The post-Barthesian emphasis on semiotic decoding has dominated accounts of Western fashion and clothing, seen in the prevalence of magazine analyses (Buckley and Gundle 2000) and the abundance of treatises on subcultural style (Cole 2000) – wherein understandings of clothing centre upon fashion’s communicative capacities. However, often the clothing – ostensibly the subject matter of such accounts – remains a ghostly presence, coming to appear immaterial by the very lack of engagement with the physicality of clothing. Structuralist approaches are clearly problematic, in positioning clothing as a text with arbitrary signifiers (Barthes 1985). However, given that clothing is based upon assemblage, this focus upon relations between items remains particularly pertinent. The principle aim of this paper is to reconcile the structuralist emphasis upon the totality of clothing as a relational structure of meaning, with an exploration of the particular materialities of clothing. This is accomplished through investigating how clothes from women’s wardrobes in London are put together as outfits that come to constitute a personal aesthetic. This aesthetic emerges as perceptions of what ‘goes together’, based upon colour, texture, style, cut, pattern. Rather than merely explaining the details of such an aesthetic, in the manner of costume history, what ‘goes together’ is taken in terms of what ‘feels right’. As material culture, clothing is not seen as simply reflecting given aspects of the self but, through its particular material propensities, is co-constitutive of facets such as identity, sexuality and social role. Thus, instead of assuming a predetermined self, the question here becomes that of determining what anthropological conceptualization of the self would arise when viewed through the practice constituted by clothing.

The ways in which clothing is comprehended are fundamentally linked in to wider understandings of the relationship between the surface and personhood. The Western ontology divides the inner intangible ‘self’ located deep within, from the frivolity and inconsequentiality of the surface (Napier 1985, Wigley 1995, Miller 1994). Within popular and academic discourses, clothing and fashion are therein seen to be superficial and unimportant, as material objects situated at the periphery of the body. However, accounts that point to the problematics of interpreting
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Combinations of the Self

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One woman I worked with, Rosie, a married management consultant in her
early thirties, was recently invited for the first time to dinner at The Ivy Restaurant
(a renowned haunt in London of the fashionable and famous), with four of her
female friends. Greatly excited by the prospect of attending such an exclusive
location, the issue of what to wear was one of grave consideration. In selecting
her outfit she wanted to look as if she belonged at such a venue, as adequate
fortheoccasioninthecontextofsuchstylishpeople.ThroughoutherlifeRosie
has participated in a series of clearly defined subcultures: Goth, hippy, 'student',
camp club culture, 'single girl on the pull', persistently dressing to fit in with
various established groups. Such a desire to conform to the place and people
that constitute The Ivy, can be seen to form part of Rosie's sartorial trajectory
of adhering to categories of clothing. On this occasion her anxiety to fit in is
exacerbated by the novelty of the occasion. As a highly paid professional with no
financial dependants, a house in Hampstead, her concern does not centre on her
financial position. She certainly possesses an abundance of designer clothes that
would appear to benefit the occasion.

However she remains unsure of what to wear and spends the next few hours
futilely trying on various items from her seven wardrobes. In order for the
unprecedented occasion of going to The Ivy to live up to its anticipated expectations,
Rosie feels she needs to wear something new and dynamic. Overwhelmed by the
mass of clothing, in a myriad of colours, patterns and styles, she is unable to
differentiate between them and her usual capacity for aesthetic combination is
lost. In this moment of panic she falls back on her favourite black leather knee-
length Maxmara skirt as a lifeline of security in the ever-expanding vortex of
clothing that engulfs her room, piling up on the bed and floor. The fit of the skirt
is perfect, clinging to the hips, gradually triangulating out, ceasing just below the
knees. Despite being leather, the refined shape and style and its blackness give
it an understated effect when worn with her usual black cotton cap-sleeved top.
Viewing her wardrobe through the lens of the unprecedented invitation, the vitality
of her favourite outfit is drained. The sombre blackness fails to give voice to the
ambiguous facets of her personality needed for the occasion: trendy, youthful, stylish, yet also successful. Resolving still to wear the skirt, the search begins for a suitably 'funky' yet fashionable top, as the increasing mounds of failed tops obscure her bedcovers.

