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Imitation in Fashion: Further Reflections of the work of Thorstein Veblen and Georg Simmel

Abstract

Imitation continues to play a significant role within the fashion industry, but not in the way that Thorstein Veblen and Georg Simmel, who wrote over one hundred years ago, suggest. Increased inequality in incomes, the adoption of an ethics of labour over leisure, and the creation of celebrities within the music and movie industries, who appear proximate to a broad demographic of consumers, means the social elite are no longer the predominant trendsetters and exemplars of sartorial tastes. More fundamentally, globalisation has reduced interpersonal connections and increased feelings of isolation within many individuals. Correlatively, periods of the past, which offer security, stability and status, have become an increasingly important source of sartorial – and cultural – imitation, as evidenced by the growing popularity of retro and vintage clothing styles. An awareness of the role played by heritage and history in the consumption of fashion is therefore important for researchers in academia and industry.

Keywords

Thorstein Veblen, Georg Simmel, imitation, Heritage, globalisation, sociology

Introduction

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, Thorstein Veblen (1899) and Georg Simmel ([1904] 1971) explained how imitation acted as both cause and catalyst in the creation and consumption of new sartorial vogues. In the twenty-first century, the role of imitation is no less significant within the fashion cycle, but societal transformations during the intervening centuries have opened the separate analyses of Veblen and Simmel to questions and doubt. Consequently, whilst there have been attempts to reappraise these theories, notably by McCracken (1990), Trigg (2001) and Shipman (2004), there have been suggestions that they are time bound and of limited relevance today (Davis 1992: 9; Entwistle 2000: 163; Royek 2000).

This paper argues that the works of Veblen and Simmel remain necessary for a comprehensive understanding of the fashion cycle, but contends that societal developments, which have facilitated the growth of global enterprises and global governing organisations, have divested many people of the interpersonal bonds that facilitated imitation within the fashion cycle. Increasing disparity between the wealthy and the rest, more especially the rise of a plutocracy, who form a distinctive niche within the top one percent of earners (Freeland, 2012), means that individuals perceived to be at the very apex of society are not necessarily admired and aped because of their clothing choices. In one sense, the social elite – defined as those individuals whose high incomes give them commensurate social and/or political significance – have become too remote because of their prodigious earning ability; in another sense, they are too familiar. The pervasiveness of a (predominantly western) work ethic that compels even the wealthiest people to eschew leisure and to labour means the privileged and underprivileged share broadly comparable living patterns centred on paid employment. Possessing few of their nineteenth-century characteristics, which singled them out as Thorstein Veblen's Leisure Class, the social elite are no longer emulated to the extent they were.

The creation of celebrities from within the music, movie and sports industries, who appear proximate to a wide demographic of consumers, have emerged as more suitable objects of reverie and emulation, although this is not a straightforward case of transferred allegiances. The frequency with which individual celebrities and other prominent public personalities fall from the media's gaze suggests it is the ideals they convey, curated by the brands and institutions they represent, rather than their individual personalities and characteristics, that are the real source of popular imitation. The messages that brands broadcast, which offer, to varying degrees, security, stability and status, by referencing heritage, custom and shared cultural experiences, transcend personalities; they endure long after the 'pin-ups' and 'faces' of specific marketing campaigns have faded from thought. To invert Marshal McLuhan's memorable phrase, the medium is no longer the message.

If the message is reclaiming its importance, it is largely to assuage feelings of isolation. Sociologists have long observed that feelings of anxiety and loneliness become preponderant in complex and technologically advanced societies where social networks are large and impersonal (Bauman 2007; de Certeau 1984; Durkheim 1961 Elias [1897] 1991; Habermas 1987; Wild 2014). To assuage feelings of despondency, people seek comfort and a sense of place by reverting to values that may be regarded as traditional or foundational, as noted by Douglas Holt in his advocacy of Cultural Branding (Holt 2004: 8). In the twenty-first century, periods of the past have therefore become an important source of sartorial – and more generally, cultural – imitation. Within the fashion industry this trend is apparent in the increased frequency with which historic vogues and brands are being conspicuously revived and recycled. If it seems ironic that a desire for individual security and belonging is pursued in so impersonal a manner, Zygmunt Bauman's observations regarding 'Liquid Modernity', where (western) society's 'self-propelling, self-intensifying, compulsive and obsessive 'modernization' [means that] none of the consecutive forms of social life is able to maintain its shape for long' (Bauman 2011: 11), make it hardly surprising. That said, the rise of the peer-to-peer marketplaces, where, in the case of clothing, individuals hire out their wardrobes to strangers, has been seen as an attempt to cultivate interpersonal bonds and trust (Lohman 2014). This suggests a desire to emulate and revive values associated with the past is driven as much by consumers as the companies who sell to them.

