

Sarah Mae Rogado
Professor Ann Alter
Vintage: Wearing the Present in the Past

Abstract

This paper examines the role of vintage in modern fashion and discusses if its use in fashion has allowed it to progress in terms of new ideas and design. Vintage clothing provides an alternate source of identity to choose from for its wearers in order to create their own individual personality. Many people wear vintage clothing as a way to express individuality while at the same time be considered fashionable. Others wear vintage as a means of creatively satisfying nostalgia for past decades by through dress. The progress of change and ideas in modern society has also become so rapid that vintage dress allows its wearers to modify their identity at a rate that is comfortable for them. Through innovation and vintage clothing, modern fashion has been able to create fashionable new styles that are unique yet familiar.

Today, many people use vintage styles in their clothing and dress. The use of dated clothing in modern dress has become a growing trend in fashion. Vintage began in the 1970s through the revival of clothing and art from the 1920s through the 1950s. As a form of revival termed as “retro,” many young people began to wear clothing from previous eras not just as a fashion statement but also as a way to relive better times and to make a political statement about their current time. As time has progressed, there has become a distinction between the terms vintage and retro. Vintage is the use of old clothing that appeals to modern dress whereas retro is the use of clothing that does not fit in with modern cultural expression.

Vintage has become an important part of fashion because it creates a new source of identity for its wearers. The appeal of vintage allows the average person to be able to express a sense of individuality while at the same time maintain an aesthetic that appeals to modern culture. However, consumer culture has taken notice of the increasing interest in vintage and has begun to create vintage inspired trends as part of the mainstream. Fashion has increasingly re-used styles from various eras such as the 1920s and the 1950s. Also, with the recent economic crisis, many people have begun to shop at secondhand clothing stores and buy vintage items

similar to current trends to incorporate into their wardrobe for less than the cost of mainstream clothing. So the question is whether fashion is innovative and able to move forward in terms of new styles or is fashion unoriginal by recycling and reusing ideas and trends from previous eras?

In The Empire of Fashion by Gilles Lipovetsky, he describes how fashion has gained an important role in contemporary society. He shows that through the history of fashion, the cultural meanings and values that are expressed in clothing have played an important role in society, especially those that expressed individuality and high position. He describes that modern fashion has also come to its next phase, open fashion, in which a variety of styles and principles of appearance can be mixed together to create an individual identity. He also claims that society only keeps parts of the past that are relevant to our present and so fashion oscillates between the new and the old. In Adorned with Dreams by Elizabeth Wilson, she discusses how changes in fashion not only represent a reaction against what went before but may also be self-contradictory too. Wilson also discusses how to be fashionable means to stand out but also blend in with the crowd, to be exclusive with clothes but also follow trend. When specifically addressing retro and vintage clothing, she compares it to pastiche – the imitation of several styles in order to create a new work. Both of these works will be used to explain the aspects of vintage that have contributed to its popularity and if vintage has allowed fashion to move forward in terms of style and design.

Vintage clothing reflects this idea of being fashionable. Fashion requires a creativity and knowledge about aesthetic when piecing an outfit together and creating personal style. Fashion also represents cultural ideals and values of the time; by mixing fashions from various periods, one creates an outfit that is able to represent these cultural expressions while maintaining an aesthetic and idea that is relevant to current times. Vintage in modern fashion is a progression

that allows its wearer to reminisce of previous eras while being innovative by re-evaluating its importance into a vintage owner's wear. Using vintage clothing and style does not hinder fashion's progression but rather allows us to be even more creative with trends that have previously existed.

In order to understand vintage, it is necessary to understand why clothing and fashion exist. Initially, clothing acted only as a covering for the body but when "tradition, creativity and innovation are combined in relation to clothing, we have to deal with so-called 'fashion,' which, therefore, indicates more a movement, a kind of social tendency." (Catalani 3). Fashion takes clothing and turns it into something more than just coverings. Fashion and clothing act as an indicator of social ideas of the era. Thus, clothing has become an important marker of identities in society: "it is essential to consider their polysemous nature (cloth as an item to possess, cloth as an item to show, cloth as an item to sell) and their power as social identities markers."(Catalani 2). An item that can be possessed, showcased, or sold, such as an article of clothing, acts as an exchange of ideas and is able to re-define what our identity is. In combination with innovation and creativity, clothing acts as a silent and outward expression of our identity. In one fashion theory, "Alison Lurie sees clothes as expression of hidden and largely unconscious aspects of individual and group psyche, as forms of usually unintentional non-verbal communication a sign language" (Wilson 57). Fashion has become an unintentional way to express aspects of our identity. Fashion differs throughout the eras because of innovation in design and the creation of new ideas. What happens is that new identities are also constructed because the clothing of an era represents what ideas are prominent. Ideas are always changing, however when time has passed and new ideas are created, sometimes there is a longing for ideas and cultural expressions that are considered outdated. In fashion, vintage clothing is an

alternative solution to this problem, in which creativity and innovation can take an outdated item and turn it into modern fashion.

