BETWEEN THE WARDROBE AND THE SIDEWALK: AN ETHNOGRAPHY OF SHOES IN EVERYDAY LIFE

Between the Wardrobe and the Sidewalk: An Ethnography of Shoes in Everyday Life

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An Ethnography of Shoes in Everyday Life

Veronika Zavratnik

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Prologue: Red Converse All Stars

It is hard to pinpoint the exact moment when my interest in shoes began. I remember being in sixth grade when I discovered my older sister's music collection – an encounter that quickly shifted my taste from Backstreet Boys and Ronan Keating to Queen, Nirvana, Guns N' Roses, and the Ramones. Around the same time, I started dreaming of owning a pair of Converse Chuck Taylor All Stars, the kind I saw in so many music videos. I finally got a pair in the second year of high school, and they have been a faithful companion ever since. I also remember my dismay when, during my second or third year at university, our mother bought herself a pair of white Converse All Stars. Since then, I have found myself observing and wondering about shoes. At first, it was out of frustration – I was wearing the same type of shoes as my mother! – but over time, that frustration turned into curiosity. Why did she choose to buy that pair?

Throughout my teens, twenties, and early thirties, I have consistently worn All Stars – sometimes despite, and sometimes because of, what I thought they represented. Over time, my shoe collection began to grow, slowly expanding to include everything from flip-flops and running shoes to formal and fancier pairs. By the time I was finishing my research in 2023, the number of shoes in my closet had grown to 22 (and counting). What struck me, though, is that the more shoes I own, the more anxious I am about which pair to wear – can I wear flat sandals to a wedding? Can I wear Dr. Martens to the opera house? Can I combine sneakers with an elegant black skirt? Does every woman really need a pair of high-heels in her wardrobe?

Some of these early questions accompanied me into my academic work. My research on shoes started with my master's thesis in which I focused on Converse All Stars, convinced that I had found the perfect object of study. I attempted to understand why people wear Converse All Stars, what these shoes meant to their wearers, and how they were linked to identity, style, and generational belonging. Yet by the end of that project, I realized that no single pair – however iconic I thought it was – could explain the complexity of footwear. Shoes make sense only in relation to other shoes, other contexts, and the shifting situations of everyday life.

Over the years, my curiosity about shoes thus shifted. What began as a fascination with what certain shoes seemed to represent gradually turned into a different set of questions that eventually guided my PhD research, which forms the basis of this book. I became less interested in the meanings ascribed to shoes, such as rebelliousness, elegance, or adulthood, and more attentive to how shoes participate in everyday life. How are they connected to the confidence or discomfort one feels, and how are they linked to daily routines? Why do some shoes travel effortlessly across situations and social contexts, while others have only a very limited number of "appropriate" places? It was in this spirit that I remember trying to mark the end of my long PhD journey in a symbolic way – by experimenting with shoes while writing the final words of my dissertation. I even wrote a short reflection that captured many of the shoe-related dilemmas I encounter in different situations:

> When I glance down at my own feet, I feel uncomfortable. That feeling even persists while I am not looking down at them. I am sitting in my home office behind my work desk wearing the only pair of high-heeled shoes I currently own: platform shoes with a slightly raised heel and ankle straps, in a cream colour. I bought them a few years ago when a friend was getting married, and I needed a pair of shoes to complement my new blue midi dress with yellow polka dots. I did

not end up wearing the dress as I reverted to an already tried-and--true black dress with orange blossoming flowers, but I stuck with the shoes. As I write the final lines of my doctoral dissertation, it feels like an equally special occasion to the wedding, so I chose to put on the only *fancy* pair of shoes I own to make the occasion of my seemingly never-ending journey towards completing my PhD, a special one. Yet, sitting in my office chair in my own home while wearing high-heeled shoes is anything but usual. It feels uncomfortable. My feet ache and when I look down at my feet it feels like I am looking at someone else's shoes. It seems that I have chosen the wrong pair.

However, as this book is in many ways about how we choose the shoes we do, and how we choose shoes to position ourselves (or how shoes position us), I want to start by being comfortable in my own shoes, and I have decided to share a short excerpt from my field diary, along with the story of my favourite pair of Converse All Stars:

If I had to choose my favourite pair of shoes, I'd have no problem. Although I haven't worn them for many years because they are practically unwearable, red Converse shoes immediately come to my mind. The ones I begged my dad for in my second year of high school – just as I begged for Superstars a few years earlier. Both pairs, I remember, at that time embodied exactly who I wanted to be(come): rebellious, independent, a rocker. /.../ Well-worn, with cracked rubber, wrinkles, and tears in the fabric, inscribed with slogans and names and with a hole in the sole. At some point I also changed the laces: yellow on the right side and Rastafarian colours on the left. I vividly remember how a friend of a friend untied his ponytail, plucked them out of his hair one summer evening, and gave them to me. I also remember well most of the occasions when the inscriptions were made, the friends who wrote them, and the conversations we had. Occasionally, my Converse shoes received new decorations, usually parts of beer cans – called "sntnt" in slang – while we were drinking late at night at a nearby flea market. Three festivals, four summers, cold winter days (when it was highly indecent to admit you were cold in canvas shoes), countless jumps through a high school student dorm window (at forbidden hours, naturally!), a secretly made tongue piercing, arguments, and first loves. After four years and several failed attempts, I finally realized that their soles were beyond repair. I packed them up and placed them in a box that now sits on top of the wardrobe. The red Converse shoes helped me through a period of questioning my identity, introduced me to new friends in a new phase of my life, and, because they were the ultimate choice, also solved many of the typical fashion dilemmas of adolescence. Of course, I couldn't throw them away!
/... / When I feel that the combination of first-world problems and the hardships of adulthood are moulding me too much, red Converse shoes ease the weight of those feelings. They remind me of a (now) almost vanished "rebellious" streak, of stubbornness, determination, and optimism. They remind me of my father. They remind me

> of friendships and of an infinite sense of power. Red Converse shoes aren't just a pair of my favourite shoes. They are an integral part of who I am and how I've become the person I am today. /.../ Sometimes, I even wish I was like a Converse shoe – universal and durable. But in reality, we are most similar in that we both remember the same events and keep the same memories. (Field diary, January 2019)

The red Converse shoes I describe above were worn, altered, repaired, inscribed, and eventually retired. They accumulated traces of seasons and friendships, they shaped where I felt I belong, and how I negotiated the boundaries between conformity and defiance. Perhaps this is where my research truly began – not in teenage fascination with pop culture, fashion or in a desire for rebellion, but in a persistent curiosity about how a pair of ordinary shoes becomes entangled with how we become who we are.

Introductory remarks

I am sitting in front of the Museum of Modern Art in Ljubljana, on a low stony wall, waiting for Marko. I watch people passing by; in fact, I find myself staring at their feet, observing the variety of footwear. It is late spring, with an almost summery feel in the air, which explains the presence of flip-flops and sandals. Some people are probably heading for a hike up Rožnik Hill, accessible directly from the nearby Tivoli Park – they wear sturdy hiking shoes. Then there are the sneakers – blue New Balance, black low-cut Converse All Stars, some greenish sneakers that look rather odd. But predominantly white sneakers, the impeccably white sneakers that dominate the scene.

I glance down at my own feet. I am wearing Birkenstock sandals, and I begin to wonder if I am ahead of the season. Will it rain today? Should I have chosen my Converse shoes instead? Every time my Birkenstocks get wet, they become smelly, and it takes ages for them to dry.

A young woman sits down beside me. After a while, she starts rummaging through her purse and I think to myself she is probably looking for her mobile phone, perhaps to check the time or call the person she is meeting. She then takes off her right sneaker and her sock, and I realize she is tending to a blister, most likely caused by her (new?) sneakers. She is wearing white sneakers with a green V on the side, paired with wide-leg black cropped pants and a tight sleeveless top in a shade that leaves me undecided between orange and red. A black backpack completes her outfit. Before I can witness the plastering of the blister, Marko arrives, and we head towards Tivoli Park.

"So, you actually get paid to do this kind of work, to talk about shoes I mean?" He asks the question for the third time, this time accompanied by loud laughter, and I am starting to get a little annoyed by it. As we slowly walk along the Jakopič Promenade, the park's main walkway, I suddenly realize that I have a pebble in my left sandal – again. This kind of physical discomfort usually makes it impossible for me to focus on anything else, so I have to stop, take off my sandal, and remove the pebble. While doing so, I collect my thoughts and prepare a brief response: *"Yes, and it's actually a lot of fun."*

Even though it was our first meeting, I had already grown accustomed to explaining my research interest – people and their footwear – and I patiently explain that my primary aim is neither market(ing) research nor the study of different clothing styles. Our earlier conversation had started in an interesting way, evoking memories of shopping for shoes with our parents, the embarrassment that sometimes accompanied those moments in childhood, and the realization that, in many ways, we now find ourselves asking the same embarrassing questions our parents once did: *"Really, so expensive? But why? What is so special about those shoes?"*

Yet explaining my research focus seems to elicit even more questions. Why would anyone be interested in how other people shod their feet? What could one possibly learn from observing and listening to the when, why and how of putting on shoes, switching between pairs, or going barefoot? Still, as other researchers have noted before me, there is something that appears unusual about focusing on something so "ordinary and ubiquitous" (Miller and Woodward 2012: 16) as footwear.

After about an hour, Marko and I sit down, and I ask the question that completely changes the pace and tone of our conversation: *"What about your skateboarding shoes?"*

Archaeological evidence indicates that people began wearing shoes with solid soles at least 40,000 years ago, a claim supported by changes in foot morphology, most notably the strength of the big toe (DeMello 2009: ix). Due to the degradable nature of materials used in early footwear, however, the oldest dated example to date is approximately 10,000 years old: pair of sandals found in Fort Rock Cave, Oregon, in the United States (Oregon Encyclopedia 2026).[1] For most of us living in the contemporary "Western" world, where paved surfaces are the norm, wearing shoes is now indeed a common practice as we have grown through habitually wearing different types of shoes. Despite the tendency in the academic literature and media to focus on footwear that is highly decorative and impractical, for the majority of individuals it still serves a practical purpose. More often than not, shoes enable us to perform activities that would otherwise be difficult or impossible. They allow us to engage in certain behaviours and influence the way we interact with our environment and what activities we engage in (Michael 2000), as their material form influences the way we move, our gestures, and our gait. We need particular shoes to navigate specific terrains, whether it is hot asphalt, sharp rocks, or ice-cold snow, and to navigate the social spaces in which we move, as in many social situations being barefoot would be deemed highly inappropriate.

This book originated from a simple question: *What do we learn when we place shoes at the centre of an ethnographic enquiry?*[2]

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1 Information about the oldest preserved shoes in the world varies between sources. For example, *Encyclopaedia Britannica* states that the oldest preserved shoes were found in California, the United States, and are approximately 9,000 years old (Britannica 2026). In an earlier account, Rebecca Shawcross refers to 5,500-year-old shoes discovered in a cave in Armenia as the oldest shoes (Shawcross 2014: 14).

2 According to the *Dictionary of Standard Slovenian Language*, in Slovenian, *obutev* (footwear) refers to all the products for the protection of the feet and lower part of the legs that are made of durable materials and with durable soles (Fran 2026a), while *čevelj* (shoe), can refer to low, medium or high footwear with a firm sole, to footwear in general, or to footwear intended for a specific purpose (Fran 2026b). By this definition, *čevlji* thus refers to specific categories of footwear. In my research, *čevlji* was commonly used to refer to any type of footwear that can be worn outside. The term *obutev* was explicitly used only when referring to footwear that does not enclose the foot, such as flip-flops, to very specific types of footwear, such as ski boots (*pancerji*), or to footwear that cannot be worn outside, such as indoor slippers (*copati*). However, in all these cases it was very common to name these types of footwear by their names, i.e. flip-flops, ski boots, and indoor slippers. Throughout this book, I use the terms *čevlji* and *obutev* interchangeably as this is also the way they were mainly used during the research.

As I pursued this question, one of the first things I learned was that shoes are complicated. They are emotionally and culturally charged objects, imbued with associations, stereotypes, and meanings (Sherlock 2012: 253). Despite being part of our daily routines, discussing them can be surprisingly challenging. Often, finding shoes that both fit and suit our needs feels like an impossible, overwhelming task that can drive us to despair. The plethora of different sizes, models, colours – the sheer multitude of options – can be bewildering. Whether we are scrolling through online shops or walking around a shopping mall, the choices available seem endless. To help us navigate around this overwhelming situation, "shoe experts" began to create different lists, classifying different categories of shoes according to their characteristics. "Best city walking shoes", "best running shoes", "trendiest shoes", "best toddler shoes", and so forth. The steady growth of the footwear market in Europe (Statista 2026a) points to the fact that our choices might become even more complicated. Conversely, sometimes finding shoes is an easy task, as we opt to always buy the same type or/and brand – perhaps also as a way to simplify our lives.

More often than not, however, finding a shoe that fits and suits us is not necessarily connected to shopping malls or shoe shops, but rather to the intimacy of our home, as it happens right before we leave to go about our daily lives. These moments are often about finding shoes that fit and suit the social context we are about to enter into. Can you wear flip-flops to the office? Can you attend a wedding in sneakers? Is it inappropriate to show bare toes in church? Numerous written and unwritten rules govern our footwear choices across social contexts. In 2023, for example, public reactions to Jennifer Lawrence's footwear at the Cannes Film Festival taught us that a woman should not attend such an event wearing a glamourous red dress paired with black flip-flops. Similarly, in the same year, Slovenians could read a lot about the appropriateness and meaning of the red pumps worn by the President of the National Assembly, Urška Klakočar Zupančič.[3] Sometimes shoes can also be about age-appropriateness, style appropriateness, or weather appropriateness. These complexities are also evident in our shoe wardrobes, which are being far from static. Shoes are continually rearranged according to seasons, occasions, activities or social roles (Goffman 1956, 1974), reflecting the dynamic relationship between footwear and everyday life.

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3 The intensity of the public debate is perhaps best illustrated by the fact that the red pumps have since entered the collection of the Tržič Museum, which holds the most extensive collection of shoes and shoemaking heritage in Slovenia.

In academic accounts shoes seem to be even more complicated. In the social sciences, the role that footwear plays in our experience of the world has been interpreted in different ways: as a material and semiotic resource for the body and a tool that complicates our experience of the environment (Michael 2000); a device imposing a separation "between the activities of a mind at rest and a body in transit, between cognition and locomotion, and between the space of social and cultural life and the ground upon which that life is materially enacted" (Ingold 2004: 321), and consequentially transforming us into "stepping machines" (Ingold 2011: 36); as an item so embedded in our lives that has become part of our extended selves (Belk 2003); or as an aid in inquiries into how people live out different aspects of their identities (Hockey et al. 2012, 2014, 2015; Robinson 2014, 2015). Scholars working in the field of cultural studies have paid a lot of attention to the meaning of shoes in terms of their affiliations with subcultures, as seen in, for example, the study of Yuniya Kawamura (2016) that focused on the men's sneaker subculture. In fashion studies, on the other hand, shoes are often approached in terms of their meaning, with many accounts focusing on high-heeled shoes as a feminine object, and on the sexual connotations of high heels. In general, studies of footwear in relation to femininity, power, gender, sexual identity, and footwear outnumber any other aspect of the consideration of footwear (see, for example, Steele 1996: 91–114, 2006; Cox 2004; Semmelhack 2006; Steele and Hill 2012; Small 2014).

Two general impressions can be drawn from this overview. First, until recently, in studies that focus on shoes (and dress in general), women were seen as the primary focal group, a fact that – even if not looked at from a distinctly feminist viewpoint – is at the very least problematic. With the exception of sneakers (Kawamura 2016) or certain culturally meaningful shoes (Sherlock 2014, 2016), relatively little research has addressed men's footwear (for an exception, see Robinson 2014). As Christopher Breward (2006) has noted, preoccupations with shoes as feminine, sexual objects have led to the neglect of their other roles, such as shoes as economic products. Some researchers have thus noted a need to develop the neglected study of men's shoes, as "sneakers and a new breed of mixed sport-casual shoes present a challenge to established gendered notions of footwear" (McNeil and Riello 2006: 398).

The second impression gleaned from the overview of academic considerations of footwear set out above is the focus on spectacular rather than everyday mundane shoes: designer shoes, high-heeled shoes, or otherwise extraordinary shoes. Notably, considerable

attention has been given to items of footwear as historical (Riello and McNeil 2006; Shawcross 2014; Turner 2019; Knific 2020), symbolic (Small 2014) or (culturally) significant (Steele and Hill 2012; Sherlock 2014, 2016; Moynahan and Benchley 2019) objects. Similarly, postmodern approaches tend to frame shoes as either a commodity fetish (in terms of designer shoes) or in the context of sexual fetishism.[4] Nevertheless, it is important to recognize the importance of the existing literature. As Sherlock (2012) notes, historical analyses, semiotic and postmodern approaches are instrumental in understanding contemporary contexts. They have all contributed to the discourses in which we shape our understanding and experiences of shoes, what they represent, and how we use them.

Broadening the scope, scholars focusing on the everyday (see, for example, de Certeau 1984; Lefebvre 1991) have contributed to a growing interest in everyday life in general (Highmore 2002; Shove et al. 2009; Löfgren 2014). In anthropology, researchers engaged in material culture studies have increasingly directed their attention to the mundane dimensions of daily life, examining topics such as domestic spaces, supermarkets, shopping, and food (Mlekuž 2008). Likewise, clothing has received considerable attention in this context (see, for example, Clarke and Miller 2002; Banerjee and Miller 2003; Küchler and Miller 2005; Woodward 2007; Miller and Woodward 2012). Within this broader trend, however, footwear has received only partial attention. What studies have been done tend to focus on specific themes, such as the singularization of shoes through wear (see, for example, Belk 2003; Hockey et al. 2012, 2014, 2015; Robinson 2015), particular types of footwear (Hoogsteyns 2012; Sherlock 2016; Kawamura 2016; Zavratnik 2016, 2019; Lawry 2022), the intimate practice of wearing and "wornness" (Sampson 2022 [2020]), or footwear as a global commodity (Knowles 2014; Benzecry 2022). This orientation toward the everyday is also reflected in recent publications in the field of fashion studies, which increasingly examine the embeddedness of fashion into daily life (see, for example, Jenss and Hoffman 2020). However, shoes are still working their way into the focus of these studies.

Another thing I have learned during the research on footwear is that shoes are everywhere. Regardless of our level of investment in clothing or fashion, shoes are an everyday necessity. Most of the time we spend outside the safety of our homes, our feet are shod. In the

4 For a broader report on such approaches see Brydon (1998: 12–15).

introduction to the book *Shoes: A History from Sandals to Sneakers*, the editors Giorgio Riello and Peter McNeil, argue that "[s]hoes are powerful 'things': they allow us to move, they are the main intersection between the body and the environment, they amplify our physical but also social and emotional capacities" (Riello and McNeil 2006a: 3). For someone living in Slovenia, and specifically in its capital of Ljubljana, where most of the ethnographic material for this research on footwear was collected, indoor slippers might indeed be the first thing people slip into when they get out of the bed to make their morning coffee, and the last thing they take off their feet before retiring for the night. During the day that unfolds in between, they will most likely wear shoes as they go about their obligations and planned activities. If I were to borrow a phrase from the editors of the aforementioned publication and describe the relationship between people and their shoes as "from cradle to grave" (Riello and McNeil 2006a: 28), it would hardly be an overstatement. But shoes can also be found elsewhere:

> [t]hey hang on the walls in calendars. They grace the covers of coffee-table books and magazines, including at least one devoted entirely to footwear, *Shuz*. Shoe postcards are tacked to refrigerator doors with shoe magnets. Ivy dangles from shoe planters. Women accessorize shoe bracelets and earing encrusted with diamonds. Christmas trees – even fish tanks – are decorated with the Metropolitan Museum of Art's miniature replicas of famous shoe designs. Footwear has assumed such prominence that the entire museum, the Bata Shoe Museum in Toronto, has devoted its collection the history of shoes, as well as to the shoe as an aesthetic object. (Benstock and Ferriss 2001: 1)

And the list could go on.

More than 20 years after Shari Benstock and Suzanne Ferris (2001) penned those words in their introduction to the book *Footnotes: On Shoes*, they still ring true. Shoes continue to appear in music lyrics, movies, television commercials and fairy tales. A recent and widely circulated example is the film *Barbie* (2023), where shoes act as a metaphor for the division between experiences of "the Barbie world" and "the real world". When we look at the portrayal of shoes in popular culture, it is important to note how they are often depicted as possessing kind of agency, magical qualities or some unique capacity. Elaine Webster (2009), in her study of red shoes, demonstrates how these representations resonate with our real-life experiences, where we sometimes imbue shoes with agency and transformative potential.

This ubiquity of footwear in various contexts underscores the fact that shoes indeed are a complicated topic.

The third thing about shoes that I have learned from my research is that shoes are important. They constitute a significant part of our everyday contemporary lives. As part of material culture, shoes stand at the intersection of the physical and social environment and the body, and thus simultaneously influence our ability to participate in and shape our experiences. In his seminal essay 'Techniques of the body', Marcel Mauss (1973 [1935]: 72) recounts a moment of reflection:

> /.../ where previously I had seen girls walking as my nurses walked. I had the time to think about it. At last I realized that it was at the cinema. Returning to France, I noticed how common this gait was, especially in Paris; the girls were French and they too were walking in this way. In fact, American walking fashions had begun to arrive over here, thanks to the cinema.

Mauss's essay, in which he argues that collective cultural representations are reproduced through bodily practices, is widely recognized as one of the foundational studies of embodiment. Yet, as Sherlock remarks (Sherlock 2016: 39–40) what remains absent from his account on the transformation of walking styles is any consideration of the materiality of the footwear. It is not only through imitation that walking styles are acquired; different types of footwear actively shape how we move, influencing posture, gestures, and gait. When choosing shoes, we are very aware of the need to select the appropriate "tool" for the activity at hand – be it walking, running, climbing, or dancing. The physicality of shoes affords certain movements, postures, and behaviours (Gibson 2015 [1988]; Ingold 2000, 2010), which, in turn, are related to social and cultural behaviours certain shoes can permit. In *Our Own Devices: How Technology Remakes Humanity* Edward Tenner (2003: 52) reflects on this relationship, noting that shoes change "not only our contact with the world, but our perception of it. And through the meanings we have been assigned it, it affects how we relate to others socially." The mediating capacity of footwear is thus particularly significant, since it impacts both our mobility and navigation of physical terrains and our ability to negotiate complex social environments. Shoes, then, are both materially and symbolically useful (Michael 2000).

Another aspect of their importance in our lives is that, through use, shoes "merge" with the wearer's body, assume the shape of the foot, respond to environmental influences, and thus form an especially intimate relationship with the wearer. As a particular pair of shoes is "worn habitually over a period of time /.../ it comes to define a person during a particular period of one's life" (Woodward 2007: 25). Shoes

help us remember the past, the events, and experiences when we wore them, the people we were with at the time, and thus enable us to revisit memories and rediscover our past identities. When we stop wearing them, they are sometimes transformed into memory objects (Habinc 2004: 29) stored in our wardrobes, attics, or basements. A particular pair of shoes that a person wears can embody experiences and memories of certain events, and even entire periods of one's life.

And finally, the fourth thing I learned during my research is that shoes are meaningful in many ways. Wearing them transforms shoes from mundane, mass-produced objects into something more profound. If we look at history, we can see how shoes have for centuries provided "hints" (Riello and McNeil 2006a: 3) about a person's social status; remember, for example, the sumptuary laws that forbade the use of certain footwear (Muzzarelli 2006), and reflected broader cultural, sometimes even religious, values. At times shoes become meaningful through the cultural practices in which they are embedded, such as being worn by celebrities, famous musicians, bands, or athletes. Consider, for example, the famous Nike Air Jordan sneaker and multiple associations it gained – from symbolizing "greatness in athletic performance" (Gill 2006: 379), to its entwinement with American hip-hop street culture. At other times, shoes gain their meaning because there is no body to inhibit them anymore; they retain their shape and indicate the body that was once present, like the monument depicting shoes on the bank of the Danube River in Budapest, honouring the thousands of people killed in the city by a fascist militia during the Second World War. In another context we can recall Abebe Bikila and the 1960 Olympic Games in Rome, and see how shoes can be meaningful by their absence – Abebe ran and won the Olympic marathon barefoot, his lack of shoes attracting much public attention.

Returning to the movie *Barbie*, where shoes are used to mark the divide between "the Barbie world" and "the real world", we can see how shoes can sometimes become meaningful as metaphors: pink, crystal-encrusted high-heeled shoes signify an easy and comfortable life where things do indeed always go "right", while the brown Birkenstock Arizona sandals serve as a symbol of a world filled with hardships, obstacles, and barriers that can only be overcome with sturdier shoes. In fairy tales, for example, shoes gain significance due to their transformative powers: glass slippers transform Cinderella from a maid to a princess, boots transform a cat into Puss in Boots, and ruby slippers have the power to transport Dorothy from the land of Oz back to her home in Kansas. As noted by Sherlock (2014), the frequent narrative use of shoes in popular culture has turned them into what Julia

Pine has termed a "loaded device" (Pine 2006: 353): an object that represents personal experiences or stands in for the person who wore them. In our everyday lives, too, shoes are often discussed in terms of what they stand for; stereotypically high-heeled shoes are understood in terms of femininity or "power dressing", Converse All Stars, Dr. Martens, or – more recently – sneakers in terms of (sub)cultural identifications. It seems, then, that their continual presence has rendered shoes a "potent symbol" (Robinson 2015: 905) that can stand in for something else, and now separated from the practices and dynamics of everyday life, shoes as an object are sometimes somehow invisible. This resonates with the academic accounts listed earlier, where disproportionate attention is given to the shoe as a feminine object and to the sexual connotations of high heels. Considering all this, it sometimes seems that despite – or, as some authors would have it, because of (Miller 2005a) – their consistent material presence in our lives, what shoes stand for has come to overshadow their very material existence.

To capture the complexity described above, I engage with shoes through their particularities, examining the topic by looking at "mundane, apparently inconsequential activities" (Miller and Woodward 2012: 155) related to footwear that unfold in the everyday lives. I accompanied people on their shopping trips, participated in (re)arranging of their shoe collections, strolled through the streets and pathways of the city and its neighbouring hills, attended various events, and discussed the stories of favourite pairs and the memories associated with unfortunate social shoe-related incidents.

The orientation of this book is thus based on the premise that "[t]hrough things we can understand ourselves and others /…/ because these things are the very medium through which we make and know ourselves" (Tilley 2006: 61). In order to explore this co-constitutive relationship between shoes and people, the main focus is therefore on the social and cultural practices related to footwear as a "situated bodily practice" (Entwistle 2016 [2000]), which is central to how people engage with both their physical surroundings and social contexts. Focusing on specific practices brings nuanced insights into the ways in which shoes act as mediators in the process of differentiation and social positioning (Hofman and Sitar 2016). It also considers the social and economic constraints that sometimes limit the choice of what people wear on their feet. Consequently, the theoretical framework of this book draws from contemporary material culture studies and theoretical perspectives on material culture and materiality in general, and builds upon existing empirically grounded considerations of clothing and footwear; both theoretical frameworks are thoroughly discussed

in the chapter 'Understanding the (Material) World'. I also incorporate findings from studies of fashion more broadly, and occasionally I reference historically oriented sources to contextualize my analytical findings, such as, for example, in the consideration of sneakers or indoor slippers.

THE SETTING

Most of the ethnographic research forming the basis of this book was conducted in Ljubljana, the capital city of Slovenia. Ljubljana is also where I have lived since the beginning of my university years. As the capital and largest urban settlement in the country, it has specific characteristics that are important for understanding everyday footwear practices. To bring the reader closer to this context, we will briefly examine the main characteristics of the research location.

The territory of present-day Slovenia is located in Central Europe, and has historically been positioned at the crossroads of Central Europe, the Mediterranean, and the Balkans (see also Jezernik, Muršič and Bartulović 2007): the country borders Austria to the north, Hungary to the northeast, Croatia to the south and southeast, and Italy to the west. For centuries, the territory was part of the Habsburg monarchy and later the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and Ljubljana, as a provincial capital within the empire, developed as an urban centre shaped by Central European architectural and intellectual influences. Following the First World War, Slovenian lands briefly became part of the State of Slovenes, Croats and Serbs, which soon united with the Kingdom of Serbia to form the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes, renamed the Kingdom of Yugoslavia in 1929. After the Second World War, Slovenia became part of socialist Yugoslavia (for a more thorough historical overview see Štih, Simoniti and Vodopivec 2008). The socialist period (1945–1991) profoundly transformed social and economic life; industrialization, internal migration and the construction of new housing estates reshaped both urban and rural landscapes. At the same time, everyday life was marked by a particular negotiation between socialist ideology and consumer aspiration (see Luthar 2004). While Yugoslavia maintained a distinctive position within the socialist bloc – being more open to Western markets and cultural influences than many other Eastern European countries – consumption nevertheless remained structured by availability, scarcity, and informal networks (see Luthar 2004). These dynamics influenced many areas

of daily life, including clothing and footwear practices and access to brands. In 1991 Slovenia declared independence and subsequently underwent a political and economic transformation. In 2004, Slovenia joined the European Union, and in 2007 it adopted the euro and entered the Schengen Area.

This layered historical trajectory – Habsburg, Yugoslav, socialist, and post-socialist – is important for understanding contemporary practices, as some of these shifts (particularly the transition from socialism to post-socialism) remain embedded in memories and narratives of people, and these also include former clothing and footwear and broader consumption choices. They are sometimes reflected in recollections of the (un)availability of particular brands or items, contributing to the specific cultural connotations that certain brands, items, or memories continue to carry for some people.

Within this broader historical trajectory, Ljubljana occupies a distinct position. As the political, administrative, and educational centre of the country, it concentrates institutions, infrastructure, and social dynamics that distinguish it from other Slovenian regions. Slovenia is relatively small and geographically diverse, and Ljubljana functions as its primary urban node. With a population of approximately 300,000, and just under 38,000 university students during term time, Ljubljana is the largest urban settlement in the country and the most densely populated (STAT 2026). Over the past two decades, the city centre has undergone substantial pedestrianization, and public space has increasingly been organized around walking and cycling. The urban landscape is characterized by immediate access to nearby hills such as Rožnik, Golovec, or Šmarna Gora, which are located at the edge of the city and easily accessible on foot. Many residents, as is also reflected in the practices of the people involved in this research, enjoy regular weekday afternoon or weekend hikes in the nearby hills or mountains.

Ljubljana is situated centrally within the country, and its geographic location in a basin is characterized by a temperate continental climate marked by seasonal contrasts. Summers are often warm and humid, while winters bring cold temperatures, fog, and occasional snow. Transitional seasons can be rainy and variable, with prolonged periods of damp weather. Such seasonal variation is reflected in footwear wardrobes, which constantly adapt to changing weather conditions.

Demographically, Ljubljana attracts internal migrants from other parts of the country, particularly students and (young) professionals, as the largest university in the country and certain job opportunities are concentrated in the capital. The presence of the

university, cultural institutions, and service-sector employment contributes to higher-than-average salaries and lower-than-national-average age structure (see STAT 2026). In recent years, Ljubljana has become increasingly popular with tourists, in 2024 hosting 15% of all yearly overnight stays in the country (STAT 2025).

While footwear practices across Slovenia undoubtedly share similarities, in the capital they are embedded in a distinctly urban environment. Patterns of mobility, daily activities and recreation (afternoon walks in the park, cycling, etc.) influence footwear choices in many ways. For example, several participants remarked on the difficulty of walking barefoot in the city, noting that green areas are frequently used by dog owners and that much of the urban surface is paved with asphalt.

THE METHODS USED

The research developed through ethnographic engagement with shoes: how they are chosen, maintained, remembered, and discussed. Through close attention to practices, situations, and conversations, I sought to understand how people relate to their footwear, and through it, to themselves and others. The methods I used were grounded in anthropological fieldwork and shaped by approaches developed within material culture studies. I collected ethnographic material through a combination of methods, including semi-structured interviews, informal conversations, and observations of footwear in everyday settings – while walking, at home, in shoe shops, or during other shared activities.

I placed particular emphasis on methods that enabled material engagement, such as *object interviews* (Woodward 2020: 34–53), where footwear functioned both as a topic of conversation and as a material presence that shaped the dialogue. In my work, the third participant in the interview – or less structured conversation – often turned out to be a favourite pair of shoes, whether it was the pair that was worn most frequently or the one that had just been bought. Touching, holding, and closely observing a pair of shoes often elicited memories, affective responses, and reflections that would likely remain unarticulated or unspoken in a more conventional interview setting, especially because relationships with footwear are often habitual, embodied, and thus, by definition, difficult to verbalize (Schippers 2002: 133). This approach facilitated discussions, as it enabled people to simultaneously talk

about specific shoes and the practices connected with them, practices that determine or delimit their use, value, or meaning.

Drawing on Woodward's interpretation of assemblage theory (2020: 74–94), I also used methods such as *assemblage inventories* and *assemblage interviews*. The former refers to systematically documenting all items of a certain type that a person owns – in this case, footwear – while the latter involves eliciting narratives through the presence and discussion of a set of related objects. These methods are grounded in the understanding that objects exist within clusters of relations, uses, and meanings, and by examining such assemblages, one gains deeper insight into how people engage with materiality in everyday life.

In practice, this often unfolded in domestic contexts, where the participants described, handled, and commented on various pairs of shoes from their collections. The participants would open their wardrobes or shoe storage spaces and talk me through their collections, describing the pairs they wear most often, those kept for special occasions, those they no longer wear but cannot discard, and others whose presence was difficult to explain. Frequently, these encounters were accompanied by recollections of specific situations, life stages, or affective attachments,[5] and often led to conversations that extended beyond footwear itself, touching on broader aspects of identity, memory, and care. In several instances the assemblage interviews were conducted in pairs – with partners, siblings, or close friends – which added an additional dialogical layer. These "material methods" (Woodward 2020), relatively formal in their application, proved especially productive for understanding not only how people organize and classify their footwear, but also how they negotiate space, social expectations, and aesthetic or practical criteria in their everyday engagements with shoes.

Walking interviews also became an important part of the fieldwork (see, for example, Pink 2015: 111–115). They initially emerged spontaneously, often at the suggestion of my interlocutors, as it was easier for them to discuss some aspects of their "shoe lives" while on

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5 Recently, David Howes (2022) proposed the "sensori-social approach to things" (Howes 2022: 322), which he defined as an approach that "start[s] from the recognition that artefacts and commodities (as well as buildings, landscapes, etc.) are bundles of social relations – that is they concertize the social relations /.../ and at the same time, bundles of sensory qualities or sensual relations. Thus, in addition to their material constituents, artefacts and commodities have colour, give off (and absorb) sound, emit odours, and present a particular feel or texture, as well as taste. In other words, the materiality of things is social and sensible as well as /.../ material." However, the term was introduced in an article written in response to Ingold's critique of the concept of materiality, a point that will be discussed in second chapter, which focuses on the theoretical framework used in this book.

the move. Later, they were used deliberately as a method. Walking is integral to our relationships with footwear, as it enables us to navigate spaces and social situations. Consequently, conducting interviews during walks opened up new ethnographic opportunities. It allowed me to observe how shoes are used in practice, how they are maintained, and to observe shoes within various social contexts, whether on short hiking trips, casual strolls around town, or when shopping for shoes.

Due to the nature of the research methods I employed, field diaries were an integral part of the research process. They enabled me to record detailed descriptions – "thick descriptions" (Geertz 1973: 3–30) – of situations and interactions, as well as to reflect on my own experiences.

The ethnographic material discussed in this book was collected over nine years, beginning in 2014. While the most substantial and sustained part of the research took place between 2019 and 2023, earlier work was also analytically significant. My initial engagement with the topic of shoes was a study of Converse Chuck Taylor All Stars (Zavratnik 2014, 2016, 2019), focusing on a group of self-identified All Stars enthusiasts aged 21 to 31. Although this earlier project differed in scope and focus, it was useful in contextualizing later findings, particularly regarding memories of specific pairs or footwear preferences during certain life periods. Selected fragments from that work are included here as contextual material, offering additional depth and perspective on themes such as footwear-related memories, and transitions across life stages.

In 2019, I collaborated with students from the Department of Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology at the University of Ljubljana on a project developed with the Slovene Ethnographic Museum. The project formed part of the museum's preparations for the exhibition *Bosi, obuti, sezuti* (Eng. *My Feet. My Shoes. My Way*; Žagar 2020). Over the semester, we explored various aspects of footwear and feet, with students conducting interviews or writing short (auto)ethnographic reflections on themes such as the selection and use of footwear; decorating and caring for feet; putting on slippers; going barefoot; discarded/thrown-away shoes; footwear with a story; relationships with shoes; and idioms and slang related to footwear. The participants ranged in age from nine to 82, and came from diverse backgrounds. Although the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 disrupted the completion of the project and the accompanying exhibition, I later revisited some of the students' work.

In 2017, I participated in the Summer School of Visual Ethnography in Ljubljana, where I co-created a short ethnographic film

titled *Boutique* (Zavratnik 2017a), focusing on a small shoemaking workshop in the city centre. The film documented a day in the life of the workshop and led to a longer-term collaboration. Over the following two years, I regularly visited the workshop, observing shoemaking and repair processes and engaging in informal conversations with the shoemakers. This collaboration provided an additional perspective on how people purchase and maintain their footwear. Eventually, I decided to commission a custom-made pair of sandals. This decision was as much ethnographic as personal. On one hand, I had observed how challenging it was for customers to choose among countless options – materials, colours, soles, heel heights, and finishing touches – and how rarely people knew what they actually wanted or, in fact, what they actually liked (see also Clarke and Miller 2002). On the other hand, I was curious about what it feels like to wear shoes made specifically to fit the exact length and width of my feet, rather than adapting to the shapes imposed by mass-produced footwear (see Sampson 2022 [2020]).

As fieldwork progressed, I began to follow themes that emerged through conversations with participants. One such theme was barefoot footwear. I first encountered this during a hike, when a few friends arrived wearing shoes with unusually thin soles. Curious, I asked about them and learned that they had transitioned their entire footwear wardrobe from conventional to barefoot shoes. In the weeks that followed, I noticed the same shift with a coworker and later with another research participant. All of them mentioned health benefits and an increased awareness of how their feet moved and felt. Intrigued, I joined the Facebook group they all referred to and began following a related blog. By that time, the group – which posted in Slovenian – had nearly 13,000 members, suggesting that barefoot footwear was becoming "a thing" in the shoe world. Eventually, I arranged a meeting with the group's administrators and the blog editors.

Another recurring theme was how people take care of their feet, which arose in interviews and casual conversations, often when discussing discomfort or pain caused by ill-fitting footwear. In response, I decided to take a more direct approach: I booked a pedicure in 2021 and explained to my pedicurist that I was interested in people's relationships with their footwear and the difficulties they experience with their feet, particularly those associated with ill-fitting footwear, such as shoes that are too narrow, small, rigid, or high-heeled. She generously agreed to speak with me while working over the next two years, during my regular appointments. These conversations offered a more nuanced insight into the difficulties people face when the footwear they wear

"does not fit". These ethnographic moments contributed significantly to the analytical frameworks developed in this book.

Altogether, the study involved several groups of participants. 46 students participated in the collaborative research activities conducted with the Slovene Ethnographic Museum, 17 individuals took part in the earlier All Stars-focused research, and 24 people were involved in the most intensive phase of the more recent fieldwork in Ljubljana. In some cases, our collaboration consisted of a single in-depth semi-structured interview, while in others it developed into more intensive and long-term engagement. The findings discussed in this book draw most heavily from my work with 14 participants who were most deeply involved in the research. The duration and intensity of engagement varied from six months to two and a half years, with some periods more active than others. Our meetings took various forms: planned semi-structured interviews, walks through parks or around the city, hiking trips, dog walking, shoe shopping, going outs, and more.

All the names used in this book are pseudonyms. Similarly, occupations, locations, and other potentially identifying details have been altered or generalized to ensure the anonymity of the research participants.

A final methodological remark concerns the autoethnographic moments that contributed to the research and its analytical outcomes. As noted by Ellen Sampson (2022 [2020]) in her ethnography *Worn: Footwear, Attachment and the Affects of Wear*, researchers of clothing as bodily experience often focus on "the clothing of others rather than their own sartorial choices" and only rarely do we gain a glimpse of their "embodied and bodily experience of 'doing' research" (Sampson 2022 [2020]: 39). While I do not adopt her methodological approach – Sampson designed, made, and wore footwear as part of her autoethnographic approach – her work nonetheless partly informed my own footwear practices. In addition to monthly pedicures and a custom-made pair of strappy sandals, I began making deliberate changes to the shoes I wore in everyday life. I replaced my usual Converse All Stars with Nike sneakers, chose platform winter shoes over my standard Dr. Martens, and bought trail-running shoes instead of my regular jogging trainers. These changes occasionally made me feel uncomfortable or uncertain about my (clothing) choices, but they consistently heightened my awareness of footwear. I vividly remember one particular moment: walking down the stairs from the fourth floor of my office building with my new platform winter shoes on, I noticed myself dragging one heel across the floor every few steps. Looking down, I suddenly wondered, "*Are*

these really my feet?" These practices stimulated autoethnographic moments, offered new angles and perspectives, generated ideas, and opened up new themes that I could explore and discuss.

Importance of Tik-Tok, YouTube and Pinterest boards

My fieldwork was conducted in Ljubljana, the city where I live. Given this proximity, I anticipated relatively few communication obstacles with those who agreed to participate in my research. I expected our meetings to take place in person, which indeed proved to be the case. Whether through (semi-structured) interviews or informal conversations during shared activities, most exchanges occurred face-to-face. Initially, digital technologies appeared mainly as background tools supporting communication and coordination. However, as the research progressed, their presence became increasingly apparent. Digital technologies, and information and communication technologies (ICTs) more specifically, proved integral both to how I conducted my fieldwork and to shaping the research process. I gradually realized that the way I *did* my ethnography was significantly conditioned by ICTs; they influenced how ethnographic information was gathered and revisited, extending the field site both temporally and spatially. This reflects the broader embeddedness of digital technologies in how we communicate and live our lives (Varis and Hou 2019: 229; see also Zavratnik and Svetel 2021).

On several occasions, I was able to fully grasp the information only after returning home, as our face-to-face conversations were interwoven with simultaneous engagements across multiple devices – smartphones, laptops, and online platforms. Often, I focused on the ongoing discussion and returned to explore the referenced websites or videos later, in a more reflective setting.

One such moment occurred during a rainy spring afternoon, when I was seated in the dining room of Kristina, Maša, and Mojca's family home. We were deeply engaged in a discussion about the challenges young women face when dressing for the office or work meetings while striving to be taken seriously. Maša sat beside me, while Kristina and Mojca were on the opposite side of the table. Maša worked from home and was trying to meet a deadline to submit her work on time. She was at the table working on her laptop, occasionally joining our conversation or Googling items and topics related to our discussion. Kristina, meanwhile, was holding her phone, scrolling through Zara's online store in search of suitable white sneakers. Mojca was sharing her struggles in finding the right clothing and footwear combination for

active work in her job. At one point, Kristina found two pairs of shoes she liked and passed her phone around the table for feedback. As she asked for our opinions, each of us examined the images and offered comments. Meanwhile, Maša began browsing another online store to see whether the winter jacket she had her eye on was discounted yet. She casually mentioned her new skiing boots, which she had bought the previous year – luckily, as it turned out – before she went skiing in France, where she learned how important the appearance of your skiing equipment is. While I was still engaged in the conversation about the possibility of buying new white Zara sneakers and browsing an online store myself, Maša and Mojca started a conversation about the importance of brands. Maša Googled one of the famous brands associated with the trend of quiet luxury – which I later identified in my recordings as Hermès – and shared photos of what they described as "ugly shoes" with Kristina. I only joined the conversation later and hastily jotted down brand names and websites in my fieldnotes, so as not to forget and to check them at home.

Such moments were not isolated. Similar dynamics also emerged in smaller-scale interactions. At times, these simply extended our face-to-face conversations into the digital realm – by browsing online stores, flipping through cloud-based photo collections, watching YouTube videos, or visiting Instagram and TikTok profiles. My understanding of these situations would have remained much shallower if there were no online stores, Instagram profiles, or YouTube videos. At other times, my field site extended to my home office, where I received hyperlinks to personal Pinterest boards, suggestions on which Facebook group, TikTok profile, or Instagram profile to follow, the names of influencers my participants followed and drew fashion inspiration from, as well as excerpts from books, poems, films, and songs that certain shoes reminded them of. In this sense, fieldwork consisted of a series of interconnected events unfolding across time and space. Some occurred simultaneously with face-to-face interactions, while others followed later. These events extended my field site in both time and space, profoundly influencing the knowledge derived from the research.

This resonates with the reflections of Tanja Ahlin and Fangfang Li (2019), who, in their multi-sited ethnographies, conceptualize their field sites as a "collection of 'events'" (Ahlin and Li 2019: 4), co-created within the practices of researchers, research participants, and ICTs. Drawing on material semiotics and previous conceptualizations of space and place, they propose the concept of "field events" to help understand how people and ICTs collaborate in ethnographic work.

Accompanying this conceptualization is their call for researchers not to ignore the role of ICTs in everyday life, but to include them meaningfully – a call this monograph takes seriously.

THE PEOPLE

All 24 people who contributed most intensely to this research lived in Ljubljana at the time of fieldwork. Some were born and raised in the city, while others had moved there to study, work or for personal reasons. Although the urban setting has already been discussed separately, it is important to note here once again that the shared context of city life shapes the rhythms, constraints, and possibilities within which footwear practices unfold.

