

Creativity at Work:

Entering the space of the wardrobe

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Entering the space of the wardrobe

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'Does there exist a single dreamer of words who does not respond to the word wardrobe?'
(Bachelard 1992:78)

This paper is written in preparation for the 'Wardrobe Ethnographies' conference to be held in Herning in June 2011. It aims to provide a research framework that goes beyond a catalogue of existing literature, and to provide discussion points for the conference papers. Scholars from several different disciplines have studied wardrobes and dress practices through a range of ethnographic and related qualitative and quantitative methods. The aim of the conference and ensuing book is to bring together a series of papers which combine a discussion of research approaches and methods with an ethnographic account of research findings. We hope to make a dual argument; firstly as objects of study wardrobes and dress practices can generate critical and innovative insights both at micro and macro levels; , and secondly, that what I tentatively term wardrobe ethnographies are a feasible and realistic research approach that is attracting scholars from different disciplines and with different research interests.

Singaporean sociologist Chua Beng Huat found the versatility of this field in his study of how dress 'programmes' behaviour. He had agreed with the proprietor of a women's fashion boutique that he could observe women shoppers without disturbing the normal flow of business. 'Nevertheless, the observable male in the shop scribbling in a notebook, was readily noted by many of the clients and caused sufficient discomfort that they should not step out of the fitting rooms when trying on clothes.' So the sales personnel entered the fitting room with their customers. But '[t]he wisdom of disallowing conversations with clients was born out in fieldwork, when I inadvertently made a comment which caused a client who had been enamoured by an outfit to abandon her desire' (Chua 1992:118).

The passage is memorable not only for the almost comical image it conveys of the serious, but somehow misguided, researcher whose object retreats from view. It shows women's ways of evading the intrusive male gaze, obviously more inquisitive than erotic, but

striking for its insensitive assumption that the process of dressing can be studied ethnographically without the acceptance and participation of the informants.

The assumption of this paper is that as ethnographers we need to meet the informants in the space of the wardrobe. In the following pages I present my analysis of what kind of space the wardrobe is, and therefore of what kind of knowledge can be gained from meeting informants in the space of the wardrobe.

Wardrobe as space

First of all, we can say that the wardrobe is a personal space, in the sense that Carol Smart uses the term personal to designate 'an area of life which impacts closely on people and means much to them, but which does not presume that there is an autonomous individual who makes free choices and exercises unfettered agency' (2007:28). She adds that 'to live a personal life is to have agency and to make choices, but the personhood implicit in the concept requires the presence of others to respond to and to contextualize those actions and choices' (Smart 2007:28). Smart has developed the concept of personal life, in order in a neutral way to acknowledge the importance of relationships including 'families of choice, same-sex relationships, reconfigured kinship formations and so on', while avoiding what she sees as the static and normative term family (Smart 2007:29). In addition, her intention is to study 'those areas of life which used to be slightly below the sociological radar,' including sexuality, bodies, emotions and intimacy (Smart 2007:29-30). To this I would like to add dress.

To claim that wardrobe is personal space builds on Smart's notion of personal life, although it zooms in on the material aspects of appearances and their relation to consumer markets. I share Smart's skepticism of approaches that overemphasize individual agency. In particular, she takes issue with Giddens and Beck's notions of life projects and 'individually crafted biographies'; in the study of dress and fashion such examples would be certain extreme social constructionists who emphasize the communicative aspects of clothes above all. Smart argues that people do have scope for decisions and plans, but that they are also impacted not only by other people but also by memory and cultural transmission (Smart 2007:29).

