Georg Simmel: Clothes and Fashion

Fashion is haughty, trifling, affected, servile, despotic, mean and ambitious, precise and fantastical, all in a breath – tied to no rule, and bound to conform to every whim of the minute.

William Hazlitt

German sociologist and social philosopher Georg Simmel (1858–1918) published his major work on fashion, *Philosophie der Mode*, in 1905.¹ He spent most of his adult life in the artistic and intellectual milieu of Berlin and was famous for being a charismatic public lecturer as well as an inspiration to many German intellectuals of the generation below him. Walter Benjamin, Ernst Bloch, Wilhelm Worringer and Siegfried Kracauer all openly acknowledged the importance of Simmel’s thought to their development. Georg Simmel and his wife Gertrude (a philosopher in her own right) were famous hosts and their home was a centre for the Berlin intelligentsia. One visitor to their home described it so:

The large high study on the ground floor with the view into the garden was covered with valuable old Persian carpets . . . Everywhere in cupboards or in the open stood vases, bowls from the far east, exquisite Buddha figures . . . I will never forget the distinctive fragrance which one encountered upon entering Simmel’s house; a mixture of the smell of hand picked apples and very expensive cigarettes.²

For a number of years Simmel was a member of the intellectual circle grouped around the poet Stefan George who was famous for wearing clothing he had designed himself.³ These are not individuals for whom dress, style and personal tastes were matters of little import.

The favoured literary form for Simmel, with his immersion in, and love of, the experience of metropolitan life, was condensed, subtle dissections of the daily encounters that are the stuff of city life. Simmel’s acute analytical eye arises out of the centrality he accords to art and to aesthetics. As well as writing
books on Rembrandt and Rodin, Simmel produced numerous essays and articles exploring artistic themes. But his concern with art and aesthetics goes much deeper than mere art appreciation. In the structure of the artwork, and our experience of it, Simmel finds a template by which to guide his analysis of the social order in general. David Frisby has argued that one of the most distinctive qualities of Simmel’s ideas, as well as his style of expressing them, is that he ‘adopts an aesthetic perspective in the articulation of his social theory’. What I think Frisby is implying here is that Simmel sees in works of art and our encounters with them something close to the core of what it is to be human. Aesthetics pervades the whole of human life. Indeed, aesthetics is life and so has an especial significance for how human activities and institutions are thought of at a general level. Simmel puts it thus:

For us the essence of aesthetic observation and interpretation lies in the fact that the typical is to be found in what is unique, the law-like in what is fortuitous, the essence and significance of things in the superficial and transitory.

The handle of a jug, an earring, a picture frame or the pattern that food assumes on a plate can all be places where the generalities of social life are as insistently present as in the broad social trends thought to constitute the summits of collective life. The source of this sense of the general in the particular, of the presence of the whole in the fragment, comes out of the tradition of German art history which, since the work of Winckelmann at the end of the eighteenth century, had been developing an increasingly sophisticated conceptual lexicon for analysing works of art. At the heart of this enterprise is the idea of style which, by the time Simmel encounters it, has become a notion whose remit goes way beyond the borders of high art. As with works of art, human artefacts were regarded as unique in the ways in which their material (their particular) and spiritual (their universal) dimensions are joined within the internal economy of the object. As he observes in the above quotation, this encounter in the human artefact is one where the typical can be found in the unique. Unlike his contemporary, Veblen, Simmel does not see social phenomena, and in particular the material forms of the clothes we use to transform ourselves, as screens for ‘unworthy motives’, or simply the ideological tools of a powerful leisure class. Each point, instance or particularity in social life is a momentary resolution of numerous and, very often, conflicting forces. A social fact can appear, but it can just as easily disappear, if there is an alteration in the alignment of forces upon which it rests. Frisby observes that in Simmel’s social theory ‘the notion of substance is dissolved to that of threads’. One might also add that these threads are constantly unravelling and ravelling anew. Paradoxically, if his pervasive ‘aestheticism’ encouraged what has been referred
to as Simmel’s ‘sociological impressionism’, it also alerts him to the importance of registering the precise forms and materialities of the physical environment in which we live. Aestheticism may elevate the mundane into the sublime but it also plunges the interpreter into the heart of an object’s physical make-up, its formal composition and the sensual impact these have upon their perceiver. As a thinker, Simmel never rushes to ‘overcome’ the sensuous presence of objects and just as he entitles one of his essays ‘The Sociology of the Senses’ one might also claim that much of what concerns him is a ‘Sociology of Material Form’. It is this ‘aesthetic’ sensibility which he brings to bear with such wonderful results on the social phenomena of clothing and fashion.

**Clothes**

Simmel makes a sharp distinction between fashion and clothes and sees no intrinsic link between those objects nominated as ‘clothing’ and the broad social phenomena of ‘fashion’. In fact, he declares that fashion is a process capable of appearing in areas of life other than clothing:

> the domination of fashion is most unbearable in those areas which ought to be subject only to objective decisions: religiosity, scientific interests, and even socialism and individualism have all been the subject of fashion.  

Simmel deals with clothing in his short essay ‘Adornment’. Like Spencer and Veblen, he follows the nineteenth-century anthropological convention in deriving clothes from ‘a decorative impulse’. He even tracks across the same ground as Spencer when he claims that clothing emerges from within a primitive matrix in which the individual’s possessions, his or her bodily ornamentation and his or her sense of self have undergone a minimum of internal differentiation.

> Among primitive peoples, it is reported, women’s private property generally develops later than that of men and, originally, and often exclusively, refers to adornment. By contrast, the personal property of the male usually begins with weapons.