The research brings together people of different generations, and the participants range in age from their early twenties to their late sixties. This is important for understanding of certain generational differences that will be illuminated and discussed in later in this book. The people included in this research work(ed) in diverse professional fields, including digital marketing, bookselling, psychology, the IT sector, beauty services, hotel management, graphic design, the medical sector, shoemaking, shoe selling, music, and culture (e.g. in a museum). Some are students at the beginning of their careers, while others have established careers or have already retired. The everyday routines and activities of the participants are equally varied and sometimes related to their different life stages. Some participants are avid hikers, others prefer shorter walks in or around the city, some more or less regularly spend their weekends in the mountains, while one of the participants undertakes long-distance hikes covering several hundred kilometres. Some of them just like to walk around the city to clear their heads. Others are regular gym goers or yoga practitioners. In general, most participants prioritized comfort and practicality, while some of them have a strong interest in aesthetics and/or fashion.

I met these people in various ways. Some I met at activities I regularly attended at the time – such as yoga – others were introduced to me by friends, and still others were introduced by earlier interlocutors. In some cases the participants were connected to one another as colleagues, friends, partners, or family members; in other cases, they had no prior connection. These overlapping and sometimes unexpected social constellations contributed to the research as discussions about footwear occasionally unfolded not only between myself and the

participant, but also between participants who commented on each other's habits, preferences, or (past) choices. The relationships among participants were thus not incidental to the research, as they were part of the social fabric within which footwear practices take place. As is illustrated in the following short vignette from a field diary, conversations about shoes often unfold within friendships, partnerships, families and other everyday exchanges:

> Over the weekend, I was talking with two interlocutors about high heels. Or rather: it started when one of them, quite upset, said that one of her friends interferes too much with her choice of footwear. Recently, the friend commented on the fact that my interlocutor wears Birkenstock slides, which are supposedly not ergonomically suitable for walking. The argument is that, to keep them on your feet while walking, you "*grip*" with your toes, which is not a natural position for the foot during walking and is therefore said to have a negative impact on the feet, legs, and gait. My interlocutor is generally supportive – though not an advocate – of barefoot footwear. Although it is not her primary choice of shoes, she owns a few pairs that she gladly wears because, as she mentioned, they give her a better sense of contact with the ground. What upset her was that a friend who, until just a few years ago, wore shoes that were too narrow and too small is now "interfering" or "lecturing" her about what kind of footwear one should wear. She especially pointed out that she and her friend recently realized that her foot is almost two sizes larger than my interlocutor's, even though she has worn size 40-42 her whole life, while the friend used to wear size 38. So *"why,"* she asked, *"is the one who squeezed her feet into shoes that were too small for so many years now preaching to me?"*

While we will get to know some of the people and their shoes and/or their shoe collections in more detail in the pages that follow, here it is important to stress that the participants in this research do not represent a single or homogenous group of people or a clearly defined category. They differ in age, professional trajectories, daily routines, and aesthetic sensibilities.

OVERVIEW OF THE BOOK

The structure of this book follows shoes as they move through various stages and contexts of everyday life. It is organized around those aspects of footwear that, through analysis, emerged as particularly significant. Rather than imposing a rigid thematic or chronological framework, the chapters unfold through analytical attention to the

practices, relationships, and meanings that constitute people's engagements with shoes.

Throughout the book, I include excerpts from my field diary and narrative descriptions from the research process. This approach aims to capture the actuality of situations as they happen, subsequently examining them through theoretical lenses to articulate key insights. In line with material culture approaches that underscore the importance of ethnography in the study of material culture – focusing on practices rather than verbal discourses and highlighting the importance of material relationships as embodied and practical (Woodward 2020: 7) – this structure allows theoretical reflection to emerge from the specificity of ethnographic situations. The book begins by exploring the social dimensions of footwear, focusing on its relation to fashion, purchasing practices, and the organization of shoe wardrobes. It then moves into more intimate terrain, examining how shoes are worn, experienced, and felt. Subsequent chapters look into themes that emerged as analytically productive in the ethnographic material: questions of comfort, transformation, and temporality.

The introductory chapter outlines the central conceptual, thematic, and methodological orientations that inform this book. Drawing on the relevant literature and preliminary research encounters, it situates footwear within broader discussions in material culture studies, fashion studies, and the anthropology of everyday life. In dialogue with existing scholarship – particularly critiques of the disproportionate focus on spectacular, symbolic, and gendered shoes – I argue for an approach that treats footwear as everyday, embodied, and socially embedded. The chapter introduces four insights that underpin the analysis: shoes are complicated, ubiquitous, important, and meaningful. It concludes with a description of the research location, the people included in the research, a reflection on the methodological orientation, and specific practices used to ethnographically engage with footwear in its mundane, bodily, and material dimensions.

The next chapter, 'Understanding the (Material) World', sets out the theoretical framework that underpins this study. It engages with recent developments in material culture studies, drawing on major and comprehensive edited volumes (Buchli 2002; Tilley et al. 2006; Hicks and Beaudry 2010; De Cunzo and Dann Roeber 2022) and key monographs (Woodward I. 2007; Woodward 2020; Godina Golija, Huzjan and Ledinek Lozej 2021). The chapter highlights the diversity of approaches and different understandings of material culture, laying the theoretical foundations for my own approach. It then turns to clothing as a domain within material culture studies, outlining

theoretical premises that understand dress as a co-constitutive part of who people are (Miller 2005; Miller 2010; Miller and Woodward 2012). The final part of the chapter narrows the focus to footwear, reviewing the relevant literature and empirically grounded studies that situate the present research within a broader scholarly landscape.

The third chapter, '*El Estilo de Vida*', lays the groundwork for more explicitly analytical discussions. It begins by considering shoes as fashion items and explores fashion as one of the factors that frame footwear as part of a broader clothing appearance. From there, the focus shifts to shoe shops and to the practice of buying new shoes – a moment that marks the first step in the singularization (Kopytoff 1986) of what is initially a mass-produced commodity. In most cases, this is also the point at which shoes begin their biographies within individual shoe wardrobes. The wardrobes are approached as dynamic collections (Belk 1995: 65–101) of objects that are not separated from everyday use but are constantly responding to seasonal and social changes in people's lives. Finally, this chapter turns to the broader context of clothing showing how they function as one of the building blocks of clothing appearance.

The fourth chapter, 'Feeling Good', examines the practices that contribute to the perception of shoes as comfortable. It begins with the process of breaking them in, understood as a mutual adaptation between shoes and wearer through the practice of walking, and then turns to the social dimensions of comfort. In this regard, I follow the argument that comfort extends beyond just the feel of a material, and is also linked to the need to feel appropriately dressed in a public situation and under the gaze of others (Woodward 2007; Miller and Woodward 2012; Sitar 2020). The chapter then shifts towards comfort experienced without shoes in the sense of footwear worn outdoors, explored through the practices of being barefoot and wearing indoor slippers. Slippers, in particular, are approached as objects that frame (Goffman 1974) certain places as "home".

In the fifth chapter, 'Transformative Shoes', I consider the transformative capacities of footwear. The focus thus shifts to the practices of putting on and taking off shoes, and to the changes these practices can bring about for individuals in terms of their social positioning. While the previous chapter focused primarily on habitually worn shoes, this chapter turns to footwear that is worn occasionally. It begins by examining the capacity of shoes to change the way people feel in a particular social context. It then moves to consider the transformative capacity of shoes that can frame an event as a special occasion and how it intersects with broader social transitions across the life course.

In the latter part of this chapter, attention is directed to two types of footwear: high heels and sneakers. The case of sneakers shows how certain categories of shoes can traverse both the division between habitually and non-habitually worn footwear, and the distinction between ordinary events and special occasions.

In the sixth chapter, 'Worn Out and Wanted', several threads from the previous chapters are woven together through the focus on the temporal dimensions of footwear. This chapter builds on two key insights. First, shoe wardrobes include not only the pairs that are actively worn, but also those that wait to be worn again or are kept as memory objects (Habinc 2004: 29; see also Banim and Guy 2001). Second, both the purchase of shoes and the everyday act of selecting them are shaped by orientations toward the (short- or long-term) future. Drawing on the metaphor of the "footwear landscape" (Hockey et al. 2014), I argue that shoes participate in the ways people negotiate their everyday lives and their pasts and imagined futures.

In the final chapter, I bring together the insights developed throughout the book and articulate their implications for understanding the materiality of everyday life.

Understanding the (material) world

In his contribution to the *The Oxford Handbook of Material Culture Studies*, Dan Hicks noted the long presence of the terms material culture and "material culture studies" that emerged within the disciplines of anthropology and archaeology during the 20th century (Hicks 2010: 25). In his historical "excavation" of the term *material culture studies*, Hicks identifies three core tensions that underpin contemporary discomfort with the idea (and the term) of "material culture" (Hicks 2010 26–27). First, there is the concept of culture, in itself a widely debated term within the discipline of anthropology (see, for example, Clifford 1988; Monaghan and Just 2008 [2000]). Second, there is the idea of "material", and the questioning of the adequacy or, indeed, the possibility of a "culture" that is not materially enacted. Third, there is the "nature of the connection, relationship, or boundary between the two halves of this unhyphenated term"

(Hicks 2010: 27), namely "material" and "culture" (see also Woodward 2020: 16–17).

In contemporary studies of material culture, this discomfort is intensely addressed by questioning the predefined distinctions between material objects and human subjects, and between human and nonhuman realms. This questioning takes place through various theoretical perspectives and approaches. Material culture thus challenges the assumption that culture is merely symbolic or separate from the material world. Instead, scholars adopting a material culture approach strive to investigate how culture materializes in different contexts (Woodward 2020: 17), and view culture and society as outcomes of how individuals actively participate in the creation, design, and interaction with various objects. In this view, culture emerges as a dynamic phenomenon continually shaped and perpetuated through people's relationships with objects (Woodward 2020: 17).

Over the last three decades, empirical studies and theoretical and analytical approaches to material culture have proliferated, culminating in recent years in the New Materialist movement, another politically charged movement that brings together scholars from diverse backgrounds, who apply different theoretical perspectives to reimagine humans' relationship to the world. These "material-oriented ontologies", to use Sophie Woodward's term (2020: 11–33), do not foreground the human, or culture, or the social, but instead position "things and materials as an integral and entangled part of social relations and worlds" (Woodward 2020: 25), and understand things as playing a central role in the materialization of culture.

This book draws primarily from anthropological approaches that emerged in the post-1980s reconfiguration of material culture studies, particularly those associated with the so-called University College London (UCL) tradition. In the following pages, we will outline some of the basic premises that have challenged and/or transformed research on material culture in recent decades. Different analytical paradigms and theoretical perspectives conceptualize material culture, its effects, and its meanings differently, as noted by various researchers (e.g. Lunn-Rockliffe et al. 2019; Woodward 2020). We will outline some of the key theoretical perspectives that work from the premise that "that things are not passive, but are active, and entangled components of everyday worlds" (Woodward 2020: 12).

In outlining theoretical premises and discussions, we will mostly follow the comprehensive overview outlined by Dan Hicks (2010) and his discussion of what he termed "material-cultural turn", whereas we will specifically focus on the period after the 1980s when

new material culture studies characterized by a combination of ethnographic fieldwork and anthropological debate have developed. We will, however, also draw from Tilley et al. (2006) and other works (Buchli 2002; Woodward 2020) that attempt to offer partial overviews of recent developments and include some contemporary perspectives and works that have influenced the research on material culture. We will start with a very short and general overview to show how the study of material culture emerged and was placed (and challenged) within the discipline of anthropology since its disciplinary inception, only to lay the grounds on which more contemporary discussions revolve. Then in the second part of this overview we will focus more on specific themes around which current debates within the field revolve, and which are central to ground the theoretical approach this book follows. While the perspectives we will outline share a common premise – that things are active participants in social life – they differ in how they conceptualize the material world. These distinctions shape how we think about material agency – a topic we will explore in more detail below.

Since their disciplinary beginnings, anthropological and ethnological[6] (see Shippers 2002) inquiries have engaged with the study of material culture. Museums were the first institutions where material culture studies "found their home and thrived" (Buchli 2002a: 2; see also Hicks 2010). One of the earliest scientific goals of anthropological endeavours was to document human diversity (Shippers 2002: 126) and to save what could be salvaged from the supposedly disappearing cultures. The expeditions and research of the time were usually complemented by the collection of characteristic examples of local material cultures, which were later studied and classified (Tilley et al. 2006a: 2). The idea of object typologies has played an important role in understanding socio-cultural change over time, and objects were seen as tools for the retrospective understanding of human cultures, at the time mainly interpreted through evolutionary and diffusionist paradigms (Hicks 2010: 30–35).

The fieldwork revolution of the 1920s – and the concurrent shift to a functionalist paradigm – brought significant changes in terms of the methods employed by researchers, and in terms of the

6 In the contemporary Slovenian academic context, we can speak of ethnology, cultural anthropology, and social anthropology as "specific fields with the common field of study of people and societies and their ways of life" (Muršič 2011: 23). Despite historically specific developments, theoretical and methodological approaches converged, and some authors see the contemporary disciplines of ethnology and cultural anthropology as synonyms (see Muršič 2011).

main concerns of anthropological endeavours, which now focused on social relations rather than things. As Hicks (2010: 36–37) noted, in the period after the 1920s we could speak of a gradual dematerialization of anthropology, when objects were primarily considered in terms of their role in social institutions, and writing about material culture in ethnographic monographs was sometimes reduced only to appendixes. However, with the inception of structuralist and symbolic anthropological thought in the 1960s the interest in material culture re-emerged, especially in relation to themes such as rituals and myths, but the interest in objects centred around identifying and comparing their shapes, styles, and designs, and understanding how these aspects related to their meanings and practical uses. Material culture began to be seen as a system of communication, analogous to, but not reducible to, language (Hicks 2010: 45; see also Woodward I. 2007: 57–83).

It was during the 1970s and 1980s that material culture studies consolidated as a distinct research field as we know it today. This period witnessed a culmination of efforts to address long-standing issues regarding the relationships between the social/cultural aspects and material objects in this context, aiming to analytically integrate the structural and meaningful dimensions. This transformation was largely driven by the work of scholars engaged in various archaeological and anthropological traditions of material culture studies, including historical archaeology in the USA, ethnoarchaeology, contextual archaeology, and anthropology of mass consumption. The growing influence of practice theory during this period played a crucial role in this transformation, leading to what Dan Hicks (2010: 44–64) termed the "material-cultural turn".

A defining feature of this shift was the move away from the study of objects towards the study of "object domains". Different traditions emerged during this period, but one particularly successful tradition in establishing the material-cultural turn was the UCL tradition, pioneered by anthropologists and archaeologists like Daniel Miller, Christopher Tilley, Susanne Küchler, and Mike Rowlands. In line with this, in the following decade, anthropological studies of material culture turned more explicitly to the studies of the contemporary world. They began to address topics such as consumption (Miller 1987), domestic life (Miller 2001; Miller 2008), shopping (Miller 1998), clothing (Banerjee and Miller 2003; Küchler and Miller 2005; Miller and Woodward 2012), and similar issues. These studies of material culture placed a strong emphasis on exploring the materiality of everyday life, "the blindingly obvious" (Miller and Woodward 2007) aspects of human lives. They acknowledged the importance of objects in social

relations, especially those that appear inconsequential, and primarily focused on the relationships between objects and people as mutually constitutive. Those approaches characterized what Dan Hicks (2010: 64–68) described as the "high period" of material culture studies.

However, with the proliferation of works and research interest into material culture, things, and materials that followed this, new traditions and theoretical perspectives emerged. These new perspectives influenced, challenged, and critiqued the established approaches (see, for example, Henare et al. 2007), leading to revised understandings of the relationships between the material and the social, as well as broader considerations between the human and nonhuman realms. The period around and after the turn of the millennium is thus in general characterized by discussions around topics and terms that are central to understanding this relationship and the world in general, such as objectification, agency, and (im)materiality. Before looking into these discussions, we will briefly address a more basic question: How is material culture (studies) defined and situated within some contemporary debates?

MATERIAL CULTURE (STUDIES)

"What would an artefact-oriented anthropology look like if it were not about material culture?" (Henare et al. 2007: 1) is the question which opens the seminal book *Thinking Through Things: Theorising Artefacts Ethnographically*, edited by Amiria Henare, Martin Holbraad and Sari Wastell. This compendium of papers urged ethnographers to "take things as they are". Their methodological project (Henare et al. 2007: 4) encouraged ethnographers to be radically open to objects – not to begin with a preconceived ideas of what objects are but to build understanding through the ways objects are contextualized, used and talked about. This question remains central to contemporary material culture studies.[7]

The interest of the humanities and social sciences in the study of the material in recent decades, and the current strength of this interest, is perhaps best demonstrated by a series of handbooks published in just last two decades or so (Buchli 2002; Tilley et al. 2006; Hicks and Beaudry 2010; De Cunzo and Dann Roeber 2022). These offer

7 However, the approaches to material culture brought forward by the ontological turn have also been criticized, such as by, for example, Bajič (2017b).

detailed insights into the historical and theoretical developments described above, as well as into the scope, focus, and disciplinary orientations that shape the field. The contributions and editorial introductions in these volumes reveal ongoing theoretical developments and discussions and offer different, though sometimes overlapping, understandings and definitions of material culture (studies).

In *The Material Culture Reader* (Buchli 2002), a compendium of works by scholars working in the field of material culture at the UCL, Victor Buchli notes that material culture studies have never really been a discipline, but rather "an intervention within and between disciplines" (Buchli 2002a: 13). *The Handbook of Material Culture* (Tilley et al. 2006), which primarily draws on the works of archaeologists and anthropologists, describes material culture studies as a "diffuse and relatively uncharted interdisciplinary field of study" (Tilley et al. 2006a: 1), and thus inevitably eclectic and undisciplined, but with this seen as a strength rather than a weakness.

The introduction to *The Oxford Handbook of Material Cultures Studies* (Hicks and Beaudry 2010) can be read as a reaction to this affirmation of post-disciplinarity, and a critique of the disregard of disciplinary traditions. The editors acknowledge the centrality of interdisciplinary collaborations (Hicks and Beaudry 2010a: 20–21), but highlight discipline-specific positions and stress the importance of recognizing the partiality of the knowledge and significance of disciplinary histories (Hicks 2010: 92). Drawing on theoretical frameworks associated with new materialism, they argue that the relationship between the researchers and research objects means that they co-shape each other, and the authors emphasize the importance of appreciating not only effects of things but also things as the effects of material (and research) practices. As Hicks (2010: 27) claims, the ideas of "material culture" and "material culture studies" are themselves consequences (or in his words artefacts) of "particular disciplinary conceptions of 'the social'", and therefore "we must not forget that the things we study are effects of our practice, which is always historically contingent" (Hicks and Beaudry 2010a: 21). The handbook thus engages in a dialogue between approaches to material culture studies inspired by the material turn, and research from other disciplines that emphasizes the agential power of nonhumans.

The editors of the most recent addition to this list of handbooks, *The Cambridge Handbook of Material Studies* (De Cunzo and Dann Roeber 2022), draw partially on all the above conceptions of material cultures studies: they affirm the importance of the disciplinary traditions and highlight the strength of the interplay among the

various theoretical debates on material culture or materiality (critiqued by Hicks and Beaudry 2010a) and practice (De Cunzo and Dann Roeber 2022a: 5). They propose a conceptualization of material culture studies as an "inter-discipline, intervention between disciplines, perhaps event post-discipline or un-discipline and infused with postcolonial, queer, and anarchic thinking and perspectives" (De Cunzo and Dann Roeber 2022b: 627), thus placing even stronger emphasis on the recent perspectives of new materialism. Each of these handbooks thus reflects different conceptual priorities: Buchli (2002) stresses transdisciplinary interventions, Tilly et al. (2006) foreground methodological eclecticism, Hicks and Beaudry (2010) stress disciplinary reflexivity and researcher positionality, while De Cunzo and Dann Roeber (2022) push for an even more pluralistic and politically engaged understanding of material culture studies.

Alongside these edited collections, single-authored books have attempted to provide summaries of the core ways, and the implications of those ways, for approaching material culture. Ian Woodward's *Understanding Material Culture* (Woodward I. 2007) examines, compares, and evaluates major approaches to material culture. In doing so, he also emphasizes a multi-disciplinary perspective, drawing on anthropology, archaeology, and sociology, as well as on environmental psychology and consumer behaviour studies. His contribution lies not only in comparing theoretical paradigms, but also in offering a clear overview of the field's multi-disciplinary terrain.

A more recent textbook, *Material Methods: Researching and Thinking with Things*, written by Sophie Woodward (2020), focuses mainly on methodological perspectives to researching material worlds – on "material methods". However, the author also provides a brief but useful summary of terminology, key theoretical perspectives, and methodological orientations. She notes that the term "material culture" has a twofold (and contested) meaning. First, it implies that things are not separate from social or cultural relations but are an integral part of them, a "key player within which people's lives and worlds are mutually created" (Woodward 2020: 17). Second, she connects the term to the field of research within anthropology (i.e. material culture studies) that has developed since the 1980s, which uses ethnography to explore co-constitution of people and things in different contexts. Rather than using the term material culture, she speaks of "things" and "materials", and of their "vibrancy" (Woodward 2020: 1; see also Bennett 2010).

Contemporary anthropological engagements with material culture focus on several central concerns that reflect the diverse ways in which material culture and material relations are conceptualized and approached. Key analytical concepts – such as objectification, agency, and (im)materiality – form the foundation of current debates in material culture studies. As Woodward succinctly states, an essential premise of material culture is the understanding that the "world is simultaneously material and social, as the things that surround us are an inseparable part of how our relationships to other people are mediated, and the environment, society and culture we live in" (Woodward 2020: 1). The material-cultural turn, as thoroughly described by Hicks (2010), revolves around demonstrating the various ways in which subjects and objects co-produce each other, and it is the questioning of this relationship that underpins many theoretical developments in the field.

One of the theories that engages with this relationship is the theory of materiality, as discussed by Daniel Miller in his landmark edited volume *Materiality* (2005). In the introduction, Miller sees materiality as encompassing not just the obviously material, namely artefacts and the materials an object is made of, but also the "ephemeral, the imaginary, the biological, and the theoretical" (Miller 2005a: 4). In light of this, he offers two attempts to theorize materiality: he theorizes things as artefacts, and then he proposes a theory that aims to transcend the dualism of subjects and objects. Firstly, by drawing on the works of Ervin Goffman's *Frame Analysis* (1974) and Ernst Gombrich's *The Sense of Order* he outlines the idea of the "humility of things", which rests on the belief that:

> objects are important not because they are evident and physically constraint or enable, but often precisely because we do not "see" them. The less we are aware of them, the more powerfully they can determine our expectations by setting the scene and ensuring normative behaviour, without being open to challenge. They determine what takes place to the extent that we are unconscious of their capacity to do so. (Miller 2005a: 5; see also Miller 1987; Miller 2010)

Furthermore, he draws on Bourdieu's concept of habitus to show how things shape our everyday worlds, actions, and relations, because much of what we learn emerges from our engagement with the relationships between these everyday things.

Secondly, drawing on the works of Hegel and Bourdieu (2013 [1977]), Miller proposes a dialectical theory of objectification. He

explains that "there can be no fundamental separation between humanity and materiality" (Miller 2005a: 8), as the object and the subject are not in opposition to or in conflict with each other, but actually make each other. Thus, "we do not exist in opposition to or separate from material objects: we exist through them" (Sherlock 2014: 26), through a dynamic process of "becoming" (Miller 1987: 33). In this process, the individual externalizes itself in objects, and the externalized self is then reappropriated, as the self is subsequently changed through interaction with objects. In Miller's view, materiality is dialectical, emerging through the relationships between people and things – subjects and objects – and it is precisely through this process of objectification that we create our sense of ourselves as subjects.

In my own understanding of footwear, I follow this line of thought. I draw on Miller's theory of objectification to engage with the relationship between people and things without placing them in opposition. Miller, in fact, sees culture and things as inseparable; in this view, people and things are inseparable, and relationships between people and shoes are co-constitutive.

Other theories that address the complex nature of the subject-object relationship, and aim to move beyond this dichotomy, include Alfred Gell's (1998) concept of agency and Bruno Latour's Actor-Network Theory (ANT) (2005), along with the subsequent impacts of their work. Whereas Miller emphasizes the dialectical co-constitution of people and things, Gell and Latour approach the problem of material agency from different angles: Gell through art and intentionality, and Latour through the through a flattened ontology.

In his work *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory*, Alfred Gell (1998) seeks to understand the role of art and its agency in society. Central to his approach is a shift in focus, emphasizing what "artworks *do* in social life, rather than what they *mean*" (Hicks 2010: 76, emphasis in original). Gell's work stems from his dissatisfaction with previous attempts to understand art solely through semiotic concepts of representation and meaning. Instead, he approaches artworks not as encoded with symbolic meanings, but as dynamic systems of actions capable of bringing about changes within social contexts. In this view, artworks are not passive representations but rather active participants in social relations.

Gell's approach to agency in art moves beyond traditional symbolic interpretations of objects by emphasizing the role of the social interactions, relationships, and practices that underpin them. One of the key concepts in Gell's theory is the notion of the "index". He suggests that certain aspects of art objects, such as physical form, style,

or symbolic elements, serve as indexes that trigger specific reactions or actions in the viewer. For example, a religious icon may evoke feelings of devotion or compel a certain ritual response. Gell conceptualizes how art objects, and by extension other objects, can expand or distribute human agency. He defines agency as "attributable to those persons (and things, see below) who are seen as initiating causal sequences of a particular type, that is, events caused by acts of mind or will or intention, rather than the mere concatenation of physical events" (Gell 1998: 16). An agent, according to Gell, is someone "who causes events to 'happen' in his environment", and thus is the source of causal events (Gell 1998: 16). Social agency, in Gell's view, emerges within the complex web of objects and people, and can be "exercised by 'things'" (Gell 1998: 17–18) that have the capacity to influence human behaviour. Through this process, people's intentions can be distributed through the objects and in effect the objects "become their 'distributed minds', transforming their agency into their effects" (Miller 2005a: 13).

Importantly, Gell's theory posits that humans remain the primary agents, while objects act as secondary agents with no independent intentions of their own, functioning primarily as indexes of human agency. This perspective shifts the focus from a view of objects as statics symbols with fixed meanings to considering them as agents within social and cultural practices. Gell's theory highlights how objects are embedded in and shaped by the social relationships and practices that surround them, accentuating how objects gain their meanings and agency through a combination of indexical features, their use within social practices, the intentions of the individuals involved, social attribution, emotional and aesthetic engagement, and the historical, cultural, and social contexts in which they exist (see also Vogrinc 2012: 107–116[8]).

ANT, on the other hand, takes a more distributed and non-anthropocentric view of agency. It conceptualizes agency as something that can be attributed to both human and nonhuman entities, including objects. In ANT, the agency of objects is on a par with human

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8 The essay 'Pomembno je biti neroden: Realna, simbolna in imaginarna razsežnost sodobnih tehnologij in njihovih rab' (Vogrinc 2012: 107–116), which focuses on the social uses of technologies and underpins the embeddedness of objects and their uses within specific contexts, further contributed to the clarity of these points.
Since some sources used in this book do not have an English translation, I will provide provisional translator's notes (hereinafter: (T/N) for their titles in the footnotes. In the case of Vogrinc's essay, T/N: 'It is Important to be Clumsy: Real, Symbolic, and Imaginary Dimensions of Modern Technologies and Their Uses'.

agency. Here, the agency is distributed across a network of both humans and nonhuman actors, which means that objects, technologies, institutions, and even ideas can possess agency and actively participate in shaping social interactions and outcomes. As such, agency is not something that is possessed, but something that emerges within and through relations.

The basic premise of this approach is that people and objects exist in relations, and that "everything in the social and natural worlds is a continuously generated effect of the webs of relations within which they are located" (Law 2007: 2). The emphasis of ANT is thus not on the question of whether objects have agency (Latour 2005: 63–86), but rather on the claim that agency emerges from the enactment of relations. Materiality is therefore conceived as a relational effect. According to Law (2010: 180 in Woodward 2020: 18), this is the most distinguishing characteristic of ANT, as it enables us to observe materiality in practice, because it cannot be separated from the enactment of the relations.

In Daniel Miller's view, materiality emerges through the relationships between people and things, based on how individuals engage with things within specific cultural and social contexts. In contrast, ANT takes a nonhuman-centred perspective, viewing materiality as emerging "through practices and relations of things with other things" (Woodward 2020: 18). From ANT's perspective it is impossible to distinguish human and nonhuman agency (Law 2007: 8). To avoid the distinction between "subjects" and "objects", ANT refers to all entities that have the capacity to act as actants. In this integrated network of relations, different kinds of actors – human and nonhuman (e.g. objects, machines, animals, ideas, organizations, "nature", etc. (Law 2007: 2)) – are involved in shaping social and material life. It is for this reason that that Lunn-Rockliffe, Derbyshire and Hicks (2019; see also Law 2007) see ANT as a "symmetrical" approach to understanding the active role of objects in social life. This, however, contrasts with the view of material culture studies, where the emphasis is on the relationships between people and objects.

While Gell foregrounds intentionality and Latour dissolves agency into networks, Tim Ingold offers a third approach to understanding human-environment relations through his "meshwork theory" (Lunn-Rockliffe et al. 2019: 7–9) which emphasizes movement, entanglements, and material flows. Ingold's work[9] offers a nuanced relational and holistic approach that opposes the separation of humans

9 For a critical view of Ingold's work, see Bajič (2016).

and their environment, and instead highlights interconnectedness, mutual influence, and the dynamic nature of their interaction. His approach is built around the concept of dwelling (Ingold 2000), which he refers to as the lived experience of being in the world. A meshwork is a complex web of relationships that constitute dwelling, which connects humans, animals, plants, objects, places, and so on. Movements and interactions between those entities are seen as lines of becoming (Ingold 2013: 132). In Ingold's view, agency is not something possessed by either humans or objects, but rather manifests through a correspondence between an individual and their environment, through the lines of becoming.

To conceptualize a meshwork, Ingold draws on Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (2004: 224–225 in Ingold 2013: 132) and speaks of it as an "entanglement of lines" that "may loop or twist around one another, or weave in and out", but "they do not connect" (Ingold 2013: 132). Instead, they are "drawn tightly together" in what he terms knots (Ingold 2013: 132), which are gatherings of entities in mutual interrelation. While a meshwork may share some similarities with the network outlined in ANT, the key difference, according to Ingold, is that lines of a meshwork are not the connectors "given as the relation between points, independently and in advance of any movement from one towards the other" and, therefore, lack duration (Ingold 2013: 132). The lines in the meshwork do not connect, but are lines "of movement or growth", and are temporal lines of "becoming" (Ingold 2013: 132). Ingold's focus is not on social relations that constitute the network of humans and nonhumans, as in ANT, but on pathways of movement and interactions within a meshwork.

There are certain points that are crucial for Ingold's understanding of a meshwork. Firstly, he opposes the use of the word "objects", and, drawing on Heidegger, prefers to use "things" (Ingold 2010). He believes that the term objects implies something closed off and separate from the world, as they stand in our way rather than being part of the flows of materials that make up our world. He thus suggests using the term things, which he describes as a "gathering together of the threads of life" (Ingold 2010: 4). Whereas an object "stands before us as a *fait* accompli" (Ingold 2010: 4, emphasis in original), a thing is a "going on", a part of the flows of life, inviting us to participate. In this context, a thing is a "gathering of materials in movements /…/ and to witness a thing is to join with the process of its ongoing transformation" (Ingold 2012: 436). In other words, a thing, entangled in a flow of materials, is always becoming and is never finished. In this view, "the body is moreover a thing", and "we should no longer speak of relations

between people and things because *people are things too*" (Ingold 2012: 437–438, emphasis in original).

It is important to note here that Ingold's work goes beyond the argument of Alfred Gell (1998), as presented above, that things are indexes of human agency. Instead, as we have just seen, things are brought to life through the flow of and interactions among substances, surfaces, and materials (Ingold 2007a: 4–7) that constitute the world. In Ingold's view, we should see "things in life rather than life /.../ in things", and he claims that "[b]ringing things to life /.../ is a matter not of adding to them sprinkling of agency but of restoring them to the generative flexuses of the world of materials in which they came into being and continue to exist" (Ingold 2007a: 12). Ingold's argument that things are active due to their entanglements resonates with the broader shift in focus from materiality toward the materials that things are made of. His focus on (flows of) materials differs markedly from Miller's view of materiality as emerging from relationships between people and objects, and their differing views culminated in what Hicks (2010: 77) termed the "materiality debate" (see Ingold 2007a, 2007b; Miller 2007; Tilley 2007).[10]

To further contextualize the relationship between people and footwear, it is helpful to briefly turn to another aspect of Ingold's work – the concept of affordances. Drawing on Gibson's ecological theory of perception (Gibson 2015 [1988]), Ingold argues that as we move through the landscape, the knowledge gained from our perception is essentially "*practical*" (emphasis in original) it is the knowledge of "what an environment offers for the pursuance of the action" in which we are involved (Ingold 2000: 166). Depending on the activity we are

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10 In general, Tim Ingold has been critical of understanding objects as mediating human relations to the world and forming the very fabric of social life, an approach exemplified in the work of Daniel Miller and his collaborators, or in Appadurai's interest in the social life of things (Appadurai 1986; Kopytoff 1986). Ingold's critique comes from the phenomenological approach and from the view that the focus on objects detracts attention from more significant material relations, and thus that more attention should be paid to the materials (see Ingold 2007a, 2011) and life processes rather than to objects *per se*. For Ingold, materials are the essence of life itself. He claims that human life, like all our actions, is intrinsically material and embodied, and that it is sustained through immersion in a material world. In his view, material relations are fundamental to our way of life: they are the very medium in which and through which we live our lives. Essential to this is the understanding that materials are themselves intrinsically relational, existing as dynamic and open structures that continually transform over time, independently of human intervention. Ingold's focus on material properties is markedly different from the anthropological studies that concerned themselves with the materiality of things. On the other hand, in "the materiality debate" – and elsewhere – Ingold has also been critiqued by scholars working in material culture studies for his neglect of cultural meaning (Miller 2007; Tilley 2007; but see also Michael 2000).

involved in, we "will be attuned to pick up particular types of information" (Ingold 2000: 166). What we see, then, is not an objective set of values or characteristics, but their affordances, the knowledge of what objects afford; we only perceive and notice the elements of the environment that might provide or furnish us with something. This understanding also underpins Ingold's view of footwear as a device imposing a separation "between the activities of a mind at rest and a body in transit, between cognition and locomotion, and between the space of social and cultural life and the ground upon which that life is materially enacted" (Ingold 2004: 321). While theory of affordances is important because it shows that there is no objective truth about objects, and it can partially explain why people choose a particular pair of shoes – especially when function is the primary consideration – it does not leave the room for the analysis of the cultural representations, associations, and social norms that shape the choices.

Ingold's theory of affordances and his view of footwear have also been critiqued. Mike Michael (2000) argues that the theory of affordances neglects the role played by mundane technologies, such as footwear, which not merely enable action but also mediate and disturb relations between humans and humans, and humans and nature, and can open up possibilities for new relations and new meanings. Building on Serres' concepts of quasi-objects as objects that have the ability to disrupt the distinction between the subject and objects, and parasites as disruptors of a signal between communicator and receiver, Michael explains how walking boots (and indeed other mundane technologies) can intervene and influence in the relationships between human and nature. Nature, then, "does not only afford for bodies /…/ but afford to bodies-and-boots" (Michael 2000: 121–122). In Michael's view, walking boots should be seen as both material and semiotic resources for the body, capable of modifying not just locomotion but also perception, orientation, and meaning making. This perspective is particularly valuable for our analysis of footwear, which focuses on how shoes mediate not only the body's movement, but also it's cultural, emotional and symbolic entanglements.

New materialism, an umbrella term for various contemporary philosophical and theoretical perspectives, challenges traditional views of reality and human existence. It promotes a "flat" or "monist" ontology that does not privilege the human over the nonhuman, or the social over the (Fox and Alldred 2019: 3). In this regard it closely aligns with ANT, which similarly distributes agency across human and nonhuman entities. New materialism can very broadly be described as a "set of theories which taken together suggest that

everything is part of an assemblage. Nothing 'causes' or precedes the assemblage (even objects) but rather *become with* it" (Woodward 2020: 124, emphasis in original). The so-called "turn to matter" that is characteristic of this perspective places an emphasis on the materiality of both, the natural and social world, and cuts across various dichotomies that differentiate the natural and social worlds, among them the human-nonhuman dichotomy, but also those of animate-inanimate and mind-matter (Fox and Alldred 2019: 1).

At its core, new materialism emphasizes the agency and vitality of matter, objects, and the nonhuman world. It recognizes that matter is not just passive and inert, but possesses a form of dynamic activity and influence. As noted by Fox and Alldred (2019), five key points can be abstracted to describe the opportunities that new materialism offers. First, there is the rejection of the boundary between social and natural sciences, which is replaced with the world (and everything "social" and "natural" there is) that is produced through a wide array of forces. Second, there is the view that the world and its contents are not fixed or stable entities "but relational and uneven, emerging in unpredictable ways around actions and events" (Fox and Alldred 2019: 4). Third, there is a view that agency is no longer attributed only to humans, but instead the capacity to affect and be affected is a feature of all matter. In line with this, the world is seen as constantly emerging. Fourth, there is the view that one part of the turn to matter leads to political engagements that seek to change the world for the better. Fifth, new materialism emphasizes ontology over epistemology (Fox and Alldred 2019: 5).

Agency, as one of its core terms, is conceptualized differently by different theories working under the umbrella of new materialism. Many of these theories bring together the notion of agency and the idea that things are animated by flows of materials (as suggested by Ingold and described above), and in this sense material agency, which emerges from the active roles of nonhuman entities in social processes, is also one of the core principles within new materialism.

One of the central theories under the umbrella of new materialism[11] is assemblage theory, a paradigm commonly associated with

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11 In *Thinking Through Fashion: A Guide to Key Theorists*, the editors Agnés Rocamora and Anneke Smelik (2019) argue that the "new" in new materialism should be taken with a grain of salt. It is new in the sense of a renewed focus on materiality and matter after a decades-long focus on text and textuality, but one must also note that materialism has a "long and prestigious genealogy and is in fact influenced by several sources of disciplines" (Agnés and Smelik 2019: 13). These disciplines should not be understood as truly separate, as in many cases one theory inspired or triggered

the work of Deleuze and Guattari (Fox and Alldred 2019: 6; see also Deleuze and Guattari 1987 [1980]). At its core, assemblage theory understands the world as composed of interconnected and dynamic assemblages, which are "ad hoc groupings of diverse elements, of vibrant materials of all sorts. Assemblages are living, throbbing confederations that are able to function despite the persistent presence of energies that confound them from within" (Bennett 2010: 23–24). In this view, agentic materials play a central and dynamic role in shaping the interactions, formations, and emergent properties of assemblages; they are the building blocks of assemblages that come together to form complex configurations. Here, human bodies and other material, social, and abstract entities are relational and have no ontological status until drawn into assemblages with other things, ideas, and bodies (Deleuze and Guattari 1988: 88 in Fox and Alldred 2019: 6). Assemblages are therefore open systems with flexible boundaries, continually interacting with their environments, and capable of expanding or contracting at any time.

Among the most influential elaborations of material agency within new materialism are those by Karen Barad (2007) and Jane Bennett (2010). Barad's conception of agency (2007) is understood as an enactment; it is not an attribute but rather a process of cause and effect, it is a "doing" or "being" in its intra-activity (Colman 2018), and it emerges "through the relational effects of elements and thing intra-acting" (Woodward 2020: 28), from the interplay of humans and nonhumans. She developed her approaches based on insights from quantum physics and her concept of intra-action as a "mutual constitution of entangled agencies" (Barad 2007: 33) is central to understanding how entities come into being through mutual entanglements. In her

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another. They list several theories that have influenced the theories of the new materialism. First, there is the historical materialism of Karl Marx and his emphasis on production and labour. Second, the sociological approach to the culture of things is inspired by Marxism. Third, the sociological approach is closely related to the anthropological one, which considers objects as one of its central themes. Fourth, there is the influence of Bruno Latour's ANT, which attributes agency not only to humans but also to nonhuman actors. Fifth, the phenomenology of Maurice Merleau Ponty has placed emphasis on the materiality of the body. Sixth, materialist feminism reconsiders the materiality of the body and its gendered nature. Seventh, the influences of the approaches proposed by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (Agnés and Smelik 2019: 13). They go on to explain that materialism has always played an important role in fashion studies, citing the work of Sussane Küchler and Daniel Miller (2005), Sophie Woodward (2007), and Joanne Entwistle (2016 [2000]) as examples of this. They conclude: "Because these diverse approaches have always been vital methodologies for fashion studies, the claim for the novelty of 'new materialism' seems a bit singular. In that sense, it may be better to speak of 'renewed materialism'" (Agnés and Smelik 2019: 14).

view, material does not exist prior to interactions, and comes into being through intra-actions (Huzjan 2021b: 22).

Jane Bennett, a political theorist, conceptualizes "vibrant matter" (Bennett 2010), and suggests that material formations and the matter are vibrant. Her idea of "vitality" refers to "the capacity of things – edibles, commodities, storms, metals – not only to impede or block the will and designs of humans but also to act as quasi agents or forces with trajectories, propensities, or tendencies of their own" (Bennett 2010: viii). In this view, the "liveliness [is] intrinsic to the materiality of thing formerly known as object" (Bennett 2010: xvi), which means not only humans, but nonhumans too, possess a certain level of agency. In Bennett's framing, the agency is distributed throughout the assemblage in which "some points are more heavily trafficked than others" as at different times, different parts of the assemblage are activated; as such, an assemblage has what she terms "uneven topographies" (Bennett 2010: 24) – configurations where some elements have more influence than others. One of the important influences of her work is her suggestion that by recognizing the agency of nonhuman entities and considering their influence on human affairs, we can develop a more ecologically sensitive and ethical approach to politics and the environment.

In their overview of methods to research material culture, Samuel Lunn-Rockliffe, Samuel Derbyshire, and Dan Hicks (2019) recognize that the differences between some of the theories discussed above (i.e. ANT, assemblage, and meshwork) are "relatively obscure" and largely dependent upon the specific research agenda in a particular time and place. However, it is important to note that all these perspectives share a common overarching principle: objects do not exist as isolated entities, but are always situated within dynamic, relational networks. A consequence of this relational perspective is, as it is necessary to point out, that contemporary studies of material culture do not restrict their analysis solely to individual objects and artefacts, but include considerations of the built environment and broader material landscapes. Taken together, the perspectives discussed in this section represent only one part of a broader and internally diverse field. As some authors have noted (see, for example, Lunn-Rockliffe, Derbyshire and Hicks 2019), the focus on objects is only one strand shaping current theoretical and analytical discussions in material culture. In addition, attention has been directed towards the environment and questions of materiality, although these latter strands remain largely beyond the scope of this chapter.

The trajectory outlined in this section highlights how material culture studies have continually shifted and redefined both their

analytical focus and their objects of inquiry. Rather than constituting a stable or unified field, material culture emerges here as a set of evolving conversations. As Tilley and colleagues have noted, material culture studies "are always changing and developing, redefining both themselves and their objects of study" (Tilley et al. 2006a: 1), indicating that material culture is itself a contested term, dependent on the theoretical perspective and analytical approach adopted. It is within this dynamic field that the present research takes shape.

This study builds on the premise that "materiality is an integral dimension of culture, and that there are dimensions of social existence that cannot be fully understood without it" (Tilley et al. 2006a: 1; see also Tilley 2007). This orientation aligns most closely with scholarship associated with the UCL tradition in material culture studies, whose emphasis on ethnographic engagement and everyday material practices provides a central point of reference for the perspective on material culture underpinning this book. This perspective also resonates with Sophie Woodward's argument that things are not passive entities onto which meanings are imposed but are integral to the social relations through which people's lives and worlds are mutually created (Woodward 2020: 17; see also Miller and Woodward 2012: 155).

Material culture in Slovenian research

In what follows we will look more closely at how Slovenian ethnology and cultural anthropology has engaged with the issues raised by material culture. Rather than providing an exhaustive overview, we will highlight key orientations, shifts, and thematic emphases that demonstrate the continuity and specificity of scholarly engagement with the field in Slovenian ethnology and cultural anthropology.

Interest in material culture has been present in Slovenian ethnology and cultural anthropology since the beginnings of the discipline. Early research enquiries were closely tied to questions of everyday life: what people wore, how and where they lived, and what kinds of food they consumed. In the first half of the 20th century, such interests were largely framed by efforts to document and reconstruct cultural elements. Gradually, this focus began to shift, and from the second half of the century onwards increasing attention was directed towards people as producers and users of material culture (Huzjan 2021b: 15).

In her overview of research on material culture in Slovenia, Maja Godina Golija (2021) traces scholarly attention to material

culture back to Greek and Roman historians (Godina Golija 2021: 29). Although these texts often focused on important events or military campaigns, they also included descriptions of settlements and houses. Within the Slovenian context, one of the most important early sources that includes descriptions of local lives, including material culture, is *Slava vojvodine Kranjske* (*Die Ehre dess Hertzogthums Crain* 1689, Eng. *The Glory of the Duchy of Carniola*) by Janez Vajkard Valvasor, which provides vivid descriptions of local life and clothing culture (Godina Golija 2021: 31–33).

A more systematic engagement with material culture emerged with the development of archaeology, anthropology, and ethnology (Godina Golija 2021: 40), as material culture increasingly became the object of organized collection and scholarly classification. Artefacts were primarily examined through typologies and classificatory schemes (Shippers 2002: 126) and understood as evidence of the uniqueness, creativity, and historical development of human cultures (Godina Golija 2021: 40; Shippers 2002: 127). In line with broader contemporary developments, material culture was often used as proof of regional or national identity, with research frequently focusing on aesthetically significant or culturally representative artefacts. An important influence on Slovenian ethnologists of this period came from the University of Graz, where an approach known as *Wörter und Sachen* (Eng. Words and Objects) was developed. This perspective sought to connect linguistics and ethnology by examining the relationship between the mental categories of language and the material world of objects (Godina Golija 2021: 42; Shippers 2002: 128). More broadly, at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries material culture was often conceptualized as a

> mute witness to the disappearing world and the original folk culture, which began to change inexorably due to the industrial revolution in Europe, the spread of cities and the urban way of life in the countryside, losing its diversity, originality and "uniqueness" /.../. (Godina Golija 2021: 43)

Following the Second World War, a significant shift occurred. Research attention increasingly moved from the artefacts themselves to their social, historical and regional characteristics (Godina Golija 2021: 51–52; see also Shippers 2002: 129–130). Scholars began to focus more explicitly on the social contexts of production and use. Slovenian museums, most notably the Ethnographic Museum,[12] played a

12 In 1964, the Ethnographic Museum was renamed the Slovene Ethnographic Museum (Slovenski etnografski muzej 2026).

central role in this transition (for a comprehensive list of researchers, see Godina Golija 2021: 52), reflecting broader theoretical developments within ethnology and cultural anthropology that increasingly recognized material culture as embedded in the dynamics of everyday life, production and use.

