

# CREATIVE ENCOUNTERS

Creativity at Work:

## Research Approaches to the Study of Dress and Fashion

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# Abstract

Dress and fashion are rich and varied fields of study. Some scholars refer to them as 'hybrid subjects' because they bring together different conceptual frameworks and disciplinary approaches, including those from anthropology, art history, cultural studies, design studies, economics, history, literature, semiotics, sociology, visual culture and business studies. Invariably, such a pervasive phenomenon as dress has always been the subject of much commentary. Since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, there has been no scarcity of research, but studies have been somewhat sporadic and tended to stay within these bounds of their own disciplines. From the 1960s to the 1990s, the leading educational institutions with words like dress and fashion in their titles, were, firstly, design schools and technical training institutions, servicing the industry, and secondly, institutes devoted to the study of dress history, directed as museums. It was only in the last decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century that various approaches were integrated across disciplines and institutions so that it became possible to talk about something like 'fashion studies', reflected by the emergence of research centres, academic journals and graduate programmes with such heading. However, both the term, and what it is perceived to represent, is contested; while some scholars and institutions endorse 'fashion studies', others reject it or distance themselves from it.

# Keywords

Dress, fashion, clothes, dress studies, fashion studies

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# Research Approaches to the Study of Dress and Fashion

Dress and fashion are rich and varied fields of study. Some scholars refer to them as 'hybrid subjects' because they bring together different conceptual frameworks and disciplinary approaches, including those from anthropology, art history, cultural studies, design studies, economics, history, literature, semiotics, sociology, visual culture and business studies. Invariably, such a pervasive phenomenon as dress has always been the subject of much commentary. Since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, there has been no scarcity of research, but studies have been somewhat sporadic and tended to stay within these bounds of their own disciplines. From the 1960s to the 1990s, the leading educational institutions with words like dress and fashion in their titles, were, firstly, design schools and technical training institutions, servicing the industry, and secondly, institutes devoted to the study of dress history, directed as museums. It was only in the last decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century that various approaches were integrated across disciplines and institutions so that it became possible to talk about something like 'fashion studies', reflected by the emergence of research centres, academic journals and graduate programmes with such heading. However, both the term, and what it is perceived to represent, is contested; while some scholars and institutions endorse 'fashion studies', others reject it or distance themselves from it.

## Terminology and analytical frameworks

A research concept is never neutral because it belongs in an analytical framework, direction of inquiry and a set of theoretical assumptions. In the present field, there are debates, sometimes heated, over whether dress, clothing, costume or fashion should be the privileged term, and how it should be defined. The most comprehensive and influential conceptual framework, developed by American anthropologist Joanne B. Eicher, takes dress as the key concept, defined to include both body supplements and body modifications. This definition transcends the distinction, which was common until the 1970s, between clothing – the dominant form of dress in Western societies, and therefore perceived to be 'civilized' – and body adornment, such as tattoo, scarification, piercing and make-up, which were perceived to be more 'primitive'. Because it is neutral in terms of such cultural hierarchies, this concept of dress facilitates cross-cultural research, and it has been adopted by scholars from many disciplines who study dress and fashion in a global context. Eicher's concept of dress as body supplements and body modifications also change the focus from the material things that clothes the body to bodily practices, both grooming and hygienic practices, and the role dress plays in

social interaction. With this definition, dress is a multi-sensory phenomenon, engaging the senses of hearing, touch and smell as well as vision.

Another concept of dress has grown out of the study of dress history as defined by influential British art historian and designer Stella Mary Newton (1901-2001), who developed a method for dating historical painting on the basis of dress. Within this approach, in which historical accuracy and knowledge of dress detail is of paramount importance, the term dress appears to be interchangeable with the term clothing. On the whole, the term clothes has not been used as an analytical concept by any research tradition, but is sometimes the preferred term because it is a neutral and descriptive designation in contrast to fashion, which always involves an ideal. The same can be said for the term garment, and for the American term apparel, which is primarily used to designate garment manufacturing as in the term the apparel industry.

