London: Duke University Press.



Tseëlon, Efrat (1989), *Communicating via Clothing*, Ph.D. thesis, Oxford: University of Oxford.

Tseëlon, Efrat (1995), *The Masque of Femininity: The Presentation of Woman in Everyday Life*, London: Sage.

Weiner, Annette. and Schneider, Jane. (eds) (1989), *Cloth and the Human Experience*, London: Smithsonian Institution Press.

Wilson, Elizabeth (1985), *Adorned in Dreams: Fashion and Modernity*, London: Virago.

Woodward, Ian. (2007), *Understanding Material Culture*, London: Sage.

Woodward, Sophie (2007), *Why Women Wear What They Wear*, Oxford: Berg.

Woodward, Sophie (2009), 'The Myth of the Street', *Fashion Theory*, 13: 1, pp. 83–102.

## Notes

---

<sup>1</sup> See also De la Haye (2013), Sykas (2013) and Woodward, I (2007).

<sup>2</sup> This is strongly critiqued in Keane's (2005) discussion of the relationship between semiotics and materiality in which he focuses on Pierce's 'indexical sign' as an approach to meaning that both does justice to the material, and to its circulation between matter and symbol. He explores the implications of this in reference to cloth among other things, which allows him to point towards both the crafts of production in which the makers see themselves indexed in their product, and in consumption in which we can see our biographies indexed in the wear on our possessions.

<sup>3</sup> For a different conception of the immateriality of fashion, see Healy (2013).