The Capitalistic Ecosystem of Fashion Culture:
An Exploration of Georg Simmel's Analysis and its Applications to the Digital Age

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April 17, 2019

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Introduction

Objects of fashion culture have become a universal language that transcend the bounds of language, region, and history in a way that other phenomena of modern society do not. Style is seen as a synonym of individuality in many societies today. We take for granted that clothing may reveal important and unimportant facets of a person's beingness. As the world moves increasingly towards more densely populated cities and technology enhances the ways in which we create and disseminate objects, fashion culture is taking on a new meaning. Yet much of what we take for granted about fashion as a concept and what it accomplishes for humanity has not been longstanding. Fashion has become not only material and physical but also intellectual and psychological. While it was once more closely associated with the former grouping of words, a profound shift that occurred in the Industrial Era led the definition of fashion has become more closely associated with the latter. The concept and material manifestation of fashion have a history. The goal of this thesis is to chart the transformation of the concept of fashion from the late nineteenth century to the present day through the theories of philosopher and sociologist Georg Simmel (1858-1918).

Analyzing the culture of fashion becomes a vehicle to understand the immense change that occurred in our self-conception during the Industrial Age. At this time, fashion emerged as a tool used to materialize the artificial construction of a societal expectation of conformity and distinction. The increasing prevalence of these unprecedented phenomena became a source of inspiration for the works of sociologists during the nineteenth century, which was an emerging discipline in academia throughout western Europe. Yet none did as effectively and compellingly as Georg Simmel. Simmel provided much of the language that we continue to use today in terms of understanding social dynamics within metropolitan societies. The relevance of his language and ideas in the Digital Age is rather astonishing and speak to the mind of a thinker who had a remarkable ability to be acute and precise with his observations. While Simmel's position of relative obscurity

within the collective consciousness raises questions about what it means to have an intellectual legacy and the ways in which ideas can exist far beyond the connection to their devisers, modern scholarly revivals, to which I hope to contribute, of Simmel's work speak to the quality and durability of his ideas against the ruthless test of time. In this thesis, I argue that through Simmel's analysis it is revealed that the conditions of the modern metropolitan city created a system of consumerism motivated by the increasingly unescapable fragile self, which has become heightened in the Digital Age.

Chapter I provides context to Simmel's life, intellectual background, and existential conditions. This chapter seeks to understand the reference points that made Simmel into the thinker and writer be became. In addition to considering Simmel's education and the few personal details scholars have been able to uncover, it was important to document the changes occurring in Berlin spatial development at this time to understand the conditions that Simmel experienced and observed. This section also discusses the Werkbund Movement as an example that further illuminates the political, economic, and manufacturing changes that were occurring at this time. This introductory chapter is intended to situate the reader in a distinctive time and space that is essential to understand Simmel's work.

Chapter II is intended to provide the reader with an understanding of the concepts that are used throughout Simmel's work in the way he understood the words themselves. His very specific construction and application of his theories related to the following concepts— objects, culture, fashion, individuality and conformity, metropolitan voyeurism, personal relationships, the money economy, the psychology of urban life, and the personal effects of occupational status— in the Industrial Age and how they pertained to the individuals experiencing these phenomena at the time. Especially important in this section is the full definition I provide for a term I use throughout, the Capitalistic Ecosystem, which I use to highlight the connection between individuals and the new

societal, as well as economic, conditions that emerged during the Industrial Age. This section seeks to define the intellectual frameworks that Simmel puts in contradictory harmony throughout his analysis. Working through Simmel's understanding of concepts that are in some ways familiar and yet significantly dissimilar from modern usages is important for the reader to make sense of the nuanced arguments that Simmel makes using words under certain assumed definitions.

Chapter III is the section of critical analysis of this thesis in which I extract core excerpts of Simmel's writing on fashion, culture, and the modern self to illuminate not only the impressive observations that Simmel articulated but also to discuss the unusual and personal style with which Simmel composed his words. In this section I seek to illuminate Simmel's work and its relevance to the times in which he wrote. I provide analysis of Simmel's theories with reference to the definitions and context provided in the preceding sections. Given how dense Simmel's writing is, and how extensive the range of topics he explores is, it becomes easy to get lost in the volume and depth of his ideas. Particularly because his writing style implicitly subverts the conventions of traditional academia it becomes clear why he was ignored or undermined by many of his contemporaries. I intermittently weave in questions and thoughts of my own throughout my analysis in hopes that the reader of this thesis can also consider the relevance of these ideas in their own lives.

Chapter IV is the crux of this thesis in which I apply Simmel's theories to the Digital Age. In addition to reframing his ideas as they apply to the increased scope of technology and urbanity, I seek to look critically at the new ways that unprecedented phenomena have impacted our sense of self as well as our social dynamics. I take a critical look at the ways in which technology has generated a degree of self-voyeurism, existential escapism, and enhanced the circulation of fashion culture as well as the need to participate in it. Although this section reveals that we are not as far removed from the nineteenth century as we might intuitively believe, it is interesting to consider the ways in which our new conditions have enhanced the observations that Simmel described in his

writing. This thesis, a work of experimental intellectual history, ultimately seeks to grapple with

assumptions regarding fashion and identity that we have come to take for granted so that we may

reconsider our modern perceptions of beingness.

Chapter I

Each generation finds itself trying to answer the question of what it means to exist within the conditions of the era. It is in the process of trying to articulate the effects of an unprecedented change that insights are made into what it means to live a new version of the human experience. Georg Simmel (1858-1918) grappled with the radically new society he was experiencing in the wake of the Industrial Revolution's formation of contemporary capitalism and mass consumerism. One of the most compelling conceptual tools he used to make sense of the profound impact of industrialization on society was fashion. Industrialization made it possible for fashion to take on a new meaning and since that point it has held a unique position in our everyday life. The popular narratives that surround clothing today is that it can be wearable art, an expression of socioeconomic distinction, or a tool for creating a sense of social belonging. Indeed, these ideas are so interconnected that to distinguish them detracts from recognizing the profound influence fashion has on us. Whatever an individual's relationship to sartorial culture, whether or not they acknowledge that they actively participate in the social mechanism of fashion when they put any item that can be characterized as such on their body, clothing has become a powerful visual tool in our society that has the power to create or prevent personal connections before words are exchanged. Yet this was not always the case, and philosopher-cum-sociologist Georg Simmel developed important language and ideas to explain how fashion became such a crucial social mechanism in industrial societies.

Simmel and Berlin: A Man in Place

In order to understand Simmel's work, it is crucial to understand the conditions of his life that informed how he perceived the world in which he lived. Simmel was born in Berlin on March 1, 1858, and the significance of his place and time of birth cannot be understated.[1] When describing

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[1] David Frisby, *Georg Simme* (Chichester: Horwood, 1984), 21.

the influence of physical location of his father's upbringing his son, Hans Simmel, stated that: "Then still to the west of the old city centre, these two streets were later to become the most characteristic and important commercial streets; one could not, as it were, be 'even more' of a local Berlin than when one was born on the corner of the Leipziger- and Fredrichstrasse."[2] The question that arises is that if he was intellectually predisposed to the multifaceted way he thought and wrote or if both were a symptom of the conditions of his formative years. Simmel's own answer to that question when crediting the development of his work is that "… this specific achievement, that I have in fact brought to fruition in these decades, is undoubtedly bound up with the Berlin milieu."[3] Simmel was deeply inspired by, in his own words, "Berlin's development from a city to a metropolis…"[4] Perhaps it is from observing this transformation that Simmel was intellectually conditioned to assess the mechanisms that made reaching point B from point A possible rather than solely devoting his efforts to understanding point B: a concept that distinguished Simmel's work from his contemporaries.

Simmel's experience of pre-war Berlin is marked by a city split through a series of national attempts to modernize, in addition to the continental development of tension between a trans-European identity with a growing need to delineate national culture in an effort to preserve regional distinctiveness.[5] These phenomena are perhaps the unexpected consequences of colonization, as the surge of novelty coming from other parts of the world and the dissemination of European culture abroad reinforced the need to have a firm grasp on the traditional understanding of national identities. Berlin's culture, similar to other cities that modernized as a result of industrialization like Paris and London, became shaped by its spatial development. In a city where the connections

[2] *ibid.*
[3] *ibid.*, 22.
[4] *ibid.*, 35.
[5] Peter A. Lawrence, *Georg Simmel: Sociologist and European.* (New York: Barnes & Noble Books, 1976): 5.

between people were becoming increasingly individual and transactional rather than collective and based on collaborative survival, superficial contact with one another came to replace the interwoven relationships people used to experience in their day-to-day lives.

Berlin became a case-study for the impacts of industrialization and rapid urbanization on human beings, both as individuals as well as a collective unit, in the time that Simmel lived and worked. The development of the railways in 1840s along with the declaration of Berlin as the capital of the German Empire in 1871 by Chancellor Otto von Bismarck precipitated Berlin's transformation into one of the early industrial leaders of the world.[6] Since 1864, half of Berlin's population was comprised of newcomers, many of them hailing from Brandenburg, and the migration to the industrial city intensified in 1871 after France paid Germany 5 billion francs for wartime reparations.[7] This economic investment generated business opportunities in a powerful trio: banks, insurance companies, and industry emerged across the city.[8] The expansion of these three types of businesses informed and influenced each other to create a Capitalistic Ecosystem, in the heart of one of Europe's most metropolitan cities. The rise of these businesses further increased the economic draw of Berlin that motivated people to exchange the agricultural lifestyles they were accustomed to for the promise of urban opportunities. The development of industry within Berlin is what gave rise to the "city" and "society" as social conditions that individuals had to personally and collectively adapt to. The discipline of sociology, of which Simmel was a forerunner, was founded to analyze precisely this transformation. One key question that concerned Simmel, as it did all sociologist, is: In the city, how people from disparate regional and cultural backgrounds forge bonds

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[6] Eva-Maria Schnurr, *Berlin's Turn of the Century Growing Pains*. Spiegel Online. 2012.
http://www.spiegel.de/international/germany/the-late-19th-century-saw-the-birth-of-modern-berlin-a-866321.html
[7] *ibid.*
[8] *ibid.*

through their shared place, which facilitated the development of distinct urban cultures and identities?

In the case of Berlin, this process had to unfold in rapid succession. In 1880 Berlin reached 1 million citizens and by 1914 Berlin was Europe's most densely populated city, with 1.84 million inhabitants.[9] Like many rapidly developing cities, Berlin went through a period in which the city did not have the infrastructure to support the migration of people. Sewage filled the streets and buildings of the baroque era that lined the streets were congested with newcomers looking to establish a future in Berlin.[10] This changed when an underground sewage system was developed and Berlin became considered "the cleanest large city in Europe."[11] Yet housing the influx of people arriving to Berlin continued to be an issue. It is remarkable the transformation of a city from agricultural to industrial is marked by a difficult adjustment period in which the expeditious solutions developed to resolve the tension between over-population and inadequate infrastructure are what a city becomes.

Yet as a working class rapidly developed so too did Berlin's middle class. Leipziger Strasse, the street where Simmel was reared, was a street with a high concentration of trading and insurance companies.[12] Simmel was inadvertently confronted with the ways in which industrialization changed people and customs, the development of bourgeoisie tendencies, and city as an incubator for the tension between a sense of self and of belonging. The developing bourgeoisie class of Berlin distinguished themselves from the landed nobles with education and from the working classes with their increasingly opulent consumption.[13] Despite Berlin's status as the capital city, politics became more of an afterthought with consumption and entertainment becoming the driving force of the

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[9] *ibid.*
[10] *ibid.*
[11] *ibid.*, 1.
[12] *ibid.*, 2.
[13] *ibid.*

city's development, which is reflective of the people who came to be the generators of opportunity in the city. Politicians held less regional, national, and international sway in the imagination of what Berlin, as well as the German Empire as a whole, was and could be than the industrialists of the time did. The increased numbers of cafés, operas, movie theaters, amusement parks, shops, member clubs, and perhaps most importantly the department stores that began to line the streets of Berlin seemed to be more gripping for the citizens of the city than the completion of Reichstag in 1894.[14] The way the city was structurally developing illuminates that the ideological promises that the government offered had been usurped by the realities of commercialism and consumerism. Consequently, it becomes interesting to consider the rise and fall of the German Werkbund movement as an exemplification of the deep shift in values that occurred in Berlin during this time period.

The Werkbund Alliance was officially founded in October 1907, under the leadership of Hermann Muthesius, to "…improve the quality of goods manufactured in Germany by encouraging cooperation between producers, tradesmen, and art professionals."[15] It sought to create a union between the artisan and commercial business worlds by facilitating professional partnerships between these two entities, which through the development of the Industrial Revolution became increasingly oppositional.[16] The Werkbund created relationships where each side benefited through synergies between the old and the new, where both were allowed to continue in unison. The Alliance offered a new fate for this transitional period that truly embodied the Hegelian dialectic. In addition to the design and architectural work the members of the Werkbund engaged with, the Alliance sought to create wider-reaching discussions about "the role of art and artists in a modern society,"

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[14] *ibid.*
[15] Frederic J. Schwartz, *The Werkbund: Design Theory and Mass Culture Before the First World War.* (Yale University Press, 1996): 9.
[16] *ibid.*

which were met with a receptive audience. [17] At this time Berlin was still a part of the Prussian domain and the Werkbund Alliance fit into the government's goals. From the Empire's perspective: "The point of this entire technical, economic, cultural, and aesthetic exercise, as far as the Prussian Commerce Ministry's focus on German home was concerned, was to enlist home design in the service of state economic development policy."[18] There was an opportunity through the Werkbund Alliance not only to develop Berlin's local economy by making superior consumer products but also to export Prussian influence abroad through design.[19] The Alliance sought to use the advanced economic and mechanic instruments that were developed in the course of industrialization to enhance the work of craftspeople, whose work was initially seen as worth preserving.