The sheer mass of clothing leads her to panic, as she doubts whether a suitable top will ever be located. Finally, she resorts to another tried and trusted item, and opts to wear the skirt with her favourite one-shoulder khaki-look fitted top, which is dusted with silver glitter. The combination of khaki and glitter is unexpected: a casual combat look coexisting with the feminine and sexy. Khaki is ordinarily used by the army to stop the individual being noticed, whereas here the glitter, which catches the light as the contours of her body move in the light, enables the eye to be drawn ambiguously to her. In her panic Rosie ended up resorting to two items that she knows how to wear and knows are ‘her’—fitting her usual aesthetic: one from the ‘funky’ order of clothing thus enabling her exuberance, the other personifying chic stylishness—the skirt being made of luxuriant leather bought from an expensive boutique. To complete the outfit, she wears her knee-high leather boots and a three-quarter-length leather coat. Seeing as both are the same fabric and colour as the skirt, the combination seems like a safe one as the shiny blackness should all blend and merge into one, leaving the top to stand out.

However, the outfit was a failure. The leather skirt, jacket and boots, which Rosie thought would ‘go’, instead of placing prominence on the funky top, served to dominate the outfit, undermining the ordinary subtle sexiness of the skirt. She said she felt like a member of Liberty X (a ‘raunchy’ popular music band renowned for a self-conscious creation of an overtly sexualized style through the wearing of all-over leather). Rosie felt aware of her age in the outfit—being in her early thirties and having now adapted her ordinary aesthetic to her mature, more settled position in life, it was ‘a bit glitzy and a bit too much like a young, clubbing girl for me’. The outfit harks back to her days as a younger woman on the pull, inappropriate to The Ivy where there is a sense of having ‘arrived’. The crucial element in Rosie’s discomfort here lies not in the items themselves, but in the way in which the items were combined. She failed to anticipate the dominance of the shiny heavy blackness, which swamped the outfit eliminating all pretence at subtlety, and extricating different facets of her personality. Instead of looking chic, stylish and sophisticated, she felt overdressed and uncomfortable; the smooth structured contours of her skirt, concretised into a perpetual physical awareness of the heaviness of the leather oppressing her. As part of her ‘distributed personhood’ (Gell 1998), the outfit should have externalised her intentionality in order to impact upon those present so that they saw her as a chic, fashionable individual. However here the agency of the clothing becomes apparent; Rosie failed to anticipate that the leather in the boots, the skirt and the boots would articulate together in such a way as to impede her own intentions and create unwanted effects.

The failure of the outfit also relates to the particularities of place. By opting for those garments that had become most unequivocally expressions of herself, ironically Rosie ended up neither looking nor feeling like herself, because, by definition, a safe self could not create what needed to be an unprecedented self, where ‘fit’ had to include place as well as person. An aspect of the self here is therein anticipatory—seeing herself as who she could be at The Ivy: fashionable, chic, successful—refracted back onto her wardrobe. Rosie instead looks backwards to previous successful events; here the self is temporarily not merely the succession and culmination of past events as is often assumed. Rather, through clothing, the self may be forward looking: an imagined potential self as seen through the eyes of others, projected backwards onto the clothing in the wardrobe.

Rosie’s example is one of aesthetic disjuncture; however equally common among my informants were joyous moments when an outfit ‘is me’, when the combinations made constitute an aesthetic fit with the wearer. Mumtaz is a married mother of two in her mid-forties; she has lived extensively in Paris, Kenya, Uganda and India for the majority of her life. Her husband was made partner in a prestigious law firm in London four years ago, which was the impetus for their move from Paris to London, where they now live with Mumtaz’s parents and their own two children. Last year she was invited back to the wedding of one of her husband’s confidants that when living in Paris the significant investment women made in their appearance led to her own constant rigorous maintenance programme. Even a trip to pick up her children from school turned into an event wherein clothing had to be closely considered. Having been out of this cycle for a significant period, Mumtaz feels the imagined expectations of the others particularly keenly.