One of the things I find attractive about Smart's concept of personal life is that it cuts across private-public boundaries. If – as suggested by Philippe Ariès and Georges Duby (fx. 1991) – private life in Europe can be understood as a historically progressive fragmentation of the social, leading to increasing compartmentalization of activities relating to work, leisure and home life (Ariès 1989: 1-2), then we need a neutral term, such as personal life, for historical and comparative research on how people live with clothes. This is particularly important for those who inquire into the ways in which increasing consumption levels are 'normalized' through socio-technical systems and changing collective standards for comfort and convenience (Shove 2003). While people dress for all kinds of occasions, and to some extent define social situations through dress, the wardrobe is an intimate space where clothes are taken off and put on. In this respect, the wardrobe is one of the sites in which public-private boundaries are managed.

To use Goffman's term, the wardrobe is a space dedicated to backstage activities. In fact, the wardrobe may have a privileged place in Goffman's dramaturgical conception of social interaction based on presentation management, just as it is in popular culture – from Hollywood comedies to Bergman dramas. In the theatre of everyday life, wardrobes seem to afford a moment of introspection – bringing out self doubt, worries about ageing, stage fright, the surfacing of repressed feelings, reviewing of secrets, reminiscence, or anticipation. But wardrobes are the space for a series of mundane repetitive activities that are not only under the sociological radar, but also under that of popular culture. These includes showering, grooming, selecting what to wear, getting dressed and accessorizing the appearance. In consumer studies, such activities have been described as rituals (Rook 1985; Douglas and Isherwood 1996). This signifies not only that they are repetitive, but also that they in themselves constitute meaning, and perhaps comfort, for the people who perform them over and over again.

In addition, more mundane housework goes into keeping the wardrobe full of clean clothes. This has changed dramatically in the last hundred years, and there are considerable cultural and geographical differences, even though there has also been a convergence in terms of technology and norms of cleanliness (Shove 2003). At least in Europe, North America and East Asia the volume of clothing consumption has increased

immensely, so that shopping, washing, folding, putting away, and discarding are routine everyday activities, whereas it would seem that dry-cleaning, repairing and ironing are on the wane. The work that goes into maintaining clothes – we could call it the backstage of the backstage activity of getting dressed – is typically done collectively at a household level, and tends to be the responsibility of one person in the gendered division of housework (Klepp 2001; Shove 2003).

In this respect, the wardrobe is not only a space for managing appearances, but also a space that must itself be managed. What happens, we may ask, to people who cannot manage their wardrobes properly? At one end of the spectrum are those who fail to conform to standards of cleanliness and appropriate appearance. They tend to be disgust, revulsion (Shove 2003:79) or pity, for people who need help because of old age or illness. But there is also an altogether different kind of wardrobe mismanagement, popularized, for example in Sophie Kinsella's book series and film about the 'shopaholic' young woman who buys new offers from the fashion shops until she is steeped in credit card debt. In spite of all her problems (and her routine 'solution' of cheering herself up with some more shopping), she finds that her critical insights into how fashion markets work can be generalized in her column in a business magazine. Credit card debt is seen almost as a rite-of-passage for young women in Western consumer societies; it may be shameful and painful, but altogether it is a good experience to learn from (Atwood 2008).

To these two conceptions of the space of the wardrobe – Smart's notion of the personal and Goffman's notion of backstage – I wish to add a third, taken from Henri Lefebvre. Following Lefebvre's notion that time is always inscribed in space so that time and space jointly structure everyday life, I propose that we see wardrobe as time-space moments in the rhythm of everyday life (Lefebvre 1991, 2004). For Lefebvre, everyday life includes both banality and repetition, and the punctuation of what he terms 'the everyday' by moments of presence (1991:43-44). In this respect, lived experience includes both complicity and spontaneous adaptation to material structures, which Lefebvre terms the silence of the users (1991: 93). It includes moments of transcending limitations and experiencing unity beyond fragmentation.