Simmel is never at his best when indulging in anthropological speculation of this kind and observations such as these are quickly put to one side once he begins to elaborate his ‘real’ theory of adornment, namely that adornment is an attempt on the part of the individual to extend the force field of his or her ego. As always, Simmel begins his analysis by positing a social fact, in this instance adornment, brought into being through the interplay of two, logically opposed forces. These he describes in the following way:
Man’s desire to please his social environment contains two contradictory tendencies, in whose play and counterplay in general, the relations among individuals take their course. On the one hand, it contains kindness, a desire of the individual to give the other joy; but on the other hand, there is the wish for this joy and these ‘favours’ to flow back to him, in the form of recognition and esteem.\textsuperscript{14}

The nature of these forces is such that the presence of each becomes the condition for the realization of them both. The powerful need the weak because without their recognition the game of competition would never have come into being in the first place.

Pleasing may thus become a means of the will to power: some individuals exhibit the strange contradiction that they need those above whom they elevate themselves by life and deed, for their own self-feeling upon the subordinates’ realization that they are subordinate.\textsuperscript{15}

A concrete and immediate vehicle for carrying the assertive drives of the ego out into the world is the body and its accoutrements. Simmel argues that a person may give pleasure to others by making him- or herself pleasing through adornment. This ‘debt to pleasure’ will be returned to its originator in the form of esteem, envy and recognition. Clothing, he argues, appears within that set of objects and activities in which the individual strives to extend the power of the will over others by manipulating attractive body supplements. If the argument were to break off at this point there would not be much to differentiate Simmel’s argument from that of Veblen. It is only as Simmel starts to elaborate upon this line of thinking that the differences between the two become clear.

Simmel’s argument is that clothes are located midway between those bodily adornments that are engraved directly onto the wearer’s body – that is, tattoos and those things most ‘distant’ from the wearer’s body, such as ‘accessories’ and jewellery. The latter items can be distinguished from body adjustments such as cosmetics because they can stand apart from their wearer. The manner of ‘wearing’ adornments such as tattoos and cosmetics necessarily requires them to be intimately implicated in the body of that individual; they are so irrevocably fused with the particularities of that person’s movements that, despite any impersonal traits that may be carried, for instance, by the designs of the tattoo, they will inevitably be overwhelmed by their physical location on that body. Creases on the skin will disrupt the formal coherence of the design and no matter how intense is the application of make-up, individual facial incident cannot be completely eliminated. Personal distinctiveness, however, will not impinge upon, or disrupt, the formal coherence of jewellery. Simmel
sees clothing capable of inclining in both these directions: ‘Between these two stands dress, which is not so inexchangeable and personal as tattooing, but neither so unindivisible and separable as jewellery . . . ’ Clothing can create a sphere of significance around the body where the general is able to appear without being utterly divorced from, and indifferent to, the personal qualities of their wearer. It is at this point that Simmel begins to discuss the aesthetic effects created by new clothes, and he too raises the familiar question, ‘What is (male) elegance?’

Elegant is one of number of style adjectives such as ‘smooth’, ‘svelte’, ‘cool’, ‘hip’, ‘cute’ and ‘camp’ where there is a blurring of the characteristics of physical matter with the mental and spiritual condition of a human individual. For instance, to be ‘cool’ is at one and the same time to be of a certain mental attitude and emotional disposition as well as to assume a distinctive physical condition. That this is not just a case of metaphorical displacement is borne out by the fact that the Concise Oxford Dictionary is explicit in declaring ‘elegant’ to be an adjective applicable both to a person – ‘someone who dresses tastefully’ – and also to an object or situation ‘characterized by grace of form, style, or movement’. Once more, a comparison between Simmel, Veblen and their respective explanations of this sartorial-cum-spiritual adjective is illuminating.

Both men accept that the notion of male elegance is always more than an objective description of certain sorts of male garments. Elegance has a social dimension in the sense that it is a term of approval on the part of those who behold the ensemble and its wearer. Elegance, in other words, requires an audience. As Simmel observes ‘elegance . . . is something for the “others”, a social notion deriving its value from general respect’. Veblen agrees with Simmel, similarly locating male elegance as a quality that exists, and is apprehended, within a relation between the perceiver of the elegance and its physical embodiment. Veblen remarks, ‘. . . what passes in popular apprehension for elegant apparel . . . ’ (my italics). From this point their understandings begin to diverge. The reader will recall that Veblen argues that the aesthetic judgements we make on clothes and their wearers rest on what he calls the ‘Pecuniary Canons of Taste’. The approval and the envy packed into the adjective ‘elegant’ constitute recognition on the part of the person making the judgement of the ‘pecuniary strength’ of the wearer of the clothes. Veblen puts it so:

A detailed examination of what passes in popular apprehension for elegant (male) apparel will show that it is contrived at every point to convey the impression that the wearer does not habitually put forth any useful effort. It goes without saying that no apparel can be considered elegant, or even decent, if it shows the effect of manual labour on the part of the wearer, in the way of soil or wear. The pleasing
effect of neat and spotless garments is chiefly, if not altogether, due to their carrying the suggestion of leisure-exemption from personal contact with industrial processes of any kind.\textsuperscript{19}

Veblen recognizes that ‘elegance’ has a material form that has sensuous effects but he is loath to accord to these forms any influence in their own right. Any aesthetic pleasure experienced by the perceiver of ‘neat and spotless garments’ will always be contingent upon what they have to say about the pecuniary position of their wearer. Simmel, however, places this aesthetic dimension into the very heart of his understanding of the phenomenon of elegance.