However, in order to continue this discussion, the terms “retro” and “vintage” must be clarified even further. Many people believe that the terms “retro” and “vintage” can be used interchangeably however there are slight differences between the two. Retro is clothing revived from a different time period, however without a change in cultural meaning. In her article, Jeness discusses a group of people who wear retro 1960’s fashion in which they attempt to maintain the original cultural expression by wearing only authentic styles and living lifestyles similar to those from the 1960’s. However, Jeness does argue that “instead of finding an authentic self, these wearers work on producing it” (Jeness 399). So perhaps retro can be defined as the use of old clothing in which its original cultural meaning is recreated during modern times. These people wear retro clothing in the same manner they would have been worn in their original time to replicate past cultural ideas. Vintage on the other hand is clothing from a different era, but the cultural expression of the item has been revalued to concur with a modern cultural expression. However, both do allow its wearer to draw on important aspects of the past. As Guffey argues, “retro’s translation of recent history into consumable objects suggests how previous periods of popular culture and art and design can be used to characterize ourselves as distinct from the recent past” (Guffey 159). Even if both retro and vintage are now integrated into commodity culture, they represent what was important then, and perhaps now, and what we would like to remember in modern society. Time plays an important factor to both retro and vintage styles because it adds a unique aspect to them that cannot be found or as easily replicated in mainstream clothing. Their popularity spans “both age and ideological spectrums” because time is a relatable quality to all different ages, genders, and ethnicities (Lavenduski 59). Vintage and

retro may be two different uses of clothing, however, their ability to create a relationship between the past and present has allowed them to relate all different types of people and thus gain popularity in modern fashion.

Vintage clothing has become an increasingly popular trend in fashion because of how it creates a nostalgic, yet new and unique aspect to one's identity. Fashion presents a paradox in which, "to dress fashionably is to stand out while at the same time blend in with the crowd, to lay claim to the exclusive and to follow the herd" (Wilson 6). It has created a standard for us in which individuality and uniformity are both highly sought after ideals and it is necessary to obtain both. In an article, "Hooked on Vintage!," the authors comment that "more than ever the search is about shopping for identities, constructing images that include presenting status and identities in public, as well as revealing and concealing our private selves" (DeLong *et al.* 27). In today's world, consumer culture has created a mainstream line of fashion, causing individuals within society to search for ways to be able to represent their individuality while not having to reveal everything about them in order to stand out. Vintage is able to achieve this goal by allowing its wearer to create an outward appearance that gives them an individual characteristic while at the same time not entirely outrageous when meshed with current trends. When people buy vintage, the item is usually one-of-a-kind and no longer mass produced, so by owning a piece that no other has, it separates its wearer from the mainstream fashion. When one vintage wearer was asked in a study why she bought vintage, she responded that "she enjoyed looking different than the mainstream and vintage clothing allows [her] to do this" (DeLong *et al.* 38). For most individuals, one craves to be recognized from the others without being considered too eccentric or going to extremes. In order to be able to use vintage in their wardrobe, they must be able to know how the item can work with either more vintage items or current dress to create

alternative options to their expression of their identity.

Vintage can create individuality in one's appearance, however in order to successfully wear it fashionably, the wearer must be able to recognize how the item of clothing fits into the aesthetic of an outfit and this requires some creativity. Fashion gives the option for one to set apart identity from a group however "as a collective constraint, fashion actually left individuals with relative autonomy in matters of appearance; it instituted an unprecedented relation between individuals and the rule of society" (Lipovetsky 33). What society sees as aesthetically appealing still plays an important role when choosing items of clothing to wear. Fashion creates a relationship with society in which individuals must dress according to what society collectively finds fashionable. When shopping for vintage clothing or even clothing in general, "a customer's selection is guided by style, color and time of day, length of hem, day or evening, a marketing strategy that foregrounds the contemporary relevance of the fashions – not its historical value or date" (Palmer 208). What is more important to most contemporary vintage wearers when shopping for new pieces is that the item is able to display relevance to current trends. The historical background of the fashion is not so much as important when constructing identity based on an outward appearance. Again, to buy vintage, the wearer must be able to recognize current trends and what society deems aesthetically appealing at the time. In fashion, "trends [...] are concerned with the visual shape and form of garments – the style, silhouette, material, color or pattern – or the way these garments are worn" (Mackinney-Valentin 72). In order to keep in style, vintage clothing must not look too out-of-date, but rather be able to match trends similar to the mainstream styles yet maintain a unique quality about them. If vintage could not be easily mended into other current trends, it would not have gained the popularity it has reached today. Aesthetic plays an important part when choosing vintage wear, however, it is still

necessary to realize that this clothing comes from different eras and thus expresses a certain cultural meaning. The lines and cuts of the clothing are not the only important part when incorporating them into modern wear, but it is also necessary to view the cultural expression represented within the piece and how it can be used in modern cultural terms.

