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ALEX FRANKLIN
University of the West of England

Phenomenal dress! A personal phenomenology of clothing

ABSTRACT

The principle aim of this article is to contribute to the development of a phenomenology of fashion through an analysis of my relationship with clothing using Heidegger's phenomenology of Being as outlined in Being and Time (1997) to provide the study's methodological foundations.

I say 'a' phenomenology; however, I will argue that it is only through engagement with the 'partial perspectives' and 'situated knowledges' (Haraway 1988: 583) offered by individual Beings-in-their-worlds that small but significant intersubjective truths can be identified.

KEYWORDS

phenomenology
Heidegger
fashion
intersubjectivity
situated knowledge

This article is an experiment. It is a methodological and stylistic experiment that endeavours to both explicate and illustrate its reasoning through both its form and content. It is a personal experiment that embraces Donna Haraway's belief (1988: 583) that 'only partial perspective promises objective vision' and so I intend to embrace my immanent subjectivity as a researcher and unpick particular aspects of my life-world regarding my relationship with clothing in the hope that some small, shared intersubjective truths might emerge.

The most immediate manifestation of this experimentation is going to be my use of personal pronouns; a practice that sits uneasily with my

academically trained self as I habitually attempt to remove all overt traces of my subjectivity from the texts that I produce. That said, as a means by which the subjectivity of both researcher and reader can be made visible this use of personal pronouns is second to none; however, this process of reintroducing my 'self' into my writing – as if I was ever not present – is an uncomfortable one that grates upon authorial sensibilities I did not fully realize that I had. In attempting it I discovered that I have a deeply ingrained association of the 'I think', 'I feel', etc. mode of writing with self-indulgence and narcissism,[1] which straightaway revealed about me and my inculcation into particular writing practices than I had anticipated.

This form of self-reflexive autoethnography[2] is not unprecedented in clothing and design studies (see, for example, Verschueren 2012; Turney 2010), but this article is also an experiment in applied phenomenology. Specifically it uses elements of Heidegger's phenomenology of Being as outlined in *Being and Time* (1997) to discuss particular aspects of the, or rather, *my* lived experience of wearing clothes. I have multiple motivations for doing this, not least of which is my desire to formalize some ideas that have arisen from conversations I have had over the years with students, colleagues, friends and family regarding a shared complex, emotional and often ambivalent relationship with fashion systems and dress practices and how this manifests itself in our clothing choices.

Phenomenology therefore seems the obvious methodological underpinning for such an endeavour but Heidegger has been somewhat neglected in discussions of applied phenomenology. This is no doubt due in no small part to his active avoidance of addressing what he considered to be an embodied Being's problematic 'bodily nature' (Heidegger 1997: 143). This has led to his ideas appearing oddly discarnate and cerebral, which, it could be argued, has led to Merleau-Ponty with his seminal book *Phenomenology of Perception* (2002) being seen as the go-to philosopher for practical phenomenologists intent on capturing the experiences of being a living body in-the-world. Further, Heidegger's dense and apparently prolix writing style can be daunting[3] and when that is coupled with knowledge of his ruthless behaviour during World War II (Kirsch 2010), it is perhaps hardly surprising that he is not everyone's first choice of phenomenologist. Nevertheless, I am using Heideggerian phenomenology in part[4] because his discussion of the nature of being a 'Being' starts from their fundamental and irrevocable embeddedness in-the-world (Heidegger 1997); the belief that everything is always encountered in a context and by a Being with a particular set of concerns, needs and expectations. Hence, an object of experience can never truly be separated from the experiencing subject (Thompson 2005: 6). That is to say, any attempt to discuss the meaning of a garment, for example, without consideration being given to the defining role played by the concernful Being(s) designing, displaying, purchasing, wearing or otherwise interacting with it would be fundamentally flawed.

So far, so relatively straightforward: the importance of the context and the reader/consumer in the generation of the meaning of a 'text' is one that has been expounded by a range of post-structuralist theorists, perhaps most famously Roland Barthes (1977). However, it is the nature of a Being's engagement with the world that Heidegger offers useful insights into, and here I am specifically interested in the role that others, or, to use Heidegger's terminology, *das Man*/the 'they' play in framing my engagement with clothes in-the-world.

