The Feeling of Being Dressed: Affect Studies and the Clothed Body

Lucia Ruggerone

Abstract

In sociological and cultural studies the relationship we have with our clothes has been mostly analysed in terms of fashion and identity, with a focus on the ways in which we use clothing to represent ourselves to and in the world. In the article I argue that in all these analyses one important aspect is still missing: the feelings we experience *about* and *in* our clothes when we are dressed. I then propose a change of paradigm to find ways to incorporate in our analyses what I here call the "feeling of being dressed". This change can be performed by transgressing the boundaries of semiotic, structural and sociological explanations and by abandoning the mind-body dualism, which shapes the description of our relationship with clothes as mainly intellectual and our choices of garments as the result of a dialogue within our minds. I then show how affect studies open up opportunities for the investigation of the body-clothes assemblage: in particular, the notion of body as a composition of forces and the approach to practices (in this case dressing practices) as ways of becoming are central for this endeavour.

Keywords: body, clothes, identity, affect, becoming

As a sociologist member of a network on the culture of emotions, I was some time ago asked to write a paper on "emotions in the consumption and use of fashion". After a detailed review of the sociological and cultural studies literature in search of inspiration, I came to the conclusion that these scholarly traditions did not have much to say on the theme I had been assigned. And, although some colleagues, made aware of my predicament, were reassuring me that this outcome could have been easily anticipated ("sociology, after all, is not concerned with inner feelings and does not enter people's skulls" was the standard comment), I could not settle for this explanation, because it seems to me that the way we feel *about* and *in* our clothes is a relevant phenomenon with a definite impact on our social behaviour and ultimately on our social life. I have no doubt that all sociologists, who at different times have taken an interest in fashion and clothing would agree with this; however, the ways in which they investigated what I'll here call "the phenomenon of being dressed" seem to

uncover only some aspects (the rational, cognitive ones) of a complex relationship, while at the same time leaving other (the non rational, sensory ones) implicit, glossed over, unexplored[1].

In this article I critically review some of the sociological contributions to the study of fashion and identity and later argue that a change of paradigm is needed if we want to incorporate in our analyses what I here call the "feeling of being dressed".

Sociological Studies of Fashion and Identity

In sociological and cultural studies the relationship we have with our clothes has been mostly analysed in terms of fashion and identity, with a focus on the ways in which we use clothing to represent ourselves to and in the world. On this theme, the work of classic and contemporary scholars in the sociology and cultural studies of fashion has ranged widely from macro perspectives, interpreting clothes as signifiers of structural variables such as class, gender, race and status (Wilson 1985; Skeggs 1997; Crane 2000; Bourdieu 1984), to micro analyses, looking at clothes as scenic props used by actors in preparation for and in the course of their social performances (Finkelstein 1991, 1996, 1998, 2007; Bovone-Mora 1997, Goffman 1959).

Among the classics, German philosopher Georg Simmel was one of the first to understand the importance of clothes and fashion in the organization of modern society and to explore the new relationship between people and clothing as a specific trait of a new cultural age, i.e. modernity. Unfortunately Simmel's contribution is mostly appropriated in fashion studies and cultural sociology in isolation from the rest of his work (Finkelstein 1991; Entwistle 2000; Wilson 1985; Gonzalez 2012), in particular his existential analysis. In fact, when his essay on fashion is read against the background of his philosophy of life [especially as it is presented in the *Philosophy of Money* (Darmon and Frade 2012)], it gains a much deeper meaning and offers a more incisive wedge to explore the relationship between clothing and identity.

In his *Philosophy of Money*, Simmel (1900) observes that in modernity people are freed from the bonds of traditional, all encompassing social circles and become involved in a plurality of roles and

social spheres, so that individual identity emerges from the ever-changing combination of these roles. On the other hand, he adds that modern organization, especially through mass production, also enables an unprecedented expansion of objective culture that the individual can assimilate only to a limited degree. This expansion also implies a growth of (rational) knowledge that is paralleled by the fading of our non-rational capabilities, those very capabilities that, according to Simmel define our human status (Arditi 1996). The stunting of our emotional development, deriving from this situation, explains that typically modern feeling of nostalgia, the "remoteness from oneself" experienced by modern individuals, who feel ever more detached from the totality of life, a desirable situation where "the personality is at one with itself and the world" (Damon and Frade, 2012, 204). The disquiet of modern personality derives, according to Simmel, from an urge to connect with an original and authentic unity, while living in and through an objective culture that tends to build "an insuperable barrier (…) between itself and what is most authentic and essential in it" (Simmel 1989 [1900/1907], 674)[2]. When the subjective culture or subjective spirit is overcome by objectivity, the individual longs for her authenticity[3], tries to find a form of life that provides occasion to attain distinction. The world of fashion appears to provide such an opportunity, and it therefore becomes attractive to modern individuals, particularly to women[4]. However, fashion and clothing do not, according to Simmel, deliver on this promise: they are in fact by all means part of this objective culture and individuals' relationships with them are, for Simmel, ultimately mediated by intellect and rationality. For Simmel, the fascination with fashion and clothing, so typical of modernity, ultimately amounts to just an outlet for the nervousness and tension pervading the existence of modern people, an outlet for the anxiety deriving from the loss of contact with the vitality of life, the flow of energy still untamed by the rationality that modern objective culture has rendered unavailable to most of us.

