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From "things of imitation" to "devices of differentiation"

uncovering a paradoxical history of clothing (1950–2015)

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Abstract

This article argues for a renovated theoretical framework in fashion studies. It proposes that perspectives emphasizing the social role and the technological nature of dress should be considered complementary, and that their joint application can contribute to new understandings of fashion history. Employing ethnographic methods, this stance is explored through a comparative analysis of the sartorial practices of two groups of women living or working in Amsterdam during the 1950s and the 2010s. A theoretical framework integrating theories of identity (mainly based on the writings of Georg Simmel and Gabriel Tarde) and philosophy of technology (in this case the device paradigm of Albert Borgmann) allows us to uncover a paradoxical history of fashion in which clothing shifts roles, transforming from "things of imitation" into "devices of differentiation".

Key words: fashion theory, history of dress, identity, materiality, philosophy of technology

Introduction

The issue of identity has been central to academic perspectives on fashion and dress, as it is useful to understand sartorial practices as permanent negotiations between social imitation and uniformity on the one hand, and differentiation on the other. These perspectives are mainly grounded in sociological and philosophical analyses of modern society developed at the end of the nineteenth century, one example being the writings of Georg Simmel. The tension between imitation and differentiation in fashion dynamics was as significant at the time of Simmel's writings as it is today, explaining, perhaps, why this theoretical base remains to be of relevance for contemporary studies. However, sartorial practices and the role of fashion have changed in many ways since then. This article argues that in order to understand everyday dress practices and their transformations over history, we should employ an updated theoretical approach that combines notions of clothing as social objects with understandings of clothing as material and furthermore technological artifacts. With technological artifacts we mean, man-made objects that are designed and manufactured with a function in mind. This approach is put to the test through a comparative analysis of the sartorial practices of two groups of women working or living in Amsterdam, the Netherlands, in their twenties and thirties; the first group during the 1950s, and the second during the 2010s. A mixed framework integrating both theories of identity and Albert Borgmann's philosophy of technology, along with the use of ethnographic methods, allows us to uncover a paradoxical history of dress in which clothing develops from "things of imitation" into "devices of differentiation".

Identity and materiality in fashion studies

At the end of the nineteenth century, social scientist and philosopher Georg Simmel (1878-1913) explains the dynamics of fashion through the tendency to express oneself as an individual and, at the same time, the need to belong to a group. In his essay "The Philosophy of Fashion" he illustrates how contrasting dynamics work to establish a distinct social reality. Simmel traces the forces that make up the fashion system back to the nature of social and emotional life: "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" (Simmel 1998, 187). Individualism and variation on the one hand and conformity and imitation on the other are both present in the non-permanent state of fashion. These principles of fashion do not exist consecutively, but are at work simultaneously.

Simmel's writings emerge from a context in which the study of fashion dynamics was particularly relevant. In eighteenth-century Europe, dress codes had been largely determined by region, class and profession. When Simmel elaborated his ideas, however, modern industrialization and the emergence of the bourgeoisie had replaced the importance of "belonging" with values associated with "the new"(Wilson 2003). A different process of identification was at play, one where affluent classes could show authority and respectability through appearance, leading to a process of differentiation and imitation - from the upper to the lower classes- known as the "trickle down theory".

Social scientist Gabriel Tarde (1843-1904), one of Simmel's contemporaries, explains these processes differently. According to him, it is inventions that cause social realities to change and differentiate from each other, and it is imitation through which these realities spread and repeat themselves. "Every social thing, every invention or discovery tends to expand in its social environment", he states; it is the process of imitation that enables this expansion (Tarde 1903, 17). While Tarde, like Simmel, regards the process of invention and imitation in fashion as taking place top-down, he foresees a more horizontal movement resulting from a multiplication of the sources of invention, leading to the fusion of all classes into one (Tarde 1903). In fact, later studies of the dynamics of fashion imitation and differentiation have uncovered different processes taking place during the second half of the 20th century, with the emergence of youth sub-cultures and supported by the popularization of cinema and television (see e.g. Crane 2000). According to these perspectives, styles emerge within lower socio-economic groups and are adopted by higher social sectors ("trickle-up"), or they emerge simultaneously at different price levels based on established market practices and expand within groups ("trickle-across").

