



DRESS & FASHION RESEARCH

**FASHIONING MEMORY**  
VINTAGE STYLE AND YOUTH CULTURE

HEIKE JENSS

B L O O M S B U R Y

# FASHIONING MEMORY

## DRESS AND FASHION RESEARCH

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Vintage Style and Youth Culture

**Heike Jenss**

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To my mother Ursula Jenß



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# PREFACE

In 2012 *Showstudio* released a short film titled *The New Faces*, photographed by Dean Chalkley. The film is shot in crisp black and white, capturing in slow motion against a white seamless studio backdrop the dance moves, poses and appearances of eight twenty-first-century modernists—six men and two women—dressed in sharp suits, polished shoes and meticulous hair styles. The viewer hears no music to this scene of dancing bodies, but the voices of three men talking about their passion for modern, timeless clothing and style. The camera zooms in on the details of clothing and appearance: on the covered buttons of suit jackets, the side vents of neatly ironed trousers, the women's eye make-up, the tassel and woven loafers, the heels that leave dark traces of the dancing bodies on the white vinyl studio backdrop. The immaculate old-fashioned clothes, the bodies dancing to mute music, the slow motion and monochrome photography create a scene that accentuates and aestheticizes a material absence and presence of time. The twenty-minute documentary gives a glimpse into the endurance of mid-twentieth-century fashion and style that is picked up, worn, enacted, remembered and reimagined by a new generation of youth or young adults, whose looks and moves are material testimony of the “affective force” (see Thrift 2010) of former fashions, or how past aesthetics “move” present bodies.

In this book I seek to explore the experience and allure of past fashions to new wearers, bringing together different times and places of research. Empirically the book builds and expands on research I began to pursue in Germany in the early twenty-first century, culminating in my German book *Sixties Dress Only: Mode und Konsum in der Retro-Szene der Mods* (Jenss 2007). Early stages of this research also appeared in some English publications (Jenss 2004, 2005a). This work is based on an ethnographic study of the sixties scene in Germany, with a particular focus on how clothing of the 1960s is used, refashioned and forms a material part of practices and processes of identification and social relationships in the context of youth culture.

My research evolved as part of a collaborative project located at the universities of Dortmund and Frankfurt am Main (funded by The Volkswagen Foundation 2002–5) that investigated dynamics of uniformization and seriality in diverse

clothing contexts, from corporate dress codes to everyday fashion, the rise of fast fashion, and mass-individualization (see Mentges and Richard 2005; Mentges, Neuland-Kitzerow and Richard 2007).

After I had moved to take on a new position in the US, the work on this book, *Fashioning Memory: Youth Culture and Vintage Style*, initially began to evolve as a project of translation. Yet with the dynamics of time and place, the process of writing and further research, this project started to crystallize its own focus on the intersection of youth, vintage, fashion time and cultural memory—with the latter offering a productive methodological angle to explore how time or the cross-temporal dynamics of fashion and youth cultural style come to be experienced and enacted through dress practices. While such an interest was to an extent inherent in the original field research and interviews, it is the bringing together of fashion and memory as an “operative metaphor,” and the understanding of remembering as a “performative act,” as it is conceptualized in more recent research in the field of memory studies, as I will outline in the introduction to this book, that shed new light on my material. In addition, it is the role of language itself and the thinking about shifting terminologies, for example from retro to vintage, and what these shifts may entail, as well as the impact of time and change itself—including the developments of new technologies and the fostering of vintage aesthetics, as well as experiences of nostalgia through media over the last decade (see Jenss 2013) and the observation of changing preferences, aesthetics and perceptions of “the sixties” and sixties style—that led me to reflect on and expand my research through perspectives on time, memory, fashion and modernity.

This book brings then different phases of research together, with insights—and hindsight—emerging from each that inform the chapters in this book, including historical research on the rise of vintage in fashion, and on the allure of the new and the old in youth culture, empirical explorations of the materialities of second-hand consumption and the performance of vintage style, and their framing through perspectives and theories on the dynamics, mediation and experience of cultural memory, modernity and the temporalities of fashion.

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This book evolved through the course of several phases and places of research. Much of the empirical material informing the discussion in this book, especially in Chapters 4 to 6, is grounded in field research I conducted on vintage and sixties enthusiasts in Germany, without whom this book would not exist. I am indebted to anyone who participated in the original ethnographic research: those who took me along to sixties events, who spoke with me informally, who hung out with me and who let me participate. I am particularly grateful to my interviewees who took the time and generously let me into their homes, allowed me to look through their wardrobes and talked with me about their clothes, and who provided me with insights into their experiences and feelings about clothing and vintage shopping and their discoveries of, and affinity for, sixties style. I want to express my thanks to The Volkswagen Foundation for funding this research from 2002 to 2005 at Dortmund University, and for the travel support to meet interviewees and participate in sixties events in Germany, Italy and Spain, as well as to pursue archival research at the Archiv der Jugendkulturen e.V. in Berlin. Thanks also to Campus Verlag, in particular to Judith Wilke-Primavesi, for the permission to work off selected material from my German book *Sixties Dress Only: Mode und Konsum in der Retro-Szene der Mods* (Jenss 2007).