What is really elegant avoids pointing to the specifically individual; it always lays a more general, stylized, almost abstract sphere around man – which, of course, prevents no finesse from connecting the general with the personality. That new clothes are particularly elegant is due to their being still ‘stiff’; they have not yet adjusted to the modifications of the individual body as fully as older clothes have, which have been worn, and are pulled and pinched by the peculiar movements of their wearer – thus completely revealing his particularity.\textsuperscript{20}

The truth of elegance is not to be revealed simply by scraping off the ‘alibis’ so as to reveal the economic truths operating behind the aesthetic judgement. The physical forms assumed by clothing, like all of our artefacts, merge into and participate in a collective ordering and interpretation of the world’s ‘stuff’. Absorption into the general relieves the individual of the burdens of differentiation. ‘Being formal’ then becomes an activity that has a precise sartorial correlative, namely absorption by, and into, a form. ‘Informality’, on the other hand, suggests a set of clothes more able to register the nuances of our individual actions and less likely to follow the strictures of form. Once again the differences between Veblen and Simmel are apparent. Remember that Veblen’s interpretation of the deterioration in the degrees of elegance exhibited by a particular outfit was the appearance upon its ‘spotless’ surfaces of traces of productive activity, interpreted by the perceiver as signs of the wearer’s pecuniary weakness. Simmel’s interpretation draws directly upon his reading of the tradition of European aesthetics. The more aesthetically autonomous the adorning object, argues Simmel, the more it approaches the work of art.

The work of art cannot, in principle, be incorporated into another life – it is a self-sufficient world . . . The essence of stylization is precisely the dilution of this individual poignancy, this generalization beyond the uniqueness of the personality.\textsuperscript{21}

Elegance is destroyed when too much of the particular or the exceptional starts to appear in the clothing of the wearer. Sartorial stylization, again like the work
of art, can invoke the general by controlling the incidence of the particular without resorting to a brutal uniformity.

Simmel begins his explanation of clothing by repeating the conventional anthropological wisdom that clothes originated as expressions of a motive of self-decoration, or adornment. What he presents in the few pages of this essay is the embryo of a properly aesthetic engagement with clothing. Simmel refuses to erase, overlook or ignore the fact that clothing is material that has been ‘worked’ for the benefit of our senses. The stages in the journey from the particular and personal through to the impersonality of a general beauty have implications for how clothes are made, what they are made from and how they are shaped, coloured and patterned. Simmel refers to these forms in which clothing presents itself to us as ‘the material means of its social purpose’. His acute sensitivity to the domain of social sensation leads him, inevitably, to pay particular attention to the physical forms of these apprehensions.

**Fashion**

Simmel’s essay on fashion, ‘The Philosophy of Fashion’, was published in Berlin in 1905. It is a work of considerable length, consisting of some forty paragraphs and all of them rich in content. As well as setting out a general explanation of fashion, much of Simmel’s essay investigates many kinds of fashionable behaviour. It is not possible to do justice to all of the various themes which Simmel raises. The aspects of the essay that I have chosen to explore are:

- the philosophical basis of his theory of fashion
- the definition of fashion
- the relationship between fashion and social class
- the relationship between fashion and gender
- the relationship between fashion and time
- the notion of a classic and the limits to fashion.

As in his ‘Adornment’ essay, Simmel begins ‘The Philosophy of Fashion’ by setting out the force field within which the phenomenon of fashion is to appear. Like the former essay, the relevant forces are pared down to just two, in keeping with Simmel’s dualistic inclinations. The sociologist Lewis Coser observes that for Simmel ‘sociation always involves harmony and conflict, attraction and repulsion, love and hatred’.²² Perhaps nowhere is this sense of how opposite forces can be simultaneously at work to constitute a distinctive social reality to be seen more clearly than in his essay on fashion. What appears to be a unified social fact, in this instance ‘fashion’, and what is experienced by the
individual as an aspiration to be ‘in fashion’, is the product of far deeper social energies. The kinds of forces constitutive of the institution of fashion are of the same order as those that impress themselves upon social life in general.

The first . . . is provided by the physiological foundation of our nature: the latter requires motion as well as rest, productivity as well as receptivity. Continuing this analysis into the life of the mind, we are directed, on the one hand, by the striving for the general, as well as by the need to grasp the particular; the general provides our mind with rest, while the particular causes it to move from case to case. And it is no different in emotional life: we seek calm devotion to people and things just as much as energetic self-assertion against them both.23

These general forces are the foundation upon which Simmel begins his journey ‘up’ toward the lived reality of fashion. Mediating between these basic strivings and those operating in fashion are the patterns of life inside of the social group(s) in which human affairs are conducted. Again, two fundamental principles are at work in every aspect of group existence. The first is ‘adaptation to the social group’ and the second its opposite, ‘individual elevation from it’. The former principle is manifest in a multitude of social forms such as heredity, tradition, socialism, generality and uniformity while the latter represents, at different moments, qualities such as variation, individualism, motion, un fettered change free of tradition, newness and the particular.

Within its own sphere, every essential form of life in the history of our species represents a unique way of unifying the interest in duration, unity and equality, and similarity with that in change, particularity and uniqueness.24

Simmel locates the mental embodiment of these opposites in the psychological disposition to imitate but, in accordance with his dualism, imitation will always be accompanied by its opposite in the form of a desire for individual differentiation – that is, a desire to constitute oneself as a particularity. It is these two forces that are brought together in the institution of fashion and it is they that create its ‘facticity’.

