

Footwear: Transcending the Mind-Body Dualism in Fashion Theory

Alexandra Sherlock

Abstract

The place of footwear in relation to identity has not yet been effectively examined in fashion theory or the contributing fields of sociology, anthropology and psychology. Existing fashion theory can be applied to footwear, however shoes as an aspect of clothing present additional qualities that deserve independent study.¹ Among the few academics who have focussed on shoes, most have been unable to provide convincing explanations as to what these additional qualities are and why shoes continue to hold such a special place in the imagination of the consumer. This paper suggests that this inability reveals inadequacies in fashion theory methodology. Historical, semiotic and postmodern approaches are characteristic of the discipline and translate to studies that use the shoe as metaphor or as a vehicle for intellectual illumination rather than focussing on the shoe and wearer themselves in a contemporary sociological context. Fashion theory tends to be a 'mind' centred discipline that could be seen to fortify binary oppositions of mind and body; structure and agency and this can be seen to constrain analysis of actual experience – this is a central criticism of the discipline. Fashion theory does, however, have the exciting capacity to connect mind and body. What is needed to transcend these unproductive dualisms are metaphors and models that link image and embodiment, that “implicate the subject in the object and lend insight into the constitutive articulation between the inside and the outside of the body”.² I propose that footwear is an ideal model to fulfil this requirement. In addition footwear, often referred to as the *Cinderella* of fashion theory (frequently overlooked and underestimated), could be the key to unlock the door between image and experience, mind and body and used as a model by which to advance fashion theory beyond abstract notions of image and representation into a study of how representation is involved in actual experience.

Key Words: Shoes, footwear, Cartesian, mind, body, dualism, identity, representation, embodiment

1. Introduction

This month will mark the beginning of the second of three years, studying the sociological significance of footwear in relation to identity and transition.³ The project is being carried out in the Department of Sociological Studies at the University of Sheffield – a department primarily concerned with social work and social policy. Maintaining the justification for any academic study is of course

always a struggle, especially in a recession and especially when the topic is fashion. Shoes in particular, however, seem to have arrived laden with baggage; the project, as one might imagine, caused quite a stir. Reactions ranged from interest, curiosity and envy, to amusement, incredulity and, on rare occasions, disgust that funding had been granted for such a ‘trivial’ subject. The question is this: why do so many people regard a study of shoes so amusing and pointless, despite the fact that most of us wear them and would find it difficult to function without them? Moreover, how can this happen in a discipline that considers itself to be unbiased and inclusive, and that has already made advances in putting clothing on the sociological map? More importantly what can these reactions tell us about dominant cultural and academic discourses, and how can I go about addressing these issues in my own research methodology?⁴

2. Methodological inadequacies in fashion studies

Shoes are clearly a potent and emotive subject, laden with cultural meanings, associations and stereotypes. Despite many deconstructive attempts, thanks largely to feminist,⁵ postmodern and post-structuralist literature, binaries such as the Cartesian prioritisation of the mind over the body, the masculine over the feminine and the rational over the irrational or emotional, still exist, causing some topics of study to be considered more important than others. The head and the mind are placed at the opposite extreme to the feet, one might say they are the *antipode* (literally meaning with feet opposite). Using this logic, if some academics prioritise the mind over the body, as is still so often the case, then the feet - the very lowest part of the body and therefore the shoes – would epitomise the extreme of the dualism. In her essay *Sensible Shoes*, Brydon uses academic choices of shoes to illustrate the mind-body dualism:

“To draw attention to the body by means of stylish or somehow ‘extravagant’ clothing would be to suggest a diminished intellectual capacity. The great mind of the genius, so this logic goes, is indifferent, indeed oblivious to the body and its ornament. Scholarly authenticity, then, is coded in footwear notable for its unnoteworthiness.”⁶

She argues that although there are no clothing rules for female academics, they will often opt for uniform, bland styles. She proposes that the striving for blandness is an extension of the Cartesian mind-body split, mimicking rational male dress to avoid the appearance of femininity which would suggest emotion and irrationality.⁷

Niessen and Brydon suggest that it is the “academic denial of the body [that] has marginalised the topic of clothing and fashion within mainstream social science, driven there by strongly-rooted assumptions inherent to the

Enlightenment's rationalising project."⁸ Perhaps it is the immeasurable power of the uncontrolled, undisciplined, emotional, irrational, expressive and sensing body that jars with rational academic methodologies - many qualities that shoes certainly embody. Or perhaps one might describe shoes as the epitome of commodity fetishism, and it is their association with irrational consumption and popular culture that has caused footwear to escape serious analysis. One thing is for certain; the neglect of footwear is symptomatic of serious methodological inadequacies particularly in sociology - inadequacies that ultimately restrict our understanding of everyday lived experience.