In recent decades, research on material culture in Slovenia has become increasingly diverse, covering a wide range of thematic and empirical areas. A substantial body of work has emerged on clothing (see, for example, Primožič 1999; Žagar Grgič 2011; Žagar 2015), food – addressed from historical, regional, and social perspectives (Mlekuž 2008, 2017), handicrafts (Zavratnik and Čebron Lipovec 2025), residential and housing culture (Zavratnik 2017b; Sitar 2017), and the social transformations of architecture (Ferlež 2008), as well as everyday and memory objects such as cars (Ilaš 2009; Pogačar 2016) and memory objects (Habinc 2004). Taken together, these studies indicate a broadening of the field beyond documentation towards its "social and cultural role" (Godina Golija 2021: 58), reflecting the broader theoretical developments described above.

Recently, the history of the study of material culture was examined in the publication *Govorica predmetov* (Eng. The Language of Objects) by Maja Godina Golija, Vanja Huzjan, and Špela Ledinek Lozej (2021). Jernej Mlekuž has co-edited several volumes on material culture, such *as Klepetavi predmeti: Ko predmeti spregovorijo o nas in drugih* (Eng. Chatty Objects: When Objects Talk About Us and Others; Mlekuž 2011), *Venček domačih: Predmeti Slovencem sveti* (Eng. A Medley of National Favourites: Things That Make Slovenes Shine; Mlekuž 2015), and *Made in YU* (Petrović and Mlekuž 2016). In 2017, a thematic issue of the journal *Etnolog*, published by the Slovene Ethnographic Museum, was dedicated to material culture, with the central theme 'Opredmetenje spominov in vsakdanjih praks'.[13] This issue presented a diverse selection of studies, ranging from the consideration of furniture to that of confectionery. The sustained presence of material culture as a research focus within the Slovenian academic sphere is also reflected in recurring scholarly events (see, for example, Studen 2019) and its integration into university curricula.

13 T/N: 'Materialisation of memories and everyday practices.'

"Man is born naked but is everywhere in clothes (or their symbolic equivalents)" (Turner 2007 [1980]: 83). In coining the term "social skin", Terrence Turner notes that the dressed body both touches the body and faces outwards, towards others, thus becoming "the symbolic stage upon which the drama of socialisation is enacted" (Turner 2007 [1980]: 83). For anthropologists and other social scientists, this opens up the possibility of examining individual and collective identities through the dressed body. Although much attention has been paid to the relationship between clothing and identities, the material dimensions of garments have remained relatively unexplored in the social sciences. One discipline that has historically attended to the material details of clothing – what Lou Taylor (2002: 3) calls the "minutiae of clothing" – is dress history. As Taylor argued as recently as 2002, although long established as a field, dress history only in recent decades freed itself from the "shackles that have held it back for far too long" and gained its deserved "academic respectability" (Taylor 2002: 1). Further, she describes how clothing, particularly that associated with European women's fashion, was seen as a "frivolous and ephemeral characteristic of society" and therefore rarely considered worthy of serious academic study (Taylor 2002: 2).

This neglect of studies of dress in industrial societies has also characterized other disciplines. Anthropology, too, has long neglected clothing in this context (Woodward 2007: 25; see also Hansen 2004; Entwistle 2016 [2000]: 55–57; Jenss 2016b: 5). However, in anthropological work on dress, significant attention has been devoted to materiality, clothing in different cultural contexts (see, for example, Weiner and Schneider 1989 on the properties of clothes), the experience of wearing clothes, and its situatedness in particular social, economic and political contexts (for reviews of anthropological studies of dress, see Eicher 2000; Hansen 2004). In her overview of anthropological work on clothing, for example, Joanne Eicher emphasizes the value of anthropology's holistic approach, which situates dress within broader socio-cultural contexts (Eicher 2000: 59).

In Slovenia, numerous fundamental studies on clothing were conducted by ethnologists such as Marija Makarovič, Angelos Baš, and Jana Žagar (for a comprehensive list of works, see Žagar Grgić 2011: 32). However, these studies mainly focused on local, regional, or national costumes, historical overviews, or specific social groups such as workers or peasants. Since the 1980s, however, the study of clothing has increasingly shifted towards the body as an analytical

focus. This shift aligns with broader changes in the understanding of culture, emphasizing its processual character and approaching it through concepts such as agency, practice, and performance (Hansen 2004: 370).

The growing scholarly interest in the cultural construction of the body and identity through dress and fashion has also influenced the increasing focus on the relationships among dress, fashion, and identity. As Elizabeth Wilson puts it, this contributed to the "rescue [of] the study of dress from its lowly status and has created /.../ a climate in which any cultural and aesthetic object may be taken seriously" (Wilson 1992: 6 in Jenss 2016b: 7). It was only in the 1990s that contemporary dress practices gained full academic legitimacy and were taken seriously as a field of inquiry (see Jenss 2016b).

Following Joanne Eicher and Mary Ellen Roach-Higgins (1993), who were among the first anthropologists to integrate the study of dress and the body (Žagar 2011: 34; Eicher and Roach-Higgins 1993: 13), here we understand the dressed body as a "gestalt that includes body, all direct modifications of the body itself, and all three-dimensional supplements added to it" (Eicher and Roach-Higgins 1993: 13), and dress (Slo. *obleka*) as "an assemblage of body modifications and/or supplements displayed by a person in communicating with other human beings" (Eicher and Roach-Higgins 1993: 15). According to the authors, this definition avoids the potential value biases and the lack of clarity or completeness implicit in terms such as clothing and physical appearance (Eicher and Roach-Higgins 1993: 15; see also Hansen 2004; Kalčić 2007; Žagar 2011; Entwistle 2016 [2000]). The definition incorporates the sensory dimensions of dress and, importantly, it also includes footwear as part of the body's supplements. Building on this, Entwistle (2016 [2000]) expands on the idea of dress as signalling "an act" (Roach and Eicher 1965: 1 in Entwistle 2016 [2000]: 43) and includes the aesthetic dimension. Adopting this broad perspective, we will continue to use the terms clothing and dress interchangeably, as they appear throughout the literature, but in the inclusive sense outlined above. When referring specifically to shoes and footwear, we will use the terms shoes and footwear.

In understanding of the term personal appearance, we will draw in part on Janja Žagar's (2015: 156) definition of personal appearance as "a form of non-verbal communication between the individual and society" that "combines aspects of dress and body, observer and observed, behaviour and judgement, experience and memory, synchronously and diachronically, always in the context of the relationship between the individual and the specific socio-cultural environment"

(Žagar 2015: 156). Two further clarifications are added to this understanding. First, appearance as a form of communication should not be understood as a straightforward process (as noted by Barnard 2006 [1996]), but as embodied, relational, and sensitive to individual circumstances and disruptive moments. Second, we will emphasize the role of social factors such as "gender, ethnicity, age, occupation, income and body shape" (Entwistle 2016 [2000]: 49; see also Mesarič 2005; Kaiser 2001), which may constrain an individual's expression in creating their appearance.

The first publication on clothing that clearly positions itself in the field of material culture studies is *Clothing as Material Culture*, edited by Susanne Küchler and Daniel Miller (2005). The volume offers a rich and diverse exploration of the significance of clothing and its role in shaping cultural practices and identities worldwide. In the introduction, the editors argue that material culture studies help overcome the long-standing divide between the study of clothing in the social sciences and in specialized fields such as textile conservation or museum studies. Rather than reinforcing this divide, the book emphasizes the shared focus on materiality across disciplines (Miller 2005b: 1–5).

One example of such an approach is the essay on the aesthetics of the self (Woodward 2005), in which Sophie Woodward describes how garments worn over time, through the softening of materials and the ageing of fabric, enable Viviane, one of her interlocutors, "not to be conscious of the clothing she is wearing". The relationship between her and the clothes becomes almost symbiotic (Woodward 2005: 32–33). Vivien's aesthetics favours comfort, and her family relationships, political orientation, and other moralities (for example, ecological) are materialized and shown by her clothes. Woodward's understanding of clothing – following Gell (1998) – as a form of extended personhood, is further developed in her later work. Karen Tranberg Hansen (2005) similarly offers a compelling example, focusing on *saulala*, or second-hand clothing, in Zambia. Through the eyes of both men and women, she shows that the meaning and value of Zambian second-hand clothing is not intrinsic to the garments themselves but is created through the experiences of wearing, social evaluations and local context. Other authors in the volume address a wide range of topics – from the entanglement of new man-made fibres with (new) modes of living to Turkish headscarves.

The Sari, a book written by Mukulika Banerjee and Daniel Miller (2003), focuses not so much on the sari as an item of clothing, but on the sari as a "*lived* garment" (Banerjee and Miller 2003: 1, emphasis in original). Through their ethnography the authors

explore the role of the sari, and particularly the *pallu* – the elaborately decorated end of the sari – as a mediator between Indian women and their environments. This relationship is analysed from multiple perspectives, including intimacy, family relations, working relations, shopping, ageing, production, politics, and fashion. In line with their call for a study of clothing that is not "'cold'" but instead "involved in tactile, sensual, emotional, intimate worlds of feelings" (Banerjee and Miller 2003: 253), their consideration of the sari pays close attention to materiality, while also tracing the changing contexts and transformations of the sari itself.

The approach outlined in *Clothing as Material Culture* (2005) has influenced further research on clothing. Sophie Woodward's monograph *Why Women Wear What They Wear* (2007), for example, focuses on the process of getting dressed as experienced by her participants in London and Nottingham in the UK. Rather than analysing clothing primarily through meaning, Woodward is interested in the embodied, material practices of dressing. Her study highlights the material agency of garments, their ability to influence bodily and embodied experience through their form (rather than their meaning). In her work, the dressed body is seen as a set of complex negotiations between one's body and different aspects of identities presented at different social situations. Drawing on these insights, we will engage with Woodward's findings throughout this book.

Global Denim, edited by Daniel Miller and Sophie Woodward (2011), is the result of the *Global Denim Project* (see Miller and Woodward 2007). This explores how denim, as a global phenomenon, is also unique in specific local contexts. The volume brings together authors examining denim from different vantage points – from India to Brazil and Germany – highlighting how its global presence coexists with culturally specific uses and meanings. Their research continued with an ethnographic study in London, resulting in the publication of *Blue Jeans: The Art of the Ordinary* (Miller and Woodward 2012). In this, the authors ask a seemingly simple question: Why do people wear jeans? (Miller and Woodward 2012: 3) Their finding is equally simple: Because jeans make people feel ordinary. Of particular relevance to our discussion is their treatment of comfort as an analytical concept. We will return to this in the fourth chapter, where we will draw on their work to interpret and contextualize the idea of comfort as it emerged in relation to footwear.

In the Slovenian context, the publication *Klepetavi predmeti: Ko predmeti spregovorijo o nas in drugih* (Mlekuž 2011) includes two contributions focused on garments – the Bosniak veil and the Tuareg

tagelmust. Špela Kalčić (2011; see also Kalčić 2007) explores the newly emerging practice of Muslim women in Slovenia covering their heads. Through a historical overview of Islamic influences in Slovenia and a detailed consideration of the materials, shapes, and colours of the veil, she situates contemporary veiling within specific socio-historic contexts. Sarah Lunaček (2011) examines the Tuareg indigo-dyed cotton cloth known as the *tagelmust* – which is used both as a veil and as a turban – and analyses it in relation to its social functions. Her analysis links the *tagelmust* to perceptions of shame and pride, political change, urbanization, and tourism. Both contributions highlight the social dimension of garments while remaining attentive to their material aspects and implications.

In a more recent volume, *Govorica predmetov* (Godina Golija, Huzjan and Ledinek Lozej 2021) Vanja Huzjan (2021a) examines clothing practices among preschool children. Drawing on testimonies collected in Ljubljana and its surroundings, and available resources that paint the broader contexts, she explores dressing in the interwar period. Her contribution reveals intimate recollections from people from diverse backgrounds – from urban dwellers to working-class families and children raised on farms – who remember clothing in both "good" times and "misery" (Huzjan 2021a: 94–95).

A material culture approach to fashion and clothing, as outlined in these works, has informed more recent publications that focus on fashion. For example, the first section in the edited volume *Fashion Studies: Research Methods, Sites, and Practices*, edited by Heike Jenss (2016), is dedicated to research on fashion as material culture, and is titled 'Approaching fashion and dress as material culture'. The volume emphasizes how fashion is embedded in people's everyday life through practices of wearing and other routine practices and pays considerable attention to ethnographic studies of fashion. It can also be read as a recognition of the influence that material culture studies have had on the development of fashion studies (Jenss 2016a).

Another publication that seeks to "contribute to the existing material culture studies on clothing and fashion" (Jenss and Hofmann 2020a: 2) is *Fashion and Materiality: Cultural Practices in Global Contexts*, edited by Heike Jenss and Viola Hofmann (Jenss and Hofmann 2020). The editors acknowledge that despite the widespread recognition of clothing as a "particularly significant form of material culture" (Jenss and Hofmann 2020a: 3), material culture research on fashion and clothing remains comparatively sparse. Both publications resonate with the theoretical developments in material culture studies outlined earlier in this chapter: they frame clothing and fashion as material

culture while also focusing on how specific materials participate in and shape everyday practices and cultural meanings.

The common thread that runs through all these works is a specific research approach that focuses either on making or on wearing clothing, and emphasizes the materiality of garments and how the material qualities shape the ways these items can externalize cultural categories of identities. These approaches reflect broader shifts within material culture studies. Early work in the field focused on categorizing objects and emphasizing techniques, characteristics, and contexts of their use. The linguistic turn then introduced a focus on language and semiotic readings of culture (and objects). In fashion and clothing, the semiotic tradition – following Barthes (1990 [1985]) – dominated and put the focus on representation and meaning that had to be decoded. Material culture studies that emerged with the material turn sought to reconcile these structuralist and semiotic approaches by reasserting the focus on materiality.

Daniel Miller has been critical of semiotic approaches to "stuff" (Miller 2010) in general, and especially in relation to clothing. These approaches, he argues, reduce clothes to signs or symbols that represent, for example, the status or beliefs of the wearer. In a book chapter 'Why Clothing is not Superficial' (Miller 2010: 12–41; see also Miller 2005a: 29–35), Miller challenges the idea that "the material form makes manifest some underlying presences which account for that which is apparent" (Miller 2005a: 29; for a critique of linguistic approaches to clothing see also Carter 2012). This, he contends, turns "clothes into mere servants whose task is to represent /.../ the human subject" reducing them to "pretty worthless creatures, superficial, of little consequence, mere inanimate stuff". He further critiques the presumed relationship between the interior and exterior in what he terms "*depth ontology*" (emphasis in original), the belief indicating that our "*being* – what we truly are – is located deep inside ourselves and is in direct opposition to the surface" (Miller 2005a: 16, emphasis in original). Under this logic, clothes can be seen as superficial.[14] Yet through his ethnographic studies in Trinidad, India, and London, Miller

14 In relation to shoes, Anne Brydon illustrates this point in her essay 'Sensible Shoes' (Brydon 1998), in which she refers to the shoes worn by some female academics as "sensible shoes". She argues that one of the means through which the pursuit of authenticity becomes visible is shoes. She suggests that the academic pursuit of blandness is an extension of the Cartesian mind-body split: "To draw attention to the body by means of stylish or somehow 'extravagant' clothing would be to suggest a diminished intellectual capacity. The great mind of the genius, so this logic goes, is indifferent, indeed oblivious to the body and its ornament. Scholarly authenticity, then, is coded in footwear notable for its un-noteworthiness." (Brydon 1998: 4)

demonstrates that clothes "do not just mean something different" in different contexts – "they are something different" (Miller 2005a: 20). The example of the Indian sari (Banerjee and Miller 2003) is particularly telling: wearing a sari does not simply suggest a difference in how a woman is dressed, but it suggests a difference in what it means to be a woman altogether, as the sari is an integral part of techniques a woman uses in the kitchen or as a mother or how a woman presents herself in the public (Miller 2005b: 15–16; see also Banerjee and Miller 2003). In this sense, clothing plays "a considerable role and active part in constituting the particular experience of the self, in determining what the self is" (Miller 2005a: 40).

For Miller, the understanding of clothing as superficial is the consequence of representation being the dominant understanding of the relationship between the material and immaterial (Miller 2005a: 31). When clothing is seen as representing a person, fashion or, for example, femininity, the materiality of this clothing is not important but is only an arbitrary means of representation. Yet as Miller's ethnographic example from Trinidad shows, contrary to the belief that what is on the surface is superficial, Trinidadians believe that surface phenomena are honest, while depth is considered as secretive and dishonest. In debunking this notion that material signs stand for social relationships, Miller draws on Webb Keane's critique of semiotics (Keane 2005) and his own theory of objectification. The conception of objectification is one of the ways to overcome the dominant relationship between the material and immaterial, as "a theory of objectification leaves very little space to a concept of immaterial, since even to conceptualize is to give form and create consciousness" (Miller 2005a: 21) – immateriality can thus only be expressed through materiality (Miller 2005a: 28). The process through which we create our sense of ourselves as subjects is the same process that creates the clothing (Miller 2005a: 32). We are then not just clothed, but are in fact constituted by our clothing (Miller 2005a: 42).

This understanding of clothing calls for a methodological approach that focuses not only on clothing as objects, but also on the practices, on what people do with things, and the relationships that emerge from those practices. Ingrained in such an approach is the understanding of clothing as a situated bodily practice, as proposed by Joanne Entwistle (2016 [2000]). She describes dressed bodies as "socially constructed, always situated in culture and the outcome of individual practices directed towards the body" (Entwistle 2006 [2000]: 11). In *The Fashioned Body: Fashion, Dress and Modern Social Theory* (2016 [2000]), she emphasizes the way clothes feel as opposed to how

they look, contributing to a broader move towards more embodied approaches to clothing (see, for example, Woodward 2007). Such perspectives transcend the long-standing separation between subjects and objects and, in this case, between people and their clothing. In material culture studies, clothing is thus not understood as primarily symbolic, but as an "active agent or instrument, as it is a means by which people accomplish various tasks" (Miller and Woodward 2012: 24).

However, Sophie Woodward and Tom Fisher (2014: 6) urge scholars to remain attuned to critics, such as Tim Ingold, who challenge approaches that focus on objects, like garments, rather than (the transformation of) materials. While anthropological studies of clothing have always been attentive to material, as the materiality of clothing is central to its cultural meanings, in fashion studies materials have often been neglected. Woodward and Fisher argue that "clothing gets its meanings from its materials and materiality" (Woodward and Fisher 2014: 6). They propose a "symmetrical approach" that follows Miller's call to see things and culture as inseparable and Ingold's focus on materials. This approach accounts for both the "cultural/symbolic elements in fashion and the elements of clothes that respond to the agency of the wearer" (Woodward and Fisher 2014: 12). This symmetrical approach is especially pertinent for the study of footwear. It allows for attention to both footwear practices and the physical attributes of specific pair of shoes – how they respond to the practice of wearing, and how this shapes the mutually constituted relationship between people and their shoes.

UNDERSTANDING FOOTWEAR

In their introduction to the book *Shoes: A History from Sandals to Sneakers*, Giorgio Riello and Peter McNeil (2006a) note that only in the past four decades have shoes lost their status as "the forgotten Cinderella of dress" and reclaimed their place as an integral part of fashion and dress scholarship (Riello and McNeil 2006a: 21). They attribute this shift to postmodernism, particularly to the view of the body as composed of "body parts" rather than as a whole figure or silhouette, and to the fragmentary nature of fashion that emerged with postmodernism. Their claim is supported by a growing number of studies exploring footwear in its historical, cultural, and symbolic dimensions. Some works trace the development of specific footwear styles and their historical usage (Shawcross 2014); others combine

historical and cultural perspectives to examine the social meanings of footwear across time and place (Riello and McNeil 2006); and many focus on specific, often extraordinary (Steele and Hill 2012) or otherwise meaningful footwear (see, for example, Moynahan and Benchley 2019). While there has been a slight shift towards considering men's footwear (Robinson 2014; Kawamura 2016; Sherlock 2016), shoes are still frequently framed as exclusively feminine, even as sexualized objects. The book *Shoe Obsession* (Steele and Hill 2012), for example, a scholarly examination of shoes within fashion theory, focuses on women's experiences with extraordinary footwear, mostly high heels. Its strong emphasis on femininity and the sexual connotations of high heels, however, highlights a recurring pattern in the literature. More broadly, studies linking footwear to femininity, sexuality, and power continue to dominate the field (see, for example, Steele 1996: 91–114, 2006; Cox 2004; Semmelhack 2006; Small 2014).

A review of the literature suggests that, historically, in studies of footwear representation has been privileged over experience – a pattern that echoes earlier research on clothing, which tended to focus on high fashion, subcultural or extraordinary styles, or spectacular items of clothing, rather than mundane, habitually worn garments (Miller and Woodward 2012: 140). Although footwear is part of everyday life for billions of people, many studies continue to overlook the embodied practices and experiences of wearing shoes. Paradoxically, while Riello and McNeil credit postmodernism with drawing attention to footwear, it could also be argued that the postmodern fragmentation of fashion and disintegration of the body have contributed to a more disembodied treatment of shoes, one that privileges meaning and representation over footwear practices and their materiality (for a critique of the postmodern approach to footwear, see Auerbach 2001).

An early exception to such approaches is research conducted by Russel W. Belk, summarized in the paper 'Shoes and Self' (Belk 2003). Working in Salt Lake City, Utah, in 1990 and 2000, Belk and his students conducted interviews, observations, and questionnaires to explore participants' shoe wardrobes and collect autobiographies of their shoes. Based on an analysis of these, Belk argues that footwear is not only a practical necessity in our daily lives, but also an object of "hope, joy and sorrow" (Belk 2003: 12). He suggests that shoes are not just the carriers of identity, but can be understood as part of the extended self – an insight that closely parallels Sophie Woodward's reflections on clothing (2007).

A significant contribution to the study of footwear as an embodied practice was made by the project *If the Shoe Fits: Footwear, Identity, and Transition* (2010–2013), conducted at the University of Sheffield. Although its explicit aim was to "bring a sociological perspective to emerging studies of footwear" (Footwear Research Network 2023), the project employed a wide range of qualitative methods, including focus groups, footwear diaries, and shopping expeditions. The research explored themes such as the temporalities of the wornness of high-heeled shoes (Dilley et al. 2015), the relationship between sneakers and life course processes (Hockey et al. 2015), the temporal landscape of footwear (Hockey et al. 2014), and the role of footwear in identity formation (Hockey et al. 2012; Sherlock 2014). Importantly, this research also involved collaboration with podiatrists, resulting in practical tools such as an online resource to facilitate conversations about footwear and foot health between practitioners and patients (Farndon et al. 2016). The work of these authors is particularly relevant for our understanding of footwear, as it foregrounds the embodied dimensions of footwear such as practices of selection and wearing.

Building on this shift towards an embodied understanding of footwear, Alexandra Sherlock's PhD research on different styles of Clarks Originals shoes explores the role of footwear in everyday processes of identity and identification (Sherlock 2016).[15] She begins with the observation that, due to their visual (commercials, films, songs, fairy tales) and symbolic (i.e. shoe as metaphor) ubiquity, the material presence of the shoes has become invisible. By focusing on both the material and what she calls semiotic affordances, Sherlock develops an approach that considers Clarks Originals in terms of both their material and symbolic dimensions, combining an understanding of the meanings and associations of the shoes with their material possibilities (see also Sherlock 2014). She builds her concept of semiotic affordances on Ingold's theory of affordances and Michael's critique of this approach (Michael 2000). In her understanding of semiotic affordances, she draws on the ecological approach to semiotics, promoted by Luke Windsor (2004 in Sherlock 2014, 2016). Windsor expanded the theory of affordances by proposing that signs

15 Alexandra Sherlock's PhD research on Clarks Originals was conducted in part as part of the *If the Shoe Fits* project, though much of her work – particularly on design processes and her engagement with designers – was carried out independently. The title of her dissertation is 'This Is Not a Shoe: An Exploration of the Co-constitutive Relationship Between Representations and Embodied Experiences of Shoes' (Sherlock 2016).

can also be approached functionally: "rather than asking what the shoes mean /.../ we should ask what their meanings afford a particular individual" (Sherlock 2014: 29). Interpretation, in this sense, becomes a matter of perceiving an affordance.

A different perspective on footwear is offered by Yuniya Kawamura, whose book *Sneakers: Fashion, Gender, and Subculture* (Kawamura 2016) explores how sneakers have transformed from athletic shoes to iconic fashion statements and symbols of subculture. Her study examines intertwining of sneakers with various subcultures such as hip-hop, skateboarding, and sneaker-collecting communities. Combining ethnographic observations with the theoretical frameworks of cultural studies, Kawamura reads the "meanings of sneakers as a text" (Kawamura 2016: 42). Her approach foregrounds the gender dynamics surrounding sneakers, addressing how certain styles have been associated with masculinity or femininity, and how these gender norms have been challenged and redefined over time. While not grounded in material culture studies, her analysis of subcultural style and fashion contributes to a broader understanding of footwear as a site of identity construction and social differentiation.

A different focus can be found in the work of Naomi Braithwaite, whose research is largely connected to the work of shoe designers and creativity (Braithwaite 2017), rather than the experiences of wearers. Her ethnographic perspective allows her to explore the role of materials and the materiality of footwear in expressing the creativity of shoe designers. More recently, Braithwaite has been involved with the project *Shoe and Tell*, which applies visual ethnography to document the experience of identity for British teenagers. In this research, she focuses on the embodied relationship between the shoes and their wearers (see, for example, Braithwaite 2021; Shoes and Identity 2026), particularly during the "transitionary period" of adolescence, framing shoes as meaningful artefacts within rites of passage. This perspective resonates with my own research, as many of my participants described shoes as markers of important life events – such as weddings, graduations, or other "firsts".

Ellen Sampson's recent book *Worn: Footwear, Attachment and the Affects of Wear* (2022 [2020]) focuses on the practice and experience of wearing. At the beginning of the book, she presents the following guiding questions:

> What is our attachment to clothes which are marked through wear and why do they have a power to affect us so deeply? How are our relationships to clothing produced and maintained through the

> embodied and bodily practices of wearing, cleaning, and repair? (Sampson 2022 [2020]: 11)

Her approach is methodologically distinctive, an auto-ethnographic practice-led approach in which she simultaneously designs, makes, and wears the footwear she studies. The shoes she designed, crafted, and wore thus become part of the research process itself. Throughout the book, Sampson explores answers to the questions posed above. She argues that our attachment to footwear is the consequence of the whole process of consumption as we become attached to our shoes through practices of buying (or in her case making), wearing, cleaning, and repairing. Her attention to materiality, bodily practice and the idea of shoes as a "record of lived experience" (Sampson 2022 [2020]: 139), provides a valuable perspective for my own research. It offers a framework for understanding how certain pairs of shoes become memory objects, a theme we will return to in the sixth chapter.

In addition to studies that focus on the symbolic and embodied aspects of footwear, some recent works have explored how shoes are embedded in broader social, political, and economic processes. Caroline Knowles's ethnography *Flip-flop: A Journey Through Globalisation's Backroads* (2014) follows the life of a flip-flop sandal, from oil extraction in Kuwait – the raw material used to produce plastic – to a rubbish dump in Ethiopia. Her research traces material transformations of the object, as well as social lives it becomes entangled with across global supply chains. Knowles connects many of theoretical perspectives discussed earlier: she follows material flows, tracks the object through different stages of its life, and examines how it shapes – and is shaped by – people's everyday experiences. For example, in Chinese and South Korean factories, flip-flops become so embedded in workers daily routines that talking about life without flip-flops becomes nearly impossible. Plastic, in her account, is not inert but vibrant; it "vibrates with the vitality of the social lives with which it is enmeshed /.../ [a]ctivated in the lives it entwines, plastic is mobile and vital" (Knowles 2014: 4). Her study offers an account of the "social life" of flip-flops (Knowles 2014: 3; Kopytoff 1986), as examined through the lens of globalization and grounded in the lived experiences of workers and traders and the very vibrancy of plastic.

A complementary perspective is provided by Claudio E. Benzecry in his book *The Perfect Fit: Creative Work in the Global Shoe Industry* (2022). Rather than following a single item, Benzecry uses a "follow-the-thing approach" (Benzecry 2022: 14) to trace the process of women's shoe production for the US market. He follows the work

of designers, developers, production managers, fit models, and trade agents, moving between multiple sites – including New York City, China, and Brazil – to understand how a shoe is imagined, developed, and eventually produced. His study draws on anthropology, history, and cultural sociology, but is methodologically rooted in what he describes as "laboratory ethnography", an approach developed within science and technology studies (STS) (Benzecry 2022: 14). This perspective is particularly evident in his attention to mapping connections between multiple sites in the production chain. By focusing on the people responsible for design and development in the shoe industry, he demonstrates how shoe production involves creativity, selection, and negotiation between drawing on previous experience, creating something new, and predicting future (fashion) trends. While Benzecry's focus is on the creative processes and transnational infrastructures behind shoe design, his findings provide a useful parallel to more intimate studies of footwear – especially in understanding how shoes are shaped by and respond to global forces.

Footwear in Slovenian research

Slovenian ethnologists have most often addressed footwear as part of clothing appearance (see, for example, Makarovič 1971; Baš 1987), typically considering it as a component of broader folk costume and sometimes focusing on regional differences. Some of these works, however, also provide insight into historical changes in footwear practices – for example when the use of shoes became widespread or how shoelessness persisted in some (rural) areas until the end of the 19th century (Makarovič 1971: 60–61, 75). Contemporary Slovenian research approaches footwear from a range of perspectives. With the important exception of Janja Žagar's museum exhibition, these works tend to focus either on footwear as a static object – examining the historical development of shoe types or on the historical presence of different types of footwear, or specific types of footwear, such as indoor slippers.

Among more recent publications, the edited volume *Moda in kultura oblačenja* (Pušnik and Fajt 2014),[16] addresses clothing as both a cultural and material practice. In their introduction, the editors write:

> Fashion is understood in this book as cultural and material culture, so it is necessary to look at practices related to fashion and clothing

16 T/N: *Fashion and Dress Culture*.

> culture at the intersection of their material and symbolic aspects /.../. Fashion as material culture /.../ can be understood through the prism of how inanimate things, objects /.../ such as clothes can in a certain in environment act on people and for people. (Pušnik and Fajt 2014: 9)

The volume covers a wide range of topics, from production to consumption, and considers both the practical and symbolic dimensions of dress. Particularly relevant for our footwear research is Peter Stanković's chapter on the practice of wearing indoor slippers (*copati*), titled 'Pravila preobuvanja v copate in vprašanje slovenske oblačilne kulture' (2014).[17] As we will see in the fourth chapter, the use of slippers as indoor-only footwear is a common cultural practice in Slovenia. Based on 85 qualitative interviews conducted across the country, Stanković explores how slippers are (not) worn in selected households and how this practice is generally perceived as self-evident or a "natural fact" (Stanković 2014: 368). The most common reason given – by both hosts and guests – is related to hygiene, the desire to keep the home clean, and thus for practical reasons. Drawing on Bourdieu's concept of habitus, Stanković interprets this emphasis on practicality as a specific value disposition associated with – in his attempt at interpretation – the (lower) working class and with the complicated position of the middle class and the absence of the urban experience in Slovenian history (Stanković 2014: 375). However, as he himself acknowledges, this is a provisional interpretation rather than a definitive answer.

Blaž Bajič's PhD thesis 'Poti tekačev na Ljubljanskem' (Eng. 'Runners' Ways in Ljubljana Region') (2017a), offers an ethnographic account of recreational running in Ljubljana and its surroundings. Based on long-term fieldwork, he explores running from different angles, including the anthropology of leisure and recreation, the anthropology of space, and place and the cultural geography of sport. Although footwear is not the primary focus of his study, shoes – ironically – emerge as particularly salient in his discussion of barefoot running and barefoot shoes. Bajič discusses how such shoes are sometimes perceived as a "metonymy of the bad" (Bajič 2017a: 219), as the objectification (in Miller's terms) of contemporary society's alienation from the nature. These insights are in some ways parallel to some of the findings we will discuss in this book (see the fourth chapter).

The historians Tjaša Konovšek, Peter Mikša, and Matija Zorn (2018) explore the development of hiking boots (*gojzarji*) in 19th- and

17 T/N: 'The Rules of Putting On Slippers and the Question of Slovenian Clothing Culture'.

20th-century Slovenia. Their article links the evolution of this form of footwear to the growing popularity of mountaineering, emphasizing that boots were not only a key part of mountaineering equipment, but also an essential safety element in the mountains. Based on historical sources, their contribution provides a broader temporal context, although the practices of wearing such boots are only glimpsed through fragments of diaries and mountain guides. Nevertheless, their work highlights how innovations in technology and materials contributed to new bodily experiences of the mountains themselves.[18]

In 2019, the Slovene Ethnographic Museum hosted the exhibition *Bosi, obuti, sezuti* (Eng*: My feet. My shoes. My way)*, curated by Janja Žagar (2020). The exhibition offered a multifaceted exploration of footwear that ranged from historical perspectives, and modes of production, to personal narratives and memories. Žagar's holistic approach is especially notable, as it examines footwear as historical evidence, a product of both manual and industrial production, a commodity of consumption, a memory object, and an item that is worn, felt, and remembered. Particularly insightful are reflections on shoes as "evocative" items (Vogrinc 2015), and on the processes through which particular pair becomes meaningful. Žagar's academic work more broadly centres on the clothing appearance. In her PhD thesis 'Osebni videz: Izbira in komunikacija' (Eng. 'Personal Appearance: Choices and Communication') (Žagar Grgič 2011), she focuses on the process of forming a personal appearance as a form of self-presentation and as a bodily experience of the world. A segment of her empirical research focused specifically on footwear in relation to people's wardrobe more generally. While these insights are fragmentary, they offer valuable comparative context for understanding footwear's role in constructing personal appearance, especially with regard to what she terms "fragmentary order" (Žagar Grgič 2011: 175–183).

One of the most recent and comprehensive historical overviews of footwear in Slovenia is by Bojan Knific (2020), in *Obutvena Dediščina na Slovenskem: O škornjih, čevljih, coklah, opankah, copatah in drugih obuvalih* (Eng. The History of Footwear in the Slovene Lands). While he states that the book is primarily intended for individuals working in the field of costume design and leaders of folklore groups, it is a wonderful resource that helps one navigate

18 One particularly interesting account is the origin of the Slovenian word *gojzar*, now used generically for hiking boots. It derives from the town of Bad Goisern in Austria, where a widely worn type of mountain boot was produced at the end of the 19th century (Konovšek, Mikša, and Zorn 2018: 57–59).

terminological dilemmas, and place footwear and footwear practices in a broader spatial and temporal framework. His work informs this research, particularly in relation to specific types of footwear such as slippers and, to some extent, barefoot walking.

El estilo de vida

It is difficult to begin a discussion of footwear in everyday life without reference to the broader context in which it is usually found – namely clothing. A brief review of books that deal with the historical development of footwear styles over time (for example, Shawcross 2014) suggests that other researchers have arrived at similar conclusions. To truly comprehend shoes, they have to be put into context. Paintings, drawings, photographs, and images from journals, advertisements, or posters are used in the related books to illustrate the style of a particular era or of the individuals who wore them. In books dedicated to presenting the emergence of various shoe styles and models over time, and their connections to technological, social, or political developments in specific periods, these visual representations effectively convey how particular pairs were combined with clothing ensembles and how new styles emerged from these combinations. In the book that examines footwear in everyday

life, however, the notion of context is broadened to include the practices and details of the people involved, as well as the shoes themselves within those practices. This chapter thus shifts attention from representations found in books to real-life situations and practices.

In the conversations I have had in recent years, shoes were only rarely discussed, let alone used, as items separated from clothing outfits. During shopping expeditions, they were discussed in terms of how well they could be paired with other items in the person's wardrobe. Sometimes they appeared as the single element that can either downplay or lend a touch of seriousness to an outfit that would otherwise look too relaxed. During our walks shoes were not only discussed but also present, felt, and actively used. In fact, most of the time, shoes were connected to a whole range of things, from relationships and music to sports activities, adventures, or hairstyles – past, present, and expected (as will be discussed in the sixth chapter).

I recall one occasion when, after I asked Janez about his favourite pair of shoes, he explained that the story of his beloved Converse All Stars from his student years was not merely about the shoes themselves, but about the context: about where he bought the shoes, how and where he wore them, and which music he listened to at the time: *"All that, the shoes – my Converse All Stars, cut-off jeans, the shirt* [that I bought in an Ecuadorian shop] *and long hair /.../ the combination of all that was something that defined me. And, of course, the music and books."* More generally, discussions of footwear were almost always inextricably linked to questions of style, identities, relationships, and social expectations. This chapter therefore situates shoes in precisely these contexts: it first explores footwear as a fashion item, then traces shoes in shops and wardrobes, and finally considers them in relation to broader clothing outfits.

FROM SPECTACULAR TO ORDINARY

In the introduction to the book *The Seductive Shoe: Four Centuries of Fashion Footwear*, Jonathan Walford asserts that despite footwear's primary function of protecting us, today "[f]ootwear in the Western world is under the influence of fashion" (Walford 2007: 9). The claim that shoes are a now fashion item is hardly an exaggeration. One need not recall the television series *Sex and the City* and its obsession with Manolo Blahnik shoes to make this connection; a simple walk down the main street of Ljubljana and a glance at the windows of

shoe shops filled with different brands and designers, models, styles and colours that change seasonally or even more frequently, already makes a point clear.

Beginning this section by referring to shoes as fashion items, however, is not intended to suggest that people consider all shoes to be fashionable or that all shoe wearers engage with high fashion. Rather, it draws attention to fashion as one of the factors that influence decisions about footwear. If we follow Aspers and Godart's assertion that fashion "comes into being only when consumers make choices", while at the same time "their choices are framed by what is offered" (2013: 180), fashion can be understood as one of the factors that provides the "raw material" (Entwistle 2016 [2000]: 48) for everyday dress. Even in a study where shoes are not explicitly approached as fashion items, fashion remains an implicit context. This book, however, does not examine the fashion system as such or the general influence of fashion on shoe choice. Instead, it begins from the premise that wearing shoes is a common practice of people in Ljubljana and explores how the "raw material" available in shoe and online shops is incorporated into existing shoe wardrobes and becomes part of everyday footwear practices.

In studies that focus on fashion, there is a consensus that one of its defining characteristics is change (see, for example, Willson 2003 [1985]: 3). A quick glance at shoe shops, fashion magazines, or fashion blogs (see Rocamora 2020) readily confirms the speed with which new items appear. Yet when attention shifts from these sites of display to people's wardrobes or to the street (Woodward 2009; see also Miller 2020 [2004]), it becomes clear that the abundance of choice and rapid turnover does not necessarily translate into everyday clothing and footwear practices. Sophie Woodward's (2009) four-year longitudinal observation of street style in Nottingham shows that what people actually wear changes far more gradually than the official face of fashion suggests. She therefore emphasizes the situatedness of clothing choices within broader contexts that shape them (Woodward 2009: 95), including networks of relationships and the existing contents of wardrobes. This insight is equally relevant for understanding footwear practices.

I considered several aspects that influence how are shoes situated in shoe wardrobes and everyday shoe practices. First, I examined their relationship to the body. This involved attention to the relationship between clothes and shoes, bodily specificities that may limit choice (e.g. foot deformities, size of feet), changes in movement brought about by different types of shoes, and issues of hygiene in relation to shoes and feet. Second, I focused on time and space. Seasonality

emerged as an obvious and important factor in the choice and use of shoes, but other temporal dimensions were also present, including attachments to shoes from the past and changes in shoe styles over time. Spatially, footwear practices were shaped both by the physical environment and by the ways shoe wardrobes are arranged and rearranged, a point we will return to later in this chapter. Finally, I paid attention to social contexts. These include context of (non-)occasions, discussed in the fifth chapter, as well as the influence of family members, friends, partners and economic constraints on shoe choices. Fashion itself also operates as a social factor, shaping what is available, what is popular at a given moment, and what sources of inspirations people draw upon. Taken together, these dimensions help to situate shoes within the texture of everyday life.

To bring these perspectives together, we will approach footwear as a situated bodily practice which, as Joannes Entwistle argues, requires

> moving between on the one hand, the discursive and representational aspects of dress and the way the body/dress is caught up in relations of power, and on the other, the embodied experience of the dress and the use of dress as a means by which individuals orient themselves to the social world. (Entwistle 2016 [2000]: 39)

Such an approach makes it possible to attend to the lived experiences of dress – and shoes – and to how people feel both in them and with them, while also acknowledging how appearance is evaluated by others (see, for example, Woodward 2007) and shaped by broader, sometimes constraining social contexts. From the perspective of everyday footwear practices, fashion can thus be understood as "a creative act of assemblage by people from the resources (both physical and informational) presented to them in magazines and the shops" (Woodward 2009: 93). In Ljubljana, this includes not only shop windows and magazines, but also fashion influencers, television channels, and digital media more broadly. This perspective foregrounds fashion as part of everyday routines and draws attention to the ongoing process of "fashioning" (Jenss 2016b: 10; Woodward and Fisher 2014), that is, the process of putting together an outfit.

In some respects, the consideration of shoes I employ also draws on broader discussions of fashion. Georg Simmel's (1957) discussion on the tension between individuality and conformity offers a useful framework for thinking about people's footwear choices, as people often weigh whether a particular pair of shoes allows them to stand out or fit in. Simmel understood fashion as a social

phenomenon characterized by constant change, and elaborated on this in terms of the tension between the desire for individuality and the need to conform to social norms. Fashion enables expressions of uniqueness through the choices people make, yet always within the constraints of prevailing trends. To some extent, it is also helpful to understand shoes as semiotic resources, particularly when considering culturally meaningful shoes and the contextual understanding of these meanings, as demonstrated in studies of Clarks Originals (see Sherlock 2014, 2016), and sneakers (Kawamura 2016; Kulinicheva 2022).

Taken together, these considerations show that fashion – understood here primarily through what is available in shoe and online shops – is only one of the factors shaping everyday footwear practices. Age, occupation, income, gender, peer group, body shape, social conventions and much more (Entwistle 2016 [2000]: 48) all play a role. Against this backdrop, shoes can be seen as transformed from a "spectacular" creation produced by design houses (such as those that "made" Naomi Campbell fall during a 1993 fashion runaway in Paris), to the "demotic, ordinary, mundane, routine and humble" (Breward 2016: xviii) pairs found in ordinary (shoe) shops in Ljubljana.

SHOPPING EXPERTS

At times, buying shoes can be understood as an act of ordinary consumption (Gronow and Warde 2001):[19] sooner or later one of our pairs wears out and we need a new one. We might simply replace the old pair with the newer model of the same type of shoe, investing little time, thought, or effort in the purchase. At other times, we are invited to an event and need a pair appropriate to the occasion, or we need new running shoes to continue our daily recreational activities. Perhaps, we have just bought a dress or shorts that do not match our old, worn-out sneakers. Sometimes, as may happen, shoes "call to us" and make us buy them, even if we did not intend to purchase anything.

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19 Gronow and Warde (2001a: 4) refer to ordinary consumption as "involving those items and practices which are neither highly visible nor in any way special and which often stand in a subsidiary relation to some other primary or more conscious activity. /.../ Such items, mostly taken entirely for granted and without symbolic communicative potential, are typical examples of ordinary consumption."

I have chosen to focus on buying a new pair of shoes for several reasons. First, choosing from a seemingly infinite number of choices is usually the first step in what Kopytoff (1986) termed "singularization", through which a more personal relationship with our footwear develops through practices of possession and wearing. Second, ethnographic observations show that the act of purchasing new shoes is not only focused on the here and now, but involves a longer temporal perspective, a projection of how people imagine themselves in the future – an insight explored further in the sixth chapter. Third, while many of the points discussed below cannot be generalized, they nevertheless reveal how nuanced shoe-buying practices are, and how they require a specific set of skills to navigate decisions about style, quality, value for money, and the ability to imagine how, when, and for what purposes shoes will be worn. In this sense, shoe-buying practices can be understood as part of what Karen Tranberg Hansen (2005) has called "clothing competences", a point to which we return in the following sections. Finally, as others have emphasized, "shopping is about social relations" (Miller et al. 1998: 22): it is about the relations in which we are embedded, but also about the shoes themselves – shoes that are embedded in those very relations.

Finding the right pair of shoes is often considered hard work. Shoes are tried and accessed in terms of their fit with one's self-image and of their appropriateness for situations in which they may be worn as part of the wider clothing assemblage. There are many factors – the colour, the material, the model, the brand, and so on – that come into play when browsing the seemingly endless options offered in shoe shops, shopping malls, and online shops. The latter seems to make shopping both more difficult and easier.

For some people, especially the younger participants in the research, shopping online has become somewhat of a routine, a process accelerated by the recent global COVID-19 pandemic. Filtering options and home delivery are seen as great relief, as they remove the burden of browsing shop shelves stacked with different items and walking or driving from one store to the other. Online retailers, such as About You or Zalando, bring together items of different brands and styles, creating collections that can be browsed from the comfort of our homes. At times, however, uncertainty remains about the right size or the fit of the model with the individual's personal aesthetics, but systems for returning items are now so simplified that it only takes a few clicks to arrange things, and an unwanted purchase can be sent back, free of charge. Sometimes multiple items are bought and tried on at home: the ones that fit are kept, and the rest returned to the seller.