In any case, the tension between imitation and differentiation described by Simmel and Tarde can still be seen today, explaining, perhaps, the permanent relevance of so-called

"theories of identity" in fashion studies. On the other hand, as the fashion system experiences new challenges, the continuity of this approach is subject to criticism. In a critique of the stagnation of fashion studies restricted to the issue of identity, Rebecca Louise Breuer points out how such approaches fail to provide answers to the biggest challenges of the current fashion industry. She proposes fashion theory to move "beyond identity" by incorporating other approaches that may help to address such challenges:

> (…) the question of what more there may be to fashion apart from its signifying qualities can be extended to incorporate the associated problems and one may conclude that the way in which fashion operates today entails not only a relentless focus upon the ego; its economic motor also amounts to ecological destruction and an ethical approach which favours the appearance of western consumers over the conditions of the workers in developing countries (Breuer 2015, 18–19).

Breuer's claim is somewhat in line with what has been called "the material turn" in cultural and fashion studies. The material turn in this field is based on the critique that excessive attention has been given to clothes as symbols during the second half of the twentieth century and the acknowledgement that fashion is an embodied practice that involves material objects. In line with Breuer's statement, Woodward and Fisher claim that thinking about fashion with emphasis on its materiality

> … has consequences for how we study it. It also forces us to think about the consequences of fashion in terms of sustainability. Fashion as a system requires new items and the production of more items that are fashionable. It has clear consequences for materiality as it produces a mass of things that are no longer fashionable. These are either discarded or re-used. If we shift our attention to think about fashion through its materiality, we are also forced to consider the implications of the stuff that fashion leaves behind (Woodward and Fisher 2014, 19).

The extent to which such an approach is actually new to the field has been discussed by Rocamora and Smelik (2016); they suggest that "renewed materialism" would be a more accurate term for this line of thought, claiming that classical sociological approaches to fashion, such as Simmel's, already take into account the dimension of materiality. Michael Carter, for instance, has argued how Simmel presents clothing as "the material means of its social purpose" (Carter 2003, 60), meaning that there is a correlation between the material and the symbolic aspects of clothes, and a dependence of the former on the latter.

Anthropological perspectives of material culture have been particularly influential in this renewed interest in the material within fashion studies, especially the work of Daniel Miller (2005) and Sophie Woodward (2002; 2005; 2007; 2015). Woodward's studies are based on the understanding that clothing gets its meanings from its materials and materiality. They include detailed analyses of actual garments and dressing practices as a primary source of information, rather than restricting the role of bodies and objects to examples of the social dynamics of fashion. Although this approach and that of identity-focused studies differ in many aspects – including the research methods employed and the agency assigned to

materials in determining fashion processes - they coincide in that the resulting view is a consistent one, where the symbolic and material aspects of clothes are coherently integrated.

In this study, we argue that by diversifying the theoretical lenses through which clothes and sartorial practices are analyzed, we may enrich our views on fashion by also finding conflicting or ambiguous aspects. The material and symbolic qualities of clothes may also be contradictory. In order to analyze everyday dress practices and their transformations, we can consider these aspects independently and with equal attention. With this aim in mind, and taking into account the material aspect of clothing also involves the manufacturing process, we attempt to complement classical theories of identity with Albert Borgmann's philosophy of technology.

Integrating perspectives of clothing as technological artifacts

In "Technology and the Character of Contemporary Life" (1984) Albert Borgmann reflects on how modern technological solutions transform human life and society. Armed with a rather critical take on the idea of progress through technical innovation, he discerns two kinds of material artifacts: "things" and "devices". Things, according to Borgmann, are artifacts that are inseparable from their context or world. Using the example of a stove, the author elaborates:

> Thus a stove used to furnish more than mere warmth. It was a focus, a hearth, a place that gathered the work and leisure of a family and gave the house a centre. Its coldness marked the morning, and the spreading of its warmth the beginning of the day. It assigned to the different family members tasks that defined their place in the household. The mother built the fire, the children kept the firebox filled, and the father cut the firewood. It provided for the entire family a regular and bodily engagement with the rhythm of the seasons that was woven together of the threat of cold and the solace of warmth, the smell of wood smoke, the exertion of sawing and of carrying, the teaching of skills, and the fidelity to daily tasks. These features of physical engagement and of family relations are only first indications of the full dimensions of a thing's world. Physical engagement is not simply physical contact but the experience of the world through the manifold sensibility of the body. That sensibility is sharpened and strengthened in skill. Skill is intensive and refined world engagement. Skill, in turn, is bound up with social engagement. It moulds the person and gives the person character. Limitations of skill confine any one person's primary engagement with the world to a small area (Borgmann 1984, 41–42)

