

NORDES 2021

# ON WEARING DIARIES AND SCALING PRACTICES: EXPLORING WARDROBE STUDIES IN FASHION EDUCATION

JULIA VALLE NORONHA

ESTONIAN ACADEMY OF ARTS

JULIA.VALLE@ARTUN.EE

## ABSTRACT

This paper seeks to explore ways to promote scalar thinking in the field of clothing and fashion design education for more responsible futures by means of wearing diaries, a method in wardrobe studies. It does so through the case of activities carried in a bachelor level course in Fashion Design called Futurology at the Estonian Academy of Arts. In the course, students collect diary notes on their personal wearing practices during a semester alongside designing future-oriented design proposals for the field of clothing and fashion design. The final reflections suggest that by attuning to personal wearing practices design actions may be scaled to help overcome the great environmental threats posed by current practices related to textile and clothing today. The work contributes especially to the development of teaching and research methods in the field addressed.

## INTRODUCTION

The past few decades saw a great change in how we understand current practices of making and consuming clothing. Mass production, usually carried in offshore locations, previously understood as business opportunities, starts to raise spread concerns on the ethical and environmental implications of the clothing and textile industries (Kim et al., 2013). Aside from quantity and quality concerns, the high complexity of the production chain leads to well-founded criticism on

the various processes that support the industry, ranging from macro perspectives such as agricultural practices (Rigby and Cáceres, 2001) to textile finishing (Muthu, 2016), and more granular ones, including fitting strategies (Valle-Noronha, 2019). Just as the general understanding of practices of making and consuming clothing has changed, and as we face climate collapse, the need to update educational strategies is urgent.

This exploratory paper asks if wardrobe studies (Fletcher and Klepp, 2017; Valle-Noronha and Wilde, 2018; Skjold, 2014) could be integrated in fashion education to drive critical discourses in fashion and sustainability. To explore that question, it looks into the case of a bachelor level course in Fashion Design, namely Futurology—taught under the current format since 2018. In it, an autoethnographic approach done via wearing diaries is taken to raise students' understanding of the complexity of factors that impact the environmental footprint of garments. The proposal expects to promote scalar thinking as students become able to critically analyse their wearing practices and connect those to professional design choices. Due to the exploratory nature of this contribution, it is relevant to note that the intention is not to provide clear answers to how fashion education should change and evolve, but rather to explore possibilities through the case exposed.

In the first section of the paper, a brief overview of fashion education today helps identify the gap of suitable methods in learning approaches, shedding light on the relevance of experience-oriented and informed decision-making alternatives to teaching fashion design. Next, the course is outlined in a general sense and the diary activity is explained. Following, an exploration of the notion of scales based on the teachers' perspective is made, grounded on personal experiences. Reflections on the limitations of the work and future directions in transforming the fashion education system for more responsible futures conclude the work.

## FASHION EDUCATION NOW

From as early as the 60s, fashion designers have raised discussion on the need to change the ways we make, consume and wear clothes in the global north context, driven by the hippie movement. However, it is not until the early 2000's that the discourse started to gain strength in academic realms (e.g. Fletcher, 2008; Berlim 2012). These initial efforts focused on opening up the complex fashion industry and identifying a need for change, especially in terms of production and consumption. Since then, the field has become a fruitful arena for discussion, and countless valuable publications emerge each year, identifying new forms of thinking and designing clothing with an environmental balance in mind.

While the discussions are currently present in most educational environments, little efforts have been put so far in affecting the ways fashion design is taught in higher educational institutions, with rare publications offering specialised perspectives to fashion education (e.g. Parker, 2009; Williams, 2016). Until today, the well-established approach to teaching fashion as image making (McRobbie, 1998) remains prolific in most fashion curriculums, with few exceptions. Some examples that challenge this norm are the masters in Practice held in Common and Fashion Strategy at ArtEZ (ArtEZ, 2021) and Fashion Futures at UAL (UAL, 2021), where the focus moves towards shared practices in the first and experimental approaches to sustainability in the latter.

Recent studies carried in institutions across the globe (Williams et al., 2019) provide an overview of the current state of fashion education. It shows that while there is generalised interest in enacting new approaches and methodologies into current fashion design curricula, the little availability of targeted information, scarcity of time to develop new courses or activities, and a lack of institutional aims linked to environmental concerns restrict the implementation of change. As a result, students' efforts often remain in the scale of material choices, such as more sustainable fibres (cf. MacArthur Foundation, 2017) or less harmful pattern cutting practices, such as zero waste (Rissanen, 2013).

Interested in contributing to this discussion, this exploration asks about ways to support students in discovering and reflecting upon other forms of supporting a shift from an industry that does harm to an industry that does good, departing from their personal experiences as clothes wearers. It defies the current fashion design focus, which emphasises the imagetic dimension of clothing, often leaving aside its experiential dimension (Valle-Noronha, 2019: 33-46). Can a careful attention to the practices of wearing, including its material and experiential dimensions, shift the ways one designs?