Decorating one's home became a political act. Production of home goods became so imbued with the German industrial economy that in a speech by Muthesius for the inaugural ceremony of the Berlin Commercial College in 1907 which was funded by the Commerce Ministry, he "…formally denounced all crafts industries that followed the old methods of historicist decoration and applied ornamental reproduction as enemies of the German nation and culture."[20] The reaction from the uninvolved craftsmen to this speech is what solidified the relationship between the Prussian government with the Alliance, and with that the Werkbund ushered in the novel concept of "quality mass products."[21] This transition that was experienced first in the home— precipitated by industrialization and perpetuated by an increasingly insatiable appetite for consumerism— would soon be seen in every facet of German life by 1914.[22]

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[17] *ibid.* 10.
[18] John V. Maciuika, "The Production and Display of the Domestic Interior in Wilhelmine Germany, 1900-1914." (*German History* 25 Nr. 4 2007): 509.
[19] *ibid.*
[20] *ibid.* 513.
[21] *ibid.* 514.
[22] *ibid.* 515.

Yet the Werkbund only ignited the practice of mass-produced consumer goods, they did not survive to sustain it. By 1911, this synthesis, almost utopian in its accomplishment of bringing pre-Industrial and Industrial methods together, began to unravel under Muthesius. He sought efficiency above all and prioritized "large-scale industry" as well as the establishment of "types" that would facilitate the production process.[23] The opposition, led by Karl Ernst Osthaus and Henry van de Velde, declared their dissatisfaction during the only official Werkbund convention in Cologne after Muthesius tried to make the aforementioned guiding principles as the standard approach of the entire organization.[24] The debate that ensued was not a question of sacrificing "art" for "industry" because fundamentally this organization sought to preserve beauty in the face of modernity, which threatened to depose this pursuit that has always had an important role in human history.[25] The ideological split that was being debated was between "supporters of types and the defenders of individuality."[26] The exhibition began just a month before the outbreak of World War I and these debates became increasingly insignificant as the country prepared for war.[27] Consequently, the Werkbund was spared the humiliation of having to announce the disintegration of an organization that initially seemed to find a solution to the question of how life, all that people had once known, would continue in a post-Industrial world.

Cities borne from industrialization across Europe and the United States are the structural evidence we have of the newfound emotional and intellectual conditions people faced as they navigated new meanings of opportunity, large scale enterprise, hope, struggle, individualism, and disparate unity in the ecosystem of city life. Furthermore, the city as a new social habitat, conceptually speaking, had little respect for the traditional indicators of power such as

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[23], Frederic J. Schwartz., *ibid.* 10.
[24] *ibid.*
[25] *ibid.*
[26] *ibid.*
[27] *ibid.*

landownership and titles. The societal and personal values that ensue from living in a city are very different from those that develop through the demands of life in farm country or coastal communities. Over-crowded buildings and boulevards were both conducive to developing an increasingly voyeuristic sense of self and others. In this setting, it was possible that in every moment an unfamiliar face could be encountered that one would never see again— the ways in which people related to each other were becoming increasingly superficial and brief. The conditions of the city were only further exacerbated by the rise of industrially produced consumer goods. The Werkbund foreshadowed the rise of mass-produced goods. Despite operating for a limited number of years, early into their development they were confronted by the unforeseen predicaments created by the efficacy of machines. How did the human spirit fit into the mechanical world when work could be done more cheaply, simply, and faster by a coal-operated apparatus? Berlin's spatial development and the rise of new forms of consumerism provided Simmel with a case-study that served his intellect well.

Simmel's Education: A Man in Intellectual Lineages

Georg Simmel was in large part also formed by the thinkers and writers he encountered throughout the formative years of his education. Simmel began his studies at Berlin University studying history under Theodor Mommsen before transitioning to psychology under the Moritz Lazarus, who also influenced Wilhelm Dilthey and Wilhelm Wundt, both Simmel's contemporaries.[28] With Adolf Bastian he briefly studied Ethnology, which can be characterized as a branch of anthropology that preceded sociology, before completing his education in Philosophy under the guidance of both Eduard Zeller and Friedrich Harms.[29] In 1881 Simmel obtained his Doctorate for his essay, "Description and Assessment of Kant's Various Views on the Nature of

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[28] David Frisby, *ibid.,* 23.
[29] *ibid.*

Matter," after a failed attempt in 1880 when he submitted a dissertation titled "Psychological and Ethnographic Studies on Music," which was an early indication of his stunning ability to discern the connections between seemingly unrelated realms.[30] Charles Darwin's theory of social preservation, Gustav Theodor Fechner's "logical atomism," and Herbert Spencer's evolutionism and principle of differentiation were key influences in the development of Simmel's theories pertaining to society.[31] And yet his knowledge of Kant and Nietzsche as well as his fascination with aestheticism, which can be studied through his writings on Dante, Michelangelo, Rodin, Rembrandt, etc., were all critical intellectual references that informed his social theories pertaining to the development of fad-fashion culture.[32]

There is debate with regard to the timeline of Simmel's academic dedication to sociology, which is difficult to track with certainty given how seamlessly he flowed through disciplines. It is possible that sociology was the appropriate field for Simmel to explore the fluidity of his intellectual breadth because, as a discipline, it was early in its development and not yet defined in its methods or references. Simmel most actively pursued his academic interest in sociology between 1894 and 1908, which mark the years he taught various courses and wrote articles pertaining to the subject.[33] As early as 1887 Simmel lectured on "Ethics with Special Reference to Sociological Problems" before records show that in 1894 he lectured on "Sociology" every year until 1908, when he published his book *Sociology,* and from then on only taught the homonymous course in 1909/1910, 1911/1912, and 1917/1918.[34] Simmel was a gifted writer who wrote more than a hundred essays and a number of substantial books throughout his career, yet it seems that his literary skills still paled in

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[30] *ibid.*
[31] *ibid.*, 24.
[32] *ibid.*, 26.
[33] *ibid.*, 25.
[34] *ibid.*

comparison to his rhetorical talent.[35] In his lectures "he combined a clear, logical analysis with an artistic, impressionistic approach. A beautiful voice, an excellent diction, an appealing personality… a vivid gesticulation would bring suggestions of life and growth and give real expression to the dynamic quality of his thought" (xxv).[36] His lecture in 1894 titled "Sociology" drew 152 students to the new discipline and his course "On Pessimism" gathered an audience of 269 students.[37] What appealed to the young, intellectually impressionable students he taught was the fact that Simmel's:

> …problems were not problems of conceptual abstractions. They arose out of an effort to reach an understanding of socio-historical actualities… He has treated the most varied subjects, the more divergent aspects of social life, has thrown new light on old problems, and given a new approach to the interpretations of modern culture in all its phases… He was primarily a fine and subtle analyst rather than a synthetic builder.[38]

In an educational system that prized tradition and rigid structure to develop academic conceptualizations rather than practical comprehension of the underlying forces moving our society, Simmel believed that sociology was a way of thinking that allowed for an "understanding of socio-historical actualities," which was different from the approach his contemporaries took. Simmel showed the next generation of German and Prussian youth a new method of thinking about the urban experience, culture, and consumption that did not force ideas into traditional frameworks but rather an expanded view of the function of intellectual frameworks to facilitate the explanations between interconnected phenomena.

Simmel's Legacy: A Man Marginalized

While Simmel's work was influenced by the exceptional education he received and became part of a defining moment in intellectual history, he was and continues to be on the fringes with regard to popular knowledge of his contributions to philosophical and sociological debates. This is

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[35] Nicholas J. Spykman, *The Social Theory of Georg Simmel*, (New York: Atherton Press, 1966): xxv.
[36] *ibid.*
[37] David Frisby, *ibid.*, 25-27.
[38] Nicholas J. Spykman, *ibid.*, 3-4.

attributable to the fact that in all of his writing he did not consider each topic with a singular, static point of reference— he was all at once a philosopher, a sociologist, a psychologist, and an "aesthete"[39] As David Frisby, a notable Simmel scholar, stated: "Even those of his contemporaries who admired his work were often bewildered by the variety of perspectives that it contained."[40] In his explanation of Simmel's rejection of sociology as the sole framework of analysis that needed to be substantiated by "empirical research and specialized modes of conceptualization," Frisby quotes Caplow who states, "Simmel 'seems to have envisaged sociological progress to be an increase of understanding by the sheer process of ratiocination and not to have any attached any importance to the accumulation of descriptive facts.'"[41] This implies that Simmel's intention in writing was not motivated by the conclusions he would have made but rather is driven by his quest of understanding the connections between disparate social mechanisms. This explains why his methodology isolated him from the sociological community and why his work was predisposed to being misunderstood or ignored by his contemporaries.

Another possible explanation for this unique approach is Simmel's particular views of history. His brief work with history during his University years seem to have profoundly impacted the way he explored philosophy—relying heavily on the past to make sense of the present.[42] In fact Nicholas J. Spykman, another amongst the small number of Simmel scholars, stated that Simmel's historical studies led him to consider that "…all existence is seen as a phase in a process of becoming and all phenomena in relation to an ever-changing environment, as functions of numerous variables" (xxiv).[43] And yet, Simmel's work is notably devoid of nostalgia or language that glamorizes the past as is often done in attempts to contextualize the present. Spykman goes as far to

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[39] David Frisby, *ibid.,* 16.
[40] *ibid.*, 15.
[41] *ibid.*, 15.
[42] Nicholas J. Spykman, *ibid.*, xxiv.
[43] *ibid.*

say that Simmel's work pursued "…a philosophical expression of a historical point of view" (xxiv).[44] What this suggests is that, given our associations with what it means to write historically versus philosophically, a certain interpretation may have been projected unto Simmel's work that was not consistent with the mechanics of his thinking. It is perhaps because of his unconventional approach to formulating ideas, as well as the topics he chose to apply his unique framework that limited the extent of his contemporary and future impact.

Simmel directly challenged the methodological conventions of nineteenth century thinking, which operated with specific intellectual tools for each discipline. The strict observation of distinctive methods based on the impression of logic, a quality that allowed thinkers to establish a baseline level of credibility, can be attributed to the legacy of the Scientific Revolution, which had conditioned thinkers of all disciplines to proceed with a set of universally established methods to which they applied their own ideas. In essence, the framework was the same; what varied was the content that was applied to the framework. Although Simmel rejected the intellectual boundaries established between the disciplines, he still seems to recognize that people read his work with certain frameworks based on how they understood his perspective. In a correspondence with Durkheim's colleague Célestin Bouglé, Simmel revealed: "'it is in fact somewhat painful to me to find that I am only recognised abroad as a sociologist—whereas I am indeed a philosopher, I see philosophy as my life-task and engage in sociology really only as a subsidiary discipline.'"[45] This letter illuminates that Simmel thought that his work was being misinterpreted because he wrote with a philosophical, rather than sociological, frame of reference yet it was not interpreted as such. Simmel's flippant attitude towards the distinctive structures of philosophy, sociology, and psychology was the theoretical justification his contemporaries used to underrepresent his work at the time and stymie

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[44] *ibid.*
[45] David Frisby, *ibid.,* 25.

the progression of his career.[46] The consequence of this contemporaneous attitude towards Simmel is that his work exists in relative obscurity today when compared to the impact of his colleagues despite the meaningful contributions his intellect had on the development on sociology as a discipline, and the subtle influence of his work on our society today.

Born into a Jewish family, Simmel converted to Evangelicalism at some point in his life.[47] The significance of this detail illuminates that his biographies, which are few in number and limited in their depth, do little to describe personal details about Simmel. The passage of time has removed Simmel from aspects of his personal individuality, which posit him as a solely academic being. As ideas flow through our collective discourse, what contributes to maintenance of the legacy of an idea? The argument can be made that in knowing the life of an intellectual, we have a better understanding of the references that fostered their ideas and thus feel the need to continue that legacy. Details of Weber's struggles with anxiety and depression are well known. Information about Marx's strained home life has also become common knowledge. Although these points may seem trivial, and they hardly come up in modern analysis of their writing, they humanize these prominent thinkers who have become mythologized in the passage of time. These details shorten much of the distance between the present reader and the bygone thinker by grounding the latter in the transhistorical human experience. I would argue that the process of alienating Simmel from his personal life, a natural historical process if not intentionally prevented, contributed to the exclusion of his name from popular discourse.

Especially in the case of Simmel, to approach his work without an understanding of how he developed his personal frameworks or his own perception of his work does the reader a great disservice in understanding the magnitude of his ideas especially for the time period in which he

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46 *ibid.*, 26.
47 Nicholas J. Spykman, *ibid.*, xxiii.

lived. It should be noted that the legacy and the biographies of many notable people across professional spheres were altered in the wake of Nazi attempts to alter history to align with their political and social mission. It is entirely possible that Simmel's life and his intellectual impact were distorted as a consequence of the rampant anti-Semitism that existed in Prussian-German academia, which was already apparent when he was lecturing in the 1890s.[48] Thus, while anti-Semitism could have been a key factor in motivating the resistance Simmel faced, ultimately his ideas were deemed chaotically organized and even trivial by his contemporaries. Nonetheless, the legacy of his theories is felt today not only for the relevance of his ideas, but also for a certain timelessness of his analyses. The fact that a conception of social differentiation and belonging facilitated by adherence to changing trends is widely understood affirms the impact Simmel's perceptive and innovative theories had on our understanding of the world we live in.

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[48] David Frisby, *ibid.*, 26.

Chapter II

Culture is a social stimulant. It provides a foundation to which people can ebb and flow from individuality to conformity. The process of developing culture is one that we actively participate in and simultaneously adapt to. However, the conception and construction of culture, particularly fashion culture, adapted to our more aestheticized view of life during the Industrial Age. In the nineteenth century with the rise of the metropolis, fashion emerged as a cultural phenomenon. A modern definition of the word conflates fashion with the material objects themselves. However, to Simmel's mind fashion more broadly refers to a social mechanism that is manifested through objects— conceptually, it refers to the ways in which propriety became maintained in urban settings. The metropolis arose because of the development of the intricate Capitalistic Ecosystem that was developing in the nineteenth century. The social conditions that ensued ushered in new conceptions of culture, fashion, and self-consciousness.