As someone who loves clothing and fashion, Mumtaz relishes the opportunity to create an outfit afresh. Rather than purchasing anything new, she searches through her many wardrobes: three of which contain ‘Western clothing’ the other containing ‘Indian clothing’. The final outfit she decides upon consists of a white linen short summer dress, with thin spaghetti straps, worn over her ‘ethnic’ trousers—fitted black cotton trousers with colourful embroidery encircling her ankles (the trousers are in fact from New Look, a standard UK chain with no particular Asian connection). To finish the outfit off, she drapes one of her chunis (the scarf part of one of her many shalwar kamiz) round her shoulders. The particular chuni is jade green with round embroidered sections that shimmer in the light (her ‘spotty scarf’). The monochrome effect of the dress and trousers is invigorated by the playful shimmering of the chuni and the embroidery that surrounds and defines her ankles. Mumtaz has drawn on her pre-existing wardrobe yet has made a unique combination: wearing a dress over trousers, mixing her Indian and her Western clothing.
On this occasion the outfit was a considerable success, she spent the afternoon basking in the admiring glances and comments of her friends. Not only did she manage to conform to the social mores, yet she also managed to look chic, stylish and most importantly individual; she looked and felt ‘like herself’. What Muntaz is combining here is not just colours and fabrics; she is also combining in aspects of her self: former parts of her biography – her life in India, her global existence – bringing together the diverse items within one outfit. The ‘surface’ of her body here is the site for the construction and presentation of her self, constituted biographically and relationally. Strathern (1979), writing on self-decoration in Mount Hagen in Melanesia, demonstrates that for the people of that region appearance is regarded as anything but superficial. Focusing explicitly upon body decorations employed by men on formal ritual occasions, Strathern points out that such elaborate make-up is not a form of disguise, but rather this is seen to be where the self is displayed, ‘bringing things outside’ (Strathern 1979: 249). Although the context considered in my ethnography is vastly different, an analogous process can be seen to be happening. The different facets of Muntaz’s self – her past, her ethnicity, her global travels – are objectified in the clothing hanging in her wardrobe. In the act of dressing, she hangs her self around her body, bringing attributes of her personality and aspects of her self into the surface of her outfit. Others will regard her work of selection as an expression of her intent, which thereby makes visible to them things which on other occasions may remain private and concealed.

In this moment of selection Muntaz is able to draw together disparate threads from her four separate wardrobes. Rather than expressing recidivist tendencies like Rosie, going for items that are ‘safe’, Muntaz makes a novel, bold combination. Such eclectic assemblage is something Muntaz does frequently, befitting the multiple facets of her self. Furthermore eclecticism is a defining feature of fashion, the fortuitous consequence of her diverse combinations lead to her outfits appearing fashionable and original. The self is here backwards looking – through considerations of her previous experiences of dressing in France, and through her past sartorial biography. Yet simultaneously Muntaz’s imaginary projection of herself in the eyes of others at the wedding, successfully refracts back on her wardrobe to lead to the unprecedented assemblage. Like Rosie on the actual occasion of wearing the clothes – in this case the wedding – wearing her self round her body, she is exposed to the judgements of others; the adulation she receives reinforces her sartorial confidence, vindicating her decision.

Vivienne’s Wardrobe

Rosie and Muntaz reveal instances of aesthetic disjuncture and aesthetic ‘fit’ respectively; the moment of assemblage incorporates the particular anxieties and concerns engendered by significant social occasions. However, the example to be considered next centres on a delineation of an entire personal aesthetic, from which emerges specific moments of actualization. While for both Rosie and Muntaz, their clothing is fundamental to their self-conception, Vivienne, a retired political researcher in her fifties, appears to be the opposite. Politically aware and motivated, she insists that her appearance – clothing and otherwise – is not fundamental to her beliefs or values. The real important self is ‘inner’, intangible and invisible. She professes to have no interest in fashion, despises shopping, and states she just ‘throws on whatever’ every day from her one and only wardrobe. She relates with relish instances wherein her work colleagues roll their eyes in despair at the sight of her in ripped jeans and fraying old sweaters. It has become so important to demonstrate that clothing does not matter to her, she now actively to be considered next century on a delineation of an entire personal aesthetic, and invisible. She professes to have no interest in fashion, despises shopping, and states she just ‘throws on whatever’ every day from her one and only wardrobe.

Her sole wardrobe contains her skirts, shirts and dresses. Piled at the top are various jumpers and fleeces, with many of her pairs of shoes rammed at the bottom. Her only other receptacle for clothing being her chest of drawers, containing her underwear, Yoga clothing, winter jumpers and T-shirt tops. Now retired, she partakes only in the odd freelance political research project. Even during her full-time working days, as there was no dress code, Vivienne did not have separate work/casual clothing. The clothing she wears is continuous across the different domains of her life: whether she is going in to work, having dinner with a friend, seeing one of her daughters or spending time at home. The styles, fabrics and colours tend to cohere around particular configurations, defined by her own aesthetic. The main points of disjuncture from this are clothing worn to weddings or when travelling – where the external influences of social, cultural and religious expectations come into play. However, even in these cases, in order for her to feel ‘comfortable’, Vivienne’s dominant aesthetic widens to incorporate such events. The notion of ‘comfort’ incorporates a physical sensation of comfort; but also in a more nuanced sense, comfort involves the notion of aesthetic fit: the wearing of clothes which are ‘you’.