The cultural ideas characterized in vintage clothing are sometimes used as an alternative way to satisfy nostalgic feelings and attempt to better societal circumstances. Lipovetsky discusses an idea in which “imitation of the same models from the past allows the generations to continue to resemble one another and to form a single society” (Lipovetsky 228). By taking ideas from the past, generations can use them to compensate for wrongs in their current situation and create a single society. It is through a collection of new and old ideas and values that society is able to exist. When younger generations wear clothes from older generations, they feel as if they are vicariously living an experience that they wish they could have had. In fact, this feeling of nostalgia for a past that never belonged to them was part of the reason why retro was created. During the 1970s, “*Life* magazine [philosophically noted] how a younger generation was drawn to this revival and claiming that ‘pop psychologists – and many of the kids – see the flight to the ‘50s as a search for a happier time, before drugs, Vietnam, and assassination’” (Guffey 112). By reviving vintage styles, this younger generation seemed to have found a comfort in wearing the clothing of a generation who had lived during better times. This generation re-evaluated 1950s clothing’s cultural expression and applied it to their current situation. The 1950s for the youth of the 1970s represented a time in which there seemed to be no corruption or violence and just overall seemed like a better situation than their own.

The idea of such a past seemed better than their present and even their future because “obviously the past is simpler and less painful than the present. It has been lived through. In a

world with very few standards left, the past offers those standards whether you live by them or not” (Guffey 122). The past is more enticing than the future because we already know what has happened and what is expected. It is much easier than living in the present where we cannot predict future circumstances. Perhaps it is for this reason that “the fashions of the past continue to recur not so much for the love of their details and lines as for the security blanket they provide in [times] of terrible confusion” (Fraser 240). Through second-hand clothing, wearers are compensated for their loss of experiences that they could never have and apply it to their current situation. Vintage clothing, in this sense, seems to be able to compensate and satisfy emotional gaps in creating personal identity.

Designers from the past to present actually look to their old designs for inspiration for their new ones. When haute couture started to become popular, “renewal in fashion was for the first time institutionalized and orchestrated [...] Haute couture brought discipline to fashion at a time when fashion was giving rise to an unprecedented process of innovation and creative fancy” (Lipovetsky 58-59). It was through haute couture that designers looked toward renewing old fashions and using innovation and creativity to create a new line of clothing. Authenticity plays an important role in renewal, in which the wearer must be able to recognize the designer label as well as recognize that the design was made from a previous line. Authenticity is so important in vintage shopping because “modern vintage wearers seek authenticity in what is rare and cannot be duplicated, in what is old but does not look old or used. Ideally, wearing vintage positions the vintage virgin and vintage whore, not as historical, retrograde or subcultural, but as an informed, avant-garde fashion connoisseur” (Palmer 212). Vintage wearers search for items in which are recognizable by others as one-of-a-kind and high quality because it makes them seem as informative and selective shoppers. Vintage designer labels can achieve this because recognition

of their name gives a sense of uniqueness and the age of the product allows it to be redefined in a modern perspective. Designers are then forced to make sure that their customers are able to recognize not only the label but also the signature characteristics of their old designs that can be used in modern dress.

One could argue that designers keep characteristics of their designs because “the role of the traditional element is always preponderant; the prestige of ancestors is superior to that of innovators” (Lipovetsky 228). Past influences are always present and recognizable in our present, such as Greek and Roman architecture and dress in their contemporary counterparts. It is up to modern society to take past influences and innovation to create a new idea. Designers are faced with a paradox of inspiration because “the fashion world is predicated on creating ‘new’ designs seasonally, yet consumer interest in ‘original’ vintage designs [have] challenged designers who are themselves competing for vintage pieces in order to create ‘new’ designs” (Palmer 209). Vintage provides inspiration for new fashion while allowing us to maintain certain elements of the past. It creates a path in which we are able to change our identities as we please and keep up with fashion trends as well. Thus, designers compete with their own old designs and look toward them for inspiration in order to satisfy the interests of their customers. Designers are not being uncreative or lazy when creating new designs, but rather they are pulling from a different source of inspiration that is more appealing for the consumer market.