Understanding the ways in which culture adapted to and was propelled by urban voyeurism is how Simmel approaches the new manifestations of fashion culture and its impact on self-consciousness. Simmel uses a theoretical framework to connect the changing perceptions of time and the new ways of thinking about production to make sense of the new state of culture and new perceptions of selfhood as well as collective identity. Unpacking Simmel's specific definitions of culture, fashion, and self-consciousness is essential to understanding his application of these ideas in his analysis of society in the Industrial Age.

The Subjective Soul and Objective Product: Simmel's Metaphysical Conception of Culture

Georg Simmel believed that culture was a fluid representation of the present constructed based on the past and anticipations of the future. As he states: "Whereas every inanimate thing only possesses simply the moment of the present, that which is alive extends in an incomparable way

over the past and the future".[49] This broad idea is a foundational element that sets the parameter of Simmel's analysis. In this sentence he is suggesting, as many other philosophers have, that the distinction of time in these three phases does not truly exist in modern life—in a single moment, beings experience the past, present, and future all at once. Contextualizing this idea in terms of the development of culture, and eventually to material as well as sartorial culture, he distinguishes that the tension of synthesizing these three phases of time is experienced by the individual and that only the "inanimate thing" is believed to be of the present. Thus, it is interesting to consider that the anxiety generated by creating a present through a concurrent reconciliation of the past and future was mollified by objects. Because the "inanimate thing" is singularly capable of "possess[ing]" the present, the circulation of things of the "moment" provided a novel form of escapism from the perennial discomfort of existing in this conflicting binary.

Yet Simmel does not take culture, as a concept, for granted. Culture does not exist within or without us. This challenges an anthropocentric view of the world, which has been underlying human belief systems since the Renaissance, that would have humanity believe that culture is inherent to our being. Simmel states:

> Culture comes into being – and this is what is absolutely essential for understanding it – by the coincidence of two elements, neither of which contains culture in itself: the subjective soul and the objective intellectual product… In the formation of the concepts 'subject' and 'object' as correlates, each of which finds meaning only in the other, there is already the longing and anticipation of a transcendence of this rigid and ultimate dualism.[50]

It is interesting to consider that although humans are creators we are concurrently objects to our creations. The closer the associations of objects with culture, and culture as a comfortable explanation for our inner self, the more we associate our identities with objects. The idea that objects offer a "transcendence" of "longing and anticipation" again reveals the desire to find control

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[49] Georg Simmel, *Simmel on Culture: Selected Writings*, ed. David Frisby and Mike Featherstone (London: Sage Publications, 2000) 56.
[50] Georg Simmel, *ibid.*, 58.

between past and future, which suggests that feeling a grasp on the present is conventionally believed to relieve the tumultuousness of existence. It is interesting that Simmel posits the "soul" as "subjective" and the "product" as "objective" in the development of culture. This idea challenges modern sentimentalities around objects. While people imbue subjective meaning onto goods, Simmel reminds us that objects are unequivocally still "objective." Thus, Simmel reminds the reader that culture is not ultimately defined solely by material goods, which tends to be the primary understanding of culture in its modern conceptualizations.

Expanding upon his construction of *culture* primarily as a synthesis of humans and time, manifested through objects, he then transitions into an exploration of the relationship that ensues between us and the material creations that arise. While perhaps evident, the richness of Simmel's explanation that inevitably we are subject to objects and objects subject to us reveals the nuances he carefully extracts and thus, compels us to reconsider concepts we may take for granted. He writes:

> Yet our relationship to those objects with which we become cultivated by incorporating them into ourselves is a different one, since they are themselves spirit, which has taken objective form in those ethical and intellectual, social and aesthetic or religious and technical forms. This dualism, with which the subject – reliant upon its own limits – faces the object, that exists for itself, experiences an incomparable formation when both elements are spirit… An objectification of the subject and a subjectification of the object occurs here, which constitutes the specific nature of the cultural process, and in which, beyond the latter's individual contents, its metaphysical form is displayed.[51]

Simmel believes that objects do have a "spirit" based upon the "ethical and intellectual, social and aesthetic or religious and technical forms" they were imbued with by their creator. Yet he seems to contradict that by saying the "subject" is ultimately confronted by the "object, that exists for itself" and the idea that "both elements are spirit," or that in some way both the creator and creation exist independently and also cooperatively. Contextualizing this idea to a time when commercialized goods were becoming increasingly prevalent in a way that disassociated people from the process, it

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[51] Georg Simmel, *ibid.*, 58.

becomes clear the assumptions Simmel urges us to reconsider. The "objectification of the subject and a subjectification of the object occurs" fit into a Hegelian dialectic where the cultural process was a synthesis that incorporated the subject and the object. Yet as goods that threatened this "dualism" emerged, they threatened the "specific nature" of the process that had once allowed the object to still be an expression of the subject. These new conditions of the Industrial Age made it so the subject was an expression of the object when the spirit of the object in itself was more established than the process which allowed for its creation.

Simmel maintains that objects only have value when the spirit of the subject is palpable. He states:

> Certainly, the crucial thing for the cultural meaning of the object – which is what we are ultimately concerned with here – is that will and intelligence, individuality and emotion, the forces and the mood of individual souls (and also of their collectivity) are gathered within it. Only because this has occurred have those psychological meanings reached the endpoint of their destiny.[52]

Simmel goes on to explain that although there is a material outcome, the sense of satisfaction reaped from the process of creating is objectively important in itself. Industrialization exposed us to a new conception of outcomes. While we once valued process we became fixated on efficiency, which inherently made us more subject to outcomes. Given the temporal nature of the present it became futile to invest time into the process of creating when the result of that labor would be, by that point, ostensibly outdated. Simmel implicitly questions the fallacy of human hegemonies. The way humans created time was an attempt to create a hegemony over the passage of time, somehow in declaring a system over this unaffectable phenomenon, deluded us into thinking that we were indomitable. Yet it is because we are so vulnerable to time, to the affected objects that mask the fragile self within, that we became comfortable feeding into a system that enabled us to tangibly grasp time as well as our connection to culture.

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[52] Georg Simmel, *ibid.*, 60.

We have become accustomed to the belief that an identifiable sneaker, sweater, or purse distinguishes ourselves as units amongst the collective that allows us to identity the other units that are dressing themselves towards the visual representation of a personality type that resonates. Yet, this is the Frankenstein iteration of the concurrent relationship of subject and object. When there was more connection between the process of developing the object by the subject, the subject imparted bits of themselves in the object and the object allowed the subject to uncover either a new idea or a new understanding of themselves within the circumstances of time. However, as the subject is further and further removed from actively participating in the creation of the object, they become wholly dependent on the aesthetic as a complete means of worth rather than the intellectual, creative, and manual process being the core value of the object.

The Capitalistic Ecosystem and the Rise of Voyeuristic Relating

This growing distance between subject and object is a symptom of the Capitalistic Ecosystem. In 19th century Berlin a web of financiers, producers, and consumers developed and became intricately dependent on each other—the Capitalistic Ecosystem was blossoming. Banks and insurance companies facilitated the ways in which industries systematized the creation of consumer goods, which thrived due to an unprecedented change in the social infrastructure of Berlin. Department stores institutionalized systems of desire and wide boulevards encouraged performative adornment. The rapid changes in demographics, the development of new consumerist phenomena, and an increasingly clear disruption of traditional understandings of social order in Berlin's culture, and that of other emerging metropolitan areas, in flux.

In writing about the "Sociology of Senses" as a means to understand the *Culture of Interaction* that developed in metropolitan areas, Simmel writes:

> The fact that people look at and are jealous of one another, that they write each other letters or have lunch together… that one person asks another for directions and that people dress up and adorn themselves for one another – all the thousands of relations from person to person, momentary and enduring, conscious or unconscious, fleeting or momentous, from

which the above examples are taken quite at random, continually bind us together… Herein lie the interactions between the atoms of society, accessible only to psychological microscopy, which support the entire tenacity and elasticity, the entire variety and uniformity of this is so evident and yet so puzzling life of society.[53]

Simmel's quote above illuminates in crisp and technical, yet poetic and engagingly contradictory language that through the uncertainty of whether connections are fleeting or long lasting, we have become indebted to our superficial interactions with each other. According to Simmel, the reductive nature of personal interactions rooted in voyeurism comprises the social conditions of the city. The "life of society" that Simmel observes in the metropolis is constructed in the "interactions between the atoms of society," colliding and repulsing each other in "all the thousands of relations" that we experience in our day to day lives. In the wide boulevards "people look at and are jealous of one another… people dress up and adorn themselves for one another," which are ideas that we take for granted today. Simmel's observation of "life of society" in the city is personally engineering the sensation of connectivity in conditions that are not conducive to such through increasingly impersonal means of interaction. It is constructing the effect of feeling connected without the labor that is necessary to truly develop these connections. Thus, interactions in cities are revealed to be superficial and transactional "moments" rather than profound and dependable relations.

In the poem, *City of Orgies* (1900), Walt Whitman captures the rise of the anonymous voyeurism erupting in cities in the midst of Industrialization's effect on social interactions based on his experience of New York City. His poem is remarkably, and yet perhaps unsurprisingly, parallel to Simmel's philosophical analysis. In painting a picture of city life Whitman writes: "Nor the processions in the streets, nor the bright windows with goods in them / … your frequent and swift flash of eyes offering me love, / Offering response to my own—these repay me".[54] This poetic

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[53] Georg Simmel, *ibid.*, 110.
[54] Walt Whitman, "City of Orgies" (1900), https://whitmanarchive.org/published/LG/1891/poems/60.

exploration of the changing conditions of life in the industrial metropolis reveal how unfamiliar these types of interactions were to the people living through this change. Whitman's poetic exploration of the concept of "looking" mirrors Simmel's work who states: "… the eye is destined for a completely unique sociological achievement: the connection and interaction of individuals lies in the act of individuals looking at one another. This is perhaps the most direct and the purest interaction that exists."[55] It is interesting that Simmel calls the act of "looking" the "most direct and the purest interaction" in what Whitman describes as "the processions in the streets." The ways in which Whitman intentionally associates the "processions" with the "bright windows with goods in them" speaks to the close connection to the idea that people became walking mannequins to goods coming from department stores.

In the "frequent and swift flashes of eyes," which illuminate the fleetingness of passersby, Whitman holds onto an idea of "love."[56] This "love" seems to be rooted in the lingering idea that despite the individualistic nature of city life, there is still a yearning to connect through the universality of the human condition. Simmel shares this thought, as he writes: "Yet the whole interaction between human beings, their empathy and antipathy, their intimacy and their coolness, would be changed incalculably if the look from one eye into another did not exist— which, compared with the simple seeing or observation of the other person, signifies a new and incomparable relationship between them."[57] What Whitman and Simmel both identity, through different means, is that despite the anonymity of the human experience in cities people crave connections. Eyes as a vehicle of seeing as well as fostering an awareness that one is seen, the facilitators of voyeuristic interactions that are markedly fleeting, are also the tools used to give and seek community. An exchange of eye contact can be the simplest way that we say, "I see you," in

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[55] Georg Simmel, *ibid.*, 111.
[56] Walt Whitman, *ibid.*
[57] Georg Simmel, *ibid.*, 112.

conditions where it is easy to feel invisible. Thus, we are conditioned to call attention to ourselves so that we may be seen by those we seek validation from.

What Whitman suggests is that people entangled the "flash of eyes" with "love." The explicit expression of this "love," or perhaps compassion, was lost when anonymity became the marked feature of the human experience in the city and we entangled personal understandings of our humanity in the fleeting approval we experience based on the inanimate, decorative objects we adorn. In this process we became more individualistic and less willing to express the fragility of self because it became increasingly easy to mask that through the perfect exterior. He states that the eyes, which are a "response to [his] own… repay [him]."[58] This idea juxtaposed with Simmel's belief that "the whole interaction between human beings… would be changed incalculably if the look from one eye into another did not exist" reveals a profound shift that occurred in the Industrial Revolution through the rise of cities and the new ways in which people felt permitted to relate to their fellow beings.[59] He observes that the exchange of eye contact was a way in which humans share "their empathy and antipathy, their intimacy and their coolness… to [signify] a new and incomparable relationship between them" in conditions that do not facilitate open and unabashed expressions of tenderness for the unifying experience of being alive.[60] Despite the close physical proximity of people on busy boulevards and densely filled apartments, the emotional and intellectual distance people felt between each other was eased through moments of looking. The primary sources that Simmel and Whitman provide document the paradigm shift for social dynamics that occurred in society during the Industrial Age. In different forms we realize how palpable and staggering it was to learn what it meant to exist and connect in new habitative conditions.

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[58] Walt Whitman, *ibid.*
[59] Georg Simmel, *ibid.*, 112.
[60] *ibid.*

Self-Consciousness in the Metropolis: The Emergence of the Need to See and Be Seen

Spaces and the sensory experiences we have within different habitative contexts condition us towards different tendencies. The ways in which we see ourselves are often reflective of whom and what we see around us. Today, we take metropolitan social conditions for granted because the nineteenth century normalized the concept of cities. Simmel's articulation of the impact of the pace on the psyche reveal his intersectional approach to understanding this topic as a philosopher. with intellectual roots in history, psychology, and anthropology, trailblazing the discipline in sociology. Simmel reminds the modern reader of how the city changed human beingness both individually and collectively.