3. Historical and postmodern preoccupations

It would be misleading to suggest that shoes have been entirely excluded from academic research. Much of the existing literature however seems to approach the topic with the mind rather than the body. This is not to say that the body is ignored. On the contrary the body often plays a central role. Nevertheless, studies opt for a disembodied and mind-ful analysis. Indeed this has also been a criticism of much of the body theory that has emerged in sociology over the last three decades⁹ which often takes the body as a focus of analysis, as an object, looking at what is *done to it* rather than what it *does*.¹⁰

Fashion studies, as one might expect, is responsible for most of the existing literature on footwear. As a discipline, however, it has been criticised for its tendency to rely on historical and sensational approaches.¹¹ This is certainly true of most of the existing literature on shoes which is either historical, as with much of Riello and McNeil's work, or interested in the sexual properties of footwear as fetish, with numerous references to Chinese foot binding, misogynistic oppression or sexual liberation. Similarly the structural and semiotic view of clothing as language, communication and sign system (deriving from Saussure's early semiotic model) to be adopted or subverted is a main thread throughout the literature particularly in postmodern analysis.¹²

The postmodern tendency to fetishise the shoe, both in the Marxian (commodity fetish) and Freudian (psycho-sexual) sense, for what it 'stands' for rather than what it is, is another main criticism of existing shoe literature. While Benstock and Ferriss's book *Footnotes* - one of the few dedicated volumes to the subject of footwear - has been commended for its successful situation of shoes as much more than simple fashion accessories and "an integral part of the lives of billions of people",¹³ it has also been criticised for using shoes as exemplar, metaphor or illustration of wider issues - "writing lovingly about particular items of clothing while detaching clothes from the [people] that must wear them".¹⁴ Explicit and frequent references to postmodernism are made throughout the book but rather than maintaining a critical distance, the volume actually embodies a postmodern perspective.

The disembodied nature of existing studies of shoes seems not only to separate them from the bodies that wear them, but also from the lives that animate them. As Elizabeth Wilson explains at the beginning of her book *Adorned in Dreams*:

“[C]lothes are so much a part of our living, moving selves that, frozen on display in the mausoleums of culture [as they are in the historical, sensational and semiotic analyses], they hint at something only half understood [...]”.¹⁵

One of the consequences of these types of disembodied approaches is that they tend to lead to a very one-sided Foucauldian perspective where consumer culture is seen as a dominant and tyrannical structure, and the consumer body is studied in terms of its production and commercialisation – a process in which it is proposed that “doubt is created about the self in order to sell grace, spontaneity, vivaciousness and confidence”.¹⁶ The media, advertising and film industries, for example, have been criticised for having a considerable influence over the way we perceive our bodies and selves, implying a passive acceptance of dominant discourses and a lack of agency.

It is, however, critically important to acknowledge the value the existing work on footwear. Historical analysis, for example, is essential for understanding contemporary contexts. Moreover, historical representation, along with postmodern, semiotic and psychosexual analysis have all contributed to a shoe discourse within which we all develop our understandings and experiences of what shoes are and how we use them.¹⁷ Existing studies do however leave considerable opportunity for complementary studies to expand our understanding in a more empirically grounded way, looking at shoes through a contemporary cultural, anthropological or sociological lens. Interestingly, Riello and McNeil suggest that the fact shoes have started to gain interest in their own right is actually *because* of the postmodern turn, which encouraged a view of fashion and the body as fragmentary rather than unified.¹⁸ While postmodernism may have brought shoes to our attention by drawing them away from the bodies that wear them, we must now break this cycle and return the shoe to its lived context.

4. New methodologies

As I have discussed, most existing literature on shoes is either about their representation or contributes to a discourse *of* representation. So how do we link representation with actual lived experience in order that we can transcend this unproductive separation? Budgeon suggests that what is needed are metaphors and models that link image and embodiment, that “implicate the subject in the object and lend insight into the constitutive articulation between the inside and the outside of the body”.¹⁹ If shoes are the example to use - and I believe they are a very good example due to their extensive cultural representations and the very personal

connection they have with the wearer - then the following question would hopefully guide us onto the right track: how do we personally experience shoes in the face of powerful and established discourses?