For others, this very same process can be perceived as stressful, and as too much work to be done after an item has already been bought. The existence of online sellers can, for some people, make things worse than before: there is now much more to choose from, and the anxiety of browsing through collections is further increased by multiple platforms available (for a discussion on anxiety, see Clarke and Miller 2002; see also Sitar 2011). Even though online shopping has by now become somewhat routinized in many regards, shoes are actually only rarely bought online. The reason listed again and again can be summarized as follows: *"You have to put a shoe on before you buy it. You have to feel it, see if it fits."* In contrast to clothing, shoes are made of sturdier materials that, over time, adapt to the shape of our feet, but they cannot be stretched – at least not like clothing can. Besides, they carry the weight of one's body, and *"they have to take you places"*. Out of the 24 people I collaborated with intensely, only eight had ever ordered shoes online – some before the research began – and in half of these cases the model had already been tried out, so there were no doubts about the size and the fit of the model.

The platforms of online sellers are also used as a resource to browse and see *"what is available"*, and can thus serve as a tool for narrowing options and finding out what one likes. This was the case with Kristina, who we met in the introduction. She already had a picture in her head of what she wanted to buy – white sneakers – and was browsing an online store to see different models. Ultimately, however, she purchased a pair in a physical shop, because she wanted to try on two models to see which one better fit her style and offered more comfort. Maja, another participant, would also regularly use online stores to see her options. However, her approach – or better, her tactic (de Certeau 1984) – was somewhat different. She would place the pairs she liked in her online basket and then wait for days, sometimes weeks, to see if they would be discounted. She noticed that retailers occasionally offer personalized discounts when items remain in a basket for some time, interpreting this as a technique to prompt a purchase. In this way, she developed her own counterstrategy: waiting for the discount and, in a sense, persuading sellers to lower the price. In the meantime, she would sometimes visit physical shops to check the prices and try on the pairs she had selected online to ensure the size was right. Eventually, she opted for whichever was cheaper – the online or regular store. Her boyfriend Aljoša, on the other hand, would use the internet and online stores as a resource to see the models that are available and to compare reviews, the quality of materials, and the prices. In the end, he would still always buy his shoes in a regular store. Since he typically wears the same pair for two to three years, he always wants

to make an informed decision. To this end, he also asks for the recommendations of his friends, his girlfriend Maja, and checks the Instagram profiles of people whose opinion he values.

One example illustrated this dynamic well. During one of our walks on the Path of Remembrance and Comradeship, a trail that follows the route of the barbed wire perimeter which surrounded Ljubljana during World War II, Maja received a call from Anže, who needed her advice about new walking shoes he was going to buy. After online research, some advice from his friends, and a quick trip to two different shops, he was still not sure which shoes to buy and needed her opinion. After a few minutes, we headed back to Maja's place to go over his options, and I was invited to join as an additional pair of eyes.[20]

An unnecessary necessity or a reward?

Leaving the possibilities of online shopping aside, there is one important distinction to be made: there is a clear difference in perception between shopping for shoes as an act of necessity – such as needing new sports shoes, dance shoes or shoes for a specific occasion – and when it takes place spontaneously. This division roughly coincides with what Paterson (2006) describes as two dominant views of contemporary consumers: on the one hand, rational consumers that actively craft their identities through use of certain commodities; and on the other, mindless consumers, compelled by mass media to incessantly buy new goods. However, the distinction invoked here is not meant to imply nor confirm such a division. Rather, I follow authors who emphasize a much more nuanced understanding of shopping as a practice, in which "shopping is not about possessions *per se*, nor it is about identity *per se*. It is about obtaining goods or imagining the possession and use of goods" (Miller 1998: 141).

After one of her occasional shopping trips to a mall to Italy, just over the Slovenian border, with her sister and cousin, Mojca, a young woman in her mid-twenties remarked:

> [t]here are two different ways of buying [shoes]. In one case you shop for something else and then you see something you like, for example shoes, and you buy it. But it's very different when you go shopping specifically for shoes and then you have to find the specific type of shoe you are looking for. You already have a clear picture in your mind of what you want, and you have to go through all the available options [in different shops], compare the choices and find the best option.

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20 This is, in fact, how my collaboration with Anže began. In a couple of weeks, we met again, and I learned that he chose the pair most recommended by his friends.

Her remark goes further to explain how finding the right shoes when they are needed can be exhausting, even frustrating, given the abundance of shops and models available. To make the process less frustrating, she would usually go shopping with one of her friends or family members (see also Clarke and Miller 2002). Even when buying shoes online, she would ask their opinions prior to making a purchase. This practice was not limited to shoes, and in her case extended to shopping more generally.

Having a companion, someone who offered opinions, advice and sometimes assistance, turned out to be a common strategy that people resorted to when buying shoes. Typically this companion was a friend or a family member, someone with whom the individual shared a close relationship. Sometimes the person offering advice was also sales assistant and, exceptionally, during my research, sometimes this role was taken on by the ethnographer, i.e. me. Companions would comment on possible combinations and occasionally bring new pairs to be tried on. In some cases, the consultations took place through group chats or private messages, and in one instance even through an Instagram poll.

In one example, shopping together was described as particularly important because it was understood as a family tradition. As mentioned earlier, Mojca, her sister Maša, and their mother Kristina occasionally went shopping together, sometimes joined by friends, and these shopping trips were described as an integral part of their family relationship. In this sense, shopping together can be understood as an "objectification" (Miller 1987: 2005) of their familial ties – the mother-daughter and sister-sister relationships – with shoes in a way "embody[ing] social relations and extending them in new directions" (Miller et al. 1998: 23; see also Luthar 2004). Occasionally, people also rely on other means to help them decide on a particular pair of shoes, such as lists (supposedly) made by sports or fashion experts, ranking the best choices of the year: best casual shoes, best waking shoes, best running shoes, best barefoot shoes, the trendiest shoes, or the most comfortable high-heeled shoes, and so on.

By contrast, buying shoes by chance, spontaneously, can be understood as a form of leisure activity, and it is often described in terms of a pleasurable experience, as the moment something unexpected that might be needed in the future is found and bought. This resonates with other observations of shopping as a pleasurable, primarily when associated with the idea of leisure (Miller 1998: 69). Since I only participated in planned shopping trips, I rely mostly on the retrospective events when considering these, sometimes referring

to the recent past and sometimes recalled while we were going through a person's shoe wardrobe.

In my research, spontaneous shoe purchases were mostly associated with women; only in one instance did a man, Marko, mention his habit of visiting his usual skateboarding shop, where he would occasionally come across a pair of shoes and buy them. Spontaneous purchases, of course, are not unique to buying shoes, they are part of shopping practices more generally. Women often described moments when, while walking down the street or through the mall, they noticed an item they liked and bought it. Sometimes shoes were even described as "reaching out" to someone: *"They call me, somehow. They're there and they say, 'Come on, try and put us on'. That's what happens to me."*

In one instance, such an act of spontaneous purchase was described as a reward. Nataša, whom we will meet later, had just completed another of her 800–kilometre hiking tours. During a day off, she passed a window display with beautiful green high-heeled shoes, which she bought *"as a reward"* for her hard work during the last month. Indeed, Nataša often described how shoes seemed to find her by chance. The one category of shoes that was almost never bought spontaneously, however, were those requiring a higher degree of commitment, most notably sports shoes, as Nataša herself explained:

> Veronika: You said you have a lot of shoes – what prompts you to buy new ones?
> Nataša: I, when I see the shoe – well, the shoe finds me. That's how I'll put it. I never look for new shoes, except if I need them for my hikes or runs. Otherwise, shoes find me. It's that simple.
> Veronika: So, if you walk by...
> Nataša: Let's say, Via Carducci – I remember a small shop, tiny shop, with a red shoe in the window display. I still have them.

Always the same model

In recent years I have had many conversations that began with statements such as: *"No, I never think about what shoes I am going to wear, I always wear just one model."* Sometimes these conversations ended hours later, after an odyssey in shopping malls and shoe shops. Time and again, it turned out, that the shoes which were purchased were nevertheless carefully chosen, taking into consideration the colour, model, materials, brand, price, and the contexts where the chosen pair was expected to be worn. In one instance, when the same model as usual could not be found in Ljubljana, it was purchased online and delivered via very expensive express shipping from Spain.

The models of shoes that people buy repeatedly are usually described in terms of comfort. Comfort, however, needs to be understood as a nuanced concept (a point we will explore more thoroughly in the fourth chapter); it refers not only to the physical sensation shoes afford, but also to their aesthetic fit and to social comfort, as people are already familiar with wearing a certain pair of shoes in different social situations. We will return to the notion of social comfort and the sense of security it provides later, but for now, let us illustrate it with a brief story.

Marko, a man in his mid-thirties, has only ever worn skateboarding shoes since fifth or sixth grade. One winter, when heavy rain and snow left him tired of cold, wet feet, he decided to buy winter boots. He purchased a beige and black, ankle-high pair of winter boots. To his surprise, they kept his feet much warmer than his usual skateboarding shoes, and he enjoyed being able to walk through the puddles and mud without concern. He wore the winter boots a few times, until one day he met a friend who had only ever seen him in skateboarding shoes. The friend commented on the boots, saying that Marko looked like an astronaut on his way to space. When he returned home, he put the boots away and never wore them again – the shoes had failed him.

Figure 1: Marko's astronaut winter boots. Marko, Ljubljana, 2023. [21]

21 Marko's approach to collaboration in my research was notably systematic. As an engineer, he approached many aspects of our collaboration in a very organized and systematic way. The documentation of his shoe collection, for example, looks like a project assignment. Each pair was photographed and named, as he would normally refer to that particular pair of shoes. For example, his winter boots, which were called "*astronaut shoes*", were labelled "For Mars" (*za na Mars*). Later we will also see how he explains the wear and tear of skateboarding shoes through wear and skateboarding, using technical drawing programmes to illustrate how the shoes wear out after a period of use, then putting the drawings together in a booklet with a title page.

In this sense, the reasons why people buy the same model or brand can be understood as rooted in knowing how those shoes "work". This knowledge operates on several levels and depends on the type of shoe, but generally encompasses three aspects: how shoes fit one's feet in terms of the size and width; what they afford in terms physical capabilities; and how they function in terms of the appropriateness within specific social settings. This knowledge can be understood as an embodied cultural competence (Mauss 1973 [1935]; see also Woodward 2007), providing individuals with a sense of security that they will get the situation (and the shoes) "right". If we look at shoes in this way, buying a different pair may appear as an opportunity to fail, while relying on a familiar model or brand functions as a way of reducing (social) uncertainty and, at the same time, as a tool simplifying the act of purchase by avoiding the search for a new fit.

There is, however, also a sense of contradiction that emerges when the same model is not available. This became particularly evident in the case of a pair of shoes ordered from an online shop and delivered from Spain – Miha's blue Camper shoes. He wears his blue Camper shoes all year round, except in summer when he replaces them with flip-flops or sliders, and he has been wearing this type of shoe for the last ten years. Despite his claim that he does not really care about his shoes because he always wears the same model, it turned out that when his old pair became too worn to wear, he invested considerable effort and expense in getting a replacement. He searched the shops in the city centre and visited two shopping centres in an attempt to find the same model. In the end, he had to resort to an online shop and pay for an expensive express delivery from Spain.

A similar situation arose among some of more elderly participants in the research, who bought an extra pair of their preferred model as a precaution, in case their production was stopped. Taken together, these cases reveal a kind of dialectic: choosing the same model is meant to simplify the process of buying shoes, but this very strategy can easily turn into a prolonged and demanding search – a shopping quest, tinged with a hint of anxiety.

Nataša's walking shoes

I wait for Nataša at our usual spot, on the edge of the bridge near her home. We had planned a shopping trip to the sports equipment store where she usually buys her walking shoes. About every two years she does one of her long hikes, usually in Spain or Portugal, and she is planning the next one in a few months. Her old hiking shoes are just

too worn out to last the next 800 kilometres, so she decided that she needed new shoes, and a few months were enough time to try out and test the new pair. She already knows which model she wants to buy, the one she usually wears, but the trail she is taking this time is expected to be wet and rainy, with several river crossings. For this reason, she decided to buy shoes made out of Gore-Tex, a waterproof material. She had already visited the shop a few days earlier to check the available colours of the particular model she is after, as she wants to find the right shade to match her orange hiking trousers, red jacket, and red backpack. The model she wants was only available in grey, a colour she did not really like, so she ordered the same model in raspberry, and we are on our way to test the shoes.

Everything she needs for the hike, which would last about 30 days, has to fit in her 30–litre backpack, which means that there is little room for manoeuvre when it comes to equipment. Getting the colour palette right therefore matters – looking like a *"parrot"* is the last thing she wants. When she arrives, she is wearing her old reddish hiking boots, a tracksuit, and her hiking backpack filled with her old and new hiking trousers, and a jacket that she usually wears on her hikes. On the way to the shop, she explains she had also bought a new pair of hiking trousers in this store, but they seem a bit too sturdy, and the fabric too heavy, so she is planning on replacing them with a lighter pair that day.

When we arrive, her raspberry hiking shoes are already there, waiting for her. But first, she puts on the new trousers, and she realizes once again that they are indeed too sturdy for the Spanish climate. She asks for lighter ones, which fit well and feel good, but they only come in light blue, a colour she does not like. Moreover, they do not match well with the raspberry shoes. After careful consideration, she decides to exchange her sturdy trousers and opts for the lighter version, as her legs do not feel trapped in the trousers, and she is able to move more freely. However, she wants them in green, so she asks the saleswoman to order them and decides to come back later to pick them up. The newly chosen pair of trousers is not only more comfortable but also more practical; it is much easier to add an extra layer underneath them in if the weather turns cold than to deal with thick and sturdy trousers on warm days.

While she is trying out her trousers, I walk around the store, observe the shoes, and chat with the shop assistant. She explains that this summer her most common customers are tourists; in fact, there are so many of them she ordered tourist maps from the tourist information centre. She does not feel very comfortable selling hiking equipment to people who are going to the mountains. Because of the large number

of inexperienced hikers, there are also many rescue operations in the Slovenian mountains, and she does not believe a good pair of hiking shoes can ever replace experience.

Now is the time to try on Nataša's shoes. Raspberry pairs well with the shade of green in her newly chosen trousers, but does it go with her old trousers, jacket, and backpack? She tries on both colours and we – Nataša, the shop assistant, and I – assess the situation and agree that the grey boots look gloomy. Nataša walks around the store for a bit, to make sure that the shoes are the right fit. Then, once again, we go through the colour palette and make sure everything looks right. Nataša is satisfied with the assemblage; the trousers will be exchanged – she only needs to find the receipt – and she will buy the shoes in raspberry. First, she will exchange the old trousers for the new shoes as the price is comparable and, when the new trousers arrive, she will return to buy them. Later in the day, however, she tells me she might not buy the new trousers after all; she is not entirely satisfied with the colour contrasts. She had originally wanted trousers in a shade between red and orange – "*cigel rot*" – and since such trousers are quite expensive, she wants to be sure about the colour, the material, and the combination with the new shoes. She decides to check other stores as well – perhaps they offer a colour that matches the raspberry shoes better. After all, she will be wearing those shoes for the next six to seven years.

In the introduction to this section, I characterized the knowledge and skills required to buy a pair of shoes that fit as part of the "clothing competence" (Hansen 2005). In her research on the market for imported second-hand clothes in Zambia (*saulala*), Karen Tranberg Hansen (2005) uses this term to describe buyer's concern with the fabric quality, texture and construction, care, and style potential – concerns that, as this vignette shows, closely align with the skills required to buy a pair of shoes that "fit". The scene recounted above therefore serves as a way to explore these skills and to connect the process of buying with questions of individual aesthetics and style.

What becomes clear is that Nataša's primary concern when choosing her hiking boots is functionality: she needs shoes that will last at least 800 kilometres without her having to worry about either the shoes or blisters on her feet. For this reason, she relies on the model she already knows and understands what it can afford in terms of her physical capabilities. This reliance is grounded in the "affordances" (Gibson 2015 [1988]; Ingold 2000) of the shoes – in the ways particular walking shoes enable certain movements and behaviours, allowing the wearer to navigate specific terrains. Buying the

right pair of shoes thus involves task specificity and selection of the right "tool" for the job.

At the same time, even when functionality and comfort are foregrounded, (sports) shoes are never understood solely in terms of their affordances (as was also discussed by Michael 2000). They also need to fit within the broader individual aesthetics. This is evident in Nataša's struggle to find the appropriate combination of colours for her outfit, involving the shoes, trousers, backpack, and jacket, and in her desire to not look like *"a parrot"*. As Michael (2000: 117–118) notes, even hiking boots, though primarily purchased for their function, are objects of semiotic consumption. By choosing Scarpa walking shoes, worn by people who do not just walk but *"by those who really hike"*, Nataša affiliates herself with serious hikers and, in this sense, blends into the group. At the same time, she opts for colourful shoes that align with her personal aesthetics and can single her out – but not to the extent of making her look like a parrot. Here, questions of conformity and individuality come clearly into view.

This balancing act is further intensified by the temporal horizon of use: Nataša expects to wear the chosen pair of shoes not only for her upcoming hike, but for the next six to seven years. She also considers the materials and price of the shoes, factors that are implicit in acts of purchase. We can see how, by choosing the right pair of shoes, Nataša is fashioning not only her style (through assembling a particular colour combination), but also herself as an experienced walker (by choosing the shoes that enable her to tackle difficult terrain and adverse weather conditions). In this sense, Scarpa walking shoes illuminate her identity as a serious walker. Here, the term fashioning (Jenss 2016b: 9; see also Woodward and Fisher 2014; Woodward 2016) refers to the relationship between Nataša and her shoes (the purchase of shoes being only one part of the process), and should be understood as a process that characterizes a dynamic relationship between Nataša and her shoes, where shoes participate in the generation and actualization of her agency (Gell 1998) and objectification of her identity as an experienced walker.

The process of fashioning, however, is one of negotiation and compromise. This becomes particularly true for women who wear shoe size 42 or larger, or for men who wear size 46 or larger. Awareness of this problem started during my work in the shoemaker's workshop and gained momentum through further observations and interviews. While no man I worked with had a shoe size larger than 44 – although friends' of their friends did – there were five women with a shoe size 41 or larger, two of them with size 42 or 43. For them, buying a new

pair of shoes was a frustrating process that sometimes ended with them buying something from the men's section.

Silvija, a nurse in her mid-twenties who wears size 43, described how she has hated buying shoes since her teenage years because she always goes home empty-handed or disappointed and frustrated by her purchase. On one occasion, she explained that she had been buying what she considered ugly shoes since she was 14:

> I, since the 9th grade – imagine when I was in the 9th grade, there were no nice women's shoes in size 42. There really weren't. Women's shoes come in sizes 38 to 41. Even if you have a very small foot, you have problems. And at some point, I started wearing only men's shoes. And I – the first thing I asked the shop assistant when I entered the shop was, "What's the biggest size you have in women's shoes?" "Yes, I have these shoes in 41.5." "No, I need 42+." And then they take you to a section with the ugliest shoes ever and say, "Well, these are the options." And I look at them and think, "Fuck, no way I'm ever putting these shoes on." And then I went to the men's section. And, basically, since my first year at university, I've only ever bought men's shoes. Exclusively. And then, I think it was only a couple of years ago, that these shoe manufacturers apparently realized that women obviously have bigger feet and started making slightly nicer shoes in bigger sizes. Again, that was a problem, because the size numbers for women were not the same as those for men. And because I have such wide feet, the women's shoes still basically didn't fit me because they squeezed me in at the sides. /.../ The proportions are different.

While Lili, a computer programmer in her mid-thirties who wears shoe size 41 or 42, has not experienced the same level of frustration, her limited choice has led her to adopt a strategy of buying the first pair that fits and looks acceptable. Kaori O'Connor (2011) makes a comparable observation in the context of clothing in her discussion of Lycra fibres, describing her "ethnographic moment" (O'Connor 2011: 1) with the realization of how Lycra leggings only come in certain, small sizes. She focuses on middle-aged women (between 45 and 64) in larger sizes who are unable to purchase Lycra products; indeed, such product are so lacking that she considers naming them part of "immaterial culture" (O'Connor 2011: 153). Her analysis is equally relevant for shoes that cannot be bought: if Lycra products had been available for these women, they might have enabled them to construct their identities differently. As the cases of Silvija and Lili illustrate, the "fashionable ideal" (Thesander 1997 in Woodward 2007: 27) limits individual women's choices and thus their choices about who they can or cannot be.

The impact of the ethnographer

A short excerpt from one of the collaborations within my research can be understood as my own "ethnographic moment", in the sense described by O'Connor (2011). It marks a moment of realization of how my questions, presence and ongoing conversations might influence the participants' (ways of thinking about their) own practices. At the same time, the excerpt also points to how shoes can be seen as objects of what Thorstein Veblen termed "conspicuous consumption" (Veblen 1899 in Aspers and Godart 2013: 176). In public discourse, shoes are often interpreted as items associated with excessive or mindless spending. Remember, for example, Imelda Marcos and her thousands of pairs of shoes.

A few months into our collaboration, Maša, a woman in her late twenties, described how our conversations about shoes made her think much more about her footwear. She explained that she had begun to look at her shoe wardrobe more analytically, and at times even critically.

Recently, a pair of her favourite shoes for the autumn-winter-spring season – a pair she inherited from her grandmother – had started falling apart. She had already repaired the left shoe a few weeks earlier, when the sole had come loose. To fix the problem she simply used shoe glue, and was satisfied with the result. On a recent shopping trip to an Italian shopping mall, which she occasionally visited with her mother and sister or, as in this case, her sister and cousin, the sole of the right shoe also came off. She attempted to fix this shoe as well, but the shoe glue did not hold this time. A few days before we met, she sent me a link to a pair of shoes she was considering as a replacement, sold through an online Etsy shop. She was uncertain about the choice: the shoes seemed a bit unusual for her style, they had a heel, and she was unsure how often she would actually wear them. In short, she was uncertain if this new pair could truly replace the old one. When we met a few days later, Maša described how after our conversations about shoes had prompted her to consciously follow her own thought process while considering the purchase – something she noted was unusual for her. She described the monologue in her head that accompanied her decision-making:

> Well, now it's already warm outside, so I can wear the pair I usually wear when it's warm. Why would I buy another pair that I don't need right now. /.../ Okay if I had a little more money, I would probably buy them. But I don't have any extra money, and I said to myself "Okay, I can basically wear this other pair [of shoes] that's open at the heel but closed at the front". And then I said to myself, "You know

what, these are good for now, I don't need another pair like the old one, if I buy a new pair, it should be more casual, the most casual, so I can wear them instead of the ones that fell apart. But I will never find shoes like that". So, I decided that I could wear the shoes I already have, open-back shoes, because now it's warm enough to wear them. The only difference [between the shoes that fell apart and the open--back ones] is that I can't wear my nylons with them because it always bothers me to wear nylons with open-back shoes. So, I decided I don't need new shoes /.../. As I was running a quick errand, I started a conversation in my head "Would I wear shoes with a heel in this situation?" And I realized that I wouldn't. /.../Maybe it doesn't matter, but in my head that was the answer. These new shoes would never replace the old ones. I need ordinary shoes. Maybe they will not be the prettiest shoes I own, but I need shoes I can walk in, and they shouldn't be high heeled, because then I will not wear them habitually then.

SHOE WARDROBES AS COLLECTIONS

"How many pairs of shoes do people generally own?" This has probably been the most frequently asked question I have had to answer since I embarked on footwear research. However, the answer is anything but simple, as footwear wardrobes are hardly static. On the contrary, they are a kind of living organism that shrinks when old, worn-out shoes are discarded and grows when a new pair is acquired. Sometimes a pair of shoes stored in the basement or at the back of the wardrobe is forgotten and left there for the next season. Or a pair is left at one's parents' house after a weekend visit. Or a pair of hiking boots is kept in the car, ready for the next hike. There are also work shoes that are not allowed to leave the workplace and therefore remain, for example, in a hospital. And are the wedding shoes that have not been worn for 20 years still part of a footwear wardrobe? And what about the pair bought for a special occasion, worn only once, but kept "*just in case*"? Some shoes are no longer worn but kept for memories, or because children might want to wear them in a few years when they become fashionable again. Others are reserved for dirty jobs – repainting a house or helping neighbours move furniture. And then there are the old Converse All Stars that have been cut in half, glued to the floor, spray-painted pink, and framed – are these art objects, or are they still part of a footwear wardrobe? Indoor slippers, ski boots, diving fins? Some of these questions point to the terminological distinction between *čevlji* and *obutev* discussed in the introduction, while others arise from the inherently changing nature of our wardrobes.

These observations resonate with Sophie Woodward's (2007) research on women's dressing practices. She notes that, on average, women regularly wear less than 40% of the garments in their wardrobes, while the remaining items retain a certain "potential" either to be worn (50.55%) or to remain inactive (12.20%) (Woodward 2007: 44–46). As she argues, understanding women's dressing practices requires attention to "what they reject as much as what they select" (Woodward 2007: 9). Restricting the analysis of footwear only to habitually worn shoes that have currently found a place in shoe cabinets, and excluding the rest, would therefore significantly limit the analytical scope.

To address these questions, I began to think of footwear wardrobes as collections. There are many parallels between the footwear wardrobe and collections as conceptualized by Russel W. Belk (1995: 65–101). Collecting is, first, a form of consumption, where acquisition – most often purchase – is a key process, and where additional items must be added to the collection continuously. Second, a collection is shaped through active personal selection, although once the rules of the collection are recognized, items may also be acquired as gifts. This process relies not only on personal taste, but also on an understanding of what is appropriate for inclusion in the collection and what is not. Third, the items in a collection are not identical. Finally, collecting is typically an individual pursuit. There are, however, two important points of departure from Belk's conceptualization of collecting and collections. Belk understands collections as deliberately curated groups of "special items", leading him to exclude objects of ordinary consumption whose primary purpose is use. Moreover, items in collections are, in his view, removed from everyday use. In contrast, I draw on Woodward and Greasley's (2017: 660) and their attempt to develop a new understanding of the term, where the collection is "not separated off from the use". Instead, they think of collections in terms of everyday consumption. Such collections allow insight into diverse temporalities – when shoes are worn habitually, sporadically, or not at all – and may therefore incorporate "a range of diverse temporalities, materialities, and practices" (Woodward and Greasley 2017: 660). Understanding footwear wardrobes as collections of everyday objects broadens the analytical perspective by allowing attention to all shoes, regardless of their current involvement in social practices – it takes into account both worn and unworn shoes. This perspective encompasses the totality of shoes: the used, the unused the forgotten, the favourite, etc., and it thus highlights the dynamic nature of such everyday collections.

But what do these collections look like in practice? Compared to clothing (see Woodward 2007: 39–44), which is almost always kept in a wardrobe in the bedroom, the ways in which footwear is stored vary from household to household, often adapting to the spatial arrangements of a home and the number of people living in it. Perhaps the only general rule is that at least one pair of a person's shoes is kept in the hallway, close to the front door, right beside the indoor slippers. There is usually a shoe cabinet with shelves arranged either horizontally or vertically. In the latter case, the cabinet is designed so that when the doors are open, the shelves lie horizontally, while when closed they turn vertical, a spatial solution intended to minimize the amount of space the cabinet occupies. Sometimes shoes are kept outside a shoe cabinet, close to the doors so that they are immediately at hand when needed. In such cases, there is usually only one pair per household member – typically the pair used for quick errands, such as taking out the trash. Another common place where part of the shoe collection is kept is a wardrobe, most often located in a bedroom or dressing room. Here, shoes are stored either on the top shelf or in the lower part of the wardrobe, sometimes also in the bottom drawer. In these locations, shoes are almost always kept in shoe boxes or, alternatively, in plastic bags, which further separates the shoes from clothes. Shoes that are rotated seasonally or used only for specific activities – such as hiking or mountaineering – are sometimes kept in the basement or another storage room, often removed from the main living area. In some cases, parts of the shoe collection are also stored outside the living space altogether, for example in front of the entrance doors to a house or in a shared hallway outside an apartment.

Storage locations correspond vaguely to the frequency of use. Shoes that are used most often are kept in places that are easily accessible and not stored in shoe boxes. Shoes kept in a wardrobe in the bedroom or dressing room, by contrast, are used less frequently; these are often shoes used for specific, sometimes special occasions (such as a wedding), or shoes that require particular care because they are made of more delicate materials. The wardrobe is also the storage place for shoes that have not been worn for a relatively long time, but are likely to be worn again, or shoes that are kept as memory objects. Shoes stored in places separate from the living area (basement or storage room) are sometimes kept in shoe boxes, but sometimes simply placed on the shelves. These are usually shoes worn seasonally, such as winter shoes/boots, hiking boots, and rain boots, and take up a lot of space.

Figure 2: Shoes stored in a labelled shoe box. Veronika Zavratnik, Ljubljana, 2023.

Figure 3: Shoes at the top of the wardrobe. Veronika Zavratnik, Ljubljana, 2023.

Although the number of shoes in each person's shoe collection is constantly changing, it varies greatly between individuals. The smallest collection in this research consisted of only six pairs of shoes, while the largest contained around 70; the average number of shoes per individual was 26 pairs.

One of the largest collections documented in this research belongs to Kristina. She owns about 50 pairs. At the time of our count, there were 53 pairs; a few weeks later, however, she bought a new pair of white sneakers and prepared her flip-flops from Irregular Choice, a British fashion brand, to give away. Her old running shoes have somehow disappeared from the closet in front of the apartment; it is quite possible that they were thrown away by her husband, Anže, as they were old and at the limit of being functional. Kristina never explored this small mystery further. She stores her shoes in four different locations, largely due to the limited space and layout of the family home.

Her most frequently worn shoes are kept in the hallway, distributed across two different shoe cabinets. One of them contains shoes she uses for her daily walks with the dogs or her hikes through the nearby forest. In practice, this cabinet is shared by the whole family, as it holds footwear used for similar activities. These shoes are kept separately as they are used in different weather conditions, and they regularly become muddy, often remaining uncleaned for some time. The pairs kept here are described by Kristina as "*a constant*", and are not replaced unless the old pairs wear out. Another cabinet stands

diagonally to the first. Here she keeps her shoes that are also worn daily, but for different purposes: running errands, picking up mail, going shopping, and so on. She refers to these as her first choice when leaving the house. These pairs change seasonally – her Converse shoes and indoor slippers are always present, while in spring and summer she replaces her platform winter boots with "lighter" footwear, such as Yellow Cab sandals or sliders. None of these shoes are kept in boxes; they are simply placed on the shelves.

Most of Kristina's shoe collection is in her bedroom. She has a walk-in wardrobe with shelves that hold numerous personal belongings, from photo albums to some smaller, frequently used tools, but her shoes take up a proportionate amount of space. All the shoes stored here are in shoe boxes, sometimes in the originals, sometimes in other boxes, or sometimes there are two pairs in one box. The shoes she keeps here have different biographies (see Kopytoff 1986), and a walk through this part of her collection is in many regards like a walk through many important events in her life – a fact we will further explore in the fifth chapter. Some pairs were worn long ago but are kept because of their connection to specific events, such as the shoes she wore when she first took her eldest daughter to kindergarten, or winter knee-high boots she wore when she collected signatures when one of her friends wanted to run for president of the country. Or the black platform slides she wore when she fell down the stairs and hurt her head. Other shoes are waiting for a change of season or the next appropriate occasion. Some are kept because she particularly likes them and wants to slow down their wear, preserving them for longer. Some shoes in this wardrobe are "*spare shoes*" waiting here just in case one of her favourite pairs – platform winter boots – gets destroyed. Still others are stored with the expectation that Kristina's daughter Maša, who draws her fashion inspirations from the 1990s, may one day wear them. To generalize, this part of the wardrobe contains shoes that Kristina is confident will be worn again.

There are two other places in her bedroom where Kristina keeps her shoes – at the bottom of two different built-in wardrobes, though only a few pairs are kept there. The first wardrobe mainly contains shoes that have only been worn once, and as they were uncomfortable, they have never been worn again, but there are also shoes that have never been worn. In one of the boxes there is a pair of sandals in a cream colour that are identical to another pair she owns, except in a different colour. She bought those in 2007, and both the exact date and price can still be traced from the receipt kept inside the box. The second wardrobe mostly contains winter boots she once wore frequently but

now rarely uses, as she currently prefers platform boots. This wardrobe also holds a brand-new pair of Zara sliders – a pair Kristina had forgotten about and rediscovered with some surprise, deciding to use them as her next indoor slippers.

Some of the shoes stored in the bedroom bear traces of mould; these pairs are later cleaned, and some are even washed in the washing machine. There is also a pair of old surfing shoes, described by Kristina as her *"favourite of all favourites"*. They are unfit to be used anymore, but she will never give them away as they always trigger memories of *"the sea, the wind, sun, and diving"* and they *"make her soul happy"*. There were many instances when pairs of shoes triggered different reactions, but here we can clearly see how (mouldy) shoes and surfing shoes in her collection are agentic (Gell 1988) and can trigger certain actions, such as the act of cleaning or washing, or emotions such as surprise.

One additional pair of shoes is kept in the basement: Kristina's sturdy mountaineering boots, worn primarily when visiting the family's holiday house in the mountains.

The arrangement of the shoes in the different places is not static but constantly shifting. Sometimes shoes move due to seasonal changes; sometimes they are worn for a particular occasion and then returned to storage; at other times, Kristina simply remembers a forgotten pair and begins wearing it again. Although she has decided not to discard any shoes – partly because her daughters may wish to wear them in the future – certain pairs worn only once or twice are occasionally cleaned and prepared for *"adoption"*, usually by friends. Only rarely are shoes thrown away.

Kristina's shoe collection is thus dynamic, changing both in size and in its temporalities. Different segments of the collection become active at different times, sometimes triggered by seasons or events, at other times by a pair that calls for attention through mould or wear. Spatial arrangements also shift, as the locations of individual pairs or groups of shoes change over time. Drawing on Miller's theory of objectification (Miller 1987, 2005a), Kristina's shoes can be understood as objectifications of her various social roles (Goffman 1956, 1974) – as a mother, a dog walker, an active citizen – as well as of her memories and relationships. They thus form a constitutive part of her self, becoming elements of her "extended self" (Belk 2003; Gell 1998). In this sense, Kristina herself, along with events in her life, can also be understood as part of her shoe collection.

To capture the dynamic nature of the collection described above and account for all its diverse members – shoes, shoeboxes,

mould, Kristina herself – the shoe collection can, following Woodward and Grasley (2017), be interpreted as an assemblage (Bennett 2010). Assemblages, in Bennett's view, are "ad hoc groupings" that include various vibrant elements of people and things (2010: 23); groupings consist of the relationships between these vibrant elements, and they are constantly changing. Here, the assemblage includes not only shoes, but also cabinets, shelves, boxes, people, mould, dust, and light.

Thinking of the shoe collection as an assemblage allows us to focus on the dynamics and changes that take place over time both in the constitution of the collections – such as when some shoes are discarded and replaced with a new pair – and in their "uneven topographies" (Bennett 2010: 24), such as how different segments of the shoe collection are activated at different times. In relation to footwear, the understanding of the temporal dimension seems especially pertinent, as understanding the relationship between long-term and short-term practices of keeping collections is central. However, there is a certain dynamic that comes not from what people do with things, but from shoes themselves – such as when Kristina's shoes became mouldy. As in the assemblage, the agency is understood to be distributed across the entire assemblage, it is not only the agency of the individual pairs of shoes that matters but also the agency of the assemblage as a whole. This corresponds to the way the shoes in the collection are ordered, which shoes she uses more often, where she puts them afterward, which shoes are forgotten, how she cringes at the sight of mouldy shoes, and so on, and it highlights the importance of looking at the shoe collection as a whole, as well as the relationships between individual pairs and groupings. Further, this also shows the importance of viewing and considering a collection of shoes in relation to the practices it facilitates (such as the need to tidy up a particular pair of shoes) or enables (such as being able to climb a mountain).

Not all people who participated in the research arrange and order their shoe collections in the same way, and some might indeed be dismayed by the fact that I termed their shoe wardrobe (that consists only of 12 pairs) a collection, even if only for analytical purposes. Nevertheless, Kristina's case allows us to identify broader patterns. Shoe collections tend to follow an individual sense of order, typically along two lines. First, shoes are divided into habitual and non-habitual, with frequently worn pairs kept easily accessible. Second, shoes are ordered by season or by the social contexts in which they are expected to be worn – at work, at home, or at formal events (a point we will return to in the fifth chapter). In almost all cases, collections also include shoes

that are no longer – or not yet – worn, but are retained as memory objects, a theme we will revisit in the sixth chapter.

People engage with their shoe collections on a daily basis, and Kristina's case illustrates how ordering shoes parallels the ordering of everyday life. How and when shoes are selected for wear is the focus of the remainder of this book.

I DIDN'T HAVE SHOES THAT WOULD GO WITH THE DRESS

In her conceptualization of dress as situated bodily practice, Entwistle draws heavily on Bourdieu's notion of habitus (Bourdieu 2013 [1977]: 72) and explains how habitus, "a system of durable, transposable *dispositions* [emphasis in original]" that are produced by particular class groupings, links an individual to social structures (Entwistle 2016 [2000]: 35–39); habitus is a balance between an individual's agency and (social) structure. The notion of habitus is therefore tied to our social positioning, which is constituted through different fields such as home, education, or economic position, and mediated through our upbringing. In Bourdieu's terms (Bourdieu 2013 [1977]), taste emerges as the result of a particular habitus, and this perspective is useful for understanding how clothing styles are generated. Daily dress, including footwear, can thus be seen as a continual negotiation between the fashion system, the social conditions of everyday life, and the norms governing particular social situations (Entwistle 2016 [2000]: 37). Our habitus provides, as Sampson puts it, an "arena in which we both conform and rebel" (Sampson 2022[2020]: 104), and it is through this arena that our sense of which items can or cannot be combined, takes shape. We can see how Bourdieu's notion of habitus brings forward the importance not only of what one wears, but also of how items are worn together, including shoes and their relationship to the rest of an outfit.

As Mike Michael (2000) demonstrated, only a few people choose a pair of shoes purely for their utility or protective function. No matter how much they protest that this may be the case, footwear will also be chosen for its meaning (or lack thereof, as the case may be), and/or how it fits the individual style of the person.

As was reflected through many of the conversations I have had regarding shoes, style in the sense of the combination of the dress and how it is worn (Entwistle 2016 [2000]: 137) is a way of managing appearance; it can also be expressive of identity and, importantly, it also adapts according to social situations a person enters:

> I wouldn't say that I have a particular [style]. I have el Estilo de vida, the style of life. I would hardly call it a particular style. My styles are different for different purposes, but there is always something new [in my style]. And I love fashion channels. In the morning, when I do my morning exercises, [I watch it] /.../. What I am saying is that fashion always brings something new, new combinations that you did not think of before, but now they just "go". And sometimes I say to myself, "I always wanted to wear this combination, but I wasn't sure". I'm ahead of the times.

In relation to clothing, Sophie Woodward (2007: 101–118) notes her surprise at how much of women's clothing is gifted, borrowed, or passed on among sisters and friends. A similar point is made by Miller and Woodward (2012: 30) in their discussion of blue jeans and their biographies, where they observe that clothing biographies are never entirely personal but are always shaped in relation to others. As the points of intersections between the general influence on the person's life and specific stories and interactions, they identify two moments as particularly important: stories of borrowing, gifting, and passing down clothing, and references to the opinions of others regarding appearance. In contrast to these observations, footwear is only rarely borrowed or gifted. On one hand, this is partly due to the fact – as we will discuss in the fourth chapter – that through repeated wear, footwear takes on the shape of the wearer's feet and adapts to an individual's way of walking, retaining this shape even when stored. To wear another person's shoes therefore often feels *"weird"* and as if shoes *"don't fit"*, it literally feels as if one is walking *"in other people's shoes"*. On the other hand, several additional factors complicate the gifting or borrowing of footwear. For example, guessing the size of a person's shoes is a delicate matter, and shoe sizes differ from brand to brand. Some models are narrow while others are wider, and some models are designed with a high instep while others are not. As we have seen, considering all these factors and finding a pair of shoes that "fits" is sometimes an impossible task for oneself, let alone for someone else. Moreover, buying shoes often involves considering how a pair will fit into an existing assemblage of clothes, jackets, bags, and accessories, knowledge that is rarely shared in full with others. Lastly, there is the price of a pair of shoes, which is often quite high, and usually more expensive than buying a piece of clothing.

This does not mean, however, that shoes are never gifted. Lili, for example, has worn the same type of footwear – Converse All Stars, size 7 – for almost 20 years, and her mother has bought her a new pair as a birthday gift every two years, a tradition that continued well into Lili's thirties.

Shoes are thus one of the building blocks of broader clothing appearance. The "dressing rule" followed by all the people I worked with can be summarized succinctly: *"First the dress, then the shoes that go with it. Never the other way around."* Occasionally, however, shoes do become the starting point in putting together an outfit, and this tends to be closely related to two factors: the classification of the occasion (occasion or non-occasion; see the fifth chapter) and the size of the individual's shoe collection. The smaller the collection, the broader the expected purpose of each pair. Especially among younger participants, it was common to own only one pair of "*nice*" shoes for each season – suitable for formal or special events such as weddings. As Silvija, a woman in her mid-twenties, explained during one of our meetings, when we decided to attend a theatre performance together:

> For example, today I thought, "Oh, I'm going to the theatre, and the weather is so nice and warm, how about I put on a nice dress". And then I thought, "Okay, I have the dress, but I don't have a nice jacket to go with it, and I don't have nice shoes". And eventually, I changed my mind and changed my whole outfit because I didn't have shoes that would go with the dress.

Here we can see how the way people choose and wear their shoes in combination with clothes is connected to their sense of self and how they present themselves in daily life. This involves physical aspects, like the materials of shoes (Sherlock 2014), but also cultural and social influences, a point explored further in the fifth chapter. As the examples throughout this book show, shoes can reflect desires, creativity, frustration, conformity, and acts of subtle rebellion. As Silvija further reflected:

> My shoes, they're in black because it goes with everything. Most of my dresses are in black and I don't want my shoes to stand out. I want them to blend in with the rest. /.../ But one of my friends, she has 60 pairs of sneakers. She wears each pair for different purposes. I think she expresses her personality with these sneakers, and she says they make her feel different. But I am obviously not like that, because everywhere I go, I wear the same pair. Well, maybe they are my personality, and they say: "Clothes and appearances are not part of my character."

The embeddedness of shoes in everyday life and their responsiveness to the context does not relate only to relationships with other people. One of the more unexpected insights to emerge from my research concerned the relationships participants formed with their pets. These relationships often initiated broader lifestyle changes, including

more frequent walks and outdoor activities, which in turn reshaped everyday footwear practices. To summarize how such a relationship affected shoe use, we will turn to Aljoša's account of how adopting Beja, a dog he and his partner recently welcomed into their household, altered his footwear choices:

> Veronika: Do you often wear sliders?
> Aljoša: Oh, yes, I do. But I've noticed that my choice of sliders grows smaller, and I only have one pair at home, which I use mainly to take Beja out. For quick walks. But it's really interesting how the use of shoes changes when there's a new dog in the household. I, for one, have become much more pragmatic. Much more pragmatic. There's always a pair of sneakers that I can easily put on, even if they are well broken in. Because sometimes you're in a hurry and I don't have time to tie shoelaces. And in the summer, of course, the alternative are the sliders, which you just hop into and go for a walk. /.../ So now I mostly wear my sneakers. And I also have a pair of shoes that are perfect for walks in the forest, to get over the rocks and roots and things like that. And I can walk with the steadiest step because they don't slip and stuff. I also have to be careful because of Beja.

If we return to the title of this section, 'I didn't have shoes that would go with the dress', it becomes clear that this is not just an expression of practical inconvenience, but points to a broader logic of everyday dressing. Shoes do not simply complete an outfit; they actively shape which combinations are possible, which situations can be entered, and how one can appear in them.

Feeling good

From the moment people put their feet into a new pair of shoes, a process of adaptation begins; what appears as a mundane act of wearing shoes unfolds into a complex set of experiences and expectations that often remain unnoticed. The phenomenon commonly referred to as "breaking in" the shoes is a practice located at the intersection of the body, environment, and social expectations. At its core lies a widely shared understanding that new shoes require a break-in period, period of walking a fine line between comfort and discomfort. Over time, shoes are expected to conform to the contours of people's feet and lead to a coveted sense of balance and ease. One's feet and shoes rarely match exactly, and need to change each other's form to achieve a better fit. These expectations were repeatedly articulated in conversations. The following excerpt from one of the walks with Maja and Lili illustrates this belief and points to the fact that even when a person

finds a model of shoes they think fits them particularly well, as was the case with Lili's Converse All Stars, the break-in period is still understood as inevitable:

> Maja: But the truth with any pair [of shoes] is that you have to break them in, right? What you get at the beginning is something serial, and then you have to adapt it to the condition of your feet.
> Lili: Oh, yes, that break-in period is always painful. I remember my All Stars. For the first two or three months you always got these blisters until you broke them in. And then they're good.

Breaking in, however, is not understood solely as a material process through which shoes adapt to the shape of the foot and feet adjust to the characteristics of the shoe, but also as a nuanced social process through which shoes become what people frequently referred to as *comfortable*. The term *comfortable shoes* was by far the most frequently discussed topic during the research, and comfort was the main reason why people wear the shoes they do. Analysis of the ethnographic material shows that it is only through nuanced processes of discovering how a particular pair of shoes works in terms of what it can afford people physically and socially, and through processes of adaptation, that people discover a pair of shoes that "fits".

BREAKING THEM IN

The process of purchase described in the third chapter, and the activities that help people to orient within the ever-growing possibilities of choice, are the first step toward what Kopytoff (1986) termed the singularization of commodities. However, the intense process of the personalization of a pair of shoes takes place through the practice of wearing. What emerges from the ethnographic material is the extent to which finding shoes that suit an individual is often a prolonged and uncertain process. In some cases, the wrong choice becomes apparent immediately, when people try on a pair in a shoe shop and realize that the sole is too stiff, too hard, or that the model is too tight. More often, however, a poor fit reveals itself only over time. It is through prolonged wear that people come to realize that the shoes they have chosen do not fit them in the way they had anticipated.

