Georg Simmel

Fashion, Adornment and Style

The Philosophy of Fashion

Our manner of apprehending the phenomena of life causes us to feel a number of forces at every point of our existence, and in such a way that each of these forces actually strives beyond the real phenomenon, suffusing its infinity with the others and being transformed into mere tension and longing.

For the human being is a dualistic creature from the very beginning, but this does not affect the unit of his or her actions; in fact, they only prove to be powerful as the result of a multiplicity of elements. A phenomenon which lacked this branching of its root forces would be impoverished and empty to us. Only elevation from it. Whether the oscillation of our inner life between these two poles is expressed philosophically in the antagonism between cosmotheism and the doctrine of the inherent differentiation and separate existence of every cosmic element, or whether it is grounded in practical conflict as the partisan antagonisms between socialism and individualism, it is always one and the same fundamental form of duality which is finally manifested biologically in the contrast between heredity and variation. The former of these represents the idea of generality, of uniformity, of inactive similarity of the forms and contents of life; the latter stands for motion, for the differentiation of separate elements producing the restless development of one individual aspect of life into another. 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. Within the social embodiment of these oppositions, one side is usually maintained by the psychological tendency towards imitation. Imitation could be characterized as a psychological inheritance, as the transition of group life into individual life. Its attraction is first of all that it also permits purposive and individual into the general, and emphasizes the permanent element in change. Conversely, wherever change is sought in permanence, wherever individual differentiation and self-elevation above generality are sought, imitation is here the negating and restraining principle. And precisely because the longing to abide by that which is given, to act and be like others, is the irreconcilable enemy of those striving to advance to new and individual forms of life, social life appears to be the battleground upon which every inch is stubbornly contested by both sides, and social institutions may be seen as the never permanent reconciliations, in which the continuing antagonism of both principles has taken on the external form of cooperation.

The vital life conditions of fashion as a universal phenomenon in the history of our species are circumscribed by these factors. Fashion is the imitation of a given pattern and thus satisfies the need for social adaptation; it leads the individual onto the path that everyone travels, it furnishes a general condition that resolves the conduct of every individual into a mere example. At the same time, and to no less a degree, it satisfies the need for distinction, the tendency towards differentiation, change and individual contrast. It accomplishes the latter, on the one hand, by 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. Whereas in general our clothing, for instance, is objectively adapted to our needs, 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. 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. The complete indifference of fashion to the material standards of life is illustrated by the arbitrary manner in which it recommends something appropriate in one instance, something abstruse in another, and something materially and aesthetically quite indifferent in a third. This indicates that fashion is concerned with other motivations, namely solely with formal social ones. Of course, it may occasionally adopt objectively justified elements but, as fashion, it is only effective when its independence from any other motivation becomes positively palpable, just as our dutiful action is only considered completely moral when we are not motivated by its external content and goal, but solely by the fact that it simply is our duty. This is the reason why 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 fashions. But the motives which alone should lead to the adoption of these contents of life stand in absolute opposition to the complete lack of objectivity in the developments of fashion.

If the social forms, the clothes, the aesthetic judgements, the whole style in which human beings express themselves are conceived in the constant transformation through fashion, so fashion that is, the latest fashion in all these things affects only the upper strata. 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 its turn differentiates them from the broad masses. And thus the game goes merrily on. Naturally, the lower strata look and strive towards the upper, and they encounter the least resistance in those fields which are subject to the whims of fashion, because fashions, by means of which each group establishes uniformity within itself, as well as differentiation from outsiders. On the other hand, there exists a widespread predilection for importing fashions from outside, and such foreign fashions assume a greater value within a particular social circle, simply because they did not originate there. Even the prophet Zephaniah expressed his indignation at the aristocrats in foreign clothing. As a matter of fact, the exotic advantage of fashions seems to favour especially strongly the exclusiveness of the groups which adopt them. Precisely because of their external origin, these imported fashions create a special and significant form of socialization, which arises through the mutual relationship to a point located outside the circle. It sometimes appears as though social elements, just like the axes of vision, converge best at a point that is not too near. Thus, among primitive peoples, money and thus economic value itself is the object of the most intense general interest, and often consists of objects that are brought in from outside. In some areas (on the Solomon Islands, and in Ibo on the Niger, for example) there exists a kind of industry for the production of shells, or other monetary symbols that are not employed as a medium of exchange in the place of production itself, but in those standing in a lower position which the higher group characterizes as not belonging to it.