The more recent work on this book began most productively with a pre-sabbatical leave I was awarded by Parsons The New School for Design in the academic year 2012/13 that enabled me to immerse myself in the research and early writing stages of this book. I want to express my gratitude to Dean Sarah Lawrence for all her support. My special thanks go also to my colleagues and friends at Parsons' School of Art and Design History and Theory and beyond: particularly to Hazel Clark, Jilly Traganou, Miodrag Mitrasinovic, Clive Dilnot, Pascale Gatzen, Christina Moon, Francesca Granata, Rachel Lifter, Marilyn Cohen, Todd Nicewonger, Janet Kraynak and David Brody for opportunities to speak about my research in classes or in conversations, and for their interest, comments or encouraging nods along the way. I am thankful for the generous funding I received from Parsons to help with research expenses, including travel

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# 1 INTRODUCTION: FASHION AND CULTURAL MEMORY

Memory is in fashion. The reevaluation of used, aged and discarded clothes, making their way through the second-hand clothing circuits back onto the bodies of new wearers as “vintage,” is an example for the appeal of fashion and clothes as forms of material memory. A century ago the word vintage was used in the context of high fashion to describe last season’s clothes, whose age or “datedness” should ideally be hidden by updating them in fresh combinations or by modifying any season-revealing details. Today, however, the word vintage refers to clothes of a certain age: clothes that are precisely valued for their materialization of time and “datedness” and their capacity as memory modes through which new wearers can feel in touch with a former fashion time.

The rise of old clothes to the rank of vintage and the incorporation of the sartorial past in contemporary appearance making has become one of the major developments across fashion and popular culture in recent decades, tying in with the promotion of ideas of individuality and authenticity. This popularity of the past as vintage occurred alongside an increasing acceleration of fashion production and communication, leading to the global expansion of fast fashion, but yet equally along an expanding memory culture propelled through the accumulation and circulation of the past in material and visual culture. The use and valuing of second-hand clothing as vintage, a kind of reversal of the idea of “newness” in fashion by dressing in outmoded clothes, has been particularly popular among youth, raising questions with regard to the intersections of fashion, time, age/generation and cultural memory. Building on ethnographic fieldwork in Germany, this book sets out to explore how these intersections play out in everyday dress and consumption practices—focusing in on youth and young adults, who through clothing and style recollect “the sixties” in the early twenty-first century.

As part of a youth cultural scene that bridges past and present, contemporary sixties enthusiasts form a particularly interesting case study for an exploration of vintage style and cultural memory. They are remembering a decade intricately

bound up with ideas of modernity, the expansion of fashion and consumer culture, and the generation of a powerful memory culture. By immersing themselves into the fashion and music of the 1960s, hunting for old clothes and modeling themselves on past styles as closely as possible, “the sixties” are here not distant history but come to enter their own memory, even though they were not even born in the time they now recall with their bodies.

Despite the fashionability of vintage and retro styles in varied youth cultures, the everyday practices and experiences that are part of their use and performance through the material and visual culture of fashion have so far been only little explored. This may be in part due to the conception and expectation of both fashion and youth culture as sites of innovation and eternal renewal. Through its apparent ephemerality and its continuous production or intriguing narration of the “new,” fashion is understood to immerse us in the now by generating distance to the past and a desire to forget: “Every new Fashion is a refusal to inherit, a subversion against the oppression of the preceding Fashion,” noted Roland Barthes (1990: 273). In this sense fashion has been conceived as a promise of future and modernity, liberating from the past as a cultural burden. This idea of working against the past, the “refusal to inherit,” can be extended to the understanding of youth, or youth culture, as motor and metaphor for modernity. From its conception in the late nineteenth century and even more so with the expansion of consumer culture from the mid-twentieth century onwards, “youth” has been conceptualized as an innovative force (see Savage 2007), feeding into the development of fashion styles, brands and markets. From this perspective, the ongoing aesthetic immersion into the past among younger people may read as a sign of cultural regress or as indicating a lack of, or even inability for, cultural inventiveness. Such a tendency is evident in the discourse that has evolved since the 1970s and 1980s around the meaning, or rather the lack of meaning, associated with “retro” in the context of media and consumer culture, seen as a random, “cannibalistic” or ironic ransacking of history. This perspective has been formulated most forcefully by Fredric Jameson, who argued that “the producers of culture have nowhere to turn but to the past: the imitation of dead styles, speech through all the masks and voices stored up in the imaginary museum of a now global culture” (see Jameson 1984: 65; see also Baudrillard 1993). This postmodern reading of retro as an all-encompassing phenomenon continues to inform contemporary views of the engagement with the past among youth. Music writer Simon Reynolds reflects in his book *Retromania* (2011a) on a wide range of examples of “pop culture’s addiction to its own past” and expresses concern about the impact that the expansion of media and its apparently endless storage capacities have on youth:

What seems to have happened is that the place that The Future once occupied in the imagination of young music-makers has been displaced by The Past:

that's where the romance now lies, with the idea of things that have been lost. The accent, today, is not on discovery but on recovery. (Reynolds 2011b)

Reynolds sees a “compulsion to relive and reconsume pop history” as evidence of an “unhealthy fixation on the bygone” (Reynolds 2011b). His worry is that the omnipresence of the past in images, videos and websites suffocates the present, and results only in a “total recall” and exact replication of the past; a process that suppresses in his view any innovativeness, originality or “imaginary reworkings” of the past (Reynolds 2011b). Inherent in these readings is to a certain extent the continuation of a narrative of modernity that idealizes ideas of “newness” and “progress;” promoting a perspective on time or temporality that tends to undermine the dynamic role of the past—for example in the form of cultural memory or remembering—as constitutive to the present, and an integral part in the experience of time or temporality, and identity or subjectivity.