Veblen, Simmel & Imitation within Fashion

The idea of imitation has invidious associations, but it plays a significant role within the fashion cycle. The foundational works of Thorstein Veblen and Georg Simmel described how people's desire to emulate individuals perceived as socially superior to them acted as both cause and catalyst in the creation and consumption of new sartorial vogues. Clothing styles, which are responsive to and reflective of societal mores, made them a universally useful – if frequently problematic (*cf.* Lurie 2000) – communicator, for as Veblen baldly opined, 'without reflection or analysis, we feel that what is inexpensive is unworthy. "A cheap coat makes a cheap man"' (Veblen 1899: 112). Veblen argued that the nexus of imitation derived from anxiety among those people who did not possess the luxuries of the Leisure Class, chiefly their ability to engage in wasteful behaviour, the squandering of time and money especially. A crucial signifier of the Leisure Class' privileged position was dress. Their ostentatious and impractical clothing demonstrated financial fortitude and the

ability to live without labouring (Veblen 1899: 111-14). It was also regularly renewed so as to remain fashionable:

To preserve their status, the Class wanted to acquire the most costly, and thus beautiful, objects. This necessitated sartorial innovation to create more glorious garments, particularly for women whose dress flaunted the success of their male masters (Veblen 1899: 119). The endeavour proved to be as pricey as it was pointless, for conspicuous expenditure, wasteful because it does not serve a common good, is offensive and inherently ugly (Veblen 1899: 116-18). The Leisure Class were inadvertently using raiment to realize materially a sense of reassurance they could not achieve mentally. (Wild 2014: 220)

Simmel's interest in people's imitation of fashion was more theoretical. He suggested that imitation provided a means for people to mediate the omnipresent tension that existed between their desire for social conformity and personal distinction (Simmel [1904] 1971: 19). The facility of clothing to convey messages about an individual's social status led him to believe that an understanding of the fashion cycle would help to elucidate complex social relationships. Underpinning the theoretical and practical implications of both men's work was a rigid social hierarchy. Clear demarcations between different social strata, and a desire by people occupying lower rungs of the figurative ladder to climb, engendered what is commonly referred to as a 'trickle-down' process of imitation. It is the gradual disillusion of rigid social hierarchies within the West, in particular, that has led some scholars to question the continuing utility of Veblen and Simmel's work, notably Davis (1992: 9), Entwistle (2000: 163) and Rojek (2000).

Reappraising Simmel's 'Trickle-Down' theory and Veblen's Leisure Class

Attempts have been made to demonstrate the continued relevance of Veblen and Simmel's work with reference to twenty-first century patterns of consumption. Spencer James, for example, has used Zygmunt Bauman's concept of 'neotribes' to show how people forge identities through the goods they purchase (James 2009: 71). Other scholars, chiefly McCracken (1990), Trigg (2001) and Shipman (2004), have adapted the work of Veblen and Simmel to preserve its utility.

Grant McCracken has suggested that the utility of Georg Simmel's 'trickle-down' theory is compromised because it offers no motivation for people's imitation of individuals perceived to be socially superior to them. It fails to identify an end result of the imitation (McCracken 1990: 100) and does not satisfactorily predict when the emergence of one fashion innovation would trigger 'the eventual appearance of a second reactive innovation' (McCracken 1990: 96). McCracken regarded this predictive quality to be one of the chief advantages of Simmel's model. In his reappraisal, he thereby emphasises the importance of knowing when fashion changes occur. The significant change he makes to Simmel's work is to shift the cycle of imitation from one based on social groups to one based on gender, where female professionals are the imitators and male professionals are the imitated (McCracken 1990: 96-7). Women copy elements of men's dress to disassociate themselves from the negative connotations conveyed by their clothing in the hope that they can gain acceptance as equal and competent partners to men (McCracken 1990: 100).