Simmel scholar Donald N. Levine notes that, in construing fashion as a form whose inner articulation is made up of two opposing forces, Simmel is simply iterating his wider fascination with the subtle interactions between elements that on the surface appear to be contradictory.25 But ‘inner articulation’, points out Levine, can take different forms in Simmel. One of the senses in which he construes fashion is to see it as a form that synthesizes oppositions so that two contradictory aims may be secured at the same time. In this way, a single fashionable action, for instance the buying of new shade of lipstick, can simultaneously adhere to the general norm governing the appearance of women in
public but can also inflect these rules by introducing an element of individual differentiation by the novelty of the lipstick’s colour. Another way Simmel has of relating his contradictory forces is to see social forms as consisting of varying amounts of the elements in opposition. Simmel adopts this strategy when he describes his gallery of fashion types. The ‘dandy’, the ‘bohemian’, in fact what has become known as cultural sub-groups, can be differentiated by specifying the precise ways, and amounts, in which opposite tendencies are brought together. For instance the ‘dandy’ achieves an increase in the degree of individual differentiation by intensifying the rules of dress that are the norm within the group while the ‘bohemian’ may attempt differentiation by violating such rules. But the violation of these rules of appearance is not singular because the ‘violators’ imitate one another. This is borne out by the ease with which it is possible to discriminate between the dress of an eccentric and the styles of the bohemian.

No matter how these opposite forces are related, be it as compromise or synthesis, both have to be present for fashion to come into existence. Simmel’s insistence upon their co-presence is something that tends to be omitted from the many précis of his theory scattered across costume studies. What is seized upon is fashion as group imitation, and it is left to novelists, poets and journalists to appreciate the subtleties of individuation that the pleasures of conformity can open up. Indeed, Simmel warns about the dangers that can result from a one-sided view of fashion. If one of the opposing forces is absent, or has been almost ‘overcome’ by its other, Simmel argues that fashion will cease. If the desire for uniformity and imitation could reach fulfillment there would be no such thing as fashion, only mass similarity. Indeed, mass uniformity in appearance has been a recurrent theme in Western utopian visions of the fashionless society. Just as we saw with Spencer’s notion of ‘absolute’ differentiation, an exacerbated individualism would also spell the end of fashion since ‘the desire for integration’ must be absent in a situation where self-assertion is so dominant.

The final general feature of Simmel’s theory of fashion to be highlighted here is his insistence that fashion is not to be just equated with changes in dress styles over time. Fashion is a set of relations, not a set of contents. In other words, what is important in fashion is adherence to the demands and inner promptings of the institution of fashion. Simmel is explicit in stressing that ‘meaning’, in the sense of being able to ground and to derive the minutiae of fashion changes from external sources, is impossible (and pointless).

That fashion is... a product of social needs is perhaps demonstrated by nothing stronger than the fact that, in countless instances, not the slightest reason can be found for its creations from the standpoint of an objective, aesthetic or other expediency.
Since what we see unfolding within fashionable clothing cannot be exclusively anchored to any specific objective functions of dress there are no inherent reasons why fashion-as-a-process might not manifest itself in areas of life other than clothing. Simmel hints in this essay that not only has fashion been present in areas other than dress but that it is in the process of broadening its remit aided and abetted by the forces of modernity.

The break with the past which, for more than a century, civilized human kind has been labouring unceasingly to bring about, concentrates consciousness more and more upon the present . . . so to that degree will it turn to fashion in all fields, and by no means merely with regard to clothing. Indeed, it is almost a sign of the increased power of fashion that it has overstepped the bounds of its original domain, which comprised only externals of dress, and has acquired an increasing influence over taste, theoretical convictions, and even the moral foundations of life in their changing forms.\(^{27}\)

Follow this prediction through to its logical end and fashion becomes the historical destiny awaiting modern capitalism. From being a game of competition in the restricted area of appearance, fashion expands to become the dominant organizing principle for a whole civilization.

**Fashion and Class**

Differentiation and imitation constitute the bedrock of fashion and, with these in place, Simmel sets out to explore a number of the objective and subjective dimensions that structure the actions of the participants in the fashion drama. The first, and most important, of the objective frameworks is that of social class.

Fashions are always class fashions, by the fact that the fashions of the higher strata of society distinguish themselves from those of the lower strata, and are abandoned by the former at the moment when the latter begin to appropriate them.\(^{28}\)

Simmel repeats this explanation of the relation between fashion and social class later in the essay.

Just as soon as the lower strata begin to appropriate their style – and thereby overstep the demarcation line which the upper strata have drawn and destroy the uniformity of their coherence symbolized in this fashion – so the upper strata turn away from this fashion and adopt a new one, which in turn differentiates them from the broad masses. And thus the game goes merrily on.\(^{29}\)
This, in essence, is what has come to be regarded as Simmel’s most distinctive contribution to the theorization of fashion. It is known as the ‘trickle-down theory’ since any element of dress originating with the upper class should eventually, via the process of class imitation, come to rest within the lower classes. But, as we saw from the earlier discussions in chapters 2 and 3, the bare bones of this notion of fashion dynamics had been in circulation for a number of decades before it surfaced in Simmel’s essay. Simmel was not the originator of the trickle-down theory, nor did he ever claim to be; he was just one of a number of thinkers who had played around with it in the hope of better accounting for fashion’s unceasing changes of style. As readers of his fashion essay will discover for themselves, the ‘trickle-down theory’ occupies only a very small part of Simmel’s commentary. Just why this element of his theory has overshadowed the rest of his thought on this topic is unclear. One reason might be that it is the one section of his account of fashion that most clearly adheres to a ‘predictive’ model of theory. It suggests a regularity and coherence to the workings of fashion that would be attractive to those agencies of mass marketing, and their academic counterparts, keen to divine some sort of order in one of the most ‘unpredictable’ of consumer choices.