Connection and differentiation are the two fundamental functions which are here inseparably united, of which one of the two, although or because it forms a logical contrast to the other, becomes the condition of its realization. That fashion is such 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. Whereas in general our clothing, for instance, is objectively adapted to our needs, 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. 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. The complete indifference of fashion to the material standards of life is illustrated by the arbitrary manner in which it recommends something appropriate in one instance, something abstruse in another, and something materially and aesthetically quite indifferent in a third. This indicates that fashion is concerned with other motivations, namely solely with formal social ones. Of course, it may occasionally adopt objectively justified elements but, as fashion, it is only effective when its independence from any other motivation becomes positively palpable, just as our dutiful action is only considered completely moral when we are not motivated by its external content and goal, but solely by the fact that it simply is our duty. This is the reason why 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 fashions. But the motives which alone should lead to the adoption of these contents of life stand in absolute opposition to the complete lack of objectivity in the developments of fashion.

If the social forms, the clothes, the aesthetic judgements, the whole style in which human beings express themselves are conceived in the constant transformation through fashion, so fashion that is, the latest fashion in all these things affects only the upper strata. 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 its turn differentiates them from the broad masses. And thus the game goes merrily on. Naturally, the lower strata look and strive towards the upper, and they encounter the least resistance in those fields which are subject to the whims of fashion, because fashions, by means of which each group establishes uniformity within itself, as well as differentiation from outsiders. On the other hand, there exists a widespread predilection for importing fashions from outside, and such foreign fashions assume a greater value within a particular social circle, simply because they did not originate there. Even the prophet Zephaniah expressed his indignation at the aristocrats in foreign clothing. As a matter of fact, the exotic advantage of fashions seems to favour especially strongly the exclusiveness of the groups which adopt them. Precisely because of their external origin, these imported fashions create a special and significant form of socialization, which arises through the mutual relationship to a point located outside the circle. It sometimes appears as though social elements, just like the axes of vision, converge best at a point that is not too near. Thus, among primitive peoples, money and thus economic value itself is the object of the most intense general interest, and often consists of objects that are brought in from outside. In some areas (on the Solomon Islands, and in Ibo on the Niger, for example) there exists a kind of industry for the production of shells, or other monetary symbols that are not employed as a medium of exchange in the place of production itself, but in those standing in a lower position which the higher group characterizes as not belonging to it.

Connection and differentiation are the two fundamental functions which are here inseparably united, of which one of the two, although or because it forms a logical contrast to the other, becomes the condition of its realization. That fashion is such 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. Whereas in general our clothing, for instance, is objectively adapted to our needs, 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. 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. The complete indifference of fashion to the material standards of life is illustrated by the arbitrary manner in which it recommends something appropriate in one instance, something abstruse in another, and something materially and aesthetically quite indifferent in a third. This indicates that fashion is concerned with other motivations, namely solely with formal social ones. Of course, it may occasionally adopt objectively justified elements but, as fashion, it is only effective when its independence from any other motivation becomes positively palpable, just as our dutiful action is only considered completely moral when we

if every inner energy pushes outwards beyond the measure of its visible expression does life gain that wealth of inexhaustible possibilities which enhances its fragmentary reality. Only in this manner do its phenomena give a hint of deeper forces, more unresolved tensions, struggle and peace of a more comprehensive kind than those betrayed by its immediate facticity.

This dualism cannot be described directly, but only in the individual antagonisms that are typical of our existence, and are felt to be its ultimate, structuring form. The first hint 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.

The whole history of society is reflected in the conflict, the compromise, the reconciliations, slowly won and quickly lost, that appear between adaptation to our social group and individual meaningful action even where nothing personal or creative is in evidence. We might define it as the child of thought and thoughtlessness. Imitation gives the individual the assurance of not standing alone in his or her actions. Instead, it elevates itself over the previous practice of that activity as if on a solid foundation, which now relieves the present practice of it from the difficulty of maintaining itself. Whenever we imitate, we transfer not only the demand for creative activity, but also the responsibility for the action from ourselves to another. Thus the individual is freed from choosing and appears simply as a creature of the group, as a vessel of social contents. The drive to imitate as a principle characterizes a level of development upon which the wish for purposive personal activity is alive, but the ability to gain individual contents from it is not yet present. The progress we have made beyond this level is that thinking, action and feeling are no longer determined only by what exists, by the fashions of today an individual stamp compared with those of yesterday and of tomorrow and even more energetically, on the other hand, by the fact that 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. Hence fashion is nothing more than a particular instance among the many forms of life by the aid of which we seek to combine in a unified act the tendency towards social equalization with the desire for individual differentiation and variation. If we were to study the history of fashions which hitherto have been examined only from the viewpoint of the development of their contents with regard to their significance for the form of the social process, then we would find that it is the history of attempts to adjust the satisfaction of these two opposing tendencies more and more perfectly to the conditions of the prevailing individual and social culture. The individual psychological traits that we observe in fashion all conform to this basic essence of fashion.