Costume is another concept that has been used in research. Like dress, costume has the advantage over the term clothing of connoting a whole outfit or a whole appearance, but the term has been associated with unchanging dress, as a form of anti-fashion. This is the case in the study of folk dress, where the term costume has played an ideological role of reifying regionally and historically diverse dress practices. Museum pieces are also sometimes referred to as costume; indeed, designating dress as costume makes it appear stable and removed from everyday life. Therefore it should be avoided, except to designate special outfits for performance arts and carnival where costume is the appropriate term.

Fashion, for its part, is a term much loved and hated, with two rather distinct meanings – clothing and something that is popular (and usually short-lived). In this way the concept of fashion is both narrower and broader than the concepts of dress and clothes. Scholars of fashion are not interested in the universal phenomenon of dress, but in cultural and historical developments in Europe and the West. Fashion is usually seen as a geographically specific system for the production and organization of dress, emerging over the course of the fourteenth century in the European courts, particularly the French court of Louis XIV, and developing with the rise of mercantile capitalism. Historically, in the 19<sup>th</sup> century Europe it was possible to talk about ‘fashionable society’. When in the 20<sup>th</sup> century consumption of fashionable clothing became a mass phenomenon in the most developed countries, fashion became an institution for launching novelty, an ally of the avant-garde. The study of fashion has tended to privilege elite phenomena – famous designers, cosmopolitan fashion centres, and what is new and exciting in all walks of life. The key figure to promote research under the heading of fashion has been American historian Valerie Steele who has authored a number of richly detailed and topically varied books.

While practically all languages have a term for fashion or trends, no word has been more important than the French *la mode* (which is used as a loan word in all non-English language Western countries, only beginning to be replaced

by the English term in the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century). *La mode* emerged in the 1840s as a feminine noun, replacing the masculine *le mode*, derived from the latin *modus* which had been the common term for style or lifestyle in earlier European history. In this respect, there is a correlation between emergence of the term *la mode* and the emergence of the haute couture fashion industry in France in the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century. Most of all, the term *la mode* is associated with the concept of modernity and with a particular temporal experience which is associated with modern, urban life. Scholars, such as Ulrich Lehman, who work within this conceptual framework point to the heightened experience of the fleeting moment, the ephemerality, that is seen to characterize the experience of both fashion and modernity. A big problem with this approach is that since the concept of fashion derives its analytical power from very specific linguistic, cultural and institutional developments in Europe, it was never easy to apply outside the West.

From research conducted before the 1980s, there has been some consensus about what constituted the central research questions in an inquiry into dress and fashion. These are, firstly, the way dress has been an outlet for display of class privilege, and for competition between social classes, secondly, the way in which dress has marked gender distinctions, and thirdly, the way in which the meaning of dress and fashion is embedded in a system, which can be analysed on the basis of the principles. To argue that research from before the 1980s constitute a classic body of knowledge may be something of a stretch, but it is justified by the fact that research from the 1960s and 1970s have over time come to be seen as foundational debates, on which more recent interdisciplinary research is grounded.

## Class

The so-called 'trickle-down theory', which is the idea that fashions spread from upper to lower classes, has been highly influential in the study of dress and fashion. It has grown out of a pervasive idea in 19<sup>th</sup> century thought of social evolution, the application of Darwinism to society and culture. If any one scholar should be accredited as the originator of the trickle-down theory, it should be Herbert Spencer (1820-1903).

In spite of the pervasiveness of this idea, the trickle-down theory is often ascribed to North American economist Thorstein Veblen (1857-1929) and to German sociologist Georg Simmel (1858-1918). Strictly speaking this is not accurate. Rather than analysing the relationship between classes, Veblen and Simmel were interested in the role dress and fashion played for the upper classes around 1900. Veblen analysed the way in which the economic wealth of the new rich industrialists was converted into prestige through consumption, an idea which was later taken up by French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1930-2002). Veblen coined terms such as conspicuous consumption, conspicuous waste and vicarious consumption. Central to his analysis is the transfer within

the family from the industrialist husband who makes money to his wife and daughters, who through elaborate dress and leisurely lifestyle display his wealth. In Veblen's analysis, upper-class women are chattels.

By contrast, Georg Simmel presented an essayistic analysis of the concept of fashion, which he saw as bringing together two opposite social forces – the need for conformity and the need for individual distinction. They can be united in a variety of different ways, and Simmel analyses a selection of types, from the dude who is always the first to adopt new styles, to women who compensate for their overall repression by superficial display in dress, to the true individualist who uses fashion as a mask of conformity under which his or her individualism can be all the stronger.