McCracken's reappraisal of Simmel's work is thought-provoking, but in assuming that professional women are perceived, by themselves and others, to be subordinate to professional men, its central premise is untenable. Whilst women may continue to suffer some workplace discrimination, chiefly with regards to their pay, ongoing studies of the relationships between men and women suggests McCracken's analysis is too simplistic. Where some research indicates that young men are comfortable with women possessing comparable or more privileged educational backgrounds (Bingham 2014), other studies describe an intensification in the 'masculinization' of consumption since the 1980s, whereby men choose gender-specific products, services and relationships, in response to socio-economic changes that preference women. (Galilee 2005: 32-34). Research has also indicated that young men feel constrained and enervated by socially defined notions of acceptable male body image, which is generally 'lean, well-toned [and of] muscular build' (Frith and Gleeson 2004: 41; Hancock II and Karaminas 2014). The cumulative implication of this diverse research is that men can feel as socially and professionally vulnerable as women regarding their appearance, if not more so. Indeed, some commentators have suggested that the ascendancy of women in recent decades has been so swift and successful that it has triggered a terminal crisis of masculinity (Rosin 2012).

Subsequent attempts to reappraise the work of Veblen and Simmel have continued their socio-economic focus. The most thoroughgoing reappraisal of the role of imitation along these lines is that undertaken by Andrew Trigg. He argues that three main criticisms of Veblen's work, based on 'misrepresentation and over-simplification' (Trigg 2001: 104), can be overcome if his Leisure Class is studied in conjunction with Pierre Bourdieu's writing on distinction (Bourdieu, 1984). The first criticism, that the 'trickle-down' process is too restrictive because 'pacesetters for consumption' could emerge at lower points in the social hierarchy, can be surmounted by suggesting that imitation is more akin to a 'trickle-round' process (Trigg 2001: 107). According to Bourdieu, 'cultural capital' – defined by Trigg 'as the accumulated stock of knowledge about products and intellectual traditions, which is learned through educational training and also through social upbringing' (Trigg 2001: 104) – is a more sophisticated means of conveying status than conspicuous consumption. Veblen had acknowledged this point. He suggested that accumulated culture was an important means by which established members of the Leisure Class could distinguish themselves from novitiates (Veblen 1899: 34-36). The distinction derived through cultural capital is based on taste, which typically manifests itself as an aversion, certainly a differentiation, from the popular and the norm (Trigg 2001: 105-6). To maintain their lofty position from middle class emulators, Bourdieu observes that members of the upper classes periodically adopt working class behaviours (Bourdieu 1984: 185, 209). Trigg cites the preference for peasant dishes among a social elite used to *haute cuisine*, folk music and sport (Trigg 2001: 106). Members of the working class, whom Bourdieu suggests repudiate patterns of elite consumption, can therefore influence a 'trickle-up' practice of consumption, making the imitative relationship cyclical, rather than vertical.

The second criticism, that today's consumers display their wealth in subtler forms, is apparently based on too superficial a reading of Veblen's text, which acknowledges that some consumers' display of wealth is less conspicuous (Trigg 2001: 108; Veblen 1899: 103). Bourdieu's conception of the *habitus* – people's socially acquired values, behaviours and thought – suggests 'a standard of decency' – in this context, patterns

of consumption – will be adopted by individuals to accord with the community of which they are a member (Trigg 2001: 113). The *habitus* can also be used to overcome the third criticism of Veblen’s theory, namely, that social hierarchies are not the sole determinant of consumer behaviour (Trigg 2001: 99). By acknowledging the socializing force of the *habitus* and being aware of lifestyle differences, which are associated with an individual’s level of cultural and economic capital, it is possible to show how patterns of consumption change among and within classes, a point Veblen recognized but did not develop (Trigg 2001: 110). Trigg clarifies Bourdieu’s thought using the following diagram (Trigg 2001: 111):