Seeing wardrobe moments as punctuations in the flow of everyday life further enables us to inquire into the fragmentation of the social. For example, most people change their clothes twice a day, and it is interesting to note that these times have been designated as 'getting dressed' in the morning, and 'undressing' in the evening, even though most people in the West wear pyjamas, night dress or dressing gown. But on what other occasions do people change clothes? Sports and exercise are a typical reason for changing clothes, and for showering. Depending on profession, some people change clothes after work. In this respect, clothes changes and definitions of social occasions may vary considerably between nations, classes and lifestyles (fx. Borregaard). Elizabeth Shove argues that the decline in collective modes of coordination lead to the escalation of demands for conveniences and services, based on high levels of water and electricity consumption (2003: 180-5). In this respect, studying the wardrobe as space enables us to inquire, not only into how people manage their clothes and appearances, but also how the underpinning notions of what is appropriate have come about, and how they may be reconfigured.

The analysis I present in the following pages is based on Lefebvre's notion that the mental, the social and the physical intersect in space (1991). The paper contains three main sections in which the wardrobe is analyzed as, respectively, mental space, social space and physical space. This analytical separation allows for an engagement with different research approaches and ideas with the aim of showing the complexity of the subject. As Bachelard put it, 'the inner space of a [...] wardrobe is deep' (1992:78).

Mental space: 'The philosophy of having'

One of the most persistent associations of the word 'wardrobe' is that of intimacy and personal secrets. An example is the metaphor of an open sexual orientation – 'coming out of the closet'. After the sexual liberation and identity politics of the 1970s, it is obviously better to be out than in, even though being in the closet can also signify an active participation in a covert homosexual subculture. Other wardrobe secrets, such as a closet drinker, are more ambivalent. Perhaps they are best left in the closet along with the other skeletons?

This meaning of the wardrobe dates back to the 16th and 17th century when, in the houses of the central European elites, compartments were built into the bed or in the space between the bed and the wall (*la ruelle*) for keeping clothes, along with the most valuable belongings such as jewellery, books, religious objects and property deeds (Ranum 1989:220). In the same period, personal rooms appear, such as a woman's *boudoir*, and a man's *studiolo* or cabinet, both names after pieces of furniture, or 'clausum' (meaning enclosure) the word that developed into closet. For men the dressing gown became the fashionable dress that matched the rooms in the 'expression of the individual as creator and intellectual' (Ranum 1989:225-231). The wardrobe has emerged as a part of this private space, but the reflections it facilitates are not contemplative or critical, but practical, oriented towards participating in the public world as a bodily appearance among others.

However, wardrobes have not only been used for personal goods, but also for textiles that belonged to the family or household as a whole. For example, Klepp (2006:24) reports that in Norway in the mid-19th century the best clothes, used on Sunday and for festive occasions, were hung up in the attic as soon as they were taken off. Everyday clothes, however, were not kept in any particular place, but could be found on a bench or in a corner. For Eiler Sundt, the Norwegian ethnographer of the 1860s, the attic or outhouse where clothes were stored, mostly home-made textiles, represented the housewife's 'pride and joy', and exemplified the culture of neatness ('*pyntelighed*') which he found even among the poorest (quoted in Klepp 2006: 20,24).

In Bachelard's analysis of spaces in the house, the wardrobe is associated with order, harmony and also the duration of time, marked by the slow transfer of scent from the lavender bag into the linen (1992:79). The linen cupboard, in particular, was 'an entity which possesses such a great wealth of intimacy' that it is no surprise it is 'so affectionately cared for by housewives' (1992:81). The wardrobes Bachelard describes are not used every day. Locks signal that they contain something valuable, just as the word *ward-robe* (or in French *garde-robe*) indicates that the contents were worth looking after. Wardrobes were placed in attics, corridors, or even an outhouse. In this respect they represent the careful storage of valuables. What characterizes wardrobes, chests, and drawers, according to Bachelard, is also the need for secrecy (1992:81). They are objects

that 'may be opened' (1992:85), and when they are, the division between inside and outside is erased in a stroke. In this respect, they all represent 'a "philosophy of having" [...] both literally and figuratively.' (1992:78).

