

Taste and Fashion: The Social Function of Fashion and Style

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In the classical European humanistic tradition, fashion was always thought to be antithetical to good taste. A person blindly following the whims of fashion was without style, whereas a man of style – or a gentleman – used his own power of judgement. Immanuel Kant shared this conception with many of his contemporaries. It is well known that Georg Simmel's idea of a formal sociology was influenced by his reading of Kant's aesthetic writings. Even Simmel's famous essay on fashion can best be understood as a somewhat ironic commentary on Kant's idea of a *sensus communis*: the community of fashion is the real community of universal taste. To Simmel, fashion is a societal formation always combining two opposite forces. It is a socially acceptable and safe way to distinguish oneself from others and, at the same time, it satisfies the individual's need for social adaptation and imitation. Furthermore, the charm of novelty offered by fashion is a purely aesthetic pleasure. Fashion helps to solve – at least provisionally – the central problem of the philosophy of life, also expressed in the antinomy of taste as formulated by Kant. It teaches the modern man how a person can be a homogeneous part of a social mass without losing his individuality, or how he can both stick to his own private taste and expect others – who recognizably also have a taste of their own – to share it. Simmel's suggestion of the 'stylized life-style' further develops the same idea. In modern society, both style and fashion are functional equivalents to 'good taste'.

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1. Immanuel Kant and Georg Simmel on fashion

Georg Simmel's idea of formal sociology was, in many ways, influenced by his reading of Immanuel Kant's aesthetic writings, and *Critique of Judgement Power* in particular (see Frisby 1992 and Davies 1972). Less attention has been paid to the fact that many of Simmel's essays on various social phenomena can also be understood and read as extended commentaries on Kant's ideas or suggestions – often not forming any essential part of Kant's own thinking and mentioned only in passing. This, in particular, is the case with Simmel's famous essay(s) on fashion.¹

Immanuel Kant made a short comment on the significance of fashion in his writing

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on anthropology (Kant 1980 (1798):571–572), but obviously this social phenomenon was not considered to be worth any extensive treatment. Kant's ideas cannot be said to be very original either. Rather, he shared an attitude towards fashion common among learned men of his time (cf. Gadamer 1975:34).

Kant discussed fashion in the context of taste. According to him, fashion has nothing to do with genuine judgements of taste (*Geschmacksurteil*), but is a case of unreflected and 'blind' imitation. As such it is the opposite of 'good taste'. It stems only from human vanity and social competition in which men try to get the better of each other and improve their social standing. Still, it is interesting to note that Kant shared Simmel's opinion that it is far better to try to follow fashion than to try to avoid

or totally neglect it – an effort as futile as it is impossible ('Besser ist es aber doch immer, ein Narr in der Mode als ein Narr ausser der Mode zu sein' (Kant 1980:572)). As Kant also already knew, fashions are transitory – otherwise they would be transformed into traditions. Fashion regulates only things that could just as well be otherwise or, as Herbert Blumer put it, 'the pretended merit or value of the competing models cannot be demonstrated through open and decisive tests' (Blumer 1969:286; see also Gadamer 1975:34). It is, moreover, the principle of novelty which enlivens fashion and lends it its special charm (Kant 1980:572).

There is, however, no hint in Kant's treatment of fashion to suggest that he would have thought its social significance to be anywhere near as important as Simmel later thought it to be. To Simmel, fashion helped to overcome the distance between an individual and his society, and it was a phenomenon of modernity *par excellence* (Simmel shared Baudelaire's idea about fashion as 'contingent, transitory and fugitive' (cf. Frisby 1985:40–41)). It is, however, useful to read Simmel's essays on fashion as critical commentaries on Kant's *Critique of Judgement Power*, or rather ironic comments on his ideas about taste and beauty. Fashion is a living antinomy: it does not have to make up its mind whether to be or not to be, because it can both be and not be at the same time (Simmel 1983b:47).

As Colin Campbell (1987) suggested, there is an important affinity between fashion and taste. Fashion can be understood as a *de facto* solution to the main – and theoretically unsolvable – problem inherent in the aesthetics of taste of the 18th century. Fashion offers a socially valid standard of taste which is only based on the individual preferences and choices of the members of the 'community of tastes'. In order to avoid misunderstandings, it should be pointed out that fashion obviously does not share the ideal, and in a sense exemplary, character of 'good taste', but still it can be said to be equally binding or obliging in relation to the individuals concerned (see Gronow 1993; see also Gadamer 1975:35). In the most general terms, it can be said to form a

universal standard of taste which, however, allows for the singularity and subjectivity of individual tastes.

