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## **DRAWING ON JULES PROWN'S MATERIAL CULTURE METHOD OF OBJECT ANALYSIS TO INVESTIGATE SENSORY ENGAGEMENT WITH EVERYDAY DRESS**

SARA CHONG KWAN – 2<sup>ND</sup> YEAR PHD STUDENT

In order to gain a fuller understanding of the complex part dress plays in our everyday lives in the UK today, the aim of my postgraduate study is to draw out individual sensory experiences of wearing everyday dress, situating them within social and cultural contexts and exploring the inter-related physical, meaningful and emotional aspects to multi-sensory interaction with dress.

The methodology used draws on existing tools to research everyday dress and develops these by attending directly to the senses. The focus is on the wearer's account of their dress, which informs the use of semi-structured life-world interviews as the main method of enquiry. This interview method is combining with a heightened sensory awareness and physical, sensory investigation of dress items belonging to the interviewees. In order to develop the interviews in this way, I draw in particular on the following approaches. Firstly, recent developments towards a sensory methodology from within both applied ethnography (Pink 2009) and sociology (Mason and Davies 2009) inform how a sensory awareness is brought to the methodology. Secondly, object-based research that looks to understand objects within the context of its owner, use and culture, both from within dress studies (Taylor 2002, 2004) and within museum studies (Prown 1982, 2001) inform how methods of investigating the dress items themselves are incorporated into the methodology.

This paper focuses on one aspect of the above primary research methodology: object analysis. In developing a methodology that aims to draw out multi-sensory engagement with everyday dress, I am integrating object analysis with and into qualitative interviews. To do this I have drawn on Jules Prown's (1982) classic material culture method of object analysis. This paper documents the process of working through the reasons for drawing on Prown's work, both the similarities and differences with my own approach, what is useful and where his method is limited, the practical issues in applying his methods in the context of my study, and finally ways in which I might extend Prown's approach further to better suit my research aims and objectives.

Although I have not yet begun the formal empirical research project, a pilot study involving three participants was undertaken in order to test recruitment methods, develop the interview structure and enable the research methods to be reviewed in preparation for the main primary research. I will refer to examples from the pilot interview data in this paper. Two interviews are undertaken with each participant, each interview lasting around one and a half hours. These two interviews and some accompanying photographs of the participant's items of dress make up the data collated on each participant. The first interview focuses on a general discussion around the subject of their personal dress, based on a series of themes. This takes place outside the home, and is audio recorded. The second interview follows on from the first and is based on around 5-10 items of dress that the participant brings with them to discuss. Detailed questions are asked about each item of dress and they are physically explored during the interview. Where possible the second interviews will be conducted at the participant's home, and will be video as well as audio recorded. The video recordings will be used at the analysis stage to look more closely at the physical interaction between the wearer and the items; the way the items of dress are handled or used by the participant and how their sensory properties are demonstrated. For example, in one of the pilot interviews, the participant demonstrated his particular method of polishing his shoes and the scent of the polish. It is in this second interview that I draw on Jules Prown's method of object analysis, which I will outline now.

### **Jules Prown's Material Culture Method**

Jules Prown's material culture method of object-based analysis is outlined in his essay 'Mind in Matter: An Introduction to Material Culture Theory and Method', first published in *Winterthur Portfolio* 17, 1 (Spring 1982) and later published in Prown's book *Art as Evidence: Writings on Art and Material Culture* (2001). Within the context of museum studies and historical and archeological investigation of art and artifacts, Prown's approach has become a classic method of analysis. Prown views objects as the embodiment or 'material manifestation' of a culture, advocating a theoretical and methodological approach to analysing them in order to tease out information from the object about the culture from which they came, the beliefs and behaviour of the society and individuals that made and used them. Prown's method is an attempt to understand objects that are removed from their original context of production and usage; it aims to help the researcher reconnect with this original context.

