It is not old-fashioned, it is vintage

Vintage fashion and the complexities of 21st century consumption practices

Abstract

This article reviews consumption practices concerning vintage, a fashion style based on used or retro-style garments. Existing studies connect vintage with authenticity, nostalgia and identity. We explore how the vintage style deploys and comments on consumer culture, bypassing producers by wearing old garments to communicate ‘authentic’ identities. We argue that existing theories on consumption, fashion and subculture cannot fully explain vintage practices. Bypassing the dichotomies and one-dimensional explanations of these theories, we show that vintage, with its ambivalent relation to both subcultural distinction practices and mainstream consumer culture, serves as a prism through which to examine and understand the complexities and subtleties of 21st century consumption practices.

Contemporary fashion scholarship usually studies fashion styles in the context of (sub)culture. Fashion is conceptualized, then, as a text to be read: the distinct orientation of a (sub)cultural group can be theoretically understood by interpreting stylistic signs (Hodkinson 2012). This subcultural approach is also the common approach to vintage, a style based on used or retro-style garments that emerged in the 1990s (DeLong et al. 2005; Gregson et al. 2001; Jenß 2004; Palmer & Clark 2005).

This article proposes to understand vintage as a form of consumption, rather than an expression of subcultural identity. Although consumed today, original vintage items are not recently produced, implying that ‘power and value can be imbued in commodities long after the original production has ceased’ (Gregson & Crewe 2003).
This uncoupling of production and consumption makes vintage an interesting case to explore existing theories of consumption.

Simmel (1957) identified the societal importance of fashion over a century ago, yet the sociology of fashion remains underdeveloped (Crane & Bovone 2006; Skov & Melchior 2008). Fashion is ‘at once public and private, material and symbolic, always caught within the lived experience’ (Paulicelli & Clark 2009, 3). These characteristics make fashion an ideal domain to study consumption, which gained a central role in contemporary societies as a means to perform one’s identity.

This article reviews scholarly work on vintage fashion. Moreover, it uses the case of vintage fashion to critique and expand theoretical perspectives on consumption and consumer culture. Eschewing the moralism and celebration of many consumption theories (Rief 2008), we argue that consumption, including consumption of vintage fashion, enables communication. Critiquing subcultural approaches to fashion, we argue for vintage as a vantage point to understand contemporary consumption practices.

**Dressed in nostalgia and authenticity: the vintage identity**

The taste for vintage fashion dates back to the nineties but has become very prominent in the early 21st century. Vintage wearers most highly value original items, at least 25 years old and preferably by designer labels, but also wear (limited edition) reproductions (Gregson et al. 2001; Jenß 2004; 2005; Palmer & Clark 2005). Contemporary clothing can be altered or combined with original items to achieve a ‘vintage-look’ (DeLong et al. 2005). Yet, this vintage-look has to meet contemporary demands regarding body size, body shape and convenience. Vintage is worn, not merely collected. Selecting vintage garments therefore is guided by fit as well as age and originality.

The result is an eclectic assemblage of garments originating from different periods. Due to the required investment of money and especially time, vintage requires a certain amount of cultural and economic capital. Hence, vintage wearers are generally young, and from a middle-class background (Jenß 2005). Recent literature highlights two main characteristics of the vintage-style: nostalgia and authenticity. Identity, a third main characteristic, is explored in the next section.

**Past images**

Jenß (2005: 179) defines vintage as a ‘construction of past images and historic looks which can be achieved with original objects as well as with new ones that look historic’.
Accompanied by an unsentimental nostalgia, vintage is neither concerned with the sanctity of tradition nor with a conservative reinforcement of cultural (gender) values (Ferreday 2008; Gregson et al. 2001; Jenß 2004 & 2005; Palmer 2005). As Gregson et al. (2001) argue, the nostalgia invoked through vintage entails a reappropriation and reinvention of consumer goods, rather than a longing for an actual past.

Initially marginal, this reappropriation and reinvention has become ‘a mainstream phenomenon that is highly commodified’ (Palmer & Clark 2005, 174). Some recent examples illustrate this incorporation of vintage into the mainstream fashion industry: The reproduction of Adidas Classics (Jenß 2004), the limited-edition redesign of Yves Saint Laurent’s Mondrian-dress (michaelbarnaartvanbergen.com) and the reinvention of 1920s sports brand Goliath (goliathsportswear.com). Reproductions are not the only way fashion relates to times (long) gone: NARS names its lipsticks after classic Hollywood movies such as ‘Blonde Venus’ (Ferreday 2008: 54).

