Fashioning Identities

I shop therefore I am.

Barbara Kruger (1987)

When we wake up in the morning with a fresh day ahead, we will at one point or another need to get dressed, especially when the activities of the day require us to leave the house. As sociologist Joan Entwistle has convincingly argued, “human bodies are dressed bodies” (2000: 6 [original emphasis]). Almost all of our public activities, whether they are work or leisure related, require us to appear dressed. Consequently, we tend to dress with a certain occasion in mind and may ask ourselves which outfit will suit the activities we are to engage in during the day, and who we will encounter whilst doing so. Many people will change into different clothes when arriving home from work, either to keep their more formal work clothes clean, to feel more comfortable, or to practice sport, for instance. Sometimes we say that we have nothing to wear, but there evidently are clothes in the wardrobe that would get us through the day. Perhaps we feel we have worn these outfits to certain occasions too often and experience the need for ‘something new’, or there simply is no item of clothing present that suits our mood or the specific activity we are to undertake.
Apart from dressing for certain activities, one may also experience a more personal or individual approach related to dressing oneself. We often show preferences for certain styles of clothing, certain colours, cuts, brands, fabrics, types of shoes and accessories that we may relate to our sense of identity or personality. “That dress is so you!” for instance, is a common phrase used by female friends to comment on an outfit. In addition, fashion brands draw attention to the power of communicating your identity through their apparel. The French mainstream fashion brand Éram, for instance, launched their Spring/Summer 2014 campaign with the slogan: “Play with fashion, play with yourself”, presenting real life models ‘playing’ with the outfit of look-alike mannequins wearing similar clothes and shoes. Indian casual wear brand Parx used a similar tactic in their 2009 men’s campaign, displaying fully dressed bodies with coat hanger heads and the slogan: “Who do you want to be today?” And Dutch high street fashion brand We presented the slogan “We is Me” in a black and white commercial featuring a young man named Julian who we see in his several moods, activities and at different times during the day, always dressed in clothing by We.¹

¹ See: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DGHey7uWzNY for the ‘We is Me’ commercial, accessed May 2014.
Figures 1.2 and 1.3
Parx, *Hanger-heads*, “Who do you want to be today?”
by Dentsu Marcom, Mumbai, India 2009.
Photograph: Vinay Mahidhar, © Raymond Next.

Figure 1.4
“*We, Julian*”
Director: Toby MacDonald.
What is it about the relationship between the clothes that we wear and the person we supposedly are? Who is the ‘yourself’ we are encouraged to play with by Éram? How does Parx help someone to be who he wants to be? And how can a fashion brand claim to be ‘me’? When we say we have nothing to wear, does this entail that we cannot find ourselves in the clothes that are available to us in our wardrobe? These are the questions that lead me to examine the relationship between fashion and identity in this chapter. I will research what has been written about this relationship between what we wear and who we supposedly are, and examine how this relationship has been theorised throughout what one may call the history of fashion studies. May one detect certain systems by which fashion constructs the identity of a person? Or is dressing oneself a more ambiguous game to play, as suggested by the Éram advertisement mentioned above? Before researching what has been written about fashion’s relationship with who someone is, or wants to be, however, there is a need to clarify the concepts of fashion and identity as they are applied throughout this dissertation.

**Fashion and Identity, Charging the Terms**

Clothes, apparel, attire, costume, uniform, outfit, garment, ensemble, vestment, dress, there are many words one can use to describe the cloth that is used to cover and adorn the body. But what does the term ‘fashion’ add to the list? In which ways is it different to all the terms listed above and when and why is something called fashion? In this section I shall explore a number of different perspectives upon what fashion may be, in order to charge the term and clarify how I will use it throughout my research.