Among the sociological contributions of the 20th century, the highest level of continuity with Simmel's interpretation of fashion is shown in the seminal work of Fred Davis. Moving, like Simmel, from an almost Hegelian dualism, in his book *Fashion, Culture, and Identity*, Davis (1992) argues that fashion's main role in social life is that of mediator between dialectical terms and he explicitly

refers to Simmel as the first to see fashion as a "social by-product of the opposition (…) of conformity and individualism, of unity and differentiation" (1992, 23). In following this lead, however, Davis decides to focus on the kind of ambivalences that are troubling contemporary identities and somehow ends up replacing Simmel's core existential dilemma with a range of more specific ambiguities: namely gender ambivalence, status ambivalence and the dichotomy between the erotic and the chaste. According to Davis, when selecting the clothes to wear, individuals are mostly attempting a synthesis between contradictory pulls concerning their identification with one or the other gender, their membership in a social class or group, and the more or less overt expression of their sexuality.

The preoccupation with exploring the connection between fashion and identity is shared, around the same time, by Joanne Finkelstein (1996, 1998, 2007) who also recognises the debt that fashion studies have with Simmel and follows him in describing clothes and fashion as a way of enhancing our social persona, by attracting the attention and the admiration of others; in her analysis, clothes are ways of self promoting, aimed at representing to the world "a more complex ego" (Finkelstein 1996, 40). Finkelstein's notion of identity is however quite different from Simmel's who, as we have seen, posed a stark distinction between subjective authenticity and the objective (social) world. On the contrary, Finkelstein full heartedly adopts Goffman's notion of the multiple self and agrees with him that the idea of a "stable interiority (…) embedded in the ideology of identity" (2007, 133) is an illusion, albeit one that continues to endure "across the centuries in the face of challenging evidence" (134). As a consequence, in her view, the most important role of fashion and clothes is not so much to manage (sometimes contradictory) social roles, but rather to serve people in the processes of self-invention they constantly need to carry out in the various situations in which they engage.

Like Goffman, Finkelstein describes the self as something social actors create and perform situationally, by using a variety of scenic props, some of which they carry with them, while some they find available *in situ*. Choosing the right clothes and adornments for the character we are about to impersonate therefore emerges as an extremely important part of our theatrical representations, given that "in everyday life, fashion appearances are interpreted as literalizations of the wearer's

character, economic success and educational attainment" (Finkelstein 1999, 376). In this perspectives clothes are only one of the various techniques actors use to create their personality; other tools normally used to this end are body language, etiquette, tone of voice, manners, demeanour, charisma and personal style.

In the late 20th century, as a consequence of the growing sociological interest in the body as a crucial aspect of the self, the debate on clothes and identity increasingly centred around embodiment and on the ways in which clothes and the human body might interrelate. The mutual implication of dress and body is indeed the starting point for Joanne Entwistle's analysis of clothes as situated embodied practices. By distancing herself from the reductively abstract approach shared by classic sociologists and more recent cultural scholars interested in (subcultural) dress as an abstract symbolic system (Polhemus 1994; Hebdige 1979), Entwistle (2000, 2001) advocates the adoption of a framework which addresses the complexities and heterogeneity of everyday dress practices. Such a framework can be created, she argues, by drawing inspiration from structuralism (Douglas, Foucault, Mauss)-, which shows "the way in which the body is rendered meaningful by culture" (Entwistle, 2001, 35)- and the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty, -"suggestive of the ways in which dress can be understood as a *embodied practice*"-, and combining them with insights from the works of Goffman and Bourdieu, who both provide "a sociological rather than a philosophical approach and substantiate their accounts with empirical evidence of actual social practices" (Entwistle 2001, 46). The cross-fertilization among all these perspectives allows Entwistle to produce a framework able to explain how people dress in everyday life transcending the limitations of studies that discuss clothes only as products of the fashion industry (the sociology of fashion production: see Pedroni 2013) or as texts expressed in a visual vocabulary (Lurie 1981; Barnard 1996; McRobbie 1998). Moreover, the combination of all these insights is needed to thoroughly analyse the complex theme of dress in everyday life, especially if we want to untangle the complicated intersections of structural, psychological and situational constraints impacting on our embodied vestimentary practices. Indeed Entwistle's is a powerful attempt at producing a kind of general theory of dress as the result of "a

practical negotiation between the fashion system, the social conditions of everyday life such as class, gender and the like, as well as the rules (…) governing particular social situations" (2001, 52). However, I would argue that her analysis still fails to address an important element of the body-dress compound: the *affective* practical experience of the clothed body in space. To attain this level of analysis the boundaries of semiotic, structural and sociological explanations need to be transgressed.