As a matter of fact, there is strong evidence that Simmel was aware of this parallel, even though he did not formulate it in quite the same terms or quite as explicitly.

Simmel's analysis of social formations was often aimed at showing how they all offer – at best – provisional societal solutions to a problem which, in his opinion, was obviously the main problem facing modern man. Sociology could thus directly make an invaluable contribution to the philosophy of life. In 'The Metropolis and the Mental Life' (1950 (1903):423), 'Grosstadt' (read: modern society) offered an ideal arena for the two principal ways – in principle always fighting with each other – of allocating roles to men. According to the first principle, all men are equal and they share a common substance of humanity, whereas the second principle dictates that every man is a unique being and irreplaceable as such. Both principles are logically exclusive – and still their opposition is overcome daily in modern society. In the same way, fashion is a societal formation always combining two opposite principles. It is a socially acceptable and secure way to distinguish oneself from others and, at the same time, it satisfies the individual's need for social adaptation and imitation:

Fashion is the imitation of a given example and satisfies the demand for social adaptation: it leads the individual along the road which all travel, it furnishes a general condition, which resolves the conduct of every individual into a mere example. At the same time it modifies to no lesser degree the need for differentiation, the tendency towards dissimilarity, the desire for change and contrast on the one hand by a constant change of contents . . . (Simmel 1981 (1904):6–7)

In Simmel's opinion it was, in fact, Immanuel Kant in his *Critique of Judgement Power* who, more clear-sightedly and more profoundly than any other before him, had formulated this great problem facing every modern individual. Kant's aesthetics show how it is possible for the individual to be genuinely free and autonomous without degenerating into a state of isolation and lawlessness:

In any case, it is one of the first and one of the most profound attempts of reconciliation in the aesthetic sphere between the indispensable individual subjectivity of the modern man and the equally necessary overindividual community. (Simmel 1905b:168–169; trans. J.G.)

As Simmel tried to show in great detail, the modern fashion pattern constitutes a social formation which operates like an overindividual scheme through which an individual can express his loyalty to and strengthen his social ties with the 'norms of his time' without losing his 'inner freedom' (see Simmel 1983b:57). Expressed in the most general terms: 'Two social tendencies are essential to the establishment of fashion, namely, the need of union on the one hand and the need of isolation on the other' (Simmel 1981:8).

2. The antinomy of taste

As Howard Caygill has recently shown (1989), in writing his *Critique of Judgement Power* Kant confronted two parallel traditions of European thought of the 18th century: German 'Polizeiwissenschaft', represented by Christian Wolff and practised by Frederick the Great who thought that the state should legislate the happiness of its citizens, and British empiricist aesthetics, who left the decisions concerning the goodness and the beauty to the private judgements of the members of the civil society. In presenting his famous antinomy Kant tried both to unite and to overcome these two traditions which can be understood to be dealing with exactly the type of questions emerging from Simmel's reading of Kant. Aesthetics was by no means understood to be dealing in any very straightforward manner with a political question. Still, the opposition between individual autonomy and social order could not only be discussed but was obviously also thought to be felt and experienced in the most touching form in the aesthetic sphere.

The old saying 'De gustibus disputandum non est' did not originally mean that every man had a taste of his own which was of no concern to others. On the contrary, matters of taste were thought to be self-evident and judgements of taste, at least in principle, generally shared by all. There could thus

be no reason or grounds for arguing about them. A false judgement of taste was caused either by ignorance or error. According to this interpretation, judgements of taste concerning the beauty of objects were ultimately based on feelings of pleasure and displeasure: what felt good was both right and beautiful (see Hooker 1934 and Campbell 1987).

In these discussions, the physiological or gustatory sense of taste often acted as a model for the aesthetic judgement of taste. As Dr. Armstrong wrote in 1702: 'As of beef and port, judge for yourself, and report of wit.' In particular, making judgements of taste, and distinguishing beauty from ugliness, was as self-evident and easy as telling salt from sugar. As Edmund Burke (1987 (1857)) quite seriously claimed in his treatise concerning the beautiful and the sublime, which was probably the best-known work on aesthetics during the 18th century, once the possibility of mistake had been overruled, only a fool could fail to make the proper judgement.