Vivienne articulates comfort as linked to practicality and eschews any notion that she has a defined aesthetic where ‘how I look’ links in to ‘how I feel’. Claiming she makes no effort with what she wears, what emerges from an analysis of her wardrobe is that in fact the ‘natural’, thrown together look involves a great deal of cultural work and cultivation. Ordinarily Vivienne wears her Rohan trousers and perhaps a sweater in the day in the winter time; she asserts that the trousers are
Another facet of this aesthetic paradox is that while the colours exist in strong blocks of colour stand in stark juxtaposition, challenging the viewer. Although she no longer wears this dress (given the political connotations of wearing a dress that is evidently Afghan) she loves the colours, patterns and style of it. Seemingly in contrast to the uncompromising boldness of the colours, the fabric itself is soft, worn cotton, falling in loose flowing waves around the body. This stylistic paradox is central to Vivienne’s aesthetic, as will become apparent.

Assembling Aesthetics

As Rosie’s example makes apparent, the ways in which combinations are made are crucial in realizing a particular aesthetic. Despite Vivienne claiming she will ‘throw on whatever’, and that she has no concern with what colours go together, there are certain combinations that are always made. She possesses three red shirts in total, and each one is only ever worn with black trousers or a skirt. All of Vivienne’s skirts are floor length, with a slit running right up the back of the skirt, ceasing half way up the thigh. When she walks the trailing leg is almost entirely exposed. This facilitates ease of movement, yet simultaneously Vivienne confesses she likes exhibiting her legs. Her daughters Sandra and Tamsin regularly buy her skirts with a slit, insisting this is her best bodily feature. While being appropriate for a woman of her years and status, the outfit is practical in not impeding her bodily movements, yet at the same time is sexualized. As regards the colours, not only is the contrasting effect of red and black quite striking but the combinational potential of the shirts is severely limited. Although the red shirt and black skirt
The material of the poncho consists of wide vertical stripes in dark brown, enabling comfort and cosiness, in particular in the home self-conceptualization as a global, politically astute person. Only one of them is an actual poncho (wherein the head goes through a neck slit at the top, and the material falls like a cape over the shoulders, leaving the arms free). Two of the others follow the principle of a pashmina (a large strip of material which is flung around the shoulders like a shawl). However, the commonality lies in the fabric and patterning, and similarly in the effect and function of wearing them. She tends to wear all of them in autumn and winter time; made from llama wool they are rough to the touch, and are worn over her usual clothes for an extra layer of warmth. Being impractical in the rain (merely getting sodden and waterlogged) she favours them on dry winter days, and often doubles them up as rugs in the park.

The material of the poncho consists of wide vertical stripes in a dark brown, camel and stone colour. The stripes run down vertically from the neck, yet as the material slopes over the shoulders, so too do the stripes, resulting in them curving with the arms, as they become diagonal and gradually horizontal as they reach her lower arms. As the neck is a wide V-neck, in conjunction with the softening of the shoulders through gently curving stripes, the effect is to make the neck area expansive, and the overall look is unstructured. The shape of the body is softened, rounding off the shoulders, physically engendering a sense of casualness. When worn: particularly on winter evenings in at home when there's a chill in the air, the masses of woolen fabric enswathe and enclose her body — still allowing the free movement of her arms. The cosiness of the poncho is further facilitated as she is able to hug her own body with her liberated arms, while still being subsumed by the clothing she wears.

These shirts are also now her standard wear for when she is compelled to dress more formally. Although Vivienne’s clothes are relatively continuous across domains, slight moderations are made for formal wear. A particular combination she favours is her long grey skirt, with one of her greenish shirts and her fitted grey woollen waistcoat, from Monsoon. The thickness of the waistcoat material, and rigid seaming, serves to structure and formalize the waistcoat — designating its appropriateness for smarter occasions. Yet, it is covered with delicate embroidery, consisting of small red flowers with yellow centres and green ivy growing up the front. Vivienne admits that she loves to wear a green shirt with this waistcoat in part due to the coordination between the green embroidery and the selected shirt. This outfit recapitulates the ambiguity at the heart of Vivienne’s aesthetic hinted at earlier: the fluidity of the draping shirt and skirt coupled with the rigidified structure of the waistcoat, which is further softened by intricately floral embroidery.