The Bloomsbury (formerly Berg) journal *Fashion Theory*, edited by fashion historian Valerie Steele, defines fashion as “the cultural construction of the embodied identity” (Steele 1997: 1). This suggests that fashion is chiefly concerned with providing the means to make the identity of a person tangible or visible within a certain culture. One could then add that when clothes are put to use and as such presented to other people...
to represent the identity of the wearer they are considered to be fashion. The definition of ‘Clothing, Costume and Dress’ in The Encyclopedia of Clothing and Fashion further complicates matters since it reveals that both clothing and fashion are regarded for their identity shaping qualities within a shared culture. Or as anthropologist Joanne Eicher writes:

> Dress functions as a silent communication system that provides basic information about age, gender, marital status, occupation, religious affiliation, and ethnic background for everyday, special occasions and events, or participation in cinema, television, live theatre, burlesque, circus, or dance productions. What people wear also can indicate personality characteristics and aesthetic preferences. People understand most clearly the significance and meaning of clothing, costume, and dress when the wearers and observers share the same cultural background.
> (Eicher 2005: 270)

The explanation above overlaps fully with Steele’s definition of fashion as culturally constructed identity marker. Both ‘dress’ and ‘fashion’ are thus recognised for communicating the identity of the wearer and more seems to be needed to be able to distinguish the two terms.

Cultural studies scholar, Elizabeth Wilson equates fashion with change when she writes that:

> Fashion is dress in which the key figure is rapid and continuous changing of styles. Fashion, in a sense is change, and in modern western societies no clothes are outside fashion; fashion sets the terms of all sartorial behaviour – even uniforms have been designed by Paris dress-makers; even nuns have shortened their skirts; even the poor seldom go in rags – they wear cheap versions of the fashions that went out a few years ago and are therefore to be found in second-hand shops and jumble sales.
> (Wilson 2003 [1985]: 3)

Apart from enabling us to represent our identity, fashion is thus characterised by a succession of change. The clothes we use to reveal, at least partly, who we are, are susceptible to changing and prevailing modes, styles and tastes. These changes may be rapid and continuous on the one
hand. On the other hand, the examples Wilson provides us with (uniforms, nuns, the poor) are to be characterised by subtle or slow changes in style. This brings forth the question how the change Wilson relates to fashion comes into being. Who or what initiates the changing of styles and tastes in dress?

Steele uses the example of fashions in children’s names to undo the idea that changes in fashion are solely due to changes in society “and/or the financial interests of fashion designers and manufacturers” (Steele 2005b: 13). She writes that children’s names are not promoted by advertising companies yet are prone to changing fashions. Steele, furthermore, suggests an “internal taste mechanism” is at work within sartorial fashion and change. That is to say that changes in fashion can be the result of a difficult to define, shared, and thus cultural, mechanism as well as the accomplishment of active marketing and promoting of new styles, shapes and colours. Wilson, in addition, advocates viewing fashion “through several different pairs of spectacles simultaneously – of aesthetics, of social theory, of politics [...]” (2003 [1985]: 11). Although this study adopts such an array of perspectives in the next section when researching fashion's relation to the communication of identity, it is important to complete the exploration of a concept of fashion for this research project. We therefore turn to yet another source: the introduction to Fashion Theory: a Reader by visual culture theorist Malcolm Barnard (2007: 2-4).

In his introduction, Barnard questions what fashion is, adopting a philosophical perspective. That is to say he critically studies the principle concept of what fashion is. Firstly, he takes on a practical perspective and writes that one could say a certain item of branded clothing is thought to be a fashion item – a Balenciaga coat, for example. In addition, Barnard includes the idea that “[f]ashion is what people wear” (Barnard 2007: 2). However, Barnard rightly comments that both explanations assume that

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2 Steele refers to Stanley Lieberson’s study into how taste affects the choice for children’s names, see, for instance, Lieberson and Bell (1992). Lieberson and Bell suggest the choice for certain names can be connected to the gender of the child and the race, social class and education of the parents, and as such state that “cultural and structural conditions drive taste choices” (Lieberson and Bell 1992: 549). Although I do not dismiss their ideas and findings, I argue that there is much more that may influence a concept as complicated as taste.
one already knows enough about what fashion is to identify examples of it such as the branded item of clothing and the clothes people wear. He furthermore states that there is a tendency for ‘fashion’ to be confused or combined with ‘the fashionable’. What people wear can thus be called fashion, whilst it can also be identified as not being fashionable, or ‘in fashion’ at the moment. Barnard, however, does not expand upon the supposed idea of change involved with fashion which can be related to ‘the fashionable’; he does write that “the inclusion of being in fashion into the meaning of fashion, is probably [also] unavoidable” (2007: 4).

