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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

Present 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, and furthermore, to explore a research methodological observation; namely 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 on going 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 summery on the theoretical foundation. Theory that on the one hand has helped identify the lacuna and on the other has given theoretical substance and argumentation to what otherwise could be described as gut feelings and

assumptions on behalf of the author. The theoretical design methodological backdrop is made up by classics from architecture and industrial design namely Schön (2001), Cross (2006) and Lawson (2006) Included are also more artistic method studies from dance, film and sculpture i.e. choreographer Twyla Tharp's *The Creative Habit* (2006) for her descriptions on muscle memory. Last but not least I lean on some of the few texts available on fashion design and method; Lars Hallnäs on *The all-important difference...concepts of creativity in the fashion design process* (2007), Julia Gaimster's *Visual Research Methods in Fashion* looking broadly at visual ideation methods in industry and education (2011) and the recent article *Fashion Thinking*, in which Nixon & Blakeley (2012) points towards distinct features of the fashion design practice to do with temporal, spatial and social dimensions, articulated taste and the balance between commercial goals and artistic necessity. All elements of the work practice that emerge on the radar in present project as well.

The core motivation; that fashion designers will benefit on many fronts 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 leads in the way of 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 present paper exemplified by Certeau's text *The Practise of Everyday Life - Spatial Stories* and the tropes of *Place and Space, Maps and Tours* (1984).

DATA AND METHODS

The inquiry is build 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 (Dewey In: Rylander 2012) and reflexive (Pink 2006) stance, focusing on experience and experiential knowing. 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 interview allow the informants to describe 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 scheduled four in total. The last two are to be performed in London 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 sit down with the designers and conduct interviews, 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)

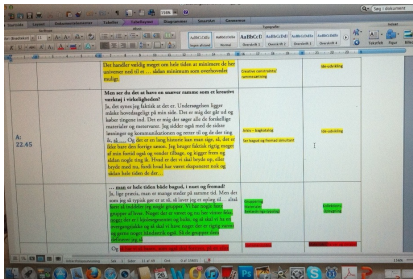


Figure 1: Colour coding descriptions

The video observations where conducted in the studios of the designers. I was in both cases 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 troughs 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 have been invited to join the designers whenever I could, but have also received briefings from the designers along the way on events in relation to the progress of the collection. Looking at fashion designers working through a video lens 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 as well, supplementing 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 designerly 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 materialise itself 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 itself in its own individual way. Or maybe materialise is a better word, as the empirical data emerges as two different forms of materials. Both on a concrete level in the transcriptions, mappings, film clips and captured actions, but also more abstractly, which has to do with how the data communicates and begin to have a 'will' of its own. One very linear, orderly, map-able as the interview descriptions works their way through the processes of creating a collection, which makes it possible to form a design methodological fashion related language. To break passages in to sound bites that become detailed containers of specific fashion designerly knowledge. In the interviews the more analytical structuring of the fashion design work and the building of a fashion collection transpires very clearly, but there is little or almost no descriptions of knowledge in relation to bodily skills and practices, which, in a way is surprising, considering the field.

The other, video observations seem 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 jump from ideating a collection, to fitting the previous, to evaluate sales samples on the one before again, to look at sales from even further back. Constantly shifting back and forth in time. The visual data produced and the process of being within the data as it happens, has somehow set off metaphorical images to emerge. As opposed to the interview data, the knowledge doesn't seem to be enclosed in the detail, but in a three-dimensional and somehow 'whole' experience. In observing the designers again and again, as they perform actions, the processes observed slowly mould themselves into what transpires as possible general approaches specific for fashion designers to do with body, time and space, presenting themselves in a metaphorical language partly developed via the use of sketching. I will here give an example of this process.

WATERRIPPLES – 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 with the notion of 'the new' and they 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 on different spiral forms 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, somehow the total work of the designer, one could see the water drop as the tiny added ingredient, or *difference*, as Hallnäs coins it (Hallnäs, 2007) in each new collection. A small addition that affects what already exists, without really 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 meaning condensation, 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 on 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)*.

Place and Space. How are they different? How are they interlinked? de Certeau talks about a 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)

On *space* he goes on to state that it (...) *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.)

Space, as a place that holds a practise, is a description that somehow aligns well with the data experience described earlier. The interview data could be seen as a representation of a design-*place* and the video footage as a representation of a design-*space*. To add yet another level of understanding Certeau offers a metaphor of the place being similar to a map, i.e. the floor plan of an apartment as opposed to the tour i.e. where you are guided through the rooms. (Ibid. p.119) de Certeau here uses a word for the practice of the place, namely that of a map, that is a frequent practice in design, and which present inquiry also means 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*'. Opposed 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 generates different types of data material, which call for different analytical grips. The visual data invites metaphorical imaging, the interviews mapping and categorising. A double viewing, that can provide new knowledge on how fashion designers ideate, develop and organise their work. As for the metaphor of the water ripple it might potentially challenge the image of fashion designers working in a blinded search of 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 more closely at in the further work a long other emerging tropes related to both different bodily knowledge as well as the building of collections.

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