Things, then, are always experienced through bodily and social engagement, and through this engagement things provide more than one function, or, in Borgmann's terms, more than one "commodity". Devices, on the other hand, offer only commodities related to the object's primary function. Continuing the example of the stove as a thing, its corresponding device would be a modern central-heating system. Whereas the heating system can fulfil the function of heating a space better than a wood stove can, many of the other commodities of the stove are lost, for example its performance as a heart or centre of the home. According to the author, this is a consequence of devices' separation of commodity and machinery, i.e. the artifact's ends and means. Whereas the thing was inseparable from its context, the device

is in many ways impenetrable to its users, the inaccessibility of the machinery leading to de-skilling and a loss of engagement with the artifact's world.

While Borgmann presented the concepts of thing and device as separate categories according to which technological artifacts may be classified, we prefer to see them as conceptual extremes on a scale, given that the kind of engagement with the artifact's world may depend on other factors than its technological nature such as the user's experience with it.

So how can Borgmann's philosophy of technology help us better comprehend dress? The material structure of clothing may not have shifted as drastically as in the example of the stove: it is still generally made from textiles, seams and haberdashery, and worn in a similar way as a century ago. However, we argue something equally fundamental has changed, and has changed radically: the way clothing is designed and manufactured. In order to further explore what this shift in the production of clothing has meant, we conducted a case study; a comparative analysis of the sartorial practices of two groups of women based on ethnographic methods.

Case study: comparing the sartorial practices of two groups of women

For this case study, we interviewed two groups of women about their sartorial practices. The aim of these interviews was to compare how these women deal or dealt with their clothes; taking into consideration both means (technological, material and bodily aspects) and ends (symbolic values and ideals, among other aspects).

The first set of interviews was carried out in 2011 with 11 women living in a nursing home in Amsterdam. They were asked open-ended questions about their experiences during the 1950s, when they were in their twenties and thirties. The second set of interviews was carried out in 2015, with 11 women working at a research institution in Amsterdam. At the time of writing these women are between 25 and 35 years old. They were interviewed about their present or recent practices based on an open-ended questionnaire. The names of respondents have been changed for privacy reasons.

Given the impossibility of analyzing the actual clothes worn in the 1950s by the first group, we made an effort to include photos or recall concrete examples when discussing dress practices during the interviews. For the second group we used the clothes worn at the moment of interviewing to discuss these aspects. Although these women cannot be considered representative of their era, the relatively random selection and similar age at the period discussed resulted in a useful selection for the purpose of this theoretical exercise. In the following sections we will discuss how some aspects of the sartorial practices of these women were largely shared within groups, while differing to a great extent when both groups are compared. By discussing these aspects, we do not aim at objectively portraying the profile of all young Amsterdam women during the 1950s and 2010s. Rather, we identify

issues that are useful in illustrating the potential for diversifying fashion studies' theoretical resources.

Group 1: Women In The 1950s

Drawing on the interviews with the first group, the 1950s can be seen as a transition period in the Netherlands, going from making clothes and visiting a dressmaker, to buying ready-mades in a store. This is more or less in line with the rest of the industrialized western world (Wilson 2003, 89). Industrial clothing had already been available for approximately a century in Europe, but at first only simple items, such as underwear, ties and men's shirts were made. As the twentieth century advanced, other items of clothing with improved fit became available and during the second half of the twentieth century one could find any article of clothing in the large department stores (Godley 1997).

In early and mid 20th-century Netherlands, the teaching of vocational sewing skills and handicraft such as embroidery or knitting at home or at elementary schools was common and many Dutch women attended a domestic science school or did their exam in 'useful handicraft'. Domestic sewing machines and magazines including paper patterns were increasingly available, making home-sewing activities available to all, especially within the middle class.