		Cultural Capital	
		+	-
Economic Capital	+	Lifestyle A	Lifestyle B
	-	Lifestyle C	Lifestyle D

By way of explanation, people with Lifestyle A possess the economic resources for costly consumption and have the knowledge to appreciate ‘legitimate culture’ (Trigg 2001: 111); their opposite is represented by Lifestyle D. Lifestyle B represents people who have the money for high-price cultural consumption, but lack the inclination; Lifestyle C represents people who have a high appreciation of culture, but lack the money to fully sate their cultural appetite (Trigg 2001: 111). Concepts enunciated by Bourdieu can therefore help to remove the social hierarchy and rigidity of Veblen’s original theory.

Trigg’s reappraisal of Veblen’s thesis has been pursued further by Alan Shipman, who contends that a continuing focus on material consumption is misplaced because ‘social preference and public policy [have tended] to drive a reorientation of conspicuous consumption, from the physicality of consumption to the conspicuity of preferences’ (Shipman 2004: 281). If an excess of material consumption now provides diminished legitimacy (Shipman 2004: 280), if it has become ‘vulnerable to financial attack’ through taxation and scarcity (Shipman 2004: 281), and if governments have asserted their right to the ‘worthier objects of individual indulgence – notably the patronage of the arts and scientific research, and the duty of poverty relief’, thereby divesting the wealthy of their ‘stabilising activity’ (Shipman 2004: 280), the social elite have moved from demonstrating conspicuous consumption to ‘symbolic consumption’ (Shipman 2004: 277). In this new scenario, which preferences experiences over exhibits and taste over waste, connoisseurship and cultural capital are prized, as consumers demonstrate skill and perception in their selection goods and services (Shipman 2004: 281-2). Branding facilitates the awareness of the extra-material benefits of goods and services. Much maligned, most notably by Naomi Klein (2000), Shipman contends that branding has the potential to engender positive economic, ecological and social change, by overcoming pricing-power imbalances, labour and resource exploitation (Shipman 2004: 285). It can also reduce stress on natural materials through the promotion of ‘de-materialized’ values (Shipman 2004: 287). In the context of status consumption, Shipman suggests that

‘Instead of a trickle-down of elite material consumption, which could exhaust resource stocks and overflow pollution sinks once extended to the masses, the promise is of a lifting-up to elite symbolic consumption, healing social disparity without courting ecological disaster’ (Shipman 2004: 287).

Shipman is right to remind us of non-material factors in the distribution and display of personal wealth, but consumer behaviour across the world indicates the wealthy, and consumers more generally, still continue to value products that convey socio-economic status. In Cambodia, for example, where average annual per capita income is \$1000, Rolls-Royce, whose cars sell for a minimum of £299,999, made ten sales between June and July 2014 (Peel 2014). Moreover, government organisations do not have a monopoly on civic patronage. Members of the plutocracy continue the work of their nineteenth-century forebears as social benefactors (Camplin 1978). For example, the recently opened Foundation Louis Vuitton in Paris is a privately funded cultural institution by LVMH CEO Bernard Arnault (Foulkes 2014). The altruistic activities of the world’s wealthiest have now become so significant, in both senses of the term, that they warrant their own phrase, ‘philanthro-capitalism’ (Freeland 2014: 71). Making distinctions between government and the very wealthy is also far harder than Shipman implies. According to Chrystia Freeland, ‘nearly half of all members of [America’s] Congress – 250 in all – were millionaires in 2010, and their median net worth was \$913,000, more than nine times the national average [...] At least ten lawmakers are full-fledged plutocrats, with fortunes of more than \$100 million’ (Freeland 2012: 269).