It is hard to find any self-professed protagonists for the trickle-down theory. In marketing studies it has survived the longest, because it fulfils a need to predict market developments on the basis of carefully identified individuals. It forms the theoretical basis behind such concepts as 'fashion leaders', 'early adopters', 'cool hunters' and 'lead users', although it is widely acknowledged, that clothing markets are not as simple as a multilayered fountain, in which consumer preferences trickle like water from upper to lower levels. The study of trends, which has been done for marketing purposes since the 1960s, began to emerge as an academic research field in the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Many scholars have critiqued the trickle-down theory and presented alternative analytical models. American sociologist Herbert Blumer (1900-1987), who defined the concept of fashion movement, argues that fashion is based on collective selection in a kind of 'trickle-across' movement. American sociologist Diana Crane similarly argue that changes in the fashion production system has led to consumer-driven fashion, that follow a 'trickle-across' movement. American anthropologist, based in Great Britain, Ted Polhemus (b.1947) has analysed the way in which street fashion, associated with spectacular youth subcultures, influences the market, in a movement that can be described as 'trickle-up'. French sociologist Gilles Lipovetsky (b.1944) criticizes all preceding studies of fashion from Veblen to Bourdieu and Baudrillard for their preoccupation with dress as class display, and argues instead that the central concern should be with comfort and individualism.

## Gender

Gender and sexuality have made up another central field of inquiry in the study of dress and fashion. In anthropology this has been a rich area for field studies, which have brought out the tension between some of the basic purposes of dress: decoration and modesty. In most societies, display is the natural privilege of those in power. So it is a cultural and historical anomaly that in Western societies since the 19<sup>th</sup> century women have outshone men in terms of appearance. British psychologist John Carl Flügel (1884-1955) termed this 'the

great male renunciation'. On the basis of Freudian psychoanalysis, he argued that major changes in clothes fashion are symptomatic of the psychological dynamics between men and women. However, Flügel also saw clothes as central for drawing the infant out of its id-dominated condition, and thereby foundational for human life.

To some extent British curator at the Victoria and Albert Museum James Laver (1899-1975) followed Flügel's lead with a theory of "shifting erogenous zones" as a functional explanation of the changes in specifically women's fashions. By this Laver, produced a view on women as passive objects of the male gaze since he believed the seduction principle to be governing women's fashion. Whereas he interpreted women's clothes as instrumental in the race to reproduce by providing sexual attractiveness to men, he believed that a hierarchical principal determines changes in men's dress.

Feminist scholars have analysed the relation between dress and gender in order to question the asymmetrical relationship between men and women that Laver took for granted. The most critical voice is that of French existentialist philosopher Simone de Beauvoir (1908-1986), who argued that fashion that keeps women pinned to a superficial life, away from matters of importance. The woman of elegance is a tragic creature, to Beauvoir who wrote in the 1950s, because through her preoccupation with things, she has turned herself into a thing. In the following decades, feminists have debated whether it was necessary to discard the old symbols of femininity in order to liberate themselves. A decisive answer came from British cultural studies scholar Elizabeth Wilson who in the mid 1980s presented an original framework for seeing fashion as an everyday art form, although its implication with the capitalist economy is seen to be ambiguous. In this approach, fashion is not repressive to women; on the contrary dress offers the tools of creative self expression, which is particularly important for those who have been excluded from high art institutions on account of gender, class, sexuality and ethnicity.

Following this lead there have been multiple studies that combine mistrust of the market economy with a notion that fashion and consumer goods are empowering for the play of gender and sexual identities. In this approach, destabilizing the meaning of commercial images through critical readings is seen as political practice.

## Language

The development of structural linguistics by Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913) has been had an immense influence on in the development of the humanities in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and also on the study of dress and fashion. The principles of linguistics were first applied to the study of dress by Slovakian folklorist Petr Bogatyrev (1893-1971) in a monograph from 1937 on folk dress in Moravian Slovakia in Eastern Europe.