Crossley's interpretation of the work of phenomenologist Merleau-Ponty is helpful here. To him the body is itself an effective agent: the body is not just acted on, it acts – it is a “visible-seer, a tangible-toucher, an audible-listener”.²⁰ To Merleau-Ponty perception is not just an inner representation of an outer world, subject and object are not separate entities, and his term ‘embodiment’ situates the body at the centre of all perception – no one ever perceives from nowhere, one always perceives from somewhere, and that somewhere is always the body.²¹ Therefore any perception of anything is always a subjective embodied perception, even when generated by the mass media, advertising and the Internet. At its very simplest, one wouldn't know how to interpret an image of a shoe unless one had some sort of experience of shoes or something like them, and that interpretation depends heavily on that particular subjective experience – therefore an interpretation of an image of a shoe involves an imagined embodiment. Potentially then, the concept of embodiment could offer a way out of the frequent nihilistic and self-replicating approaches to consumer culture as dictatorial, oppressive and manipulating. Crossley proposes a ‘carnal sociology’ using the structuralist approach of Foucault in conjunction with the phenomenological approach of Merleau-Ponty to show that structure and agency, rather than being mutually exclusive, are actually in constant interplay.

Entwistle elaborates on this by explaining that dress “is so closely linked to identity that these three – dress, body and the self – are not perceived separately but simultaneously, as a totality.”²² She proposes the idea of “situated bodily practice as a theoretical and methodological framework for understanding the complex dynamic relationship between the body, dress and culture”.²³ Since then, her promising framework appears to have been largely ignored in studies of clothing and certainly in studies of shoes. Perhaps this reluctance is due to a long tradition of structural and semiotic analysis and a resulting difficulty in ‘getting one's head around embodied experience’. So how can we change this ‘mentality’?

5. Linking fashion and embodied experience

Interestingly there has been at least one empirical study of shoes that has, in my opinion, successfully attempted to transcend the boundaries of structure and agency, mind and body by linking representation, in this case myth, with embodied experience. Webster's article *Red Shoes: Linking Fashion and Myth* aims to “connect literature, fashion, and dress through meanings that are uniquely personal yet resonant across wider cultural and social groups.”²⁴ She explains that red shoes are familiar to many of us through the childhood transformational tales of Hans Christian Anderson's *The Red shoes* and the classic feature film *The Wizard of Oz* released in 1939, based on the book by L. Frank Baum. When she asked red shoe

wearers what had prompted them to choose their shoes many would refer to the fictional examples and to the colour: often clearly influenced by these popular representations.²⁵ Alternatively some participants wouldn't wear them because of negative mythical connotations, for example one woman's father had always told her that prostitutes wore red shoes and another was familiar with the adage "red shoes, no knickers". Webster explains that fashion as an industry uses and recycles myth to sell goods, however she quotes McDowell and Kaiser by explaining that *style* is different to *fashion* "style is fashion made personal. Style is part of who I am and who I could be".²⁶ Returning to Entwistle she explains that "Style is part of dress, which is always an embodied, situated practice".²⁷ Fashion provides us with "agency's wardrobe" and it is through the ritual of wear that wearers activate their symbolic value and source of vitality "It is our participation in myth rather than fashion that invigorates us. We access myth through the ritual, not of fashion, but of style."²⁸

6. Applying 'situated bodily practice' in empirical research

Keeping in mind Webster's observation, that the symbolic value and the source of vitality of the shoes is activated through the ritual of wear, I would now like to briefly address some of the empirical data that has been collected through an early pilot focus group for the research project *If the Shoe Fits: Footwear Identity and Transition* at the University of Sheffield, of which I am a part.²⁹ The focus group, conducted by Dr Rachel Dilley, comprised a mixture of participants of varying ages, both male and female. The observations and hypotheses I will now raise are by no means representative of the wider body of research, nor of the other members of the research team. They are samples, chosen by me, to show the potential that empirical data might lend to the development of situated bodily practice. Here I will be looking at the data within a wider context that can be defined as myth and fairytale.

When considering popular culture, it seems striking that in much of the folklore, fairytales and popular stories about shoes they are attributed an agency, magic or special capacity of their own – Karen's dancing red shoes in the Hans Christian Anderson story or Dorothy's magic slippers in the Wizard of Oz. Other, more recent examples are Billy Dane's magic football boots which endowed him with the talent of their previous owner, *Dead-Shot Keen*; *The Shoe People*, in which the shoes were attributed personalities and lives of their own; and *William's Wish Wellingtons* that granted William any wish. These representations would not appeal if they didn't in some way resonate with human experiences of shoes. I suggest that some of the comments made in our focus groups indicate a perception of shoes as holding some type of potency, agency or power. This agency can take many forms but it seems particularly evident when participants spoke of their shoes being alive or dead in some way - for example describing them as coming to the end of their life. Many made attempts to prolong the life of their shoes by re-

soling, passing to brothers or daughters. Many would mention shoes they had thrown away, but when quizzed it would often be revealed that they actually meant they had recycled them, given them to a charity shop or just put them in a box at the back of a wardrobe. One woman had kept her childhood ballet shoes at the back of her wardrobe to be looked at occasionally. Another explained her experience in the following way:

“I just, I can’t throw them away, I just, because I don’t know, it reminds me of things that, like, erm, when I got married, or even before that I had, I actually got a pair of shoes when I were like nineteen but they’re actually like sandals but they were my favourite then, so you, can’t throw them away [...] I look at them when I’m tidying my wardrobe but I don’t, I can’t say that I take them out and look, but I look at them and think oh yeah and then put them back.”

So this inability or reluctance to permanently dispose of or *kill* certain pairs of shoes might suggest a connection with shoes that goes beyond their functionality or look, and perhaps even feeling they are in some way alive or connected with the wearer – animated through the ritual of wear and social processes of interaction.

According to Riello and McNeil “[shoes] take control over the physical and human space in which we live. They are the principle intersection between body and physical space [...] [t]hey are tools that amplify our bodies’ capacities”.³⁰ Perhaps similarly to Billy Dane’s football boots, many of the participants spoke of particular shoes that gave them the ability to perform particular activities. One woman was unable to go on a night out or to dance without her heels, another spoke of a friend that was unable to drive without a certain pair of shoes and a skateboarder made a similar comment:

“If I wasn’t wearing skate shoes then it would have [...] made me feel a lot less confident about, sort of, what I was doing and also it would have definitely adversely affected other people’s views of how good I am as a skateboarder [...]”

The same participant had chosen his shoes because a famous skateboarder, with whom he wanted to associate himself, had promoted them. The transformation of these shoes depended on the socially reflexive process by which other skaters positively recognized the shoes and their famous allegiance, leading him to consequently internalize their approval. Once worn-in, these shoes gave him confidence and a belief in his own ability. His shoes molded to his feet and his particular style of skating. In a way it might be said that through the process of wear he became his shoes and his shoes became him. In this case throwing away a

pair of shoes that have gone through this transformation might feel like throwing away a part of oneself.

7. Conclusion

In summary, early analysis of empirical evidence would seem to suggest that it may be possible to overcome the mind-body, structure-agency dualisms by showing that external influences, representation and ideologies can be embodied by using the symbolic capital of the shoe and activating it through a process of wear and transformation - both of the shoe to fit the wearer and the wearer to fit the shoe. To return to Brydon's masculine-shoe-wearing female academic, by wearing her shoes, rather than extricating herself from fashion, she uses fashion to embody the Cartesian mind-body 'ontology'.³¹ If the mind-body dualism can be embodied, then logically it is no longer a dualism.

Shoes have been described as the *Cinderella* of fashion theory, frequently overlooked and underestimated.³² They do however have the potential to broaden sociological perspectives and ground a discipline, fashion theory, that has been criticised for struggling to find its academic footing. I suggest that perhaps it is possible to walk the mind-body divide – all that is needed are the right pair of shoes.

Notes

¹ Giorgio Riello and Peter McNeil, "A Long Walk: Shoes, People and Places," in *Shoes: A History from Sandals to Sneakers*, ed. Giorgio Riello and Peter McNeil (Oxford: Berg, 2006).

² Shelly Budgeon, "Identity as an Embodied Event," *Body & Society* 9, no. 1 (2003).

³ *If the Shoe Fits: Footwear, Identity and Transition*, funded by the ESRC, conducted at the University of Sheffield, Department of Sociological Studies. Principle Investigator: Professor Jenny Hockey, Co-Investigator: Dr Victoria Robinson, Research Associate: Dr Rachel Dilley and Postgraduate Researcher: Alexandra Sherlock. For more information visit www.sheffield.ac.uk/iftheshoefits

⁴ This paper comprises early PhD literature research conducted using a sociological and anthropological approach to identify the co-constitutive relationship between representations – in popular culture, the media, folklore, fairytales and art - and everyday embodied experiences of footwear. The PhD is running in tandem, and as a complement to, the aforementioned ESRC funded project at the University of Sheffield.

⁵ Particularly the work of de Beauvoir, Bordo and Butler who successfully sought to deconstruct the notion that gender or sex are fixed or 'natural'. Mary Evans and

Ellie Lee, eds., *Real Bodies: A Sociological Introduction* (New York: Palgrave, 2002), 1.