Secondly, Barnard concentrates on fashion as a noun, which is distinguished from fashion as a verb. The latter indicates “the action of making or doing something”, whereas fashion as a noun is more confusing since it is used interchangeably with words such as ‘dress’, ‘style’ and ‘adornment’, and can also be related to consumer goods in general: cars, mobile phones, and food are just a few examples of goods that are regarded as potentially fashionable. In this sense ‘fashion’ must be seen as a characteristic of western modernity, or as French philosopher Gilles Lipovetsky writes: “[...] I view [fashion] as an exceptional process inseparable from the origin and development of the modern West” (Lipovetsky 1994 [1987]: 15). Whereas for Lipovetsky fashion is not limited to clothes and dress alone and in its broadness is characterised by “a particularly brief time span”, Barnard puts less emphasis on change as a fundamental characteristic when he seems to come to a final definition of fashion by quoting Anne Hollander:

> everybody has to get dressed in the morning and go about the day's business... [w]hat everybody wears to do this has taken different forms in the West for about seven hundred years and that is what fashion is. (Hollander 1994: 11, quotation in Barnard 2007: 3)

Barnard elaborates upon the idea that fashion, in the sense of ‘what people wear’, includes ‘clothing’ and “all instances of what people wear, from catwalk creations, through High Street and outlet purchases, to police and military uniforms” and therewith adheres to Wilson’s idea that even wearing a uniform is to be considered part of fashion (Barnard 2007: 3). He ends his search for a definition of fashion by stating that fashion, in addition to dealing with ‘what people wear’, must be regarded
as a *cultural* practice.

The elegance of the also rather general definition of fashion as ‘what people wear’, may be appealing at first glance; it includes the dynamic relation between the fashion industry, its marketing and branding strategies, and individuals. What people wear does also change through time, and as such styles, looks, and fashions may alter due to individual preferences or motivations, the suggestions made to them, or a combination of the two. The idea that the *causes* of changes in fashion are necessarily cultural, as Barnard, Lipovetsky and Wilson maintain, can, however, be questioned and this study seeks to look beyond fashion as a necessarily cultural practice in the chapters to follow. In addition, one may remark that although fashion’s origin and development can be situated in the West (Lipovetsky 1994 [1987]: 15), its effects reach out far beyond the West alone. Apart from the fact that the majority of the clothes we wear are produced in developing countries, western styles of dress are, for instance, increasingly adopted by eastern populations (Wilson 2003 [1985]: 14).

Fashion, as I would like to ‘charge’ the concept for my research project, hence revolves around all processes and forces involved in the actualisation of what people wear, and thereafter. And although my focus does lie upon what most people currently wear on a day-to-day basis in western countries, the effects this practice has in non-western countries will not be omitted in the remainder of my examinations. Fashion’s relation with the communication of identity, however, is the subject of *this* chapter: I will thus follow Barnard, Steele, Lipovetsky and Wilson here and extend the definition of fashion as ‘what people wear’ by including the perspective of fashion as a cultural practice. Barnard refers to sociologist Joanne Entwistle’s notion of fashion as an embodied practice when he writes that: “[t]o say that the fashioned body is always a cultured body is also to say that the fashioned body is a meaningful body, and that it is therefore about communication” (2007: 4). As said, this is a useful perspective for this chapter, which explores the manners in which fashion theorists have commented on which meanings can be conveyed through fashion. Nevertheless, my research is ultimately aimed at moving beyond such a meaning. I will therefore in subsequent chapters challenge Barnard’s notion that “there can be no simple, uncultured, natural body” (Ibid.) and argue that we may *think* beyond the boundaries of culture and
meaning. However, before being able to do so I have set myself the task to map what has been written regarding fashion, communication, meaning, and representation of identity in order to know what exactly we are trying to move beyond.

**Intertwining Fashion and Identity**

Look rather and see if it now seems to you so certain that tomorrow you will be what you assume you are today. My dear friend the truth is this: they are all fixations. Today you fix yourself in one fashion, tomorrow in another. I shall proceed to tell you how and why.