The representatives of this tradition, for example Hume, Hutcheson and Addison, were by no means so naive as to think that people's choices and preferences actually tended to converge. On the contrary, even people of similar origin were seldom seen to agree on their judgements. Good taste was a 'Bildungsbegriff'. It was something which, at least potentially, could be shared by all in spite of their social origins, even though it had to be admitted that its proper exercise demanded practice and the presence of suitable examples to be followed. And practice obviously demanded time. Thus, in practice, only men of considerable wealth could be expected to show good taste in their daily manners (cf. Thorstein Veblen's (1961 (1899)) critique of the aesthetic standards of the 'leisure class' at the turn of the present century; see also Bourdieu's (1984) like-minded critique of Kantian aesthetics as the aesthetics of a ruling class).

Still, the revolutionary nature of the standard of 'good taste' should not be forgotten. For the first time, it was now possible to think that all human beings had similar taste: the hunger of a king did not,

in principle, differ from the hunger of a beggar.

There was a problem inherent in the tradition from the beginning, of which its representatives were only partly aware. This was explicitly formulated first by Kant. How could something which was exclusively based on the subjective feeling of pleasure (see Kant 1966 (1790):§31) be universally valid too? The feeling of beauty requires that it be shared universally. As the antinomy was formulated by Kant, both the following positions are equally plausible and defensible, and yet they cannot both be true at the same time: (1) everyone has a taste of his own ('Ein jeder hat seinen eigenen Geschmack') and (2) one cannot argue over matters of taste ('Über den Geschmack lässt sich nicht disputieren').

According to Kant's definition of (pure aesthetic) taste, it is the ability to judge or choose in a universally valid way (*allgemeingültig zu wählen*) (Kant 1966:§20). But what kind of universal validity of judgement is it which shares only the universality of a single judgement (*die Allgemeinheit eines einzelnen Urteils*) and cannot, consequently, be equal to any logical and conceptual universality, and for which there cannot possibly be any a priori grounds of acceptance (Kant 1966:§31)? Universality cannot be gained by means of a concept that deals with the contents of the judgement of taste (see Lyotard 1988:37). In Kant's own words, we are dealing here with something which can be referred to as 'non-conceptual subjective universality':

We want to submit the object to our own eyes, just as if our liking of it depended on that sensation. And yet, if we then call the object beautiful, we believe we have a universal voice, and lay claim to the agreement of everyone . . . (Kant 1987:§8).

In particular, there cannot possibly exist any general standards or criteria according to which one could judge an object beautiful. The power of judgement operates 'as if' with examples (see Kant 1966:§18).

Kant emphasized time after time that this subjective universality had nothing to do with the empirical generality of a belief or a preference ('Since a judgment of taste is in fact of this sort, its universal validity is not to be established by gathering votes and

asking other people what kind of sensations they are having' (Kant 1987:§31)). The fact that something is generally liked does not justify our calling it beautiful. The universality of aesthetic judgements which Kant had in mind is of another kind altogether. In his opinion, we should be equally careful not to blend genuine aesthetic, (disinterested) pleasure with sensual pleasure: it is, in principle, a different matter to say that one likes oysters than to say that Titian's painting is beautiful.

3. Kant's community of united tastes

As Kant pointed out, in presenting an aesthetic judgement, despite the fact that it is ultimately based only on our subjective feelings, we cannot avoid expecting others to join our appreciation of the object of beauty. Otherwise, the judgement would not be a real judgement of taste. This judgement of taste must have a 'subjective principle, which determines only by liking rather than by concepts, though nonetheless with universal validity, what is liked or disliked' (Kant 1987:§20). But how can such a claim of universality be justified? Kant's 'solution' to the problem is the postulation of a 'sensus communis', common sense, or a community of feeling and taste. Every time we make a judgement of taste we are, in fact, presuming that such a community exists. It is this idea of a community of taste that makes Kant's discussion especially interesting as far as a sociology of fashion is concerned, even though Kant would without doubt dismiss the whole question by saying that a community of fashion is only empirical and, as such, it cannot possibly have anything to do with the universality expected from aesthetic judgements.

The different characterizations of this *sensus communis* given by Kant are rather problematic and difficult to interpret, as evidenced by the long history of commentary. At some points, Kant seemed to define it in purely negative terms: such a community must be postulated, otherwise judgements of taste would be impossible to be made but, on the other hand, it is only constituted in case the judgements – or

feelings – are, in fact, universally shared (see Kant 1966:§20)). Kant's argument would seem to be almost a circular one.