This outfit is appropriate to formal occasions, yet simultaneously is one in which Vivienne feels comfortable; the ‘comfort’ is enabled by the ease of movement, and by being a particular look which Vivienne habitually wears. This issue of comfort is crucial to understanding Vivienne’s wardrobe. She is in possession of a range of poncho-style tops, all purchased about fifteen years ago from a South American shop in Camden Town (North London). The authenticity of the items, being made in South America, from llama wool, is important to Vivienne in her self-conceptualization as a global, politically astute person. Only one of them is an actual poncho (wherein the head goes through a neck slit at the top, and the material falls like a cape over the shoulders, leaving the arms free). Two of the others follow the principle of a pashmina (a large strip of material which is flung around the shoulders like a shawl). However, the commonality lies in the fabric and patterning, and similarly in the effect and function of wearing them. She tends to wear all of them in autumn and winter time; made from llama wool they are rough to the touch, and are worn over her usual clothes for an extra layer of warmth. Being impractical in the rain (merely getting sodden and waterlogged) she favours them on dry winter days, and often doubles them up as rugs in the park.

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The looseness of the fabric is crucial; even in her more formalized items, already discussed, rigidified structured shapes are not those Vivienne favours. The relationship between structured formality, as required by an evening/smart event, and soft fluidity is encapsulated in her skirt, silk shirt and waistcoat combination already discussed. Here, through appropriate combination, Vivienne is able to feel appropriately smart, and aware of the formality of the occasion through the rigidity of the waistcoat. Yet she is simultaneously allowed her usual ‘comfort’ through the flowing shirt in her usual blocks of colour. The fact that it is silk, a sensation apparent as it sensuously caresses the skin, makes it again defined as a smart or special occasion. Sexuality is heightened through the slits in the skirt, her legs are suggestively revealed only when she walks. The physical style of the skirt, with its slit, allows it to be practical but at the same time, by taking a healthy stride, a glimpse of the leg is revealed and the skirt is elevated beyond the level of mere function. Both factors are equally important to Vivienne. Within this look it is not merely that each individual item allows distinct facets, rather it is within the surface of individual items (the shape of the waistcoat yet covered with delicate ornament) that this happens. Comfort involves a combination not only of particular colours and fabrics, but also a complex interplay within the surface of each item: the complexities of the items ambiguously contradict and enhance each other. Part of what is being combined are aspects of her self and biography, cultivated through this aesthetic. Such an outfit shows the complexities of the surface through clothing – not only are different items layered upon each other to differential effect, but within each item the nuances and subtle antagonisms – of function and sexuality – interact and interchange with each other within the feature of a single item of clothing. Also players in this interchange are aspects of her biography, of her personality. As in Strathern’s (1979) discussion where attributes of the person are brought to the surface, here with the movement of Vivienne’s leg to a different angle, such attributes may be activated, then temporarily submerged, only to resurface again.

One of the most striking factors about Vivienne’s clothing is the means through which she acquired it. The vast majority has been passed up to her by her two daughters – items they no longer wear or want, yet which are not yet completely threadbare, often things which are already second-hand. Many of her items are faded through perennial washing and wearing. Like the orange top discussed earlier, along with many items procured from charity shops, the biography of many items in her wardrobe is already extended over a long period of time, testing the durability of fabrics to their limit. Until clothing has physically disintegrated, Vivienne perseveres in wearing it. In wearing her clothing, Vivienne is bringing her familial relationships, her political orientations, her ecological moralities all within the act of dressing. Combinations of clothing involve a moment of

totalization: of incorporating the diverse threads of her life within her clothing.

Given that Vivienne’s aesthetic is relatively coherent and continuous, the aesthetic totality that constitutes her wardrobe is able to bring together multiple facets of her self – as constituted biographically, relationally, politically and ethically. Like Mumtaz, what she is combining is not just colours, and fabrics, but fragments of her self.

Such an aesthetic totality only crystallizes over time, as the clothing softens through wearing, so too the clothing becomes integral to being a part of her. In wearing the same clothes over a period of time, the fabric starts to relax. The persistent washing and wearing of a sweater starts to drain the colour, softening both the appearance and the texture. Through perpetually wearing the same items of clothing it is as if they age with the wearer, becoming like a second skin. On wearing them there is no awareness of constraint, or a seam that rubs or chafes; rather the items soften in the places where the body is most harsh on the clothing: the elbows of a jumper, or the knees on trousers. The relationship between the clothing and person becomes symbiotic, the hardness of the body being softened by the fabric. Having occupied such a relationship to clothing all her life, Vivienne loves not to have to feel conscious in the clothing she is wearing. When the clothing is already worn and aged, the boundary that separates the clothing and the person starts to disintegrate, and the clothing is able to ‘become’ the wearer. Bayly (1989) has pointed to the links between biography and clothing, wherein the porosity of cloth, and as something worn by individuals next to the body, enables a fusion between person and clothing. Through clothing’s capacity to age, yet being similarly durable this symbiotic relationship between person and clothing is created, where the wearer feels comfortable in her clothing. What Vivienne makes apparent is that she is equally able to do this when someone else has worn the clothing in for her. Although her favourite item is still a fleece she bought in Camden market twenty years ago, and is now so ripped and torn, it cannot be worn, but hangs – not quite dead – on the back of her door.

