THINKING WITH/IN THE WARDROBE

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ABSTRACT

In this paper I discuss different scale-making practices related to the wardrobe. I will firstly discuss how locating a potential for more sustainable clothing futures within the wardrobe can be understood as a re-scaling project, shifting attention away from industry defined macro scales towards the micro scale where people's engagements with their clothes are located. Based on a short vignette from my own fieldwork with five first-time mothers and their babies' wardrobes I will then present the heuristic device *thinking with/in the wardrobe,* which I developed to think through different scales of abstraction found and applied to my empirical material. In the last part of the paper I will then take a critical look at my analytical approach thinking about the problems I encountered once I started transforming my analysis into my dissertation argumentation. To overcome the obstacles that an analysis on multiple scales confronted me with, I present the conceptual idea of *wardrobe encounters* as a way of presenting my findings coherently while allowing the complexities that emerge when diverse scaling projects merge, to unfold.

INTRODUCTION

In our here-now reality of the many environmental crises of our time, researchers interested in fashion and clothing are increasingly stepping into the wardrobe as a research setting, as it is praised to hold potential as an entry point into more sustainable clothing futures (e.g. Klepp & Bjerck, 2014; Fletcher & Klepp, 2017). Bearing at once testimony to the increasing over-consumption of clothing and textiles and thereby becoming the very representation of throwaway culture, studying wardrobes simultaneously reveals practices of (continuous) use(s) that challenge and complicate the temporality of "fast fashion". By paying attention towards and emphasizing the ways people use their clothes rather than the economically driven framework of consumption choices within the purchasing context, we see patterns and practices emerge that might be thought of as being "accidentally sustainable" (Woodward, 2015), i.e. highlighting e.g. practices of care that go into using clothes.

> Pay attention to the practices of use, and we pay attention to fashion in larger contexts: the 'life world' of people who wear clothes, their actions, their ideas, how they configure material, how their choices combine to affect the whole (Fletcher, 2016).

Hence, the wardrobe and the practices related to it are linked to potentialities to think and do Fashion Sustainability differently and this potentiality is, I argue, related to a shift in scaling the wardrobe.

In this paper I discuss different scaling projects related to the wardrobe. I will start out by briefly elaborating how turning towards the wardrobe in light of debates on Fashion Sustainability can be understood as a re-scaling project, shifting from the macro scale that is dominated by industry needs towards the micro scale of people's clothing uses.

Drawing on a short vignette from my own fieldwork with five first time mothers and their babies' wardrobes, I will then move the discussion towards unpacking three levels of scaling I applied to my

empirical material, namely *thinking in*, *thinking within* and *thinking with the wardrobe*. I understand these levels as scales of abstraction, moving from the tangible towards the intangible, from the micro towards the macro, and from the private towards the public. Yet, although scale-making is an integral part of research (as it is of social life in general) that helps us organizing, ordering and navigating by applying infrastructure to our thinking processes (Carr & Lempert, 2016), an increased awareness of the often taken-for-grantedness of scales is necessary, as they are by no means ontologically given; rather, "scale must be brought into being: proposed, practiced, and evaded, as well as taken for granted" (Tsing, 2005). In the last part of this paper, I then elaborate critically on the shortcomings of my heuristic device of *thinking with/in the wardrobe* in light of the problems I encountered once I started transforming my analytical ideas into my dissertation argument. I finish up by introducing the conceptual tool of *wardrobe encounters*, a framework I apply to let the various scales of abstraction work through my argumentation.