Towards a Different Paradigm

The transgression of these boundaries implies an epistemological leap; most importantly the decision to leave behind the mind-body dualism, which shapes the description of our relationship with clothes as mainly intellectual and our choices of garments, at the point of sale or in front of our wardrobe, as the result of a dialogue within our minds, or between the social and the intimate part of ourselves (Woodward 2007, 39). As I mentioned earlier, the focus on the practice of wearing clothes as an *embodied* experience (Entwistle 2000, 2001) recognises that at least part of this experience is extra-cognitive, *in the flesh* and therefore not reproducible in a strictly analytical form or vocabulary. It also foregrounds the extra-cognitive (emotional and/or affective[5]) dimension of our relationship with clothes, which plays an important part in the process of choosing what to wear. Sociological attempts to explore the emotional side of our engagements with objects in general (Illouz 2009), and in particular with clothes, are infrequent and not fully persuasive in answering the questions I am here posing[6]. For these reasons I think it is necessary to turn to an emerging body of ideas variably labelled as "non-representational theory" or "affect studies", originating in cultural geography and feminist theory and rapidly spreading across the other social sciences and beyond. This scholarship seems to offer more useful tools for the investigation of the body-clothes *assemblage*[7]: firstly it proposes a radically alternative notion of the body, which finally allows us to overcome the Cartesian dualism; secondly it conceptualises practices not as bounded events, but as fluxes or becomings.

The non-representational notion of the body radically differs from the dualist discourses that have implicitly or explicitly informed most of the sociological (and cultural studies) literature on fashion

and clothing. After being almost totally ignored in sociology for over a hundred years (Witz 2000), the body made its forceful appearance as an object of study in the late 20th century, when its importance, especially as a boundary between nature and culture, started to be recognised and discussed. Yet, despite its relevance, a comprehensive theorization of the body has proved elusive. Arguably, in social and cultural studies, the dominant paradigms in theorising bodies have been those associated with the linguistic turn on the one hand, which tend to adopt a semiotic approach – the "body as parchment" (Foucault 1980; Shilling 1993; Cream 1995; Conboy et al. 1997; Griffen 2007)- and with the area of consumption studies on the other, which sees the body as a tool to market the self - the "body project" (Giddens 1991; Featherstone 1991)-: both of these notions have extensively been used in studies of fashion and adornment. Many traditional (macro) approaches have indeed treated fashion as a sign of the times and the bodies bearing the clothes as passive surfaces inscribed by various forms of text. In this perspective, bodies become "parchment", as they can be assimilated to blank pages on which society's discourses (at the collective or individual level) are inscribed. Arguably, Simmel's (1904) and Veblen's (1899) interpretations of fashion and its role in modern society could be seen as examples of this stance, as well as more contemporary contributions such as Barnard's (1996) and Lurie's (1981).

Theories of the body project, on the other hand, tend to regard the body as the container of our individual identity- the "visible carrier of self-identity" (Giddens 1992, 31)-; here the body is seen as a material object we possess. It is also perceived as our individual responsibility to control the body through the mind in order to shape it according to the dominant cultural standards and thus using it as a "passport to the good life" (Jackson et al. 2001, 91). This idea of body is implicit in all the contributions where fashion and clothes are presented as tools to construct and express our (variable and situational) personality, as mentioned earlier. It is also worth noticing that both these perspectives on the body imply a differentiation between body as crude materiality and the mind as the immaterial force that culturalizes the body. Within this dualistic framework, the relationship between people and clothes cannot be regarded as other than an intellectual liaison, in which a thinking agent (a sense-

making mind) adorns his/her body (the material, *natural* part of the ego) to give the world an intellectually orchestrated representation of the self. As a consequence of this approach, the meaning of dressing practices gets completely "torn from the body" (Lefebvre 1991), in as much as it is not produced by the event of a body wearing a particular garment, but is rather transferred *onto* the dressed body from outside (the ideas or images in the wearer's mind).