However, it was French semiotician Roland Barthes (1915-1980) who influenced the study of dress in a significant way through his work in the 1960s and 70s, including his study of French fashion magazines, published in 1967 as 'The Fashion System', sometimes called the most boring book ever written on fashion. His other works on fashion, popular culture, literature and art combine clarity and wit in a way that is much more reader-friendly, albeit intellectually challenging. For Barthes, fashion is a system that generates meaning, like language, through its combinational structure. He makes a distinction between the real garment (that is actually worn), the image garment and the written garment, and argues that language, associated with what he calls Fashion (with a capital F), dominates over both image and reality. Because fashion is perceived as a system, meaning is relational and seen to reside within the system; only the detail that is new in relation to last year's fashion is meaningful.

Barthes' semiotic approach which ignores both the production of clothing (although it assumes a profit motive that is constant and homogenous) and consumer practices, in order to focus on a system of signification, was influential in the formation of cultural studies in the 1970s and 80s. Although few have tried to emulate his rigid analysis of the grammar of fashion, many scholars have taken an analytical approach based on a reading of fashion, dress and image. The influence of the semiotic approach can be found, firstly, in a popular strand of research that purports to explain the meaning of fashion details, represented by American writer Alison Lurie (b.1926), and secondly, in a more scholarly body of work, by British cultural studies scholars such as Dick Hebdige and Malcolm Barnard, who approach dress and fashion as a communication system.

However, American anthropologist Grant McCracken disputes the idea that dress is a communication system comparable to language. He argues that it is not possible to generate combinational meaning out of garments in the way that it is with words, because clothing does not contain a grammatical generative structure that makes it possible to add elements. On the basis of an experimental study in which informants were shown images of people who were dressed with different degrees of combinational complexity, he found that many different elements combined in an outfit did not make it easier for his informants to 'read' a person. Instead of generating a more sophisticated message, it made it impossible for the informants to place a person in social space. To McCracken, dress studies should be embedded in what he calls the study of contrast and the study of material culture. He perceives fashion as a specific system for creating and transferring meaning through three different capacities: to interconnect meaning created in dress with the cultural constituted world, to create new cultural meanings, and to create radical reform.



## Interdisciplinary and transnational developments (1985-2010)

In the late 1980s and 1990s there was an enormous development in the study of dress and fashion, associated with the so-called 'cultural turn' and the post-modern critique of knowledge in the humanities and social sciences. This brought about a new interest, based on an interpretive approach, in human subjectivity and contextual meaning, bringing together, but also criticizing, ideas from Marxism, feminism and structuralism. The toppling of cultural hierarchies, characteristic of post-modernist thought, made the study of dress and fashion more interesting, if not outright fashionable, especially when the field was led by French sociologist Jean Baudrillard (1929-2007).

These developments created a place for the study of dress and fashion within the emergent discipline of Cultural Studies, and in the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century there have been claims that it should be a discipline in its own right. The field of knowledge was consolidated by a splurge of new publications that defined and explained the study of dress and fashion, including collections of foundational works, fashion and dress study readers, study source books, and reference works. In many sub-fields it is common to talk about 'the new' - the new dress history, the new fashion history, the new material culture studies and so on - which connotes parallel developments of an anti-positivist theoretically-informed interest in meaning, identity and reflexivity. But these many 'new' schools are still relatively discreet, so the overall development is characterised by both homogenization and heterogenization.

These changes in the organization of knowledge were related to changes in the fashion business in the most developed countries. As it shifted from a manufacturing industry, employing seamstresses, technicians and engineers to an image-based creative industry, employing designers, brand managers and other so-called knowledge workers, the fashion business increasingly opened the door to academic research of dress and fashion. Importantly, the academic curriculum that has been adopted in fashion design education that has taken place in many countries since the 1980s has brought academic researchers into design schools. Dutch fashion scholar Jose Teunissen has argued that research based in design schools has an advantage over university studies, because of its proximity to the practice of fashion design.