The rise of nostalgic consumer goods is also apparent beyond fashion. Examples include cars (e.g. the reappropriation of the MG, Leigh et al. 2006), film (e.g. silent black-and-white movie The Artist won 5 Academy Awards in ‘an evening suffused with nostalgia’, LA Times, 2012) and books (e.g. the reissue of the 1950s ‘Golden Books’, randomhouse.com). In marketing this trend has not gone unnoticed. Brown et al. (2003) ascribe the revitalization of old brands to a revival of nostalgia, since customers value past products over contemporary ones.

In the early 21st century, this sense of nostalgia can be observed in all layers of societies (Lowenthal 2011). Individuals compensate ‘dislocation’ - caused by a fast-changing society - by invoking the past. Earlier, Berger et al. (1973) defined nostalgia as a metaphysical ‘homelessness’ that becomes increasingly prevalent in plural and fast-changing societies. In an effort to achieve steadiness within this society, a longing for a home arises (cf. Duyvendak 2011). Turner (1987) sees nostalgia as ‘a mood of particular importance in contemporary cultures in association with the loss of rural simplicity, traditional stability and cultural integration’ (p. 152). Nostalgia, as visible in vintage and in many other forms of consumption – thus refers to alienation.

**Authenticity as aesthetic preference**

In their rejection of new (mass-produced) design, vintage items symbolize uniqueness and authenticity: a distinctive individual look that is worn by nobody else (DeLong et al. 2005). This aesthetic preference for authenticity, expressed through vintage, has become
a broader (mainstream) preference. The upgrade from shabby second-hand stores to
trendy shops and department stores has ended the bargaining and hunting-and-gathering
aspect that vintage used to have (Baker, 2012). These are complemented numerous
webshops, such as ‘online marketplace’ Etsy (etsy.com), that sell both originals and
(handmade) reproductions (Jenß 2005).

Vintage is promoted as exclusive and authentic, replacing contemporary haute
couture, as ‘a sign of individuality and connoisseurship’ (Palmer 2005: 197). Tellingly, the
Dutch Vogue, launched in 2012, opened with two vintage-look articles (Vogue 2012a;
2012b). Authenticity refers to ‘sincerity, truthfulness, originality, and the feeling and
practice of being true to one’s self or others.’ (Vannini & Franzese 2008, 1621). In her
work on vintage, Jenß (2004) concludes: ‘authenticity is neither an immanent feature of
objects nor of identity, but a matter of negotiation of the cultural actors’ (p. 388).
Beverland and Farelly (2010), studying the quest for authenticity in consumption,
confirm this: consumers define a product as authentic – whether or not mass-produced –
when they perceive it as real, genuine, true and foremost not commercially intended.
Authenticity, then, emerges as the opposite of commerciality.

Koontz (2010) identifies two forms of authentication in search for ‘real’ products
in consumer society: ‘otherizing’ and ‘traditionalizing’. Otherizing uses the mainstream as
referent, defining subcultural, foreign or minority products as ‘the authentic other’.
Traditionalizing consists of five aspects, three of which characterize vintage. The first
entails hands-on and personalized ‘production methods’. The second is ‘constructing
nostalgia’: idyllic products are adapted to contemporary consumer desires. The last,
‘replicating original formulas’, concerns replication of authentic products. (Koontz 2010).

The ideal of authenticity is thus not exclusive to vintage wearers. Rather, the ideal
of authentic products has become the norm in contemporary society. Accordingly,
authenticity is the result of negotiation and tension between (mass) production and

**We are unique: consuming fashion to reproduce or communicate**

Jenß (2004) suggests that by wearing vintage, ‘the originality and the uniqueness of the
garment literally rubs off on the wearer’ (p. 396). Yet, what is ‘rubbed off’ is limited.
Only insiders recognize and appreciate the eclectic whole originating from different
periods, original or homemade, potentially combined with new (possibly altered)
garments. Vintage is ‘dressing for knowing audiences’ (Gregson et al. 2001, 12). The
connoisseurship required to identify authentic vintage qualifies as ‘subcultural capital’ (Thornton 1995). Subcultural capital, like all cultural capital, is acquired through the investment of time (Bourdieu 1986). Through gradual accumulation of knowledge, people learn to recognize ‘proper’ vintage-style, and to dress accordingly.