In some instances, this realization occurs only after months or even years of wear, when it becomes clear that the materials or construction of the shoe do not correspond to the purpose for which it

was bought. Nataša, for example, realized that her first serious walking boots – made to order – did not fit her needs only after they had injured her feet so severely during a several-hundred-kilometre walk that she had to stop for several days to recover. As she explained, she *"didn't give in so easily"*, and did not want her shoes to prevent her from reaching her goal on time. Once she recovered, she abandoned the boots and replaced them with a lighter pair along the way. At other times, miscalculation is a consequence of variations in sizing between brands. To avoid this, Aljoša always tries on two different sizes at the same time, wearing each on one foot, because, as he puts it, *"if you try on one size and then the other, sometimes you just don't know"*. In other cases, the very perception of what "*fits*" changes over time. The intricacy of these processes was described in many conversations, but perhaps most clearly in Maša's case, as she only realized in her late twenties that she had been buying the wrong shoe size for more than a decade.

> Veronika: When did you realize that these shoes were too big?
> Maša: Do you know when? I know exactly when. Here, these are my sports shoes, for indoor sports. And I bought the ones I showed you downstairs, the white Nike sneakers. Well, when I tried on these Nike sneakers, they seemed a bit too tight, as I could feel them all over my foot, and I was convinced that they were too small. So, I went back to the shop to exchange them for the bigger ones, but they didn't have any, so I had to keep the smaller ones. Later I found that after they had adapted to my foot, they were much more comfortable than any other shoes I had that were number 39. And then when I put these sports shoes on again after some time, I couldn't believe how I could even exercise in them at all!
> Veronika: They were that big?
> Maša: Oh, yes! Horrible. I couldn't believe it. So now I have these [shoe insoles] in them. The shoes are terrible. I cannot wait to replace them. I have to wait until I have a bit more money for new shoes – these are the first shoes I want to replace. Because I use them a lot when I go to the gym, and they are terribly uncomfortable. /.../ Like when I jump over the swings and stuff. So yeah, that's quite – and I think they are terrible. I feel terrible wearing them because they are so big. And I didn't even know it until I bought these Nike sneakers!

Figure 4: Maša's sports shoes. Veronika Zavratnik, Ljubljana, 2023.

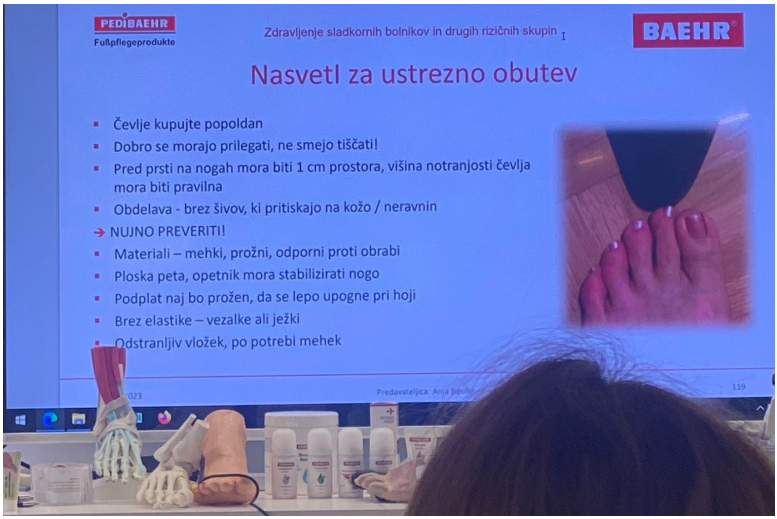

Figure 5: Advice on appropriate footwear. Sent by Eva. Ljubljana, 23. 5. 2023.[22]

22 At one of the training sessions Eva attended at her workplace, advice was given on proper footwear. In translation, the advice follows in this order: buy shoes in the afternoon; shoes must fit and not be too tight; there must be at least one centimetre of space in front of the toes; the height of the shoes should be appropriate; there should be no seams on the inside that press against the skin – be sure to check!; the materials should be soft, flexible and wear-resistant; a flat heel must stabilize the foot; the soles should be flexible so that they bend when walking; the shoes should have a Velcro fastener or laces and no elastic bands; a shoe insert that can be removed when worn out – soft if needed.

Maša's process of realization underscores the importance of wearing as a bodily practice. Wearing shoes is closely connected not only to the shape of people's feet, but also to the ways they walk. Through the practice of walking, shoes gradually "merge" with the body and begin to adapt to its contours. This relationship becomes even more pronounced when the same pair of shoes is worn day after day – not only for weeks, but for months or even years. The shoes we have worn extensively have changed and adapted to the contours of our feet. This constant and ingrained engagement sets shoes apart from most other forms of clothing. Unlike garments, shoes retain their shape when taken off and merge with the body when worn, rendering the relationship particularly intimate. Some authors have even referred to shoes as body "prosthetics" (Gonzales 1995: 133 in Lupton 1988: 144), as objects that "receive the imprint of human trace as the autonomy of their purely functional status is worn away by time". Through wear, the fabric of the shoe becomes personalized, and the shoe becomes, in a way, a mirror of the foot. Through this process, shoes adapt to people's physicality and become familiar.

People are often least aware of the shoes they wear most frequently – not only because they have adapted to the shape of their feet, but also because they have gotten used to walking in them and to their material features. Ida, a retired woman in her sixties, for example, has been buying the same model of shoe for the past 15 years. Although she owns other shoes, her most reliable pairs are her "*standard*" Legero shoes, of which she usually keeps at least two pairs at the same time: one that is already well broken in and becoming softer and more flexible, and another that she breaks in gradually, wearing it little by little until it is ready to replace the older pair that is getting too soft and too flexible. A day before one of our last meetings in one of the cafés in her neighbourhood, she had just celebrated the anniversary of her graduation with her former classmates. To celebrate the occasion properly, she put on one of the nicest pairs of shoes she owns, the only ones she owns that have a slightly raised heel. As always when we met, she commented on the pair of shoes she had chosen for our meeting, but this time her Legero shoes seemed to give her a special comfort, as her feet were exhausted from the prolonged wearing of shoes they were not used to:

> And already I have these shoes on again! And thank God I have shoes that I can put on without thinking about my feet, and the feet can do what they are supposed to do, and my head can do what it's supposed to do. So that's why I'm wearing them again. And I just bought another pair. The same – but I left them at home. /.../ I put them on a shoe tree. But yes, I'm wearing these shoes again, and I'm really

grateful to have them. I don't know when they will stop producing this model – but I was told that many of us [older ladies] are buying them, probably that's why they are still making them. And I was really happy when I came into the shop and saw that they had them in a new colour. And I don't see myself as a person who usually does what everybody else does or has the same taste. Well, here, with these shoes, I've found a point of contact with other older ladies.

Figure 6: Ida's standard Legero shoes. Veronika Zavratnik, Ljubljana, 2022.

As shoes adapt to the contours of people's feet through walking, they also respond to the environment; shoes act as a form of "armour" (Sampson 2022 [2020]: 76–78), protecting people's feet from the surfaces and conditions through which they move. They protect the feet from potential pollution, and they also quite literally protect them from injury, cold, and heat. This utilitarian purpose is of course self-evident, but it is usually – although not exclusively – more explicitly

emphasized by male than female shoe wearers. One way of contextualizing this emphasis is offered by Christopher Breward's (2006) discussion of fashioning masculinity through footwear. He shows how the persistence of aesthetic conservatism in men's footwear is historically connected to an emphasis on utility, durability, and simplicity of style, an orientation that became central to the promotion of "masculine" footwear, in contrast to the decorative and fashionable shoes designed for women. However, this is only one possible explanation and should not be generalized in terms of gender. In fact, in my research one of the strongest "advocates" of the utilitarian footwear was a woman. Often, the concern for functionality is shaped by material circumstances, such as an individual's financial situation or the number of shoes they own: the fewer pairs a person has in their wardrobe, the more clearly the function of each pair is defined. This logic is effectively illustrated through the words of Janez:

> For me, shoes are first and foremost something that makes walking easier. Like the shoes I told you about, which are not shoes, but more like sneakers, my access shoes. They are shoes that I can walk with everywhere. Okay, if there's snow I wouldn't go, or if it's really muddy. Maybe I'd go, but these shoes are not made for mud. They're more for walking around town and stuff. /.../ And shoes, they're kind of a support that also keeps my feet warm. I mean, I could also walk barefoot, but /.../ if I walked for a long time, I'd get cold. /.../ The most important thing is, that the shoes that I buy last as many kilometres as I could potentially walk in them. /.../ But all these shoes that I wear every day, they have to last. This is the only thing. And well, of course, I have to like how they look. I mean, I would never buy a pair of shoes I don't like.

Returning to the dual responsiveness of shoes, just as shoes absorb dirt from the streets and paths people walk on, they also absorb some of their bodily excretions, such as sweat. Dirt on the outside of shoes can often be cleaned relatively easily, whereas cleaning the inside proves more difficult. Shoes made of textiles or other fabrics can be washed in a washing machine, but shoes made of leather or other water-sensitive materials require different forms of care, most commonly disinfection sprays. Drawing on this dual responsiveness of footwear, Martha Chaiklin (2006: 175) points out that in early modern Japan footwear was perceived as "unclean both from its contact with the ground, and with the feet". This understanding resonates with my research, particularly in expressions of discomfort and disgust that emerge in conversations about second-hand shoes. In one group conversation within a family, Maša, one of the few participants who wears second-hand shoes, even asked her mother and sister whether she was *"disgusting"* for doing so.

These reactions draw attention to the role of bodily fluids such as sweat and to concerns about intimate infections, such as foot fungus. Over time, shoes become so closely associated with the wearer's body, so thoroughly imbued with its presence, that wearing someone else's shoes becomes deeply uncomfortable because one can literally feel as if one is walking in someone else's shoes. Ellen Sampson (2022 [2020]: 78), in turn, describes how through this dual responsiveness worn shoes can "become a reminder of our pasts", recording both the paths people have taken on their outer surfaces and traces of their bodies on the inside. In this sense, worn shoes function as repositories of physical and public histories, reminding people "where and who we have been" (Sampson 2022 [2020]: 78). While the evocative agency of shoes (Vogrinc 2005) is addressed in more detail in the sixth chapter it is important to note here that these processes establish a particularly intimate relationship between shoes and their wearers.

Regardless of how often people wear a particular pair, the shoe, when worn, is not a static object but changes through use. The shoes a person puts on in the morning and the shoes they take off at the end of the day are not the same, as they have inevitably been altered through wear. It is through this ongoing relationship that shoes can be understood as "things" in Ingold's terms (2010: 4), as a continuous "going on". Drawing on Joshua Pollard, Ingold explains how things "are processes" (Pollard 2004: 60 in Ingold 2010: 8). Through the practice of wearing, shoes indeed do become a continuous process: they are constantly transformed, changing shape, adapting to their wearer's feet, and responding to the influences of the environment.

The relationship between the wearer and shoes is best understood as reciprocal. Shoes adapt to the shape of wearer's body, but archaeological evidence also shows that feet adapt to the shape of shoes (DeMello 2009: ix). Often these adaptations do not refer only to the feet. Mauss's (1973 [1935]) concept of bodily techniques demonstrates how seemingly "natural" bodily movements, such as eating or walking, are learned. Shoes shape the way people move, while at the same time the material form of the body is changed through wearing different kinds of footwear. This becomes particularly noticeable when people begin wearing shoes with sturdier soles, such as mountain boots, or high-heeled shoes, which alter not only gait but also posture. But a similar process was described when, for example, men bought what they called "*nice shoes*" with a slightly raised heel, only about a centimetre, and suddenly found walking difficult because they are accustomed to flat-soled footwear.

As Ida's case illustrates, even subtle changes in footwear require learning new ways of moving. When, after a long period of wearing

her "*standard*" Legero shoes, she bought a pair of sandals, she found herself having to learn to walk differently.

> Well, these sandals I brought last time, have such thin straps. And of course, if you walk a lot and your foot is used to having support and not just a thin strap – these sandals, they – well, let's just say it took a while to get used to each other. But they were so pretty! But I had to choose when to put them on. I started slowly because my feet had to get used to them. And it did. These are the only shoes like that. Because they have these thin straps, and I have such a determined gait that I had to learn to walk differently. You know, I have only worn trousers all my life, and then I bought a suit with a skirt, it was a sexy suit – mamma mia – I remember how small my steps became because the skirt was so tight. That was the first time I had to learn how to walk, and those sandals were the second thing that taught me that. It's like the sandals would say: "Take shorter steps, walk more softly."

Figure 7: Ida's colourful sandals. Veronika Zavratnik, Ljubljana, 2022.

This relationship, however, was most intensely discussed by Marko, an engineer in his mid-thirties who is an avid skateboarder. He owns 11 pairs of shoes, including the astronaut winter boots that were introduced earlier. However, the shoes he considers an inseparable part of himself are his skateboarding shoes, of which he owns three pairs. All three are used for skateboarding, but he differentiates among them according to their degree of wornness. As he explains, *"a good skateboarding shoe is a construct of our society, there's no such thing as a perfect skateboarding shoe"*. Every skateboarder develops a distinct style and requires shoes that respond to what they want to do, and no universal skateboarding shoe can meet all their needs. For this reason, Marko claims that he can recognize a skateboarder from afar not by the model of shoe, but by patterns of wear. Even further: from the worn areas it is often possible to tell whether someone is left-footed, right-footed, or ambidextrous. His own shoes too, tell a story of his own performance, through the areas that are most worn out.

For Marko, breaking in a new pair of shoes takes approximately three to four weeks, to *"calibrate the shoes, make them my own, and relate them to my motor skills"*. Calibration is crucial, as a skateboarder needs to know precisely where the shoe begins and ends; shoes are in constant, close contact with the skateboard, and this *"feeling"* (i.e. calibration) can determine the difference between success and, as he puts it, *"picking up your teeth from the pavement"*. The inevitable result of this close connection is that every skateboarder knows that they have to "*sacrifice*" three or four weeks of bad skateboarding before they *"connect with their shoes"*. Throughout his active years of skateboarding, he has learned very well how he responds to new shoes and how shoes respond to his style of skateboarding; to such an extent that he was able to illustrate the wornness of his shoes after every two months' of intensive skateboarding, as shown in the figures below.

Marko's skateboarding shoes show how, while learning how to use newly bought shoes, both the shoes and he had changed, and new possibilities of action emerged (Michael 2000). Shoes as an object are thus part of the ongoing interaction with Marko that produces and provokes new understandings and relationships.[23]

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23 A similar observation was made by Maartje Hoogsteyns in her research on ballet pointe shoes. However, to describe the emerging relationship between people and pointe shoes, she drew upon Tim Dant's (2004) and Tim Ingold's (2000) notions of "assembly" and "person-thing" (Hoogsteyns 2012: 126).

NikeSB Janoski's

za primer sem izbral meni osebno najbolj primerno rolkarsko obuvalo, ki je tudi postalo najbolj razširjeno zadnjih 10 let

p. 1

Figure 8: Wornness of Marko's shoes – the shoe. Marko, Ljubljana, 2023.

prikaz glavnih elementov obuvala

kompozitni vložek ščiti pri udarcih s peto in prvič dodanta zaščita označena z rumeno, varuje celoten zgornji del nad podplatom pred obrabo

p. 2

Figure 9: Wornness of Marko's shoes – shoe parts. Marko, Ljubljana, 2023.

Figure 10: Wornness of Marko's shoes in the first month of skateboarding. Marko, Ljubljana, 2023.

Figure 11: Wornness of Marko's shoes from the second to the fourth month of skateboarding. Marko, Ljubljana, 2023.

Figure 12: Wornness of Marko's shoes from the fourth to the sixth month of skateboarding. Marko, Ljubljana, 2023.

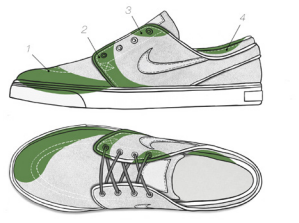

Figure 13: Wornness of Marko's shoes in the sixth month of skateboarding. Marko, Ljubljana, 2023.

Figure 14: Wornness of Marko's shoes – asymmetry of the wornness. Marko, Ljubljana, 2023.

Figure 15: Marko's skateboarding shoes. Marko, Ljubljana, 2023.

It is this intimacy, rooted in an unspoken and tactile form of knowledge, that emerges from the relationship between people and their footwear, which is often expressed as physical *comfort* and articulated by saying that shoes fit. But therein also lies a paradox: shoes become increasingly ideal in terms of comfort, yet through use they also become less ideal, as wear and tear gradually accumulate. As Kristina's shoe collection shows, she bought a new, similar pair and kept her favourite shoes in the wardrobe in order to preserve them and extend their lifespan. While Kristina's case is somewhat exceptional, the sense of regret over comfortable shoes eventually wearing out was frequently expressed by all the people I worked with.

The relationship with shoes in this chapter is approached primarily through their functional properties, most often articulated through the idea of a well-broken-in pair. In practice, this refers to shoes whose materials have softened through wear and adapted to the shape of the wearer's feet, as well as to what materiality of particular pair of shoes enables us to achieve. A similar argument is developed by Miller and Woodward (2012) in their study of blue jeans in North London. They referred to this kind of relationship as *practical comfort* (2012: 65–71), which in relation to jeans emerged mostly through the attitude towards denim as being a low-maintenance and long-lasting material, that through time softens and adapts to the shape of the body of its wearer. In their ethnography, Miller and Woodward identify three semantic fields of comfort: *practical comfort*, *appropriate comfort*, and *the comfort zone* (Miller and Woodward 2012: 65–83). In the following sections, I draw on this framework to show how, in relation to footwear, the notion of "feeling comfortable" similarly encompasses a broad range of practices.

In relation to footwear, individual perceptions of what is comfortable in this particular sense (i.e. practical comfort) vary widely. This becomes particularly evident when we consider how the same type of shoe – such as sandals – can evoke a sense of freedom and carefreeness for one person, while for another it produces feelings of insecurity and constant attention to their gait, thereby undermining that very sense of a lack of concern. What matters, then, is not the intrinsic quality of a particular type of footwear or the materials from which it is made, but the individual connotations, uses, and attitudes attached to a specific pair. What matters is the process through which a particular pair has acquired such status.

In the context of footwear, practical comfort is often literally linked to a sense of safety. This was particularly evident when working with people who described themselves as being "*older*". Here, feeling

comfortable was often expressed as trusting that the shoes would hold their feet in place, and prevent them from slipping, sliding, or even falling. In this sense, shoes that become comfortable by being worn – a quality much desired by most people – may actually lose their functionality for someone else. Sometimes this is also linked to specific health concerns, as illustrated in a conversation that begins with a discussion of a favourite pair of shoes that has, over time, become too comfortable. The balance between comfort and insecurity proves delicate: when shoes are new, they require breaking in to become comfortable; once they are fully broken in, they may also become unstable or shabby:

> Yes, it bothers me if they adapt too much to the shape of my foot. When I feel – I don't know how to put it, but when it happens that I slip in a pair of shoes, they have to go. Because it feels like the shape of the shoe has changed and it no longer gives me the support I need. And at my age, you have to be very careful about things like that. And because I was diagnosed with early-stage osteoporosis, I have to be careful about safety and the shoes, they have to give me a secure step. And, because I wear quality shoes, they usually last a long time. /.../ It's important that I don't actually feel the shoes, but I need to feel the support they give me. Just like that. You know, I don't want to have to pay attention to every step I take, I want to be able to walk. And when I'm walking uphill, I usually make sure I don't hurt my ankles or anything. So, I'd say comfortable shoes have to give me support when I walk, optimal support when I walk.

This understanding of comfort resonates with Miller's notion of the "humility of things" (2005a: 5; 2010: 51). Similarly, in a short reflection, one of the students involved in the preparation of the exhibition on shoes describes wearing only a single pair of shoes because they fit so well that she no longer notices them. It is precisely this good fit – this material invisibility – that gives her a sense of safety:

> Why do I wear only one [pair of shoes]? Because they are the most comfortable and functional because I know they will not let me down. I know they will not let me down wherever I go, because they are the most universal of all shoes [I have] /.../.

The practices discussed so far are integral to the complex process of finding shoes that fit. However, in this context fit does not only refer to the physical experience of how shoes feel on the feet, but also to how they align with how people feel about themselves, including questions of style, colour, material, and social context. All these processes are a constitutive part of the process of shoes becoming comfortable.

"When I don't know what to wear, I wear these [shoes]. *Everywhere. They're so comfortable. And now they are starting to fall apart. /.../ I don't know what to do, they're such a memorable model."* This is a familiar way in which people describe shoes they wear habitually: they are comfortable, go with everything, and seem suitable for almost any social situation. Feeling comfortable in such shoes is not only a matter of their physical characteristics, but also of familiarity: people know these shoes well enough to know what they enable not only physically but also socially, as they know in which situations they are appropriate. In her study of women's clothing choices with regard to habitual clothing, Sophie Woodward argues that such garments offer a sense of "safety", not only because women know how to wear them and what they allow them to do, but also because they are confident that the chosen outfit looks good (Woodward 2007: 156). A similar dynamic can be observed in relation to footwear, especially to shoes worn habitually: people know how these shoes work in terms of their physical comfort and in terms of their personal aesthetic, and in this sense they can be understood – following Mauss (1973 [1935]) – as part of embodied, practiced cultural competencies.

As the following conversation between Kristina and Maša illustrates, however, physical comfort and aesthetic considerations are rarely experienced as separate domains in practice, but are closely intertwined:

> Veronika: How come you wear these shoes so often?
> Kristina: Because they are my favourite. To be honest, I don't even think about other shoes. I don't even think about them. And these shoes are here, close by, and I just put them on. /.../
> Maša: For me it's also important that they match other things I wear. I usually wear things in a similar style, and the shoes have to match. That's the most important thing for me. And of course, that they're comfortable, that's also very important. But I'm not sure what comes first.
> Kristina: Oh, I know – for me it's definitely both: they have to be comfortable, but I also have to like them. If I like them and they're not comfortable, I don't wear them. And if they're comfortable and I don't like them, I don't wear them either. /.../ And these [my favourite] shoes I can wear with anything. They would also go with my wedding dress if I decided to marry my husband again. (Laugh)
> Maša: Maybe you're right. The fact that they match the rest of my clothes is a necessary condition for me to feel comfortable in these shoes. Because sometimes I put on a pair that's more special and I like it very much, but I'm very conscious of these shoes. I know that I'm wearing them. I'm aware of it. But with these [my normal] shoes,

I just put them on and forget about them. I mean, I feel really good wearing them. And they go with everything I wear, so I don't have to think about it.
Kristina: So, you feel one with your shoes?
Maša: Maybe. And maybe I like some other pairs a little better, but then I'm always aware that I'm wearing these other shoes, and that they are a little different from the shoes I usually wear. But maybe my regular shoes are also different for someone, and they think: "Oh, look at her shoes, she's wearing granny shoes"!

Figure 16: Kristina's favourite pair of shoes. Veronika Zavratnik, Ljubljana, 2023.

Figure 17: Maša's favourite pair of shoes - granny shoes. Veronika Zavratnik, Ljubljana, 2023.

Maša's last words point to another semantic field of comfort conceptualized by Miller and Woodward (2012: 72–77), namely appropriate comfort. Here comfort is understood in terms of people's sense of the social surroundings, in that it is important to feel comfortable and good about ourselves in social situations. This understanding of comfort extends beyond footwear. As Joanne Entwistle (2016 [2000]: 6) notes, "[i]n almost all social situations we are required to appear dressed, although what constitutes 'dress' varies from culture to culture and also within a culture, depending on the situation or occasion." Her thoughts point to the fact that shoes, as part of material culture, sit at the intersection of the physical and social environment (Sherlock 2014: 47), the body, and the ability to participate in and shape our experiences. In relation to footwear, this is linked to the practice of wearing as a process through which people come to know their shoes, as Maša explained in one of our conversations:

> But for me, the situation is like this: I don't really know if I feel comfortable in a pair of shoes until I've worn them for at least a day. That's the point where it becomes risky – to wear something I don't know, because I don't know how I'll feel in them. Like those tassel shoes, I told you about. I really liked them, and they are comfortable, and every time I looked at my feet I was like, "Oh, they're so cute". And then I saw myself in the mirror at an event, from far away, and I looked like a dwarf! I looked stumpy. And my sister was wearing high heels and looked so elegant. So, I never wore these shoes again.

If we stay with Maša's shoe collection and return to her favourite pair, it becomes clear that even her habitually worn "granny shoes" (*babičasti čevlji*) can become problematic in certain social situations and make her feel uncomfortable.

> Maša: There was a time when I felt uncomfortable in these shoes. I often had to go to the office to work. And our offices are behind the warehouse, in an industrial area. And every time I had to go there – now I only work with them occasionally – and I wore those shoes, or when I wore nicer clothes, I always felt... Because it's an industrial area, with all the trucks and people loading things onto them. I always felt so bizarre. And I said to myself, "No, it's okay, I like the way I look". But I still felt strange. So, I started wearing my Nike sneakers. And I don't want to be the kind of person who adapts so much to her surroundings, but unfortunately, that's me. So, I often wore Nike sneakers, to look sporty and to fit in better.
> Veronika: Why did you feel uncomfortable?
> Maša: Well, because of everything – the warehouses, the trucks, all this industry. Factories, smoke from the chimneys, and so on. And nice shoes didn't fit in so well.

This tension resonates with Georg Simmel's view (1957: 543) of how individuals and society can be interpreted through two antagonistic forces that limit each other: "We seek to combine in uniform spheres of activity the tendency towards social equalization with the desire for individual differentiation and change." This perspective offers a productive starting point for thinking through the complexities and contradictions that shoes entail. Discursive theories of fashion have often approached clothing as a form of communication (for example, Barnard 2006 [1996]), suggesting that the shoes we wear say something about us. Indeed, different meanings are ascribed to shoes. However, to approach the relationship between shoes and identity as straightforward, and to focus solely on what shoes "mean" to an individual, risks neglecting the embodied nature of shoe-wearing, as well as the role that relationships, individual circumstances, and disruptive moments play in everyday life.

In this sense, Miller and Woodward's (2012: 63) argument that relationships to clothing are always "peopled" is particularly relevant: in essence clothes are mainly an instrument in people's relationships with others. Footwear, then, is not only expressive but constitutive of the relationships people have – with themselves, with others, and with the shifting social contexts in which their lives unfold. This point is clearly articulated in Miha's reflections on following unwritten rules when preparing for an event:

> For me, it has always been important to me that I'm dressed and feel comfortable in what I wear. I have never seen any point in being dressed in a way that makes me feel bad or makes me feel underdressed. /.../ Yeah, it's a really shitty feeling when you see that – well, maybe there are people who don't care, but if you do, then [clothing] is also a part of it, a dimension that makes you feel like you belong, that you belong. And therefore, you will choose clothes and shoes that fit [the occasion].

The responsiveness of shoes to social contexts is explored in greater detail in the fifth chapter, where the focus is on how footwear can sometimes be the (only) element of a broader outfit that distinguishes between (non-)occasions. Here, however, the emphasis remains on the notion of feeling comfortable, which in this context can be understood as finding a balance between feeling (i.e. shoes that do not pinch) and looking good. Sports shoes, commonly perceived as inherently comfortable, provide a particularly illustrative entry point into this discussion, and draw attention to the contradictions that can arise in specific situations:

> I just remembered one of those feelings when I felt inadequately shod. And it was awful; it was really awful. Awful, awful, awful. Oh, shit. Okay, I was out with my dad, and we were visiting our holiday home in the mountains. We were there because some of our relatives who live in the United States were visiting and staying in Bovec. So, we went there to say hello. And we were dressed very sporty because in our house there's no electricity, no hot water, and it's in the mountains, so it only makes sense to wear sporty clothes. So, the only shoes I had with me were my well-worn sneakers. They were not in as bad a condition then as they are now – at least I hope they were not. /.../ And I had my sports clothes on because we also went cycling. And then in the evening, they invited us to dinner at the hotel where they were staying. And – oh, my God, I don't know if I have ever felt so awful before in my life. When they invited us, I told them I didn't have anything nice to wear and they said it didn't matter, my cousin would not even wear any make-up and stuff. And in the evening when we got there, everything was very fancy, and we ordered a multi-course dinner, and I don't know what else. And at our house, I couldn't

> even take a shower, I just washed with cold water, but that didn't help. And then I was also dressed like this. I literally only had my running shorts and a windstopper with me. It was awful. And I was wearing these running shoes – I felt really awful; I tried to hide them under the table. /.../ I wanted to sink into the ground.

The discomfort described here emerges from an unexpected situation. Had she known about the invite and the nature of the restaurant in advance, Maša would have chosen different shoes (and clothes) and adjusted her appearance accordingly. This moment can be productively approached through Susan Kaiser's (2001) concept of "minding appearances", which offers a way of thinking about footwear in relation to the notion of "safety" discussed by Woodward (2007: 156). Minding appearances refers to the active, conscious process through which people make decisions about their clothing and overall appearance. It involves a thoughtful consideration of how one presents oneself to the world, and thus making conscious choices to align one's appearance with personal values, cultural norms, and social contexts. The concept foregrounds an individual's agency in shaping one's appearance and the meanings conveyed through the related choices, while also acknowledging that personal style is not just about aesthetics, as it can also be a means of self-expression, identity negotiation, and sometimes even resistance to social norms and expectations. In this sense, minding appearances resonates with Bourdieu's concept of habitus (2010 [1984]) and aligns with the "classic" fashion paradox described by Simmel (1957): the simultaneous desire to conform and to differentiate through style, as it is reflected in the folloving conversation:

> Mojca: You know, I think that sometimes I feel that I'm too well dressed. I often feel that I'm too dressed up. And it would be more fun for me if I could dress the way I want. Not too extravagant or anything, but just the way I want.
> Maša: But I think you already do that.
> Mojca: Not as much as I would have liked. Because then I feel like I'm too dressed up and I can feel people looking at me. Not that it bothers me that much, but it does. And I don't want to dress in a way that draws too much attention to myself, and with the clothes and high-heeled shoes I really like, I would do that /.../. I don't want to stand out too much. Maybe I wouldn't and it's all in my head, but still, maybe I would.

The notion of appropriate comfort is most often articulated through negative experiences, specifically through recollections of situations in which shoes made people feel uncomfortable. In this sense, an analogy can be drawn with Featherstone's argument that in order to

know who we are, we must first know who we are not (Featherstone 1992: 286 in Muršič 1997: 7). By extension, knowing when we feel comfortable also requires knowing when we do not.

These examples show how the way people choose their shoes and construct their appearance involves wider social and cultural contexts, and how in everyday life shoes can be used as a tool to negotiate interactions with others.

While concepts such as minding appearances (Kaiser 2001) and the tension between conformity and individuality (Simmel 1957) offer important ways of understanding appropriate comfort, they do not fully capture the role of objective social circumstances, which may significantly constrain how and whether people are able to choose footwear that corresponds to a given social context. This dimension becomes particularly evident in Boštjan's account. As a student, he worked as an occasional host in a museum in Ljubljana, a job that required a black outfit, including shoes. At his first event, he wore black trousers and a black shirt, but lacking black shoes he chose a grey pair. Just before the event, his supervisor told him that unless he bought black shoes, he would not be allowed to work. At the time, Boštjan was *"completely broke"* and had only €20 left to last him for the next two weeks. But since keeping the job meant buying some black shoes, he went to a shop known for selling the cheapest footwear and bought the least expensive black shoes available: a pair of black canvas shoes costing €7.99. Although the white rubber sole meant they were not entirely compliant with the dress code, his supervisor accepted them temporarily, while instructing him to buy *"proper"* shoes for the next event. Boštjan never did so. Instead, he continued to wear the same cheap shoes to work for the next five years, deliberately. While the acute sense of helplessness he associated with calculating how much food he could buy with the remaining €12.01 eventually faded, the discomfort produced by that situation stayed with him for a long time. Now, with a stable and well-paid job in the IT sector, he reflects that he would never again allow himself to be placed in a situation that made him feel so uncomfortable.

When thinking about comfortable shoes, a somewhat contradictory view of comfort comes to the fore. Comfort is not always simply a matter of personal preference, but is connected to a whole array of social factors. This resonates with Woodward and Miller's (2012) semantic distinction between practical and appropriate comfort mentioned above, a distinction that is very well articulated in the accounts of Mojca and Nataša:

Mojca: But with some shoes, I don't care that much about the comfort. I mean, I do, but in a different way.
Veronika: So, it depends on the shoes?
Mojca: Yes, it depends on the shoes. When I go for a walk, they have to be comfortable. When I go to town, or to an event it's not so important if they're [comfortable] or not. Only if I walk a lot in them, then I want to be able to walk in them. But when I go to town, I don't walk so much, and it doesn't matter.

And in a similar way Nataša explained:

Nataša: Oh, yes, it bothers me if my shoes are not comfortable. But I don't mind if my high-heeled shoes are uncomfortable. (Laughs) Because the benefits are quite different. It all depends on the interest. That's me, I just don't care [if they're comfortable].

A key distinction between habitually worn and occasionally worn shoes, it could be argued, lies in the expectation of a different kind of comfort. Habitual shoes are expected to adapt to the feet and provide physical comfort, whereas with shoes worn only occasionally, people often expect to adapt themselves to the shoes in order to suit a particular occasion. And, as one participant said, *"ideally, you find shoes that cover both of these aspects, the comfort, and the aesthetics".*

Drawing on Miller and Woodward's discussion of the "sore thumb syndrome" – referring to "wearing jeans that are as tight as possible, so tight that the only way the wearer can get them on is by lying down on the floor of the changing room and using the thumbs to squeeze the buttons into their holes" (Miller and Woodward 2012: 76) – a similar logic can be observed in relation to certain types of footwear worn occasionally. In this sense, we might speak of an "itchy shoe syndrome", for which high-heeled shoes offer a particularly fitting metonym. As shown in the fifth chapter, high-heeled shoes did not feature prominently in this study; nevertheless, when some women chose to wear them, the aim was rarely physical comfort, but rather appropriate comfort – to complement an outfit or to conform to the conventions of a specific occasion.

It is through the nuanced practices discussed in the previous two sections that footwear gradually becomes comfortable. Yet these reflections also point to another recurring insight: in relation to footwear, the ultimate experience of comfort can often only be experienced when without shoes – when one is barefoot. Indeed, when people describe a pair of shoes that they find very comfortable, they often say something like the following: "*When I wear these shoes, it feels as if I am barefoot*" (*Ko jih obujem, je kot bi bila bosa*). As one of the participants

stated, after a day spent with feet enclosed in shoes, this sense of relief becomes especially pronounced: *"There's no better feeling than when I take off my shoes in the evening. I'd make a hot bath for my feet and rub them with essential oils."*

ON SOLID GROUND

Some authors have been critical of shoes for separating people from the environment and turning them into "stepping machines" (Ingold 2011). To some extent, arguments that frame shoes as prisons for the feet (Ingold 2011: 36) resonate with the experiences of some wearers –particularly when shoes are too small or otherwise experienced as physically uncomfortable. Yet for most people I worked with, shoes enhance their physical abilities and enable them to do things they would otherwise not be able to do. As argued earlier, shoes function as a kind of "armour" (Sampson 2022 [2020]: 76–78), protecting the feet from the potential dangers of walking barefoot – for example, on the hot, sun-baked asphalt of Ljubljana's streets. This duality of footwear – its capacity to simultaneously separate us from the ground beneath our feet and to enable movement across that same ground – occurred repeatedly in the conversations with participants. This was particularly evident because some of the people I worked with wore, or began wearing, barefoot shoes during the course of our collaboration. However, the positive health impacts of being barefoot were also generally acknowledged, even among those who rarely practised it.

In a short reflexive essay, Randy Laist (2020) captures this ambivalent relationship through his experience of walking barefoot across a parking lot at an American beach – an episode that, for him, unfolds as an almost existential dilemma:

> Barefoot in the parking lot, my being is focused down to a pair of feet, painstakingly preoccupied with self-preservation and pain--avoidance. If I only had my trusty sneakers, all the solid ground in the world would be available to me. The quarter inch of material between my feet and the ground would separate me from the physical earth but, in making the world accessible, would create a world too. (Laist 2000)

Laist's reflection foregrounds people's dependence on shoes. We rely on particular forms of footwear to navigate specific terrains

and to navigate the social spaces in which we move, as in many social situations being barefoot would be deemed highly inappropriate. A dilemma similar to Laist's surfaced repeatedly. This tension can be linked, at least in part, to broader public discourses that promote health and bodily care, frequently encouraging walking barefoot or wearing footwear in which the feet can "breathe". In the conversations, people often expressed a desire to spend more time barefoot. Yet despite this widespread acknowledgment of the purported benefits of barefoot walking, the practice itself is in fact very rare.

Historically, the social meanings attached to bare feet have shifted considerably. In the relatively recent past, being barefoot or shoeless was often closely tied to social and economic conditions. In the Slovenian context, Bojan Knific (2020: 283–291) shows that shoelessness was relatively common well into the first half of the 20th century. Walking barefoot in this period needs to be understood in relation to multiple factors: at times as a matter of habit or seasonal adaptation, but more often as an expression of economic constraint and the careful, sparing use of shoes. More broadly, barefootedness reflected differences between rural and urban settings, between men and women, while children in many instances went barefoot long into childhood. Beyond this local context, shoelessness has also been discussed as a marker of social subjugation and low status. Margo DeMello (2009: 30–32), for instance, situates shoelessness within wider global histories, including slavery, where it could function as an explicit sign of domination. In his discussion of sneakers, Miner (2009: 88) takes this argument even further, suggesting that in the context of slavery, "one's ability to wear shoes is intertwined with one's ability to be a human".

At the same time, DeMello also draws attention to forms of deliberate shoelessness, highlighting its symbolic meanings. These include religious practices of removing shoes as a sign of humility or purification, as well as voluntary shoelessness understood as a form of liberation or refusal. In this latter sense, being barefoot became associated with countercultural movements such as the hippies, for whom bare feet signified freedom. A similar reading is offered by Ellen Sampson (2022 [2000]: 62), who interprets bare feet and shoelessness as the "foot without responsibility". It is precisely this connotation of freedom that also surfaces in the experiences of the people I worked with. This connotation of freedom was most clearly reflected in the fact that the only context in which people regularly walk without any kind of footwear or socks is during holidays, most commonly by the sea. Importantly, this practice does not refer only to the beach itself

– where walking barefoot may appear self-evident – but also extends to everyday activities such as going for a beer, a coffee, an ice cream, or taking a short walk back to a hotel, apartment, or campsite: places people would ordinarily visit wearing shoes.

Being barefoot is also closely linked to a sense of safety. This safety is understood both as a feeling of control over where one can go and what one can do, and as a means of avoiding potential dangers – such as broken glass, bees, snakes, or sharp stones – that may be encountered when feet are not protected by shoes. Decisions about whether or not to walk barefoot are therefore often shaped by a combination of perceived risk and personal upbringing, as well as by the ways in which these two factors intersect. One participant explained this, as follows:

> [Only rarely do I go barefoot], too little, actually. I was brought up very conservatively and very fearful. My mother was afraid of everything, and my father was very strict – a great combination, right? /.../ So, no, only by the sea. There it's a very special feeling [to walk barefoot]. Even at home, I'm not barefoot, even if I could be. Maybe I'm worried that something might hurt me, that's the reason in my head. But one of my daughters and her son, who live in the countryside, start walking barefoot as soon as the snow is gone, they walk barefoot everywhere – and I admire them. /.../ It was only when they started writing about how healthy it is to walk barefoot in the grass that I sometimes walked barefoot with my mother- and father-in-law, who live on the farm. But I never continued with that. You know, I'm a person who likes to be safe, I prefer to know what's going to happen, and when you walk barefoot [you don't know]. So, I have never walked barefoot. But I'd like to – in another life.

The notion of safety is often closely intertwined with ideas of cleanliness. In some cases, the possibility of one's feet getting dirty is itself perceived as a risk – for instance, stepping in dog urine or excrement. This overlap frequently produces contradictions: places that are imagined as clean may simultaneously be understood as potentially dangerous. "Nature", for example – often evoked in the form of a meadow – was described both as a space where walking barefoot feels appropriate and as a site of numerous hazards (such as a sting from a bee), which in turn discouraged barefoot walking. In this context, the lawn emerged as a compromise: a surface perceived as sufficiently "natural" to allow barefoot walking yet controlled enough to minimize risk.

Finally, being barefoot is associated with intimacy. This association does not refer solely to the strict practice of walking barefoot or being shoeless. Rather, the intimacy of feet also becomes perceptible

through more subtle practices – such as changing enclosed footwear for flip-flops or slippers, or simply through the act of revealing one's bare feet. Showing bare feet is often perceived as an intimate, and at times explicitly erotic gesture. This was particularly evident in conversations about high-heeled shoes and their erotic appeal, which frequently shifted toward discussions of bare feet as part of the body with particular appeal to some people. This intimate and occasionally erotic connotation of bare feet was affirmed by both men and women, although it was most often attributed to women's feet – a pattern that can also be traced historically (DeMello 2009: 105–107; Steele 2006). As one participant explained: *"When I'm barefoot, it's almost a part of intimacy for me. Because they are normally so protected, my feet feel to me like part of my nakedness. That's how I see it. They are almost an erotic element."*

Because feet are usually covered – by shoes or at least by socks – their exposure is often sometimes accompanied by a certain degree of anxiety, particularly during transitional periods between seasons. At these moments, people exchange sturdier footwear for lighter shoes that reveal more of the foot. For women, this anxiety was frequently articulated in relation to whether their feet were sufficiently well cared for; although, as Eva, who works in a beauty salon, noted, increasing numbers of men now have regular pedicures. More broadly, however, this anxiety was connected to the fact that the feet were becoming more visible: questions of appropriateness in relation to weather, warmth, and the extent to which one should reveal the body. One male participant described this process as a kind of mental adjustment:

> You have to make a mental shift – it's like taking your clothes off. You wear something that exposes you. But you have to do that, or you will get too hot. And you want to do that because you want to say to summer, "Come to me". /.../ And I see this exposure in terms of warmth. You know, now in June I will expose my feet, [but I wonder] "Will I be cold? Can I get used to the street dust?" But with this unveiling, I have some difficulties because I would rather not [show my feet] because I don't know if "now" is the right time. In short, I wouldn't do it, I would put it off until tomorrow, but then I force myself to do it today and be done with it.
> Veronika: Why do you want to wait?
> Because it's hard for me, it's hard for me. Why should I deal with it today when I can just put on my normal shoes and go.

This notion of anxiety, however, cannot be completely generalized, as some people feel quite confident about their bare feet. At the same time, conversations and observations in the beauty salon during my pedicures highlighted the significance of the moment when feet

become exposed. This importance can also be traced "quantitatively" through the noticeable increase in pedicure appointments during spring and summer.

In this context, wearing flip-flops or sliders was sometimes equated with the feeling of being barefoot. This was particularly evident in Mojca's case, who referred to one of her pairs of sandals as *"bare shoes"* (*bosi čevlji*). A similar equivalence between open footwear and bare feet also emerged in relation to cleanliness and exposure to dirt: in both cases, feet require careful washing at the end of the day, due to what the participants commonly described as *"the dust from the street"*.

Figure 18: Mojca's bare shoes. Veronika Zavratnik, Ljubljana, 2023.

The importance of bare and especially healthy feet was particularly emphasized through my work with people who wear barefoot shoes.[24] In many cases, the decision to start wearing barefoot shoes was motivated by health-related concerns, either directly related to the feet – such as flat feet or bunions – or to the body more broadly, for example difficulties experienced after childbirth – such as rectus diastasis. Barefoot shoes were often described as a practical means of addressing or alleviating these conditions. The differences between "normal" shoes and barefoot shoes are most apparent in the thickness and flexibility of the sole. In barefoot shoes, the sole is designed to be as thin and flexible as possible – ideally flexible enough to be rolled up. Other defining features include a wide front that does not constrict the toes, the permeability of the sole, allowing the wearer to feel the surface beneath their feet – the relief, pebbles, roots, and asphalt – and secure fastening to the foot, which is particularly important in the case of sandals. All these characteristics mean that wearing barefoot shoes is as close as possible to walking barefoot, ensuring that the feet continuously respond to the stimuli of the surface and are thus gradually strengthened. This strengthening is most commonly described in terms of enhanced functionality: increased flexibility of the toes and ankles, the ability to soften one's steps, and the repositioning of the big toe, as the foot gradually widens. Against this background, "normal" shoes are frequently described as too tight, too rigid, and too firm, and therefore as detrimental to foot health. They are often referred to – quite literally – as prisons for the feet (see also Ingold 2011: 36), and the process of breaking shoes in, discussed earlier, is commonly characterized as *"absurd"*.

The imitation of walking barefoot is also accompanied by an altered way of walking. As discussed earlier, walking is a learned bodily technique (Marcel Mauss 1973 [1935]), and it is simultaneously conditioned by footwear (see Tim Ingold 2011: 33–50; Ingold and Vergunst 2008) and in this sense, walking barefoot is also a learned practice. Learning to walk barefoot typically begins gradually, through shorter and lighter activities, allowing the feet to adjust to new stimuli and a different bodily dynamic. Eventually, a person *"changes the way of walking and you start to walk like a cat, more elegantly, in order to better cushion the impact"* (for a similar discussion of barefoot running, see Bajič 2017a: 196–236). Wearing barefoot shoes also reshapes how comfort itself is understood. On the one hand, this relates to practical

24 Although barefoot shoes are indeed shoes, it seems appropriate to consider them in the context of bare feet, because that is what they are trying to imitate.

comfort, as discussed earlier, but here the logic is reversed: barefoot shoes are not expected to adapt to the contours of the feet. Instead, they are designed to allow the feet to assume what wearers describe as their "natural" shape. On the other hand, this shift also affects appropriate comfort, which is often articulated through the acceptance that such shoes may look unusual – but that this simply no longer matters.