These developments have also been accompanied by scholarship, which questions and criticizes the way in which the concept of fashion is embedded in research approaches that privilege Western culture and history. This marks a decisive change; until the 1990s it was not uncommon for fashion scholars to claim, quite falsely, that fashion does not exist outside the West. But in the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century there was a critical awareness of the need the move beyond the Eurocentrism, embedded in old concepts, led by scholars such as

Canadian anthropologist Sandra Niessen and Australian historian Antonia Finnane. Empirical research has gone in two directions, firstly, the study of the global diffusion and appropriation of Western types of dress, also known as world fashion, and secondly, in the study local and regional fashion movements that occur more or less independently of the West.

Even though these developments in the study of dress and fashion has brought about a highly complex and patchy field of knowledge, it is possible to identify four main research approaches that are distinctive in terms of methodology and analytical framework. These are the object-based approach, the culture-based approach, the practice-based approach and the production-based approach.

## Object

Object-based research is characterized by description and documentation. Emerging predominantly out of the work of museum curators, its aim is to identify, register and classify individual garments typically of historical origin. The approach is influenced by art history, and based on the methods developed to understand art through authorship, style and general appreciation. The ability to dating of surviving clothes and painting on the basis of representation of clothing has been a useful tool for authentication. The emphasis on chronology and stylistic progression has been paradigmatic for dress and fashion history. The central element in accurate dating of dress objects is the examination of constructions and sewing techniques. Therefore, the scholar needs knowledge of sewing technology, fabric types, various weaving techniques, different kinds of trim, cut of fashionable and other dress throughout history and in different parts of the world. Research is based on time consuming and patient examination of objects in the museum storage room.

This criticism directed at this approach, mostly from scholars outside the museum world, is that it ignores broader social, cultural, economic and political contexts that are central to the understanding of dress and fashion. For their part proponents of the object-based approach, such as dress historian Lou Taylor, claim that material knowledge gives privileged insight into dress and fashion history. However, the object-centred approach has developed to include contextual information such as visual media, for example fashion plates, fashion magazines and fine arts paintings, oral history of the wearer of the clothing, and company history or design philosophy behind the production of clothing. The strength of this approach lies in its ability to embed the grand issues in economic and cultural history of specific material objects.

## Culture

In reaction to what has pejoratively been called the “hem-line history” of the object-based approach, some scholars have argued the need to bring more contextual knowledge into the analysis, and to understand dress and fashion as cultural representations similar to architecture, arts, literature, music and design. This is the basic claim of the cultural-based approach, which has emerged as the dominant discourse in dress and fashion studies. This approach has primarily drawn scholars from history, art history, visual culture and cultural studies. The interdisciplinary journal: *Fashion Theory*, launched in 1996, has been the leading forum for consolidating this approach.

As this approach is less focused on materiality, the object of study can be idea, object and image, if not all three at the same time. Typical for this approach is a conflation of the terms fashion and dress to mean something like a cultural constitution of the embodied identity. This is a highly inclusive approach that brings together processes of creative authorship, technological production, and cultural dissemination in an overall focus on cultural representation. On the negative side, the identity of such a loosely defined field of study is premised on culturally and geographically specific developments so that it can be said that this approach has tended to privilege a Western culture and history.

It covers a wide variety of works, from the detailed cultural histories of American fashion historian Valerie Steele or French historians Daniel Roche and Philippe Perrot, to the analysis of the relationship between body, clothes and art by American art historian Anne Hollander, by way of British fashion historian Christopher Breward’s interpretation of the relationship between fashion and modernity. Many scholars present their research in an essayistic form which is suited for bringing multiple contextual elements into the analysis. This also goes for the increasing body of literature, for example by Caroline Evans and Barbara Vinken, about the work of individual fashion designers and photographers based on theoretically sophisticated interpretation.

## Practice

Founded in the tradition of anthropology and ethnographic research, the human body and the self are at the centre of the practice-based approach to the study of dress and fashion. Methodologically, this approach is based on participant-observation and human documents such as diaries and photographs. Research questions are less concerned with the meaning of objects as with what constitutes subjective being in the world. In these studies, issues of tradition, ethnicity, gender, and age are often highlighted, but these are never fixed, but constantly negotiated through practice. Its strength lies in its ability to document and analyze the complexity of actual dress practices, for example British anthropologist Emma Tarlo’s study of the dress dilemma, encountered by Indians who live with two distinct dress systems, the local and the Western,

that are fraught with the history of colonialism, independence and notions of propriety.