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The method Prown suggests follows a structure of three stages of analysis, which I will briefly outline here. This begins with *Description*; observations made from the object itself based on physical form and content. The next stage is *Deduction*; analysis of the relationship between the object and the perceiver, which includes sensory engagement with the object, thinking about what the object does and emotional responses to the object. The final stage is *Speculation*; creative imagining and formulation of potential hypotheses around the object and what it might be telling the researcher, followed by validation of this speculation using secondary data sources and evidence outside the object, for example verbal or written accounts from the time (see Prown 2001:78 – 87 for a more detailed outline of the method).

Prown suggests that any object made or modified by man reflects consciously or unconsciously the beliefs of the individual that made, commissioned, purchased or used them (2001:70). In particular objects with a definite function make it easier to pinpoint the stylistic elements that are beyond this functionality and that attest to underlying beliefs. In Prown's earlier essay 'Style as Evidence', first published in 1980 in the *Winterthur Portfolio* 15, 3 (Fall 1980) and also included in his book *Art as Evidence* (2001), he describes 'form' as the physical configuration of the object itself, and 'style' as a distinctive manner that is expressed by the object and which can also be found in other related objects that differ in form. He argues that style is therefore "inescapably culturally expressive" (2001:52).

Prown includes items of dress and adornment in his categories of artifacts, pointing out that items of adornment embody both function and style in a relatively simple way so as to enable easy distinction between the two. Prown notes how clothing is a particularly personal form of artifact, strongly connected to a person's sense of identity and values (2001:89), and therefore has the potential to say much about a culture, yet despite this clothing had been largely overlooked within material culture studies, writing, "Although personal adornment promises to be a particularly rich vein for material culture studies, to date little significant work has been done with it" (2001: 89). Since Prown made this point in 1982, his work and that of Susan Pearce (1994) on museums, objects and collections has influenced approaches within dress history and dress curation. These have advocated investigating and presenting dress within the context of its social and cultural setting, in relation to the wearer and where possible uniting it with oral testimony (de la Haye 1998, 2005, see de la Haye and Wilson 1999, see Taylor 2002, 2004).

An early and groundbreaking example of this was the exhibition of Jill Ritblat's wardrobe at the V&A, curated by Amy de la Haye (1998). This demonstrated how one woman's collection of clothes can be explored from different perspectives and how Ritblat's own testimony lights up these explorations, contextualizes the dress objects within the life of their wearer, and at times contradicts what might be inferred from looking at the objects alone. Once in the museum Ritblat's collection appears highly considered and well planned, yet she explains how she is not overly concerned with or knowledgeable about 'fashion' and points to the organic way her wardrobe grew and the many different reasons behind her purchases (Ritblat 1998:14). Sophie Woodward's (2007) more recent ethnographic work on the everyday wardrobes of UK women also highlights the complex, often anxiety-ridden choices that women make when contemplating what to wear and buy.

Within the wider discipline of material culture studies, from the late 1980s object-based approaches to understanding the material culture of everyday life also emerged that positioned objects within the context of their use, the user and the wider economic, social and political environment. These approaches gave agency to the objects themselves drawing attention to the importance of exploring and understanding the complex roles they play in our lives. These approaches emerged from within anthropology (Appadurai 1986, Kopytoff 1986, Miller 1987, 2001, 2010) and to a lesser degree from design studies (see, for example, Judy Attfield 2000 who interrogated the nature of objects in use, post design). Daniel Miller in particular has attended to clothing as material culture (Kuchler and Miller 2005) within mainly cross-cultural contexts and this builds on earlier ethnographic approaches that have traditionally taken an interest in dress, adornment practices and textiles (see Weiner and Schnieder 1989).

I aim to use some of this recent work to build on Prown's theoretical approach, but in terms of providing a structured and detailed *method* of object analysis, Prown's work remains the most explicit and useful guide. I will now illustrate the main issues that I encountered in drawing on Prown's methods which can be arranged under three themes that emerged as relevant: uniting object and user, wear and tear and engaging with the senses.