The idea of a 'Gemeinsinn' obviously gets some support from the fact that we are indeed able to communicate both our knowledge and our feelings (Kant 1966:21). In the traditional interpretation which was presented by Georg Simmel in his lectures on Kant, the question of the possibility of a shared 'Gemeinsinn' was reduced to the rather metaphysical idea of a community of souls. Aesthetic experiences find a common basis of resonance in all human beings who all, in the last instance, have a soul with similar spiritual functions:

And this vague awareness, that the most basic functions of our spirit are here in operation, functions that are identical in all souls, lets us believe that these judgments are not ours alone. As a matter of fact, we do believe that every one would judge in a similar way, if only he could approach the object (das Object zulassen) in the same way. (Simmel 1905b:168; trans. JG)

There are some formulations in Kant's own writing which certainly would lend support to such an interpretation:

A judgment of taste is based on a concept (. . .), but this concept does not allow us to cognize or prove anything concerning the object because it is intrinsically indeterminable and inadequate for cognition; and yet the same concept does make the judgment of taste valid for everyone, because (. . .) the basis that determines the judgment lies, perhaps, in the concept of what may be considered the super-sensible substrate of humanity. (Kant 1987:§57)

There is, however, another possible interpretation which is less orthodox but more interesting, and which has recently been suggested by Lyotard, in particular (see Lyotard 1988; see also Weber 1987 and Santanen 1991). According to this interpretation, Kant's community of taste is only a regulative idea or, rather, a promise which can never be realized. The community can never come into being:

The esthetic community, therefore, remains, as Kant puts it, only an idea, or as I would say, a horizon for an expected consensus. Kant used the word 'promise' in order to point out the non-existent status of such a republic of

taste (of the United Tastes?) The community concerning what is beautiful has no chance of being actualized. But every judgment carries with it the promise of its universalization as a constitutive feature of its singularity. (Lyotard 1988:38)

Universality should be sought only in the form of the demands (see Lyotard 1988:38). In other words, as Kant put it, in making a proper judgement of taste we do not, in fact, postulate that everyone agrees with us on the matter; we only, so to speak, propose that everyone joins in the same community of feeling. Everyone else must, at least, be able to experience the same aesthetic feeling. When we call an object beautiful we appeal to other people and 'believe ourselves to be speaking with a universal voice and lay claim to the consensus of everyone' (Kant 1952:§8). In Kant's own words:

The judgment of taste itself does not *postulate* everyone's agreement (since only a logically universal judgment can do that, because it can advise reason); it merely *requires* this agreement from everyone (sinnet jedermann), as an instance of a rule . . . Hence the universal voice is only an idea. (1987:§8).

4. Fashion and taste

As has already been pointed out, if asked, Kant – and Lyotard – would certainly hasten to add that this kind of a 'non-existent' consensus or harmony of feelings has absolutely nothing to do with the universality of fashion, which is always 'only' empirical by nature. Still, Simmel's characterization of the fashion pattern includes features resembling, to an amazing extent, Kant's idea of *sensus communis* as interpreted by Lyotard:

The kind of concensus implied by such a process, if there is any concensus at all, is in no way argumentative but is rather allusive and elusive, endowed with a special way of being alive, combining both life and death, always remaining *in statu nascendi* or *moriendi*, always keeping open the issue of whether or not it actually exists. This kind of consensus is definitely nothing but a cloud of community. (Lyotard 1988:38)

Like Kant's consensus of taste, fashion, too, is in a perpetual state of coming into being and dying. It is a self-dynamic process which constantly reproduces the very forces

which keep it going (see Mayntz & Nedelmann 1987). It never actually exists. 'To be in fashion' is constantly being transformed into being 'out of fashion'. There is a tendency towards universalism inherent in every fashion, but this tendency can never be fully realised. As soon as a fashion permeates everything, it stops being a fashion:

As soon as the example has been universally adopted, that is, as soon as anything that was originally done only by a few has really come to be practised by all – as is the case in certain portions of our apparel and in various forms of social conduct – we no longer speak of fashion. As fashion spreads, it gradually goes to its doom . . . fashion includes a peculiar attraction of limitation, the attraction of simultaneous beginning and end . . . (Simmel 1981:9).

As has already been pointed out, Colin Campbell has suggested that fashion should be understood as a practical solution to a problem inherent in 18th century aesthetics of taste. Fashion first formed the sought-after aesthetic community:

Fashion became the *de facto* answer to the problem which none of the eighteenth-century writers on taste would solve; that is, how to find a commonly agreed, aesthetic standard which, while catering for people's real preferences, could also continue to serve as the basis for an ideal of character. These writers, whilst perceiving the need for such a standard, had understandably assumed that it would be based upon universal and unchanging rules: the sociological necessity, arising out of the form of modern hedonism, demanded change. (Campbell 1987:158)

Colin Campbell, whose main occupation was the search for the intellectual origins of the self-illusory, hedonistic, modern consumer was a bit careless in his formulations, making it sound almost as if the social pattern of fashion had, in fact, been invented in order to satisfy the theoretical need to solve the antinomy of taste. One would stay on firmer ground by only claiming that fashion is a functional equivalent (cf. Luhmann) to the principle of good taste. It sounds equally unconvincing to claim that fashion could substitute 'good taste' as a new ideal of character. (One simply does not say to a child that he/she should act in a certain way, because it is in fashion.)