Fashion is, as I have said, a product of class division and operates like a number of other forms, honour especially the mixing of a male and a female principle. The very fact that this mixing process only occurs in the sphere of fashion as in an ideal dilution that, as it were, only realizes the form of both elements in a content that is in itself indifferent, may lend a special attraction to fashion, especially for sensitive natures that do not care to concern themselves with robust reality. From an objective standpoint, life according to fashion consists of a mixture of destruction and construction; its content acquires its characteristics by destruction of an earlier form; it possesses a peculiar uniformity, in which the satisfaction of the destructive impulse and the drive for positive elements can no longer be separated from each other.

Because we are dealing here not with the significance of a single content or a single satisfaction, but rather with the play between both contents and their mutual distinction, it becomes evident that the same combination which extreme obedience to fashion acquires can also be won by opposition to it. Whoever consciously clothes or deports 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. If modernity is the imitation which a tyranny has been broken, often becomes no less tyrannical and violent; so this phenomenon of tendentious lack of modernity illustrates how ready the fundamental forms of human nature are to accept the total antithesis of contents in themselves and to show their strength and their attraction in the negation of the very thing to whose acceptance they still seemed a moment earlier to be irrevocably committed. Thus, it is often absolutely impossible to tell whether the elements of personal strength or of personal weakness have the upper hand in the complex of causes of such lack of modernity. It may result from the need not to make common cause with the crowd, a need that has as its basis, of course, not in independence from the crowd, but rather in an inner sovereign stance with respect to the latter. However, 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, which is immune to any external connivance, 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.

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. Out of the weakness of the social position to which women were condemned throughout the greatest part of history there arises their close relationship to all that is 'custom', to that which is 'right and proper', to the generally valid and approved form of existence. 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, which prevents the strong person from exercising his exceptional powers, was still denied them. They compensated for this by adopting the most extravagant and exaggerated fashions in dress. Conversely, we see that in Italy during the same epoch, women were given free play for individual development. The women of the Renaissance possessed extensive opportunities for culture, external activity, and personal differentiation such as were not offered to them again for many centuries. In the upper classes of society, especially, education and freedom of expression were almost identical for both sexes. Yet it is also reported that no particularly extravagant Italian female fashions emerged from that period. The need to exercise individuality and gain a kind of distinction in this sphere was absent, because the impulse embodied therein found sufficient satisfaction in other spheres. In general, the history of women in their outer as well as their inner life, in the individual aspect as well as in their collectivity, exhibits such a comparatively great uniformity, levelling and similarity, that they require a more lively activity at least in the sphere of fashions, which is nothing more nor less than variety, in order to add an attraction to themselves and their lives for their own feeling as well as for others.

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 the one by consent, however acquired, in the other. On the whole, we may say that the woman, compared to the man, is a more faithful creature. Now fidelity, expressing the uniformity and regularity of one's nature only according to the side of one's feelings, demands a more lively change in the outward surrounding spheres in order to establish the balance in the tendencies of life. The man, on the other hand, who in his essence is less faithful and who does not ordinarily maintain an emotional relationship that he has entered into with the same absoluteness and concentration of all his vital interests, is consequently in less need of external variation. Indeed, the lack of acceptance of changes in external fields, the indifference towards fashions 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 that reason, can exist without external changes. Therefore the emancipated woman of the present, who seeks to approach towards the whole differentiation, personality and personality in a purely individual way. The fact that the demi-monde is so frequently the pioneer of new fashion is due to its distinctively uprooted form of life. The pariah existence to which society condemns the demi-monde produces an open or latent hatred against everything that has the sanction of law, against every permanent institution, a hatred that still finds its relatively most innocent expression in the striving for ever new forms of appearance. In this continual striving for new, previously unheard-of fashions, in the ruthlessness with which the one that is most opposed to the existing one is passionately adopted, there lies an aesthetic form of the destructive urge that seems to be an element peculiar to all who lead this pariah-like existence, so long as they are not inwardly completely enslaved.

And if we seek to gaze into the final and most subtle movements of the soul, which are difficult to express in words, so we find that they too exhibit this antagonistic play of the fundamental human tendencies, which seek to regain their continually lost balance by means of ever new proportions. It is in fact fundamental to fashion that it makes no distinction at all between all individualities alike, and yet it is always done in such a way that it never affects the whole human being; indeed it always remains somewhat 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 ornamentation of the personality.