Figure 19: Tamara and Luka's barefoot shoes. Veronika Zavratnik, Ljubljana, 2022.

IT FEELS LIKE HOME

If being barefoot was described as the ultimate state of feeling comfortable, indoor slippers introduce yet another dimension of comfort, not least because wearing slippers feels like being home.

The habit of changing into slippers can be described as the practice that unfolds upon arriving home, when shoes worn outside are replaced by footwear intended exclusively for indoor use. This indoor footwear may take various forms: soft-soled textile or leather slippers, ordinary sliders, or other types of light footwear with a firmer sole. In some households, warm fleece or woollen socks (*debeli štumfi*) fulfil the same function and are worn instead of slippers. In what follows, I refer to all such forms of indoor footwear as slippers. This reflects how the related terms are used in the conversations, where these different items are understood less as distinct categories and more as variations of the same practice: wearing footwear that is reserved for indoor space. This practice is closely linked to the expectation that visitors will

also take off their shoes and put on slippers when entering a home. The normative strength of this expectation is reflected in the fact that most Slovenian households have a drawer, basket, or shelf prepared with slippers for visitors – *"at least two or three pairs, for just in case."*

In this sense, I share the observation made by Peter Stanković (2014) and his students that wearing slippers is a relatively widespread practice in Slovenia, often regarded as a "natural fact" (Stanković 2014: 368). I would further suggest that the habitual replacement of outdoor shoes with slippers can be understood as an embodied cultural competence (Marcel Mauss 1973 [1935]). While the practices discussed here are grounded in specific groups and places, it is nevertheless significant that none of the people I worked with wear outdoor shoes indoors. Only two participants stated that they prefer to walk barefoot or in socks – and even they kept several pairs of slippers for their visitors. Wearing outdoor shoes indoors was consistently described as something people could hardly imagine, let alone practise.

In the scholarly literature, the practice of removing shoes upon entering a home is most commonly associated with Asia, particularly Japan and parts of the Middle East (Chaiklin 2006; DeMello 2009: 297–298), where it is closely linked to notions of purity and cleanliness (DeMello 2009: 31–32; Stanković 2014: 368). In her discussion of purity and pollution in Japan, Martha Chaiklin (2006: 163) notes that outdoor footwear was traditionally never worn indoors, "not even when the floor was made of earth". She further demonstrates how, in early modern Japan, this practice shaped domestic architecture, with the addition of vestibules designed specifically for changing footwear (Chaiklin 2006: 166). By the 14th century, the practice extended even to toilets, where changing footwear served both hygienic and symbolic purposes (Chaiklin 2006: 171).

In a different historical context, Rebecca Shawcross (2014: 124) traces the growing popularity of slippers in 19th-century Europe. Here, the term "slipper" did not refer "to comfortable, cosy footwear", but to a "style of indoor footwear that is more akin to boudoir slippers". This type of footwear would typically be worn in the privacy of the bedroom or for certain activities within a family setting, such as having breakfast.

In her memoirs, Erica Johnson-Debeljak (2009: 87) reflects on the practice of wearing slippers indoors through a literary lens, situating it within a broader Balkan cultural imaginary:

> It is sometimes said that the real border between Western Europe and the Balkans could be drawn along an imaginary line, on one

> side of which people drink espresso and cappuccino and macchiato (Italians, Spaniards, the French) and on the other side of which they drink Turkish coffee (the Ottoman hordes). Another way to define this same border would be to draw a second imaginary line, similar to the first, only this one would divide the people who maintain the Oriental practice of wearing slippers within the inner sanctum of the home from the people on the other side: the barbarous Occidentals who wear shoes or socks or flip-flops or nothing at all on their feet regardless of whether they're inside or outside, in the bedroom or the barroom.

Johnson-Debeljak's words resonate with the experiences of the people I worked with (see also Jezernik, Muršič and Bartulović 2007). In conversations about the origins of this practice, references to the Balkans frequently emerged, alongside recurring expressions of amazement at how people could wear outdoor footwear indoors. However, these explanations do not necessarily trace the actual historical origins of the practice, and it might to some extent also be connected to the changes in lifestyle that arose with increased urbanization, and discourses that promoted increased cleanliness of the home (see, for example, Sitar 2015a, 2015b: 469). Most commonly, wearing indoor slippers is associated with the idea of cleanliness, understood as an effort not to bring dirt from outside into the "sanctum of the home" (Johnson-Debeljak 2009: 87), a finding that aligns with the research of Stanković and his students (2014). At the same time, this practice also works as a means of actively producing the distinction between outside and inside, home and not-home.

In a passing remark on slippers, Ema Surman (2002: 211) notes how one of the teleworkers she worked with relied on the distinction between shoes and slippers as appropriate for different settings and occasions in order to orient herself within her work-from-home environment – in terms of "what to do and how to behave". Although this example does not fully translate to the case of slippers in Ljubljana, it nonetheless suggests that slippers can function as the type of footwear that frames (Goffman 1974) a particular place as home. This framing is further reinforced by the common understanding that a pair of slippers constitutes an appropriate housewarming gift when someone moves into a new home. A similar association can also be traced in contemporary media and advertising, such as the line "Home is where the slippers are", aimed at tourists and other foreign visitors to Slovenia (Golob 2020).

Similar to what Chaiklin (2006: 163) describes for Japan, albeit in a less monumental way, slippers usually have a dedicated place in the home – most often in the hallway, near the entrance door, where they

are easily accessible to both residents and visitors. At the same time, practices surrounding the wearing or not wearing of slippers vary according to several factors: seasonal changes, the presence of animals in the household, the perceived state of cleanliness, and, in the case of visitors, the relationship between host and guest. These factors tend to be intertwined and mutually dependent. For example, it is more common not to wear indoor slippers during the warmer months, when walking barefoot is perceived as more comfortable – but only when the cleanliness of the floor is considered sufficient. Maja, for instance, explained:

> You know, sometimes I have trouble with that. It makes me nervous if I feel I'm walking over some breadcrumbs or something. I cannot tolerate that – "Let's go and clean that up". And if I walk over it barefoot, it's even more [disgusting] – even if it's in my apartment, you know, it's not like someone else's breadcrumbs bother me. But I just cannot stand that [feeling]. /.../ At least I know it's time to vacuum when it starts crunching under my feet. Then it's enough.

What becomes obvious is that wearing slippers is not only about keeping the home clean, but also about keeping one's feet clean; care for the feet emerged as the second most frequently cited reason for wearing slippers, a consideration that becomes particularly salient in moments such as going to bed or putting one's feet up on the couch or a kitchen chair.

Similar logic applies when visiting others. Slippers are worn out of respect for the host, based on the understanding that wearing outdoor shoes indoors is inappropriate and may bring dirt into the home. At the same time, visitors also wear slippers to protect the cleanliness of their own feet. Silvija's explanation is particularly illustrative:

> Silvija: /.../ In my view, shoes are a part of the outside world. And that's why when my flatmates come home – that's exactly why I bought a doormat – I demand that they take off their shoes on this doormat and not bring the outside world into my flat. That's why I can't understand these Americans. How can you walk around in your home with the same shoes you wore outside, with all the piss on the ground and everything – do they even know how dirty the ground is? And that's why I want to separate that. So, you put on slippers and only wear them indoors. Or you can be barefoot, whatever.
> Veronika: Do you wear slippers in your flat?
> Silvija: Yes, we do. But I wear them more or less selectively. If they're there when I come home, I put them on, if not, I can wear my socks. When I was a kid, I hated slippers. But when I visit, I always want to wear slippers because I don't know. /.../ If your feet are sweaty, they leave those stains on the floor – so I prefer slippers.
> Veronika: So, you always wear slippers when you visit?

> Silvija: Yes, I usually ask if they can give me a pair. You never know how clean the floor is. And there's always someone who says, "No, you can come in with shoes", but I never do that. Not only because of them, I know they can clean the floor, but because I just can't imagine wearing shoes indoors, I just can't. And then when someone is really persistent, I feel uncomfortable, really. Because I know where I've walked with these shoes.

Occasionally, exceptions are made for certain visitors who are allowed to enter the home with their shoes on. This most often refers to elderly people or others who may have difficulty taking their shoes off. In one of the families, visitors were in fact usually asked to keep their shoes on. Because the household included four dogs, whose presence inevitably brought dog hair and other dirt into the home, hosts preferred that visitors keep their socks clean by wearing shoes instead. On the other hand, another participant described an entirely different logic for wearing indoor slippers:

> I like being barefoot at home. In my family, we were all barefoot at home. /.../ But at my boyfriend's house – when you enter the house there's a room with floor tiles and there you put on your first pair of slippers. When you go into the room with the parquet floor, you have to change your slippers for another pair. And then when I go into his flat [upstairs] – I put on Birkenstock slippers to go up the stairs, but when I go into his room, I have to take them off. It's funny, I change my slippers three times.

In his interpretation of the practice of wearing indoor slippers, Stanković (2014) draws on Bourdieu's concept of habitus, and in particular on his discussion of taste (Bourdieu 2010 [1984]). He links the practice of changing outdoor shoes for indoor footwear to the value of practicality (Bourdieu 2010 [1984]: 244; Stanković 2014: 373), understood primarily in terms of keeping the home clean and reducing the amount of domestic labour, most notably cleaning. Within Bourdieu's framework, such an orientation towards practicality is commonly associated with a working-class habitus (Bourdieu 2010 [1984]: 244), a connection that Stanković situates within the specific historical developments of Slovenia. While this interpretation helps to explain the persistence of the practice and situates it within the broader context of dress culture in Slovenia, the fragmentary examples discussed above suggest that, from the perspective of individuals, the practice extends well beyond mere practicality. What emerges instead is an underlying sense of the creation of order in Mary Douglas' terms (1984 [1966]). The distinction between a dirty outside and a clean inside closely parallels the practice of taking off one's shoes and the

notion of "protecting" the home from the potential impurities of the outside world. At the same time, it also symbolizes a "shift" in context, with slippers further framing a particular place even more strongly as a home. In this sense, efforts to keep the home clean should be seen as "a positive effort to organise the environment" (Douglas 1984 [1966]: 2) producing a sense of comfort not only through the boundary between outside and inside, but also through the internal organization of the home itself – a process in which slippers play a central role.

Transformative shoes

In the imaginary world of Charles Perrault, an ordinary cat puts on a pair of boots, and the boots transform him into a cat who is anything but ordinary: a Puss in Boots with authority and power, capable of extraordinary feats. With the help of these magical boots, the cat helps his poor and seemingly unremarkable owner to achieve wealth and success. In another imaginary world conjured up by the Brothers Grimm, the delicate glass slipper finally leads a young prince, after a search throughout the kingdom, to a young woman whose feet perfectly fit the shoe that was left behind when she fled from the ball at midnight. With the help of the slipper that fits, a mistreated young woman is thus transformed into a real princess and escapes the constraints of her previously difficult life. In yet another world that is closer to reality than a fairy tale, Paolo Nutini, a Scottish singer, sings about his new shoes. One Tuesday morning he woke up tired and feeling bad, he looked

through his wardrobe and put on some clothes and old shoes, but he felt they did not fit him, and then:

> I put some new shoes on / and suddenly everything's right. / I put some new shoes on / and everybody is smiling, it's so inviting. / Oh, short on money but long on time, / Slowly strolling through the sweet sunshine. / And I'm running late, and I don't need an excuse / 'cause I'm wearing my brand-new shoes.

Each of these instances drawn from well-known narratives and popular culture points to the wide-ranging transformative capacity associated with footwear. Shoes are not merely functional items, but instead they possess an almost enchanting capability that surpasses their practical function. Their seemingly magical powers offer solutions for the protagonists who confront real-life challenges in these narratives. Moreover, shoes are perceived as also having importance for one's identity – through the act of changing their footwear, the main characters gain the ability to transition from one identity to another.

Similarly, Mimi Pond, an American writer, illustrator, and cartoonist, comments on how shoes "seem to have the magic power to make you into someone else, someone without skin problems, someone without thin hair, someone without a horsy laugh. And they do." (Pond 1985: 13 in Belk 2003: 1) In a similar vein, in her analysis of the rhetoric surrounding the advertising of new technologies concerning sneakers, Alison Gill (2006: 274) notes how sneaker manufacturers use "the belief that choosing the right pair of shoes is the first step in committing to a program of exercise" to convey the message that new shoes can improve an individual's athletic performance and thus make them a better runner, basketball player or, for example, climber. Here too, we can see the transformative potential of a pair of shoes.

The transformative capacity of dress is very extensively documented in the anthropological literature. C.A. Bayly (1986), for example, in his consideration of Indian clothing in the context of the Swadeshi industry, identified three overlapping basic uses of clothing in social processes: to symbolize status, "magical or 'transformative' use" (Bayly 1986: 286), and as a pledge of future protection. In relation to the transformative capacity of clothing, he discusses the capacity of clothing to "change the moral and physical substance of the individual" (Bayly 1986: 286). As he explains, this notion is based on two ideas: first, the capacity of clothing to absorb the spirit or substance and preserve it for years; and second, the notion that the individual is an amalgamation of different qualities such as colours and textures, each with its spirit. This leads to the spirit of a particular fabric being

able to combine with a person's substance and "transform it" (Bayly 1986: 286); the cloth is thus not merely a symbol of status, but a necessary component of transformation.

Mukulika Banerjee and Daniel Miller (2003) similarly point to the transformative capacity of the sari. In one of their examples, they note how boys "talked about the magical change in their mothers as they prepared to go out for an evening, transforming themselves from comfortable, domestic and maternal figures into elegant and glamorous ladies" (Banerjee and Miller 2003: 67). Sophie Woodward (2007) provides multiple examples of the transformative capacity of clothing for the women she worked with. Perhaps the most monumental change is told through the story of Emanuela, a participant diagnosed with breast cancer. Her greenish grey trouser suit help end her depression after radiotherapy, giving her the strength to re-enter a "socialized life of clothing, /.../ return[ed] to her full existence as social being" (Woodward 2007: 64), and brought about a transformation in her life.

We can see how a momentary transformation, for example feeling good when seeing your reflection in the mirror in a shop – as was the case with Emanuela's green suit – may also engender more long-term and monumental transformations. The transformative potential of dress at important life transitions is also described in the literature. Susanne Friese (2001) writes about bridal dresses, and Michele Thurgood Haynes (1998) about debutantes' dresses. Regarding the latter, she discusses how fitted corseted dresses, covered with rhinestones and beads worn by young debutantes, transform them both physically and psychologically (Thurgood Haynes 1998: 12).

Alongside broader discussions of dress, its transformative aspects have also been traced through everyday practices of wearing shoes, most notably in relation to high-heeled shoes and (emphasized) femininity (Robinson 2015; Dilley et al. 2015), but also in relation to red shoes (Webster 2009) and sneakers (Hockey et al. 2015). Victoria Robinson, for example, focuses on transformative moments for women connected to their shoe practices, to show how the everyday can be transformed into something memorable and out of the ordinary, by putting on high-heeled shoes or Dr. Martens boots within the realm of the family or work obligations. Similarly, Hockey et al. (2015) focus on sneakers and show how putting them on can engender a transformation, whether in the sense of becoming more athletic or more fashionable. Elaine Webster (2009), on the other hand, moves away from specific categories of footwear and instead approaches shoes through colour, focusing on red shoes and their symbolic meaning. She argues that the potency of redness that gives such shoes their transformative

potential derives from stories and film, and she approaches the analysis through psychoanalytic treatments of myth. Her conclusions, however, open up insight into how red shoes were interpreted by her participants; they "spoke of desire, change, risk, and movement, always in terms of enlarging the self and becoming more one's self" (Webster 2009: 173). Despite differences in analytical perspective, some of her arguments about the transformative potential of red shoes resonate closely with the findings of my own research, which suggests that colourful shoes generally make people stand out or feel more confident.[25] However, for the younger women in my research, this colourfulness was often expressed through an anxiety of not wanting to stand out.

This chapter builds in part on the work of other researchers who have noted the transformative potential of footwear (see also Belk 2003), and turns to the ways in which the promises of transformation outlined above resonate with the experiences of people who go about their daily lives wearing ordinary pairs of shoes. Rather than approaching transformation as something exceptional, the chapter remains attentive to everyday practices of wearing shoes, and it takes these practices as an occasion to consider the dynamic and fluid processes of identification. In this sense, it explores the notion that changing one's shoes can sometimes quite literally mean expressing different facets of identity.

People use shoes as markers of distinction that contribute to processes of social differentiation and identification of the individual – for example by wearing shoes that enable culturally specific abilities (such as climbing or dancing certain dances) or by altering one's image depending on how shoes are worn and combined. When planning a trip to the Alps, visiting family on a Saturday morning, trekking the Cuban rainforest, going bouldering, or attending a rock concert, one will most probably choose a different type of footwear for each of these activities. Moving between different pairs of shoes enables different affordances, allows people to navigate different territories, and illuminates different aspects of identity – such as being a mountaineer, a family member, a traveller, a climber, or a music fan. Understanding shoes as material and semiotic resources (Michael 2000; Sherlock 2014) for navigating natural, cultural, and social environments means that changing one's shoes or taking them off can mark shifts between different aspects of one's identity. This understanding is closely linked

25 This point can also be paralleled by the fact that Silvia Bellezza, Francesca Gino and Anat Keinan (2014) chose the colour red to coin the term "red sneaker effect", which refers to the consequences of non-conforming behaviour (see below).

to contemporary approaches to identity, which have moved from seeing it as static and bounded towards conceptualizations of it as processual and relational (see, for example, Giddens 1991; Jenkins 2014), as well as to approaches that understand things as constitutive of who we are (Miller 2005a: 42).

The focus of this chapter, however, is also shaped by the observation that all the people I worked with, irrespective of their background or gender, have some pairs of shoes they wear a lot and some they wear only rarely. On average, every person tends to have two to four pairs for every season that they wear a lot – for example, flip-flops, Birkenstock sandals, casual sneakers and running or walking shoes for summer, and regular winter shoes, sturdier shoes suitable for snow and rain, and ski boots for winter. Sometimes these numbers increase depending on work or other social requirements. Alongside these routinely worn pairs, however, there are other shoes that are worn only occasionally. This chapter follows the dynamic relationship between these shoes, paying attention to the temporal and spatial dimensions through which they are worn, stored, and brought into use. To elucidate this relationship, we will also focus on how these shoes relate to one another.

BECOMING SOMEONE ELSE?

Using the description of Kristina's shoe collection, we have seen how one of the lines along which it is organized and used is the distinction between shoes that are habitually worn and those that are not, a point that can be generalized across my ethnographic data. This distinction also mirrors the distinction between habitual wardrobes and glamorous clothes noted by Woodward (2007). The distinction made in this sense is simple. Habitually worn shoes are those that people do not have to think much about precisely because they are worn frequently, usually on expected or repetitive occasions. These are often shoes people wear to work, for daily errands, shopping, sports or other physical activities, and so on. Shoes that are worn habitually are usually kept in places that are easily accessible. As we have seen with Kristina's shoe collection, this is typically a shoe cabinet in the hallway or a dedicated shoe space near the front door. In some cases, shoes worn at work are not kept at home but in work settings themselves, such as Silvija's shoes – as a nurse, she leaves her shoes at work, where they are also cleaned and disinfected – or Aljoša's shoes, who, as a mortician, keeps three pairs of shoes at work: *"working boots, nice shoes, and fancy shoes."*

Silvija's work shoes are particularly illustrative, as they show that different sets of shoes are habitually worn – work shoes, shoes for sports and physical activities, shoes for lounging around the house or garden, and shoes for walking the dog – and that these sets are usually linked to the different social roles (Goffman 1956, 1974) that an individual occupies. Shoes that are habitually worn are – in Mauss's terms (1973 [1935]) – part of embodied, practised cultural competencies, and as discussed in the fourth chapter, people know how these shoes "work" and what they can afford either physically or socially. On the other side of this division, there are shoes that are worn non-habitually, only occasionally or very rarely, usually on certain special occasions, such as formal events, weddings, birthday parties and the like: this category also includes shoes that are waiting to be worn (again), and shoes that sometimes never leave the comfort of the home. It is these non-habitually worn shoes that move into the foreground of our discussion here.

The everyday,[26] or the mundane, usually refers to routines and often taken-for-granted activities, behaviours, and interactions that constitute our daily experiences; something that constitutes what Henri Lefebvre referred to as the "common ground" or "connective tissue" of all our thoughts and activities (in Gardiner 2000: 2). Putting on shoes before leaving the house is usually, indeed, a routine act,[27] but as we have seen in the discussion on comfortable footwear, it should also be seen in broader terms. It goes beyond being just a functional act; it unfolds as a nuanced, dynamic interplay among social expectations, personal choices, and different temporalities of everyday life. From this perspective, we will consider the transformations related to the practices of wearing and changing shoes that emerged in the analysis of ethnographic data.

In this chapter, however, transformation is understood as potentially unpredictable, transitory, and easily abandoned, rather than as inevitable progress towards a transformative goal, as is often the case in imaginary examples listed above. These transformations can only be temporary and last only a few moments or hours. At other times, they may be longer term and associated with broader life transitions, or may occur regularly, for example, when putting on work shoes. In

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26 In their research on wearing blue jeans among North Londoners, Daniel Miller and Sophie Woodward (2012), make claims for the everyday and ordinary not to be equated, despite this being the case in most theoretical accounts (2012: 144; for the conceptualization of ordinary, see pp. 139–156).

27 Many nuanced and empirically grounded views on routines are provided in the publication *Time, Consumption and Everyday Life: Practice, Materiality and Culture* (Shove et al. 2009).

all these cases, transformation relates to how people feel and position themselves within specific social contexts. On the one hand, such transformations bring about a separation between habitually and non-habitually worn shoes; on the other, they engender the transformative capacity of shoes for everyday life. Linked to this is the understanding of the everyday in which we will follow Highmore (2002), and which is seen here as being in constant dialogue with the possibly extraordinary, transformative aspects of everyday life.

Transitions, on the other hand, are connected to transitions between social categories – such as single to married, active at work to retired, student to employed, and so on. In anthropology, the process through which individuals evolve into persons and integrate into society was originally conceptualized using Van Gennep's framework of rites of passage (Van Gennep 1960 [1909]). His emphasis was on the concept of transition – the journey from one identity to another – facilitated by ceremonial rituals. Subsequent anthropological work (Turner 1974; Cohen 1994) has proposed more flexible models of transition. Nevertheless, the fundamental ability of humans to move between identities remains central to the study of identity, with contemporary authors describing it as processual, fluid, embodied, and open to change (Giddens 1991; Jenkins 2014). If we understand shoes as constitutive of who we are (Miller 2005a: 42; Miller and Woodward 2012: 24), observing the practice of putting on and taking off different shoes can be a lens through which to explore the dynamic and embodied process of identification, of becoming who we are. Through such observations we can understand how individuals are "being themselves", and how they inhabit and move among different social roles, activities, and different stages of life. A particular pair of shoes can enable certain actions, limit others, or steer a person in a particular direction. As people move between different pairs of shoes, their affordances come into being, shaping how different aspects of identity are enacted in the flow of everyday life. In this sense, adding shoes to or removing them from the body can engender social transformations.

At this point, we can return to the work shoes of Aljoša and Silvija. Similar to indoor slippers, shoes that are kept at the workplace, that are part of the prescribed work uniform, or that are worn only at work, can be understood as items that frame (Goffman 1974) a place as work and an activity as a job. For Silvija, however, this framing is particularly explicit, as she understands her work shoes as an item that "brackets out" (Garfinkel 1984 in Woodward 2007: 144) the domain of work from other areas of her life. As a nurse, she is required to wear a uniform, and every few years the hospital provides her with a pair

of work shoes. These shoes are not a compulsory part of the uniform and can be changed to suit individual preferences. Nevertheless, Silvija found the hospital-provided shoes to be more practical, and thus exchanged her Skechers sneakers for white clogs. These shoes are explicitly tied to the domain of work and must meet the practical demands of her job, overriding her usual aesthetic preferences. She experiences them as closely connected to her work persona, and clearly separated from other spheres of her life. When she wears white clogs, she is a nurse; without them, she is Silvija. As she explained:

> In my work, I need shoes that are easy to disinfect and clean. I wear them for eight hours and, basically, these shoes are not a part – they are not a part of how I am normally dressed. They are not a part of my image; they are just shoes that I wear at work. It's basically a different persona, it's not me. And they are not aesthetic, I would never say "Oh, my work shoes are so nice". I bought them two years ago, the first ones, Sketchers sneakers, and they are the complete opposite of what I normally wear every day. But then I quickly realized that they are not very practical, especially because they have to be white, they get dirty very quickly. At work, I often have to take breaks on a bed, or I bump my feet against something, and they get dirty very quickly. And that's why these clogs that we get from the hospital as part of our work equipment are much more practical. You can wash them, disinfect them or do whatever needs to be done.

Figure 20: Silvija's work shoes. Silvija, Ljubljana, 2023.

Through the consideration of Silvija's work shoes, we can see how putting on a pair of – in this case, habitually worn – shoes engenders her transformation into a nurse, and how this transformation is embedded in her daily routine.

In their discussion of tea-drinking practices in contemporary Turkey, Güliz Ger, and Olga Kravets (2009) point to the way special and ordinary times *seem* to be separated. On the one hand, here is the taken-for-granted, barely noticeable ordinary; on the other, there are special times that seem to be distinguished from the ordinary by special discourses, special objects, rituals, or particular times. Their analysis, however, undermines this apparent distinction by drawing attention to the importance of mundane practices of consumption in objectifying what they call special times. Using the changes in tea-drinking practices that accompanied the growing popularity of tea bags, electric kettles, and plastic cups, which all transformed tea-drinking practices, they show how the slow practice of drinking tea, once deemed mundane, transformed into a special practice in the world of rapid change. The materials and tools related to drinking tea play a central role in this shift: it is only in relation to the electric kettle that traditional tea acquires its significance as an object marking a special time. This relational perspective is particularly instructive for the discussion of the transformative potential of footwear in everyday life. It draws attention to the ways in which "special" times are embedded into everyday life; the "special", or indeed extraordinary, is embedded and in constant dialogue with mundane, everyday practices, rather than being separated from the habitual practices we perform every day (see also Robinson 2015).

In a similar way, shoes that are worn habitually come to be experienced as "everyday" only in relation to those that are worn non-habitually. This argument also resonates with broader approaches to everyday life, such as Highmore's (2002: 3) observation that the "non-everyday (the exceptional) is there to be found at the heart of the everyday". He proceeds to demonstrate that understanding the exceptional requires a close examination of the everyday, as this is exactly where it is found. His argument resonates with Ger and Kravets' point (2009), and further enhances the view that mundane experiences can be seen as subsuming the "special" or extraordinary – or, as we will further see in some of the shoes discussed below, how what could be termed "shoe moments" (Robinson 2015: 916) can be understood as emerging from, rather than interrupting, everyday social contexts.

In her study of women's clothing choices Sophie Woodward (2007: 24) argues that a crucial part of understanding clothing is to

understand its materiality as "lived and embodied"; how a fabric feels on the skin, how it holds the body, how it conceals or reveals, what it affords to the body. As we have seen in earlier chapters, she shows how choosing clothes is a complex activity shaped by anticipated social contexts, daily schedules, planned activities, and the obligations that structure the day. In this sense, clothing and shoes should be understood as a kind of framework chosen with daily obligations and individual and societal expectations in mind: "*I already think in the morning about what awaits me during the day – will I have time to go home* [to change] *or not?"*

Maja, a young woman whose job included having meetings with her clients, many times online, sometimes in person, explained how in her previous job she kept an extra pair of *"slightly nicer shoes"* in her drawer to reduce the stress of being unprepared for an occasion and not being taken seriously because of her footwear. Here, adding to or removing shoes from the body can be seen as a tactic (de Certeau 1984) that can engender social transformation, and transform a young woman into a serious project leader with more authority. In general, women often described how in work contexts they had to negotiate their positions, and how shoes enabled them to achieve some kind of transformation, in the sense of changing into another pair of shoes to gain (more) authority. These moments, however, were often described as a combination of how the shoes position them socially, but also how they make them feel physically or emotionally. We will discuss this in more detail in the following section, but in the following example of how Kristina described the work situation of one of the women she regularly meets while walking her dog, we can see how these transformations are perceived as twofold:

> She is a web developer, she creates websites. And she said that for some time now /.../ she has been wearing suits and high heels when she goes to meet with clients. She said, "Since I started wearing high heels, everybody treats me differently, nobody wants to negotiate the price of my work anymore". I don't know, she's probably a bit more confident too, it must be something. But I, for example, will never put on different shoes because of my clients. /.../ I'd rather not work for them.

A similar dynamic can be seen in Janez's account of playing football barefoot during a work sports day, where taking off his sandals allowed him to position himself differently in relation to his colleagues, and to inhabit a more assertive, fearless role:

> Well, only once [did I play sports barefoot] when we had a sports day at our work. /.../ And then I took off my Teva sandals. /.../ And here I was playing tough again: here I am, playing barefoot. We were playing on a macadam, the stones were sharp and there I go barefoot, "I will try to outplay you, you can't touch me!" And you know, that's how it is, that's how you show them – right from the beginning you show that you're not afraid of them.

Janez's experience is particularly illustrative, in that it brings into focus the strong sensory and affective dimensions of embodied experience – one that emerges through the interaction between the body, especially the feet both with and without shoes, and the surrounding personal and social environments. Accounts of such temporary shifts in how people feel when they change their shoes recur throughout the ethnographic material. People described, for example, how different pairs of shoes made them feel differently. In a casual conversation with a friend, a hairdresser explained how wearing new shoes always made him feel special. On another occasion, a young woman told one of the students how wearing comfortable shoes not only changed how she felt about herself, but also how she related to others, noting that *"shoes change the way I feel, and they change the way I feel about others."*

At certain times people also connected how a pair of shoes made them feel in relation to images drawn from popular culture. For example, when Kristina wears flip-flops, she feels *"more grounded"*. She explained that while watching the film *Notting Hill*, she noticed a scene in which the main actress was also wearing flip-flops and, in that moment, appeared "*more grounded*" and "*humbler*" than in other scenes where she wore high heels. This observation can be linked to earlier discussions of comfort, as footwear is integral to everyday engagements with the world: it stands at the intersection of the physical and social environment (Sherlock 2014: 47), the body, and the capacity to participate in and shape experience. Moreover, as we have seen, compared to other items of clothing, people's relationship with shoes is particularly intimate. Shoes assume the shape of people's feet, respond to the influences of the environment, and bear traces of the paths people have walked and the puddles they have stepped into, in this way becoming markers of embodied individuality. Rather than being "dead" objects, shoes share people's biographies. As such, they are not only visible items, but are also crucial to how people move through the world. They are intimately linked to the body and shape how people feel.

Sometimes these temporary, even momentary, transformations are recalled precisely because of the material qualities of shoes, as we

have seen in the case of comfortable footwear or in Janez's description of playing football barefoot. At other times, as in the case of Maja's work shoes, such transformations are also engendered by the ideas and meanings invested in a particular pair of shoes. A pair of shoes may, for example, make someone feel younger, more confident, or more fashionable; it may testify to competence in a particular sport or leisure activity, or emphasize professional skills. In certain situations, these meanings are activated through specific circumstances in which a person is involved.

During a Saturday hike on one of the hills surrounding Ljubljana, Janez and I found ourselves talking about the notion of comfortable shoes. Walking through the forest, he recalled the first time he wore his new walking boots and described how this pair enabled him to travel back to a time he had never experienced, transforming him into a hominid:

> You know, the first time I wore these shoes that I bought before I went on my trip to Tanzania – I tested them a little bit before we left. /.../ And then I walked along this route back to my home, and I realized that I was in a kind of hollow that was covered with trees. And then I moved back in history, to the beginning of the Holocene, and I was transformed into one of the hominids, Neanderthals, and [I] observed the surroundings. And then I walked slowly, literally trying to walk like a hunter in the Holocene who had to observe his surroundings to avoid being attacked. I associate this with walking, observing what is happening around me to see if there's any possible danger. /.../ And I just remembered this feeling a few days ago, this moment when I had these shoes on.

These interactions with shoes, imbued with meanings and transformative moments in the sense of how people feel, often render otherwise mundane moments memorable, somehow extraordinary, which is also reflected in the fact that people remember these particular moments and the feelings they triggered.

(NON-)OCCASIONS

In the previous chapter, we explored the notion of comfort and its relation to social context, introducing the notion of appropriate comfort – the idea that individuals must feel appropriately dressed and shod in specific social situations to feel comfortable. When everyday social contexts are approached through footwear practices, shoes emerge as

objects that have the capacity to make the difference between what is perceived as an unmarked social event and a special occasion. This often parallels the distinction between shoes that are worn habitually and those that are worn only occasionally. These divisions often emerge from personal rules that people establish for themselves to distinguish between an unmarked and a marked occasion (see also Miller and Woodward 2012: 84–89). At the same time, these distinctions are also a consequence of different social expectations and requirements that depend on the context, such as work requirements or how often an individual is engaged in formal or cultural events. Shoes that are worn habitually tend to accompany situations when people are not required to dress or appear in any special way, and we can understand these pairs in as sense that through the practice of wearing them habitually, they become naturalized. "Special" events, by contrast, are usually understood as situations that require people to reconsider their habitual footwear choices and conform – or not – to the overall expectations.

A useful conceptual lens for thinking through this distinction is offered by J. C. Faris's (1973) differentiation between "occasions" and "non-occasions".[28] Based in a small fishing community on the coast of Newfoundland, Faris examined how different events and activities were categorized and observed that villagers classified certain collective events as "occasions", and others not. He developed this distinction in order to explore not only what separated these events, but also what they shared (Faris 1973: 51). Faris ultimately defined occasions as "special /…/ social events of sanctioned deviation" (1973: 6). While his focus was primarily linguistic, the distinction he draws provides a helpful way of contextualizing everyday footwear practices. In what follows, the term "occasion" is used to refer to social events that are marked, among other things, by the wearing of shoes that are not habitually worn. In this sense, footwear becomes one of the elements through which an event is framed as "special" and identified as an occasion. A similar logic has been noted in relation to clothing, for instance when an occasion is marked by not wearing jeans (see Miller and Woodward 2012: 87).

Rather than treating occasions as fixed categories, we will focus on tracing the dynamic relationship between shoes that are worn habitually and those that are worn only occasionally, and on examining the role shoes (can) play in shaping how situations come to be perceived as occasions or non-occasions. Seen through the lens

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28 I owe the reference to Faris' work to the paper by Dilley et al. (2015) on high-heeled shoes, femininity and identity.

of footwear, occasions usually engender a self-conscious awareness of wearing certain shoes, simply meaning that on occasions one is *"aware of the shoes"*. This is a similar notion to what has in terms of clothes also been termed "event wear" (Woodward 2007: 142), in the sense of clothes that are "only worn at social occasions in the presence of other people".

In relation to shoes, this awareness of the shoes is, on the one hand, connected to the fact that they are not worn very often and are indeed what people term a special choice or even special shoes. It is closely linked to the observation discussed in the previous chapter, namely that shoes which are worn habitually are expected to conform to the foot, the image, and the intentions of the individual. With occasionally worn shoes, this relationship is often reversed. In these cases, people frequently describe how they accept having to conform to the shoe in terms of physical (dis)comfort to be appropriately dressed for the social contexts they enter. For some people, this is expressed in terms of shoes not offering them the comfort they expect from their habitually worn pairs as they are too sturdy or not yet well worn. For others, it is a matter of unfamiliarity with the model of the shoes, because certain models alter the way they walk, as we have seen with Ida's sandals in the previous chapter.

Monika, an academic in her mid-forties, has a similar experience in relation to the shoes she usually wears for more formal events, which not only look but also feel different:

> You know, I'm a sporty type of woman, and I like to do things my way, physically and mentally. But when you are visiting someone or something, you have to – well, you dress up a bit more and wear nicer shoes too. /.../ Hooray! And then I walk differently because with these shoes I cannot walk in my usual way. The shoes I told you about, the ones I wore yesterday, they're comfortable, but with a slightly raised hill, so my sense of balance is different, it's a bit different. And I walk differently, my stride is different, my pelvis works differently. And I always feel a bit uncomfortable when I cannot walk at my own pace. But in some cases, you decide to tidy up, as they call it, and the price I pay for that is that I feel a bit uncomfortable. But not to the extent that the shoes would itch.

Another detail that Monika points to is that when people speak of occasions, they sometimes speak of actual occasions, such as formal events, visits to the theatre or opera, or life transitions – graduations, birthdays, christenings, wedding – and these events consistently intersect with what is widely perceived as an occasion. At other times, however, these occasions might appear unremarkable from an outsider's perspective, but the fact that one wears special shoes marks an event as

an occasion, such as visits to friends or relatives. For example, meeting with me was sometimes described as an occasion because people deliberately chose a pair of shoes they would not habitually wear – either a newly purchased pair or one I had not seen before. At our second meeting, during a casual stroll around town, Janez explained that he had chosen the shoes he was wearing *"just to show them to you, you haven't seen them before"*. These examples point to the nuanced and relational ways in which shoes participate in the making of occasions.

Important events in individual lives, such as life course transitions are "classic" events that are indeed considered an occasion. These are often events when people conform to particular social conventions and select dress and shoes according to what they think is expected. While social context is always taken into account when getting dressed, on occasions – as discussed in the previous chapter – the question of shoe fit becomes closely tied to social expectations rather than to physical comfort alone. Events such as a prom dance, graduation, wedding, first day at work, and similar would sometimes trigger a purchase of new shoes which later become closely associated with memories of these moments, as will be discussed in the sixth chapter.

These situations often evoke a degree of anxiety, as individuals negotiate the need to conform to conventions while still striving to feel like themselves. This tension between conformity and individuality recalls Simmel's discussion of the development of modern life (1971; see also Woodward 2007:141), where he delineates two forms of individualism as subsequent historical developments. The first form refers to liberation from social hierarchies and constraints, allowing people to dress in the same way; here individualism is defined as equality. The second form characterizes modern life by equating individuality with looking different from everyone else. Ethnographic material suggests that, in relation to shoes, conformity is not necessarily experienced as the opposite of individuality, but rather as a space for negotiation of relationships, creativity, and, at times, for discovering who one might become.

Janez is a man in his late forties. He currently works in an advertising company, but at heart he is a social scientist with shelves full of books on various subjects. He often describes himself as a walker, and the streets of Ljubljana as his home. His relationship with shoes is rather practical, in the sense that for him shoes are, first and foremost, a tool that facilitates his walking. Yet his relationship with shoes is very intimate, as he can articulate many nuances about how he feels, or felt in the past, in a particular pair of shoes, and almost every pair he owns reminds him of events from the past or aspirations he had

when he bought them. His shoe collection reflects his relationship with walking, as the main category of shoes he owns are walking shoes and what he terms "*access shoes*" – those that give access to certain activities – and Birkenstock sandals. It is for this reason he sometimes feels uneasy when attending occasions where it seems appropriate to wear more formal footwear. The most recent such event was his son's junior prom, where he found himself uncertain about what to wear. Rather than buying new shoes for this single occasion, he borrowed a pair from a theatre and returned them the following day. Shortly afterwards, he reflected on the experience in an email:

> The shoes were exceptional (although a little uncomfortable at first)! Actually, I would like to put it differently: The way you can borrow the shoes was great – I would dress more elegantly more often if I could borrow the clothes, even for more casual events. I like being able to dress more elegantly.

Janez's account suggests that, despite his initial discomfort with the expectation to conform, the experience of wearing borrowed formal shoes opened up a space for imagining himself differently. Although he did not own shoes that he considered suitable for the occasion, the act of conforming temporarily to the conventions of the event became an opportunity to experiment with another version of himself. Janez's experience can to some extent be generalized, as the feeling that conforming to particular conventions opened up an opportunity to

Figure 21: Occasion and non-occasion. Janez, Ljubljana, 2023.

try and combine (new) shoes in a new or different way was often mentioned and described by the participants: *"Yeah, I had to wear nice shoes to this wedding, but I dress up so rarely, that I wanted to wear them"*, or *"I realized they go perfectly well with this dress I have."*

Kristina's experience offers another perspective on how occasions are negotiated through footwear. Whenever possible, Kristina wears clothes and shoes in which she feels comfortable. When she was younger, before she got married and had her daughters, this usually meant sneakers. Now, in her fifties, she prefers to wear her platform boots for the winter and her platform Converse All Stars or platform sliders for the summer. In her current shoe collection, all the shoes she wears habitually are platform shoes – even her slides she only wears indoors. She often says that she is quite short and that platform shoes make her feel a bit taller, so she sees them as a necessary tool to go about her daily life. The only times she breaks her routine relationship with her sneakers or platform boots are at events with an explicit dress code to which she knows she has to conform. In recent years, she has found ways to navigate these situations by choosing shoes that accommodate both the expectations of the occasion and her own aesthetic preferences, often combining platform shoes with more formal clothing as a compromise. She frequently describes her style as androgynous – a characterization her daughters loudly contest – and identifies high heels as a type of footwear that does not align with her sense of self. Nevertheless, there are moments when she chooses to suspend these self-imposed rules and conform more fully to conventional expectations of the occasion. One such moment emerged during one of my visits, when we were looking through family photo albums and tracing changes in her style over time. Among these images were photographs from her wedding, where she wore her first pair of high-heeled shoes:

> Kristina: My first nice shoes were my wedding shoes. /.../ Shoes, shoes. I still cannot believe I actually wore those shoes; it was a miracle. You see [these shoes] – that was my style, not shoes like these. (Laughter) They were like pumps, but with a heel – see? And I also dyed my hair with henna.
> Veronika: Didn't you like it?
> Kristina: Come on, look at my hair. And these shoes, they were like slip-on shoes, but with a strap on the back. And I was already pregnant. /.../ Good thing I didn't break my legs. It was the first time for me, to wear heels. And it wasn't a high heel. If it was up to me, I'd get married in jeans and sneakers. But... Well, my husband's mother couldn't stand it, it meant so much to her. So, we bought this dress, the one that suited my pregnant body, and it was not so easy to find it. And when we found the dress, we looked for the shoes, and we bought the ones that were acceptable to me. But I never wore them again.

Although a wedding is commonly understood as a significant life-course event, conversations such as this one often revealed that conformity to the conventions of an occasion was not primarily experienced as a need to "fit in" with a social context as such. Instead, it was frequently articulated as a way of acknowledging and responding to particular relationships that constituted the social context. In Kristina's account, this was expressed through the expectations of her mother-in-law; in other situations, she referred to the sensibilities of her artist friends. This understanding resonates with arguments made by other researchers, who have suggested that the relationship to clothing is "in essence mainly an instrument in people's relationship to others" (Miller and Woodward 2012: 63; see also Robinson 2015).

This relational understanding of conformity is further underscored in Ida's explanation of how she perceives conformity to the conventions of an occasion. Ida is a retired woman in her sixties who previously worked in a bookshop and now works more or less regularly as a therapist and lecturer in psychology. She describes herself as a sporty person who prefers comfortable footwear and is generally reluctant to compromise on this aspect. For instance, when attending a funeral in winter, she chose to wear her warm, rather unremarkable shoes and sought to compensate for this choice with a slightly more elegant dress. Her shoe collection is clearly divided into shoes she wears habitually and four pairs of what she calls *"slightly nicer shoes"* – colourful sandals, beige and black pumps, and black winter shoes with a slightly raised heel – that she wears on certain occasions. In explaining these choices, she reflected on how she decides when to wear a special pair of shoes:

> [A]nd as long as you go somewhere where you feel important, of course, you always want to fit in. That's just the way it is. I don't know, some people go to church – for example, I had a conversation with my auntie once, and she said, "Ida, in the morning, when I come out of the stable, I take off my boots, get ready, put on a nice dress and nice shoes and go to church and enjoy the peace and quiet and my nice dress". And all I could say was, "Thank you, Auntie". So, she comes out of the barn, gets ready, puts on a nice dress, and goes to church. And that's the same thing I still try to teach my children – you have to know the difference. This is a regular day, and this is a special event. Even now, when everything was on Zoom, I used to dress like I was going to my lectures and put on perfume and everything. When one of my daughters came to visit me, she asked where I was going, and I told her I had Zoom lectures and she laughed. But I was really proud of myself for doing all that, even when I was at home. I was proud of myself for dressing up for it. It was out of respect for my students. I think this is about respect, respect for people and context, especially when it's expected – hopefully not demanded. And I'm not talking

> about the dress code, I would only abide by it if it was a pyjama party. (Laughter) But it's about who you are. /.../ Sometimes you want to look good, other times you just want to be [yourself]. And sometimes that overlaps and comes together when you want to show respect. For example, you always go well dressed to a funeral, to church, to a business meeting or to Cankarjev dom. And when you meet with your girlfriends, of course, we each wear our nice clothes, especially because one of my girlfriends is always perfectly dressed. So, for me, this is a point where my rebellion meets respect for others. And that's not difficult for me, because I see that people appreciate it when you do that for them. And then they compliment you, and no one is ever blind to the compliments. For me, it's not a question of conforming to social pressure, it's a question of respect.

This example further illustrates how conforming to social conventions is not necessarily experienced as a form of oppression or general social pressure, but rather of choice and as an opportunity to reflect on and reaffirm relationships with others.

One of the social contexts in which occasions and non-occasions frequently intersect is work. Although work shoes are generally worn habitually – particularly when footwear forms part of a prescribed outfit – certain situations are nonetheless experienced as occasions. This is especially the case during important meetings, presentations, or business trips. At the same time, workplaces can also become sites where established expectations are deliberately crossed, for instance when individuals use dress and footwear to signal disagreement with an assigned role or to distance themselves from the values of a collective. Aljoša, for example, previously worked in a communication agency where he was dissatisfied with his salary, working conditions, and the general attitude of his colleagues. As a form of protest, he explicitly chose not to invest effort in his appearance and regularly went to work wearing Adidas slippers. Seen through the lens of Gell's (1998) theory of agency and his notion of distributed personhood, Aljoša's footwear can be understood as a medium through which intention is externalized into a form by which he could influence how his colleagues and boss interpreted his outfit.