(Luigi Pirandello 1988 [1926]: 41)

The concept of identity has a complex and influential philosophical history. Identity, however, is also a term we commonly use to discern who or what someone or something is. The consequences and genealogy of philosophical thought guided by the concept of identity will be addressed in the following chapter. In this part, how and why fashion and the concept of personal identity became understood as bearing such a persistent relation with each other is researched. It is my aim to show that clothing oneself caters well for the plethora of selves that is imposed upon us by the social sphere in which we shape our lives and beings. In order to arrive there, I see the need to begin with questioning the idea of having or being an authentic self. And I will suggest that, however we collectively tend to couple a performance of our identity (or perhaps identities) with some stable and continuous being, the two cannot convincingly be placed on the same footing.

We have an idea of who we are – as unified self – and we realise others have also developed their understandings of who we are. The two might not overlap, and what is more, several others may have several

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3 The indicated page numbers for Pirandello’s *One, No One and One Hundred Thousand*, refer to the Dutch edition of this novel. The translations from Dutch into English are my own.
different ideas as to what characterises us and makes us into who we are. Perhaps dressing differently for certain occasions pertains to this idea in the sense that we confirm the perception others have of us through our attire. Most people dress differently for work than for leisure, for instance, and as such present different versions of a presumably unified self to others. Who are we then, how did we arrive here, and is an escape possible or desirable? These questions lie at the heart of Luigi Pirandello’s novel One, No One and One Hundred Thousand (1988 [1926]). Vitangello Moscarda, the protagonist of the novel, starts a search for his genuine self after Dida, his wife, has pointed out that his nose is placed slightly off centre. Once aware of a fact that Moscarda had never noticed himself, he realises that he is someone different for his wife than he is for himself. He is not ‘one’ persona, but he is as many different ‘ones’ as the number of people that have an external perception of his being, perhaps as many as one hundred thousand as the title of the novel suggests. In addition, Moscarda comes to realise that, apart from the many people he is through the perception of others, there is no one self to be found. One equals no one. Or as Pirandello writes:

I knew, moreover, that by placing myself under new conditions of life, by appearing to others tomorrow as a doctor, let us say, or a lawyer, or a professor, I should no more than before have found myself either one to all or an individual to myself, as I went about in the garb and performing the functions of any one of those professions.

(Pirandello 1988 [1926]: 151)

Determined to undo the manifold of beings reflected back to him by others, Moscarda decides to eliminate all that society has provided him with to construct his identity. He divorces his wife for he feels he is not the person she imagines him to be. He uses the money he inherited from his father to build a house for the poor, discards all his material belongings, and refuses to continue to behave in the manner society expects of him. He is declared insane and moves into the poorhouse surrounded by nature to retreat. Here he finds peace and becomes part of his surroundings far away from the identities society demands him to perform. Moscarda even discards his name; he no longer wants to define himself.
A name is fitting for the dead. For those who have concluded. I am alive and I do not conclude. Life does not conclude. And life knows nothing of names. This tree, tremulous pulse of new leaves. I am this tree. Tree, cloud; tomorrow book or wind: the book I read, the wind I drink. All outside, wandering.

(Pirandello 1988 [1926]: 189)

Pirandello’s protagonist undoes all socially constructed ties that bind him to human life, enabling him to blend with other forms of life (such as the tree) and even with ideas or fictional forms of life with which he connects through reading.

The concept of identity as being socially and culturally constructed is also the key subject in Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble, Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990). Comparable to Pirandello’s Moscarda, Butler is set to demonstrate that what we regard to be our ongoing and somewhat stable identity, is in fact a socio-cultural construction. Identity, for both Pirandello and Butler, is ultimately to be regarded a fictional creation erected within the bounds of human language, understanding, and acceptance. These bounds are limiting for they cause someone like Moscarda – who becomes a tree, rather than identifying with socially accepted categories such as profession, family, or class – to be excluded from society: Moscarda is labelled insane. Butler takes on a similar stance but concentrates on the apparent naturalness of sex and gender being divided – yet also limited – into the binary opposition between male and female sexes and genders. Although it is not my aim to contribute to gender debates in particular, I do suggest examining her thoughts, since they may clarify how the construction of identity became a seemingly natural feature of social life.