Clothing, ‘as one of the most visible forms of consumption, performs a major role in the social construction of identity’ (Crane 2000, 1). DeLong et al. (2005) describe the search for vintage as ‘shopping for identities, constructing images that include presenting status and identities in public, as well as revealing and concealing our private selves’ (p. 27). This takes us to the relation between vintage, consumption and identity. According to some theorists, like Jeinß (2004, 396), vintage garments are primarily ‘markers of distinction’. However, others have critiqued such ‘reproductive’ theories of consumption, stressing the communicative aspects of vintage.

Reproductive consumption
Over a century ago, Simmel (1957/1904) argued that fashion is related to (class) identity. Fashion serves to distinguish the higher classes, and is therefore synonymous with change: when the lower classes catch up, styles must be reinvented. As Simmel rather moralistically concludes, fashion ‘releases the individual of all responsibility – ethical and aesthetic – as well as of the possibility of producing within these limits individual accentuation and original shading of the elements of fashion.’ (Simmel 1957, 558).

Veblen (2005/1899) similarly argued that consumption is class distinction, citing fashion as the most compelling example: ‘our apparel is always in evidence and affords an indication of our pecuniary standing to all observers at the first glance’ (p. 169). Fashion showcases the economic ability to adapt to the latest fashion (‘conspicuous consumption’) and the lack of need to engage in physical labor (‘conspicuous leisure’). Goods no longer serve their primary functions, like covering the body, but become a status symbol through the display of (needless) consumption.

Like Simmel and Veblen, symbolic interactionist Blumer (1969) proposed a rather mechanic account of fashion where higher strata adapt to the latest fashion until others catch up. However, Blumer stresses that fashion is a matter of choice, not the blind following of trends. Fashion serves those willing to ‘express new tastes which are emerging in a changing world’ (Blumer 1969, 282). Taste is a selection process in which extensive knowledge is employed. This applies both to designers, eager to be successful, and to buyers, willing to adopt the designs ‘en vogue’.
Class thus does not determine what is in fashion; rather it is ‘the potential fashionableness of the design which allows the prestige of the elite to be attached to it’ (Blumer 1969, 280). Bourdieu (2009) would identify the ability to recognize ‘potential fashionableness’ as a form of ‘cultural capital’. Cultural capital is determined by upbringing and education, whereas economic capital refers to acquired (financial) assets. Both enable distinction, which can be expressed through clothing. Writing about fashion, Bourdieu (1993) identified a hierarchy within the fashion field, with haute couture at the top. However, he specifically mentions vintage wearers as people challenging the hierarchy of the field. Yet, the legitimacy of fashion is made possible by acknowledged specialists: ‘that is why revolt within the field always has its limits’ (p. 138).

This perspective on consumption in fashion can be summarized as reproductive (or passive, Barnard 2002) consumption. (Class) identities are reaffirmed, rather than chosen or invented. Rocamora (2002) critiques Bourdieu: ‘new patterns of consumption and production of fashion have emerged which do not easily fit Bourdieu’s model, not least being those influences by the importance in contemporary society of mass fashion’ (p. 359). The more ‘postmodern’ theoretical approaches that emerged in the 1980s also contested the mechanical perception of style, arguing that identity is a (consumption) choice.

Constructive consumption: performing and communicating identity…
As social mobility increased, education became more accessible, globalization set in, individuals experienced an increasing freedom to shape their lives as they pleased (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim 2001). Consumption became central to this construction of identity. Featherstone (1982; 1987) argues that appearances increasingly function as an external reflection of the best possible self. If not properly maintained, the result is ‘a lowering of one’s acceptability as a person’ (Featherstone 1982, 26). In late modernity, this best possible self is increasingly performed through consumption.

The choice of lifestyle in contemporary consumer society is ‘to be regarded as the individuality of taste and sense of style of the owner/consumer’ (Featherstone 1987, 55). Featherstone’s approach allows for considerable ‘agency’: the consuming individual is free to act and thus to choose among a range of possibilities. Fiske (2010) downplays structural limitations on the individual’s agency even further. He argues that ‘the subordinate make their own culture out of the resources and commodities provided by the dominant system’ (Fiske 2010, 13), which he calls ‘excorporation’. Using the example
of the torn jeans, he shows how dominant culture incorporates oppositional signs, turning them into commodities. Yet the original item retains its oppositional character. This approach is based in a rather simplistic dichotomy: either one adheres to or opposes dominant culture.