## MAKING FUTURES FOR FASHION DESIGN

Fashion design is always looking forward through the practices of trend forecasting, understood as essential and frequently performed by professionals in the field (Choi et al., 2014). Due to this, trend forecasting often features as an essential subject or content within fashion education curricula in institutions across the globe (Gaimster, 2012). Aligned to this, the futurology course, offered to third year bachelor students at the Department of Fashion Design at the Estonian Academy of Arts, has historically taught and practiced trend forecasting. Here, I explore the course in its 2019 version. The course was organised in five meetings, spread over the course of a semester and a total of 36 academic hours (see Table 1 below).

Table 1 Summarised version of the course schedule.

Day	Content of the class	Homework
1	<b>Introduction</b> Course Intro Video "Powers of Ten" Delivery of Diaries Group formation	Start wearing diary, watch the 3 selected 'future scenario' videos and choose a scope with the group
2	<b>What I Wear Workshop</b> Discussions based on literature + wearing diaries Future scenario planning workshop (in groups)	Develop the scenario and start designing your final project. Read literature
3	Interim presentation and Peer Discussion	
4	Group Consultations	
5	Final Presentations	

In summary, the course's learning outcomes are stated as:

- Develop critical awareness on contemporary issues and discourses in fashion design practices
- Practice systemic thinking, reflecting on design and designer's agencies and their societal and environmental impacts
- Get acquainted with methodologies to identify and approach trends in fashion and its ecologies

According to the Enciclopædia Britannica "Futurology, in the social sciences, is the study of current trends in order to forecast future developments" (2021). Within the course context, the urgent call for rethinking fashion industry practices has led to a provocation that challenges the general understanding of fashion forecasting. Instead of departing from examples of historical shifts of trends or an analysis of catwalks vs. streetwear, the course starts from the statement that the most relevant forecast today is that of climate collapse. Through this, it prompts students to rethink how trend

forecasting could or should be carried in the field of fashion design to nurture better futures.

The introductory class focuses on presenting the current practices in the fashion industry, followed by the notion of scalar thinking, illustrated by the video 'Powers of Ten' (Eames Studio, 1977). Building a parallel with the video, the discussion with students revolves around how wearing practices may affect positively or negatively the fashion system. At the end of the first day, wardrobe studies are briefly presented to students as a means to carry research in fashion and are instructed on the 'wearing diary' method. They all take home a physical diary—a notebook with a set of questions about their wearing practices that should be filled at least once a week for the duration of the course. The Figure 1 below illustrates a spread from the diaries.

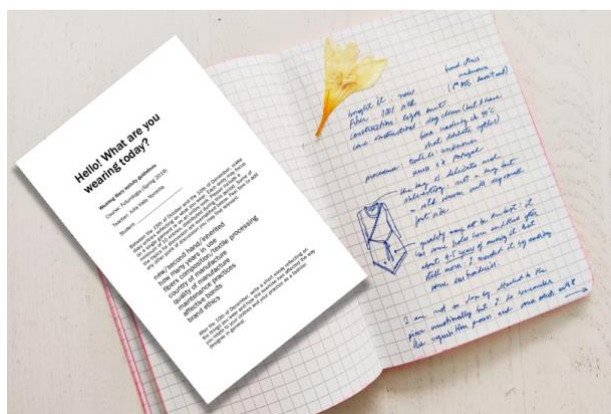


Figure 1 . Example of a wearing diary with the set of questions and instructions in a loose sheet.

The instructions asked students to make diary entries discussing topics such as: garment age, period in use, fibres composition/textile processing, country of manufacture, quality, maintenance practices, affective bonds and brand ethics. A number of digital resources that could help students in evaluating the environmental footprint of their garments was provided together with course literature.

Alongside this individual activity, students formed groups to design a product or service that targets a specific issue, making use of future scenario planning methods. At the end of the course, they are expected to present their outcomes.

#### FROM PERSONAL TO INDUSTRIAL PERSPECTIVES: SCALING THOUGHTS IN FASHION DESIGN

The wearing diary activity sought to support the development of critical reflection on wearing practices, drawing from findings in my doctoral dissertation (Valle-Noronha, 2019). It built on previous works in the burgeoning field of wardrobe studies (Cwerner, 2001; Fletcher and Klepp, 2017; Skjold, 2014) that identify

the wardrobe as a space for investigations in the field of fashion studies. Concomitantly, the experiential dimension of clothing — how one feels about the clothes one wears — becomes relevant and an alternative way to explore clothing, overcoming the prevalent focus on image.

When the fashion design student becomes aware of the intricate factors behind the environmental impact of a garment, his practice in the scale of designing is prone to change, affected by the reflections on the intimate, personal scale. For example, knowing that fitting issues may affect the longevity and intensity of use of a garment may suggest new ways of fitting clothes, encompassing longer wearing experiences. Additionally, finishing processes that add to the environmental footprint of a garment (e.g. prints, embroideries, etc.) may be reimagined through different surface design approaches.

On a positive note, students stated becoming more aware of how small design decisions affect the final environmental impact of a garment. On a negative note, they also stated an increased sense of self-criticism consciousness, which may have prevented them from wearing or cherishing garments that carried in them clearly unsustainable practices.