An example of this approach is Woodward's (2007) ethnographic study conducted by interviewing women at their homes while they were choosing an outfit from their wardrobe. Although the study is presented as a material culture approach, emphasizing the agential role of garments, the description of the ways in which women choose their clothes is still anchored to Giddens's dualistic idea of a person selecting an outfit as a mean to actively (intellectually) construct and order his/her biography. Through the daily selection of items from their wardrobe- Woodward (2007, 38) tells us-, women order and re-order a personal narrative and practically and repeatedly answer the basic question "who am I?"[8]

This type of theoretical framework can only be changed if and when we abandon the Cartesian perspective and replace it with a notion of the body introduced in philosophy by Spinoza and then resumed by Nietzsche (1968; orig. 1901) and more recently by Deleuze (1988) and Deleuze and Guattari (1987). In this tradition of thought the body is conceived as a composition of forces capable of forming specific relations with other bodies (human and non-human) (Buchanan 1997). The bodies/assemblages are clusters of connections between a variety of material and immaterial elements: molecules, neurons, cells but also ideas, signs, cultural symbols, etc…; all these elements and their constantly moving relations impact on the affective potential of the body. Clearly, here, the emphasis is shifted from an ontological concern about *what the body is* to an ethological account about *what the body can do*, namely what it can become through encounters with other bodies endowed with their own set of affective (material and immaterial) capabilities. These embodied encounters are the stuff that makes up the material texture of our daily practices -actually rendering these practices possible-; and because these practices are continuously flowing events (becomings),

their meaning can only be partially captured by interpretative/linguistic discourses. Like Garfinkel (1986, 172-173) had already noted, albeit in a different context, these discourses are always "glosses", *a posteriori* rationalisations that fail to grasp the "feeling of what happens" (Damasio 2000): the living corporeality of our practices, the fleshy experience of life we sense but cannot fully describe, like the feeling of walking through the city (DeCerteau 1984), or sinking in a warm bath or wearing our favourite dress; all these are examples of perpetual becomings, events in which our bodies transform as a result of encounters with other bodies (human and non-human).

Moreover, this theoretical tradition offers another crucial concept to describe the motions and transformations of a body in the world: the notion of affect, which can be defined as the "capacity that a body has to form specific relations" (Buchanan 1997, 80) with other human or non-human bodies. Importantly this set of relational dispositions cannot be controlled by the mind, as it functions at the pre-cognitive level, so that when the potential of the body to form relations with other bodies is actualized and encounters happen, the results, positive or negative as they might be, are in any case outside our control. Following Spinoza's explanation about what happens in these encounters, if the power of acting of the body is increased and expanded, then we experience an emotion of joy: if, at the opposite, it is restricted or worse annihilated, we experience various degrees of sadness, even, ultimately, death. As becomes clear here, although often used as synonyms in affective studies (Gregg and Seigworth 2010; Clough and Halley 2007), for Spinoza (1993; orig.1667) and Deleuze, affect and emotion are separate concepts: while affect is "the continuous variation of someone's force of existing" (Deleuze 2007, 3), or "bodily intensity or the concentration of bodily forces" (Massumi 2002, 27) unqualified and located at the pre-subjective level, emotions emerge as "the socio-linguistic fixing" (Massumi 2002, 28) of a personal experience of a relation, a subjective and qualified intensity, sensed and recognised by a subject. The relevance of this distinction will emerge clearly in the discussion of the feeling of being dressed.

Affective Clothing

As already mentioned, these theories of the body and its variations (the affects), elaborated within a spinozian tradition, have become central to contemporary affect studies and have had an influence on domains of scholarship with a much broader scope than the analysis of clothing practices. However, I argue that their insights can be used to fill the gap in fashion scholarship on the actual experience of the dressed body and to theorise on the feelings of pleasure or displeasure we experience towards clothes in a way that may help an understanding of the extra-cognitive reasons that inform our choices of what to wear. In this frame the power of clothing (everyday or fashionable) to transform the wearers is pushed to the fore and the event of selecting and wearing clothes can thus be interpreted as an encounter between a human body and objects that initiates a process of mutual becoming with either a positive or a negative outcome. In this analytical framework the fashionability of the garment (its connection to the current fashion trends) can become important, as it may well be the element that attracts the attention of the (potential) wearer and excite his/her desire to buy it and put it on, thereby initiating a process of becoming in which the reciprocal affordances of human body and dress result in non-predictable transformations of both. However, the fashionable gradient cannot be assumed to always facilitate the formation of a healthy relation with the wearer's body- a "compound" (Buchanan 1997)-; in fact, the result of the encounter ultimately depends on the opening up of possibilities for the dressed body to form further healthy relations in the flux of practices at hand.