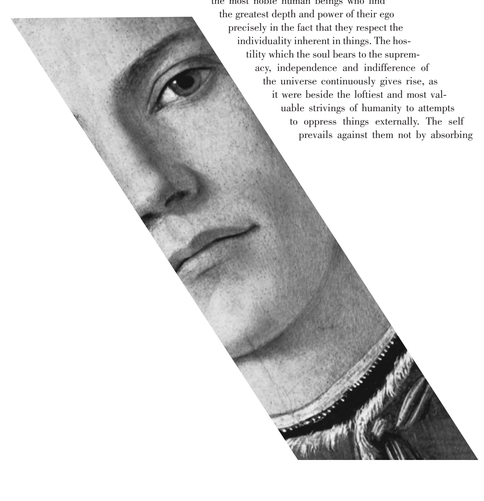
It seems that there exists for each class of human beings, indeed probably for each individual, a definite quantitative relationship between the impulse towards individualization and the drive for immersion in the collectivity, so that if the satisfaction of one of these drives is denied in a certain field of life, it seeks another, in which it then fulfils the amount that it requires. Thus, it seems as though fashion were the valve, as it were, through which women's need for some measure of conspicuousness and individual prominence finds vent, when its satisfaction is more often denied in other spheres.

During the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, Germany displayed an extraordinarily strong development of individuality. To a great extent, the collectivistic regulations of the Middle Ages were breached by the freedom of the individual person. Within this individualistic development, however, women still found no place and the freedom of activity of the male sex, lays particular stress on her indifference to fashion. In a certain sense, fashion also gives women a compensation for their lack of social position in a professional group. The man who has become absorbed in a vocation has thereby entered into a relatively uniform social circle, in which he resembles many others within this stratum, and is thus often only an exemplar of the concept of this stratum or occupation. On the other hand, and as if to compensate him for this absorption, he is invested with the full importance and the objective as well as the social power of this stratum. To his individual importance is added that of his stratum, which often can cover over the defects and deficiencies of purely personal existence.

Fashion accomplishes this identical process by other means. Fashion too supplements a person's lack of importance, their inability to individualize their existence purely by their own unaided efforts, by enabling them to join a group characterized and singled out in the public consciousness by fashion alone. Here too, to be sure, the personality as such is adapted to a general formula, yet this formula itself, from a social standpoint, possesses an individual colouring, and this makes up by a socially roundabout way for precisely what is denied to the individual even in those spheres outside mere clothing fashions. For the form of mutability in which it is presented to the individual is under all circumstances a contrast to the stability of the sense of self, and indeed the latter must become conscious of its relative duration precisely through this contrast. The changeableness of the elements of fashion can express itself as mutability and develop its attraction only through this enduring element of the sense of self. But for this very reason fashion always stands, as I have pointed out, at the very periphery of the personality, which regards itself as a pièce de résistance to fashion, or at least can be experienced as such in an emergency.

It is this significant aspect of fashion that is adopted by refined and special persons, in so far as they use it as a kind of mask. They consider blind obedience to the standards of the public in all external as the conscious and desired means of reserving their personal feelings and their taste, which they are eager to keep into the centre of general attention, the moment they step to themselves alone; indeed, so much to themselves that they do not care to allow moment they make themselves conspicuous in any way, a painful oscillation between emphasis upon and withdrawal of the sense of the self manifests itself. In so far as this individual conspicuousness, as the source of the feeling of shame, is quite independent of the particular content or the basis of which it occurs, so one is actually frequently ashamed of good and noble things. If in society, in the narrower sense of the term, banality constitutes good form, then this is due not only to a mutual regard, which causes it to be considered bad taste to stand out through some individual, singular expression that not everyone can imitate, but also to the fear of that feeling of shame which forms a self-inflicted punishment for those departing from the form and activity that is similar for, and equally accessible to, everyone.

By reason of its distinctive inner structure, fashion furnishes a conspicuousness of the individual which is always looked upon as proper, no matter how extravagant its form of appearance or manner of expression may be; as long as it is fashionable it is protected against those unpleasant reflections which the individual otherwise experiences when he or she becomes the object of attention. The phenomenon that appears here in the form of a caricature is noticeable to lesser degrees everywhere in the relationship of people to objects. It is only the most noble human beings who find through which human beings seek to save their inner freedom all the more completely by sacrificing externals to enslavement by the general public. Freedom and dependency also belong to those pairs of opposites, whose ever-renewed struggle and endless mobility give to life much more piquancy, and permit a much greater breadth and development than could a permanent, unchangeable balance of the two. Just as, according to Schopenhauer, to each person a certain amount of joy and sorrow is given, whose measure can neither remain empty nor be filled to overflowing, but in all the diversity and vacillations of internal and external circumstances only changes its form, so much less mystically we may observe in each period, in each class, and in each individual either a really permanent proportion of dependency and freedom, or at least the longing for it, whereas we can only change the fields over which they are distributed. And it is the task of the higher life, to be sure, to arrange this distribution in such a way that the other values of existence thereby acquire the most favourable development. The same quantity of dependency and freedom may help, at one time, to increase moral, intellectual and aesthetic values to the highest point and, at another time, with-



Aeron Bergman and Alejandra Salinas • Seattle • 2014