If the work of McCracken, Trigg and Shipman has specific shortcomings, a general problem is that none of these accounts consider the role of dress in imitation, aside from Trigg’s highly gendered consideration of work attire. Dress had been central to the original arguments of Veblen and Simmel on emulation because of its ubiquity and widely perceived facility to signify social position. Moreover, all of these major reappraisals were written before the economic downturn of 2008, which caused the ‘global destruction of wealth on the most colossal scale since the Second World War’ (Freeland 2012: 143). Consequently, the studies’ conclusions are not cognisant of the profound socio-economic changes that have affected socio-economic relationships since, chiefly the increased disparity in incomes and the stratification that has occurred within the top one per cent of earners. Mindful of the fact that fashions reflect the society in which they are produced, periods of disruption will affect what is worn. As G. Bruce Boyer and Patricia Mears observe in their study of fashions during the tumultuous 1930s, it is in times of crisis that ‘various aspects of culture often come to assume hyper-importance. Certainly in the 1930s, the cinema, jazz, and the automobile played such a role. Clothing did, too’ (Mears and Bruce Boyer 2014: 4). If the writing of Veblen and Simmel regarding imitation is to remain relevant to contemporary studies of the fashion cycle, there is a renewed need to reconsider its main conclusions in light of recent social transformations.

No One to Imitate

Since the nineteenth century the means and motivation for imitation has changed, chiefly because the affects of globalisation and the advent of finance capital have weakened social hierarchies and interpersonal bonds. The dissolution of social hierarchies was exacerbated by the global recession – or whatever analogous phrase is preferred – that began in 2008. The subsequent years of financial stringency

highlighted and heightened the growing disparity in people's incomes, more especially among the top one percent of earners. Within Britain, for example, 'the country's five richest families now own more wealth than the poorest 20% of the population' (Elliott 2014). The consequences of this seismic socio-economic shift are hard to overstate. Whilst examples of conspicuous consumption remain prevalent, a tendency among the wealthiest of the social elite to foster their own cultural and social networks has continued, with events like Davos, the World Economic Forum's invitation-only annual meeting (Freeland 2012: 67-68). Participation in this particular event also reveals that today's social elite are very different to their nineteenth- and twentieth-century forbears, because they continue to work:

[Peter Lindert] has found that in 1916 the richest 1 percent of Americans received only one-fifth of their income from paid work; in 2004, that figure had risen threefold to 60 percent. "As a consequence, top executives (the 'working rich') have replaced top capital owners (the 'rentiers') at the top of the income hierarchy during the twentieth century" Saez and Piketty write in their seminal paper on the subject. (Freeland 2012: 43).

The emphasis on labour over leisure has led some of the wealthiest of the super elite to be termed 'alpha geeks' (Freeland 2012: 46-49). This is a far cry from the profligate and pleasure-seeking Leisure Class identified by Veblen. These changes mean that today's social elite are at once too inaccessible and too ordinary to be a source of sustained reverie and imitation in the manner conceived by Veblen and Simmel.

If the impact of the global recession on social hierarchies was immediately noticeable and quantifiable, the development of finance capital has had a subtler, but no less profound, effect in dissolving interpersonal bonds and changing the nature of imitation. In his seminal paper 'Culture and Finance Capital', Frederic James, who follows economist Karl Polanyi in his belief that the development of a global economy fundamentally changed people's conceptions of society and self (Polanyi [1944] 2001), cogently links Western society's conception of money to its cultural appreciation and output. At an earlier stage in the development of a global economy, the exchange of physical goods and specie led to:

a more realistic interest in the body of the world and in new and more lively human relationships developed by trade. The merchants and their consumers need[ed] to take a keener interest in the sensory nature of their wares as well as in the psychological and characterological traits of their interlocutors. These new interests develop[ed] new kinds of perceptions, both physical and social – new kinds of seeing, new types of behaviour – and in the long run create[d] the conditions in which more realistic art forms [were] not only possible but desirable, and encouraged by their new public' (Jameson 1997: 254).

Prosaically, the exchange and accumulation of specie encouraged correspondingly tangible expressions regarding its personal and public benefits.

By contrast, the development of finance capital, which transformed money into a concept, led to 'dematerialization' – where messages and physical objects can be transmitted 'instantaneously from one nodal point to another' through cyberspace –

‘decontextualization’ – when things are wrenched out of their ‘original context’ – and ‘deterritorialization’ – when the original usage and nature of an object ‘becomes insignificant’ (Jameson 1997: 259-260) – rendering people’s conception of culture, and themselves, increasingly abstract. Calls for a return to gold are becoming increasingly cognisant of the psychological unease that pervades finance capital (Tett 2014).