The potential of non-representational approaches to the study of fashion and clothing has indeed already been noted and used in recent contributions in the field of art and design studies, published mostly by practicing artists or scholars of fashion and design (Marenko and Brasset 2015; Eckersley 2008; Seely 2011, 2013; Smelik 2015). These contributions reflect upon the ways in which non-representational theory's emphasis of the "affective practical experience of the body in space" (Eckersley 2008, 1) can inspire fashion designers to "open up their practice to new and innovative techniques resulting in potentially new fashions" (2008, 12). A few examples of the new becomings that fashion can afford its users and followers are described by Stephen Seely in two recent articles (2011, 2013), where he details how haute couture designers (such as McQueen and Kawakubo) have

produced collections that problematize the dualism between human bodies and things, human and non-human bodies and humans and technology, where clothes are the "third term" enabling the transformation. Interestingly Seely presents these creations as examples of "affective fashion" in as much as these garments "harness the body's capacities for transformation and provoke the body to become otherwise" (2013, 253). He also draws a demarcation between fashion as haute couture and everyday clothing: in his view, they differ not so much in terms of their capacity to transform the body- both types of garments do-, but rather in the degree of the awareness that the fashion designer shows of this very capacity. So, while Seely's focus is to explore the work of distinguished designers/artists who actively incorporated this awareness in their creations, what I would like to do here is to inhabit a much more quotidian dimension and show how the concepts of the body assemblage, affect and transformative encounters can help to shed light on the extra-cognitive elements involved in the everyday practices of getting dressed and of living in and through a clothed body.

To do so I want to focus here on a specific situation that we all experience everyday and sometimes several times a day; the moment(s) when we must choose what to wear before going out to take part in some social activity, or when, during a shopping trip, we try to decide what item of clothing to buy. The moment of choice in both the scenarios has been extensively investigated both by social scientists and marketing scholars; both cohorts have recently recognised and tried to understand the role of emotions at these particular times in order to explain how different factors impact on our choices. Not knowing enough about marketing sciences, I can only notice their growing interest for the neurosciences in an attempt to grasp consumers' emotions at the point of sale (Venkatraman et al. 2012). Instead I want to critically revise the social scientists' contributions to this topic and to show how an affective approach can offer a more persuasive account of what happens when we choose our outfits.

As I mentioned earlier, in Woodward's 2007 study and in other contributions on similar topics (Guy and Banim 2000, 2001; Colls 2004), women's choices of clothing emerge as a mainly

intellectual exploration of one's own identity and a conscious decision about which aspects of this identity to show and underline, given the social circumstances under which the choice is made and the characteristics of the situations in which the clothes have to be worn. In this perspective the process of dressing "becomes a means through which women attempt to convince others that they are a particular kind of person" (Woodward, 2007, 33); so choosing clothes and wearing them boils down to a "technology of the self" (Foucault 1988), where the mindful agent, equipped with a distinguished set of aesthetic taste materialised in the contents of her wardrobe, selects the scenic props that allow her to project the best "face" for whatever event.

Differing from those analyses and using a Deleuzian approach, I am trying to build a two-fold argument: firstly I contend that clothes choose us as much as we choose them (in fact what happens is an encounter) and, secondly, that choosing clothes is not only a matter of aesthetics (i.e. taste dispositions) combined with practical considerations, but an opening up to a process of becoming, a line of flight, the final result of which we cannot foresee. Even when we are struck by the beauty of a dress, for example, it may happen that, when we put it on, we stop liking it, it almost looks like a different dress: this event is usually glossed with a "it doesn't suit you", or words to that meaning. In Woodward's examples the situation is explained away by participants with "the dress is not me" (2007, 40), and translated in theoretical terms as "the object cannot be reintegrated within the self". Here, again, the dominant role is played by the mindful individual, who acts on the materiality of the clothing. In a non-dualistic, spinozian perspective, we could explain the episode as an encounter in which a productive relation failed to be formed. But productive for what, we may ask? In deleuzian terms a productive relation is one that affords us an enabling encounter, i.e. allows us to increase our power of acting or our force of existing (Deleuze 2007, 3); so in my example, that dress was failing to increase my power of engaging in activities and practices, on the contrary it was restricting my power to form other relationships, to promote the formation of new compounds. In return, my body was also turning that beautiful dress into something less attractive, less pleasant, my body was *bad* for that dress. But then, at another time of my life, the changes occurred in my body (and in a parallel

fashion in my ideas, see Deleuze's explanation of Spinoza, 2007) through, for example, the process of aging or the gaining or losing weight, might create a set of dispositions (affects) of a kind that the very same dress that I discarded before, suddenly becomes perfect and I feel great wearing it, as it allows me to fit into the current flow of existence smoothly and effortlessly, to become somebody right for the kind of existential set up I am part of at that particular moment and able to form new positive relations.