One of the more unfortunate effects of this dilution of Simmel’s theory of the relation between social class and fashion is that there has been a consequent simplification of the way in which he conceived of the ‘inner articulation’ between the opposing tendencies of imitation and differentiation. Commentators have tended to place imitation somehow logically before differentiation within the class model so that it is the action of imitation of the upper class by the lower class that initiates the fashion cycle. It is only when there is a ‘threat from below’ that the upper class acts to reassert its sartorial differentiation, which is then followed by a reciprocal imitative action by the lower class, and so on, and so on. But this is to overlook the fact that Simmel’s ideas of class and fashion are much more discriminating than such a version allows. Simmel’s notion of fashion’s inner articulation is one in which imitation and differentiation can be expressed at the same time, within a single fashionable act or object. All fashion, whether it be the actions of a group such as social class or those of the individual, is about ways of keeping these two forces in play, albeit in a variety of combinations. Even when an intense regime of exclusion is being practised it is rare for intra-group differentiation to be forbidden absolutely or not resorted to by those attempting to assert some individuality within a rigidly enforced dress code. Rather than schematizing Simmel’s notions of fashion and class into a mechanical model of sequential imitation, it is much more interesting (and fruitful) to assume that neither of the major principles of fashion is logically before the other but that they are in play simultaneously. All choices in the arena of clothing are both positive
and negative and aim to declare the wearer is not something as much as they declare the positive quality of ‘I am’. This is a better way of conceiving what Simmel is getting at with his class model rather than some kind of mass game of ‘chase and flight’ in which imitation and differentiation neatly follow one another.  

**Fashion: Women and Men**

Another of the objective social frameworks across which the process of fashion is played out is that of gender. Simmel was writing against a backdrop of the struggle for women’s rights that can be roughly equated to the suffragette movement. He took a close interest in the activities and philosophy of this movement in both Germany and the rest of Western Europe and it is clear from his writings that the progress made towards female emancipation was one of his central political and intellectual concerns. A considerable portion of the fashion essay is devoted to analysing the different combinations of imitation and differentiation available to the sexes in the organization of their appearances. All the more intriguing is the fact that Simmel adopted a different approach to the one he used to explain the relation of fashion to social class.

Simmel’s discussion of fashion and of gender opens by taking issue with the conventional assertion that those who participate in fashion are the victims of their ‘weak sensibilities’. What is so impressive about Simmel’s demolition of this moralizing argument is that he accomplishes it without himself having to leave the field of the moral. That our fashion strategies harbour a series of ethical dispositions he agrees with, but he also argues that they are far more complex than the crude equation of ‘strength’ with individual differentiation and ‘weakness’ with unthinking adherence to the latest mode.

It may also be due to a weak sensibility, which causes individuals to fear that they will be unable to maintain their little piece of individuality if they adopt the forms, tastes and customs of the general public. Such opposition to the latter is by no means always a sign of personal strength. On the contrary, personal strength will be so conscious of its unique value . . . that it will be able to submit without any unease to general forms up to and including fashion. Rather, it is precisely in this obedience that it will become conscious of the voluntariness of its obedience and of that which transcends obedience.

It soon becomes clear why Simmel approaches the relation between gender and fashion in this way.
If fashion both gives expression to the impulse towards equalization and individualization, as well as to the allure of imitation and conspicuousness, this perhaps explains why it is that women, broadly speaking, adhere especially strongly to fashion.\footnote{33}

It had been customary to explain the close bond between women and fashion as a result of their ‘weak sensibilities’: that is, their vanity, superficiality and so on. Simmel extends this idea of a ‘weak sensibility’, not by its outright dismissal, but by redefining the central idea of ‘weakness’ to mean ‘the weakness of the social position to which women were condemned throughout the greater part of their history’.

Simmel has a distinctive way of construing the social and individual being of the sexes, one that differs from our contemporary notion of gender in which male and female form a sexual binary in which women are represented as the negative term in the social and symbolic construction of the sexes. This difference from current notions of gender does not mean Simmel is insensible to the gross imbalances that existed in the social and political standings of men and women.

It is important to affirm at the outset the fact that human culture, even as regards its purely objective contents, is not asexual . . . It is rather the case that, with the exception of a very few areas, our objective culture is thoroughly male.\footnote{34}

But having said this, there is no doubt that he is not of the opinion that female emancipation consists primarily in taking possession of a set of ‘cultural goods that already existed and to which they had merely been denied access’. Simmel sees masculinity and femininity as ‘being male’ and ‘being female’. Sexual identities are ‘forms of life’, or ‘existential totalities’, that are incommensurable. The contents, but more particularly the forms of these male and female cultures, are quite different from one another and it is for this reason that the modalities of fashionable behaviour for men and women are seen as quite distinct.

Simmel begins his discussion of women and fashion with the assertion that ‘Women were especially strong adherents to fashion’. If this is to become more than a banal commonplace we need to ask what, precisely, he means by this statement. The traditionally weak social and cultural position occupied by women leads Simmel to argue that they will tend to conform to the general and the typical as a way of ensuring security. The weak ‘lose themselves’ in the acceptable and so avoid any trouble that might arise from acting and appearing different to that which is sanctioned by custom.
For those who are weak steer clear of individualization; they avoid dependence upon the self, with its responsibilities and the necessity of defending oneself unaided. Those in a weak position find protection only in the typical form of life.  

But fashion, as we saw earlier, cannot exist as pure imitation and Simmel, ever the dualist, cannot imagine any human situation in which the dynamism of forces is ever finally settled, least of all in the dynamics of fashion.

Just as in the case of individualism and collectivism, so there exists between the uniformity and the variety of the contents of life a definite proportion of needs, which is tossed to and fro in the different spheres and seeks to balance the refusal in one by consent however acquired, in the other.

Paradoxically, it is the very necessity placed upon women to conform to ‘approved forms of existence’ that makes them such enthusiastic participants in fashion. It is in fashion that we find a socially approved form of individualization, albeit one that is severely restricted in its reach. Here lies an opportunity for women to allow themselves a degree of visibility that is forbidden elsewhere.