However, in other respects, Campbell was able to catch something essential in the role played by fashion in modern society: fashion does function as a substitute standard of taste, without actually being one. It is equally indeterminate in character and cannot be subsumed under concepts. One cannot formulate any explicit conceptual criteria or standards for fashion, and yet fashion offers a 'norm' according to which individuals can orient their actions and choices without suppressing their individuality.²

The parallel between fashion and judgments of taste goes even further. Fashion is a thoroughly aesthetic phenomenon in the Kantian sense. The charm of novelty and transitoriness offered by fashion (see Simmel 1981:47) is a purely aesthetic pleasure. Simmel certainly shared the prejudice of his contemporaries (cf. Veblen) in believing that the creations of fashion were more often ugly and, from an aesthetic point of view, disgusting. As a matter of fact, it would be impossible to defend such a stance once Simmel's other and more principal formulations about fashion are taken into account. To Simmel – as well as to Kant – fashion only regulates things that could just as well be otherwise. In other words, fashion does not recognize any objective criteria or reasons. As Simmel understood it, this necessarily means that all such considerations which have to do with the usefulness or purposiveness (*Zweckmässigkeitsbeziehungen*) of objects are totally out of place in fashion:

This is clearly proved by the fact that very frequently not the slightest reason can be found for the creations of fashion from the standpoint of an objective, aesthetic, or other expediency. While in general our wearing apparel is really adapted to our needs, there is not a trace of expediency in the method by which fashion dictates, for example, whether wide or narrow trousers, colored or black scarfs shall be worn. (Simmel 1981:7)

In the above quotation Simmel, curiously enough, identified aesthetic with 'other' objective expediency. If fashion does not obey the criteria of objective reason, it shares precisely that peculiar feature which was suggested by Kant to distinguish aesthetic pleasure from both sensual pleasure

and every utilitarian consideration: 'Beauty is the form of finality in an object so far as perceived in it apart from the representation of an end' (Kant 1952:§17). Kant also dismissed the relevance of such classical criteria of beauty as harmony and perfection. Objects of beauty have a form of finality as if they had an objective end, either serving an outer purpose or need, or an end dictated by its inner nature. Still, they do not have either, but only the form of finality (see Kant 1966:§§11–15).

Fashion, as characterized by Simmel, seems also to have such a form of finality without satisfying, for instance, any outer needs. As a matter of fact, fashion does have a 'purpose' – or function – but it is a purely social and, hence, 'formal' one (see Simmel 1981:7). It is, furthermore, the function of the whole fashion pattern, and not of any single object of fashion. Simmel also seemed to think that consumer goods are used to satisfy the 'social-psychological' need of individuation, or distancing oneself from others. The usefulness of objects as markers of social distinction is obviously different from, say, their ability to satisfy needs. However, this would offer an independent criterion according to which one could judge their merits, a criterion which, in principle, is different from any judgement of their aesthetic worth.

It is, however, a different thing to say that people enjoy fashionable consumer goods because of the feeling of novelty associated with them, than to claim that they consciously make use of them in order to promote their own social standing. It is also a different thing to say that fashion has consequences for social stratification than to claim that individuals consciously make use of objects of fashion in order to climb up the social ladder. Nor is it always clear whether Simmel had in mind the first or the second process or mechanism.

5. Class fashion or mass fashion?

Simmel's essay has dominated much of the sociological discussion about fashion up to now to such an extent that Herbert Blumer (1969) made him responsible for the generally held conception that fashions are

class fashions. In Blumer's own opinion, modern mass fashion operates in a rather different way. The whole secret of fashion consists of the process of collective taste formation. Blumer obviously only knew Simmel's first essay. However, even though one can find in Simmel's later essays formulations and ideas which make it clear that he did not think that the only distinctions making up the dynamics of fashion were class distinctions (see Noro 1991:70–75), it still cannot be denied that he shared with many of his contemporaries the model according to which fashions have their origins in the upper stratum of society from which they then more or less slowly descend down the social ladder:

... the fashions of the upper stratum of society are never identical with those of the lower, in fact, they are abandoned by the former as soon as the latter prepare to appropriate them. . . . Fashion. . . . is a product of class distinction . . . (Simmel 1981:7)

