

# DOUBLE VISION - RESEARCHING FASHION DESIGN PRACTICE BY USE OF QUALITATIVE TECHNIQUES

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## ABSTRACT

Present short paper concerns itself with the question of how new ways of understanding the work methods of professional fashion designers can be uncovered. The paper presents two different but interconnected discussions, one relating to the use of interview and video when researching studio practice, the other addressing the practice of analysing through sketching and metaphorical imaging.

## INTRODUCTION

This paper concerns itself with the question of how new ways of understanding the working methods of professional fashion designers can be uncovered through the use of qualitative techniques. In the paper I wish to show and discuss how I have produced empirical material. Furthermore, to explore a research methodological observation, showing that the visual data, produced by video ethnography, and the audio and text data, produced by qualitative interview, not only present themselves in different material forms, they also seem to invite different analytical approaches. The paper sets out from an ongoing Ph.D. study on fashion design methodology

## LITERATURE AND THEORY

To outline the background and motivation driving present Ph.D. inquiry this section gives a short summary on the theoretical foundation. This theory has helped identify the lacuna and has given theoretical substance and argument to what otherwise could be described as gut feeling and assumption on behalf of the author. The

theoretical design methodological backdrop comprises classic texts from architecture and industrial design (Schön, 2001; Cross, 2006; Lawson 2006). Included are more artistic method studies from dance, film and sculpture, such as choreographer Twyla Tharp's *The Creative Habit* (2006) for her descriptions on muscle memory. In addition, I lean on some of the few texts available on fashion design and method; Lars Hallnäs' *The all-important difference...concepts of creativity in the fashion design process* (2007); Julia Gaimster's *Visual Research Methods in Fashion* (2011), looking broadly at visual methods in industry and education; Nixon & Blakeley's *Fashion Thinking* (2012), a recent article which points towards distinct features of the fashion design practice involving temporal, spatial and social dimensions, articulated taste and the balance between commercial goals and artistic necessity.

The core motivation that fashion designers will benefit from gaining access to formal methodological knowledge has been fuelled from several sources. Central is Skov's report on the work lives and careers of Danish fashion designers (2012) where some of her conclusive recommendations lead to formal knowledge building, implementation of fashion designers at strategic levels and the birth of an actual fashion designer organisation setting an agenda of its own. Thea Mikkelsen's recommendation of an explicit methodological language in creative fields (2009) sustains this view. Further theoretical grounding is provided by Vangkilde (2012), Melchior (2008), Entwistle (2000) and Kawamura (2005).

When entering the process of analysis and inference in the Ph.D. project, I intend to include an eclectic selection of concepts from phenomenology, process philosophy and pragmatism. In this paper, this is exemplified by de Certeau's text *The Practise of Everyday Life - Spatial Stories* (1984) and the tropes of *Place and Space, Maps and Tours*.

## DATA AND METHODS

The inquiry is built as a qualitative case based study of professional fashion designers working in-situ. The

overall approach is phenomenographic, in the sense that it obtains descriptions of phenomena (Dall 'Alba & Hasselgren 1996) with a pragmatic (Rylander 2012) and reflexive (Pink 2006) stance, focusing on experience and experiential knowledge. It has been important to ensure a methodological opening towards the bodily aspects of designing fashion, hence to find a way to produce and obtain data on actions and embodied knowledge as well as descriptions. For this purpose the chosen qualitative techniques are visual ethnography (Pink 2006) and semi-structured qualitative interview (Brinkmann & Tanggaard 2010). Video film is appropriate when aiming at obtaining bodily actions, embodied knowledge as well as non-linear processes, whereby the qualitative interviews allow the informants to describe their own experiences related to the work methods they use when designing.

### EVALUATION OF DATA

The paper builds on empirical data from two Danish case studies undertaken between May and December 2012. They are the first two cases out of a scheduled five in total. The last three will be in London and Copenhagen in the spring 2013. The objective for selecting the cases has been to create maximum variety of both educational background and type of company, but all with Scandinavian roots. The framing is set up to allow for a broad range of design methods to emerge but also to ensure a certain compatibility in the empirical data. In the process of data production, I conduct interviews with the designers, which is later transcribed. Through the following iterative data processing it has been possible to categorize the fashion designers own descriptions of how they work as design methodological actions related to various areas of the design work. In the process I have colour coded all method descriptions and design areas (fig.1), cut up the texts and begun the work of forming a phenomenographic outcome space. (fig.2)

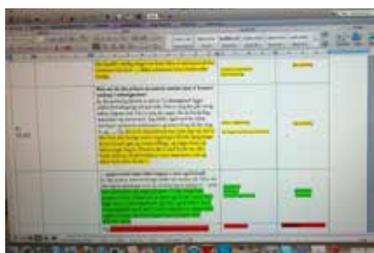


Figure 1: Colour coding descriptions

The video observations were conducted in the studios of the designers. In both cases I was allowed to follow and to video film the process of developing a fashion collection. This meant being present in workshops, at design meetings and fittings, in run throughs and at evaluations (fig. 3 -5)



Figure 2: Categorising descriptions



Figure 3: Video footage



Figure 4: Design meeting at Part Two



Figure 5: Studio space at Barbara I Gongini

I was allowed to observe the designers in their studios at any time and also received briefings from them specific to the progress of their collections. Video filming fashion designers at work creates a certain distance to an otherwise familiar subject (author being trained as a fashion designer) and it has become a methodological practice for me to note down daily observations and reflections to supplement the video footage, in order to remember fleeting thoughts and notions.