Clearly, and before going any further, it is important to understand what Heidegger meant by 'the "they"', because he was very clear that the 'they'

1. A concern I share with Coffey (1999 cited in Holt 2003).
2. In this article I take the term 'autoethnography' to refer to 'an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyze (*graphy*) personal experience (*auto*) in order to understand cultural experience (*ethno*)' (Ellis, Adams and Bochner 2011).
3. This is not just my opinion; *Being and Time* (1997) regularly appears in the top ten of the world's most difficult books (e.g. Flood 2012).
4. In the interests of full disclosure I am also, to a lesser degree, using Heidegger's phenomenology because I suspect he would have been irritated by his ideas being used to discuss such a seemingly frivolous topic as fashion.

were not simply a collection of individual Beings (Heidegger 1997: 166) and the '"they" never dies because it *cannot* die' (Heidegger 1997: 477, original emphasis). Rather the presence and influence of the 'they' is manifest in the language, mores, ideas and ideologies that an individual Being absorbs and internalizes; it is through the influence of 'they' that an individual Being learns expected and accepted ways of carrying itself and as a result 'is for the sake of the "they" in an everyday manner' (Heidegger 1997: 167).[5]

It is worth considering how fundamentally the influence of the 'they' permeates every socialized individual's lived experience. Most of us have an earliest memory that we can identify; it may have been confused or influenced by shared recollections and family lore, but there will be one moment we clearly recollect as being our first memory. Prior to this point we know we existed; we must have done as other people – usually family members – vouchsafe that we did even though we have no memory of it. This early childhood lack of recollection is known as 'infantile amnesia' and it is typical for adults not to be able to remember much before the age of three or four (Society for Research in Child Development 2010), which is remarkable given that it is during this period that we are learning how and what to eat, how we are expected to carry ourselves, how familial and social relationships function, we learn our name and that vocal sounds equate not just to things but to actions and ideas, we are house trained, and myriad other things that we had no control over and no recollection of acquiring but accept them as de facto truths central to our way of being a Being-in-the-world.[6] It is also during this time that we learn what to wear, i.e. what colours and garments are associated with which genders, what different age groups do and do not wear, what our family wears and how that distinguishes it or aligns it with other social groups, and so on. To wit, we come to self-consciousness already fully '*dispersed* into the "they"' (Heidegger 1997: 167, original emphasis) to the point that our everyday, accepted way of being-in-the-world is determined by the 'they'.

This means that instead of expressing our individuality, our authentic selves through our clothing choices – as myriad ad campaigns would have us believe – we are in actuality expressing our inauthentic[7] 'they-selves' (Heidegger 1997: 167). Theodor Adorno (2002: 445), influenced by Heidegger, similarly recognized that the 'pre-digested' offerings of capitalism are in fact pseudo-individualized, off-the-peg identities, but whereas he was concerned with critiquing a specific system of influence, Heidegger's model does not appear to be tied to ideology, rather he sees the 'they-self' as an essential element of being a Being. In other words, 'Heidegger begins with our relationships *with others* then sets out to investigate how to determine, or reclaim, our relationship with our selves' (Thompson 2005: 8, original emphasis).

So that is my current and ongoing project: investigating with a view to determining how I might have an authentic relationship with clothing. This may lack the ambition of a quest for ultimate or monist truth, but if in articulating smaller, personal truths and identifying the source of my 'situated knowledges' (Haraway 1988) they resonate with one other person then I will have achieved an intersubjective truth that I can live with.

It is all but impossible to talk about clothes without discussing fashion – and by 'fashion' I do not mean the aesthetics of clothing; rather I agree with Simmel (1957), Schiermer (2010) and many others who hold that fashion has little to do with aesthetics and everything to do with social relations. So here I am not actually interested in looking at a specific garment, outfit or look that

5. Heidegger uses the term 'everyday' to indicate a normal, unquestioning attitude.

6. This phenomenon could suggest the reason why so many Beings are willing to entertain the idea of life after death; if we existed before we were consciously aware of being, then why not afterwards?

7. 'Authentic' and 'inauthentic' are not used here as part of a hierarchical or moral lexicon, rather Heidegger distinguished the inauthentic 'they-self' from 'the *authentic Self* – that is the Self which has been taken hold of in its own way' (Heidegger 1997: 167, original emphasis).

I have tangled with, but rather how clothes via 'fashion' make me feel and why. And I am not talking 'high' fashion here, as represented in the pages of the likes of *Vogue*, with its fantastical, otherworldly aspect; though do not get me wrong, I find the worlds presented therein fascinating but in much the same way an ethnographer might. The garments, lives and values that are shown are as real to me as those presented in, for example, a hip-hop video – which is not to say they do not filter through to me and impact on me indirectly, but not in the same way as if I were embedded in those worlds and living them every day. Rather I am interested in my everyday, lived experience of buying and wearing clothes; of being obliged to engage with a system which has for the most part made me feel unwelcome and *unheimlich*, uncomfortable and ill at ease.