Fashion offers them (women) this very combination to the most favourable extent, for we have here, on the one hand, a sphere of general imitation, the individual floating in the broadest social current, relieved of responsibility for their tastes and their actions, and yet, on the other hand, we have a certain conspicuousness, an individual emphasis, an individual ornamentation of the personality.

Although Simmel sees this as constituting the normal operating conditions for women there had been, at certain periods in the past, situations where the social position of women had enabled them ‘free play for individual development’. During these periods female investments in fashionable behaviours and objects were diminished considerably. Likewise, the modern movement for female emancipation had produced women whose insertion into the processes of fashion more nearly approximated to that of men. They signalled their absorption into the public sphere by, not just an indifference to fashion, but also by reworking male clothing into appropriate female forms.

**Men and Fashion**

Simmel may argue that men have a different relationship to fashion than women, but he never argues that men are absent from it, or have somehow been able to inoculate themselves against its attractions. His analysis of fashion is not one that depends upon the existence of identifiable ‘fashion institutions’,
for example a garment industry, or upon a collection of clearly recognizable ‘fashion objects’. The forces that are impressing themselves upon, and being experienced by, men were the same ones that are at work on women. The difference is that they experience and respond to them through the structures of male culture.

Simmel argues that one of the sources for women’s ‘strong adherence’ to fashion is in the high degree of integration (compared to men) of female being.

For if there is any sense in which the distinctive psychic quality of woman’s nature can be expressed symbolically, it is this: Its periphery is more completely integrated into the whole than holds true for male culture.\

What Simmel seems to suggest by this is that in female culture the outside, in the form of clothing, is only partially differentiated from the inside. Men, on the other hand, are more likely to be split into external, objective dimensions against an intense personal subjectivity. Clothing for men is not a vehicle for the totality of their being but is an element taken from, and appropriate to, their participation of the objective formations of the social order. This means that, in theory at least, the external appearance of the male is more ‘detached’ from his inner life than is the case for women, and Simmel traces a number of consequences which this objectification of the male has for both the style of his clothing and the manner in which he inhabits the garments.

It hardly needs to be said that Simmel’s analysis of men’s relation to fashion has as its backdrop the state of European men’s clothing of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In other words, it was the style of clothing that was consequent to the bourgeois political and cultural revolution in men’s dress that began in the nineteenth century. This meant a restricted use of materials; very limited colours; tailored construction; a radically simplified set of surfaces; standardization stopping just short of uniformity and a form related to occupation only in the abstract. The complex of forces that went into the making of this costume of male modernity are still not fully understood, but Simmel is surely correct in seeing in its restraint and remarkable stability an ensemble that crystallized all the complex aspects of the new configurations of work and politics that was the bourgeois public sphere. It was a new form of dress for a new form of citizenship. As opposed to the circumstances of women’s dress, men’s appearance seemed to be beyond the pressures of fashion because

... the lack of acceptance of changes in external fields, the indifference towards fashion in outward appearance are specifically a male quality, not because a man is more uniform, but because he is the more many-sided creature, and for this reason, can exist without external changes.
The high level of uniformity and relative stability of male bourgeois dress is a badge indicating the intensity with which he is able to pursue his vocation in the objective realm of the public sphere. His life is purged of the necessity to display personal qualities through his dress because of the power and status which membership of a professional group imparts to the individual member. But male appearance, particularly inside of the novel social arrangements of the modern metropolis, is not ‘evenly flat and grey in tone’. Just as women compensate for the necessity for them to adhere to the typical by pursuing individuation, so certain male metropolitan types, in order to gain the attention of the social world are tempted to adopt ‘the strangest eccentricities, to specifically metropolitan extravagances of self-distanciation, of caprice of fastidiousness . . .’. Simmel singles out two types of male defectors from bourgeois sartorial normality. These are the dandy and the bohemian, and both strategies can result in radical departures from what is regarded as normal appearance for the respectable bourgeois male. Simmel’s term for the dandy is *modenarren*, or ‘slave to fashion’. He is an individual who gains conspicuousness by the intensity with which he follows fashion, and Simmel makes much of the fact that he is a ‘follower’, not an originator, of fashion. As Simmel observes, *modenarren* are to be distinguished from eccentric dressers because, unlike the latter, they are not violators of current dress codes but their militant servants. The contempt which is a common feature of these dedicated followers of fashion is reserved for those unwilling, or unable, to follow the mode with the *modenarren’s* commitment. The structural opposite of the dandy is the bohemian, an individual whose appearance is determined by his or her opposition to fashion. In a paragraph that can stand comparison with Carlyle and Baudelaire’s dissection of the philosophy of the dandy, Simmel skewers the transgressive integrity of the bohemian:

> it becomes evident that the same combination which extreme obedience to fashion acquires can also be won by opposition to it. Whoever consciously clothes themselves in an unmodern manner does not attain the consequent sensation of individualization through any real individual qualification of his or her own, but rather through the mere negation of the social example . . . The deliberately unmodern person accepts its (modernity) forms just as much as does the slave to fashion, except that the unmodern person embodies it in another category: in that of negation, rather than in exaggeration. \(^4^1\)

Again, Simmel urges us to distinguish these bohemian types from the ‘true’ eccentrics. The oft-remarked-upon conformity in the dress styles of rebellion is caused by there being a ‘pattern of negation’ – that is, a consistent set of refusals which in turn are formed by the characteristics of the figure they are negating. Bohemian dress is the sartorial equivalent of a Black Mass.
Fashion, Time and Modernity

A matter of dispute among Simmel scholars is the extent to which his work can be regarded as a fully conscious critique of modernity. David Frisby has cogently argued that it is in Simmel’s sensitivity to the impact which ‘the break with the past’ had upon time and its experience that he can be seen engaged most closely with the modern. While the present author is loathe to collapse Simmel’s exploration of fashion into a theory of modernity, there is no doubt that Simmel sees it (fashion) as something which gains its present significance and intensity within the social and mental conditions brought about by the arrival of the modern. No aspect of fashion is more redolent of these ‘modern times’ than the rather odd temporal structure it seems to exhibit.