Simmel writes about how the city offers individuals an abundance of stimuli in a way that had never been experienced in other phases of human history. He states: "The psychological basis of the metropolitan type of individuality consists in the *intensification of nervous stimulation* which relates from the swift and uninterrupted change of outer and inner stimuli… [The] mind is stimulated by the difference between a momentary impression and the one which preceded it."[61] It is interesting to consider, although a definite answer is impossible, if this state of mind has always been within us and was just unlocked by the emergence of cities or if the development of the metropolis triggered these psychological responses for the first time in human history. What Simmel suggests here is that because the "stimuli" became "swift and uninterrupted" we started to exist comfortably in a state of heightened "nervous stimulation" where we move quickly between "a momentary impression and the one which preceded it," which he identifies as the new modus operandi for "the metropolitan type of individuality."[62]

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[61] Georg Simmel, *ibid.*, 175.
[62] *ibid.*

Simmel continues this by explaining how urban conditions impact the psychological state of city dwellers.[63] He writes:

> With each crossing of the street, with the tempo and multiplicity of economic, occupational and social life, the city sets up a deep contrast with small town and rural life with reference to the sensory foundations of psychic life… Here the rhythm of life and sensory mental imagery flows more slowly, more habitually, and more evenly. Precisely in this connection the sophisticated character of metropolitan psychic life becomes understandable -- as over against small town life which rests more upon deeply felt and emotional relationships.[64]

What is unconventional about Simmel's conclusions are the ways in which he paints the city-dweller as simple and the small-town habitant as more sophisticated because of their ability to grapple with the personal skills necessary to cultivate "deeply felt and emotional relationships." These skills became undervalued, and in fact largely lost, through the course of Industrialization. As Simmel continues to say about the metropolitan individual:

> He reacts with his head instead of his heart. In this is an increased awareness assumes the psychic prerogative. Metropolitan life, thus, underlies a heightened awareness and a predominance of intelligence in metropolitan man. The reaction to metropolitan phenomena is shifted to that organ which is least sensitive and quite remote from the depth of the personality. Intellectuality is thus seen to preserve subjective life against the overwhelming power of metropolitan life…[65]

Although it is easy to discount these ideas based on the style of Simmel's writing, which can be described as intuitive rather than objective, he challenges the conventional approach to academia that favors the guise of objectivity and detached intellectualism. It is precisely because of the phenomena that Simmel describes that personality and the emotional qualities of the individual have been discouraged from being expressed. In the process of repressing the inner self to the point of obscurity, people began to channel that energy elsewhere— namely finding fulfillment in exploring outer expression.

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[63] *ibid.*
[64] *ibid.*
[65] Georg Simmel, *ibid.*, 176.

I would like to digress for a moment to discuss the ways in which objectivity is a mythology that developed and clouded our ability to make individual judgements. For all the tremendous discoveries made during the Scientific Revolution, which undeniably revolutionized the progression of human history and improved wellbeing, the idea that objectivity was possible in everything was consequently assumed to be true. Art has been subject to the unforgiving ebbing and flowing of popular opinion. Theoretical ideas are equally subject to being loved and hated. Considering Simmel as an individual and an intellectual figure who has been ignored or slighted, despite the longstanding weight of his ideas across disciplines, reveals the ways in which our stubborn adherence to convention stymies the unconstrained development of the collective consciousness. As Simmel himself says, "The calculative exactness of practical life… corresponds to the ideal of natural science: to transform the world into an arithmetic problem, to fix every part of the world by mathematical formulas."[66] Our dependence on structured ways of thinking and the mythology of objectivity, has distracted us from being in tune with our humanity. The greatest strength and vulnerability of individuals is the process of uncovering the self because then it becomes impossible to escape all that we are. The relics of others who have engaged with this process, deliberately or unhappily, are works of art and literature, and everything in between, which reveal slivers into the experience of beingness others have lived. These represent the true accomplishments of humanity.

It is important to note Simmel's assessment of the rise of the money economy, that is the emerging nature of reductive, transactional relationship, in the metropolis. He writes:

> Money economy and the dominance of the intellect are intrinsically connected. They share a matter-of-fact attitude dealing with men and with things… Money is concerned only with what is common to all: it asks for the exchange value, it reduces all quality and individuality to the question: How much? All intimate emotional relationships between persons are founded in their individuality, whereas in rational relations man is reckoned with like a number, like an element which is in itself indifferent. Only the objective measurable achievement is of interest.[67]

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[66] Georg Simmel, *ibid.*, 177.
[67] Georg Simmel, *ibid.*, 176.

What is striking here are the ways in which Simmel connects the emergence of money as a vehicle of the deterioration of human connectivity. Because of the ways we have been conditioned to think, the modern reader may dismiss Simmel's assessment as an overstatement of the power of money. Yet I believe this would only be because of our anachronistic views of money and the ways in which the transactional state of most relationships in urban settings have been normalized over the last one hundred and twenty years. Because many of us have never experienced social conditions beyond the ones that Simmel describes, we are not confronted by the fact that from our consumption of food and coffee, to art and objects, experiences and education, the act of exchanging money reduces the majority of our interactions to impersonal exchanges of good for compensation. Additionally, what Simmel establishes here is that in this reductive exchange, where money is made important because of the ways in which it enables our ability to participate in the money economy, coupled with the aforementioned idea that we have become detached from our emotive, inner self, we have become fixated only on the "objective measurable achievement."[68] What Simmel suggests is that in not reaping tangible benefits from the interactions we shared with people we became interested in the objects of consumption, as a way to measure success, and in that process became fixated on objects for their own sake.

What is important about Simmel's writing on "The Metropolis and Mental Life" is how he prepares the reader for what he will eventually discuss as our resolve to claim individuality and community through materiality by addressing the tremendous isolationism that is central to urban life. Simmel argues:

> ... the reciprocal reserve and indifference and the intellectual life conditions of large circles are never felt more strongly by the individual in their impact upon his independence than in the thickest crowd of the big city. This is because the bodily proximity and narrowness of space makes the mental distance only the more visible. It is obviously only the obverse of

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[68] *ibid.*

this freedom if, under certain circumstances, one nowhere feels as lonely and lost as in the metropolitan crowd.[69]

Simmel's writing is marked by contradictions and his exploration of tension. In trying to find balance between one idea and another, the dejected and vulnerable state of the individual navigating the "bodily proximity" and "mental distance" seems to direct us to the placating comfort of fashion and voyeuristic relating, as will be discussed further.[70] It seems that when we are confronted by high volumes of persons a superficial satisfaction is reaped, and the consistent exposure to people allows us the become apathetically accepting of this state of being, yet it would seem that our nature does not have a tendency towards these type of interactions nor the social conditions of metropolitan areas.

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[69] Georg Simmel, *ibid.*, 181.
[70] *ibid.*

Chapter III

Today we take for granted a modern definition of fashion, which refers to the haphazard way in which we assign value to chosen material objects for their ability to embody the momentary conception of culture, because it has become intrinsically linked to an industry that has commodified and commercialized the process of self-adornment. Yet fashion, as a sociological and philosophical concept, extends far beyond seasonal variations in clothes and accessories. Once the heavy machinery developed during the Industrial Revolution had exhausted the Empire's need for infrastructural development—namely railways and buildings— the question of what would be next inevitably arose and was quickly answered by consumer goods. Fashion was, and continues to be, defined by all aspects of material culture that have the capacity to accomplish social signaling. It also refers to the upholding of popular and vogue understandings of beauty that may or may not encompass any inherent aesthetic or utilitarian value. While clothing has been the most evident manifestation of fashion so too are household goods, furniture, buildings, and leisure activities.

Particularly in city settings, where moments are more often characterized as transitory than remarkable, seeing where someone takes their morning coffee or observing the vestibule of the building a person just walked into after the workday have become ways of superficially developing an understanding of people. These are amongst the ways in which we participate in voyeuristic relating and fashion has facilitated the means by which humans have become comfortable with the implication of personality demonstrated through visual appearances because, theoretically, industrialization provided us with the tools to broadcast the inner-self to the outer world. Consequently, we have become conditioned to take appearances for granted. Simmel's analysis of fashion reveal the ways in which the city incubated fashion as a cultural phenomenon, the ways in which fashion became a profound social tool, and how clothing became the primary vehicle for fashion culture to manifest in Industrial societies.

Fashion as a Cultural Phenomenon

There is an unresolvable tension within the modern urban habitant that is constantly in flux: the teetering of a fine line between conformity and individuality. In the midst of asserting the fragile veil of a constructed conception of individuality, we seek validation. Yet, the moment that validation is presented, there is an instantaneous rejection and repulsion to it, which pushes us to more rigidly claim whatever sense of individuality we feel. The ebb and flow between *I* and *we* is one that is volatile and delicate. Because peace is found in neither of these perceptions of self, fashion's ability to alleviate this predicament, albeit superficially, has become a remedy that we heavily rely on. Conceptually speaking, self-adornment is an important process of self-realization and self-actualization that humans have participated in for centuries for different social, economic, as well as political reasons. Yet for all its potential to be a liberating practice, it is simultaneously an inhibiting process that is restricted by dogma and norms, another way in which the struggle between self and community in modern urban life is revealed. Imitation becomes an interesting way to understand how this tension reveals itself in metropolitan areas because voyeurism has become a hollow substitute for fulfilling relations between people.

According to Simmel imitation is a tendency that we are psychologically conditioned to crave because it is the "transition of group life to individual life."[71] Considering the human beings are above all social beings this is not surprising, however it is still incompatible with the metaphysical conditions of cities. Simmel claims that as imitation has become easier and more widespread with the following consequences. Being "freed from choosing" and just becoming a "vessel of social contents" means that the individual no longer holds the agency that they once did.[72] Instead of making decisions about the way one would like to adorn oneself, people have become vehicles for

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[71] Georg Simmel, *ibid.*, 188.
[72] *ibid.*

socially-loaded objects. An individual that is swayed by the populous means that he or she is never able to gain fulfillment from the present. What we feel and do is not grounded in the present, nor in tradition, because the future manifests more rapidly that the need to stay ahead becomes an unsettling present.[73] Simmel posits the "imitative" human as opposite to the "teleological" one because of the fact that we ground ourselves in our future desires rather than our present being.[74]

Simmel explores the contradictory nature of self-adornment in metropolitan areas by exploring the anxiety about belonging and distinguishing, as well as the inherently classist nature of participating in imitative fashion. He writes:

> ... [imitation] furnishes a general condition that resolves the conduct of every individual into a mere example. At the same time, and to no less a degree, it satisfies the need for distinction, the tendency towards differentiation, change and individual contrast. It accomplishes the latter, on the one hand, by the change in contents - which gives to the fashion of today an individual stamp compared with those of yesterday and tomorrow - and even more energetically, on the other hand, by the fact that the fashions of the higher strata of society distinguish themselves from those of the lower strata, and are abandoned by the former at the moment when the latter begin to appropriate them.[75]

This pivotal passage summarizes, with precise language, the motivating factors for behaviors we have largely come to take for granted since Industrialization. Because we have imbued clothing with personal meaning, believing fully that inanimate objects may say something about our perceptions of self and how others are then granted license to make conclusions about us, we have become conditioned to finding satisfaction from buying items that exist with or without us yet seem to reveal something that we believe is important to signal. Thus, we incorporate things so profoundly with our perceptions of self because we have been able to alleviate the anxiety of finding the self in a community and feeling included in that community. Fashion has become a tool on which we depend to satisfy the two psychological conditions to which each individual is bound: the

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[73] *ibid.*
[74] *ibid.*
[75] Georg Simmel, *ibid.*, 189.

need for "social equalization" and the antithetical need for "individual differentiation and variation."[76] This informs and reinforces a system in which clothing and fashion hold significant weight in our social dynamics. Additionally, he claims that the contemporary perspective on the history of fashion is constricted to the history of *"contents,"* meaning objects, in the context of facilitating the movement towards a more perfect satisfaction of our human condition.[77] Simmel suggests that fashion exists beyond the human construction of it yet we try to mold it with comfortable narratives that it is a reflection of "individuals" and "social process."[78] Fashion according to Simmel is nothing more than the objectification of "social process" in which we ground our identities because of the ways whereby they create the sensation of grounding our identities in a rapidly changing present.[79]

Simmel adds an additional layer by stating the importance of class dynamics within this universal modern struggle. He reveals the increasing clashes between the different social classes engendered by city conditions.[80] It cannot be understated how impactful the sheer physical properties of a city, tightly packed inhabitants confronted by new commercial ventures that enabled this new form of consumption, produced new challenges for modern understandings of the human condition. City's challenged the interactions between the classes during a time when the social order was in flux. Relations were once more formally arranged and rigidly bound to the social order. Yet the rise of the bourgeoisie class challenged this. The aristocracy clung to the historical weight of titles and the story of the lower stratas has unfortunately been reduced throughout history, one of the main things that distinguished the developing bourgeoisie class from other groups was the ways in which they benefited from the rise of fashion's influence on culture. As they financially outranked

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[76] *ibid.*
[77] *ibid.*
[78] *ibid.*
[79] *ibid.*
[80] *ibid.*

the aristocrats and illuminated the newfound power of money in these new economic conditions, the newcomers of the socioeconomic ecosystem transgressed what were once very clearly marked social lines. Thus, rapidly changing fashion became a way to signal class likeness and difference in a way that aligned with the superficiality of voyeuristic interactions. It binds people within a social group by isolating themselves from other groups, yet offers the opportunity for further demarcation within this isolated group.[81] Simmel depicts this as a never ending cycle— the upper strata adopt a fashion, it is coopted by the lower strata, and in order to restore the social order the upper strata develop a new fashion, "and thus the game goes merrily on," which Simmel claims is made possible by the fact that "external imitation is most readily accessible".[82] He claims that because intra-class imitation is more difficult to distinguish, more attention is paid to and boundaries set for inter-class imitation, a process he describes as a "frantic… hunt for imitation from below and the flight towards novelty from above."[83] These lively and kinetic verbs reveal the underlying tension and perturbation underlying the creation of consumer culture in the metropolis.