LOCATING FASHION SUSTAINABILITY IN THE WARDROBE – A MATTER OF SCALE

Fashion and research practices related to the phenomenon have always navigated between the micro and the macro scale, emphasizing e.g. how fashion at once encapsulates macro scale issues such as capitalism as well as engagements on the micro scale of people's identity projects (Woodward, 2007). With an increased focus on the devastating environmental as well as social consequences of the fashion industry, people's consumption habits, especially in the global North, have become a central topic of discussion. This has contributed to a shifting focus towards garment consumption, thereby including the consumers' role(s) into wider debates into trajectories towards increasing Fashion Sustainability. It is within this context that the wardrobe as a research site becomes of heightened importance of investigation. Focusing on the consumer side of the Fashion system, understanding using clothes not only from the perspective of identity construction but in its broader complexity, paved the way for a counter-narrative of what fashion is, emphasizing that garments, when in use, become much more than a commodity. As Fletcher (2017) suggests

> notice the context of use and we acknowledge fashion values and actions that fall outside the normal terms of reference of the market, we exercise our fashion intelligence in a broader field. Hone our attention on using garments and we may start to question the legitimacy of assumption, firmly lodged in global understandings of success and development, that

> continuous growth in sales is essential, that more is better, that it leads to life.

What Fletcher (2017) coins as *Craft of Use*, is a conceptual framework that addresses the many aspects that come to light when we take serious the ways people engage with garments. Even though this might be regarded as a shift in scale from the macro to the micro, as it calls for attention towards the small scale engagements people have with their clothes, I understand this move as a shift on two grounds: firstly, it challenges the macro perspective that for a long time has dominated discourses and practices of Fashion Sustainability, often being dictated by industry needs and perspectives. Secondly, it simultaneously also broadens the micro perspective of relationships people have with their clothes as use is much more than a means to establish an identity.

This shift in attention away from macro frameworks towards the more micro scale of engagement does not stand isolated within Fashion Sustainability research. A similar argument is e.g. made by Gibson-Graham (2014) in relationship to "the economy" and the role ethnography can play in changing its dominant narrative: "For ethnographers today, no task is more important than to make small facts speak to large concerns", she writes, "to make the ethical acts ethnography describes into a performative ontology of economy and the threads of hope that emerge into stories of everyday revolution". We can then understand the shifting focus towards the wardrobe as a more general trend of moving away from understanding people's behaviour within already formed, taking for granted large-scale frameworks. Thinking Fashion Sustainability from the macro scale imposed by industry needs that often reinforce and operate on a logic of continuous growth and which validate solutions based on their potentiality for scaling up, erases the potential of change found within the wardrobe. "Scalability banishes meaningful diversity, that is, diversity that might change things" (Tsing, 2015). The politics of moving our attention towards the micro setting of the wardrobe is thus related to dismantling the naturalness of taken-for-granted frameworks, in order to create space for nuanced engagements that might not be scalable but question our pre-defined understandings. It is here where a source of change might emerge, where the micro might inform and thereby transform the macro scale.

THINKING WITH/IN THE WARDROBE

How to study something so large-scale as sustainability within the small-scale setting of the wardrobe? This question somehow lingered in the back of my research project all along. My empirical material was collected through fieldwork with five first-time mothers' engagements with baby clothing, trying to understand

how different uses might inform our thinking about and doing of sustainability. Implicitly, my research design was based on scaling the wardrobe as being located somewhere in-between the micro and the macro scale; incorporating at once the micro engagements people have with their clothes, while also allowing for broader discussions that relate to large-scale issues. This is a common understanding of the wardrobe, often seen to be operating in-between, a contact zone where e.g. boundaries between the private and the public are being negotiated (Skov, 2011), or the global and the local collapse into each other (Miller & Woodward, 2011).

To think through the different scales of my participants' babies' wardrobes, in my analysis, I developed the heuristic device of *thinking with/in the wardrobe* (figure 1), which helped me in applying an infrastructure for thought upon my empirical material.
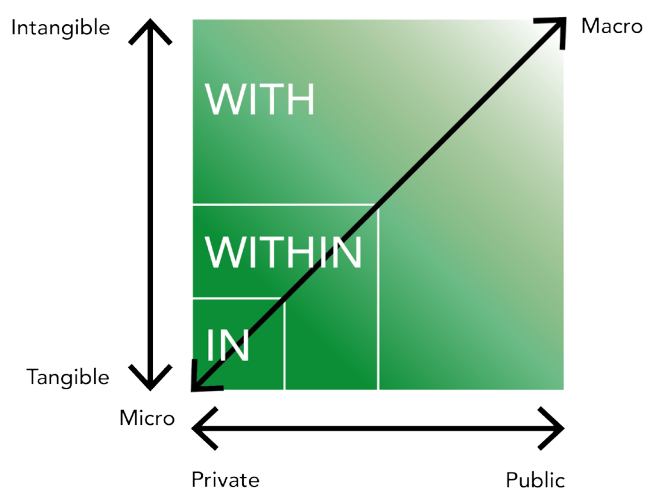