Following Simmel's ideas, it has been typical to think that fashions unite members of a social class while demarcating classes from one another. The dynamics of fashion pattern has been understood to result from the fact that once the lower classes have succeeded in adopting a new style or mode of social conduct, the upper classes have hastened to abandon it in order to find new styles to mark their superiority and distinctiveness (for a recent discussion, see Jones 1991). Simmel's idea of fashion as combining the opposite motives of distinction and imitation is thus often understood as if the first motive operated mainly between, and the second mainly within, classes. Such a view is certainly supported by historical evidence concerning the operation of fashion in earlier capitalism.

In at least one respect, Blumer's (1969) analysis of fashion comes closer to Kant's idea of a *sensus communis* than Simmel's does. Simmel strongly emphasized the demarcating role of fashion, the function of which is to accentuate one's individual uniqueness – a tendency becoming more marked because of the great levelling impact of money in modern society. Blumer, on the other hand, who used the Paris fashion market and fashion shows as empirical examples, was mainly interested

in the process through which a collective and uniform taste was distilled out of numerous individual tastes.

The main problem with Blumer's characterization of the fashion pattern is that he does not give any reasons for its continuous dynamics: once collective taste has been reached there would not seem to be any reason to break away from the consensus. On the other hand, the opposite version, which emphasizes the logic of distinctions in fashion formation, often leads to the conception that the actors in this game are closed social groups which set themselves strictly apart from other social groups (see Simmel 1983b:63). If one, however, reads Simmel's writings on fashion through Kantian spectacles one could suggest that the 'need of differentiation' does not only include a 'tendency towards dissimilarity'. As Simmel (1981:10) wrote, 'while fashion postulates a certain amount of general acceptance, it nevertheless is not without significance in the characterization of the individual, for it emphasizes his personality not only through omission but also through observance'. In setting themselves apart in order to emphasize their individuality and uniqueness, individuals always also expect others to approve of their choice and share their taste. The impetus to set oneself apart as an individual by choosing differently is already given by the fact that, once a taste has been generally adopted, it becomes impossible to recognize it as one's own and to identify oneself with it. It has become completely anonymous. A metaphor, more apt than the social ladder for the spread of fashion, would be the dissolution of a drop of liquid in a basin containing a liquid of a different colour.

6. Life-style, style of art and fashion

Niklas Luhmann, in a recent article (1986), suggested that style first makes art a distinct functional social system. Without style there would not be any separate system of art at all. Art objects as such are characterized by a high degree of autonomy. They are understood to be closed and self-sufficient entities that only have a goal in themselves. Once works of art are appreciated

for their novelty and surprise value – as is increasingly the case in modern art – the problem becomes even more accentuated: what makes an object a work of art? Style is something that is common to different works of art, shared by many. Thus, style first makes it possible to determine which objects are to be regarded as art, and what their special contribution to the system of art is:

It is the style of a work of art which makes it possible to recognize what it owes to other works of art and what is its importance to further, new works of art. The function of style is to organize the contribution of a work of art to the autopoiesis of art, and to a certain extent, against the intension of the very work of art, which aims at the closure of a single work. The style both corresponds to and contradicts the autonomy of a single work of art. (Luhmann 1986:632; trans. J.G.)

Luhmann's characterization of the function of style could have been taken from Simmel. In his rather little-known essay 'The Problem of Style', he (1991 (1908):64) presented, in many respects, similar ideas:

By virtue of style, the particularity of the individual work is subjugated to a general law of form that also applies to other works; it is, so to speak, relieved of its absolute autonomy. Because it shares its nature or a part of its design with others it thus points to a common root that lies beyond the individual work . . .

However, Simmel's concept of style differs from Luhmann's in one important respect: Simmel thought that genuine works of art cannot share a common style (see Simmel 1985). Only works of applied art (arts and crafts) or designed products can have a style. In Simmel's words, 'instead of the character of individuality, applied art is supposed to have the character of style, of broad generality . . .' (see Simmel 1991:67). Because objects of applied art are always meant to be used, they cannot be unique. They already have something in common: they all serve a specific useful purpose and satisfy a need that is common to many men (see Simmel 1991:65).