### **Working with Prown's method: Issues, uses and limits**

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The theoretical positioning that underpins my methodology is that everyday dress should be understood as a 'situated practice' (Entwistle, 2001), a series of interactions between the wearer and the objects of dress that they wear within given social and cultural situations and in the contexts of their lives. Any analysis of everyday dress should therefore address both the material item and the wearer, of the relationship between the two in which both items of dress and the body have agency, and not just the wearer's body but also other bodies the wearer comes into contact with. This echoes Prown's assertion that objects are linked to their maker, user and their culture, that 'mind' can be found in 'matter' (see also Prown's later essay 'Material/Culture: Can the Farmer and the Cowman Still Be Friends' (1996) 2001:235).

Prown points to the physical and metaphorical connections between some objects and the human body using two chairs as examples: "Chairs are particularly revealing of cultural values because they so easily become human surrogates" (2001:54). One of the chairs, the Bamileke chair from Cameroon has legs in the figure of a squatting man holding up the seat and the back is the figure of a female with open arms. Less obvious is the other example from Salem circa 1795. This more formal side chair shows repressed human forms and Prown reminds us that elements of chairs are referred to using the language of the body; legs, arms etc. This reflects the close contact that the body has with the chair, the bottom firmly planted onto the seat, back supported by the chair back and arms used as a rest for the arms. Unsurprisingly, these human characteristics can also be found in items of dress, as dress covers the body. Its shape through necessity relates to the contours of the body and the body changes in relation to dress. This intimate contact gives dress a familiarity and as with chairs, we sometimes attach anthropomorphic qualities to dress. For example, in one of the interviews the participant refers to his shoes as having a pair of 'older brothers' that he keeps at his second home.

Dress has traditionally been viewed as a marker of identity (de la Haye and Wilson 1999) but as my study has progressed, the complex way in which items of dress become part of our everyday lives has steered me away from the notion of dress as identity and towards understanding it as a series of connections in which our senses provide the link between thoughts, beliefs, emotions, physical feelings and memories, and our items of dress. Connections that are made and broken change and transform throughout our lives. In their study on family likeness, Mason and Davies (2009) describe the entanglement of the senses, with each other and with cultural beliefs. The term 'entanglements' can also be applied to the way in which we become entangled with our items of dress through the physical, metaphorical and emotional connections we have with them. This was suggested in one of my interviews where the participant described being literally tangled up in her necklaces. She liked to protect her neck with scarves or jewellery and went through a stage of wearing layers of paste pearls, not bothering to take them off at night. Eventually they all became tangled up and one day she had to cut them off, at which point she described feeling bereft but also free. While this is an extreme example, a wedding ring or scarf that is always worn could be seen as a more everyday item with which we can become physically, emotionally and symbolically entangled.

These connections are made through intimate sensory and bodily engagement with items of dress, and thus drawing this out requires a method of getting close not just to the subject and their senses but also to their items of dress. Prown's detailed and close methods of investigation provide a way of uniting the macro context (social and cultural influences) with the micro context (individual physical experience) of everyday dress. It also provides the means for the participant to think about their items of dress in a different way, with the eyes of an investigator. Although Prown intended his methods to be used by researchers rather than the object's users themselves I would argue that because everyday dress is so ubiquitous and habitual a practice which people tend to take for granted, his methods help the participant to think more deeply about everyday dress, to get past their assumptions and to articulate their experience. In one of the pilot interviews the participant had talked in depth about the detail of the clothes he wore and the highly ritualised way he stored and maintained these, but then followed this by stating that the act of getting dressed was not something he thought about at the time, rather it was an automatic daily act, part of his morning routine.