These historical analyses need to be supplemented in the light of the development of textile consumption and storage in the last fifty years or so. There has been a shift in the perception of clothes from a durable consumer good with an intrinsic material value to a non-durable consumer value with novelty and brand value (Fine and Leopold 1993; Kostecki 1998). This means an increased frequency of shopping, shorter product life-spans, a focus on little-ticket items, light clothes, and coordinates that can complement what consumers already have. In the same period, the value of textiles has gone down; the proportion of a family budget spent on clothing has decreased (Lipovetsky 1992). The cost of clothes manufacturing has decreased even more: this has been necessary in order to feed that long chain of intermediaries that stand between the factory and the consumer.

As the volume of textiles has increased and the duration of use decreased there is a need for more wardrobe space available for everyday use. This is felt acutely by those who live in old houses. For example, '[g]arderobber finns det som regel för få i gamla hus, beroende på att de som en gång bodde där hade färre ägodelar och kläder än vad vi vanligen har idag. Dessutom användes kistor, skåp och loft för förvaring. Moderna standardgarderober bryter sig lätt ut ur ett äldre hus inredning.' [wardrobes are usually too few in old houses because of the fact that those who used to live in them had fewer possessions and clothes than we usually do today. In addition, they used trunks, cupboards and attics for storage. Modern standard wardrobes tend to clash with the interior of an old house] (Hidemark 2006: 263-4). The most recent solution to the problem of storing space is the North American 'walk-in closet': a closet large enough to walk inside to store clothes on two or three sides. They may have lighting, mirrors, and flooring distinct from adjacent rooms (definition from Wikipedia, Feb. 2011).

In this respect, Bachelard's notion that the wardrobe represents a 'philosophy of having' must be updated to include the imagery of availability and choice, echoing the dominant imagery of consumers as discerning decision-makers (Slater 1997; Lang and Gabriel 1995). Choice is certainly the idea behind Dadong Wan's 'Magic Wardrobe' (2000), a concept of a

technologically enhanced wardrobe which registers its contents with smart tags and suggests new purchases to match. The wardrobe, with a touch-sensitive screen and a voice output, connected to the internet and a credit card account, builds an interactive relation with a user-defined set of online stores. The scenario is as follows:

‘After a long workday and a hectic commute, Natalie finally arrives home. As soon as she steps into her bedroom, she hears a voice from her Magic Wardrobe: “Good evening, Natalie. I have found a pair of matching trousers for your newly bought blouse.” Quite delighted, Natalie walks towards her wardrobe’ (Wan 2000:236).

There she can inspect the suggested purchase on an interactive screen, and decide whether to buy, reject or save for later. Through situated computing, the Magic Wardrobe addresses the problem of how to bring information about what people already own to bear on what they are about to buy. By knowing what Wan calls the ‘buyer context’, online stores are able to personalize their offerings and build longer-term relationships with customers (Wan 2000:234). As far as I know, this kind of technology-enhanced wardrobe has never been built, but the term magic wardrobe is used for several online clothes stores. The long-term shift from a limited number of durable possessions to a large number of less valuable items also changes the perception of the wardrobe in other ways. The housewife’s pride and security may be mixed with concerns over the never-ending housework of handling increasing amounts of washing and keeping things in place. Clutter in the wardrobe may in itself be perceived as a problem. American psychologist Joan Borysenko has written about the therapeutic effect of cleaning out the wardrobe on several occasions. In ‘Inner peace for busy people’ she describes the experience under the strict guidance of a friend. First they took out all the clothes, cleaned the closet and burned sage for purification. Then she tried on every single garment to identify what it matched and which accessories went with it. Finally, they discarded everything that she had not worn within the last year, except for clothes for formal occasions such as weddings and funerals. The two women are humorously described as the ruthless Ruth, who drives the process on like an indefatigable goddess of cleanliness and organization, and more passive Joan whose emotions oscillate uncontrollably from gratitude for Ruth’s help to exhaustion and shame during the prolonged judgment of all her stuff, before

ending up with the feeling that she has succeeded in making room for something new in her life, symbolized by the empty space in her closet (2003:89-92). Three quarters of her clothes were given to friends and recycling shops, and the downsizing was permanent. 'I have not replaced most of what I gave away. It is amazing how many different outfits a few pieces of great clothing can be combined into. I dress more creatively than I used to because by pruning the forest I can now see the trees. It takes less energy to decide what to wear when there are fewer choices, and energy is of essence. Why be drained by things that are meant to serve us or to create comfort and enjoyment?' (Borysenko 1997:155).