Isolated Nodules of Clothing

Given that she no longer works full time, Vivienne is able to wear such clothing all the time; however as has already been suggested when discussing her more formal wear, she widens her ordinary aesthetic to accommodate such necessities. Within her wardrobe Vivienne does possess certain isolated ‘outfits’, compelled by particular social occasions. Despite despising wearing rigidified formal clothing, on the occasion of her brother’s wedding, her anticipated potential discomfort is subsumed to familial relationships. The purchased outfit consists of a cream top and burnt umber coloured skirt, both made of cotton which shimmers slightly in the light. The top is short sleeved and hangs loosely, yet at the bottom where it
is at its fullest the top is layered with asymmetrical jagged fabrics. The natural undulations of a loose top are enhanced by the extra layer of material present at the bottom. The skirt is in exactly the same style, and falls to near the floor. When wearing such an item, the body of the wearer recedes in prominence and instead the overlapping waves of fabric dominate and become the focus of attention. Moreover the body is still able to move freely underneath, albeit with the material swishing and catching against the legs with every step. Vivienne has worn this outfit to two weddings and would probably wear it to another, as she felt sufficiently comfortable in it, although professes she would not wear it to any other occasion as she would feel too ‘self-conscious’ in it, ‘over the top’. Although such a domain forms a distinct nodule of her wardrobe, it is apparent that it still corresponds to her particular personal aesthetic: the colours and the style. While she ordinarily favours clothing that is like a second skin, here the ‘fit’ to the external event, and the expectations of those attending, means she is able to feel comfortable wearing it.

Such relatively formalized wear is able to be incorporated within Vivienne’s overall personal aesthetic; while only wearable for particular occasions, she still feels comfortable in them. Vivienne’s wardrobe constitutes an aesthetic totality in the convergence not only on particular colour combinations, but in her incorporating her family and her global political orientations into her clothing. So tyrannical is this aesthetic totality that more often than not Vivienne turns down invitations to formal events if she is not able to wear her everyday clothes. She turned down an invitation to a very prestigious media awards ceremony last year, solely on the basis that she did not want to get dressed up. She hated the thought that she would be forced to walk in a ‘mincing way’, wearing shoes she would be unable to take a full stride in, ‘I just wouldn’t be able to be!’ On this occasion Vivienne vividly imagines the discomfort she would feel at the event, and is able to opt not to attend. The way in which she moves and stands is fundamental to her ‘being’, and is enabled and facilitated by the clothing she wears. Despite professing to throw ‘whatever’ clothing on, here an entire decision to not attend an important event is based upon clothing, and the ‘discomfort’ the wearing of formalized clothing would entail for her.

Conclusion

The very fact that Vivienne turns down prestigious invitations based upon her refusal to wear certain clothes makes it clear that clothing is just as significant for her as it is for the explicitly clothes conscious Rosie or Mumtaz. For all three women their wardrobes have been analysed as forms of extended personhood – wherein clothing becomes a means through which disparate facets of their selfhood are objectified (Gell 1998). Gell’s theory points to the ways in which a person’s intentionality may be distributed through objects, thus highlighting the immense potential to influence the minds of others through a particular medium. Such actualized potential is seen in Vivienne’s cultivated image of lack of cultivation, resulting in the despondent groans of her daughters. However what becomes apparent through closer analysis of all three cases is that ‘how I look or feel’ turns out to be anything but merely a personal and free expression of the self. One of the supposed characteristics of postmodernity is that ‘everyone can be anybody’ (cited in Featherstone 1991), which translates sartorially into the wealth of often contradictory styles and identities to experiment with. What the examples here make clear is that there are numerous constraints that prevent this free exertion of agency through clothing.