According to Simmel the synthesis that occurs within the self, grappling with urbanity and class anxiety, is what creates the basic conditions for fashion culture that iterates upon itself without aims beyond commercialism. Simmel writes, "Judging from the ugly and repugnant things that are sometimes modern, it would seem as though fashion were desirous of exhibiting its power by getting us to adopt the most atrocious things for its sake alone".[84] Simmel's humorous, slightly flippant and mocking tone reveal something about Simmel as a thinker and a person. There is a certain degree of intellectual fearlessness in writing so plainly and resolutely about a phenomena that is palpable yet, according to propriety, unspeakable. What Simmel precisely identies is the ways in

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[81] *ibid.*
[82] Georg Simmel, *ibid.*, 190.
[83] *ibid.*
[84] *ibid.*

which items that ensue from the concept of fashion are a physical derivative of what they are

conceptually intended to represent. In terms of form, fashionable items may be objectively

unappealing however, due to the metaphysical influence they suggest, fashion as a concept sanctions

the value of that item. Thus, there is a certain arbitrariness that comes with fashion— mainly that

the aestheticization, objectification, and adornment of illusive representations of modernity define

the ways in which fashion and objects are defined and created. Simmel also suggests that the more

removed an item is from any aesthetic or practical form, the more desirable it becomes because it

ultimately signals a level of disposable income that is indefinable outside of material expression—

this in and of itself is a form of consumption that is particularly desirable and exclusionary. Simmel

goes on to say, "The complete indifference of fashion to the material standards of life is illustrated

by the arbitrary manner in which it recommends something appropriate in once instance, something

abstruse in another, and something materially and aesthetically quite indifferent in a third. This

indicates that fashion is concerned with other motivations, namely solely with formal social ones."[85]

As money became the singular medium of exchange for participating in the social life of the

Capitalistic Ecosystem, it is interesting to note that money in its physical form had no social capital.

Money's value came from having an abundance of it because of the opportunity it provided the user

to demonstrate their ability to be attuned to fashion culture.

Thus, the democratization of consumption was a new phenomenon brought about by

Industrialization and the sheer prevalence of standardized products that ensued from mass

consumption. Higher levels of disposable income in an economy that moved away from

collectivized survival into a consumer economy made it so that people were much more isolated

from each other in their walks in life. Simmel states:

> The prevalence of the money economy is bound to hasten [the flight towards novelty]
> considerably and render it visible, because the objects of fashion, embracing as they do the

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[85] *ibid.*

externalities of life, are particularly accessible to the mere possession of money, and therefore through these externalities conformity to the higher stratum is more easily acquired here than in fields which demand an individual proof of worthiness that money cannot secure.[86]

What is revealed here is how the reductiveness of money, which aligned well with the demands of the Capitalistic Ecosystem, created new problems for the people discovering how they personally fit into these conditions. Economists revere the objectivity of money and yet it is because of the imposed, rather than intrinsic value of money that we defaulted to consuming things as a way to alleviate the personal dilemmas people were encountering for the first time in Industrial metropolises. Because there was no way to flaunt the accumulation of paper money, objects became a way to qualify success in a way that the expansive nature of cities inhibited community knowingness regarding individual pecuniary status. Yet it is important to note that Simmel emphasizes that "objects of fashion" are "particularly accessible to the mere possession of money," yet distinguishes money from the "individual proof of worthiness."[87] This speaks to how profound material culture has become linked to our perceptions of character. Because we are all acutely aware of the choices that come with sartorial presentation based on personal engagement with this process, it becomes easier to believe that there is a deeper meaning to the choices we make. We imbue "objects of fashion" with meaning for the sociological implications we have assigned.[88] Objects, imbued with this unifying concept of creating and adhering to "fashion," became the ultimate tool for facilitating connections in spaces where walking by someone temporary fills the holes created by the anonymity and disconnection of city life. Consequently, voyeuristic connections unified everyone from the moneyed to the impoverished members of society such that the impact of signaling became important in an unprecedented way. Thus, it seems that the rise of paper money at

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[86] *ibid.*
[87] *ibid.*
[88] *ibid.*

this time coincides, strategically so, with the rise of consumer goods. Money discouraged bartering

and other collaborative forms of consumption, in favor of transactional exchanges that made the

good in and of itself more important than anything else. Furthermore, because status was becoming

less of a prerequisite to participate in consumption it was no longer enough to have valuable goods.

At this time it was becoming increasingly important to not only have the ability to consume

seemingly high-value goods, but to do so fashionably and frequently because according to Simmel's

understanding of the city as an isolating environment it ultimately forced a reliance on voyeuristic

connections to artificially create the relief that comes with being validated by one's peers.

In an attempt to destabilize prevailing conceptions of fashion as a phenomenon, which had

not yet been articulated to any significant level, Simmel provides two interesting historical case

studies to examine a concept that was, and continues to be, taken for granted. Consistent with the

fact that Simmel did not concern himself with legitimizing his ideas through the frameworks of

historical justification he states the two examples of subversions to fashion as a way to introduce the

reader to an idea that challenges the conceptions of fashion that was largely taken for granted in

metropolitan areas. After using examples of tribal communities that do not adhere to a social value

system based on fashion Simmel states that the manifestation of fashion was intentionally avoided in

certain cultures. He writes:

> It is said that around the year 1390 in Florence there was no prevailing fashion in men's
> clothing because each wished to present himself in his own special way. Thus, in this
> instance, one of the elements of fashion-- the desire for integration -- was absent, and
> without it there can be no fashion. On the other hand, it is reported that the Venetian *nobili*
> had no fashion since they were all required by a specific law to wear black, so as not to make
> their small numbers all too obvious to the lower strata. Here there was no fashion since the
> other constitutive element was missing, because differentiation from their social inferiors
> was to be deliberately avoided.[89]

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[89] Georg Simmel, *ibid.*, 192.

It is interesting to note that Simmel offers no official citation to either of these claims and perhaps that was the freedom that writing through the lens of sociology offered him— he was bound neither by the conventions of history nor philosophy. This claim seems to add credence to Simmel's idea that fashion culture, and the material manifestations, are bound by a matrix in which individuality and conformity are the parameters that define the ways in which we see ourselves. Simmel forces us to recognize that societies can exist without an implicit and underlying social contract created through fashion, as is the case in an Industrial metropolis.

Simmel positions fashion as a never ceasing cycle that is ultimately ineffectual. The cycle he describes is one in which people chase newness to the point that an object that was once considered distinctive is co-opted by a sense of ordinariness that renders the object in question useless. Simmel writes:

> Every growth of a fashion drives it to its doom, because it thereby cancels out its distinctiveness. By reason of this play between the tendency towards universal acceptance and the destruction of its significance, to which this general adopted leads, fashion possesses the peculiar attraction of limitation, the attraction of simultaneous beginning and end, the charm of newness and simultaneously of transitoriness. Fashion's question is not that of being, but rather simultaneously being and non-being; it always stands on the watershed of the past and the future and, as a result, conveys to us at least while it is at its height, a stronger sense of the present than do most other phenomena.[90]

Simmel's acute and pointed observation that fashion items trying to create a grounded sense of the present by reconciling the fast approaching future with the fleeting past illuminate how disjointed people in the modern city have become to their sense of the present. The idea that something is only significant when it is fashionable is what has perpetuated a system in which things have been imbued with more meaning than their form or function would objectively afford them. It is as if fashion grounds us in the present but only because it is the vehicle in which we find comfort because of the potential it represents, the ability to escape the fragile self by believing that the future to come will

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[90] Georg Simmel, *ibid.*, 192.

relieve us from the restlessness that comes with a present that is not satiating the basic human desire to connect and feel connected in meaningful ways. By grasping the material future we momentarily release the emotional and intellectual anxiety of the present— the responsibility to be intentional beings, knowing that others can vaguely perceive an intention based on the way we choose to adorn ourselves and the signals we consequently offer.

This dangerous cycle is bolstered by the certainty that there are more things yet to come. Things that we have come to believe will bring us closer to self-actualization. However, what does it mean if the way we adorn ourselves is so subject to change? Does that not reveal that the self has no true roots if it can appear one way in a certain season and then contradict itself the next? The conception of personality can be argued in and of itself. Does individuality in terms of intellect or character truly exist or have we deluded ourselves into believing these constructs because they help us feel grounded in conditions that would otherwise swallow us whole? If we are to assume that a personality does in fact exist, then the understanding of fashion as a phenomenon and us as individuals is even more troubling. If we are to believe that personality is constantly in flux and subject to change, perhaps implying that growth is the most consistent feature of humanity, it is still questionable to imagine that it is legitimate to root our identities in objects. Believing that a new object can bring one closer to manifesting a current conception of self means that we become more comfortable exploring the breadth rather than depth of ourselves. We are spared from being confronted with the difficult, yet rewarding, challenge of finding peace in the present because the present we value and believe in is constructed by material representations of the future. The contradictory language that Simmel uses reveals how we seek to reconcile completely opposing feelings at once through fashion. It is physically "being and non-being" given that these inanimate objects also are the reflections of the meaning and personalities we have imbued them with. It is the

metaphysical representation of the fact that, in the metropolis, the present is defined as the transient and ungraspable "beginning and end."

Simmel follows this idea by claiming that fashion as a phenomenon moved from being about material products to being valued solely for their representational qualities. He writes:

> This accentuation of the present is evidently, at the same time, an emphasis upon change and to the extent to which a particular strata is the agent of this cultural tendency, so to that degree will it turn to fashion in all fields, and by no means merely with regard to clothing. Indeed, it is almost a sign of the *increased* power of fashion that it has overstepped the bounds of its original domain, which comprised only externals of dress, and has acquired an increasing influence over taste, theoretical convictions, and even the moral foundations of life in their changing forms.[91]

What Simmel accomplishes in these sentences speak to the mind of a man whose finely tuned skills to observe and articulate the mechanisms underlying the shift in what fashion meant to Industrial societies. The idea that fashion "overstepped the bounds of its original domain" to move beyond the materiality of clothing, as he states, to have "increasing influence over taste, theoretical convictions, and even the moral foundations of life" reflects the changing cultural significance of fashion.[92] Simmel again links the changing of fashion to an anxiety related to preserving a social order that was not as rigidly divided as it had once been. The rise of the bourgeoisie class and the ways in which currency worked towards democratizing luxury, as in objects and products that were for pleasure rather than survival, consumption challenged the traditional operations of the social ecosystem. To a certain extent Simmel presents an almost theoretical formula. Fashion culture is defined as the attempt to harness the fast changing present by the social group claiming the authority to define what that present is. What Simmel suggests is that the exercise of defining the present moment in the Industrial Era was only a transient step in a restless attempt to make change more constant than consistency. Simmel highlights the "emphasis upon change" as the main catalyst to materially

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[91] Georg Simmel, *ibid.*, 193.
[92] *ibid.*

defining the present rather than a desire to feel ownership of the present for its own sake.[93] The importance of this distinction cannot be understated because it reveals why humans have become conditioned to never reaching a level of satisfaction or satiation from their consumption since the Industrial Era.

Additionally, Simmel highlights how fashion as a social phenomenon has not stayed singularly in terms of clothing— it has proliferated through all facets of human life. Most interestingly is the idea that even our "theoretical convictions" and "moral foundations of life" can be characterized by a fashionable stance and one that is less so.[94] To a certain extent the argument can be made that so long as humans have existed in collective communities, which is most of recorded human history, considering that we have behavioral and intellectual influence over each other how can this idea of fashionable perceptions of living be attributed only to the changes that occurred during Industrialization? Yet the point that Simmel makes is that the ways in which culture has become unwaveringly bound to fashion and the constant chase to the future is a new way in which humans began to navigate their lives. Unification is indicated through fashion and it is when social lines are crossed that fashion is then forced to reinvent itself to create the marker of distinction As he writes: "As soon as a fashion 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 elements of clothing and in various forms of social conduct -- we no longer characterize it as fashion."[95] The profundity of this statement lies in the articulation of how encompassing adhering to fashion become to people living in metropolitan societies through the new process of developing fashion. Fashion was not only material and physical but also intellectual and psychological, which reveals the profound shift that occurred in the Industrial Era.

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[93] *ibid.*
[94] *ibid.*
[95] Georg Simmel, *ibid.*, 192.

According to Simmel, fashion is defined by an indiscriminate process of projecting value and obsolescence.[96] Unlike things that exist in "continuance" and "*objective* justification," items of fashion are defined as such because they are arbitrarily given meaning and then subsequently detached from the previously constructed value so that it is rendered unfashionable.[97] He continues to say "Indeed, it is almost a sign of the *increased* power of fashion that it has overstepped the bounds of its original domain, which compromised only externals of dress, and has acquired an increasing influence over taste, theoretical convictions, and has acquired even the moral foundations of life in their changing forms."[98] Simmel suggests that even beyond clothing we are attaching this transient concept of "fashion," defined as a socially constructed, codified system of valuation that is determined by an arbitrary attachment of value and an equal ability to deconstruct that value, to all things of life. erhaps most prevalent in the Digital Age where the presence of fashion is trackable in every aspect of social media from the content of the images produced, to the ways in which those images are produced, and even the ways in which those images are reinforced through fashionable uses of language and the aestheticization of words, support Simmel's assessment of the all encompassing nature of fashion culture in modern as well as post-modern life. This process has been facilitated with the development of ready-to-wear fashion. When the subject had agency in the construction of their self-adornment there was a degree of control over their objects. However, when things became mass produced it became less of a matter of exercising creativity and rather an expression of social acuity. In imbuing labeled and branded items with an essence we have assigned meaning to objects that do not have any meaning in their own right. During the Industrial period people developed an aesthetic value system that became maintained by our belief in the power of objects, which was reinforced by our belief that objects may reflect something about our selfhood because of the

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[96] Georg Simmel, *ibid.*, 193.
[97] *ibid.*
[98] *ibid.*

essence we ascribed to them. The cycle became ingrained during the Industrial Age— people

became reliant on objects and companies capitalized on this developing need to participate in

fashion culture. Essentially, in this transition to an existence experienced through a consideration for

fashion, few things are considered sacred and everything becomes dispensable.