Unlike Fiske and Featherstone, Zygmunt Bauman emphasizes the importance of ‘structure’ in consumption. Consumption is merely a response to ‘conditions of life’ (Bauman 2001a, 18). However, not consumption as such characterizes consumer society, but the wish to consume. Through consumption people seek stability and construct identities. Yet modern identities are ‘liquid’: ‘it is not so much how to obtain the identities of (…) choice and how to have them recognized by others, but which identity to choose, and how best to keep alert and vigilant so that another choice can be made’ (Bauman 2001b, 126 – italics in original). Whereas Fiske overemphasized the meaning that is attached to objects, Bauman underemphasizes this meaning: it becomes a (fluid) result of consumer society.

German sociologist Schulze (2005) acknowledges both agency and structure in his analysis of late-modern societies as characterized by a plethora of (consumption) choices. According to Schulze, aestheticized identities become the central structuring mechanism: ‘in an environment of countless small possibilities, an accumulation of available experiences and endless choice amongst new emerging tastes, identity has a central aesthetic component’ (Schulze 2005, 102 – authors’ translation). Contemporary societies are structured by accumulation of experiences, reflecting the pattern of consumption that both identifies and communicates to what group one belongs. Personal style then not only expresses identity, but also communicates this identity to others. Moreover, by communicating what to expect, style structures experiences.

Finally, and most radically, Baudrillard (2010/1970) argues that consumption is a ‘system of communication and exchange, as a code of signs continually being sent, received and reinvented – as language’ (93 – italics in original). Rather than imitating prestige, as in reproductive consumption, belonging to a group depends on understanding the ever-changing code. Therefore, to be ‘a true citizen of the consumer society’ (Baudrillard 2010, 100), people should constantly be ‘recycled’, adapting to the latest fashions. In this perspective, the material base of consumption becomes irrelevant: materiality is completely subordinate to signs.

In postmodern theories on consumption, individuals structure their world by performing themselves, and reading the performances of others. This implies a society in
which the main limitation is the choice to either resist or conform to dominant culture. Kaiser et al. (1991), grounded in symbolic interactionism, nuance this approach, by arguing that ‘appearance management and perception’ (p. 180) is central to fashion. Meaning though, is still embedded in consumer choices, rather than merely a response to what is in vogue.

Postmodern consumption theories direct our gaze then to the communicative aspects of consumption. This is especially applicable to fashion, with its ever-changing moods. However, this approach ignores important constraints to consumption, for instance regarding the materiality of fashion or the world at large: financial assets, body size, body shape, availability of garments in shops or wardrobes, or having to ‘cover up’ for reasons of climate or conformity. Turning to fashion – with its close connection both with the symbolism of consumption and change, and the materiality of bodies and fabrics – may help us bridge the limitations of reproductive (‘modern’) and performative (‘postmodern’) theories on consumption.

…through fashion

Postmodern approaches to communication are widely applied in fashion theory. Barnard argues that fashion ‘appears to be little else apart from the appropriation of different styles, often styles from the distant past’ (Barnard 2002, 177). Vintage seems to fit seamlessly into this postmodern understanding of style. Barnard points to Jameson’s notion of postmodern society as characterized by pastiche. The ‘random cannibalization of all styles of the past’ (Jameson 1991, 17) by no means implies nostalgia for the actual past; rather it is ‘an identical copy for which no original ever existed’. Jameson argues that life is now subjected to changes in fashions (and ideologies) that reduce history into exploitable images.

Introducing different perspectives on communication through fashion, Barnard concludes that fashion is capable of communicating meaning, but is only able to do so within a (social) context: ‘the differential play of signs must be curtailed in order for communication to take place’ (p. 188). This implies that garments, as individual pieces, do not communicate. However, ensembles worn in a social environment convey a message, which implies style is part of a broader assemblage of signs. Although he does not elaborate on the construction of ‘appropriate’ individual styles, Barnard concludes that fashion is a way ‘in which individuals can differentiate themselves as individuals and declare some form of uniqueness’ (Barnard 2002, 61).
Crane (2001) similarly contends that fashion is capable of conveying messages. However, ‘clothing as a form of communication has become a set of dialects, rather than a universal language’ (Crane 2001, 247). This mirrors societal fragmentation. Yet, ‘some fashionable styles are highly subversive; others are intended to represent specific lifestyles that are related in varying degrees to the way people actually live’ (Crane 2001, 244). Thus, fashion does not per definition indicate how people live, people also adopt styles that are produced by subcultures and ‘in turn popularized by the media and marketed by clothing industries’ (Crane 2001, 244). This implies that some people carefully construct an identity by means of fashion, whereas others stick to commodified items provided to them.