Figure 1: Scales of *thinking with/in the wardrobe*

I will briefly introduce how I used *thinking with/in the wardrobe* in the context of my own analysis by drawing on a short vignette from my fieldwork:

"It is just so difficult to know how much clothes they should wear, you know?" Marianna and I are sitting on the floor of her living room, surrounded by baby clothes we have taking out of her daughter Nina's wardrobe. "And then they tell you to think what you would wear and then just put an extra layer on top of that. But somehow that doesn't really make sense to me, because I am always cold and Mikkel wears way less clothes than me." I nod, because I know all too well what she is talking about: how to know whether your baby is warm enough or overheating? "When we were in Australia, I really liked dressing Nina in these". Marianna is fishing a flowery blouse out of a stack in front of her. "I often matched them with these pants. You know, it was so warm and I remember when I had to travel with work to countries where you have to cover up, how nice it was to wear clothes where the air could come through. I remember the feel of it" She takes up the blouse,

rubbing it through her fingers, "just that very light cotton".

In relationship to this vignette the level of *thinking in the wardrobe*, prompted me to think more in-depth about the spatio-temporal encounters taking place in the situational context of my research. I started wondering how the setting of my wardrobe inventories, namely the private spaces of my participants homes contributed to the unfolding of situations; what kind of emotional affects these spaces made possible and how that varied from one participant to another. *Thinking in the wardrobe* also directed me towards paying attention to how touching clothes can enable meaning-making processes based on embodied memories related to clothing materials and the sensations on the body experienced through them. I therefore came to understand this scalar level as being located within the realm of the private, where engagements with tangible things enabled at once situational meaning-making processes as well as a curiosity about how to translate these haptic engagements into my own research.

On the level of *thinking within the wardrobe*, the above storied encounter prompted me e.g. into paying closer attention towards how motherhood is a process rather than a status, and how practices of dressing ones child "correctly" can contribute to enable (self) validation, while there is also always the chance of perceived failure; I wondered who "they" are, and from which authority they speak and how ideas about "good maternal care" and its perceived naturalness play out within the space of the wardrobe. It was also a way to think how e.g. kinship and friendship ties are being (re-)established and negotiated through baby clothing and practices of use related to them. The level of *thinking within the wardrobe* thus guided thinking processes that traced the workings of larger discourses within the space of the wardrobe, trying to better understand how baby clothing engagements are linked to them in multiple ways. Within my conceptualization, *thinking within the wardrobe* then relates to the meso level, drawing the micro level engagements with baby clothes into broader, more large-scale contexts and vice versa.

Where I with *thinking in the wardrobe* ask questions about the tangible and direct engagements taking place in situational research moments and the affects they had, and with *thinking within the wardrobe* tried to understand how broader discourses and values enter into the space of the wardrobe, are negotiated and made-sense of here, the last level, *thinking with the wardrobe* moved me into a manifold of possible trajectories to be explored. It ushered my thinking processes further away from the concrete engagements into more abstract wonderings about e.g. care. Using maternal care as an entry point, I grew increasingly interested in discussions on e.g. *care ethics* (Tronto, 1993; 2013), the *logic of care* (Mol, 2008) and care as

knowledge politics (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017). *Thinking with the wardrobe* thus opened up a space for explorations that, even though they might have had their fundament within the concrete encounters made during my fieldwork, moved my thinking into broader debates, many of them relating to onto-epistemological issues. As I have briefly presented, I use *thinking with/in the wardrobe* as a heuristic device to think through my empirical material on different scales of abstraction that relate to various levels of micro/macro, private/public, tangible/intangible engagements (see fig.1). Although useful in creating an infrastructure for thinking and thereby helping to navigate and order complexity, while keeping my analysis open and flexible, this approach also created shortcomings. I will discuss the problem I encountered while writing up as well as the approach I applied in order to work around it in the next section.