This example demonstrates a main difference between investigating everyday objects and those that are highly regarded or valuable, everyday objects are subject to the 'wear and tear' of daily life, which more highly prized artifacts are able to avoid. Prown acknowledges that, "Material things are heir to all sorts of ills – they break, get dirty, smell, wear out..." (2001:70), but perhaps due to his focus on 'style' he fails to address this fully in his method. Prown is primarily concerned with the stylistic manner of objects at their point of production and during description he suggests that 'at this stage' the 'condition' of the object should be ignored (2001:79). However, during the later stage of deduction, he makes only one other oblique reference to dealing with wear and tear when he discusses

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the fact that the moment of investigation exists at a particular point in time, and that at an earlier or later date both the object and the investigator may be different and come to different conclusions (2001:81). I would argue that when investigating worn items of dress the evidence of wear and tear is hard to ignore and moreover, is integral to understanding the item and how it is and has been used. Prown is clear that different types of objects will yield distinctive information and require different investigative techniques (2001:87). In terms of items of dress their materiality and construction is more delicate and vulnerable to decay than that of an item of furniture. Dress is also worn close to the body, taken on journeys with the wearer through different environments. It is ravaged by life, action and washing, as a result it ages just as bodies do. This also means that fewer items of dress survive as historical or archaeological objects (Prown 2001:73).

For the purposes of my study, marks of wear and tear are discussed at the description and deduction stages. These marks are sensory imprints left on the garment and suggest the life the item has led and can trigger memories and emotions attached to the item. Sometimes the lack of wear and tear is significant. In one interview, the participant felt that even without obvious marks of wear and tear, the memories associated with one of her dresses were so strong she was reluctant to erase them by wearing it again, suggesting that the senses themselves can work in intangible ways. In other interviews looking for evidence of wear and tear led to a discussion of how the participant maintained their clothes, an aspect of sensory engagement with dress that can be revealing about attitudes to dress and the way in which the social role of items changed as they become worn out, often moving from public use to private use in the home.

Prown's approach is best suited towards unearthing values that were part of the item's production however it is limited in what it can tell us about how these values and meanings change when in use. The very personal nature of dress means that when it is worn it often moulds to the wearer's body and may be worn in ways that are very different to that imagined by the designer or maker. In fact 'style' in relation to dress is as much about the manner in which it is worn and the attitude it is worn with, as it is the manner of its form. Prown provides a starting point but in order to develop his approach in relation everyday dress I also draw on Judy Attfield's work on the chaotic nature of objects in use or 'Wild Things' as she poetically terms them. Attfield (2000) views the purpose, definition and life of objects, including dress, as fluid and ambiguous. For Attfield, the meaning and design of everyday objects extends past the point of production and consumption as they are embedded in the chaotic complexity of life and constantly transformed through their use.

In the interviews I therefore spend less time on Prown's 'Description' stage and more on his 'Deduction' stage, as this attends to the connections between the item and wearer. The participant is encouraged to talk loosely about the item, their relationship with it and how this has changed. Where contradictions or complexities emerge they are followed up. It will be during data analysis that Prown's 'Speculation' stage will take place, although during the interviews I found that the participants occasionally made their own speculations and hypothesis towards the end of the second interview. For example one participant noted a pattern of behaviour towards his clothes that he felt related back to his time in the Army. I will also draw on the first interview during the analysis to reflect upon and validate data from the second interview.

Within my primary research I can bring verbal data from the interviews, like the above example, to bear upon the object analysis of the items I am discussing with the participant. However in the case of historical and archeological objects, devoid of verbal or written testimony, the researcher is reliant on using only their bodily senses to gain as much information from engagement with the object itself. As the aim of my study is to focus on multi-sensory engagement with dress, Prown is useful in that within his work he engages with all his senses, embracing the fact that sensory engagement with an artifact can be just as revealing about culture as verbal or written data. Prown argues that style is not purely visual but is *multi-sensory* and contained or embodied in all the sensory dimensions, the texture, and the weight even the smell of an object. He writes, "Every time a person in the past manipulated matter in space in a particular way to satisfy his practical or aesthetic needs, he made a kind of statement, albeit a nonverbal statement" (2001:53). Prown believes that to an extent mute objects can give greater insights into a culture than the verbal and written accounts by people. He suggests that the reason non-art, music or archaeology historians have tended to work with verbal or written data, is partly because they are less at ease with using objects as a form of mute evidence.