The first constraint comes at the moment of assemblage: the individual has to commit to a particular outfit, combinations which in turn are unequivocally associated with that person. On any particular occasion one cannot be all the possibilities or looks that are present in the wardrobe. Although a degree of ambiguity can be incorporated within one outfit, the multiple identities offered by fragmented and ephemeral fashions cannot all be co-present within the one assemblage. Rosie’s many wardrobes are overburdened with postmodern possibilities – offers of identities or selves Rosie may try on. Though for others who are aware of her affluence in clothing this makes her selection that much more specific, they know how easily she could have chosen something else. In the case presented in this paper, rather than this abundance of choice leading to greater freedom, it is this very profusion of clothing that leads to her inability to choose and indeed in the end making what seemed like a ‘safe’ choice, but was in fact unsuited to the occasion. What is constraining here for Rosie is the fact that in the moment of dressing she has to perform an act of aesthetic totalization to create herself. In Vivienne’s case the opposite appears to be going on – her entire wardrobe constitutes a totalized aesthetic, rather than this merely being required at the moment of dressing. Such a totality incorporates not only particular colour domains and softening, flowing fabrics, but incorporates all aspects of her existence – an aesthetic ‘comfort’ materially cultivated through a lifetime of wearing. However, what becomes apparent is that such a complete aesthetic coherence can be just as constraining as Rosie’s multiple possibilities. So enclosed are her aesthetic parameters that she is unable to attend events where she cannot wear these clothes.

Vivienne’s personal aesthetic is extremely restricted in terms of what colours and fabrics she will wear, this leads on to the second major area of constraint, which is the constraints of the clothing itself – in terms of both its material propensities and also its own internal logic of combinations. In positing the agentic capacities of objects, Gell (1998) critiques the assumption that autonomous human agents have
intentions, which are imposed upon passive objects. Instead agency emerges in the context of a web of objects and people – and that ‘agents thus “are” and do not merely “use” artefacts’ (1998: 21). Through this he refers to objects as secondary agents; they are not therefore seen to have independent intentions of their own but rather are the material embodiment of this intentionality – part of the matrix of its generation and actualization. Implicit within this argument – that objects are part of the externalized mind which may impact upon the mind of others – is the potential for failure. As the objects carry people’s intentionality – yet in Gell’s own argument are not passive – then through their very materiality objects may thwart our intentions. This is clearly apparent in Rosie’s case. She intended to look chic and sophisticated; while each individual item in itself had worked before, she failed to anticipate that through combination an entirely unwanted effect would be produced. The particular fabric from which the skirt was made – leather – sits heavily upon her. Throughout the whole night she cannot ignore its presence; the combination of three items that are all black and all leather leads to an unexpected consequence. In communion with each other, they come to dominate Rosie herself, and the subtlety of her top. Thus not only does the clothing not act as a medium for her own intentions, it produces quite the opposite effect, through its own logic – the blackness and the fabrics connect with each other. The black leather in combination through the items comes to have its own efficacy and takes over the outfit, submerging Rosie’s own intentions.

Rosie’s example shows both the constraints of the material propensities of clothing, and the internal combinational logic of clothing. All the women I have worked with have a clear sense of what can and cannot be combined together – in terms of colours, styles or fabrics. Vivienne has an evident tendency towards wearing silk shirts and loose cotton skirts. Stylistically the looseness of the shirt and skirt correspond to create an overall feeling of fluidity; the skirt is in a ‘safe’ colour (blue or black), which has a high combinational potential. Again it is the shirt that is of the different fabric – the outfit is both smart and ‘special’ – through the shirt, yet the skirt grounds this in a comfortable everyday aesthetic. The style, colour, fabric all articulate together to create a particular effect. More often than not however this sense of what ‘goes’ is extremely constraining. What women experience as an aesthetic logic inherent in the style of the clothes itself can considerably impede their sense that they are free to choose.

As already noted, Vivienne’s clothing constitutes an aesthetic totality which in itself prevents her from attending an event as her clothing delimits her. Cultivated throughout her lifetime, the dominance within her clothing of items that are soft and worn is overwhelming. As she has worn the clothing over such a long period of time, she becomes inextricably interwoven with the item itself. She cannot have this relationship to newly purchased clothing, which impacts upon her purchasing patterns – if clothing is not handed up to her she often buys it from second-hand shops – so it is already worn. This in itself creates its own logic of narrowing, in that she rarely buys new clothing. Furthermore, if her old worn clothing ‘is’ her, the differential relationship she would occupy to a new item means that one of her pre-existing soft worn items could not coexist in one outfit with a new item. When new items are purchased they form distinct nodules within the wardrobe (and are usually ‘smart’ items). Only once items are worn are they able to be combined again with older items. What is apparent here, then, is that the aesthetic logic is not that the logic of the clothing is constraining Vivienne, but that she herself is part of this logic. It is the interactive process of Vivienne wearing the clothing that creates this aesthetic incompatibility between the new and old clothing.