Both Barnard (2002) and Crane (2001) thus identify limitations when it comes to fashion and its opportunities to communicate. Whereas Crane emphasizes the confined ability of fashion to communicate in its own right, Barnard stresses the importance of the social environment in which fashion is able to communicate. Yet, these fashion theories do not explore individual choices made regarding style. A new approach does: wardrobe studies. These studies use an ethnographic approach to observe individual choices in selecting outfits (e.g. Skov 2011; Woodward 2007). Instead of exploring the performance of self, the preparation of this performance is studied ‘behind the scenes’.

In exploring this backstage process both Skov (2011) and Woodward (2007) find limitations on what can be worn. When selecting an appropriate style, individuals rely on what is provided to them by the garment industry, but also to what they (are able to) buy and wear. Thus, limitations are set by financial means, by what is considered appropriate, and by body size and shape to represent their unique identity within a certain social situation. Moreover, people are limited by their wardrobe in combining (clean) garments and accessories.

This type of consumption, in which identities are constructed by means of what is provided by the fashion producers (often large multinationals) and acquired by consumers, can be identified as performative consumption (some call it active, cf. Barnard 2002). Some consumers fully understand the combination of garments, consciously selected by critical and knowledgeable consumers, whereas others adhere to what is fashionable.

Yet, wardrobe studies show that individuals are limited in their choice. Style is thus restricted in its ability to communicate, both on macro and micro levels, in ways that postmodern theories with their neglect of materialities and practicalities ignores.
Therefore, we do not believe that signs, in fashion or elsewhere, can be understood as nothing but liquid language. Vintage clothing, therefore, also cannot be exclusively understood as a language of signs and symbols, afloat in an immaterial world. To explore this further we will now turn to subcultural theories of fashion.

Subcultures and the creation of style: rebellious consumption

Group-specific fashion styles, such as vintage, can also be understood perspective of subculture than fashion theory. Hebdige famously argued that intentional communication through style is most visible in (youth) subcultures. He defines subcultures as countermovements that articulate a uniform discontent of post-war working-class youth through the consumption of subversive style. Individuals construct the message through ‘the communication of a significant difference, then (and the parallel communication of group identity) is the “point” behind the style’ (Hebdige 1988, 102 - italics in original). This distinction through consuming mass-produced goods of which the meaning is subverted (e.g. Punk) has to be reinvented constantly, since mainstream fashion inevitably takes over all subcultural styles. Exemplifying this in vintage is the emerged emphasis on accessories, which signal whether you belong to the scene or not (Jenß 2005).

It is the concise definition of the subcultural style based on collective resistance that led to debate (Thornton 1997; Bennett 1999). Thornton (1997) for example embeds her research on club cultures in the Birmingham tradition of (sub)cultural studies, but defines it as ‘post-Birmingham’. Minimizing the ‘opposition’ to existing (mainstream) culture, subcultures reflect a quest for identity and distinction, affirming that its members are not an ‘anonymous member of an undifferentiated mass’ (Thornton 1997, 185). Secondly, Thornton incorporates media in her research, whereas Birmingham cultural studies ‘tended to banish media and commerce from their definitions of authentic culture’ (1995, 9). Yet, media and commerce are crucial in confirming the exclusive character of the subculture.

Thornton integrates reproductive consumption (social distinction and reproduction of social cleavages through a subcultural repertoire) with performative consumption (the invention and appropriation of signs to distinguish oneself). Building on Bourdieu (2009), Thornton introduces ‘subcultural capital’ as characterizing a subculture. This extra-curricular knowledge is both objectified through ‘fashionable haircuts and well-assembled record collections’ (Thornton 1995, 11) and embodied through
‘being ‘in the know’’. To achieve this, large time and money investments are required. Although knowing what’s ‘hip’ is of great importance, knowing what is not is even more relevant: ‘the social logic of subcultural capital reveals itself most clearly by what it dislikes and by what it empathetically isn’t’ (Thornton 1995, 105).

Bennett (1999) argues that the concept of subcultures imposes divisions of social categories that cannot be verified in empirical terms: members have different backgrounds, mere taste can motivate choices and moreover, subcultural identity is fluid. Bennett therefore proposes the concept of ‘neo-tribes’: ‘tribal identities serve to illustrate the temporal nature of collective identities in modern consumer society as individuals continually move between different sites of collective expression and reconstruct themselves accordingly’ (p. 606). Bennett (2005) argues that it is a ‘heterogeneous range of individuals from very different walks of life’ (p. 256) that characterizes neo-tribes.