It is interesting to note here that in all the contributions I have mentioned from the social sciences literature, the focus is on *women* and clothes as opposed to the discussion in this article, which presents the dress/body assemblage as neuter. While gender differences in relation to clothing is not an area that I wish to discuss here, it would certainly appear that in our society and culture, women are more *affected* by clothes than men; their lives seem to be more likely to be expanded or indeed reduced by the use of the "right" or the "wrong" clothing, as confirmed by the anxiety that women of all ages admit to be experiencing about how to appear "at their best", while generally men do not report the same degree of concern. Although Deleuze's contribution to women studies and feminist theory is highly controversial (Buchanan and Colebrook 2000; Coffey 2013; Coleman 2009; Goulimari 1999; Braidotti 1997), the work of some deleuzian feminists offers interesting suggestions about how to interpret this evident phenomenon. For example, in a study of make-over television programmes, Coleman (2011, 161) notes that "images of self-transformation seem to appeal most strongly to working-class women"; in a similar way, she remarks, a study conducted by Skeggs et al.(2008) a few years earlier on reality TV had shown that the same social group tended to be "carried away" by the shows much more often than middle-class women, who tended to distance themselves from the programmes and did not display affective engagements with them. In commenting these results, Coleman describes the affective absorption in popular culture as "part of an impulse to become" (2011, 161) and seems to imply that a social position closer to the margins predisposes bodies to change. In a similar vein, MacCormack (2001) assimilates women with the "minoritarian", where this term indicates their difference from the "majoritarian" subjectivity, typically white,

middle-class and male: “woman defined by lack, historically denied self-representation, means that what woman ‘is’ is, of course, a contentious term” (2006, 65). So, if wo-man is only negatively defined as ‘not-man’, her preferred dimension isn’t the *being* but the *becoming*, that dynamic situation charged with potentiality for creativity and change, which is activated by the desire for transformation[9]. However, woman’s proximity to the margin and her fascination with and desire for change does not mean that only women’s bodies can transform through encounters; actually, in this perspective, it makes little sense to speak about men and women as two discrete, static categories, as such an approach would bring us back to the traditional (representational) ways of thinking. On the contrary, this exquisitely situational perspective suggests that, although in order to initiate becoming the majoritarian body has to be disallowed, nonetheless, “no individual body is precluded from entering into the process of becoming”, a dynamic situation in which the relationships with other bodies are never determinable in advance, but form “unexpected connections (…) in a process where each moment and thing is defined in terms of its *haecceity”* (MacCormack 2001, 1).

So, going back to the discussion about clothes and the feeling of being dressed, it can be said that generally speaking, although perhaps in different ways, both men and women always try to create a productive, “healthy” situation for themselves by imagining future circumstances and by trying to exercise some control on them through a set of instrumental choices aimed at producing the desired result (i.e. Goffman’s projection of the best “face”). In other words, I can anticipate in my imagination which dress will be most suitable for a future setting, I might have *expectations* in regard to what it is going to happen; but it is not until I physically put on that dress (so that it *becomes with my body* in the situation)- a process accompanied by a vague sense of *suspense*- that I can sense (i.e. feel) whether it was the right or the wrong choice. What cannot be anticipated (perhaps the sociologists would call it the “unintended consequences”) is the event formed by the body and the dress and by my so dressed body and the other bodies partaking in the event[10]. The outcomes of these encounters are variations –what Deleuze (2007) calls “affects” and Massumi (1995) renames “intensities” - that may be positive (or healthy) or negative (or unhealthy) and will surface in my consciousness as

different types of emotion. Spinoza mainly talked about “joy” and “sadness’”, but in the case at hand these main emotional states can be further qualified and articulated in more subtle nuances such as feelings of self-confidence, competence and ease, or at the opposite of embarrassment, awkwardness, unease. These emotions are the stuff we can finally name and talk about, in a process that translates the confused embodied feelings we perceive into a code of communication that at the same time expresses and rationalises the affections produced by the live encounters between bodies[11].

Concluding Remarks

The recent affective turn in sociology and cultural studies can be effectively employed to better understand the embodied relationship people have with the clothes they wear and/or try on when they are out shopping. Although previous works in fashion studies (Entwistle 2000, 2001; Tseelon 1998; Woodward 2007) have emphasised the need to investigate the embodied experience of clothing, most of them (even the anthropology-inspired ones) implicitly retain a dualistic Cartesian approach that tends to regard the body as a purely material element controlled, shaped and rendered meaningful by a separate entity: the mind. In this corpus of work the mind is conceptualised as the repository of the meanings through which the individual creates the self that then needs to be reflected/represented by and in the (dressed) body (of course this self does not need to be stable, rather it can be altered at every point): the latter is therefore reduced to a passive element.