Although reusing vintage styles and clothing may seem as if designers have run out of new ideas, vintage actually acts as an important source of inspiration in a society in which many ideas already exist. Such fashions provide a way to discover new fashions: “If one considers the interest in vintage and retro fashions in terms of Virilio’s angle of fashion divergence, these past fashions can be understood not only as a means of authenticating the present, but also as a route

for future fashions” (Palmer 212). Vintage creates a path in which one can change their identity as they please and as well as keep up with fashion trends. It creates a new way in which ideas can move forward to through a combination of innovation and recreation. In one fashion theory, “the very way in which fashion constantly changes actually serves to fix the idea of the body as unchanging and eternal [like] a mirror held up to fix the shaky boundaries of the psychological self. It glazes the shift identity, freezing it into the certainty of image” (Wilson 59-60). Vintage has the ability to maintain an image of ourselves in a world that is always changing. Society has reached an age in which so many ideas have been created that it has become difficult to discern which route should be taken to move forward. Through vintage and retro, society is able to take past ideas and reinvent them, creating something fresh yet familiar without going to extremes or recreating something already done. Mackinney-Valentin also argues that “retro is not old news, because as a trend it is always caught up in contemporary negotiations over social identity, shifting zeitgeist, and production cycle” (Mackinney-Valentin 78). Retro and vintage revive ideas and are able to compromise their age in order to blend into modern ideas. Retro and vintage items can be reinvent their cultural meanings to match the shifting of cultural values in the current period. There is a rapid change of ideas in today’s society, and retro and vintage items are able to compensate for the rate of change by allowing its wearers to shift their identities at a rate that is comfortable to them. The rate at which clothing and trends change. “according to Virilio’s ideas, [...] makes it impossible for the average person to incorporate the new array of designs into a wardrobe” (Palmer 207). Designs and styles change so rapidly that the consumer cannot keep up with changing their identity at such a rapid pace. To change our identity at the same rate that the seasons change designs would be too exhausting and so as an alternative, we look toward vintage items for an alternate source of creativity to our identity. Fashion trends

change every season and we do not have the mental as well as financial capability to manage to keep up with such a change in identity, therefore vintage seems to be a more reasonable option.

Vintage clothing has become an important part of modern fashion because it allows fashion to progress in terms of style and design. It allows its wearer to create an identity at his own pace that is unique, nostalgic, and familiar. As mentioned, to be fashionable is to be able to stand as an individual while at the same time to be stand in uniformity with the rest of society. When mixed with modern clothing, vintage makes its wearer fashionable. It is a form of pastiche in which wearers combine old styles of clothing to create a new aesthetic. From vintage clothing, designers draw inspiration for a new line of styles that is very familiar but also at the same time innovative. With so many ideas today, vintage opens a new route to move forward. The past contains ideas that are already known, and from it society takes them and builds on them to create new ones and make progress. Vintage in modern dress follows the same idea in which elements of the past are incorporated in such a way to create a new type of style and design. With so many new ideas and changes occurring in society today, vintage allows those who wear it to change at a pace that is comfortable yet innovative. The idea of using vintage dress in modern fashion has become so appealing because of its creative aspects and ability to provide an identity that is fashionable to each wearer. Vintage is the new route for new trends and fashions because it opens up a source of identity and creativity that can be remolded and reinvented without getting old.

Works Cited

- Catalani, Anna, and Yupin Chung. "Vintage Or Fashion Clothes? An Investigation Inside the Issues of Collecting and Marketing Second-Hand Clothes." Diss. University of Leichester, 2005. *Google Scholar*. Web. 8 April 2012.
<http://neumann.hec.ca/aimac2005/PDF_Text/CatalinaA_ChungY.pdf>
- Delong, Marilyn, Barbara Heinemann, and Kathryn Reiley. "Hooked on Vintage!" *Fashion Theory: The Journal of Dress, Body & Culture* 9.1 (2005): pp. 23-42. Print.
- Fraser, Kennedy. *The Fashionable Mind : Reflections on Fashion, 1970-1981*. 1st ed. New York: Knopf, 1981. Print.
- Guffey, Elizabeth E. *Retro: The Culture of Revival*. London: Reaktion, 2006. Print. Focus on Contemporary Issues. pp. 1-187
- Jenss, Heike. "Dressed in History: Retro Styles and the Construction of Authenticity in Youth Culture." *Fashion Theory: The Journal of Dress, Body & Culture* 8.4 (2004): pp. 387-404. Print.
- Lavenduski, Sara. "Retro Fitted." *Wearables* 16.4 (2012): 57-61. Print.
- Lipovetsky, Gilles. *The Empire of Fashion : Dressing Modern Democracy*. Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 1994. Print.
- Mackinney-Valentin, Maria. "Old News? Understanding Retro Trends in the 21st Century Fashion" *Multi: The Journal of Diversity & Plurality in Design* 3.1 (2010): pp. 67-84. Print.
- Palmer, Alexandra. "Vintage Whores and Vintage Virgins: Second Hand Fashion in the Twenty-first Century." *Old Clothes, New Looks*. Ed. Hazel Clark. Oxford: Berg, 2005. pp. 197-213. Print.
- Wilson, Elizabeth. *Adorned in Dreams : Fashion and Modernity*. London: Virago, 1985. Print. pp