Although subcultural identity might be fluid, Bennett mistakenly assumes this implies the identity to be non-committal. As Thornton showed, subcultural identity requires subcultural capital, which is expressed via meaningful consumption practices. Drawing attention to the complexity of subcultures, Hodkinson (2012) critiques the textual analysis of just outer appearance: ‘it remains hard to determine whether such interpretations reveal more about the subculture itself or the theoretical persuasions of the analyst’ (p. 6).

Rather, subcultures should be contextualized within a framework of other subcultures and mainstream culture, for example through consumption: ‘the centrality of avid consumption and collection of cultural goods not only provides common ground between subcultures but also indicates a further connection to practices, meanings and understandings across consumer-societies’ (Hodkinson 2012, 14). This indicates an important shortcoming of subcultural research: style is generally addressed in the context of research that is not aimed at styles. Fashion style, too, is studied to explain a subculture, not the style itself. This takes us back to vintage fashion. As we have seen, this style is specific to certain social groups. Like other subcultural styles, it appropriates mass produced goods to create a distinctive style. But is this style oppositional? How can we position vintage as a form of – possibly subcultural – consumption?

**Discussion: vintage style beyond dichotomies in consumption and subcultural theory**
So far we found consumption studies rife with dichotomies: consumption can be reproductive or performative, top-down or bottom-up, conforming or rebellious, mainstream or subcultural. Goods are provided by commercial organizations, yet can be subverted. Through accumulated (subverted) signs one performs and communicates identity. The nuances of this identity only reach those that are informed regarding the style. Vintage, as it emerges from the literature, only partly fits these characteristics. Therefore, we argue that vintage directs us towards a need for a more nuanced perception of contemporary consumer society, and rethinking of theories of consumption and subcultural styles.

Vintage communicates and expresses a longing for an authentic identity that is informed by a sense of nostalgia. While vintage distances itself from mainstream consumption culture, it does not ‘rebel’ against society, nor does it explicitly ‘subvert’ items that are offered by mainstream consumer culture. On the contrary: through accumulating garments that are not recently produced, or (homemade) productions in limited numbers, the commercial producer is initially brushed aside. Rather than subverted, contemporary consumer culture is surpassed or overtaken by vintage consumption practices.

This implies that vintage deploys the logic of consumer culture: it performs identity through consumption. Yet mainstream is not surpassed in a ‘classic’ subcultural way. Although mainstream is frowned upon, vintage does not deliberately challenge ‘decent behavior’. Rather, an alternative to consumption is sought, signifying an awareness of, and strong grasp of contemporary consumer culture. The commodification of vintage therefore is paradoxical: the commodification of critical awareness regarding mass-production is re-commodified. Although the originals will remain to be recognized by those ‘in the know’, the commodified critical awareness has now reached a larger audience. The vintage-look can now be bought at Zara.

Thus, vintage is neither mainstream nor subcultural. It deploys the ‘tools’ of (subcultural) consumer culture regarding identity performance and communication through consumption. By appropriating these practices vintage wearers signify their (commodified) awareness, commenting on contemporary consumerism. This nuanced and sophisticated consumption practice implies that contemporary consumption culture is not based on dichotomies. Rather, vintage has shown us that the plethora of consumption choices matches the manifold consumption practices, ranging from full adaption to complete rebellion.
What remains is the question why vintage gained in popularity when it did. Fitting in with the quest for authentic selves, typical of consumer culture, the vintage style combines the quest for authenticity with a nostalgic ‘longing for a home’ (Duyvendak 2011). Nostalgia found its way into material culture, expressed through vintage. The materials used represent both authenticity and nostalgia, and are therefore cherished (Jenß 2004, 2005). That vintage first gained in popularity among the higher middle-classes is no surprise: the nostalgic ‘longing for a home’ is most apparent among this increasingly cosmopolitan group.

Thus, vintage shows us that current consumption theories cannot sufficiently understand and explain contemporary consumption practices. By studying consumption practices in terms of dichotomies, sociologists limit their understanding of these practices. Moreover, sociologists tend to neglect how internalized contemporary consumer culture can also be deployed to communicate through aesthetic styles and signs. Studying style on its own terms, rather than as a signifier of ‘rebellion’ or ‘adherence’, will enhance our understanding of contemporary consumer culture, and its central role in shaping and communicating identities.

References


Michæl Barnaart van Bergen. *Hommage.*