For the psychologist, clutter in the wardrobe represents stagnant energy. Voluntary simplicity is often seen as a principle of ethical consumption (Harrison et al. 2005). Yet the problems faced by NGOs in handling second-hand clothes, and the poor quality of much of what is discarded (in Denmark only 10-15 per cent of the 13 kg of textile waste produced by each person each year can be resold in domestic second-hand markets, according to genbrugersagen.dk), indicate that downsizing the wardrobe should be seen as an expressive act on the part of the consumer. Shove sees this as 'fixing problems' that are perceived to arise elsewhere (2003:115). In this respect, we can chart the mental space of the wardrobe from Bachelard's philosophy of having by way of consumer culture's notions of choice and availability, to the need to manage the wardrobe and its contents.

Social space: Time and relationships

It is almost a truism to say that dress is defined by the sociological faultlines of gender, class, age and ethnicity (Davis 1992). And sometimes, in individual dress, these huge 'continental shelves' of social structure rub against each other, causing enormous friction. This was the case for a young Indian woman who put a cardigan from her trousseau over her sari one cold morning. The clash between Western and Indian clothes was so offensive to her mother-in-law that it led to a complicated and far-reaching conflict, analysed in the opening chapter of Emma Tarlo's 'Clothing Matters' (1996). On the basis of this, Tarlo developed the concept of dress dilemmas, very useful for making sense of people's active but structured choices to balance opposing forces in dress. In Europe, the tension between national and cosmopolitan dress has been analysed, for example by Sigurjonsdottir (2010;

cf. Eicher 1995). The trans-gender cross-dressers, studied by Filip Wakander, can be said to face a comparable dress dilemma: they manage a wardrobe of binary coded clothes, and mix male and female garments only at considerable risk.

But most of the time, dress dilemmas, faced by people around the world, concern small differences in the microlandscapes of social structure. This does not save them from embarrassment, but rather it shows how finely tuned dress is to social situations. In this respect, getting dressed involves an anticipation of the near future (cf. Blumer). A humorous example of this comes from Bridget Jones' Diary when Bridget is preparing to go on her first date with her boss whom she fancies. In getting dressed she is faced with the dilemma of which panties to put on – one pair is large and wired to control her stomach bulge; the other pair leopard spotted and sexy, will be more suitable if her evening ends as she hopes – in bed with Daniel. She chooses the first option, and ends up in an embarrassing though not altogether unpleasant situation when Daniel undresses her and uncovers her granny panties. (I personally fell for this story when, on the commentary track of the DVD, I heard director Sharon Maguire explain that the male members of the film crew did not understand why this scene would be funny until it was explained to them, very clearly, with props taken from the director's own wardrobe.)

Woodward, using concepts such as objectification (from Daniel Miller) and externalization (from Alfred Gell), sees clothes as a kind of amplification of the social self (2007). At the same time, dress also functions as a kind of social programming (Chua 1992) or framing device (Goffman 1986) through which social situations, moods and occasions are defined. For Lefebvre, getting dressed up and putting on an appearance is essentially an act of generosity, which involves the whole body including 'a big muscle machine' and 'a sensory machine' (Lefebvre 1991). His approach to fashion and dress is much more untroubled (and therefore perhaps more durable) than that of his structuralist contemporaries, Jacques Lacan and Roland Barthes. In a debate with Roland Barthes, staged by the *Nouvel Observateur* in 1966, Lefebvre takes issue with the semiological structuralism in which creativity is only conceptualized as recombination, and in which systems (such as 'Fashion') are seen to function beyond people's actions or understandings. Instead, he argues that fashion is not only open to changes in society, but

also to playful interaction. On this ground, he gets the last word: 'Let's not forget that fashion is a game. Getting dressed up is wanting to play' (Lefebvre in Barthes 2006:90).