Simmel quite obviously would not have wanted to deny the usefulness of the concept of style in art history. He must have been well aware of the common use of the

concept of style which had become established in the middle of the 18th century. His own concept of style, however, is more ambitious. In some respects it comes closer to the older concept of 'maniera' traditionally designating the way to make things (see Link-Heer 1986). In order to share a common style, objects of applied art – or any objects – must have been produced in a special manner: they must be stylized. Genuine works of art, on the other hand, can never be stylized, otherwise they would lose their uniqueness and individuality. One could then perhaps venture to say that 'style', to Simmel, is something more than a mere thought abstraction. It is a 'Realabstraktion'.

What makes Simmel's discussion of style sociologically interesting is the fact that he draws a direct parallel between the style of objects of use and life-style. In his opinion, in the same way as one can speak of a personal fashion (see Simmel 1981:13–14), one can also speak of a personal style. Such a personal style is, however, a borderline case, the possibility of which is reserved only for strong personalities (like Goethe). We common folk have to be satisfied with something far less ambitious. An attempt to try to surround oneself with objects with a strong personal flavour of their own would only end in total stylelessness (see also Noro 1991:92–93): '... anyone who is not that strong must adhere to a general law; if he fails to, his work fails to have style ...' (Simmel 1991:70).

What makes Simmel's comment so remarkable is the fact that he does not seem to think that the whole life-style of a person (say, a member of the modern 'middle class') should be stylized in order to obey a common law and to be shared by others. In other words, Simmel does not postulate the necessity of any general principle, criteria or disposition which would regulate his behaviour in most or even all fields of life. Neither does he think that members of a society have to share a common life-style with other members of their class or other social groups. On the contrary, even though their lives are stylized, all the individuals are still able to retain both their full individuality and uniqueness and share a common style, or rather many different but

common styles. How is this possible? The suggested solution is a typical 'Simmelian' societal solution to a theoretically unsolvable antinomy.

As has already been pointed out, Simmel's concept of a style has more to do with objects of consumption: the objects or commodities are stylized, and not the way of life or the individual taste in themselves. Simmel's own example of furnishing a room can serve to illustrate what he had in mind. The furniture of a living room should, in his opinion – at least in an ideal case – consist of a compilation of pieces of furniture all representing different but generally approved and common styles, of stylized objects:

... the individual constructs his environment of variously stylized objects; by his doing the objects receive a new centre, which is not located in any of them alone, but which they all manifest through the particular way they are united. (Simmel 1991:69)

If the room of a contemporary house consisted only of items representing a single style, it would create a very sterile impression and the individual would not find any natural place in it. It would be an equally big mistake for a modern man to try to produce all the furniture totally according to his own private taste in order to create a private style of his own. Only a genius of Goethe's calibre could succeed in such an effort. Otherwise, the result would only show total lack of taste and find no response among his fellow men (see Simmel 1991:69–70).

Simmel did not explicitly discuss the relationship between style and fashion. However, he obviously understood style and fashion – both in their peculiar fields – as making their contribution to solving the great problem of our times: how to unite or bridge the gap between something which is totally individual or private on the one hand and universal and general on the other (Simmel 1991:70)? How can an individual belong to a 'higher' totality without losing his individuality? One could also imagine Simmel agreeing with Luhmann in arguing that style and fashion are, indeed, functional equivalents. In the end, Luhmann even has to admit that it is difficult – especially as far as the modern art world

with its rapid stylistic innovations is concerned – to find any difference between style and fashion at all:

The autopoiesis of art should thus resemble the change of fashion, and one should not ask so much what is the contribution of a work of art to a certain style, but rather: how does the style of a fashion provoke the next one. (Luhmann 1986:655; trans. J.G.)

The only difference that remains is the fact that art does not tolerate copies, whereas copies make a fashion even more striking (see Luhmann 1986:656). Once the world of art is abandoned and the styles in applied art or of consumer goods are considered, the difference is of no consequence. In producing consumer goods, models are copied and style is something that characterizes the unifying features of both the copies and their original models.

7. Conclusion

Simmel's analysis of fashion – read through the critical eyes of both Kant and Blumer – has taught us how a person can be a homogeneous part of a mass without losing his individuality – or how he can both stick to his own private taste and expect others – who also have a taste of their own – to share it. For him, however, all such solutions to the conflict between the principles of individuality and sociability are only provisional. Social harmony is never within reach. As Lyotard said the community of the United Tastes is only a 'cloud of a community'. The bridge crossing the gap between the individual and his society has to be built over and over again.

In Simmel's opinion, the concept of style should be reserved only for the objects of design. Objects of art are always unique. Otherwise, Simmel's and Luhmann's conceptions of style do not differ from each other: in the modern society of mass consumption, in particular, they are functional equivalents. The concept of style has, however, more to do with the characterization of the objects of consumption, whereas fashion characterizes the whole social pattern of distinction and adaptation.