In *The Philosophy of Money* Simmel, while repeating, in two short sentences, his trickle-down theory of fashion, also suggests that the arrival of the new social and economic constellation in Europe has brought about a number of radical changes in the operation of fashion in comparison to earlier historical periods. For instance:

Yet the social changes of the last hundred years have accelerated the pace of changes in fashion . . . contemporary fashions are much less extravagant and expensive and of much shorter duration than those of earlier centuries . . . fashion now originates in the wealthy middle class . . . Consequently, the spreading of fashion, both in breadth as well as speed, appears to be an independent movement, an objective and autonomous force which follows its own course independently of the individual.

The new forms taken by fashion seem uncannily similar to that general sense of time engendered by the arrival of the modern. For instance there is a preference for the new over the traditional; an emphasis upon the present as a moment disconnected from any other point in time and a sense that time consists of fleeting moments rather than a continual flow. And within each of these moments there is a preference for a romantic notion of fashion as ‘expressive individuality’ rather than for its role of group imitation. So, while not making fashion into a wholly modern phenomenon, Simmel is certainly arguing for a more precise description of its contemporary form. Fashion seems to thrive most readily in the modern metropolis where the money economy has reached a certain level of penetration of daily life and where there is a high degree of social mobility. Just as Simmel’s analysis of fashion and class seems to imply a spatial dimension in that the game of imitation and differentiation is played out by groups that are physically adjacent to one another, so also is there a time dimension. Fashion changes are arranged chronologically with a ‘founding’ style or starting-point being implied before the start of the game of ‘flight
and chase’. It is the combination of modern notions of both space and time that adds subtlety to Simmel’s conception of the peculiarities of ‘fashion time’.

Fashion never happens at any fixed point in time or space – that is, individuals and groups are never fully fashionable but are always in the process of becoming fashionable or descending into unfashionability, and, in all probability, doing both at the same time. Fashion is a striving to overcome the spatial divide between classes, to overcome the invidious comparison between ‘them and us’, to catch up and to overtake the ‘in crowd’. In other words, what it would like to do is to abolish the very incline that enables the fashion dynamic to exist. Simmel, I think, senses the presence of this contradiction and presents the reader of his fashion essay with two notions of fashion time. There are the (not very successful) attempts to locate the exact historical and geographical locations of these ‘fashion moments’. But the processes of fashion do not fit easily into mechanical co-ordinates such as these. The time of fashion is multiple, fragmented and, most importantly, dispersed across the entire social fabric. It is a process that sits within and without the visual image and it is not until we reach the work of Roland Barthes that the consequences of this spatial, temporal and representational multiplicity are examined with any degree of rigour. To declare that fashion is perpetual becoming and an aspiration is to align it with modernity’s ‘melting’ of all that is ‘solid’. But in this case, rather than being a reflex from change, it is an embracing of it as an organizing principle in its own right. Fashion is not a move from an unstable situation A to a state of resolution encompassed by situation B. It is being in a state of ‘forever moving on’. Simmel is particularly astute in that he realizes that the promises of a stable order beyond the ‘break with the past’ are an illusion and that what is coming into being is a never-ending process of change, change, and more change. He rightly understands that, for fashion, this leads to two apparently different fashion times. The first is an acute sense of ‘nowness’.

By reason of this play between the tendency towards universal acceptance and the destruction of its significance, to which this general adoption leads, fashion possesses the peculiar attraction of limitation, the attraction of a simultaneous beginning and end, the charm of newness and simultaneously of transitoriness.44

But the awareness of the momentary nature of the fashionable action or object has the paradoxical effect of lifting the moment of fashion out of its temporal and social continuum. Time does not so much slow down as become a succession of tableaux vivants in which the fashionable individual gains a fleeting glimpse of fullness. This means that fashion is not an ordered and measured process of evolution in which an immanent principle slowly realizes itself over
time, rather it is a series of abrupt jumps with very little being carried over from one moment to the next. It is this, I think, that leads Simmel to observe later in the essay ‘that each individual fashion to a certain extent makes its appearance as though it wished to live forever.’\(^{45}\) Every instance in fashion time is one that appears to be autonomous and replete within itself; this is the condition typifying one sort of fashion photograph in which the picture emits an overwhelming sense of a world and its inhabitants being in a secular state of grace where neither a past or a future is necessary. Baudelaire senses this too as he writes, in a manner not that dissimilar to Simmel’s, that fashion is the form of modern beauty *par excellence* in that it is:

made up, on the one hand, of an element that is eternal and invariable . . . on the other, of a relative circumstantial element, which we may like to call successively or at one and the same time, contemporaneity, fashion, morality, passion.\(^{46}\)

But not all the contents of the world are equally inclined toward being colonized by fashion, and it is to Simmel’s notion of the limits of fashion that we must now turn.