Maja, on the other hand, is very mindful of her appearance (Kaiser 2001) at work. Not least because, as a young woman working closely with clients and coordinating meetings, she feels a constant need to catch the right balance, to be taken seriously. Finding appropriate combinations of colours, patterns, and styles has long been a challenge for her. Even as a child, she spent hours leafing through her mother's *Burda* magazines, cutting out images and assembling possible outfits by combining suggestions for "office wear" with those for

"leisure". Although she never learned to sew, the practice of searching for *"just the right combination"* has remained central to how she approaches dress and footwear. On the days when she feels really good, she likes to combine her clothes to create some kind of *"visual shower* [of colours]*"*. On such days, for example, she wears her orange-red pumps, black trousers, a white T-shirt and a red jacket. She knows orange and red are both dominant colours, but she likes them together. Working in a marketing agency and maintaining frequent contact with clients, Maja is acutely aware of situations in which appearance matters. On days when she has an important presentation or needs to justify her decisions, she deliberately chooses an outfit that boosts her energy. On such days, she usually wears clothes in calm tones, such as black trousers and a white, blue, or grey shirt, but then her shoes are there to make a powerful statement; it is as if some colours on her feet would make her more determined and tell the others: *"She's got it."* Wearing colourful shoes makes her feel more energetic.

In fact, Maja's wardrobe usually follows this pattern: she enjoys experimenting with shoes, while her clothing is usually bought in colours that can be easily combined and worn on different occasions; but with her shoes, she feels more comfortable when they are colourful. Her preference for such footwear is reflected throughout her shoe collection. At the moment, her go-to shoes are Adidas trainers in a fuchsia colour. Her running shoes are orange, her walking shoes blue and orange; she owns a pair of red pumps, another in gold, as well as sandals in light green, bright orange, and faded red. In addition, she has seven pairs of canvas shoes, each with a different pattern – monstera leaves, orange–pink–purple circles, bananas, black-and-white motifs, colourful dots, pink roses, and simple black mandala patterns.

In general, she is highly demanding of herself when it comes to her appearance. On days when she is not fully satisfied with the combination of her colourful shoes and the rest of her outfit, and a better idea occurs to her on the way out, she is prepared to return to her apartment and change her shoes. The combinations she creates depend on her mood and daily schedule, but also on the specific situations she anticipates. If she feels particularly attached to one pair of shoes, she will adjust the rest of her clothing accordingly. She distinguishes three broad categories in her shoe collection: shoes suitable for the office, shoes worn in her free time – including everything from sneakers to hiking boots – and shoes reserved for special occasions. Within each of these categories, there are further sets. She often describes using shoes to *"cut through her clothing assemblage"*, either to downplay or to emphasize her outfits – she sees shoes as a tool to do that. On one

occasion, when I asked which shoes she usually wore to work, she explained how she constantly seeks a balance with regard to being appropriately dressed:

> Maja: With me, it depends on the day. Sometimes I am – well, most of the time I'd say I'm pretty uniformed, wearing jeans or black trousers and a shirt. If I don't have any meetings, preferably a shirt with some idiotic statement or something, and my shoes. I don't know, I think you have to resist the system a bit, make a stand against it.
> Veronika: You think shoes change your image?
> Maja: Oh yes, and even I feel differently. These are very nuanced things. And I think if I talk to someone – in our company, for example, I'm the project manager, which means that our marketing director and the director of the company are superior to me. And when I work with the marketing director, I'm an assistant in his eyes, and then I feel much better when I'm dressed in a way that makes me feel more equal. If not, I just give them another reason to think that my work is worth less than theirs. That's why on these occasions I don't wear sneakers.

If we look at the broader context of work shoes and also include Silvija's work shoes, work emerges as a social context shaped by specific expectations, not only in terms of what footwear enables people to do physically, but also as a setting in which various tensions arise. These tensions stem from differing views and desires to fit in or to stand out, and are experienced both individually and collectively. They unfold as an ongoing series of negotiations, mediated by gender, age, and the individual's position in relation to others.

Finally, occasions for wearing special shoes are not necessarily triggered by an event or social context people expect to enter. Sometimes occasions arise from what we can term spontaneous inspiration, as people decide to wear special shoes "just because". Such moments may be triggered by suddenly remembering a forgotten pair, by a desire to look different, or simply because a particular pair catches one's eye:

> For me, it's more about when something catches my eye and I want to do something different, I go and browse my wardrobe with special shoes. Sometimes I just wear them because. I actually prefer not to stand out when we go to an event, and so I like to blend in. But sometimes I just feel like I want to look different, and then I wear these [special] shoes.

If there is one category of footwear that I expected to be more prevalent in my study than it ultimately turned out to be, it was high-heeled shoes. This expectation was shaped, at least in part, by their persistent presence in the academic literature on footwear, their visibility in popular culture, and the wide selection of high-heeled shoes in shoe shops. Yet in this research, high-heeled shoes were more of a humble companion. This is not to suggest that women do not wear heels, or that they have somehow lost their "battle" with sneakers and disappeared from everyday life. Rather, in many shoe wardrobes high heels were positioned as special shoes, often placed at the bottom of a drawer or wardrobe, carefully stored in shoe boxes and labelled "special occasion". Indeed, if there was one type of footwear that consistently marked an occasion across generations, it was high-heeled shoes – wives, daughters, girlfriends, or friends wearing high heels were regularly commented on as something out of the ordinary, including by men.

Women's relationships with high heels are, however, marked by contradictions. Some women choose to wear them because they feel comfortable in heels, while others – particularly younger women – express a desire to wear high heels but feel burdened by the connotations associated with them. Conversely, some women describe feeling problematically "grounded" in flat shoes, while others refuse to wear high heels altogether. Rather than resolving these tensions, we will take them as a point of departure. While we will not engage directly with concepts such as emphasized femininity (Dilley et al. 2015), the "post-feminist masquerade" (McRobbie 2007), or gender as performative act (Butler 1999 [1990]), this is not to dismiss their relevance for understanding femininity and gender more broadly. Instead, we will draw on a distinction proposed by Iris Marion Young between being female and being feminine (Young 2005: 5–6). This distinction offers a useful way of thinking about how being a woman is something that women do not consciously engage with most of the time, but on certain occasions they do adhere to the idea of womanhood in terms of broader social conventions (see also Woodward 140–141). We will focus on everyday practices of (not) wearing high heels, and approach them through women's own experiences and preferences. Within this category of footwear, distinctions between different heel heights – from stilettos to lower, more practical heels – are present but remain implicit in individuals' own definitions. What counts as a high heel here is defined from the perspective of the women themselves, and thus the distinction between various degrees of heel height may be somewhat fluid.

Not all women I have worked with own a pair of high-heeled shoes, and none of them wear high heels continuously. Nevertheless, all of them have worn – or at least tried on – a pair at some point in their lives, and all of them consider this an act of their free choice. A point that transgresses different attitudes and uses of high heels mentioned above is the constant mention of how heels enhance the awareness of the body: they lengthen the legs, push the pelvis forward, alter the pace and rhythm of walking, and accentuate the buttocks. As a consequence of these changes in posture and movement, women often described high heels as enhancing their sexual appeal:

> Oh, they definitely have sexual appeal, and they indeed make you feel more feminine. Because – it's more of a consequence than the heels themselves. They change your posture. If all women walked like that, we'd all be sexy. As soon as you stand up straighter, open your chest, and pull your shoulders down and back, your chest and buttocks become exposed. It's normal that this line is accentuated when you walk straight and determined. And heels force women to do this. It's such a forced posture, yes, forced, but... And your legs look longer. Whoever invented high heels knew what he was doing. (Laughter)

However, increased sexual appeal does not simply manifest automatically when one puts on a pair of high-heeled shoes. It is something that must be learned, and to achieve this (un)desired effect women have to learn how to use the tool. Here, Mauss's concept of techniques of the body (1973 [1935]) becomes particularly useful once again. If walking itself is a learned practice, then walking in high heels represents an exemplary case of such learning and is frequently described as a self-taught achievement. On the one hand, this is reflected in stories of practising at home before a first public appearance in high heels – *"to practise before the 'main thing'"*. On the other hand, it is evident in the abundance of tutorials, websites, and written guidelines devoted to mastering this skill (see, for example, Thomas and Veysset 2015: 17). Wearing high heels is consistently described as a competence one must acquire. Failing to do so produces the opposite effect, not only for the wearer but also in the eyes of observers. Both men and women readily recalled at least one "poor girl" stumbling across Prešeren Square in untamed heels, or getting them stuck between the cobblestones.

One of the points that brings the discussion back to the previous chapter is the often-invoked notion of comfort. If we can generalize about the sometimes contradictory state of feeling comfortable (physically and socially), then high heels serve as a particularly illustrative type of footwear to reinforce this. Women who choose to wear high

heels are well aware of the physical discomfort that often accompanies wearing them for more than a short period of time. Nevertheless, they sometimes accept this discomfort in order to suit the occasion and feel appropriately shod, or to make an outfit feel *"consistent"*. Such experiences are frequently described retrospectively, in comments such as, *"I can't believe I managed to walk all the way home in these shoes after going out"*. These painful experiences, however, are not exclusive to high heels, but also occur with other pairs of shoes that are worn only occasionally and have not yet been properly broken in.

Elizabeth Semmelhack (2006) traces the connotations attributed to high-heeled shoes from the late 16th century, when high heels first appeared (Semmelhack 2006: 225), to their contemporary use. She locates the emergence of their erotic significance in the mid-19th century and the figure of the courtesan, which combined notions of "female 'power' and sexual manipulation" (Semmelhack 2006: 230). Over time, these connotations have shifted, yet she sees high heels as one of the central features in gender constructions (Semmelhack 2006: 247). Indeed, the *"increased sexual appeal"* and enhanced femininity are not only linked to the physical experience of wearing high heels described above, but are also strongly influenced by the cultural connotations attributed to high heels through public representations. On certain occasions, women deliberately choose to wear high heels to emphasize femininity – for example at proms, weddings, or as guests at such events – in order to align themselves with the expectations of the occasion. At other times, high heels are worn because they may serve as a means of being taken more seriously or of asserting authority in the workplace.

Yet for some women, the sense that high heels emphasize femininity is experienced as a burden that leads them to reconsider their preferred footwear choices. We will illustrate this with the example of young women in their twenties, who often described not feeling feminine enough, or deliberately seeking to avoid presenting themselves as overly seductive. Mojca's shoe collection, for example, includes numerous pairs of high-heeled shoes, and she enjoys experimenting with them and incorporating them into different outfits. In her spare time, she sometimes tries out new combinations, taking photographs that she later stores in a digital album as a source of inspiration when she needs an outfit but does not have time to search for combinations. She likes to wear items that are "*different*", yet high heels are only rarely worn when she goes out or attends events, as she explained:

> And so, it was with one of the shoes I had. When these platform boots were not so popular here yet, I wore them. And I remember waiting at the bus stop and thinking to myself, "Okay, I have got these big shoes, and I think everyone's looking at me, but I really like these shoes". And they were unusual. At least I think they were, they were different, and I looked different. /.../ I looked different, and I felt different, and I felt they saw me as someone who was different. But I didn't care if they thought that because I was wearing those shoes. At least those shoes let them know that I was not trying to be like them. It was like that. But if I wore high heels, I would look differently in a different way, so I don't wear them that often. /.../ They have a connotation of a feminine female.

For Maša, too, the connotations of high heels were experienced as a burden, although in her case this burden was tied to the sense that high-heeled shoes would project an image she perceived as insincere. She described herself as follows:

> I identify myself as kind, modest, but not as someone who wears high heels. I am not bold, but a very modest, kind, girlish girl. Although I don't necessarily want to be that that's how I established myself, that's how I presented myself. But I am neither bold nor feminine. I'm more like a modest little girl. Not someone who wears high heels. Maybe that's why I feel uncomfortable [in high heels]. I feel too much – like I'm not myself. Like I am not myself. /.../ And I still feel very feminine, which I don't necessarily associate with high heels. I associate heels with self-confidence, with the femme fatale. With that kind of woman who doesn't care about [appearance]. And I don't identify myself in that way. Although I really like wearing them, and I like high heels and would really like to wear them more often. /.../ But I feel as if they don't fit my personality. They're too "seductive" (author's note: English in original) or something – which I'm not. And then I feel – you know?

A similar tension is articulated with particular clarity in a reflective essay written by one of the students, who describes high-heeled shoes as "extraordinary shoes", that are never worn alone, but always together with the meanings attributed to the female body and gender roles. The burden she describes lies precisely in the gap between what high heels mean to her and what she anticipates they mean to others:

> High-heeled shoes are extraordinary shoes. Wearing high-heeled shoes forms a different context than wearing shoes without heels. There are many meanings in high-heeled shoes, and they are mostly related to the perception of the female body and her gender role. When I wear high-heeled shoes, I am not only wearing the shoes but also all the ideas they symbolize and therefore wearing them is often exhausting for me – physically (because they are uncomfortable) and

psychologically (because of the symbolic meanings attributed to them). But it's interesting that it's not me who ascribes these meanings to them. For me, high-heeled shoes are beautiful and elegant shoes that mark a special occasion (a special occasion as I see it, not as dictated by the social context). And because I am aware of this range of meanings ascribed to them by others, I feel a great burden every time I wear my high heels. I am afraid of other people thinking that I want to expose myself and make myself an "object of desire" for others, that they think I am giving up my own will and handing myself over to other men. And I wonder how I can show that these shoes have a different meaning for me than – at least I think – they do for other people. I often struggle with finding ways to wear high heels that convey this alternative symbolism.

Across these accounts, high heels emerge as shoes that can transform women into someone they could be but feel they cannot be. This sense of insecurity can be understood in relation to gender and age, but it also connects to a broader social imperative to feel comfortable. As another young woman briefly explained: *"You know, in the society we grew up in, it's much more important to be relaxed. People always say, 'Why are you dressing like that?' and so on. It's more important to feel free, more relaxed, more at ease."* In this context, wearing shoes that are widely perceived as uncomfortable can act as a marker that singles one out.

Figure 22: Mojca's never-yet-worn pointed-toe shoes with a bow. Veronika Zavratnik, Ljubljana, 2023.

Figure 23: Mojca's never-yet-worn silver shoes. Veronika Zavratnik, Ljubljana, 2023.

While the women I worked with described their decision to wear high heels as freely made, there were some women who felt "grounded" in their flat shoes in the sense that they found not wearing high heels problematic. We have already met Silvija and Lili, and

seen the difficulties they encountered in finding shoes large enough to fit them – these difficulties extended to high-heeled shoes, too. Silvija has never owned a pair of high heels and expresses no desire to do so. Lili, by contrast, has spent the past two years trying to find a pair of high-heeled shoes that would fit her narrow feet in size 41–42, without success. Over the past year, she has even considered investing in having a pair made to order. Lili often speaks about her recently deceased mother, who loved wearing heels and whom she remembers as looking particularly good in them. She also recalls recognizing one of her female coworkers by the sound of her heels, and comments on a passerby wearing jeans combined with high heels – a combination she herself would like to wear. She feels that high heels would make her look more grown up, at least more so than her Adidas sneakers, which she says can make one appear almost invisible:

> You know, when you wear heels, you let people know you are dressed up. And when you walk, people know that you're coming, that you're there. If you wear sneakers you can just walk by and people don't notice you, you're inaudible. /.../ It's like when I first started wearing skirts and people were not used to it, I swear every second person commented on how good I looked. If you wear sneakers, no one ever says that.

What becomes apparent in Lili's relationship with high heels is not only the practical difficulty of finding suitable shoes, but also the relational nature of the meanings attached to them. Rather than being anchored in abstract cultural imaginaries of femininity, these meanings are shaped in relation to women who surround her – her mother, her colleagues, and her friends, from whom she draws her inspiration.

We have seen how wearing – or not wearing – high heels can be experienced as problematic, whether because such shoes are unavailable or because of the weight of their social and cultural connotations and expectations. At the same time, some women systematically refuse to wear high heels. In recent years, Luka and Tamara, a young couple, have both begun wearing barefoot shoes. While Luka initially introduced the idea, Tamara has now worn barefoot shoes exclusively for about a year. Their decision was primarily motivated by concerns for foot health and the body more generally. This choice, however, also brought about a series of broader changes, ranging from the reduction of their shoe wardrobes to five pairs each – combined across different occasions – to shifts in how they think about femininity and masculinity. Although they are aware of social expectations surrounding footwear on certain occasions, and although Tamara keeps a single pair of conventional high heels for exceptional events – a pair she

is considering giving away, as she has never worn them – they largely choose to disregard these expectations and wear shoes aligned with their values. They do, however, plan to acquire a pair of slightly more formal barefoot shoes that could be worn to weddings or other formal occasions. Within the broader context of their footwear practices, their view of high heels is nuanced. While they associate high heels with emphasized femininity and media-driven ideals of beauty, they primarily link them to unhealthy feet, bodily deformities, and the suffering of women who conform to such ideals.

During a casual walk on one of Ljubljana's paths, Luka connected high heels to a theory Tamara had once explained to him about peacocks and their evolutionary trajectory. Tamara later elaborated on this analogy:

> Okay, I am going to tell you this real quick. Peacocks courting females, and the females always choose peacocks with bigger tails. And typically, those tails get bigger, bigger, bigger, and bigger, but if you have such a big tail that you can't even walk anymore, you are going to be eaten immediately in nature because you're no longer mobile. Well, the females will still choose the ones with the bigger tails, with the more colourful tails, so only they would reproduce and that would kind of continue in nature and the species would wipe itself out because the predators would get them faster and the [population] would decrease. But since peacocks practically do not exist in their natural environment, but only in human environments, in zoos and the like, where they do not have any serious predators. Well, they are a completely blind branch of evolution that should have evolved into something else a long time ago. We have made it possible for them to be at the point they are now. Well, they are very beautiful, but they are completely non-functional – like high heels, perhaps.

While Luka and Tamara's views should be understood within the broader context of their lifestyle choices, a similar perception of high heels as outdated or excessive is also expressed by some younger women, particularly those in their early twenties. They often described how Gen Z women increasingly replace high heels with sneakers, not only for nights out, but also for proms and even weddings. These shifts were frequently commented on by others, rarely in a disapproving tone, and more often as a welcome change:

> You see, now with these sneakers, I no longer think shoes are divided by gender, like "Oh, these sneakers are pink, they're for women" or "Oh, these are blue, they're for men". No, we wear everything. Wherever you look, you can't say shoes are defined by gender anymore. The Gen Z, like my younger sister, follows these trends. And she never

> ever wears high heels. She goes out in her AirMax [sneakers] with a dress. That's what's popular now. They don't think, "Oh, I'm going out tonight, so I have to wear heels and squeeze my foot into these shoes". Not anymore. I walked past a prom venue a few days ago and looked at the shoes and almost none of the girls were wearing them – and they were all wearing beautiful long dresses. And that's good, times are changing.

While putting on shoes before leaving the house is commonly understood as a routine and utilitarian act, this chapter has shown that footwear practices extend far beyond mere functionality. They represent a nuanced, dynamic interplay among cultural norms, personal choices, and the negotiation of everyday social contexts. Within this spectrum, however, there remains a category of footwear that appears, at first glance, to cut across many of these layers of negotiation, and this is what we turn to next.

SNEAKERS

If there is anything that could be understood as a universal shoe – one that can move with ease across many of the (non-)occasions discussed above – it is sneakers. Throughout my research, sneakers emerged as one of the most consistently present categories of footwear. Every participant owned at least one pair. In Slovenian, several terms are used when people speak of sneakers – *teniske, superge, adidaski*, *športni čevlji*.[29] While the first three are used interchangeably to refer both to sneakers worn as everyday footwear and to those used for specific sporting activities, *športni čevlji* (Eng. sports shoes) is almost always reserved for footwear intended for sports, gym workouts, or other physical activities, such as going for a walk.

Sneakers were initially developed to cater to the physical needs of a growing number of sports enthusiasts at the end of the

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29 It is, however, interesting to note how different expressions are in some cases connected to specific regions. For example, in the Ljubljana region the generic name for sneakers is *superge*, whereas people who moved to Ljubljana from Styria region – or in some instances when they have relatives in this region – would commonly use *teniske* or, in some cases *adidaske*. The latter is particularly interesting, as it derives from the name of the brand Adidas but in this particular region is today used as a generic expression for sports shoes, whereas in Ljubljana the expression is not widely known and/or accepted. There have been many instances when I, coming from the Styria region, have used the word *adidaske* and people would correct me, noting that in fact, I am wearing Nike or Converse and not Adidas sneakers.

19th century (Turner 2019: 14). Since then – particularly over the past four decades – this category of footwear has undergone extensive diversification, a process that has opened up an increasingly wide range of social contexts for their use. Today we speak of specialized sneakers designed for specific sports (such as football, trail running, tennis, cycling, etc.), regular sports shoes suitable for a variety of activities, athleisure sneakers "specifically designed for casual wear" (Turner 2019: 218), as well as designer sneakers, often produced in collaboration with well-known designers.

The diversification of sneakers is to some extent reflected in the experience of shopping for them, too. Sneakers intended to be used for sporting activities are usually bought in specialized sports equipment stores, and in Slovenia most commonly in Intersport, Hervis, or Decathlon. While these stores sometimes sell sneakers in the sense of casual footwear, the choice is often limited. Thus sneakers intended to be worn as casual footwear are most often bought in regular shoe stores, such as Mass, Humanic, CCC, or Deichman, where they are sold along with other categories of footwear. There are, however, specialized footwear stores that only sell sneakers, such as Buzz, an international chain of sneaker stores, or Tike!, a local sneaker store in the centre of Ljubljana that specializes in sneakers and mostly offers sneakers from limited collections. More and more people are buying casual or designer sneakers online (Statista 2026b), although sneakers intended for sports are still mostly bought in stores (for a comparison, see Statista 2018).

Sneakers have attracted considerable academic attention, particularly in relation to their historic development since the 19th century (see, for example, Tenner 2004; Turner 2019) or to their subcultural affiliation (Cunningham 2008; Miner 2009; Kawamura 2016). Following historical accounts of the development of sports shoes, it becomes apparent how footwear originally designed for athletic performance gradually moved into everyday use, coming to be worn "for other, often far less strenuous, purposes than those for which they were initially intended" (Turner 2019: 8). There is a general consensus that by the late 1970s sports shoes had firmly entered everyday wardrobes, and were increasingly worn as a fashionable alternative to more traditional footwear styles.

As Thomas Turner (2019: 208) explains, new patterns of sneaker consumption emerged from historically specific conditions: rising levels of wealth and leisure, public fitness campaigns promoting sports footwear, international sporting events (such as the Olympic Games) that were increasingly promoted through the media, and the

simultaneous rise of global brands. Alison Gill adds another important dimension, pointing to advertising campaigns that during this period began to transform sneakers "from objects of comfort and function into a lifestyle commodity" (Gill 2006: 377). The 1970s saw a steady rise of a rhetoric emphasizing the need for self-improvement, "physically and psychologically", central to what Gill terms the cult of fitness, where health and fitness became "synonymous with enhanced attractiveness and success" (Gill 2006: 374). At the same time, the aesthetics of sports shoes became as important as their functionality, as they reached into wider fashion trends and became "an integral detail of many fashionable "looks" and lifestyles" (Gill 2006: 374).[30] As noted by Turner (2019: 219–231), one of the important pairs that highlighted the connections between the sport and street desirability was the launch of Nike's model of Air Jordan in 1984, Michael Jordan's signature basketballs sneakers, that eventually became as much popular on the streets as they were on the basketball fields and today act almost as a metonymy for stylish athletic footwear for everyday use.[31]

While there is a lot more to say about the historical transformation of sneakers in terms of both technological developments and their associations with subcultural groups such as skaters, hip-hopers, sneakerheads (see Kawamura 2016) or specific music genres – such as "old school" models that became associated with, for example, Manchester rock groups in the 1990s (see Turner 2019: 238–242) – and it is important to acknowledge that those associations and celebrity endorsements have implications for how sneakers are embedded in needs and experiences of the wearers, there is a general sense that through processes described above, sneakers have become integrated into social practices both sporting and otherwise. Sneakers today connect the world of sports, fashion, and everyday life, and in a way they have become a generic shoe. This was reflected not only throughout my ethnographic observations, but also in specific situations in which people reflected on the events they attended while wearing sneakers. In one discussion about what I should wear to a more official public event, one of my interlocutors reassured me: *"Now you can wear sneakers anywhere. Before, you had to wear* [other shoes] *to go to work and to*

30 In her historical overview of footwear styles and types of footwear, Rebecca Shawcross, for example, titled the chapter that deals with the rising popularity of sneakers in the 1970s 'The new must-have accessory' (Shawcross 2014: 218), which also implies how sneakers have transformed from functional sports shoes to an item of fashion, an accessory.

31 In 2023 the story of Nike signing a contract with Michal Jordan and designing the first pair of Air Jordan sneakers was retold in the movie *Air*, directed by Ben Affleck.

events like that – if you wore sneakers, you were tacky. Now you can wear sneakers."[32] In this sense, we can say that in the few last decades sneakers have shown the direction of fashion towards more casual and comfortable outfits, and have indeed also become part of a fashion trend (Welters and Lillethun 2007: xxv in Aspers and Godart 2013: 174).

However, because of the multiple uses and the diverse perceptions and experiences that have emerged through these processes, it becomes difficult to pin down what sneakers actually are. Their ubiquity raises a series of questions: How can one distinguish between sneakers intended for sport and a casual sneaker? Are there certain models that can only be worn for sport? Which sneakers can be worn in a more formal setting? Some of these distinctions appeared relatively self-evident to my interlocutors – most notably the difference between sneakers used for sports and those worn as everyday shoes – while others required a more complex investigation. In line with those questions, albeit with a focus on life course processes and identification, Jenny Hockey and her collaborators (Hockey et al. 2015), note that while people may use the term trainer,[33] the meanings and role of trainers within their lives can differ greatly, as they are always dependent on specific entanglements of individuals with their footwear (Hockey et al. 2015: 29–30). Drawing on Kopytoff's (1986) notion of informal singularization, they show how the meanings ascribed to sneakers through marketing campaigns and celebrity endorsements always intersect with the meaning-making process that is more private to the individual's own criteria (i.e. informal singularization), such as aesthetics, previous experiences, gender, or age-appropriateness (Kopytoff 1986: 80–83). While Kopytoff's perspective is helpful in understanding the ability of sneakers to change their meanings (or in Kopytoff's sense, to be re-classified) through the processes described above, to understand the embodied perspectives of individuals that choose to wear sneakers in certain situations, as we have seen in the fourth chapter, it is necessary to also account for the

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32 It was at this point that I decided to do a short experiment: every time I went out to run some errands, to the grocery store, or to socialize, I observed ten people who were the closest to me and counted the number of people wearing sneakers. In a week I made ten observations: in the post office, twice in the grocery store, in a drug store, at a concert in a small local music venue, in an open-air cinema, in a drug store, on a city square, twice on a walk through the neighbourhood. Although there were never ten people in my local post office, all other observations had to the same result: at least half of the ten people I observed were wearing sneakers.

33 In the academic literature, the terms "trainers" and "sneakers" are used interchangeably; British sources use the term trainer, while other English sources usually use the term sneaker. In this book I use the term sneaker because this term is also used commonly to refer to *sneaker culture* or a *sneaker shop*; among younger participants, both terms are commonly used in English.

experiential dimension of wearing them. It is only through wearing sneakers in a specific social context that people learn what a certain pair of sneakers can afford physically or socially; the different classifications of sneakers are thus (also) the outcomes of experience (Ingold 2000; see also Hockey et al. 2015: 28–30).

At the same time, it is important to acknowledge that the marketing strategies employed by certain brands create a way for people to connect with specific identities; specific brands can give people a sense of specific social status or authenticity, especially if they aspire to particular sports, music, and fashion styles (a notion we will explore further in the sixth chapter), and here we must also understand sneakers in terms of their symbolic meaning. Most of the people I worked with were acutely aware of these dimensions, including the associations of certain sneakers with particular music genres[34] or emerging sneaker-related subcultures. In this light Hockey et al. note (2015: 29) how we can see the histories of sneakers noted above and their typologies as a documentation of the process of experience-based classification. Seen from this perspective, distinguishing between what could be termed different "degrees" of sneakers (see Hockey et al. 2015) within this highly differentiated category and their perceived appropriateness for specific occasions is the result of both the rhetoric surrounding sneakers in the media and of the meanings, knowledge, needs, and specific experiences of individuals or in some cases groups of people (as in the case of, for example, sneakerheads).

There seems to be a general consensus among the participants about two things: first, that sneakers are comfortable, and second, that today sneakers can be worn almost anywhere – a fact that is also reflected and constructed through the media. What varies considerably, however, is how this second assumption is lived and embodied on an individual level. A clear differentiation emerges around what particular sneakers can afford, especially in terms of physical capabilities. This distinction separates sneakers used for sports or more intense physical activities, where the function of sneakers is of principal concern, from

34 Ekaterina Kulinicheva (2022), in her discussion of the distressed sneaker trend, focuses on the cultural biography of the distressed sneaker as a fashion item and shows how important the connection of sneakers to music genres can be. She distinguishes between two main narratives found in fashion and advertising campaigns. The positive narrative "builds on signifiers such as youthful experimentalism, being unorthodox, experimental design language, fun design for non-uptight persons, rebellion, anti-mainstream resistance, authenticity, creative revolution and creative self-expression" (Kulinicheva 2022: 76). Here she uses the example of Kurt Cobain and grunge culture to show how such connections constantly create new meanings. The negative narrative is based on concepts such as poverty, anti-fashion, and the like. However, it is interesting to note, how in both cases she uses "dirt, smudges, and other marks of wear" (Kulinicheva 2022: 76) to show how they can be used as signifiers in both – positive and negative – narratives.

sneakers worn as habitual, everyday footwear. This is also related to the modern technologies built into, for instance, running sneakers that use in-sole cushioning, or football sneakers that are spiked and therefore afford more in terms of physical capabilities. At the same time, in wardrobes that contain more than one or two pairs of sneakers, further internal classifications tend to develop with regard to casual sneakers.

Some pairs are used daily for quick errands – going to the grocery store, walking the dog, or taking out the trash – and specifically activities that are close to home, short in duration, or where it is expected that shoes may get dirty. In many households, such sneakers are kept by the door or in the hallway, placed for quick and easy access. Other pairs are reserved for "*going out*": for work, lectures, drinks, dates, or attending events. These sneakers are often described as more stylish, more expensive, and therefore better cared for, particularly in the sense that they are kept clean. There are of course many internal logics on how and when a particular pair of sneakers can be used. As it was remarked by one of the participants in the project *If the Shoe Fits*, "there's like the degrees of trainers" (Hockey et al. 2015: 21).

Questions about when and where sneakers can be worn frequently led to discussions about when they should not be worn, a boundary that often proved more meaningful; here we can again return to Mike Featherstone's argument that to know who we are, we first have to know who we are not (Featherstone 1992: 286 in Muršič 1997: 9). To help people out, there are also lists that sort sneakers according to different criteria: top running sneakers, most ugly sneakers (sometimes even called *fugly* (i.e. fucking ugly)), best walking sneakers, most trendy sneakers, and so on. Yet the sheer diversity of sneaker models means that even experienced wearers, such as Eva, can find these classifications difficult to navigate:

> Veronika: You said those sneakers are not exactly your style?
> Eva: Uh-huh. They're not so much my style as I thought they will be. They are really pretty, but...
> Veronika: Did you buy them because you liked them?
> Eva: Yes, and because I don't have any sneakers in this style. But I actually think – they are not exactly sneakers; they are more like shoes.
> Veronika: So, you have to get used to them?
> Eva: Yes, definitely! When I look in the mirror, I am quite amazed – "Who are you?"
> Veronika: What do you wear with them?
> Eva: Same as always. But [with these sneakers] you have to be more – it's weird, very weird. I don't know how to dress [for these sneakers]. They are more like – you have to dress smarter. It's not like you can you wear your tracksuit because it looks funny.

Here, we can draw a parallel with what Jože Vogrinc (2012: 110) describes as the imaginary dimension of use, referring to "the dimension of imagined activities and imagined communities". In practice, this refers to the uses people had in mind when they bought a particular pair of sneakers. In this sense, Eva's uncertainty reflects a mismatch between the uses she had imagined when purchasing the sneakers and the ways in which they demanded to be worn in practice.

In his essay on the use of technologies, Vogrinc distinguishes between three dimensions of use: the real, the symbolic, and the imaginary. The dimension of the real refers to "immutable, 'absolute' characteristics" of devices that do not change regardless of what the user does with the device (Vogrinc 2012: 9). With regard to shoes, this can be seen as a dimension that influences the breaking in the process and that simultaneously offers new possibilities of use. The symbolic dimension of use refers to "various possibilities of use" (Vogrinc 2012: 9), such as being provided with instructions for use. In practice, all three dimensions of use coexist and are interdependent. Given the high degree of differentiation and diversity of use, sneakers – as a mundane technology (Michael 2000) – are a particularly productive category through which to examine these overlapping dimensions to understand the diversity of uses in social practices. A comparison of specific situations among Eva, Maja, and Ida offers a useful lens through which to examine how age-specific knowledge, expectations, and (work) experiences are reflected through their use of sneakers and how – following Kopytoff – they produce different processes of singularization; or in other words, we can see how habitus (Bourdieu 2013 [1977]) conditions their processes of singularization.

Eva is a young woman in her early twenties who works in a beauty salon in Ljubljana. She owns 16 pairs of sneakers and describes herself as a sneaker enthusiast, noting that *"sneakers are always modern. All of us young people wear them. /.../ You only rarely see some other shoes than sneakers."* Sneakers have been her primary footwear for as long as she can remember, a preference clearly reflected in her shoe wardrobe. Besides her sneakers, she owns only two pairs of sliders – one of which she never wears – UGG boots, and a pair of high-heeled shoes she has never worn. At work, she wears shoes provided by her employer. She always refers to herself as being a regular young woman, wearing jeans and t-shirts, who grew up with sneakers, and for her, sneakers are a category of footwear appropriate for any occasion. In her wardrobe, she has three sets of sneakers: the ones that she wears for doing sports, the ones she wears every day, and the sneakers she only wears occasionally. The latter includes four pairs of Alexander McQueen sneakers and one

pair of Valentino sneakers, all of them rather expensive, ranging from around €300 to €600. For her, to wear anything other than sneakers would be an act of signification – of respect, for example, or an important occasion.

This was perfectly exemplified when she was invited to a wedding and, as she was supposed to follow a dress code, she bought a new dress and high-heeled shoes. However, on the day she ended up going in her Alexander McQueen sneakers, because she felt they were most "herself". Later, she reflected that these sneakers were new, well kept, and significantly more expensive than the high heels – and that her boyfriend wore sneakers, too. What becomes obvious in Eva's example is how the ordinariness of her sneakers can also be understood as empowering, especially when we consider their ability to negate dominant ideals of (feminine) beauty in terms of certain social contexts.

Figure 24: Eva's sneakers. Eva, Ljubljana, 2023.

Maja is a woman in her late thirties. She previously worked in several marketing companies, but recently changed her job and now works as a community manager. She owns 36 pairs of shoes, six pairs of sneakers, and seven pairs of canvas shoes (*starterke*), which in her opinion fit into the category of sneakers. She loves to wear sneakers, and they are indeed her go-to footwear for almost any occasion. Her favourite sneakers are her first two pairs of Etnies sneakers, that she bought and was gifted simultaneously in the first year of secondary school, because she

> /.../ needed a pair of sneakers, to place me somewhere in this abundance of subcultures. I couldn't go to my high school, where everyone around me were punks, skaters, and whatnot, and be there with a pair of no-name sneakers. If I did that, I would have to be at peace with my identity, which I wasn't at 14.

However, due to the nature of her work which requires frequent contact with customers, she is aware there are certain companies where the dress code is still pretty rigid, and it is not appropriate to wear sneakers. Being a young woman, she is also very well aware of the gender differences regarding the appropriate outfits in certain workplaces, and while she often challenges them, nevertheless, to do her work, many times she respects the unwritten rules of what is (in)appropriate. In this regard, she commented how the *"dress code at work has started to loosen up and even in companies where they were traditionally more official, sneakers are now somewhat tolerated"*. But still, in more formal settings she still follows the unwritten rules she was brought up with: *"You know, I still have this in my head: if I have* [to go somewhere where I have] *to dress up nicely, I will never wear my sneakers. For these occasions you* [should] *wear shoes; not necessarily high heels, but nice shoes."* For instance, when Maja attended a wedding she wore blue platform shoes, purchased specifically for the occasion. As she remarked on another occasion, when she was younger and still a student, she did wear her sneakers for job interviews, too. However, she would choose her new sneakers, make sure they were clean, and would usually combine them with some nicer clothes. There was an instance when her white sneakers got dirty with mud on the way to an interview, and to this day this is one of the most uncomfortable shoe-related moments she can remember.

Figure 25: Maja's go-to casual sneakers. Veronika Zavratnik, Ljubljana, 2023.

Nataša, a retired woman in her sixties, previously worked in a management role in one of Ljubljana's more distinguished hotels. She owns around 70 pairs of shoes – the number in her shoe collection changes constantly as she is always rearranging her wardrobe by buying new pairs and giving away some of the old ones. At the moment she owns four pairs of hiking boots, three pairs of running sneakers and four pairs of casual sneakers. While still at work she usually had to be dressed more formally, as she was in constant contact with the guests and clients who organized events at their hotel, which means she used to wear high-heeled shoes most of the time at work. She even had two pairs of shoes made to order, and what she appreciates about these is that they blended with her outfits and were practically invisible. She has a great interest in fashion, she regularly follows fashion channels, and is keen on trying out new combinations of her outfits whenever she can. Nevertheless, she is a sporty type of person: she runs regularly, does yoga, takes dance lessons and boxing lessons, likes to hike, and recently she also started gardening. Nataša often wears sneakers, she likes to combine them with different outfits, but she never even considers wearing them to more formal events. Despite her bunions, she always wears high heels on such occasions and has an additional pair of more comfortable shoes to wear if her feet need a rest. Her sneakers are always associated with activities she is involved in her free time or, alternatively, when she wants to downplay a more formal outfit on less formal occasions. In Nataša's case we can also see how sneakers are a type of shoe she uses to show her youthful spirit:

> Veronika: How do you usually combine?
> Nataša: I'm not a static [type], I always combine [different things]. Sometimes certain shoes go well with one dress, but then I try it on with other shoes and realize that the second combination is better. Basically, it all depends. Mostly on my mood, but also on where I'm going because the dress has to adapt [to the situation]. And that also determines the shoes.
> Veronika: So, shoes...
> Nataša: The shoes are the dot on the i. For example, a black dress and red shoes. And so on. And stockings with the black line on the back. That's it.
> Veronika: Do you ever get the shoes wrong?
> Nataša: No, I wouldn't say that. I try very hard with it. But sometimes it happens. Just these days I want to try [something new]. I have a suit that looks like Chanel's, it was made to order, a dark blue bouclé, a skirt, and a jacket. I want to wear white sneakers and white socks with them. With sneakers it looks more sporty and less elegant – if I wore high heels it would be far too elegant for the occasion I have to attend. And the white shirt will go with it. And

the sneakers. Combined like that, it's an outfit suitable for everyday wear, it looks very youthful.

Figure 26: Nataša's casual sneakers. Veronika Zavratnik, Ljubljana, 2023.

Remarks similar to Nataša's observation about the ability of sneakers to downplay an otherwise more formal image appeared repeatedly in the conversations. These accounts can, however, be contrasted with situations in which sneakers operate in the opposite direction, namely by elevating rather than downplaying one's social position. One example that illustrated how sneakers are a type of footwear that lends itself to multiple processes of singularization emerged in a conversation with Janez:

> Janez: You know, sometimes when I'm down and low, when I don't want to go to work, when I feel like I'd like to go [to work] somewhere else, I think to myself, "Why do I have to go back to work again?" You know, some of my colleagues change their shoes seasonally. /.../ Not all of them, but some do. /.../ And I really don't like their sneakers, they're ugly. Really ugly. Sometimes I think to myself, "Do you really have to wear that?" /.../ And then I remember Steve Jobs, for example. He always, everywhere he went, he wore sneakers. Whether he was accepting an award or a business meeting or whatever – I think it was Nike [sneakers] or something. He always wore them. And I said to myself, "Okay, I'm going to be like Steve Jobs, and these are my shoes". /.../
> Veronika: So, if you have the knowledge, you can...

> Janez: Yes, knowledge is a kind of excuse. But I'm not sure I have that kind of knowledge to break the rules like Steve Jobs. He knew how to design computers that everyone buys, and he could go anywhere in sneakers and jeans, even to events where there was a dress code, because he didn't have to follow them. At least that's how I see it.

Janez's view aligns with what Bellezza, Gino, and Keinan (2014) describe as the "red sneaker effect", a term referring to the positive consequences of non-conforming behaviour in social situations in terms of dress or behaviour. Here, sneakers can – under specific circumstances – elevate an individual's social position in the eyes of observers, as in the case of Steve Jobs, while in other contexts they may invoke dressing down, as in Nataša's case, or generate anxiety with regard to choosing the right pair to place ourselves socially, as we saw with Maja. We can also see just how multi-layered decisions about wearing sneakers are, and how they are shaped by knowledge about different types of sneakers (i.e. cultural capital), aesthetics, social expectations, economic status, and personal experiences associated with both the sneakers and the occasions one attends. In this sense, we could say that there are not only degrees of sneakers, but also degrees of events – a point discussed in the previous section. Taken together, age, different representations of sneakers in the media, and diverse generational and life experiences can produce different processes of singularization at the individual level and contribute to and shape an imaginary dimension of the use of sneakers (Vogrinc 2012).

The last important point to note concerns the predominant use of sneakers, the reasons for this, and the ways in which they are worn. In most cases, sneakers are used as an "unmarked" category of footwear, in the sense that people approach them as a generic, habitually worn type of shoe. In this respect, this corresponds to what Daniel Miller and Sophie Woodward (2012) have described as "ordinary", as people habitually put on sneakers when they simply want to be shod.

Sneakers, not iPhones

Casual sneakers, however, tend to have a somewhat double nature. In a similar way to what Miller and Woodward (2012) noticed in relation to jeans, which people wear because they make them feel ordinary, but which can also appear in designer or "special" versions to fit a special occasion or make the wearer stand out, sneakers can also function in this manner. In her recent study on sneaker enthusiasts – sneakerheads, sneakerholics, or sneaker pimps as they call themselves – Yuniya Kawamura (2016) showed how sneakers can move out of the

zone of the ordinary or generic shoes and become an "object of desire" (Kawamura 2016: 37), a single item that bounds a community of (mostly) boys and young men. Kawamura demonstrates how, even before sneaker companies began producing limited editions, sneaker enthusiasts "would colour and paint their sneakers to create something unique", as it was important for them to "stand out wearing a special pair" (Kawamura 2016: 104). Although I did not focus specifically on subcultural affiliations connected to footwear, nor was I specifically concerned with sneakers as a category of footwear, on some occasions sneakers nevertheless could become shoes intended to "mark" a person. A brand, designer or model that are the most popular at a specific moment can be something that makes the wearer stand out, or simply makes a certain pair especially desirable.

As Eva remarked in this context: *"Ten years ago people waited in line all night to make sure they could get a new iPhone, but now they wait in line to make sure they get a pair of the new Air Jordans."* Here we can again see how particular branding strategies can, for particular groups, mobilize certain forms of identification, such as "being young" and being aware of the trend-obsessed sneaker culture. As Eva continued:

> I don't know, we're a generation where it's really important to have style. For example, if you wear a pair of really cool Nike sneakers, everyone says "Woah!" That's why everyone wears them. Maybe we're a bit more careful not to get them dirty, but yeah, we all [wear them].

As noted by Thomas Turner (2019: 250–255), sneaker culture began to (re)emerge at the beginning of the 2000s, when the internet transformed sports shoe marketing and significantly expanded the global presence of sneakers, a process that was later further shaped by the rise of social media. A global reach, new marketing strategies that targeted both the "fashion-conscious" and the "sports-oriented", and the public release of limited editions created new possibilities for social differentiation.

There is, however, an important gendered dimension to the consideration of sneaker culture, or sneakers more generally. In many academic accounts, sneakers are approached as an explicitly male category of footwear (Cunningham 2008; Miner 2009; Kawamura 2016). As Kawamura (2016) notes, this can be understood in light of the historical association of sneakers with subcultures that were distinctly male, such as hip-hop, and she observes that sneakers still "continue to symbolize maleness and masculinity" (Kawamura 2016: 80) among sneakerheads. Miner (2009: 74) even noted how "the sneaker bears a strong historical connection to male consumptive practices, dating

to at least the Victorian period". In contrast, for many of the women I worked with, sneakers were described primarily as default, everyday footwear, largely detached from these gendered associations.

Cristine Boydel (1996) conducted a short study on gender representations in the targeted advertising campaigns of sneaker companies, analysing their rhetoric from the 1970s to the 1990s. She found that female buyers of sneakers were only explicitly targeted in the 1990s. Boydel shows how companies actively produced gendered understandings of sneakers, not only through the use of different colours and names, but also through distinct keywords. "Male" sneakers, for instance, were often advertised using terms associated with competitiveness, aggression, or male bonding, while "female" sneakers were framed primarily in relation to women's bodies, rather than their physical capabilities. Today, these views and advertising strategies appear more balanced, and despite the continued endorsement of particular sneaker models by celebrity sportsmen – and only exceptionally by women – the "regular" sneaker, used as everyday casual footwear, has to some extent shed these explicitly gendered associations.