Most of the women in this group regularly made clothes for themselves and their family members, until buying ready-to-wear became more popular. "People made a lot by themselves," remembers Marianne, born in 1925. "I did a lot of knitting and embroidery". They generally used patterns from magazines and books, with the exception of three respondents who had been trained as professional dressmakers and could develop their own patterns. One respondent would visit the dressmaker regularly, but several interviewees stressed that access to professional dressmaking was a possibility only for higher classes and therefore not within their reach. Another respondent could only afford to buy second-hand clothing from charity.

Economic restrictions were highlighted during the interviews as a central reason for not purchasing ready-mades until the post-war period. From 1940 until 1949, all textiles for daily use were rationed. Families received a coupon with a certain amount of points that was valid for six months to one year. When clothes or textiles were available, one had to wait in long queues to obtain some pieces (Hofstede, Hoitsma, and Jong 1995). New consumption possibilities emerged after the war, together with increasing purchasing power. A respondent called Adelia, born in 1922, remembers starting to visit stores such as C&A during the 1950s, after she was married and her children were "a little bigger". "I got married in 1945", she notes.

Not only was the practice of dressmaking popular among these women, they also transformed and remade garments, adapting them to changing body shapes and fashion trends. Such skills had become especially useful during the war, when the existing wardrobe was a pantry for new clothes. People altered and transformed their garments, sometimes using alternative materials such as parachute fabric, rope, carpet and flour bags (Hofstede, Hoitsma, and Jong 1995). When Jacoba was 18 (in 1935) she bought her first ball gown. "[Black] always looked good on me so I bought a black dress. First it was a long dress and later I transformed it into a short dress, that way it lasted longer […] You could change the whole look; for example [by altering] the sleeve of a blouse". Ria, born in 1925, recalls transforming ready-mades regularly. "I bought this skirt and top, and made them into a dress. The skirt was pleated, but I changed it. Then I got a different effect." Hendrika, a seamstress born in 1925, also used her skills to alter clothes: "By adding a small thing it would become a little different. It would become fashionable."

Although widespread sewing skills at the time allowed for a complex and continuous process of design and manufacture, resulting in the making and remaking of unique pieces, the stylistic ideals of these women were far from unique. Dutch crafts education authorities stressed the creative ability of girls to design something of their own: "[e]very human being has the need to put something of himself in his work. The girl should not only learn the techniques. Her confidence and imagination have to be developed in order to design something herself"(Spanning 2015, 61). However, the importance our interviewees gave to fashion trends had a much stronger impact in their creative process than their own imagination.

When asked about their design decisions, both the amateurs and professionals stressed the role of ready-mades as a source of inspiration. Jacoba, who regularly made her own clothes at home, said she "looked for what was fashionable in magazines and in shop windows", and based her own design choices on what she encountered. "Fashion was in the window displays," Hendrika confirmed. Jantien, a professional dressmaker born in 1924, was aware that her services were second choice for consumers who had an expensive taste: "[People] came to me because it was cheaper than buying something". They often told her what they had seen in the shops and she would recreate those ready-mades. "To see what was fashionable, I would sometimes go look at the shop windows. I was good at drawing, so I imitated what I saw".

From the responses of these interviewees we can conclude that following fashion trends, to be modern and 'fit' into society, was considered essential. It would seem that, at that time, conformity and imitation had the upper hand in the workings of fashion. It was the responsibility of the consumer to keep up with the latest developments in order to be "'well-dressed". Clasina, born in 1925 and regularly sewing at home for herself and her children, would "try to follow fashion trends as much as possible". Similarly, Marianne (1925) recalls

that "there was fashion and then I would try to follow it, of course". The main reason to (still) do that according to Jachienke (1935) is that "it's important to look good, and that was also the case then." For Hendrika, the social significance of fashion transcends simple personal appearance: "if you are in fashion you matter", she stressed.

In 1950s Netherlands, the concept of fashion had a straightforward meaning. The creations of Parisian couturiers were adapted and disseminated by local players, who had an intermediary role in translating French models to the Dutch audience. Historical analyses of this process have pointed out that these adaptations were based on comfortability, differences in climate and body shapes. Local fashion magazines stressed the particularities of a Dutch fashion mindset; however they also made clear that it only existed in reference to French trends (Feitsma 2014, pp.47–50). As Lipovetsky has described it "[t]he fashion system that had been constituted in the name of the principle of individuality managed to spread only by imposing uniform, standardized norms, swallowing up the free play of personal difference" (Lipovetsky 1994, 63–64).