In relation to my own approach to understanding contemporary dress, visual interpretations have tended to dominate, not just in the work of researchers, but also in the way in which we talk and think about dress on a daily basis. In contemporary UK society, dress is commonly understood and verbalized in predominately visual terms. The body's reflection is checked in the mirror after dressing

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and the latest catwalk 'looks' are displayed and discussed in fashion magazines. Dress is a creative, aesthetic practice and also a means of presenting ourselves to the outside world linked to the construction of self-identity in relation to social groups and categories. The visual aspects of dress are a vital and important consideration, however non-visual aspects of sensory engagement with dress also contribute to their aesthetic value and to our bodily and social experience of being dressed. For example, the way a certain fabric feels - luxury fabrics, for example - can contain social and aesthetic value in the same way as the appearance of a fabric or item might. Just as Prown suggests that some material culture historians were unfamiliar with and therefore reluctant to use non-verbal or written data like objects as evidence, so too have some fashion and dress scholars tended to ignore how it 'feels' to be dressed, and what this might tell us, instead relying on the more familiar visual aspects of dress. More recently however an embodied approach to understanding dress as a practice (see Entwistle 2001) has been very influential in moving the focus within dress studies away from the purely visual, and a growing interest in the senses across the social sciences and humanities (see 'Sensory Formations Series: Berg') has demonstrated new ways to understand culture that accounts for all the body's senses.

Further, although I agree with Prown that detailed multi-sensory object analysis may help to circumvent the investigators own assumptions, I would argue that ideally this should be brought together with oral testimony to provide the deepest insight. Prown tends to weigh heavily on the side of the senses, suggesting that they are more reliable than the mind when he says, "By undertaking cultural interpretation through artifacts, we can engage the other culture in the first instance not with our minds, the seat of our cultural biases, but with our senses" (2001:75). This statement suggests that Prown does not view the senses themselves as influenced by culture, nor does it appear to acknowledge that the mind and sensory perception are inextricably linked. However recent sensory scholarship has argued that sensory experience and the values we give it are shaped by culture (see Howes 2005) and this is an area that I aim to investigate in relation to dress.

## Conclusion

Thinking through Prown's approach and how I could apply it within my own primary research has helped to resolve some of the difficulties I had in articulating how the mind, the senses, emotions, the body and items of dress interrelated. Approaching the object itself and thinking about how an object can contain conflicting and changing attributes and values suggests that it might be more useful to think about the nature of these entanglements rather than trying to disentangle them. It is simpler in many ways to investigate an object once retired, when it is no longer in use and structured systems of analysis like Prown's can be carefully applied. When items of dress are in everyday use and animated, our relationship with them can be untidy, messy, chaotic and ever changing. As part of life they are hard to pin down. So in developing Prown's methods within the context of my study I will take a looser approach that firstly takes greater account of change and secondly attends to the worn out items and the clothes that did not survive, as well as those that did. The life of an item of dress, unlike many other artifacts is short, but it is packed full of life, so a more biographical approach to understanding its meaning as changing through time is appropriate.

Furthermore, without oral testimony from the wearer it is difficult to understand an item of dress and the complex biography and constant process of transformation and use it has gone through. Due to the nature of their closeness to the body and their entanglements with our everyday lives, items of dress must be analysed through oral testimony *and* object analysis, if we want to understand them within their specific cultural context. Like Prown, Lou Taylor's (2002) influential approach to dress history proposes integrating the examination of artifacts of dress with oral history and archaeological research. Looking to the future, she hopes that within museums, 'donors' object-related memories will be taped or videoed with a view to providing both museums and future researchers with unprecedented material cultural information (2002:245). By drawing on Prown's methods within my interviews I aim to contribute such data.

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Sensory imprints of wear and tear evoke the physical, emotional and symbolic entanglements between items of dress and their wearer.

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