TOWARDS WARDROBE ENCOUNTERS

As I described above, *thinking with/in the wardrobe* enabled me during my analysis to move between different scales of abstraction I detected and applied to my empirical material. It was a fruitful way to explore different ideas and trajectories and keep my analysis open while still moving it forward. Yet, once I started to write up the ideas that emerged into my dissertation, I was confronted with the problem of how the manifold of ideas and trajectories that had opened up, could be bundled together, organized if you wish, into something that resemble a coherent argument. This, I argue, is very much a problem of scale and scale-making, as research outputs, in the end often are presented in favour of one scalar perspective over another, so as to present research findings in some kind of coherent way. To work around this problem, I found inspiration in the writings of anthropologist Anna Tsing. As she puts it

> To listen to and tell a rush of stories is a method […] Its research object is contaminated diversity; its unit of analysis is the indeterminate encounter. A rush of stories cannot be neatly summed up. Its scales do not nest neatly; they draw attention to interrupting geographies and tempos. These interruptions elicit more stories (Tsing, 2015)

As Tsing argues, if we allow for stories to emerge and commit to following them where they might take us, scales and especially one-dimensional scalar frameworks might not work. Rather, by following stories, we have to make space for multiple, interacting and at times interrupting scales; this is not problematic, even though it might be framed as such in scientific discourses, but rather an ontological ground from where to start. Taking these ideas into account and letting them work through my research project, I came to coin the conceptual framework of *wardrobe encounters*.

Wardrobe encounters account for moments of intensity, where something felt like *some*thing (Stewart, 2007). They are found in the ordinariness of something so small as the vignette I presented earlier. Yet, as I have tried to demonstrate, out of this seemingly ordinariness, stories might emerge. The notion of *wardrobe encounters* then can be understood as a descriptive tool, accounting for the intensity of moments and situations that make up research; moments of curiosity, wonder and at times frustration, when something fells like *some*thing. On the other hand, I understand *wardrobe encounters* also as a methodological approach towards studying the wardrobe that incorporates multiple scales of abstraction related to *thinking with/in the wardrobe*, following the stories that emerge in the complex entanglements that wardrobes afford. This approach doesn't seek to build closed argumentations, but rather open-ended exploration of where the stories that emerge might lead to. *Wardrobe encounters* by definition then are manifold and situational, i.e. every encounter is filled with potentialities of unfolding, cutting through multiple scalar levels at once, challenging their ontological standing.

The conceptualization and focus on *wardrobe encounters* thus is an attempt to let the different scales I detected in and applied to my empirical material, interact and –connect with each other as well as with my thinking processes. Rather than excluding one scale for the benefit of another I am trying to bring them together and let them work through each other.

CONCLUSION

In this paper I discussed different scaling project found within the research setting of the wardrobe. After elaborating on how focusing on the wardrobe as entry point into more sustainable clothing futures can be understood as a re-scaling project in itself, I moved the discussion towards my own research project, unpacking three levels of scalar abstractions I applied to my empirical material. I described how the heuristic device of *thinking with/in the wardrobe* provided a useful way to understand and move around different scalar levels of abstractions, opening up multiple trajectories to be explored. Yet, in the last part of the paper, I also elaborated on the difficulties I encountered once I tried to bring together the multiple scales I detected and applied to the analysis of my empirical material. To overcome these problems, I introduced the notion of *wardrobe encounters*, an attempt to let the different scales of the babies wardrobes interact and –connect in my thinking processes and in the finished product that will become my dissertation. As the final version of my dissertation is yet to be finished the usefulness of the notion of *wardrobe encounter* to at once capture as well as open up ideas will still have to be shown. Let's see where this story will lead.

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