Historically, clothing and I have had an ambivalent relationship; my overwhelming memory of my clothes in my pre-adolescent years is of their being hand-me-downs from my brother and cousins and occasionally my mother, but then I out-grew her, so then from my dad. Similarly my memory is that clothes were primarily valued according to their function, they were something that you wore to keep warm or dry but were not something through which you displayed anything much more than your family's ability to keep you clean and warm. This was not because there was a lack of understanding of the cultural capital of clothing, of the role it plays in inscribing one's habitus on the body; on the contrary, it was something that I was highly sensitized to thanks to a combination of a stylish grandmother – whose mother had been a seamstress – who was quick to observe any sartorial transgressions both inside and outside of the family and, perhaps somewhat counter intuitively, limited access to the mass media, which meant that a TV programme like the BBC's *The Clothes Show* (1986–2000) developed a cult following within my family and any style supplements in the Sunday papers were leapt upon and scrutinized closely.

Rather being 'fashionable' was seen as something optional or at least an option available to only a finite number of people. There did not seem to be the same ever-present pressure for people of all ages to follow it as there is now, in the same way that at school there did not seem to be the same pressure for all the girls to be 'pretty' and/or beautiful – that responsibility fell to just one or two classmates while there were other roles left for everyone else, such as being the bright one, the one that could draw, the funny one, the one with good hair, the sporty one, the one that was good at maths, and so on.

No doubt this discretionary approach to fashion was due in part to where I grew up, Lincolnshire a sparsely populated and, at the time, incredibly ethnically undiverse farming county in the United Kingdom with limited public transport and limited opportunities for those with an acquisitive streak. I also attribute some of this electiveness to the limited presence of the mass media at the time: It is worth noting that when I was growing up there were only three TV channels available in the United Kingdom until 1982 when a fourth one was introduced (BBC News 2007), satellite TV did not come into being for another eight years (Bains 2008), just before a fifth terrestrial channel appeared (Sweney 2010), there was no Internet and we were lucky if we could pick up more than two radio stations. This meant that as an audience member you were obliged to wait for fashion or lifestyle shows, you could not choose to submerge yourself in them 24/7 in the same way that you can now.

Equally, when you did encounter images of the beautiful and/or famous they were presented as something 'other', something separate and different

from the everyday rather than the possessors of something that should be within everyone's reach. This was pre-*Big Brother* (2000–present), *The X Factor* (2004–present), *Britain's Got Talent* (2007–present), *The Voice UK* (2012–present), and so on, and the only way people I knew garnered any kind of fame was through academic achievement, one of their sheep winning at a county show or by their knocking over a post office: all of which would get a mention in the local paper and all of which had a limited impact factor and varying degrees of financial reward attached.

Also, I was born into a double-dip recession in the 1970s (Werdigier and Ewing 2012) and then grew up in the 1980s at a time when unemployment rose from 5.3% of the working population in 1979 to 11.9% in 1984, i.e. an increase of 124% within five years (Hyde 2010). This affected my family and many others in my community and so, unsurprisingly, disposable income was low; new, fashionable clothes were something special that could be saved up for or requested for birthdays and Christmas but this required much forward planning and by the time the occasion came round or the money was saved, chances were the object of desire was on its way out and so the ephemeral value of the fetishized fashion item was writ large.

But even if money had not been in such short supply, 'fashion' was something that was simply inaccessible to me. Some of this limited availability was due to geography, there were a limited number of shops that I could get to; and to access the garments or fabrics on offer in mail order catalogues I had to negotiate a credit card- or cheque book-wielding gatekeeper of an adult; but also, and to my mind more importantly, I was very literally denied access because things or, more specifically, the things that I desired were not made in my size.

I can speak with confidence here about footwear; most ladies shoes are simply not made in my size and if they are they are usually one or more of three things: ugly – appearing corrective and/or orthopaedic in style; aimed at drag queens – with vertiginous, ankle-breaking heels and more sequins and buckles than I have ever really needed; or outrageously and therefore prohibitively expensive. I have size 9 UK/43 European/9.5 US/27.5 Japanese feet or rather I should say that I take a UK size 9 shoe (most of the time, but some of the time a 9.5 and occasionally a 10, depending on the brand but never an 8.5 or an 8). This is an important and hard-learnt distinction: I take (generally) a size 9 shoe; I do not have size 9 feet. Semantic pedantry perhaps, but it is important to avoid conflating shoe and garment sizes with the size of the bodies that wear them; the wildly differing numbers attached to the same body by different designers and manufacturers is at best an inconvenience – as it means you cannot simply *know* your size, you have to keep trying things on, which is a trauma I unfortunately do not have time to address here – and at worst can lead to the internalizing of an ideologically rather than biologically determined bodily schema. Which is to say that aiming to reconstruct one's body so that it fits a particular size of garment irrespective of your body type or proportions – for example, the variously lauded and maligned American size 0 – is an inherently futile exercise as you could never fit all of the allegedly same-sized clothes all of the time.