⁶ Anne Brydon, "Sensible Shoes," in *Consuming Fashion*, ed. Anne Brydon and Sandra Niessen (Oxford: Berg, 1998), 6.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Anne Brydon and Sandra Niessen, eds., *Consuming Fashion: Adorning the Transnational Body* (Oxford: Berg, 1998), ix.

⁹ Chris Shilling, *The Body and Social Theory* (London: Sage, 2003 [1993]).

¹⁰ Nick Crossley, "Merleau-Ponty, the Elusive Body and Carnal Sociology," *Body & Society* 1, no. 1 (1995): 1. see also: Bryan S. Turner, "Recent Developments in the Theory of the Body," in *The Body: Social Process and Cultural Theory*, ed. Mike Featherstone, Mike Hepworth, and Bryan S. Turner (London: Sage, 1991); Mike Featherstone and Bryan S. Turner, "Body & Society: An Introduction," *Body & Society* 1, no. 1 (1995); Dennis D Waskul and Phillip Vannini, "Introduction: The Body in Symbolic Interaction," in *Body/Embodiment*, ed. Dennis D. Waskul and Phillip Vannini (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing Ltd., 2006).

¹¹ Efrat Tseëlon, "Fashion Research and Its Discontents," *Fashion Theory: The Journal of Dress, Body & Culture* 5, no. 4 (2001); Elizabeth Wilson, *Adorned in Dreams* (London: Virago, 1985).

¹² For example: Malcolm Barnard, *Fashion as Communication*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2001); Roland Barthes, *The Fashion System*, trans. Matthew Ward and Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1983); Fred Davis, *Fashion, Culture and Identity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994); Jean Baudrillard, *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*, trans. Charles Levin (St. Louis, MO.: Telos Press, 1981); Umberto Eco, "Social Life as a Sign System," in *Structuralism: An Introduction - Wolfson College Lectures*, ed. D. Robey (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973).

¹³ Peter McNeil and Giorgio Riello, "The Male Cinderella: Shoes, Genius and Fantasy," in *Shoes: A History from Sandals to Sneakers*, ed. Giorgio Riello and Peter McNeil (Oxford: Berg, 2006).

¹⁴ Nina Auerbach, "In the Toe Zone," review of Footnotes, *The Women's Review of Books* 18, no. 9 (2001).

¹⁵ Wilson, *Adorned in Dreams*.

¹⁶ Thomas J. Csordas, ed. *Embodiment and Experience: The Existential Ground of Culture and Self* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 6.

¹⁷ For example Turim suggests that the introduction of the representation of shoes in film as sexual signifiers coincided, and was perhaps partly influenced by, Freud's essay on Fetishism (Maureen Turim, "High Angles on Shoes: Cinema, Gender and Footwear," in *Footnotes: On Shoes*, ed. Shari Benstock and Suzanne Ferriss (London: Rutgers University Press, 2001), 62.) This highlights the reifying

potential of such sensational theories and begs the question: would we think of shoes as sexual at all if we weren't constantly being told to?

¹⁸ McNeil and Riello, "The Male Cinderella: Shoes, Genius and Fantasy."

¹⁹ Budgeon, "Identity as an Embodied Event."

²⁰ Crossley, "Merleau-Ponty, the Elusive Body and Carnal Sociology," 46.

²¹ *Ibid.*: 47.

²² Joanne Entwistle, *The Fashioned Body. Fashion, Dress and Modern Social Theory* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000).

²³ *Ibid.*, 11.

²⁴ Elaine Webster, "Red Shoes: Linking Fashion and Myth," *The Journal of Cloth and Culture* 7, no. 2 (2009): 165.

²⁵ *Ibid.*: 167.

²⁶ *Ibid.*: 173.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ *Ibid.*: 173-76.

²⁹ Unpublished data from 'Pilot Focus Group', 3rd March 2011, conducted by Dr Rachel Dilley for the ESRC funded research project 'If the Shoe Fits: Footwear, Identity and Transition'.

³⁰ Riello and McNeil, "A Long Walk: Shoes, People and Places," 3.

³¹ Csordas explains that the mind-body dualism has become so embedded that it might now be more accurately described as an ontology rather than the methodological aid it was originally intended as. Csordas, ed. *Embodiment and Experience: The Existential Ground of Culture and Self*.

³² McNeil and Riello, "The Male Cinderella: Shoes, Genius and Fantasy."

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Alexandra is currently studying for a PhD in the Department of Sociological Studies at the University of Sheffield and lectures at Nottingham Trent University. Thanks are given to Prof. Jenny Hockey and Dr. Victoria Robinson for their help and advice prior to publication.