James is not alone, and certainly not the first, to suggest that global economic developments make people commercially closer and personally distant. Bauman (2007), Durkheim (1961), Elias ([1987] 1991) Habermas (1987) and Simmel ([1903] 1971) have all suggested that technologically and financially advanced societies dilute or, at the most extreme, dissolve interpersonal relationships and increase feelings of personal loneliness. The loneliness and anxiety within contemporary society negates the form of imitation described by Veblen and Simmel because the increasing absence of fixed hierarchies and stable sartorial signifiers means the merits of aping others become ambiguous; if there is limited reason to suppose that the act of personal imitation will increase social prestige or provide psychological reassurance, there is little reason to do it.

Whilst personal imitation – in particular, adopting the consumption patterns of the social elite – may have diminishing social returns, imitation as a social phenomenon continues in a variant form. Popular media – magazines, music, television – demonstrates that imitation remains a compelling form of behaviour for virtually all people, not least regarding their wardrobes, but the waxing and waning of celebrity fortunes suggests that people increasingly attach themselves to the ideas and ideals of the brands that these individuals represent, rather than their personalities.

Brands appeals because they are ‘imbued with stories that consumers find valuable in constructing their identities. Consumers flock to brands that embody the ideals they admire, brands that help them express who they want to be’ (Holt 2004: 3-4). According to marketing analyst Douglas Holt, the ideas that iconic brands convey relate to ‘imaginary’ or ‘populist’ worlds, ‘places separated not only from everyday life but also from the realms of commerce and elite control [where people, who often live ‘at the margins of society’] share a distinct ethos that provides intrinsic motivation for their actions’ (Holt 2004: 9). Holt’s case studies reveal that the ‘imaginary’ and ‘populist’ worlds often connect to an idealised time in a nation’s past, what might conventionally be termed a ‘golden age’. It is this halcyon historical narrative that enables brands to construct credible and compelling ‘identity myths’, especially at times of social disruption, akin to that caused by the 2008 global recession:

Identity myths are useful fabrications that stitch back together otherwise damaging tears in the cultural fabric of the nation. In their everyday lives, people experience these tears as personal anxieties. Myths smooth over these tensions, helping people create purpose in their lives and cement their desired identity in place when it is under stress (Holt 2004: 8).

Holt’s arguments about identity myths are particularly relevant to the fashion industry because it is through their clothing choices that consumers tend to ‘value products as a means of self-expression’ (Holt 2004: 5).

Imitation within the Fashion Industry

The fashion industry has long revelled in, and revived, elements of its history. Many of the most prestigious fashion houses feature the date of foundation in their logo and use advertisements to convey elements of their distinguished heritage. The present ubiquity of vogues inspired by the past is not more of the same, however; for this is a difference of kind, not simply of degree. Many companies that have embraced historic styles of dress have chosen periods of the past with limited relevance to their own history, or for that matter, the personal experiences of their consumers, but which elide with the socially confused zeitgeist. The use of medieval-style dress, which has been incorporated into several catwalk collections in recent years, including Stella McCartney (Fall 2008), OntFront (Spring 2010) Vivienne Westwood (Fall 2013) and Dolce & Gabbana (Fall 2013), makes this point well. Whilst socially traumatic periods can engender a ‘fantasy culture’ (Mears and Bruce Boyer 2013: 4),

[t]he arresting and angular creations of medieval couturiers, which appear simultaneously defensive and offensive, appeal to contemporary fashion designers because they reflect the financially frightened zeitgeist. By incorporating medieval themes into their clothes, designers like Vivienne Westwood, who make use of veils, hooded cloaks, asymmetric tailoring, elongated and transparent nails, can conceive of clothes that give their consumers a second skin by providing a confidence they have recently lost and a protection they crave (Wild 2013: 5).