That aside, according to the conversion charts I have consulted (e.g. Shoe Size Conversion 2011) taking a size 9 shoe means that I have the feet of a man,[8] which is a bit harsh. My feet have been this size since I was about 13 and have in that time not been noticeably disproportionate to the rest of my 1.75 metre frame. The same can be said of clothes; for years I was obliged to

8. Don't get me started on gloves! I apparently have man hands too.

buy men's trousers if I did not want to show an alarming amount of ankle, but while this meant they were long enough in the leg it also meant that if they were to fit me round the hips they would gape at the waist. Similarly, women's clothes that fitted me around the bust would invariably be too short in the arm, jackets that fitted me in the shoulders were either so voluminous around the waist they looked like maternity wear or had sleeves so tight that if I scratched my nose I would look like I was about to burst out of them; and whoever designed the arm holes of ladies T-shirts was clearly labouring under the impression that women do not have sweat glands … which, FYI, they do, whatever their size or age.

Needless to say this was read by the pre-adult me as an indication that the world considered me a malformed giant who should know better than to try and engage with the pleasures and benefits that fashionable clothing offered to others. So for many years I took the hint and maintained an appearance of scornful indifference to the shifting styles and glittering identities that others of my age dabbled with. Instead I opted for a variation of modernist functionalism which manifested as a tendency to choose clothes primarily on the grounds of their practicality, their lack of applied decoration, their lack of gender specificity and their life expectancy, plus a tendency to buy garments that were over-sized so that I did not have to try them on in shops.

And that was fine … to a point. I understood that there were risks as well as benefits inherent to taking part in fashion. I had a horror of becoming the fashion victim, 'who negates his own individuality in the very act of exercising it' (Schiermer 2010: 91). Far better, I thought to 'look terrible out of indifference' (Schiermer 2010: 86) than to attempt to follow fashion and to misjudge it or be denied. Nevertheless I felt rejected in a way that was reminiscent of that felt when you are the last person to be chosen for a sports team at school; the burning embarrassment that comes from being judged by a system that you understand but over which you have no control. To me, fashion and team sports appeared to offer active participants similar rewards, a combination of belonging, purpose and competitiveness; but those of us destined be the last one chosen were left knowing beyond a shadow of a doubt that everyone else had taken one look at you and understood that you lack the physical properties necessary to excel, i.e. you are too fat, too thin, too big, too small, too weak, too strong, etc. and will therefore probably be a liability. You are at best going to be a wildcard; someone who every once in a while might contribute something positive because the laws of probability dictate that in some universe somewhere you will score a goal or be on trend – something I like to think I very briefly achieved in the early 1990s with my matt oxblood Dr Marten boots. Or, more likely, you are a cautionary tale; a visible reminder of the fate that awaits those who have the audacity to attempt something that is clearly outside of their abilities. So I was left with the distinct impression that I had been judged and found wanting; destined only ever to wear clothes, never to participate in fashion.

Recently, however, I have noticed a shift in my relationship with clothes. Perhaps it is because I am no longer the target demographic of most fashion ad campaigns; perhaps it is because I have been teaching critical theory, visual literacy and gender politics for over 15 years now and some of it has sunk in; or perhaps, and I suspect more likely, it is because I got tenure, so I can afford to shop – very occasionally – in places that cater for my apparently abnormal build, but I am actually starting to enjoy clothes on an everyday level.

This everydayness is important as prior to this point my every encounter with clothing, whether purchasing it or simply getting dressed, was to a greater or lesser degree one defined by anxiety; anxiety generated by the constant feeling of not being comfortable in one's own 'they-self', of being perpetually *unheimlich*. It was/is the type of anxiety that Heidegger recognized as central to the attainment of an authentic understanding of one's own self; 'Being-free *for* one's own most potentiality-for-Being, and therewith for the possibility of authenticity and inauthenticity, is shown, with a primordial, elemental concreteness, in anxiety' (Heidegger 1997: 236). And, for me, the source of this anxiety was the way that clothing functioned constantly to throw me back into myself, jolt me out of my happy everyday ignorance of my finitude, and remind me of my stressful 'potentiality-for-Being' (Heidegger 1997: 232). Clothing did this not through the pseudo-individualizing identities that were offered but through their constant rejection and, hence, reminder of my flawed embodiment.