Looking at fashion design from the perspective of dressing practices may enable the realisation of subtleties hardly perceived when disconnected from the notion of experience and increase criticality in design practice. Some examples discussed in the class environment include caring, adapting, and mending instructions, the under-exploration of clothing tags for communicational purposes, clothing care services beyond laundering, mending and ironing, amongst others. From these discussions, new actionable solutions may emerge, under industrial or more artisanal scales.

#### DISCUSSION AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

The limitations of this exploratory paper are found especially in the small number of times that the course has been running under the exposed format (2) as well as the reduced number of participating students (between 4-6, directly reflecting the low student:tutor ratio at the institution). Even though students have stated a growing awareness of processes that foster or hinder environmentally friendly practices, tracing how exactly such changes in awareness may have affected the design work, nevertheless, is extremely difficult.

The paper hints to the field of wardrobe studies, with a particular interest in investigations of wearing experiences and practices, as an umbrella of methods to be explored not only for research purposes but also for educational and professional outputs. The main reasoning lies in the fact that few methodologies have been crafted specifically to the field of fashion design,

with wardrobe studies being one of the few examples. This particularity opens up a series of opportunities as it looks closely and deeply to fashion from within the field itself and may be able to allow access to deeper and more transformational change opportunities. Additionally, it indicates the little explored field of experience to be further utilised and investigated, in terms of educational approaches. One example is the substitution of fitting sessions for experience sessions, with the aim of assessing the quality of a garment (Valle-Noronha, 2019: 243). In this way, the intention of the paper revolves around a proposal and provocation rather than a definite solution on how to improve fashion education for more responsible futures.

## REFERENCES

- ArtEZ (2021) ArtEZ Masters in Fashion Accessed on 21<sup>st</sup> January 2021 at: <https://www.artez.nl/>
- Berlim, L. (2021). *Moda e Sustentabilidade: Uma reflexão necessária*. São Paulo: Estação das Letras e Cores.
- Choi, T.-M., Hui, C.-L., & Yu, Y. (Eds.). (2014). *Intelligent Fashion Forecasting Systems: Models and Applications*. Berlin, Heidelberg: Springer Berlin Heidelberg.
- Cwerner, S. B. (2001). Clothes at Rest: Elements for a Sociology of the Wardrobe. *Fashion Theory*, 5(1), 79–92.
- Eames Studio (1977) Powers of Ten. Accessed on 11<sup>th</sup> January 2021 at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0fKBhvDjuy0>
- Fletcher, K., & Klepp, I. (Eds.). (2017). *Opening up the Wardrobe. A Methods Book*. Oslo: Novus Forlag.
- Fletcher, K. (2008). *Sustainable Fashion and Textiles: Design Journeys*. London: Earthscan.
- Gaimster, J. (2012) The changing landscape of fashion forecasting. *International Journal of Fashion Design, Technology and Education*. 5(3), 169-178.
- Kim, H., Choo, H. J., & Yoon, N. (2013). The motivational drivers of fast fashion avoidance. *Journal of Fashion Marketing and Management*, 17(2), 234–260.
- Ellen MacArthur Foundation (2017). *A new textiles economy: Redesigning fashion's future*. Ellen MacArthur Foundation, 1–150. Retrieved from <https://www.ellenmacarthurfoundation.org/publications/a-new-textiles-economy-redesigning-fashion-future>
- McRobbie, A. (1998). *British Fashion Design. Rag Trade or Image Industry?* London and New York: Routledge.
- Muthu, S. S. (2016) *Textiles and Clothing Sustainability. Sustainable textile chemical processes*. Berlin: Springer
- Parker, L. (Ed.). (2009). *Sustainable Fashion: A handbook for educators*. London: Labour behind the Label.
- Rigby, D., & Cáceres, D. (2001). Organic farming and the sustainability of agricultural systems. *Agricultural Systems*, 68(1), 21–40.
- Skjold, E. (2014). *The Daily Selection*. PhD Thesis, Designskolen Kolding.
- Rissanen, T. (2013). *Zero-Waste Fashion Design: a study at the intersection of cloth, fashion design and pattern cutting*. PhD Thesis, University of Technology, Sydney.
- UAL (2021) University of the Arts London, Courses Accessed on 21<sup>st</sup> January 2021 at: <https://www.arts.ac.uk/courses/>
- Valle-Noronha, J. and Wilde, D. (2018) *The intervened wardrobe. Making visible the agency of clothes*. *dObras*, vol. 10, no. 23, pp. 197-217
- Valle-Noronha, J. (2019) *Becoming with Clothes. Activating wearer-worn engagements through design*. Espoo: Aalto ARTS Books.
- Williams, D. (2016). Transition to Transformation in Fashion Education for Sustainability. In W. Leal Filho & L. Brandli (Eds.), *Engaging Stakeholders in Education for Sustainable Development at University Level* (pp. 263–285). Springer.
- Williams, D. et al. (2019) *Education and Research Benchmarking Report*. Milano: POLIMI