Within menswear, dress accessories from the 1920s and 1980s have become increasingly conspicuous. These trends are particularly interesting because the decades they reference were times when men’s social and political position seemed unassailable. Akin to medieval vogues, clothing styles for men – pocket squares, tie clips, boutonnieres, correspondent shoes – are imitated to confer a sense of confidence that socio-economic situations have deprived their wearers of. And this is not a new phenomenon. The rival of ‘classic styles’ following a period of economic stringency was noted during the 1970s. For much of this recession, men wore conspicuously casual clothes (Jobling 2014: 145-46), but as the economy recovered, they reverted to ‘heroic elegance’ displaying ‘grace’, ‘polish’ and ‘richness’ in their choice of dress (McCracken 1988: 101). The present appeal to tradition helps to explain why British fashion label Hackett achieved a UK turnover of £107m. in 2013, a 10 per cent increase on the previous year. The company, which is frequently characterised as ‘nostalgic’ and ‘quintessentially British’, is looking at further global expansion in light of continuing demand for ‘Brand Britain’ (Shubber 2014).

The economy’s role in shaping people’s approach to past fashions has become more important as culture has become a ‘superstructure to the economy’s base’ (Reynolds 2011: 420). According to Simon Reynolds, who has looked at the revival of trends from the music industry’s recent past, the clamour for retro fashion and music occurs because of the cultural equivalent of economic ‘overaccumulation’. Music and fashion are analogous because of the stress they place on ‘topicality’ (Reynolds 2011: xix):

Like a boom-time economy, the more fertile and dynamic a genre is, the more it sets itself up for the musical-cultural equivalent of recession: retro. In its

young, hyper-productive phase it burns through stages of development that would have been stretched out for longer, and lays down an immense stockpile of ideas that then exert a blackhole-like pull on later waves of artists (Reynolds 2011: 422).

Imitation outside the Fashion Industry

In a memorable scene involving a cerulean blue belt from David Frankel's film *The Devil Wears Prada* (2006), the steely editor of *Mode* magazine maintains that she and her coterie of advisors dictate global fashions, and alludes to a 'trickle-down' sequence of sartorial imitation to make her point. In reality, the fragmented society that economic and technological developments have created means people are subject to numerous sartorial influences beyond those of the fashion industry. The myriad sources of easily accessible information, particularly that conveyed through social media, can drown the influence of the fashion commentators and brands, or dilute it, as people consciously search for alternative points of view. Either way, social and ethnic groups now have increased cause and opportunity to curate distinctive clothing combinations without direct reference to the advice offered by the fashion industry. The men from East London who wear their tie-less shirts buttoned up (Jonkers & van Bennekom 2013) or the Mexican men who customise cowboy-style boots with elongated toes (Roderiguez 2011), are examples of individuals whose dress has not been directly influenced by the fashion industry. Their clothing still bears the influence of societal values, however, and is similar to more populist clothing styles in that it imitates styles or revives ideas from the past; the buttoned-up shirts channel Mod aesthetics and values, the modified Mexican boots reference tribal music and dance. More generally, the rise of peer-to-peer marketplaces, where individuals let homes, cars and clothing to strangers, is another example of where consumers have begun to seek identity through the emulation and rekindling of traditional values – in this case, trust – through interpersonal means (Lohman 2014).

Conclusion

Imitation continues to play an important role within the fashion cycle, but not in the manner described by Thorstein Veblen and Georg Simmel. The writings of Veblen and Simmel on sartorial imitation remain significant for showing how clothing facilitates emulation, but economic and technological developments, which have diluted or entirely dissolved social hierarchies and interpersonal bonds, renders their notion of a 'trickle-down' process unrealistic. Sartorial – and cultural – imitation today is less about people and more about periods of the past. The emergence of a truly global society has given people many new opportunities for individualization, but it has also created feelings of anxiety and loneliness. To assuage these negative feelings, people are looking to possess material recreations from periods of the past. These objects offer the promise of security – through the values associated with them – that people no longer feel in the present. The desire to rekindle values and vogues from the past is pursued within and without the fashion industry and there is little sign of it ebbing as the global economy remains weak. Correlatively, researchers, whether in academia or industry, should aim to consider the role played by history and heritage as part of the cultural and psychological motivations for the consumption of fashion.

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