Becoming so bound to the constant chase towards the next big thing meant that the

increasingly voyeuristic nature of social relationships through spatial realities of city life were

bolstered by the ways in which people saw themselves and their lives bound to the changing

fashions they observed. I would argue that this is what ignited the development of a fragile self that

needed the validation and approval, between the tension that Simmel observed, of social conformity

and individuality. This stunning observation is the crux of Simmel's argument and an idea that has

become so pervasive in our instinctive understanding of social interaction today that we seem to

take it for granted. Simmel writes:

> ... the individual derives the satisfaction of knowing that, as adopted by him or her, it still
> represents something special and striking; while at the same time the individual feels
> inwardly supported by a broad group of persons who are striving for the same thing, and
> not, as is the case for other social satisfactions, by a group that is doing the same thing.
> Therefore the feelings which the fashionable person confronts are an apparently agreeable
> mixture of approval and envy. We envy the fashionable person as an individual, but approve
> of them as a member of a group.[99]

The phenomenon that Simmel describes here were unprecedented in terms of their existing as a

social phenomenon and that very fact cannot be undervalued. The way that he describes the

conflicting "mixture of approval and envy" as "apparently agreeable," the operative word being the

former of the two, reveals the profound impact fashion material and culture created social bonds

and divisions between people.[100] While we the aforementioned case studies of Venice and Florence

reveal how clothing has historically had a place in social networks, those social networks were

[99] *ibid.*
[100] *ibid.*

reflected through clothing rather than created through it. Even considering how Louis XIV used

clothing as a way to demarcate the social ranking of his court at Versailles, the purpose of fashion

culture at the court was to reinforce preexisting social connections. Through the conditions of city

life, where social connections were becoming increasingly transactional and superficial, the

significance of fashion and clothing came to inhabit more meaning for their own sake than being the

material manifestation of deeply rooted social ties. It is interesting that the feelings of envy and

approval can coexist simultaneously. Simmel's acute observation forces the reader to grapple with an

idea that expands conventional understandings of binaries and to recognize the nuances of existing.

      Simmel provides language to make sense of the self, whose fragility is made even more

vulnerable in the conditions of urban life and fashion culture. Simmel writes:

> From all this we see that fashion is the genuine playground for individuals with dependent
> natures, but whose self-consciousness, however, at the same time requires a certain amount
> of prominence, attention, and singularity… In slaves to fashion (*Modenarren*) the social
> demands of fashion appear exaggerated to such a high degree that they completely acquire a
> semblance of individuality and particularly. It is characteristic of the slave to fashion that he
> carries the tendency of a particular fashion beyond the otherwise self-contained limits. If
> pointed shoes are in style, then he wears shoes that resemble spear tips; if pointed collars are
> all the rage, he wears collars that reach up to his ears; if it is fashionable to attend scholarly
> lectures, then he is never seen anywhere else, and so on.[101]

In this excerpt it is almost difficult to recognize the time period in which Simmel was writing

because its relevance to the state of culture today is uncanny. The flippant humour that Simmel uses

in his writing enhances his critique of a culture that became obsessively fixated on the idea of being

fashionable rather than just being. What is particularly evocative is the idea that being fashionable

was not nearly enough— individuality became attached to incorporating the approved trend beyond

the otherwise self-contained limits."[102] What Simmel is suggesting is that the most delicate and

fragile of selves found refuge in adopting fashion into every crevice of their identities. The cry for

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[101] Georg Simmel, *ibid.*, 194.
[102] *ibid.*

attention and validation was expressed through pushing the "limits" of a trend in an attempt to signal as well as reinforce an external appearance of "prominence, attention, and singularity."[103] Whether the individual is defining the fashion of the moment or simply participating in it, we have become reliant on objects because of the opportunity they provide us with to establish ourselves as a part of the whole mechanism while concurrently insisting to ourselves and others that we are, above all, still individual.

Simmel continues this idea by stating: "Thus, he represents something totally individual, which consists in the quantitative intensification of such elements as are qualitatively common property of the given social circle."[104] What the fashionable individual ultimately accomplishes is a measured venture into individuality: he enhances an element that has already been vetted and approved by the collective. Thus, it is a calculated risk. He knows that he will not be ridiculed but rather celebrated for his ability to create the illusion of difference within the safe confines of conformity. Seemingly objective binaries such as "good" and "bad" fashion provided people with an opportunity to forfeit their personal stake in the sartorial choices they made. The codification of sartorial norms through the guise of fashion meant that people were validated or ostracized through their material signals, but the systematic nature of ready-to-wear fashion made it clear where an individual stood in this binary. Thus, Simmel goes on to say: "He leads the way, but all travel the same road. Representing as he does the most recently conquered heights of public taste, he seems to be marching at the head of general process. In reality, however, what is so frequently true of the relation between individuals and groups also applies to him: that actually, the leader is the one who is led."[105] This idea, which began humorous and sarcastic, takes a harrowing turn as Simmel points out that the ridiculousness of fashion is merely masking the loneliness motivating the need to

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[103] *ibid.*
[104] *ibid.*
[105] *ibid.*

consistently find validation, despite how transient or inconsequential it may be, in the metropolis. He reveals that the "slave of fashion," which is an unsettling exhibit of the contemporary understanding of this word, only appears to be leading the aesthetic movement towards the future of fashion when it is entirely possible that he only does so because he is wholly dependent on the validation reaped from the materials that allow him to foster personal connections. The self-perpetuating cycle of fashion is facilitated by the person who disseminates the latest fashion and creates a social network in which individuality is seemingly claimed and conformity ensues.

A notable disruption occurs when Simmel speaks of women and the ways in which fashion culture of the Industrial Age directly affected them. While I take issue with the way in which he structurally introduces this part of his analysis, discussing it immediately after speaking more generally about the ways in which fashion fosters a sense of social "obedience" which reinforces the idea that women are intrinsically such, it reveals a degree of Simmel's acuity considering the time period he was writing in and is rather consistent with the type of thinker he seems to have been.[106] A slight digression that gives insight into the mind of this unorthodox academic was that he was amongst the first to allow women as "guest students" into his lectures before they were allowed to officially enroll as full-time students in 1908.[107] While this does not by any means make him an expert on the conditions of women in the Industrial Age, it provides a bit of context for his analysis that is not stated in the text itself.

With regards to women, Simmel writes: "Out of the weakness of the social position to which women were condemned through the greatest part of history there arises their close relationship to all that is 'custom', to that which is 'right and proper', to the generally valid and approved form of existence."[108] What is once again stunning and alarming are the ways in which Simmel's words bare

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[106] Georg Simmel, *ibid.*, 196.
[107] David Frisby. *ibid.*, 27.
[108] Georg Simmel, *ibid.*, 196.

relevance to the world we live in today. He states that fashion culture developed independently of women, however it was most advantageous, and comforting, for women given their social status. The idea that women are often forced to consider the "generally valid and approved form of existence" exactly translates into the ways that they are conditioned to think about sartorial expression.[109] Because fashion is so easily codified, women are prone to the expectations of sartorial norms— especially since female selfhood is often reduced to aestheticization. Simmel continues, "...it seems as though fashion were the valve, as it were, through which women's need for some measure of conspicuousness and individual prominence finds vent, when its satisfaction is more often denied in other spheres."[110] He cites the historical examples of Italy and Germany during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries which he claims were times when men and women where existential conditions were more or less the same.[111] He writes:

> The women of the Renaissance possessed extensive opportunities for culture, external activity, and personal differentiation such as were not offered to them again for many centuries… it is reported that no particularly extravagant Italian female fashions emerged from that period. The need to exercise individuality and gain a kind of distinction in this sphere was absent, because the impulse embodied therein found sufficient satisfaction in other spheres.[112]

This is notable reference that adds credence to the observations that Simmel expresses in his work. In citing historical times that counter the very state we continue to find ourselves in, Simmel illuminates that it is misguided to take for granted that materiality and sartorial expression are innate or essential to our self-expression. He later states that: "In a certain sense, fashion also gives women a compensation for their lack of social position in a professional group."[113] Through this sentence we see another shift that occurred— people started to see their identities through their professions.

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109 *ibid.*
110 *ibid.*
111 Georg Simmel, *ibid.*, 197.
112 *ibid.*
113 *ibid.*

Occupations became a form of existential escapism in the Industrial Age that people latched onto in order to find community and a sense of self. Given that women were largely barred from prestigious professions, Simmel aptly identifies the ways in which fashion almost made womanhood a professional activity.

The point at which I disagree with Simmel is where he claims that men are not exempt but considerably less affected by fashion. While I agree with his point that men had more avenues to explore their individuality, as Simmel writes: "… the indifference towards fashion in outward appearance are specifically a male quality, not because a man is more uniform, but because he is the more many-sided creature, and for that reason, can exist without external changes," I believe that it is not that men are less subject to the pressure of fashion but that they have to be more covert in their navigation of this phenomenon.[114] In doing so they only appear to be more casual about their attitudes towards fashion but if we are to look at their experience of self-adornment I believe men deal with their own set of challenges in navigating the conditions of the voyeuristic metropolis. Simmel believed that men were able to circumvent the challenges that women faced because of their occupations. I agree with Simmel that people started to lose themselves entirely to their professions. Occupations became a form of distraction and escapism from the self, and becomes less a part of the self but rather becomes conflated for the self in its entirety. In explaining why men become bound to their professions as women became bound to fashion Simmel writes: "To his individual importance is added that of his stratum, which often can cover over the defects and deficiencies of purely personal existence."[115] Once again we see the ways in which the changing social dynamics of the metropolis and the various distractions emerging in the Industrial Age were all forms that enabled the masking of the fragile, uncertain self as well as distracting us from fear of loneliness.

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[114] *ibid.*
[115] *ibid.*

The opportunity that fashion of the Industrial Age provided for its users, to claim the appearance of individuality while still working under an underlying mechanism of conformity, means that women had an especially socially authorized vehicle to reclaim a sliver of their identities that threatened to get defeated in the Capitalistic Ecosystem. He suggests that while all humans are prone to the need for validation, women are especially susceptible to the conformity clause of his argument given the social conditions they faced. Perhaps it is because of his Jewish heritage and the ways in which it made him an outsider to academia that he had the sensitivity to think critically about why women were seemingly bound to fashion culture. With hindsight I am able to argue that consumption gave women of all social strata the opportunity to participate in the economy in a way that some were barred from— namely bourgeois and aristocratic women. To a certain degree consumption was the only way in which upper class women could participate in the Capitalistic Ecosystem, which inherently imbues them with more agency than their official political or social roles could afford. While many of those women were using money provided by their husbands or families and bound to strict societal conventions regarding the materials they could consume as per fashion, the sheer act of spending in social and economic conditions that were very clearly motivated by consumption made them active participants in the system.

This new system was defined and reinforced by the industrialization of fashion as a cultural phenomenon. Simmel makes an interesting point about the "middle classes" and how rapidly moving technology, which was creating a new supply-demand dynamic, was creating a set of consumer codes that valued quantity above quality for the first time in human history.[116] The tradition of craftsmanship was replaced by the principle of novelty. Simmel writes:

> The more an article becomes subject to rapid changes of fashion, the greater the demand for *cheap* products of its kind… The speed of development is of such importance in genuine articles of fashions that it even withdraws them from certain economic advances that have been won gradually in other fields. It has been noticed, especially in the older branches of

[116] Georg Simmel, *ibid.*, 202.

production in modern industry, that the speculative element gradually ceases to play an influential role… The form of feverish change is so essential here that fashion stands, as it were, in a logical contradiction to the developmental tendencies of modern societies.[117]

The observations that Simmel describes in this section provide an explanation for the new conception of consumer culture that was developing in the Industrial Period. It is interesting to note that Simmel suggests that other industries outgrew "the speculative element," which is the "element" that is crux of fashion.[118] As he describes "[t]he form of feverish change" created a system in which production sought to satiate the need for change rather than any inherent utilitarian, aesthetic, or material desire. What Simmel reveals here are the ways in which our personal attachments to fashion transgressed the systems we have developed and imposed on society. It is interesting considering that fashion is seen as inconsequential and frivolous but according to Simmel it is perhaps the only exception to the theoretical rules of capitalism. Perhaps it is because fashion and an active interest in it threatens to expose the extent of the fragile self, the fact that we spend valuable resources to create material objects that have no true meaning, we aggressively claim it as an unimportant and distinctive facet of culture. Unlike other parts of culture, where the individual can choose to participate or exclude themselves, fashion is something that we all participate in— even claiming the choice to exclude oneself is an active choice being made— which is important to considering the profundity of fashion on our identity construction and construction as well as social cohesion since the Industrial Age.

The question that inevitably arises is what facilitated this unprecedented change? What allowed people to bestow their objects with such profound metaphysical meaning? How has the digital age enhanced this phenomenon? The underbelly of consumerism is the fragility of self. It is a social mechanism that uses adornment to empower a sense of self and hide the inner struggle to feel

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[117] Georg Simmel, *ibid.*, 203.
[118] Georg Simmel, *ibid.*, 203.

a sense of belonging in one's own body as well as in relation to others. We have become accustomed to the belief that objects made recognizable by their branding or aesthetic form distinguishes ourselves as singular units amongst the collective. In theory, this has allowed us to identity the other units that are dressing themselves towards the visual representation of a personality type that most resonates with us. Yet, this is the Frankenstein iteration of the concurrent relationship between subject and object. When there was more connection between the process of developing the object by the subject, the subject imparted bits of themselves in the object and the object allowed the subject to uncover either a new idea or a new understanding of themselves within the circumstances of time. There was an inherent individualism to objects. In the Industrial Age objects started to be developed with a heightened appearance of individuality without truly being the containers of anything beyond aesthetics. As the individual is further and further removed from actively participating in the creation of the object they become wholly dependent on the aesthetic as a complete means of value rather than the intellectual, creative, and manual process being the core value of the object. Understanding this paradigm shift in social dynamics, self-consciousness, and material culture during the Industrial Period helps us contextualize the roots of the conditions experienced today in the Digital Age.