A couple of months after Eva's remark on the Nike Air Jordan sneakers, Slovenia was taken over by a wave of indignation over what came to be called a new subculture, members of which are called *gaserji* (male members) and *limke* (female members). As national media reported (Štok 2023), members of this new subcultural group that is present mainly in the countries of former Yugoslavia, can be recognized by a set of recurring attributes. *Limke* usually wear very tight trousers or leggings, branded t-shirts, long artificial nails, and *papuče* (i.e. a dialect term for different types of footwear), while *gaserji* can be recognized by their expensive branded sports clothes, e-scooters, vapes, and Nike Air Max sneakers.[35] While public indignation was directed towards many of these characteristics – such as excessive loudness from portable speakers, the music genres they were associated with (i.e. UK drill and American trap), or the hint of a Balkan accent in the way they spoke – one of the central issues of contention was their sneakers, primarily because their high price was interpreted as a sign of the economic profligacy of the young members of this subculture. Although this offers an interesting insight into the construction

35 An interesting remark can be added here. Jennifer Craik (2020: 220) quotes Ted Polhemus describing "how the hierarchical structure of the athleisure industry creates 'the athleisure style tribe' who endorses particular brands and looks". In his words, the bar to become a member of the athleisure tribe is high, especially in the sense of curating a look of hard physical work invested in the look, and the "snobbishness toward lesser sportswear-clad people" (Craik 2020: 220).

of the Other (as was remarked by anthropologist Blaž Bajič (see Štok 2023)), we will not analyse this specific discourse, but rather return to Kopytoff's (1986) discussion of the social life of things and show how *limke* and *gaserji* offer a case-specific insight into how processes of singularization can lead to what he terms the "paradox of value" (Kopytoff 1986: 82).

In this sense, money spent carelessly on expensive sneakers simply to look good on the street provoked public disapproval, as it departed from expectations of how young people should learn to handle money sensibly. Another dimension can be added to this interpretation of the public reaction, namely that of the affective body, as discussed by Featherstone (2010). In his discussion, he lists bodily attributes that produce an intensity of effect – such as movement of the body or timbre of the voice – which, in his view, can undercut "the sovereignty of the perceiving eye and the content of the spoken words" (Featherstone 2010: 210). While Hockey et al. (2015: 37–38) point to the positive effects of affective bodies in relation to sneakers, in the case of *limke* and *gaserji* these effects were framed in distinctly negative terms, for example through associations with a Balkan accent and with more broadly stigmatized forms of youth identity, often linked to descendants of immigrants from the Balkans in Slovenia (see Bajič and Protner 2012).

We can see how sneakers have the ability to transcend one of the divisions in people's footwear collections. They can be a habitually worn pair of everyday shoes, put on without much thought, yet under certain conditions – when people choose expensive or designer sneakers – they can also allow them to be noticed and to stand out.

Worn out and wanted

In 2016, I spent several months volunteering at the Northampton Museum and Art Gallery in the UK, home to the world's largest shoe collection, with approximately 12,000 pairs.[36] At the time, the museum was preparing for a long-awaited renovation. Only a small part of the collection could be displayed in the existing space, while all the other shoes were stored in the museum depot, carefully arranged in white and brown shoe boxes, and thus a larger exhibition place was eagerly awaited. My work was mainly devoted to digitizing paper index cards, most of them related to concealed shoes, but fortunately for me, at the

36 Part of this chapter has been published in *Sensory Environmental Relationships: Between Memories of the Past and Imaginings of the Future*, edited by Blaž Bajič and Ana Svetel (2023). The chapter is entitled 'Worn-out and Wanted: Footwear and Its Temporalities' (Zavratnik 2023).

time of my visits, a few important pairs held by the museum were being photographed to create a small, digitalized collection that would later be made accessible online. This process allowed me to visit the depot and actually see shoes that were not normally accessible to the general public. For the first time, I saw shoes that were two or three hundred years old at close range, without having to wear my glasses. Most of the shoes I encountered during these short expeditions into the depot were beautifully embroidered, delicate, and made of fine and expensive materials, such as silk. While their age was evident in terms of style, embroidery, and materials, almost all of them appeared to have been hardly worn, as the soles and upper parts were remarkably well preserved.

Through conversations with the curator, I later learned that most of the shoes in the museum from the older periods had entered the collection precisely because they had not been worn extensively, at least not on a daily basis. These were shoes owned by people of relatively high social status who could afford multiple pairs, even at a time when shoes were a luxury, and who did not routinely walk distances long enough to wear them out. In fact, most of the shoes that could tell us something about the footwear of the general populace were concealed shoes from the collection I was involved with. As the curator explained, this was largely because shoes were expensive and highly valued commodities, typically worn for as long as they lasted, sometimes passed down within a family and eventually discarded.

Concealed shoes, on the other hand, were well-worn shoes that were deliberately kept and hidden in the house, usually within walls near windows, doors, or chimneys, where they served as protective objects. Because they retained the shape of the wearer's foot, they were considered to be imbued with the wearer's good spirit, a spirit that could ward off evil spirits attempting to enter the house.[37] From time to time, a pair of concealed shoes would still be found during the renovations of older houses, but the practice of concealing shoes largely came to an end at the turn of the 19th to the 20th century.

In different terms, however, a well-worn pair of shoes still seems to be imbued with the presence of its wearer. A recent example

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37 This is only one possible explanation for the act of concealing shoes, although due to the lack of written sources explaining this practice, it remains open to various interpretations (Shawcross 2014: 120–121). For more information on the history of shoes, Rebecca Shawcross' book *Shoes: An Illustrated History* (2014) offers valuable resources. More information on concealed shoes can be found on the website of the Northampton Museum and Art Gallery or at the website of the project *The Concealed Revealed: Shedding Light on the Concealed Object, Revealed* (2026).

that conveys this idea is the "installation" of some 11,000 pairs of shoes in the Place de la République in Paris, which stood for the bodies of the protesters who wanted to take part in the march on climate change at the UN COP21 conference, but was cancelled following a series of terrorist attacks in Paris in 2015. While these shoes made the absent bodies of their wearers present, other, more emotionally charged examples also testify to the perception that well-worn shoes can embody the presence of absent wearers and evoke the past. Benstock and Ferris (2001: 8), for example, write of the around 4,000 shoes from the death camps in Poland on display at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, which commemorate the "piles of corpses in the streets of the ghetto, in the death carts of the camps, in the mass graves". In these worn, empty shoes, different temporalities collide; not only do they symbolize the absent body, but the worn soles and sweat-stained insides are material manifestations of the bodies that once wore them.

The capacity of shoes to embody the presence of their previous wearer shows how wearing or keeping someone else's shoes can, in a way, awaken the presence of previous owners and their past experiences. Building on this observation, this chapter employs the metaphor of the "footwear landscape" as developed by Hockey et al. (2014), to engage with the temporal dimensions of shoes. As they explain, using a spatial metaphor "for the otherwise abstract notion of time /…/ also connotes the perspectival view of the life course, as imagined – and re-imagined by the spatially and temporally situated individual" (Hockey et al. 2014: 273).

At first glance, it may appear that shoes guide people along a straightforward line into the future, but the ethnographic data suggest a more complex movement, taking people along the "wandering lines" (de Certeau 1984: xvii) on more than one journey through time. Though mass-produced items may start out as nearly identical, through their use and wear they become individualized (a point discussed in the fourth chapter). Following the social lives of shoes (Kopytoff 1986), from their status as a wished-for pair to shoes that are worn daily, and eventually to a pair set aside or discarded, can, for a researcher, "make salient what might otherwise remain obscure" (Kopytoff 1986: 67), namely insights into people's past identities and experiences and illuminate different temporalities. It can be said that through the process of wearing an item, people "invest aspects of their own biographies in things" (Hoskins 2006: 73). From this perspective, wearing shoes can be seen as a form of individualization, through which both shoes and their wearer become distinctive.

Across the preceding chapters, various fragments of temporal orientations connected to footwear choices and footwear collections have gradually emerged. In what follows, these threads are brought together into a more comprehensive narrative concerned with the temporal dimensions of footwear.

WORN, KEPT, REMEMBERED

> /.../. the wardrobe is an anthology and collection of memories, a multi-faceted, multi-layered mirror which reflects back the full complexity of an individual's identity and history. (Banerjee and Miller 2003: 47)

Banerjee and Miller's description of Indian women's wardrobes resonates with Kristina's shoe collection and the idea that such collections are also a temporal composite, made up not only of the shoes people wear in the present but also of the shoes they wore in the past and no longer do, yet still keep. People often describe their shoe collections as very "functional", in the sense that they wear all the shoes they own. Yet as it turns out, there are often pairs that lie "hidden" or "forgotten": a pair used while still actively playing basketball, a pair worn while still at work, or a pair of slippers kept for "just in case", for the dirty work that might come with renovating one's apartment. Alongside these, there are often pairs that are kept, not forgotten. There are different reasons why these shoes are kept and stored: sometimes they are labelled as "for potential use", at other times they remind people of the bodies that wore them (for example, shoes from the infancy or toddlerhood of their children), and many times they are a reminder of other people or former times in one's life.

Seen in this way, keeping a certain pair of shoes can bring back memories and different versions of who people once were; shoes from a particular period can *"reflect different facets of my personality – and I like that"*. Sometimes the desire to keep a particular pair of shoes lies in the shoes themselves and is connected, for example, to the way a particular pair made someone feel; at other times, it arises from the events that took place while the shoes were still actively worn (see also Banim and Guy 2001). Many times, these pairs are connected to important life events, such as weddings, or – as in Kristina's case – the first day of her daughter's kindergarten; at other times, a pair that people keep can come to represent a longer period in one's life. In this way, shoes from the past that are kept can help recall past events and experiences

when they were worn, as well as the people present at the time, allowing people to travel in time, revive memories, and retrieve their identities. From this perspective, throwing away a pair of shoes can be similar to throwing away a part of oneself.

In line with this, Jenny Hockey et al. (2014: 259) explored how footwear can be used to inquire into the ways in which people live out their identities and observed that "[k]nowing who we are, partly derives from knowing who we have been". This point is also echoed by Sophie Woodward's (2007) description of clothes as a means to remember our former selves and to construct who we are in the present. With regard to women keeping clothes they no longer wear instead of throwing them away, Woodward draws an interesting analogy with placing a photograph in an album (Woodward 2007: 62). A photograph "captures 'good moments'", which it transforms into "good memories" (Bourdieu 1990: 26–27), and by putting it in an album, a good memory is framed, anchored, and preserved. In a similar way, a particular pair of shoes from the past that is kept can be understood as an anchor, reminding person of a specific time and place. This may include sneakers bought while travelling in Japan or New York, but at other times a pair of shoes is a materialization of memories and ideals of a longer period in life, as in the case of Simona:

> I have some strange memories of my childhood and adolescence, of the time when I was trying to gain my independence. And for me, my Converse shoes are a kind of emotional symbol, representing hanging out with my friends and, well, of consolation. I'd say that. /.../ And also, they've always been with me: my first kisses and other important events in my life – I've always worn them. And they connect me to those memories, to those first-time events, which were completely new and unique at the time, and maybe that [is why] I still keep them: because they are a pleasant reminder of how it felt when you were infinitely naïve and convinced of who knows what ideals and you were a good example of what you can do [if you want to], which [now you know] you cannot, ever. An example of a perfect, I'd say, perfect idea of what can be done with energy, willingness, and proactivity, exactly what I still wish people had more of, me included, more initiative. And it seems to me that this coincides exactly with the time when I was wearing my Converse shoes.

At other times, a pair of shoes is entangled with specific people with whom one has shared one's life and is kept as a reminder of those people and relationships. As Anika explained, she could not part with her almost completely worn-out Reebok trainers, which in a way even became a memory object (Habinc 2004: 29), a pair that has lost its functionality but preserves memories of her grandmother, the original owner:

> At the moment, my favourite shoes are white Reebok sports shoes that my grandmother gave me some time ago. I have had them for at least two years and have worn them every day, but now I cannot because the sole is falling off. The shoes are old because my grandmother had bought them about 30 years ago, but the quality is good, and they have lasted. They have a special meaning for me, and I am not ready to throw them away yet. I doubt I ever will, because they remind me of someone very important to me and all the memories, I shared with her. Now they are stored in a box in my room. I don't want to wear them anymore because I don't want to destroy them completely.

When a person habitually wears a particular pair of shoes over a period of time, shoes not only adapt to the shape of their body but also become one of the elements of who they were at a particular time in their lives. As discussed in the fourth chapter, through use, shoes "merge" with the wearer's body, assume the shape of the foot, respond to environmental influences, and thus form an especially intimate relationship with the wearer. This relationship is especially durable, as the person's footprint on the sole of the shoe, and the adjustments in other materials of the shoes, can remind one of the person's presence even after they have stopped wearing them or is no longer present. Particularly illustrative of this embodied relationship between worn shoes and the past are practices of wearing shoes previously worn by somebody else, such as second-hand shoes. Ida, for example, buys most of her clothes in a second-hand shop, but would never buy shoes. As she explained:

> Everything I wear today is from a second-hand shop, except the shoes. It doesn't even cross my mind [to buy second-hand shoes]. Shoes are important – and not that other things are not, but shoes are ultimately personal items. It's also because every foot is different, and we walk in different ways too.

A similar view was expressed by Janez:

> Veronika: Have you ever bought second-hand shoes?
> Janez: Oh, no. No. And I would never do it either. And do you know why not? Because a shoe – alright, if someone I know said to me: "I tried this shoe and I didn't like it, I never really wore it – do you want it?" But a shoe worn by someone else has adapted to their feet and the way they walk, probably. And it's changed a little bit, too. The sole has worn a little bit. So that's quite [tricky].

As shown through these examples, the shape assumed by footwear through its use can remind one of the events and paths walked in the shoes, and thus of the experiences one has had. On one occasion I asked Uršula why she never buys used, second-hand shoes, even though she buys second-hand clothing, and she responded: *"Because I*

think that… I don't wanna walk in someone else's shoes [Author's note: English in original]. *I also attribute a symbolic meaning to this. I want to walk these paths on my own."* It is notable that an English idiom was used to express an empathetic attitude toward footwear that has already been used by someone else. As the idiom acknowledges, the connection between shoes and their wearer is intensified through use. In Slovenian, the idiom "Everyone knows where their shoe pinches" (*Vsak sam ve, kje ga čevelj žuli*) similarly refers to the fit of the shoes as a metaphor for (undesirable) events, discomfort, or worries one has experienced. In a similar way, one of the students noted in her reflexive writing on the pair of shoes she likes to wear the most: "I see my two shoes as my companions who listen to me without prejudice. They are friends who support and comfort me, but they still pinch me here and there just to bring me back to reality." For her, too, a shoe that pinches served as a reminder of the difficulties of "reality."

We can see how a particular pair of shoes a person wears can embody experiences and memories of certain events, even of periods of one's life, and can thus be interpreted as a kind of (auto)biographical object (Hoskins 1998; Hockey et al. 2014). Due to their evocative power (Vogrinc 2005), a pair of shoes can also act as a beholder of a memory, a reminder – as the following account on Janez's Converse All Stars illustrates – of personal history and of the social norms expected in certain life stages:

> Oh, yes, now I remember something else. I stopped wearing All Stars back then [in 1994 or 1993]. /…/ You could buy them, but they weren't that popular anymore. And then they started [becoming popular again] sometime around 2010 and I wasn't interested in them anymore. Because I knew – well, they were good [shoes] from that time when I was young and stuff, a teenager in my late years – but I didn't want to wear them anymore, mainly because of their sole. And, I mean, it wouldn't be appropriate either.[38] /…/ I'd rather have them remind me of a certain time in my life than wear them again. They're something – yes, they are to remind me of my personal history. /…/ I don't want to make a big, nostalgic thing out of them. That time is over now. Well, I still dress the same, but I don't want to wear the same haircut anymore.

As already noted, certain types (and brands) of footwear are associated with certain music genres or even subcultures. Alexandra Sherlock wrote about how Clarks Originals have become synonymous

38 Similarly, someone else explained why he stopped wearing Converse All Stars shoes: "We had to grow out of that phase, and now we're at the point in life where we want people to take us seriously, right? /…/We want to prove that we can be professional."

with "masculine style, authenticity, coolness" (Sherlock 2014: 30) and their connection to the Manchester indie music scene (Sherlock 2014, 2016). Similarly, when discussing Dr. Martens' branding strategies, Cath Davies noted their connections to New Age Travellers, punk, grunge, and indie music (Davies 2014: 3). Similarly, in my research on Converse All Stars, I noticed connections to punk, grunge, and rock music (Zavratnik 2014, 2016), and they were many times discussed as *"this one accessory /.../ in rock and roll that kind of represented you. If you have All Stars, then you're a real rocker /.../."*

In the case of Converse All Stars, too, it is crucial to acknowledge the cultural importance of the way in which materials respond to the practice of walking, how they adjust to the foot, and how the traces of use are shown through time – cracked white rubber that turns yellowish, holes in the upper part of the shoe that is made of canvas, the dirt that cannot be washed away even by a washing machine. With "age and interactions with people" (Miller 2009: 162) they acquire a patina (see McCracken 1988; Appadurai 1996; Miller 2009), but only for those with specific (sub)cultural knowledge. Thus, in line with Arjun Appadurai's thoughts, All Stars acquired their full meaning only in a proper context, i.e. only in and for those "assemblies of objects and people who know how to indicate, through their bodily practices, their relationship to these objects" (Appadurai 1996: 75). As one wearer explained, it was wrong to have *"clean, nice* [All Stars] *shoes, where the white* [rubber] *was really white and you could see one's mother was cleaning them"* as it was just *"too fancy"*. Traces of wear thus became "a sign of the right sort of duration in the social life of things" (Appadurai 1996: 75). For the wearer, this was particularly important in light of the increasingly, as he put it, *"commercialized"* nature of Converse All Stars, which were, in his view, worn by some people simply because they were *"popular"*. Cracked rubber and holes in the canvas thus became essential in shaping his (past) identity as a rocker; in this way, a particular pair of shoes imbued with memories of the past can become essential in how memories of events, periods, and past identities materialize.

The temporal dimension of the past is not necessarily linked to the pairs of shoes that people have kept or still wear. Sometimes these reminiscences and memories are linked to the pairs that people no longer possess, for one reason or another. For example, some shoes are remembered because they were part of important events, or because they failed someone tremendously, and such shoes also evoke memories of events, people or mishaps. For example, Maja's Etnies sneakers mentioned earlier, which remind her of her insecurities regarding

where she belonged in high school, or Aljoša's Light Up sneakers from his childhood, which remind him of the happiness he felt when he finally received his first pair, or Mojca's roller sneakers that got stolen when she was in the second grade.

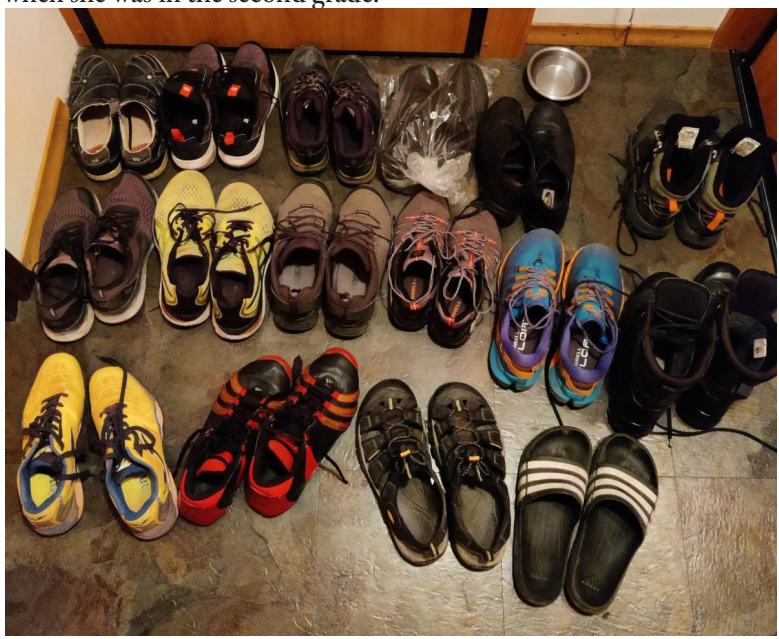

Figure 27: Aljoša's shoes from the past and the present. Aljoša, Ljubljana, 2023.

HOW WILL I LOOK?

Sometimes I think to myself, 'What if you beautified yourself'? But then I think: 'Who will walk in these shoes'?!" Maja's words point to the fact that people's footwear choices are not only engendered by the past and present. As shown earlier, with the case of Kristina's walking shoes, buying a new pair of shoes inevitably addresses the question of the future, as imagining what a pair of shoes can help people be(come) in the future is ingrained in the very act of choosing.

Another example of a shopping experience accelerates the orientation towards the future. On one of the occasions, during a shared shopping trip, Lili asked me to go shoe shopping with her, explaining I seemed to have a lucky hand when it came to finding a pair that fits. She needed a new pair of shoes for the christening of a family friend's

daughter. For her, buying shoes is a nightmare: she wears size 41–42 and has narrow feet, and because of that she has gotten used to taking the first pair that fits, often from the men's department, since 41 is the largest size for many women's models. However, when it comes to shoes for special occasions, she is not easily satisfied. Normally she would just wear her usual everyday shoes, but since she was going to be a godmother she wanted to buy a pair that were nice enough to match her chosen outfit – a long floral skirt, a white shirt, and a denim jacket – but not so fancy that she could not wear them with her ordinary outfits. She already knew which brands suited her in terms of ergonomics, and after looking at five pairs she found some that were narrow enough and nice enough. She put both shoes on, looked in the mirror, and asked: *"How will I look in front of the altar with a baby in my hands?"*

At this moment, Lili imagined herself in the future wearing a specific pair of shoes. A godmother-to-be thus envisioned herself in a particular situation, within a specific social context, with a specific role to play, and specific shoes on her feet. A similar process was reflected on many other occasions. Sabina, for example, commented on her shopping decisions as follows:

> For example, I love colours and patterns and things like that on my shoes, but it's not my style. And if I had shoes like that, I couldn't combine them with anything, and it doesn't make sense. I mean, I'm always thinking about how I'm going to wear them – am I? It's not a problem to buy them, but why just leave them standing there then. /.../ With these things, if I'm not sure, I can just go [to the shop] and look at a pair of shoes many times before I decide. /.../ In that sense, maybe I'm thinking more practically [and ask myself]: "Are you going to wear them?"

An orientation towards the future is part of how people experience their everyday and imagining (short-term) futures influences how they construct their daily outfits (Woodward 2007). As discussed in the fourth and the fifth chapters, this also includes footwear which is chosen in relation to anticipated daily obligations. However, the influence of media and popular culture should not be overlooked here. Although this was not explored systematically, the connection between commercially produced imaginaries and teleoaffects that promise recognizable futures recurs throughout the ethnographic material.

Building on the work of Theodore Schatzki, Rebecca Bryant and Daniel M. Knight (2019: 140) refer to all futural orientations as teleoaffects, dispositions that "mobilize[s] a set of practices that encompass a number of associated actions and ends which people

acceptably pursue". Such teleoaffective structures (Schatzki 2002: 80 in Bryant and Knight 2019: 18) are also visible in the reflexive excerpt on Converse All Stars from the prologue, as well as in Alexandra Sherlock's research on Clarks Originals (Sherlock 2014, 2016). A similar observation emerges in one of Janez's accounts. When explaining one of the first pairs of shoes he bought after starting his university studies in the 1990s, he described how he sought to become part of the folk-rock music scene. At the time, the duo Simon and Garfunkel figured prominently in his imaginaries, shaping his fashion choices:

> These are Paul Simon and Art Garfunkel, right. This is the record of their greatest hits. /.../ When I saw the cover of the record – this is the back of the record – wow! "I want to have shoes like that. I want those shoes! These, from Paul Simon. /.../ These shoes. I want to have them." And I had a sweater like this; I asked my grandma to knit me one. And then I bought a pair of trousers like these, and in between there were [these shoes] – this is a scene from New York, and I wanted them badly. But that was, I saw this photo in the 90s, and that wasn't even the fashion of New York in the 90s. But I really wanted to go to New York and dress like that.

Shortly after seeing the record cover, Janez bought a pair of shoes, similar to the ones worn by Simon, in Spain, where he was visiting with a friend. He spent the last of his money to buy those shoes, even if it meant that he could not afford a train ticket to get home afterwards and instead had to hitchhike and travel as a stowaway. He slept with the new shoes in his sleeping bag, to make sure they would not be stolen or lost if he had to make a quick escape. If, as Maurice Halbwachs (1992: 25) suggests, we always remember important events, then, remembering exact experiences and misadventures points to the significance of pursuing an imagined future identity that would materialize through a particular pair of shoes.

When considering orientations towards the future through footwear, however, it is important to distinguish between selecting a pair of shoes from an already existing footwear wardrobe in order to construct one's daily outfit – something Janja Žagar has called a "fragmentary order" (Žagar Grgič 2011) – and the purchase of a new pair of shoes. While the former involves a short-term vision of the future, usually linked to the schedule of the day, the latter involves a longer temporal perspective in which one imagines oneself in (more) futural situations or even in new social roles. Rebecca Bryant and Daniel M. Knight's (2019) theorization of different orientations to the future (i.e. anticipation, expectation, speculation, potentiality, hope, destiny)

is particularly helpful for discussing the ability of footwear to traverse the present and connect it to the future, and for our understanding of how the future "awakens the present" (Bryant and Knight 2019: 192). In this way, we can better understand the quotidian.

For instance, when buying a new pair of shoes, the expectation of wearing them one day in the future is implicitly present – we buy new shoes because we expect we will most probably wear them in the (near) future. One can, for example, buy shoes with the expectation of wearing them to a certain event (e.g. a wedding), for a particular activity (e.g. mountain climbing), or one may even expect to wear them in specific places (e.g. in the mountains) or under specific weather conditions (e.g. when it rains). Bryant and Knight (2019: 58) see this expectation as a "conservative teleology because of its implicit and assumed reliance on the past" – we expect what we expect because we rely on past experiences.

The futural orientation that seems most pertinent for the consideration of footwear, however, is hope. Bryant and Knight (2019: 134) write about hope as "a form of futural momentum, a way of pressing into the future that attempts to pull certain potentialities into actuality". In other words, "[h]ope is about something that doesn't presently exist but potentially could" (Bryant and Knight 2019: 134). For example, every time Janez buys his shoes, he imagines himself wearing those shoes in one of the cities he has visited in the past. While drawing on his past experiences of visiting these cities, he simultaneously acknowledges that the imagined future may or may not be realized. Visiting a certain city with a specific pair of shoes is what he hopes for, a possibility, a disposition that "motivate[d] his activity" of buying a pair of shoes "here-and-now" (Bryant and Knight 2019: 157), but the outcome of this futural orientation is "uncertain" (Bryant and Knight 2019: 142):

> You know, when I buy my shoes, I always imagine, "Okay, I am going to buy these shoes now", and then I imagine a city, a foreign city, where I am going to go [with them]. /.../ I wear some clothes, depending on the weather, a camera, [shoes] and that's it! Every time I look at those shoes – and I imagined the shoes I am wearing now in the same way! I thought "Wow, I am going to wear these in Belgrade", I imagined Belgrade very clearly. Then, I never went to Belgrade with these shoes.

On another occasion, while we were having an in-depth discussion on the popularity of Birkenstock sandals, Janez explained how he "prepared" himself for a newly expected social role and obligations and responsibilities that would come with it:

> Do you know when I bought the first [Birkenstock sandals]? /.../ I bought the first Birkenstock sandals when my [first] son was born, and I assumed I would have to carry him around to burp him. And at that time my feet kind of [hurt] when I walked barefoot in a certain rhythm. And [I assumed] that would bother me. And I bought a pair of Birkenstock sandals; they were notoriously expensive /.../ even though our family didn't have money to afford much. But I bought [a pair], I still have them at home, they are clogs. And I only wore them at home, they were my indoor slippers, and it was really much easier to carry him around.

Janez made the decision to buy this pair of clogs in the hope that he would become a good, attentive, and caring father. To achieve what he hoped for, he actively took care of his own feet by giving them enough support to walk comfortably for a long period of time. Following Stef Jansen's (2016: 448 in Bryant and Knight 2019: 139–140) analytical distinction between transitive and intransitive modalities of hope, the ability to walk for longer periods of time can be interpreted as a transitive object of hope that generates intransitive hopefulness about being a good father in general. In this sense, the future was brought into the family home even before the child was born, just as Janez's relationship with his son was established and materialized even before he was born – through this pair of Birkenstock clogs.

A MIRROR TO THE FUTURE

In his ethnography *The Perfect Fit: Creative Work in the Global Shoe Industry*, Claudio E. Benzecry (2022) looks at the process of globalization from the perspective of the women's shoe industry. Using the "follow the thing approach" (Benzecry 2022: 14), he traces the process of shoe production through his work with designers, developers, production managers, fit models, and others. Although his primary aim is to provide an insight into an example of how global production works from the ground up, he implicitly shows that the process of shoe production is one of creativity, selection, and negotiation among drawing on previous experience, producing something new, and predicting future (fashion) trends. The leitmotif of this chapter, which focuses instead on the practice of choosing and wearing shoes through the perspective of temporalities, is in some ways similar: it seeks to show how shoes, when approached analytically and through what David Howes (2022) termed the sensori-social approach, can help us understand how people negotiate their lives, make sense of the(ir) past (identities)

and imagine the(ir) futures. By understanding footwear as significant to bodily engagements with the world and by employing the metaphor of "footwear landscape" (Hockey et al. 2014) this chapter also draws together the discussion from previous chapters, showing how by choosing shoes people navigate not only physical but also cultural and social environments (Sherlock 2014: 47). It shows how a pair of shoes can come to embody memories and experiences by their association with a particular place, particular time, and particular people. Through continuous wearing, a pair of shoes can become imbued with memories of the past, acquiring an affective dimension, and becoming what Jonas Frykman and Maja Povrzanović Frykman (2016: 24) call sensitive objects. We could, in fact, take this point even further, suggesting that by throwing away the pair of shoes that embodies a memory of a certain event, the significance of the event may also be diminished, or that by discarding the shoes one can also throw away certain (hurtful) memories. This was also reflected in the conversation I had with interlocutor about his wedding shoes: *"If I were divorced, I'd most probably throw them away."* Conversely, shoes that recall unpleasant experiences may also be deliberately kept, as in Kristina's case, who has kept the slippers that "caused" her to fall down the stairs and then hurt her head, keeping them as a reminder not to wear them again.

As we have seen, the relationships people form with their shoes are reflected on many levels, not least in the ways footwear collections are arranged and organized, keeping pairs of shoes, that are no longer worn. These relationships are also reflected in the practices of handling shoes that are too worn out and lose their functionality – eventually some pairs are discarded, but even then, they can come to hold an affective dimension. For example, when Maja finally bought a new pair of running shoes and replaced her almost ten-year old worn-out pair, she was surprised how new shoes did not give her any blisters:

> Veronika: No blisters?
> Maja: No, no blisters. Very cool. I mean, the feeling on my feet was great. But then I had to throw my old ones away. But I thanked them. Just like Marie Kondo says, before you throw something away, you should say thank you and only then let it go. I think that's a beautiful practice. Because something served you well for so long, it means – and I know this may sound a bit stupid – but you are attached to these shoes.

On the other hand, a pair of shoes from the past that is no longer worn might be kept because of its imagined potential use in the future. Kristina's shoe collection, for example, is full of shoes she used to wear and no longer does. She kept them not only because of the

memories that bound her with these shoes, but also because one of her daughters might give them "*life*" again in the future. A similar logic applies to Janez's collection of four pairs of Birkenstock slippers. He has not thrown away any of his pairs but instead keeps them for different occasions; one pair is used to take out the trash or spending time in the garden in front of the house, while another is kept for *"when I will buy a holiday house by the sea. I don't have it yet, but I might. Or maybe a holiday house somewhere else, I don't know. What I want to say, I will still use them in one way or another, I will not throw them away."*

As discussed through the work of Rebecca Bryant and Daniel M. Knight (2019), their conceptualization of futural orientations – particularly hope – offers a productive framework for understanding how a person can hope for and even prepare for their future (identities) by choosing a particular pair of shoes. By drawing the "not-yet into the present" and by "motivat[ing] activity in the here-and-now" (Bryant and Knight 2019: 157), hope as a futural orientation can be understood as a mode of "awakening the present" (Bryant and Knight 2019: 157, 198; Bryant 2020), something that can also occur through our footwear. At the same time, through pairs of shoes such as those kept by Kristina and Janez, the past and the future are simultaneously manifested in the shoes people keep in the present.

Conclusions

In this book, I have followed the call to take the "blindingly obvious" seriously (Miller and Woodward 2007) and have made it the focus of ethnographic enquiry. Unlike Barbie from the movie *Barbie* – who faces the seemingly difficult choice between continuing to enjoy a carefree life in pink, crystal-encrusted stilettos or embarking on a journey of discovery in a pair of sturdy brown Birkenstock sandals to learn about the real world full of hardships and obstacles – this book has unhesitatingly put on a pair of Birkenstocks and set out to find the "truth about the universe". It takes footwear as an entry point into the textures of everyday life by investigating people's relationships with their shoes and their practices of (not) wearing them. Grounded in ethnographic research, the book began with a simple premise that wearing shoes is a habitual practice for people in Ljubljana, regardless of their particular investment in clothes, shoes, and/or fashion.

From this premise emerged an exploration of the social life of shoes (Kopytoff 1986) and of the practices through which they are bought, selected, stored, worn, cleaned, remembered, and sometimes kept long after they have ceased to be worn. Rather than approaching shoes as objects with symbolic meaning, the study situates them within the broader framework of material culture studies, based on the understanding that "materiality is an integral dimension of culture, and that there are aspects of social existence that cannot be fully understood without it" (Tilley et al. 2006a: 1).

The first part of the book outlines the theoretical foundations for such an approach, engaging with contemporary discussions on materiality, materials, agency, and the co-constitutive relationship between people and things. Drawing particularly on authors who have argued that people and things make one another (Miller 2005a: 38), I approach footwear as part of the co-constitutive process through which people become who they are. Central to this orientation is Daniel Miller's notion of the humility of things (Miller 2005a, 2008), the idea that objects often frame people's behaviour most effectively when they recede into the background.

The empirical core of this book unfolds across four chapters, each of which approaches footwear from a distinct perspective. The third chapter situates shoes within the broader context of individuals' lives by examining practices such as shoe shopping, organizing shoe wardrobes, and assembling outfits. By drawing on Belk's understanding of collections (1995), I propose conceptualizing shoe wardrobes as dynamic collections or even assemblages (Bennett 2010), responsive to shifting social roles (Goffman 1956, 1974), bodily needs, seasons, and life circumstances. The chapter thus demonstrates that footwear is embedded within a complex process of ordering, selecting an outfit and negotiating everyday life.

The fourth chapter turns to comfort, a term frequently invoked by my interlocutors yet one that proved to be layered and relational rather than an intrinsic value of particular types of shoes. By analysing the practice of breaking in the shoes, and those of adaptation and bodily adjustment, the chapter shows how comfort emerges through use and through the gradual singularization (Kopytoff 1986) of a pair of shoes. The discussion of practical and appropriate comfort (Miller and Woodward 2012) further demonstrates that what is perceived as comfort is inseparable from social contexts and expectations. The exploration of barefoot practices and indoor slippers extends this argument, showing how footwear participates in framing (Goffman 1974) places (as home or work and so on) and in organizing moral and spatial order (Douglas 1984 [1966]).

The fifth chapter examines the transformative capacity of shoes. Moving beyond fairy-tale narratives of radical transformations, it considers the more modest, everyday changes engendered by the acts of putting on and taking off particular pairs. By distinguishing habitual and occasionally worn footwear and analysing the particular case of high-heeled shoes, the chapter demonstrates how footwear can mark and produce occasions (Faris 1973), while also revealing the ambivalences and negotiations embedded in such decisions. The discussion of sneakers further complicates the distinction between habitual and occasionally worn footwear, highlighting processes of singularization and generational differentiation within this highly differentiated category of footwear.

Finally, the sixth chapter explores the temporal dimensions of footwear through the metaphor of the "footwear landscape" (Hockey et al. 2014). It demonstrates how shoes can materialize memories, becoming sensitive objects (Frykman and Povrzanović Frykman 2016), and how shoe-buying and shoe-wearing practices provide a site where expectations and hopes for the future are negotiated. By attending to shoes that are kept despite no longer being worn, as well as those purchased with specific imagined futures in mind, the chapter shows how footwear can embody multiple temporalities simultaneously.

Taken together, these chapters demonstrate that practices of engaging with footwear, however mundane they may appear, are implicated in the perception of comfort, social positioning and time.

One of the central insights that emerges from the ethnographic material concerns how the future – and time in general – is not simply imagined but is practically and bodily experienced through footwear. Purchasing a new pair of shoes involves projecting oneself into situations yet to come, into expected roles, and into possible movements. The process of breaking in shoes reinforces this temporal dimension; the expectation that a pair must be worn, gradually adapted, and experienced in social contexts to be(come) comfortable shows that the future is worked towards through the practice of wearing. Similar temporal layering is evident in the practice of keeping shoes "just in case"; shoes that are no longer worn are not only reminiscent of the past but can also host potential futures. Through practices of wearing, footwear becomes a site where time is not only experienced and measured but also materially accumulated (cf. Appadurai 1996).

At the same time, my ethnographic research shows that footwear holds a distinct position within the broader category of clothing. Although shoes are typically regarded as a subset of clothing, their material properties and modes of engagement set them apart from many

other garments. Because they must be broken in and worn repeatedly to adapt to the contours of an individual's feet, they tend to become more individualized and singular than most garments (Sampson 2022[2020]). Through prolonged bodily contact, shoes register a person's weight, posture, and movements. Creases, softened insoles, worn rubber, and accumulated patina are all material traces of use, and in this sense the process of singularization is not only symbolic but also bodily: a mass-produced commodity becomes attuned to a specific body. Once adapted, shoes often lose their interchangeability in ways that many other garments do not.

The ethnographic material further shows that everyday footwear practices are historically and generationally differentiated. As illustrated by the example of sneakers, the extensive diversification of this category of footwear in recent decades has enabled its gradual expansion across social contexts. Sneakers, previously associated with sports, leisure, or subcultural affiliations, increasingly traverse domains once reserved for more formal footwear. Approaching these differences through Kopytoff's notion of singularization and the proces of reclassification (1986) makes it possible to see how footwear acquires specific meanings and uses through practice (i.e. experience), becoming singularized in different ways across generations, genders, and social and cultural contexts. Through sneakers and high heels, these differences become visible in embodied dispositions and in practical judgements about what feels appropriate, comfortable, or simply normal to wear in certain social contexts.

The decision to focus on wearing footwear as a habitual practice inevitably and implicitly entails a commitment to the study of everyday life. The everyday is often treated as self-evident, as a domain that simply happens between significant events. This book adopts an assumption that the everyday is not merely a backdrop against which social life unfolds, but the very medium through which it is sustained and differentiated (cf. Lefebvre 1991). Approaching footwear ethnographically makes this particularly visible. Shoes rarely attract sustained attention – they operate, in Miller's terms, with humility (2005a, 2010); they influence movement, frame situations, and stabilize social expectations without requiring specific articulation. Yet, at the same time, they can also participate in transitions from one social role to another or in the transformation of an unmarked social event into an occasion, for instance when they pinch, constrain movement, or make us feel inappropriately dressed for a given situation. Following Highmore's proposition that the exceptional is located at the heart of the everyday rather than opposed to it (2002), the analysis of

footwear practices demonstrates that routine and transformation are not mutually exclusive. Likewise, Ger and Kravet's relational account of the ordinary and the special (Ger and Kravets 2009) clarifies that what is experienced or marked as extraordinary emerges only in relation to the mundane practices that sustain it. Footwear practices, whether in the differentiation between habitually and occasionally worn shoes or in the transformation enacted by work clogs or high heels, exemplify this relational structure. In this sense, the everyday cannot be reduced to repetition (see de Certeau 1984; cf. Lefebvre 1991): the everyday, as it emerges through footwear practices, can be understood as a structured field composed of singularizations, repetitions, variations and socially situated transformations. It is in ordinary acts such as walking and wearing shoes that the structure of everyday life becomes most perceptible, as captured in Jure Jakob's (2015: 44) reflection on walking:

> Wearing good shoes means a lot. Knowing where you are going, how you are going to get there, and that you have already gone part of your way. Not all shoes fit everyone. You cannot go on every journey with every shoe. Different shoes are good for different occasions. It is not good to go too far in new shoes.

Figure 28: The author's collection of shoes. Veronika Zavratnik, Ljubljana, 2023.

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Long journeys demand a lot – not only from the traveller, but also from the companions who walk alongside her. This journey was indeed long and winding, with many of you joining me at different moments. Some of you taught me to walk with a firmer, more confident stride. Others slowed me down and showed me more scenic routes. And then there were those who were simply always there – walking beside me, facing the steep climbs without ever asking when it would end. To Tea, Nina, Martina, Matjaž, and Karlina I owe the most – *hvala*!

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POVZETEK

V monografiji *Med omaro in pločnikom: Etnografija obutve v vsakdanjem življenju* raziskujem razmerje med ljudmi in njihovo obutvijo v vsakdanjem življenju. Izhajam iz podmene, da je nošenje čevljev običajna praksa, ter se osredotočam na načine in prakse, skozi katere se ljudje vsakodnevno ukvarjajo s svojo obutvijo – od obuvanja in sezuvanja do shranjevanja, izbire in skrbi za čevlje.

Monografija temelji na etnografski raziskavi, ki sem jo izvedla v Ljubljani, in se metodološko ter teoretsko umešča v polje raziskovanja materialne kulture, pri čemer razmerje med ljudmi in obutvijo razumem kot sodoločujoče. Z raziskavo pokažem, da čevlji niso pasivni predmeti, temveč aktivno sodelujejo pri oblikovanju vsakdanjih praks, telesnih izkušenj in družbenih razmerij. Osredotočenje na te, pogosto spregledane vidike razkriva številna protislovja, ki odsevajo širša vprašanja in izzive sodobnega življenja. V knjigi tako obravnavam različne vidike udobja, načine, kako ljudje razumejo in vrednotijo »primerne« čevlje v različnih družbenih kontekstih, dinamiko garderob, ki se nenehno preoblikujejo glede na situacije, letne čase, aktivnosti in življenjske okoliščine, ter zmožnost čevljev, da postanejo biografski ali celo spominski predmeti.

Posebej me zanima, kako čevlji delujejo kot posredniki med telesom in družbo, zato izpostavim njihovo dvojnost: na eni strani omogočajo gibanje in orientacijo v prostoru, vplivajo na način hoje, držo in občutenje lastnega telesa, obenem so tesno prepleteni z družbenimi normami, estetskimi pričakovanji in situacijskimi zahtevami, zaradi česar pomembno soustvarjajo načine, kako posamezniki doživljamo sebe in druge. Pri tem obutev razumem kot del utelešenih praks ter kot predmete, ki aktivno sodelujejo pri oblikovanju vsakdanjih telesnih rutin in občutij.

V monografiji tako sledim »življenju čevljev« skozi različne vidike vsakdanjosti: od nakupovanja in organizacije obuvalnih garderob do izkušenj nošenja, občutkov udobja, preobrazbenih potencialov, obrabe ter njihovega čiščenja in hranjenja. Pri tem pokažem, da čevlji ne odražajo le družbenih situacij, temveč aktivno sodelujejo pri njihovem soustvarjanju in prehajanju posameznikov med njimi – omogočajo prehode med različnimi družbenimi vlogami in konteksti, hkrati pa delujejo kot nosilci spominov na te vloge, kontekste in dogodke ali

življenjska obdobja. Nenazadnje pokažem, kako se skozi obutev izražajo različne časovnosti in kako ljudje skozi obutev reflektirajo svoje pretekle in sedanje izkušnje ter razmišljajo o prihodnosti.

S tem pokažem, da lahko prav z osredotočenjem na navidezno trivialne predmete, kot so čevlji, in na navidezno nepomembne vsakdanje prakse – kot je izbira čevljev pred odhodom od doma – pridemo do poglobljenega razumevanja vsakdanjega življenja kot strukturiranega polja, sestavljenega ne le iz ponavljanj, temveč tudi iz variacij, nepredvidljivih izbir in situacijsko pogojenih preobrazb, ki oblikujejo načine, kako živimo, delujemo in se umeščamo v svet.

SUMMARY

In the monograph *Between the Wardrobe and the Sidewalk: An Ethnography of Footwear in Everyday Life*, I explore the relationship between people and the shoes they wear. I begin with the premise that wearing shoes is an ordinary, taken-for-granted practice, and focus on how people engage with their footwear on a daily basis – from putting on and taking off shoes to storing, choosing, and caring for them.

My research is based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Ljubljana and is methodologically and theoretically situated within material culture studies, where the relationship between people and footwear is understood as co-constitutive. I show that shoes are not passive objects but actively participate in everyday practices, embodied experiences, and social relations. Focusing on these often-overlooked aspects reveals numerous contradictions that reflect broader questions and challenges of contemporary life. The book thus addresses differentiated notions of comfort, the ways in which people understand and evaluate "appropriate" footwear in various social contexts, and the dynamics of shoe wardrobes, which are constantly reshaped according to situations, seasons, activities, and life circumstances, as well as their capacity to become biographical or even memory objects.

I am particularly interested in how shoes function as mediators between the body and society, and I highlight their duality: on the one hand, they enable movement and orientation in space, shaping gait, posture, and bodily sensations; on the other, they are closely intertwined with social conventions, aesthetic expectations, and situational demands, thereby contributing significantly to the ways individuals experience themselves and others. In this sense, I understand footwear as part of embodied practices and as objects that actively participate in shaping everyday bodily routines.

In the monograph, I follow shoes through different aspects of everyday life: from purchasing and organizing shoe wardrobes to experiences of wearing them, feelings of comfort, transformative potentials, wear, cleaning, and their preservation and storage. I demonstrate that shoes do not merely reflect social situations but actively participate in their co-constitution and in transitions between them – enabling shifts between different social roles and contexts, while also acting as carriers of memories of these roles, contexts, and events or life periods.

Finally, I show how different temporalities are expressed through footwear and how people use shoes to reflect on their past and present experiences and to imagine the future.

Through this, I show that by focusing on seemingly trivial objects such as shoes, and on seemingly insignificant everyday practices – such as choosing which shoes to wear before leaving home – we can gain a deeper understanding of everyday life as a structured field composed not only of repetitions, but also of variations, unpredictable choices, and situationally conditioned transformations that shape how we live, act, and position ourselves in the world.

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