But if wardrobe moments involve a projection forward in time of the social self when people chose what to wear in anticipation of what was about to happen, then it is also a retainer for traces of the past. Sophie Woodward found that the contents of women's wardrobes include a considerable number of items that are kept even though they are no longer worn. They are kept because they constitute a kind of material biography of their owner (Woodward 2007:51-66). Findings by Else Skjold indicate the same tendency for Danish men. Klepp found that women in Norway keep clothes after they have worn them for an average of 1-3 years before discarding them (2001).

Woodward also found that relationships are mediated through clothes (2007: chapter 6). Most importantly, relationships between mothers and daughters leave imprints on adult women's wardrobes, both because as children they have developed their taste and preferences under the guidance of their mother, but also because mothers often keep buying clothes for their grown-up daughters. One of Woodward's informants had even taken over a number of her mother's clothes which she wore regularly. Woodward found, too, that women's relationships with men are inscribed in their clothes. In particular unisex garments such as jeans, which can be worn by both men and women, and which fade and age in an attractive way, can function as mediators or containers of relationships (2011).

Finally, Woodward found that dress mediates relationships between groups of women friends who borrow from each other (2007:112-4). In particular, among four of her informants, young women who share a house in London, there was an ongoing traffic of clothing which was used to embellish their individual clothes and try out things that were different from their personal taste. Karen Tranberg Hansen (2008), analyzes the dress of an informant, a woman school teacher from Lusaka, who takes pride in never wearing the same outfit twice. She composes her outfits by borrowing from friends and neighbours and frequenting second-hand markets. Thus, even in a home with no dedicated space for storing clothes and with only sporadic contact with commercial markets, she is able to embody the notion of a 'well-dressed person' through constant variety.

By the end of Micha X. Peled's (2005) documentary about a Chinese jeans factory, the young woman worker, who is the protagonist of the film, writes a letter which she puts in the pocket of a pair of jeans about to be shipped out of the factory for its destination at Walmart, USA. In it she writes a bit about her life at the factory and the province she came from, and finally poses the question that has been on her mind for a long time: 'My friends and I are wondering, how come you are so big and tall?' In its simplicity, the scene drives home the structural distance between producers and consumers in the global economy. Practically all the social relationships mediated through clothing or other consumer products belong to the consumers' life world, and do not connect with seamstresses, truck drivers, crane operators, carpenters or washing machine manufacturers. In order to capture the connections of the world of production, we need to look at the wardrobe as physical space.

Physical space: Matter moving in and out of place

Most consumers classify the contents of their wardrobes on the basis of types of garments and appropriate use. Thus the wardrobe not only contains underwear, stockings, dresses, blouses, trousers and jackets, but is equally seen as an assembly of work wear, party wear, sports wear, leisure wear, home wear and so on. Such categories are obviously determined by the owner's lifestyle, but they are also based on large individual differences (Klepp 2001). For example, Karen Borregaard's study of Danish women's homewear found considerable variation. In the process of preselecting informants she met people who were completely unfamiliar with the notion of changing clothes when they came home. Among her informants, all of whom use home wear, there was also a difference between those who bought clothes especially for the purpose of wearing them at home, and those who recategorised clothes as home wear as they got so old or worn that they stopped wearing them to work (Borregaard *).