Many scholars have critiqued the postmodern discourse on retro (see Wilson 1990; McRobbie 1994; Evans 2000; Baker 2013), for its generalizing and also essentializing tendencies that overshadow the varied ways in which forms of the past are used in diverse contexts, and with quite different meanings or effects. With a perspective on fashion, Elizabeth Wilson already questioned in 1990 if retro is in fact “exclusively *de nos jours*” (Wilson 1990: 224), giving examples for a range of preceding style-revivals in the history of fashion (see also Burman-Baines 1981). For Wilson the generalizations inherent in the postmodern discussion of retro across all forms of visual and material culture have more to do with the “creation of a cultural myth about ‘our times’” (1990: 231)—they remain anchored in the “project of defining a *Zeitgeist*” (1990: 232), “which flattens out the contradictory, refractory nature of contemporary existence and seeks to create a stereotype of the present in the present” (1990: 231).

It is likely due to the stereotyping tendencies and overuse of the term retro as an all-encompassing label to define a particular late-twentieth-century disposition, a “retro-mood” (Horx 1995), that the term vintage started to see more frequent use in the early twenty-first century. According to the statistics of a search in *The Vogue Archive* on Proquest, which is based on the American edition, the magazine’s use of the term “vintage” almost tripled in the first decade of the twenty-first century, compared to the preceding 1990s (rising from 571 to 1,448 mentions). The term vintage is itself a kind of throwback to the time when the wearing of old, second-hand clothes emerged as an alternative to new fashion in the 1960s, and thus works as a kind of distinction from the word retro, or rather from what the term retro has been associated with, such as cultural regress, lack of innovativeness, pastiche, irony, or an “unsentimental nostalgia for the past” (Guffey 2006: 17; for a discussion see Baker 2013). Yet, as with any label, vintage as well is a term that has attracted negative critique, especially for its “branding” of old clothes, and for inflating their price. However, in what way vintage constructs

a certain value around old clothes, and around the idea of age in fashion, is open for further exploration and will be part of the discussion in this book. While I have used the term retro in my previous work, and retro and vintage interchangeably (Jenss 2005a), I am using vintage (and vintage style) in this book because it is the term that has come to name a specific form of using old clothes for their age or anachronism that has emerged as a practice among youth at least since the 1960s (McRobbie 1994). As I will further discuss in this book, it is a term, or concept, that describes a specific value related to or constructed around the age of clothes, including an idea of rarity associated with them. Overall it seems to be a word that has its origin in material culture (as an old word for “antique”), rather than in visual culture (like the word retro, emerging in the context of film).

Newer academic research, and in particular work engaging with the actual forms and practices in which objects of the past are used, has moved beyond the postmodern retro discourse, opening up more nuanced perspectives on how objects, images and styles of the past are used in a variety of practices and contexts ranging from film (Sprengler 2009), fashion (Evans 2000, 2003; Gregson, Brooks and Crewe 2001; DeLong, Heinemann and Reiley 2005; Clark 2008; Aronowsky Cronberg 2009; Granata 2010), to interior design (Baker 2013). Especially the research of scholars working on second-hand markets, both in historic and contemporary contexts, has been invaluable to illuminate the circulation of objects and their investment with new meanings and values in the context of a highly diversified market, that caters to a wide range of consumers (see Hansen 2000; Gregson and Crewe 2003; Palmer and Clark 2005; Hawley 2006; Norris 2012; Lemire 2012; Botticello 2012). Contributing to this body of research are also ethnography and interview based studies that explore the consumption of vintage clothing in the early twenty-first century (DeLong, Heinemann and Reiley 2005; Reiley and DeLong 2011; Cassidy and Bennett 2012). These studies offer insightful explorations contextualizing vintage with wider developments in the fashion market, most notably with a move towards more sustainable practices and ecological awareness among consumers. Building on this work, and to establish a context to understand the use of old clothes with a perspective on youth culture—as well as the values produced around “old” or discarded clothes—it is useful to consider here further how vintage clothes and practices are bound up with the dynamics of fashion and style, consumer culture and the fashioning of memory.

## **Fashion and/as memory**

It is only through our ability to remember that we experience “being” or “becoming” in time, experiences through which we develop a sense of self in time and place and in relation to others (see Olick, Vinitzky-Seroussi and Levi 2011: 37). Or in other words, the activating, sharing and shaping of memories together