## RESULTS

When choosing the qualitative techniques, the object was to create a possibility for different types of design knowledge to be captured. Video filming and interviewing obviously produce two very different types of empirical data but before entering the empirical work, it was not clear how this difference would appear in relation to the knowledge each method would portray or represent. What transpires at this stage, half way through the study, is that each method seems to formulate in its own individual way. Perhaps 'materialise' is a better word than formulate, because the empirical data emerges as two different forms of material, both on a concrete level in the transcriptions, mappings, film clips and captured actions, but also, more abstractly, in how both sets of data communicate and begin to have 'wills' of their own.

One set of data appears linear, orderly and map-able, as the interview descriptions work their way through the processes of creating a collection. This makes it possible to form a design methodological fashion related language by separating passages of text in to sound bites that become detailed containers of specific fashion design knowledge. In the interviews the more analytical structuring of the fashion design work and the building of a fashion collection emerges very clearly but there is little or almost no descriptions of knowledge in relation to bodily skills and practices, which is surprising, considering the field.

The other set of data, video observations, seems to have a different tempo. Its mode is more like a submersion in matter. The data reflects the multiple temporal and spatial shifts throughout the day, as the designers move from ideating one collection to fitting the previous, evaluating sales samples on the one before that and looking at sales statistics from even earlier, constantly shifting back and forth in time. The visual data produced and the process of being within the data as it happens, has begun to create metaphorical images. As opposed to the interview data, knowledge doesn't seem to be enclosed in the detail but in a three-dimensional and somehow 'whole' experience.

By constantly observing the designers as they undertake their tasks, the processes observed slowly mould themselves into what transpires as possible general approaches specific to fashion designers involving body, time and space. These have presented themselves in a metaphorical language partly developed via the use of sketching. I will give an example of this process.

### WATER RIPPLES – AN EXAMPLE

In observing the fashion designers two things stood out early on in the process. They were as preoccupied with the notion of continuity as they were with the notion of 'the new' and were working in many different modes of the future simultaneously, represented by the multiple collections in various stages of progress present in the daily work. Throughout the fieldwork these notions kept

challenging me, to try and find a way by which they could be visually understood. A strictly linear model was not appropriate for the temporal aspect and for some time I sketched different spiral forms that were also to be discarded. Then I began to see the process as rings inside each other, each ring representing a collection, and the designer moving from one to another. The image still didn't do the right thing. It was too static until it suddenly came across as water ripples (Fig 6 & 7). The metaphor of water ripples suggests a way of understanding how the above notions of time, collections and continuity are not only interlinked but also in a state of constant movement.



Figure 6: Water ripples



Figure 7: Water drop

If the water represents the matter itself, the total work of the designer, one could see the water drop as the tiny added ingredient or 'difference', as Hallnäs refers to it (Hallnäs, 2007), in each new collection. This small addition affects what already exists without drastically changing it. The notion of continuity is preserved. Each drop is the basis of a collection that pushes the previous further and further out until it disappears and no longer has any significance on the daily work.

In working with the data, the visual material has called for analysis via sketching and metaphorical imaging, whereas the interviews have called for condensing meaning, mapping and categorization. The different impact of the two qualitative techniques, as described and exemplified in this section, needs to be closely addressed in the thesis. But how can it be understood? Looking at the data outcome through the 'spatial lens' of de Certeau could offer a possible interpretation.

### DE CERTEAU AND THE CONCEPTS OF PLACE AND SPACE (MAPS AND TOURS).

de Certeau sets out to discuss the difference and connection between the concepts of place and space. He describes place as (...) *the order (of whatever kind) in accord with which elements are distributed in relationships of co-existence. It thus excludes the*

*possibility of two things being in the same location (...) the elements taken into consideration are beside one another, each situated in its own 'proper' and distinct location* (de Certeau, 1984, p.117)

He then goes out to state that space (...) *exists when one takes into consideration vectors of direction, velocities, and time variables. Thus space is composed of intersections of mobile elements. Space occurs as the effect produced by the operations that orient it, situate it, temporalize (...) in relation to place, space is like the word when it is spoken (...) In contradiction to the place, it has thus none of the univocity or stability of a "proper"* (Ibid).

de Certeau interlinks the two concepts by concluding that (...) *space is a practised place* (Ibid.)

This description aligns well with the data experience described earlier. The interview data can be seen as a representation of a design 'place' and the video footage as a representation of a design 'space'. de Certeau also offers a metaphor of 'place' being similar to a map, the floor plan of an apartment, as opposed to 'space', a guided tour of the rooms (Ibid. p.119). de Certeau uses a word for the practice of the place, namely that of a map, that is a frequent practice in design and which this inquiry also intends to use via the presence of phenomenography. By relating place and map it is clear why the design 'place' represented in the interviews presents data well in a mapping analysis. Actions and design methods are *beside one another, each situated in its own 'proper' and distinct location*. Contrary to this is the 'tour', giving the image of walking the walk, being physically emerged and engaged in the surroundings. The experience is being *composed of intersections of mobile elements*, creating narratives without univocity or stability but using the language of metaphors to transport inlaid knowledge.

## CONCLUSION

In the paper I have shown how two qualitative research techniques generate different types of data material, which call for different analytical grips. The visual data invites metaphorical imaging and the interviews invite mapping and categorising, a double vision that can provide new knowledge on how fashion designers ideate, develop and organise their work. The metaphor of the water ripple might potentially challenge the image of fashion designers working in a blind search for the ever changing 'new'. It suggests a different driving motivation altogether, where the fashion designer reflects the present in a softer mode of continuity, although still structured round the seasons of the fashion industry. This is something that will be interesting to look at more closely in the future, along with other emerging tropes related to different understandings of bodily knowledge as well as the building of collections.

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