The radically alternative notion of the body found in Spinoza and later adopted by Deleuze considerably changes the scene and provides us with different tools to analyse what happens when a body is dressed. The affects produced in the situation stir up some deep, pre-cognitive feelings that only become describable emotions if and to the extent in which they surface in the conscience and are thus re-appropriated by language and culture[12]. These emotions can be thought of metaphorically as the tip of an iceberg, the perceived and describable part of a submerged formation whose shape and boundaries are unknown to us[13].

The deleuzian approach is also more apt to explain why the relationship people have with their clothes tends to be remarkably different from the relationship they have with other possessed objects. Dealing with the connection between subjects and objects, in his seminal 1988 article *Possessions and the Extended Self*, Belk, a renowned scholar of consumer behaviour, argues that the things (or people) we possess become important components of our sense of self[14]. However, I contend that to describe our relationship with our clothes just in terms of "possession" or to see clothes simply as a set of tools to enhance our social status or amplify our ego, while capturing some of the ways in which we consume fashion items, still misses an important part of this bond and ultimately glosses over the different experience of wearing a dress as opposed to possessing a car or a new suite for the living room….And the main difference, I think, lies in the fact that the dress is something that will morph into my body and into which my body will change when I go out into the world, something that will open up or close down for me possibilities of becoming, of immersing in the flow of worldly practices more or less easily, equipped with energies or devoid of them, feeling (albeit inexplicably) strong or ill adjusted, and all this depending on a series of affects that I cannot anticipate, but might come to consciously perceive in the form of positive or negative emotions[15].

Finally I want to make some considerations about how the affective dimension of being dressed might be empirically investigated. Admittedly this is a stumbling point and a question I have been repeatedly asked whenever I presented drafts of this article to sociologists' audiences. In fact, if we accept that the affects created by being dressed are pre- or extra-cognitive, and that the emotions that exudes from them are only ripples caused by a submerged energy, any attempt of translating the affects into words, both in the form of interview texts and analytical reports, is bound to be challenging and possibly inconsistent with the approach. The discussions about how it might be possible to empirically investigate affects is well underway in the cultural studies area with most scholars of affect tackling the issue and indicating promising ways to get out of the conundrum (Knudsen and Stage 2015; Clough 2009; Lury 2009). Here I do not intend to address the epistemological complexities bearing on the topic; instead I just want to express some remarks and

ideas more specifically targeted to analyse the feelings of being dressed. In my view (and even more so after this excursus I have done) the affective dimension of our relationship with clothes has long (possibly *always*) been 'the skeleton in the closet' of socio-cultural studies of fashion and dress. Historically most scholarly attempts to get it out have involved the use of psychoanalytic approaches trying to uncover the subconscious determinants of our personal taste for some types of adornment[16]. However, as I hope to have shown in this article, the feeling of being dressed is quintessentially *situational* (unpredictable, surprising, queer) while the psychoanalytic gaze is searching for deep seated subjective dispositions that impact on our behaviour recurrently (and can be laboriously changed only through therapy), and especially dispositions that won't change with our bodily changes. Also it conceptualizes the relationship between the subject and the world of objects as a unidirectional trajectory: our subconscious dispositions dictate the ways in which we relate to the Other (person or thing).

The two-way creation of affect between bodies and clothes was much more clearly noted by the pragmatist William James "who wrote in 1890 about a woman he saw wearing a hat with a tall feather on it, who instinctively ducked as she entered the room, as if the feather were part of her body. Modern neuroscience experiments have explored this further" (Guardian 13 Dec 2015 by Daniel Glaser). In fact some of the studies on affect have embraced neurosciences and often use laboratory techniques to map what affects do to our brain (Massumi 1995). However this is a direction that most social and cultural scientists are very reluctant to take, as it diminishes the importance of the social and the historical in understanding the happening of the social world in favour of a sort of neo-positivist epistemology that, to a certain extent, solves the old dualism mind-body by treating the mind as a combination of neuronal processes.

Like many other social scientists, I also think that the desire to investigate affects does not mean discarding the analytical tools that social sciences have developed over the years. As has been noted elsewhere (Knudsen and Stage 2015), there are many ways in which methods of investigation such as narrative analysis, ethnography, interviews and action-oriented research can be steered to

comprehend and include the affective. In the case here at hand, I would suggest that two of these methods are particularly effective: ethnography (also, but not only, in the form of auto-ethnography) and document analysis (text or images produced by the affected person). An ethnography of dressed bodies participating to social life that strives to capture the feeling of being dressed would be an investigation in which the field notes compiled by the researcher become personal, rather than structured (Punch 2012) and focussed on a set of materials and aspects of behaviour that would usually be regarded as minor or irrelevant in more traditional ethnographic style[17]. Likewise an autoethnography or a narrative account produced by the affected person would take the form of *emotional recollection* of bodily states and spatial atmospheres. In both cases the narrations should be freed from any structured code of expression and allowed to use styles of expression produced either on the spur of the moment (increasingly available through digital social media) or creatively suggested with the aid of metaphors, pictures, drawings, analogies etc..