Although the value of personalization and exclusivity of dress were occasionally mentioned during our interviews, adherence to mainstream fashion proved to be a stronger force. The role of ready-mades as signifiers of fashion trends shows how they were highly desirable before becoming convenient, explaining the decrease in the popularity of personal dressmaking practices as soon as ready-mades became affordable to more consumers. Ready-mades were much more in line with the dress values of the time. The garments might not have been as durable and well-fitted as good quality custom and self-made clothing, but they were designed by professionals aware of the latest trends (Kaipainen 2010). Access to information on Parisian trends was very restricted, but the ready-made industry had slowly developed mechanisms to incorporate them in their products (Godley 1997; Marcketti 2005). The characteristics of industrial clothing made it the best way to "be modern", rendering dressmaking skills increasingly irrelevant as the twentieth century advanced.

Group 2: Women in the 2010s

Sixty years have passed since the period described by the first group of women, and a simple analysis of our own dress practices may be enough to tease out some of the aspects that have changed. In present-day society new clothes are a mouse-click away, and we seem to have limitless choice when it comes to affordable dressing. Fashion brands have detailed target customers in mind when setting out their strategies, and it is no longer clothes that are for sale, but lifestyles.

Along these lines, the sartorial practices of the second respondent group, young women working in Amsterdam today, differ in several aspects from the ones in the first group. To begin with, the great majority of these women have never made clothes for themselves or for

others. Only one of the respondents occasionally practices amateur dressmaking. These women incorporate new clothes in their wardrobe in several ways. Buying ready-made clothing from physical shops and from online shops are the most popular ways. Some respondents also exchange clothes or buy clothes second-hand. When asked about the criteria for choosing their clothes, they stress the importance of new items matching or complementing the other clothes in their wardrobe; "if you have a specific set of clothing and you are missing *this* type of item that could really make it better, then I want to buy it" says Marjolijn (28). In many cases, it is this analysis that actually leads to a new purchase. Their wardrobe represents the spectrum of clothing that defines their personal dressing style, rather than the style of the moment.

Most of the women see adherence to fashion trends as something inevitable rather than important or appealing. "I don't look at what's in (…) but implicitly you take it into account because that is what is there [in the shops]. I buy what's there, so automatically I'm following [trends], but maybe with a lag of a year or so", says Susanne (31). Klara (33) is "not interested enough in fashion to pay attention to trends". Sometimes, they explicitly resist falling in line: Ingrid (28) and Annemarie (34), for example, decided to avoid a trendy style of backpack that "everyone has today" when buying one for themselves. Lotte (28), conscious of the seasonality of the colours offered in shops, takes her chance to purchase a lot of garments when one of her favourite colours is trendy, so that she can also wear them when they are out of style.

Only one respondent in the second group acknowledged actively following fashion trends. However, instead of finding inspiration in fashion magazines and shop windows, like the first group of women, she observes what people around her are wearing. Overall, the inspiration for these women's shopping decisions comes from their personal background, memories, character, and their direct surroundings. Sara (27) recognizes the influence that living in South Africa and attending swing and jazz dance lessons has had on her style, which she describes as "contemporary" but also incorporating "African-like" prints and a certain remembrance of the 1920s. Lotte (28) has "a very rigid colour scheme" consisting of "a lot of green, turquoise, brown and earth colours", which goes well with the tones of her skin, hair and eyes, and Rosana (34) acknowledges the influence of native Ecuadorian aesthetics (her country of origin) on her style, "informal, with bright colours and accessories like rings or earrings", which has been prevalent for many years and regardless of the season.

Many of these women choose new garments from an explicit, personal starting point. Susanne prefers to buy online because she can filter out all garments that do not meet her extra long size. For Ingrid, the first condition is that garments are made from natural materials since she doesn't feel comfortable wearing synthetics. She would like physical stores to be organized per material rather than garment type or colour, to be able to choose from the specific section. Annemarie has been using pantaloon-like trousers and oxford

shoes for more than ten years; her friends say that's her "trademark". When she shops for upper garments, a main criterion is that they go well with her "trademark" lower pieces.