The practice-based approach has a special advantage in being able to analyze the social life of clothing beyond the point of purchase, in the so-called wardrobe studies of how people wear, store and look after their clothes, or in Danish anthropologist, based in the United States, Karen Tranberg Hansen's study of the distribution and use of Western second-hand clothing in Africa. How everyday dress practices influence the environment is the subject of the work of Norwegian consumer researcher Ingun G. Klepp, including studies of changing laundry practices and motivations for and practices of throwing out clothes.

This empirical focus on everyday practices also serves as a correction to the idealization that has characterised studies of fashion. British sociologist Joanne Entwistle argues that situated bodily practices are the appropriate subject matter for the study of dress and fashion, as it brings together structuring influences from the outside with the outcome of people's practical actions on their bodies. The claim of this approach is to transcend the division between the object-based and the culture-based research approaches because the dissection of clothing into pattern, fabric, form and production is viewed as an aspect of human engagement. The study of fabrics as well as high fashion clothes is subject to the same kind of understanding as non-western clothing traditions.

British anthropologist Daniel Miller has been a key figure in revitalising material culture studies on the basis of a dialectic understanding of the relationship between the material and the social as co-constitutive of each other. His approach has been a major influence, and he has also been involved in dress studies, notably of the sari and of denim. Another influence on the practice-based approach comes from science, technology and society studies (STS), which analyse the social and the technical or material as hybrid, heterogenous networks, through a strong commitment to empirical studies. Finally, in design studies the tradition of participatory design, which sees users as active co-creators, rather than passive targets, of the design process, has also been influential on the practice-based approach.

## Production

The fourth approach focuses on the relation between the production and consumption of fashion and clothing. It is different from economic or business studies, which investigate supply chain, organisation, branding or retailing on the basis of general but compartmentalized theory, in that it aims for a holistic understanding of the mutual determination of production and consumption. The questions they ask are: is there anything in the production system that determines what our clothes look like? How are changes in the style of dress related to changes in the organization of fashion production?

The term fashion system is commonly used. But unlike Roland Barthes, who saw fashion as an abstract meaning system, embedded in language, scholars working within the production-oriented approach view the fashion system as a network of institutions, including textile companies, garment manufacturing companies, retailers, trade associations, fashion magazines, designers, photographers, stylists and models. These institutions form a system in the sense that their network is based on highly routinized interaction that leaves relatively little space for individual creativity. Used in this sense, the fashion system is an emic term that is widely used by fashion designers and others working in the clothing industry.

Ellen Leopold and Ben Fine have presented a comprehensive system of provision approach, based on the observation that the difficulty of handling fabric has blocked technological development of garment manufacturing beyond the individually operated sewing machine. They argue that in order to compensate for its inability to gain advantage from large-scale production, the clothing industry has introduced more seasonal change and product differentiation. Their conceptual framework stands out for its explanatory power; it explains the two distinctive characteristics of the fashion business – its high degree of globalization of labour intensive processes and its sophistication in marketing which enables it to operate in highly saturated markets – with a single material constraint: the fact that human hands are required to make garments.

Production-oriented approaches have also used the concept of fields, for example in the study of Paris haute couture conducted by French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu in collaboration with his colleague Yvette Delsaut in the late 1960s. Bourdieu's approach has been used in more or less detail in several studies, for example by Agnes Rocamora and Joanne Entwistle. Swedish economic sociologist Patrik Aspers has developed a comparable approach to markets in fashion, whereas Japanese sociologist Yuniya Kawamura coined the term fashion-ology for the study of fashion production as a system of institutions. Production-oriented approaches have also made a central contribution to the writing of national and local fashion histories.

American sociologist Fred Davis ends his book on fashion and identity with an argument for the potential of "the fashion system model" against what he calls "the populist model", that is the focus on dress practices. Davis argue for the value of the fashion system as an analytical approach and states that to abandoning it is the same as neglecting the fact that fashion in the matter of clothes, is still highly dependable on a fashion system model continuously initiated and reproduced by the fashion industry.

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# Working Papers List

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- #2 **From Participant Observation to Observant Participation:  
Anthropology, Fieldwork and Organizational Ethnography**  
By: Brian Moeran  
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- #3 **Creative Encounters in the Film Industry:  
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