Chapter IV

Georg Simmel observed and articulated the growing prevalence of voyeuristic relating in the social conditions that were developing in burgeoning metropolitan areas during the Industrial Age— voyeurism figures as an unprecedented change in how people came to conceptualize selfhood. As we leaned into superficial signals to create the feeling of personal connectivity, we became more detached from what those objects had once represented, therefore taking the material object far too seriously at face value. Objects enable the fragile self to withdraw from the very fact of being fragile. For better or worse, fashionable objects have become the toolbox we depend on to find ourselves and the armor we wear to defend that self in the public sphere. The self is already a fraught idea to grapple with and made further challenging when it becomes distracted by inanimate objects that appease the uncertainty of the state of being. In Simmel's time Salons were on the brink of irrelevance and social events increasingly occurred out of the home. Wide boulevards and the glances from passersby became just as, if not more, socially fulfilling encounters as people were forced to become accustomed to distant connections with their fellow beings. To a certain extent, the public sphere satisfied the inner self and the private sphere was preparation for the public performance of the self.

The inner and outer self are not mutually exclusive but there are elements that exist in one sphere and not in the other. Writers, philosophers, and artists have captured the performativity of being an individual amongst the collective for centuries. The betrayal of the outer self to the inner self is not one that began in the Industrial Age, yet it certainly became more apparent as more time was spent cultivating a fashionable outer self. For social beings such as humans, the fine line between conformity and individuality has been one that has been trodden before and will continue to be one that individuals navigate in spite of the unique existential conditions they face. Thus, while this concept was not new it was exacerbated by the fact that the anxiety to create a sense of

belonging in a newly emerging urban void has become more acute. Propriety declared, with no

single person's consent but the collective's agreement, that individuals were now isolated atoms

moving through the Capitalistic Ecosystem for themselves by themselves. As we have arguably

become more accustomed to the expectations and norms of the metropolis, the Digital Age has

ushered in a new set of social considerations and challenges to the understanding of selfhood. Social

media has given the performative self, that which does its best to hide any evidence of self-doubt

and flaw, a stage on which the actor has almost complete control of what the audience sees. The

layers of culture that have come to develop on social media platforms reveals new ways in which the

strain to find serenity in the dialectic between the *I* and the *we*, which predominates social living, has

manifested in the new conditions of the Digital Age.

Pixelated Voyeurism: Seeing and Being Seen in the Digital Age

Voyeurism has become a way for us to understand the culture of fashion and its objects

through ourselves and other people. The ways in which we see other informs how we see ourselves

and vice-versa. Simmel demonstrated through his work that social phenomena do not operate in a

singular, linear fashion. In fact, his understanding of selfhood exists in the crux of the tension

between two contradictory ideas which is why relief is never definitively sought— it is only found in

intermediate moments— thus, we keep chasing mere moments of reassurance. The increasing

prevalence of the mercurial understanding of the self developed because of our increasing

attachment to objects that are temporal in their own right. Simmel's suggestion that objects are our

attempt to materialize the transitoriness of time in conditions that have made the movements

towards the future more rapid and consistent have become a norm we unconsciously operate under.

Given that technology has made it so the present is just within or without of our reach, but never

graspable, grounding ourselves in objects gives us the feeling that we can tangibly experience the

present. However, assigning an entire essence to inanimate objects muddles the objective truth of

what an object is. By placing metaphysical meaning to things, we seek to transgress the discomfort of living deeply by favoring the superficial relief that comes with material signals and the appearance of community they provide. In the same way that objects provided us with the semblance of personal likeness and difference, social media facilitates the idea of connection and isolation. Furthermore, in the same way that fashionable objects became a tangential form of signaling individuality and conformity, social media has gone a step forward to quicken the speed at which we provide these signals for ourselves and others, thus making the satisfaction of community more instant and the frequency in which we seek this relief more habitual.

Yet in order to understand the impact of social media on social connections it is important to understand the role in which social media plays in the life of the individual. Not only are we more aware of the objects and places that are of the moment, we have the opportunity to display this knowledge in a seemingly more concrete way. The culture of social media migrates rapidly as it reflects the fashion that earns the user social capital. Thus, the value of sharing ourselves with others only finds meaning when it is validated by others, which is influenced by the sartorial and behavioral trends of the moment. If these conditions were not at the baseline of social media use, would there even be a purpose to sharing the inconsequentialities that often come with simply navigating life? In asking this question the answer begins to reveal itself— social media use is a modern form in which we seek validation from our peers for our ability to create content that aligns with whatever sliver of individuality we imbue into our images, along with the intentional effort to make it palatable for a larger cohort of people aligning with the fashion of the moment.

Digital photographs reflect the fact that we moved from being process-oriented to outcome-focused even in our creative endeavors. As technology developed it was applied to every facet of human life— first to our survival, then to our comfort, and now to our pleasure. We have become conditioned to value everything from the clothing that we wear, to the food that we eat, to the

media we consume simply for the outcome that we are presented with. Having no understanding for the process that allowed for whatever it is that we are consuming means that everything is rendered disposable, negligible, and replaceable. The simple motion of moving one's thumbs down a screen can translate into an absent-minded gesture in which we are neither present digitally or physically, however we are still placated by the sheer volume and variety of images to which we have access so that being aware of this apathy is less striking.

Text captions, which accompany the easily consumable and digestible photographs we default to capturing in order to ground ourselves in the present moment and reinforce the perceived significance of visual documents of moments, reveals the extent to which we have created culture for an online world where we are all citizens and simultaneously none of us truly belong. Text captions in themselves are aestheticized because the lexicon that is in use online is not always what is verbally spoken. From the use of fashionable slang and emoticons, to the use of punctuation and sentence structure, our written social media platforms illuminate Simmel's argument that the culture of behavior reflects a social process facilitated by fashion. This is bolstered by the fact that the particular written form in use for social media is subject to fashion in a way that mirrors the ways in which the images are visually produced. Text captions transcend the lyrical opportunity they provide people to express thoughts and feelings when spoken to others to instead take on a cadence that is visual rather than tonal. The sacredness of what it means to take the time to translate sensory experiences into words becomes mundane, even subverted, through social media because the very nature of this digital medium relies on palatable expressions of the human experience. The culture of the caption is a way in which we see the ways in which the principle of fashion is imbued into everything we do in the Digital Age.

The extent of fashion's influence on behavior and the ways in which expression is licensed reveals how social norms become codified when we are physically near each other but personally

distant. It would seem that the images produced for social media follow a similar pattern that Simmel identified with sartorial, behavioral, architectural, etc. developments in the Industrial Age: in trying to be of the present images reflect elements of what was successful in the past while also experimenting with what may be of the future to create the appearance of relevance in order to create a version of the present for that individual within the collective. In subscribing to these norms we conform to the predominating culture of an online world. Social media accentuates the pleasure that is found in treading the line between the individual and the collective because it is instantaneous and measurable. It differs from the voyeurism that is experienced on the street of the modern city because it is more forthright in what we are seeking from all these interactions— the validation of others, a sense of belonging.

It becomes even more obvious what has been lost since we came to become subject to our objects. In becoming attached to the metaphysical meaning of objects, the reason why this was done in the first place has been lost. Broadcasting ourselves has become a way of creating and reinforcing the identities we construct. It is a platform where we express our social acuity and ability to incorporate fashion into our identities. It becomes a display that is so brazen in its attempt to prove our sartorial and social awareness of the moment's fashion that its absurdity has been silently normalized. We have become indifferent towards the ways in which we use social media as a quick and expansive way to prove our awareness of and participation in the latest fashion.[119] It has become a straightforward and accessible way of finding the semblance of community while circumventing the true process of finding acceptance from others. As the turnover of objects has quickened, the attachment to the performative identities we create with those objects have had similarly short life cycles. This does not in itself suggest that the only catalyst to personal expansion and growth, which

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[119] Sarah Geber, Helmut Scherer, and Dorothée Hefner. "Social Capital in Media Societies: The Impact of Media Use and Media Structures on Social Capital." (*International Communication Gazette* 78, no. 6, 2016): 499.

are arguably the foundations for existing, is a material object. However, in so closely associating our identities with materiality we have become comfortable grounding our personalities in the aesthetic manifestations of ourselves. We have become accustomed to aestheticizing personal qualities without perhaps being fully intentional about doing so. Even just in the process of aestheticizing things we complicity aestheticize ourselves, impacting our ability to be comfortable with that which is not delightful and digestible.

The idea that a certain personality trait can be represented through a garment is one that has been normalized but only became prevalent when individuals were presented with ready to wear options. In the Industrial Age it became possible to segment society because people could now purchase items from places that they felt put them among their cohorts. The subject was no longer in control of the object itself but rather, the process of identifying which object would offer them the signals they wanted to convey to the rest of society. This phenomenon is still present in the Digital Age. Social media has bolstered the aestheticization of existing. Social media aestheticizes people. It aestheticizes friendships, experiences, and places. The importance of what it means to aestheticize facets of life that have much more intellectual, sensory, emotional, and physical significance than the superficial portrayal of the very components of living means that we are more likely to take in meaningful moments without their due weight. In becoming accustomed to the aesthetics of living we are less in tune with the metaphysical components of intangible existence. Instead, we are more consumed with the concept of seeing and being seen to engineer the sensation of personal connectivity.

Existential Escapism in Modern Conditions

Applications and platforms create the impression of expected outcomes and the impression of certainty, which are two concepts we have become increasingly dependent on. While the object of consumption— visual content— is variable, the consistency of the containers— the applications

and platforms themselves— strike a perfect balance that satiates our need for stimulation and consistency. Thus, we are never satisfied, especially in today's existential conditions where we are constantly bombarded with the fast approaching future, we have become addicted to change while still needing to contain it and make it graspable. In the process of making things comfortably within our scope we have come to see the self as infallible. This is bolstered through the ways in which we have imbued deeper meaning to visual signals. Through our growing investments on materials and certificates as well as a perception that success and failure are the only two binaries that exist we have become increasingly comfortable chasing these external distractions than discovering the crevices of our identities. Not only does social media give fashion culture an additional space to develop in a way that mirrors the ways in which this process occurs offline, it also provides another stage for us to convey social signals about our seemingly individual material identities.

The question of individuality existing in the first place is arguable, yet the Digital Age has seemingly provided us with all the tools to express our conceptions of ourselves in public spheres. However, if we do not take this idea for granted and consider the fundamental assumptions we are making, then this idea becomes challenging. If words are a reductive expression of thoughts and feelings, an attempt to translate the unique language we speak in our minds through the medium of a language in which we have come to collectively agree on the explicit and implicit meanings of words, then fashion and its objects does similar work for the inner self. While we cannot take for granted the very existence of the inner self, it is equally untrue to claim that a self which is colored by the experiences we live, the thoughts and feelings we have, and the ways in which we perceive ourselves in relation to the people and spaces we exist in does not provide us with some sort of distinctiveness. However, our increasing dependence on our outer self to embody the entirety of our selfhood detracts us from leaning into the vulnerability that is essential to building meaningful relationships rather than superficial, voyeuristic acquaintances.

Furthermore, social media has not just quickened the ways in which we relate to one another through voyeurism we have reached a stage where people become restless unless they are perpetually distracted. The concept of idleness is rejected even in personal connections. Apps, social platforms, and digital communication allow us to feel emotionally connected to people at the cost of making us even more disconnected from the people we are physically nearest. Thus, we sense a feeling of consistent isolation. As Simmel revealed, Industrialization's impact on social and spatial conditions that made voyeuristic connecting a more meaningful form of relating to people than truly building deep relationships, it seems that technology has furthered this process of making individuals into increasingly isolated atoms. As Clark et. al. stated, "Lonely people are more drawn to mediated communication…but social network sites may also open the door to loneliness if they are used for 'social snacking,' or temporary but illusory fulfillment of social needs."[120] The cycle that emerges is that we become more invested in our social media the more the feeling of loneliness dissipates through "social snacking." Being less aware of the people around us and focusing on the worlds we actively choose to participate in and allowing us to opt out of the mundaneness that is equally a part of existing, we become accustomed to the idea that life is perpetually exciting. We become anxious unless we are engaged or distracted. Yet life and existence is revealed in the crevices of experiences. Our increasing discomfort with idleness creates more and more tools that satiate this at the expense of our most human qualities. Our consistent chase to have stimulating experiences for the sake of digital identity construction reinforces the fact that we live at the surface level of life. Our perceived shortcomings, physical and experiential, become magnified when we are just bombarded with reductive images that construct a fantasy world that does not truly exist but visually does. Ultimately,

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[120] Jenna L. Clark, Sara B. Algoe, and Melanie C. Green. "Social Network Sites and Well-Being: The Role of Social Connection." (Current Directions in Psychological Science 27, no. 1, 2018): 33.

connecting with someone becomes virtually impossible because we are so focused on way we aesthetically present ourselves and the lives we live.

Social media makes it possible to conflate the immediate gratification of surface level engagement with the intellectual and emotional labor necessary to create meaningful relationships. The same social principles that emerged during Industrialization— efficiency and an outcome-oriented view of life— are applied to social media, which inadvertently influences how we think of our personal relationships. It is increasingly clear that we are becoming disconnected from the skills and internal mechanisms that allow us to accomplish the process of creating social bonds. In getting lost in the adornment of the self and the broadcasting of the aestheticized self we have become more disconnected from ourselves and those around us. If objects gave people the tools to create the illusion of connectivity in the Industrial Age, social media has gotten closer to engineering the psychological and physiological experience of interpersonal connection. Various studies have revealed that when users were asked about the impact of social media on their lives the results tend to be overwhelmingly negative.[121] This is perhaps due to the fact that although the appearances of connectivity on social media appear stronger, the visualized representation aligns with the human mind's penchant for imagery as well as the highly aestheticized and codified representations of friendship in the Digital Age, the depth of those relationships are shallower and thus less fulfilling. Thus, we are compelled to lean in further to the construction of the self, hoping that the signals we take on will bring us closer to the relationships and communities we crave.