It may well be the case that '*world as world* is disclosed first and foremost by anxiety' (Heidegger 1997: 232, original emphasis) and that this is the source of an authentic understanding of the world, but it is an exhausting state to live in and I welcome the opportunity to take a day off and get dressed without being constantly confronted with my mortality. I do not particularly want to be fashionable, but I would like the opportunity to be 'stylish' – a distinction very important to both my grandmother and mother; with stylishness being a more personally defined and longitudinal project than simple fashion – and I look forward to the day when I can buy my way into an inauthentic but well-dressed everyday mode of being that the 'they' might condone.

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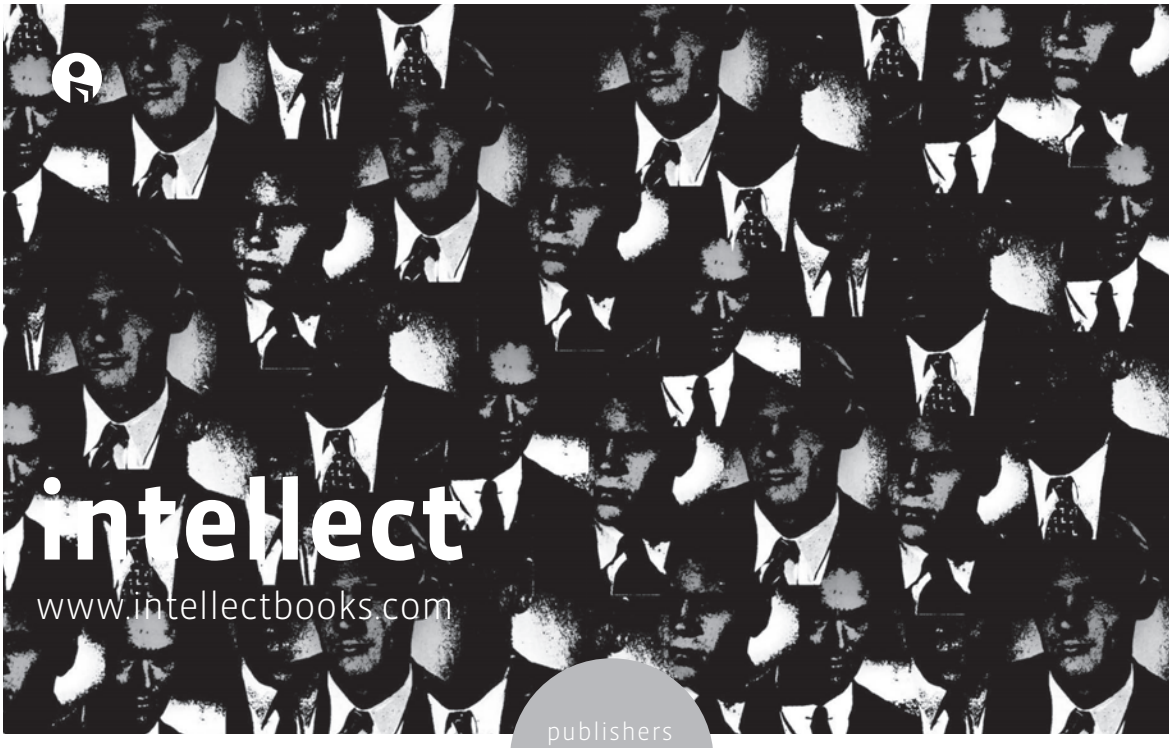
CONTRIBUTOR DETAILS

Alex Franklin is a Senior Lecturer in Visual Culture at the University of the West of England, Bristol. Her research interests span visual, material, popular, consumer and clothing cultures. She has an understanding dog, several intolerant cats and two insouciant fish.

Contact: Bower Ashton Campus, Kennel Lodge Road, Bristol, BS3 2JT, UK.
E-mail: Alex.Franklin@uwe.ac.uk



Critical Studies in Men's Fashion

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Critical Studies in Men's Fashion examines the multi-faceted dimensions of men's appearance. It uses the holistic definition of dress as a means of examining the tangible and intangible aspects of creating and maintaining appearance. This journal is the first to exclusively focus on men's dress and topics of gender, identity, sexuality, culture, marketing and business will be discussed. Men's dress and fashion have been side-lined in scholarship, and this journal provides a dedicated space for the discussion, analysis, and theoretical development of men's appearance from multiple disciplines. All articles are blind-peer reviewed in order to maintain the highest standards of scholastic integrity. Theoretical and empirical scholarship in the form of original articles, manuscripts, research reports, pedagogy, and media reviews are welcome.

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