The data thus collected and the analyses produced will inevitably look quite different from what we are used to, especially to the extent that they will seem more like experiential fluxes rather than potentially replicable expert analyses of social experiences. In some ways this style of report-writing marks the end of the search for objectivity and transferability of results that, according to some (Clough 2009), is still hovering over some parts even of qualitative research. Here the centrality of the researcher becomes at the same time greater and ultimately inseparable from the analysis produced, together creating an assemblage that will relate to the reader or spectator not on a logical basis, but on an affective one: that assemblage will in its turn be out in the social world ready to form new affective relations with others, creating new happenings, going with the flow.

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Notes

1. A partial exception to this is Warwick and Cavallaro (1998); however they are not, strictly speaking, sociologists.
2. This state of grace is achieved, according to Simmel, by geniuses like Goethe (Darmon and Frade 2012, 202).
3. According to Arditi (1996), Simmel sees authenticity as residing in a non-rational approach to the world of other people and the world of objects.
4. According to Simmel (1957, 550), women have an emptier life than their male counterparts and fewer occasions of self-realization.
5. See *infra* for a distinction between the two.
6. For example, in an attempt to explore the emotional drive that draws us toward particular objects of consumption, sociologist Eva Illouz proposes to replace the notion of desire, which has been so powerful in studies of consumption in the last twenty years, with a socio-cultural notion of emotions that she describes as "the energy-laden side of action, where that energy is understood to simultaneously implicate cognition, affect, evaluation, motivation and the body" (2009, 383). This definition of emotion is all encompassing and vague and ultimately fails to shed light on the type of embodied phenomenon I am here interested to bring to light.
7. I here use this term in the meaning given to it by Deleuze (1987, xiii; Deleuze and Parnet 1987, 101) and later discussed by Buchanan (1997, 2012), who reminds us that "assemblage" is the English translation by Tomlinson and Habberjam of the French "*agencement*". The French term points to the action of assembling as well as to the "resulting arrangement" (Buchanan 1997, 81). This double meaning needs to be preserved in the appropriation of the term.
8. Significantly the book's synopsis recites: "Each morning we *establish an image and an identity for ourselves* (emphasis mine) through the simple act of getting dressed (…) Woodward pieces together what women actually *think* about clothing, dress and the body in a world where popular media and culture presents an increasingly extreme and distorted view of femininity and the ideal body".
9. Braidotti (1997, 70) emphasises that "Deleuze's theory of becoming is also a theory of desire: the only possible way to undertake this process is to actually be attracted to change, to *want* it, the way one wants a lover – in the flesh".
10. Massumi (1995, 87) says: "Nothing is prefigured in the event. It is the collapse of structured distinction into intensity, of rules into paradox".
11. To quote Massumi, again: "Emotion is qualified intensity, the conventional, consensual point of insertion of intensity into (…) function and meaning" (1995, 88).
12. For a much more detailed description of this process of emergence and conscious appropriation see Massumi (1995).
13. In this light we could define the emotions and feelings about their clothes reported by Woodward's participants as the emerging tip of an encounter between their bodies and the material of the clothing with the deriving variations (affects) produced on/by both.
14. Belk quotes William James, who in 1890 (291-292) wrote "a man's Self is the sum total of all that he can call his, not only his body and his psychic powers, but his clothes and his house, his wife and children, his ancestors and friends, his reputation and works, his lands, and yacht and bank-account. All these things give him the same emotions. If they wax and prosper, he feels triumphant; if they dwindle and die away, he feels cast down, -not necessarily in the same degree for each thing, but in much the same way for all".
15. The importance of the sense of touch in describing this bond should not be underestimated. As Iris Young notices (2005, 69): "touch immerses the subject in fluid continuity with the object, and for the touching subject the object touched reciprocates the touching, blurring the border between self and other".

16. One of the first authors to use psychoanalysis was Flügel (1930), who argued that fashion was a strategy to manage erotic impulses emerging from the subconscious. A few decades later, König (1973) spoke of fashion as a means to manage the sense of our own mortality, while Elizabeth Wilson (1985) shared with Lacan the notion of a fragmented self and described fashion as a way to 'glue' together the scattered parts. Finally, in her recent book, *Fashion and Psychoanalysis* (2012), Bancroft argues that only if fashion is read as a language in terms of Lacan, the centrality of the subject to fashion is maintained.
17. These could involve gestures, postures, ways of moving and touching the clothing, fiddling with elements of it.

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