However, this idea aligns with the reorientation of our priorities to be more outcome oriented than process focused. Notifications, voyeurism that is more ubiquitous and less accountable, as well as the ability to create connections with people that are physically far and near

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[121] *ibid.*

provide us with an instant gratification that becomes addictive. Social media provides us the opportunity to escape the most mildly and deeply uncomfortable expressions of existence. From the digitization of romantic courting to ordering coffee, and everything in between, we are no longer forced to grapple with the discomfort of being. Because we are bombarded with perfection we have come to take perfection for granted. Truthfully speaking, existing is a very awkward state to be in. We have become so used to the aestheticization of life to the point that the humor and absurdity of *being* is masked. Thus, we become bold online when we can control every aspect of our self-presentation and become tepid in the physical world, delicately treading uncertainty out of fear for deviating from the perfect self that is digitally constructed.

To a certain extent we are not only voyeuristic of others online, we are also seeing ourselves detached from the physical version whose layers of emotional and intellectual depth is often lost digitally. A certain degree of self-voyeurism merges when the process of constructing an identity happens beyond our corporeal grasp. In the same way that we are able to see others in passing on city streets, we are given an unprecedented chance to study the self through our digital personas— thus, the skills we developed to study others are then applied back on the individual's digital self. The feedback loop that happens between the parallel construction of physical and digital selfhood, which are arguably distinct, creates dialectic tension in which a new inner struggle emerges. The fast moving nature of time in the digital world does not match the ways in which time exists in the physical world, which ultimately renders both identities in a state of flux.

What is most appealing about social media is that we are given an opportunity to exist in two worlds. We exist in the physical world where individuals who are navigating the fragility of their selfhood collide. The spontaneity of interaction creates uncertain conditions that give life its texture but is equally unsettling because it forces us to confront the fact that for all our perceived hegemonies, we are reactive and impressionable rather than operative and judicious. The pressure to

act in a certain way is internalized by the self and projected onto others because we become acutely aware of the ways in which we can be seen by the many eyes we seek validation from. In the physical world the sensory experience of feeling the intangible presence of one's fellow beings, the need for validation takes on a different form than it does online. The true meaning of self-consciousness, an intensified experience of being confronted by an awareness of self expression, emerges when we interact with one another.[122] This vulnerable state is unsettling. Thus, we escape it through social media by projecting the versions of ourselves that we would like to be. We internalize validation in a quantifiable way and adapt to that self. But there is also a liberation that occurs in the digital world. The absence of immediate awareness to judgements coming from others, a certain degree of inability to gauge judgement allows for an alter ego to emerge.

Technology is facilitating a process in which we are less adept to dealing with spontaneity and existential friction in the personal world, which reinforces a process in which we default to carrying out connections and fostering those relationships through digital means. In becoming accustomed to keeping our own understanding of our identities superficial, we tend to do the same with the majority of our relationships. In being disconnected from our own selves it becomes virtually impossible to know how to do that with others. However, online content-based communities reveal emotional and intellectual likeness in a way that is not experienced in the conditions of the physical world today. It has provided us with an aestheticized way to confront the experiences and sensations that are otherwise uncertain. In being unable to verbally express vulnerability because it would betray the aestheticized self we use digitally codified, culturally relevant, and fashionable language to talk about the human experience in a qualifying way. This

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[122] Kenneth Williford, David Rudrauf and Carissa L. Philippi. "Self-Consciousness." Encyclopedia of the Mind. Edited by Harold Pashler. (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc., 2013): 2.
http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781452257044.n250

reinforces our tendency to find refuge in digital spaces— there is an honesty that comes from being physically removed from the act of connecting. Thus, while our technology becomes an extension of the physical world it also exceeds and falls short of what we are able to accomplish corporeally.

A Consideration for the Silver Linings of the Digital Age

Social media is another form that reveals the ways in which communication and social connections have adapted to the state of technological developments.[123] The tendency to place things in extreme binaries is once again revealed to be a lazy intellectual framework that does not capture the true essence of how things exist. In articulating the ways in which the self gets lost in the digital mediums it is equally important to consider how and why social media has enhanced our relationships and enabled self-actualization. Clark et. al. cite research that has found "self-disclosure as a potential mechanism by demonstrating that self-disclosing on social network sites also increases well-being by increasing perceived social support."[124] What is most interesting about this idea is that it is possible that we have become satisfied with the perception of "social support" rather than the actuality of it, which would indicate a shift in our social dynamics and expectations. It raises questions about our adaptability and what we classify as the true experiencing of "social support." Did the profound social changes that Simmel observed and articulated in his work recondition humans to psychologically and physiologically experience personal connectivity in a new way? Or did the seeming lack of options create a degree of apathy that we have acclimated to?

It is once again interesting to consider the ways in which the self has become empowered and undermined through the cultures and fashions developed for social media. To a certain degree we are agents of these two respective phenomenon and are simultaneously passive takers. Yet given the ways in which technology is so fast-moving, we are perhaps more willing to experiment with the

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[123] Jenna L. Clark, Sara B. Algoe, and Melanie C. Green. *ibid.*, 32
[124] Jenna L. Clark, Sara B. Algoe, and Melanie C. Green. *ibid.*, 34.

expression and exploration of our identities. The anonymity that social media provides its users and the ways in which the gazes is abstracted humans have an unparalleled opportunity to consider their selfhood. In Simmel's time the gaze was omnipresent and inescapable. Social media to a certain degree emphasizes the fact that voyeurism is inescapable but also provides some refuge by giving its users the opportunity to explore the spectrum of identity. Given that we internalize a different level of self-consciousness online we perhaps become more intentional and deliberate with our expression— a skill that is lost in the physical world's manifestation of the Digital Age. While I argued that text captions tend to be reductive, I equally recognize that it provides people with an opportunity to be more precise with their language, to explore language in a way that we have become disconnected from in the physical world today. With the anonymity of social media people use language to express vulnerability and the human condition in a way that we are accustomed to not doing at all offline. It becomes interesting to consider how the language we use online expresses all at once the physical self, the digital self, the inner self, and the social self. Consequently, in the same way that technology can facilitate the distance between people it concurrently can "provide orientation for social interactions and thus stabilize informal relations."[125] It thus becomes important to consider how images embolden the exploration of the self and facilitate social connections in a way that was impossible to in earlier time periods.

The Digital Age has worked towards democratizing the flow and availability of information. Today it is possible to create platforms to share ideas that once needed tremendous infrastructure to exist.[126] While news sources have an equal tendency to become saturated or misrepresentative due to the new conception of time the Digital Age has ushered in, which moves more quickly than physical time, the tools for us to know about people and cultures, stories and ideas beyond us have never

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[125] Sarah Geber, Helmut Scherer, and Dorothée Hefner. *ibid.*, 506.
[126] *ibid.*

been more accessible. People who have been systematically ignored and undervalued by institutions with the resources to shape public opinion have been given opportunities to share their point of view with audiences that they may have never reached in the Analog Age. While we have never been more distant from each other it cannot be negated that we also have never been closer. Our citizenship to the digital world has fostered a degree of connectivity that transcends the barriers we have created in the physical world. The perils of social media and the Digital World are not negated by the benefits of it. Beyond the actual content of Simmel's work he posits a framework that proves binaries, which are an intellectually palatable way to compartmentalize complex ideas, do not exist. Social media is not bad nor is it good. It is a tool that simultaneously empowers and confines its users. In the Digital Age we must lean into the human condition and the entirety of what it means to exist in order to not lose ourselves to the comforts of distraction and escapism.

Conclusion

Modern modes of consumerism and the new social dynamics of the Digital Age have touched the deepest parts of our psychology to condition us to expect instant gratification in all experiences of life, yet perhaps most notably in the financial, personal, romantic, sexual, and professional facets of life. The Industrial Era changed our value system so that we no longer appreciated the process of building and creating. Instead, we have come to expect successful outcomes, as we have envisioned them for ourselves, as inevitable and utterly deserved. It cannot be understated how transformational the movement towards a focus on outcomes from lifestyles that were once rooted in process was for humanity, a development that Georg Simmel aptly observed and precisely articulated in his writing.

While the word *modernity* and its variations have held implicitly positive associations since Industrialization, it does not take into account that in the process of moving towards technological advancement the personal accountability we have to each other, a very necessary part of the social fabric, has been compromised. Simmel reveals that this is in large part a result of a cycle that emerged during the Industrial Age to which we become wholly devoted. With the rise of constantly changing fashion, facilitated by efficient technology, we became dependent on our jobs to provide us with the means to participate in fashion and material culture. From the rise of mass produced commercialized goods, voyeuristic relating and connectivity, to the development of fashion and materiality as facets of culture in society, which were all contained within and enhanced by the Capitalistic Ecosystem of quickly growing cities, Simmel's ideas compel society to turn the mirror upon itself and consider these changes critically. What Simmel accomplishes in his analysis is an intersectional exploration of the social mechanisms and phenomena that developed during the Industrial Age, which fundamentally changed how we navigated life since.

Through the development of urbanity, and the ways in which it facilitated voyeuristic and transactional relationships, we lost pieces of our humanity. We became out of touch with our ability to create meaningful relationships and instead resorted to material signals that could generate the semblance of connectivity. These ideas are easily dismissed for they deal with matters that our seemingly rational and unemotional value system deems superficial and inconsequential. However, this was not, and continues not to be, the case. I argue throughout that it is because articulating fashion and material culture, the ways in which they facilitate our tendency towards connection in habitative conditions that encourage individuality, threatens to reveal the extent of the fragile self that we are terrified to uncover the profound ways fashion influences us. Because the underlying impetus of fashion and material culture stems from entirely emotional needs there is an implicit concern that recognizing this would unravel the principle that humans are logical, which would consequently call into question other systems that are only legitimized because they fall under the guise of rationality.

In the Digital Age the phenomena that Simmel describes are not only perpetuated, but heightened. The growing presence of both physical and digital voyeurism has enhanced both our need to feel continuously distracted and ability to escape the perennial discomforts of existing. Technology has given us the tools to not only follow and participate in fashion culture more closely, but also to generate the objects of fashion at a faster rate. These two developments inform each other and the effect is that we are in greater flux as we tread the obscure line between individuality and conformity. Yet this task has been complicated by an additional, unprecedented consideration. Because of the ways in which the Digital Age makes self-voyeurism possible, in addition to psychologically grappling with the question of individuality and conformity as we have since the Industrial Era, we are now more visually aware of ourselves in a way that exceeds confronting the self through a mirror or the gaze of others. Social media facilitates the process in which we take the

skills that we have acquired through the rise of metropolitan voyeurism and apply them unto ourselves. In seeing ourselves through this detached means, we aestheticize our online selves in a way that is distinct from our corporeal selves. From the ways we physically present ourselves through images that brazenly signal our attunement to fashion culture, to the ways we aestheticize our intellectual and emotional depth through captions, we create additional layers to our self-expression that are seemingly meaningful but in reality only contribute to the semblance of identity. Because social media compels us to be hyper-deliberate in our self-presentation and the mechanisms of online connectivity are inherently artificial, our online and corporeal relationships are revealed to lack depth, which our consistent connection distracts us from recognizing. Thus, it becomes apparent that technology in the Digital Age has only intensified the phenomena that Simmel observed during the Industrial Age.

What is remarkable is how relevant and accurate Simmel's theories have remained since the Industrial Era to the Digital Age. Thus, the limited scope of scholarly work related to Georg Simmel's intellectual oeuvre until recently reveal what a disruptive force he was in German and Prussian academia during the end of the nineteenth and start of the twentieth centuries. The fact that awareness of his work was and continues to be on the perimeter of popular knowledge cannot singly be attributed to prevalent anti-Semitism during his lifetime, the unconventional and intersectional frameworks that Simmel developed, or the unorthodox topics to which he applied his unique perspective. Just discussing fashion, which even then was seen as frivolous, articulating the contemporary definition of objects and material culture before anyone else did, and thinking critically about the suppression of women put Simmel in a disadvantaged position in terms of the intellectual continuation of his work. It is truly a synthesis of all of these reasons, and the ways in which they reinforced each other, that positioned him further and further away from his contemporaries through the passage of time. Yet with the emergence of new approaches to

historical research, namely revisionism and historiography, revived scholarly interest in Simmel's work speaks to how the ideas of this great thinker outlived their originator and escaped irrelevancy. Ultimately, the fact that Simmel's work existed in relative obscurity, when compared to that of his colleagues Weber and Durkheim, reveals the ways in which the collective consciousness is impeded by the process of compartmentalizing ideas in order to protect propriety.

Simmel's ideas challenge convention and ground very abstract underlying social dynamics in concrete language and intellectual frameworks. This is what sociology as a discipline aims to do and it owes a great deal of its legacy to a prolific thinker whose view of the world compelled us to reconsider ideas and phenomena we take for guarantee. By providing biographical context to Simmel, examining the concepts that illuminate the phenomena of which he wrote, closely analyzing the frameworks and ideas he put forth, and applying his theories to the Digital Age I hope the reader of this thesis will think critically about the assumptions we make about the ways in which our world operates to be able to participate more intentionally and thoughtfully. The less we run away from ourselves and the timeless aches of beingness through the distractions developed during the Industrial Era and Digital Age, the more we may be able to enjoy the process of finding the pursuits and people that bring genuine meaning to our lives.

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