I wish to invoke Mary Douglas' notion that dirt is a 'byproduct of systematic ordering and classification of matter' (Douglas 1984:36; discussed in Shove 2003:82-85). If dirt is 'matter out of place', as Douglas has it, then 'dirt' would seem to be an appropriate designation for garments that move between the wardrobe, which for most people is the appropriate

place for clean clothes, and the laundry basket. In the home of the consumer, garments move from shelves to be worn, and perhaps rest on chairs or hooks before repeated use, before they land in the laundry basket. From there, they are sorted with similar colours and fabrics, washed in the machine, dried (perhaps also in the machine), perhaps to be ironed, folded and put back in the wardrobe. Yet, escalating volume of clothes, increasing frequency of washing, and dynamic order in the wardrobe can no longer be seen to be stable and durable, but is dependent on the ongoing management of material flows.

In her study of the cultural history of laundry clothes, Ingun Klepp found that the amount of textiles in the home has increased dramatically since the mid 19th century, and with that the work of keeping them clean. Until 1960 the increase was mostly in textiles such as sheets, towels, table cloths and curtains, but since then the volume of clothes has escalated. There has also been a change in perception of dirt. Before the 1960s, dirt was seen to come from the outside, illustrated by the common use of protective clothing; whereas after this dirt is perceived to come from the body, and garments in direct contact with skin must be washed the most frequently (Klepp 2006). Klepp further argues that there has been a reorganization of housework from infrequent big wash (storvask) on a yearly or monthly basis to frequent clothes wash, by aid of washing machine, on a near daily basis. The after work (etterarbeidet) of starching, ironing and rolling has been minimized, but the volume of clothes washes has exploded (Klepp 2006:56). In this respect, doing the laundry is no longer considered to be cold, wet or hard work, but requires a lot of resources in terms of electricity, water, chemicals and time (Klepp 2006:42). In addition, it is a job that needs to be repeatedly fitted in among the increasing number of other 'small tasks' that are managed by individuals (Shove 2003:180).

Elizabeth Shove poses the question of how escalation of demand for services based on power and use consumption can be perceived as normal and be embedded in habits that, although people take them for granted, are changing all the time (2003). In her analysis, laundering is a 'system of systems'; it is made up of component systems including washing machine manufacturers, detergent producers, textile and clothing manufacturers, and households, which come together in a combined effect (Shove 2003: 134-137). Although the commercial subsystems, at least, have been driving a long-term increase in

demand, Shove also uses her system of systems notion to show 'the underlying fragility of what seems like basic needs' (Shove 2003: 194).

Unlike the demand for home heating, which is irreversible because it has shaped the built environment, she sees the system of laundering as essentially reversible: 'if the "right" cog can be turned the "right way" the entire system may be transformed' (Shove 2003:195). While this change does not necessarily come from consumers, Shove's argument points to the role wardrobe ethnographies can play in documenting social and cultural diversity and engendering visions of different practices. This brings us back to Lefebvre's point that everyday life is made up of routines and repetition interspersed with moments of utopian imagination.

Conclusion

In this paper I have analysed the wardrobe as a space in which the mental, social and physical intersect. Through the subsections I have shown what directions analyses may take, but I hope that I have also sufficiently shown how different approaches may support each other. By way of conclusion I wish to make three points.

Firstly I believe that the ethnographic study of people and their wardrobes enables researchers to focus on a phenomenology of the body that does not privilege consciousness. In this respect, it is a valuable approach to everyday life.

Secondly, in so far as there is a deep-seated tendency in consumer studies to focus on how people acquire goods, rather than on how they use them and live with them, the study of wardrobes seems to correct this bias. If, as Flemming Agersnap (2011) has argued, the wardrobe is a buffer between the market and the consumer, it is one that distorts market discourses and assumptions.

This leads me to the third point: how the study of wardrobe implies a critical evaluation of fashion discourses. In so far as fashion is defined as the continuous launching of novelties, then the wardrobe is a buffer that ensures that the way people dress is oriented backward in their personal histories - to what they have already acquired and worn before. Do consumers crave novelty? And in so far as they do, is the market its best source?

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