The third aspect of constraint comes from the way the clothing interiorizes the anticipated judgements of others. Discussed earlier was the possibility that clothing may be a means by which women are able to externalize their intentions in order to impact the will of others. In terms of Gell’s (1998: 96–153) theory, clothing opens up the person to wider layers of externalized, potentially distributed, mind. But this opening up has made them vulnerable to penetration by the anticipated gaze of others. In the moment of selecting an outfit, Rosie imagines this gaze so vividly that it rapidly turns into such immense anxiety not only is she not able to find an outfit, she ends up falling back on an assortment of ‘safe’ items. In imagining how she may impact upon those at the Ivy, she lets the anticipated judgments of others in. Here the clothing may be regarded as a conduit – which in opening up the potential impact upon the minds of others, also allows the fierce judgements of others to strike deep within. In order to select the outfit that will make Rosie feel fashionable and chic, she has to envision the clientele that attend, how she might appear to them. The result is that Rosie’s usual capacity for combination and selection of outfits is lost. Despite having seven wardrobes, Rosie’s selection not only failed to express her, but from her perspective quite betrayed her, turning her into what she imagined others saw as aspects of herself she would never have wanted revealed at that time. In understanding such moments of anxiety, we need to examine how clothing as a medium that relates surface to depth is as much the fibres that conduct the judgements of others to the inside, as the intentions of the self to the outside.

In Rosie’s case this moment wherein the judgements of others penetrate within leaves her vulnerable. However such a moment can also be one of success. As Mumtaz makes apparent, on an equally important occasion, she is able to exert her own agency on her clothing. Rather than allowing the imagined opinions of others to impede her decisions, she is enabled to make a novel combination. Many of the constraints discussed earlier arise out of the material propensities of items of clothing, the perceived internal ordering of the wardrobe and the totalization necessary in the act of selecting an outfit. However, despite Mumtaz’s wardrobe having clearly defined orders – such as an ‘Indian’ wardrobe separate
from her ‘Western’ clothes – she is not confined by this aesthetic logic. She has the confidence to exert her own agency on the pre-existing ordering of her wardrobe, in order to make radical new juxtapositions. The logics of clothing do not dominate her choices. There are many instances therefore of success – of the clothing distributing the wearers mind to others – as well as of failure. When Rosie wore the leather items together, through combination they came to dominate and ultimately quash her externalized intentionality. However in Vivienne’s case often the opposite is the case. Wearing the worn, softened clothing, which is losing its colour, or the Rohan trousers with the aesthetic of functionality, she is able to feel like her ‘self’, yet simultaneously influence others into thinking she does not care about clothing.

Through these three contrasting examples we can see the agency of the wearer – in selecting an outfit, and as objectified through the items of clothing to impact upon others – yet also the ways in which the materiality of the clothing brings about unwanted and unexpected effects. However, there is not a defined opposition between the agency of the wearer and that of the clothing; nor in each instance of dressing does the order of things come to dominate the order of people or vice versa. Rather there is an intricate interaction between the two. In the earlier discussion of Vivienne, it becomes apparent that even what appears to be the structural logic of her wardrobe – the new clothing being incompatible with old favourites – is in fact more complex. As the clothing becomes worn through its relationship to her and her body, she cannot wear new clothing with this, because it is incompatible with the self that the worn clothing embodies. Therefore her self is part of, and in part created by, this aesthetic logic. This is extremely different from the situation with regard to either Rosie or Mumtaz, both of whom are deliberately attempting to create an outfit that will impact upon the will of others. However, for Vivienne the aesthetic logic has not only become sedimented over time. As the clothes become more worn the effect is twofold: the clothing externalizes her intentionality more efficaciously (as the unkempt look is enhanced), and her personal aesthetic becomes even more narrowed, delimiting further what cannot be combined. As items worn habitually over extended periods of time, she lacks the extreme self-consciousness that Mumtaz and Rosie express on instances of dressing; instead now Vivienne’s clothing draws out facets of her self and biography through its own logics independent of the wearer. The slit in the long skirt allows the ‘surfacing’ of Vivienne’s sexuality yet also of her practicality and desire for mobility. The fluctuating processes of surfacing and resurfacing of facets of the self are actualized within complex aesthetic dialogues that interweave the agency of the wearer and the logics that arise from the materiality of the clothing.

References