Even while the majority of these women place high value on individual garments and see beauty in the practice of personal dressmaking, they have rarely or never experienced it. A lack of skills is an often-heard reason. The learning of sewing and knitting skills was before a way to cultivate advantageous housewifery (Spanning 2015). This end is no longer relevant today; in an age when machines or people in third world countries can do it cheaper and more efficiently, the making of one's own clothes is not worth the effort.

Janneke (28), like most of these women, has never had a custom or self-made garment except a scarf. She thinks "[personal dressmaking] would be too expensive or take too much time because I need to learn how to do it (…) in the past you learned how to sew at school, probably it was more common that you had those skills". If that had been the case for her, she would do it "because I would already have those skills". "Now I really have to make an effort to get them (…) I don't really see me making something for myself". Annemarie wonders why she never thought of a custom-made solution when looking for her favourite hard-to-get trousers. "It never crossed my mind; maybe if I knew people who could do it…sometimes I know exactly what I want [a garment] and I can't find it…so I just give up". For Lotte, the only respondent that feels somewhat confident with her sewing skills, this ability has opened up possible new relationships with her clothes; "when I gain a bit of weight I can feel it in the tops instantly… then I cut off the sleeves and then it fits; or if a skirt is too long to cycle, or when I don't like one element of the clothes, I change it."

From imitation to differentiation…

In conclusion, the approach of the second group of women to dressing style varies heavily from that of the first group. While the first group identifies adhering to fashion trends as a key factor to dressing well, for the second group fashion trends are one element of style, an element with which they can play by incorporating, resisting and transforming it based on their own set of aesthetic values. Whereas this difference may be seen as a reflection of traditional fashion formats having transformed into postmodern ones, structured in lifestyles or style tribes (see e.g. Crane 2000), we argue that these women's dressing values are highly based on personal experience and therefore perceived as individual. As some of their previous quotes illustrate, they are well aware of the influence of others on their sartorial habits, but when explicit choices are being made they go back to what they consider "good for themselves".

The significance of personal style for this generation can perhaps best be illustrated through the experience of Lotte. For Lotte, identifying her personal style with the help of a stylist friend was "an eye opener" and she recommends this experience to others; "at some point

you discover your style, it is something that is not related to fashion, it is not related to your peers, this is just…me. And somehow it sticks and it crystalizes, and you say: Oh… this has been me for a long time, I will stick to this (…) OK, then all the other stuff I have just needs to go, because this is just… better."

These findings point to an apparent pre-eminence of invention over imitation in contemporary consumer behaviour. However, as Tarde stressed, the two do not stand in clear opposition to one another. In an account of how imitation triggers originality, and on the role time plays, Tarde states:

> Let us be sure, however, that we understand one another about this progressive resemblance of individuals. Far from smothering their true originality, it fosters and favours it. What is contrary to personal pre-eminence is the imitation of a single man whom people copy in everything. But when, instead of patterning one's self after one person or after a few, we borrow from a hundred, a thousand, or ten thousand persons, each of whom is considered under a particular aspect, the elements of thought or action which we subsequently combine, the very nature and choice of these elementary copies, as well as their combination, expresses and accentuates our original personality. And this is, perhaps, the chief benefit that results from the prolonged action of imitation (Tarde 1903, xxiv).

Tarde's view of "choice" as a source of "originality" resulting from the multiplication of imitation sources helps explain how the dynamics of fashion trends have evolved into what we see today. Early and mid twentieth-century fashion trends were unidirectional; they were created by renowned couturiers in Paris, the capital of fashion, and disseminated around the world. In the 1990s, Lipovetsky claimed that the era of "compulsory discipline" had finished; " we entered "the era of personalization, choice, and combinatory freedom", he announced (Lipovetsky 1994, 80). In our interviews we found that the author's description of "open fashion" with its multiple and coexistent aesthetic possibilities, horizontal streams of imitation and democratization of labels may have developed one step further since then. In the digital era, the sources of imitation have multiplied even more. The current dynamics of imitation follow a more complex network that stems as much from fashion gurus and editors as from young people photographed on the street by trend watchers and posted in fashion blogs. In this multifaceted setting, the individual's agency becomes more significant; developing and maintaining an individual style is of greater concern.