**The Classic and the Limits of Fashion**

Throughout the essay on fashion Simmel suggests that aesthetics and fashion have distinct spheres of operation, but it is only in the final few paragraphs that their relationship is explored in any sustained way. We have already seen that Simmel makes a categorical distinction between clothing and fashion. He does not regard the former as a set of counters that the latter is able to move around at will. Clothing, Simmel intimates, unlike fashion, can be grounded in certain grand externalities. In fashion, ‘not the slightest reason can be found for its creations from the standpoint of an objective, aesthetic or other expediency. Whereas in general our clothing . . . is objectively adapted to our needs’.\(^{47}\) Simmel never states precisely how clothes are so adapted, but it is significant that he places the dimension of the aesthetic among those objective expediencies which are exerting pressures upon clothes. Fashion, however, eschews any such concessions, something borne out by the way in which it delights in ignoring all forms of objective appropriateness:

there is not a trace of expediency in the method by which fashion dictates, for example, whether wide or narrow skirts, short or long hair styles, or coloured or black ties should be worn.\(^{48}\)
At this point in his argument, Simmel echoes Veblen’s complaint about the ugliness of so much that is fashionable, but in Simmel’s case this fact is used to emphasize the power that these objectified forms of social life can have over the individual:

Judging from the ugly and repugnant things that are sometimes modern, it would seem as though fashion were desirous of exhibiting its power by getting us to adopt the most atrocious things for its sake alone.49

If Simmel had left the argument at this point he might be accused of issuing just another jeremiad against modernity. However, unlike some of the later critics working under his influence, he places limits upon fashion’s ability to absorb everything it encounters. What intrigues him is the classic; those forms that ‘put up an inward resistance’ to fashion and which are matched by those forms which have a ‘special disposition to live themselves out as fashion’. There is no doubt in what follows that Simmel had the work of art at the forefront of his thinking. He had already explored something similar to this problem in his 1901 essay, ‘The Aesthetic Significance of the Face’, where he asked the question ‘. . . does the face have certain intrinsic aesthetic qualities that account for its significance as a subject in art?’50 The answer that he gives, in both this essay and that on fashion, is that the classic has an internal formal coherence that is capable of repelling all attempts made to dismantle it: ‘the classical possesses something collective, which does not offer so many points of attack, as it were, from which modification, disturbance and destruction of the balance might emanate.’51

What Simmel is doing is not that dissimilar to Veblen’s admiration for what he calls ‘stable costumes’ which he regards as ‘more pleasing’ because they have achieved some kind of formal coherence in which is embodied a balance of inner and outer forces. Simmel’s argument could be profitably used to engage with those clothing forms that have not succumbed to fashionable destruction, forms such as the male suit, the ‘little black dress’ and the jeans + T-shirt combination, an ensemble that has resisted modification for more than 50 years. The question that such examples raise – and it is an important one to draw from Simmel’s distinction between clothes and fashion – is that not all sartorial change is fashion. Not all clothing sits within the fashion system equally. Why is it that 50 years after the famous photographs of James Dean and Marlon Brando wearing T-shirts, these clothing styles are still current, still not open to parody? Something that Simmel knew is that some forms are ‘more classic than others’.
Notes

This chapter should be read in conjunction with Ulrich Lehmann’s *Tigersprung: Fashion in Modernity* (2000), Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, chapter 3.


3. ‘His (Stefan George) dress, though departing sufficiently from the regular mode of male fashion to make him a somewhat conspicuous figure, was likewise severe and formal.’ E.K. Bennett, *Stefan George*, Cambridge: Bowes and Bowes, 1954, p. 12.


8. Veblen and Simmel were contemporaries but it would be hard to find two more contrasting individuals. Veblen’s biographer, Joseph Dorfman, provides a rather bleak picture of his subject’s teaching style. While at Stanford University Veblen ‘appeared colourless and unimpressive, with clothing that just escaped shabbiness, a carriage that barely missed being slouchy, and a voice that spoke in a low monotone, without accent on any phrase’. Joseph Dorfman, *Thorstein Veblen and His America*, New York: Viking, 1934, p. 249. Compare this to: ‘it was on the lecture platform that he showed his real greatness . . . His lectures were not only learned, they were an inspiration. He combined a clear, logical analysis with an artistic, impressionistic approach. A beautiful voice, an excellent diction, an appealing personality, all contributed to the charm of his address’ (Nicholas Spykman, *The Social Theory of Georg Simmel*, Aldershot: Greg Revivals, 1992, p. xxxv). The sophistication of the Simmel household contrasts vividly with life at the Veblens’s, where ‘Dishes were washed only when the total supply had been exhausted. They were stacked in a tub, and when all of them had been used the hose was turned on them, and after the water had been drained off they were allowed to dry by themselves’ (Dorfman (1966 edn), p. 306).


13. Kurt Wolff has noted that: ‘Anthropology occupies a very small place in the total body of Simmel’s writings. His attention to certain biologistic notions of the age and his speculations on primitive culture and evolutionary stages are little more than concessions to currently popular trends’ (Wolff, *Essays*, p. 179).


15. Ibid.

16. Ibid., p. 208.

17. Ibid.


24. Ibid., p. 188.


29. Ibid., p. 190.

30. There is a remarkable similarity between Simmel’s précis of the trickle-down theory and that put forward by Ernst Grosse in his book *The Beginnings of Art*, New York and London: Appleton, English trans., 1914, ‘Fashion always moves from above downward. A certain style is worn first only in the highest stage of society, and thus serves as a mark of class or rank. But for this very reason the lower ranks strive all the more earnestly to acquire elegant dress, and in the course of time the dress of rank becomes the dress of the nation. The higher classes, who are still desirous as they were before to distinguish themselves from the lower, then invent or adopt another special form of dress, and the game is begun anew.’ (p. 113) The book originally appeared in German in 1893.

33. Ibid.
35. Simmel, ‘Philosophy of Fashion’, p. 196. This desire for absorption into the typical could also apply to lower-class men: ‘The Englishman was always scared . . . When he went to buy a suit, his approach was negative. He didn’t want to look conspicuous or exciting; he just wanted not to look silly . . .’ in Nik Cohn, *Today There Are No Gentlemen*, London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1971, p. 14.
37. Ibid., p. 196.
42. Frisby, *Fragments*.
44. ‘Philosophy of Fashion’, p. 192.
45. Ibid., p. 203.
48. Ibid., pp. 189–90.
49. Ibid., p. 190.