Simmel's suggestion for the necessity of a 'stylized life-style' in modern society can equally be seen as a further development

of the same idea concerning the role played by the various objects of consumption in the life of a modern person. Even though their lives are stylized, the members of a society are able to retain their full individuality and share a style or several styles with others. Now the individuality of individual taste is expressed in the relative weight which objects of different styles or fashions have in a compilation of objects. The idea of style as 'bricolage' (see Hebdige 1983) would not then be restricted to modern youth culture, but would rather characterize the whole of modern consumption culture from the very beginning. The taste expressed in such a collection of goods surrounding a person is always both private and universal at the same time. Such a solution is in line with Simmel's more general idea about the modern individuality as an intersection of many spheres of life (see Noro 1991).

The development of a stylized life-style can be seen as a concrete example of the attitude of superficiality which, in Simmel's opinion, was a possible and even a typical response on the part of the modern man to the problems caused by the increasing fragmentation of modern society (see Noro 1991). As he understood it, the division of labour – or social differentiation in general – had created a situation in which the individual is faced with conflicting demands, interests, needs and hopes. Social differentiation threatens the totality of the individual's life by pulling it in opposite directions. If one were to get involved with equal seriousness in every field of life, one would simply lose one's social integrity (see Lohmann 1992:352–353).³

It is not surprising that a recent characterization of the consumer in post-modernity in *Advances of Consumer Research* (Firat 1991) could equally well be read as a 'modernized' summary of the results of Simmel's analyses of fashion and style:

The consumption life of the consumer is segmented, fragmented into separate moments which are not or only superficially linked. Each instance may well be cultivated to represent a different image of oneself. . . . The catch in the capitalist market system is, however, that to represent the different images people will be acquiring and consuming the same prod-

ucts . . . and adopting the same consumption pattern represented by these products (. . .) So what appears to be difference at the level of symbolic culture turns out to be an underlying uniformity. (Firat 1991:71)

The only thing that Georg Simmel would probably consider somewhat strange in the above quotation would be its slightly moralizing overtone. He would probably be tempted to remind the reader that 'the difference appearing at the level of symbolic culture' is just as real and important a characteristic of modern consumer culture as its 'underlying' uniformity. In consuming goods people are both expressing their own aesthetic preferences and sharing a collective taste with others.

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Notes

¹ Simmel wrote three different essays on fashion (1983a (1895), 1905 and 1983b (1911)) which, however, do not markedly differ from each other (see Noro 1991:68–69).

² As Simmel (1983b:42) already knew, once fashions are created by a fashion industry – as they undoubtedly are in a modern commercial society – objects are produced with the very purpose of becoming fashionable. According to a standard critical argument, the feelings of pleasure and displeasure of the consumer then become more or less totally manipulated and their genuine choices and preferences no longer play any significant role in the formation of this social process. To Simmel, on the other hand, it only proved that the social form of fashion had become totally indifferent to its specific contents. The overindividuality of this form even set its label on its contents. In such a conception of fashion there is, however, a more interesting critical element, which was also expressed by Simmel. There is a danger that the objective social formation of fashion becomes so overwhelming that it suppresses the very subjectivity of the individual. Thus, the increasing disproportion between objective and subjective cultures comes into appearance in fashion too. Simmel's 'weak' (see Noro 1991:92) solution to the problem was the suggestion that one should follow Goethe's example and use fashion as a mask under which one can hide one's inner life (see Simmel 1981:13). As Mayntz & Nedelmann (1987:654) pointed out, fashion, like all similar 'self-dynamic social processes', has a tendency to become objectified and routinized. It begins to

resemble a formal schema. As a consequence, consumers may get tired of the 'Sisyphos'-work of fashion and feel that they are constantly forced to buy more and new things. However, this could only happen if fashion was eternally repetitive. 'The new' would not then be genuinely new, and it would not be able to charm and seduce the consumer (see Noro 1991:110–113).

³ As Georg Lohmann (1992:355) has pointed out, Simmel, in fact, presumed that there is always some unifying principle which determines or first creates the uniqueness and totality of an individual's life span. It also makes it possible to recognize even the most superficial expressions of his life as expressions of his very life. It is an individual principle unique to the individual and not shared by others. In Simmel's words, it is an individual law (*ein individuelles Gesetz*). The principle of the individual law obviously belongs to Simmel's philosophy of life (*Lebensphilosophie*), and as such it cannot be determined in any more concrete terms. Life is like a painting every detail of which serves as an expression of a totality (see Lohmann 1992:361–362).

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