…but from thing to device

We consider the women in the first respondent group to be dealing with their garments as "things", meaning that by being physically and socially engaged with the process of dressmaking, those means provided more than one "commodity", they served more than one end. Of particular importance here, in relation to the issue of identity and its implicit tension between imitation and differentiation, is the possibility of integrating personal aesthetic and functional requirements during the process of making. From this perspective, the material structure of a garment performs not only as an artifact but also potentially as many other artifacts, enabling transformations that accommodate changing body shapes and

styles, repairing, etc. It was through physical and social engagement with these clothes as "things" that every garment was finally unique in its materiality. At the core of this performance was the requirement and teaching of skills. Paradoxically, the aesthetic ideal behind them was to a large extent the opposite; professional dressmakers and home-sewers concentrated their efforts on imitating top-down fashion trends leading to what we call "things of imitation".

In the second respondent group we identify a very different practice. Unlike the clothes in mid- twentieth-century wardrobes, the great majority of garments today are high-volume reproduced items resulting from industrial production. The displacement of the manufacturing process from the home to factories, accompanied by falling prices, has resulted in diminished social and physical engagement. The ways in which contemporary young women engage with their clothing is linear, consisting of buying, using and disposing, rarely involving designing, making, or modifying garments in order to create unique items. This is in part due to, and reinforced by, the inaccessibility of their clothing's machinery (the material structure of the garment), restricting clothing commodities to their primary functions. On the other hand, even with their "limitations of skill", the women use these mass-made items to articulate individual or particular identities. We therefore can speak of "devices of differentiation".

Conclusion

In the first section of this article we advocate a diversification of the theories employed in fashion studies. More specifically, we state that the field has a long tradition in analyses of the symbolic and social aspects of clothes, and that considering dress from other perspectives may help us develop novel views. Furthermore, we acknowledge the influence of the so-called "material turn" in cultural studies, and concur in that looking at clothing as material objects – both theoretically and methodologically – is a valuable contribution in this respect. Lastly, we point out that clothes are not only material but also technological objects, and that in the combination of traditional and new theoretical perspectives for the field we can find fertile ground, uncovering also contradictions in the role of dress. In our case study, a theoretical framework combining more traditional authors such as Georg Simmel and Gabriel Tarde with the postmodern technology philosopher Albert Borgmann allows us to uncover a paradoxical history of dress. During the last 60 years, we argue, clothing shifted its role from "things of imitation" to "devices of differentiation". Embedded in each of these terms are contradictory notions referring to the tensions between the generic and the particular on two levels; that of values and ideas, and that of production and material results.

The extent to which the terms "things of imitation" and "devices of differentiation" are paradoxical is naturally debatable. For instance, in her studies Sophie Woodward (2005; 2007) refers in detail to the process of "assemblage". In front of the mirror, the author

explains, women study the exposure of their self to the outside world, creating an outfit that "feels right" by combining the resources available in their wardrobe. From this perspective, it is the outfit that is unique and accessible, even if composed of garments available on a massive scale. However, we argue, this practice does not resolve the paradoxical aspect of "devices of differentiation", which becomes apparent again as soon as two women feel embarrassed to find themselves wearing the same blouse. Regardless of how unique these women feel in their outfit, when the material (and technological) characteristics of the garment become apparent, there is conflict with their feelings.

During our interviews at the nursing home, copying ready-made garments when designing self-made clothes emerged as a common practice for young women during the 1950s. In a parallel and opposite process to that of "assemblage", these women made an effort to conform to specific and shared stylistic principles on the bases of individual (personally-made) garments. Far from resolving the contradiction embedded in "things of imitation", we note, this practice helped these women to bridge the gap between the symbolically desired and the materially possible. While today the self-made nature of dress may be highlighted as proof of uniqueness, in the 1950s it was not to be mentioned, among other reasons because it was a sign of economic constraints.

In advocating a diversification of the theoretical resources employed in fashion studies, we do not imply that approaches from the philosophy of technology are more adequate to uncover past and present roles of dress than more traditional theoretical perspectives. What we highlight, instead, is the opportunity to employ a variety of conceptual resources. Theories emphasizing the social role and technological nature of dress are complementary and their combination can contribute to new understandings of fashion history. We have attempted to illustrate this perspective through an exercise, a case study grounded on Simmel, Tarde, and Borgmann's writings. It is only at the crossover between both theoretical traditions that the paradox becomes apparent, resulting in a novel understanding of the subject at hand.

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