Even though we may have grown accustomed to thinking we possess some inner unity that we call our personal identity, which remains relatively stable and unchanged throughout our lives, there exists no ground for this experience outside language. In other words, the fact that we have a name and call ourselves ‘I’ does not account for the existence of some unchanging, stable and continuous being. Or as Butler writes: “the ‘coherence’ and ‘continuity’ of ‘the person’ are not logical or analytic features of personhood, but, rather, socially instituted and maintained norms of intelligibility” (Butler 1990: 23). What is more, the idea of
possessing an identity that pertains through life resonates Descartes distinction between mind and body. Our bodies clearly change throughout life; would an ongoing identity then reside within the mind, operating somehow independently from the changing body? Is it desirable and even possible to separate the two? Although I will examine the more philosophical consequences and effects of language upon our thinking extensively in the next chapter, it is important here to understand that living within the political and linguistic bounds of a society and culture influences – if not determines and most certainly restricts – our perceptions and idea of ‘self’. Through social politics and in language a continuity and an essence is erected for our identities where there is actually only change to be experienced.

If we are to view others and ourselves as contingent, discontinuous beings, how do we account for the expressions we associate with specific persons? Would those typical expressions not hint at an underlying identity? According to Butler, who is inspired by Friedrich Nietzsche, we must reverse our reasoning and realise that “identity is performatively constituted by the very ‘expressions’ that are said to be its results” (Butler 1990: 33). That is to say, there is not first a person with an identity of whom we consequently learn to recognise his or her characteristics, but rather characteristics, looks and deeds that assemble the individual to begin with, and as such also construct the identity of the person. Where then, does the ostensible naturalness and necessity of experiencing ourselves as possessing an ongoing, stable identity come from? According to Butler, social and cultural constructions such as gender and identity conceal the fact that they are mere constructions and they successfully do so since we collectively believe in their naturalness and necessity even though they are nothing but cultural fictions created to be able to divide society into nicely recognisable categories (Butler 1990: 178).

Following Butler, we can remark that if the common concept of the existence of a stable, unifying identity is in fact a construction, we cannot speak of the expression of an identity. What would be ‘expressed’ and how would this occur if there is no such core? If identity is a fictional construct, it is, like Butler’s concept of gender identity, also not expressed but performed and as such an act (Butler 1990: 180). If viewing identity as a fictional construct that is communicated through acts of performance may seem unnatural, it does however satisfactorily explain the popular
claim that fashion enables us to construct and communicate an identity. The clothes we choose to wear thus strengthen the belief in a somewhat continuous ‘self’, which is, as we saw by following Butler, fictional to begin with. Fashion and identity hence become intertwined, and the clothes we wear become shorthand for who we are. However, the idea that the clothes we wear express some inner unity, stable being or authentic ‘self’ must be regarded a fiction. Hence, we fashion our identities and the clothes we choose to wear enable us to create and fortify the belief in an ongoing, unified identity. In addition, we may deceive others by communicating who we are by means of our attire, and change our identity by means of changing the way we dress.

Butler, furthermore, is interested in how the concept of gender identity came into being, and she questions how we came to take for granted the idea that we are either male or female. Apart from the concept of identity consisting of performative acts, Butler in her final chapter explains that “a stylised repetition of acts” causes the institutionalisation of a stable identity (Butler 1990: 179). With regard to fashion, we may conclude that by adopting certain styles of dress and repetitively wearing a particular style of dress, we succeed in fortifying the belief that there is a continuous inner being for others and for ourselves. There are, however, no grounds for such a belief, and as a matter of fact the cause and effect need to be reversed: it is through dressing ourselves that we, amongst other practices, construct the idea of the existence of a stable inner core to our identity and not vice versa. Clothing thus does not express who we are, it moreover aids us to believe – and draws others into believing – there is an unchanging, stable foundation to who we are.

Now an understanding of the way fashion and identity are intertwined and essentially performative has been developed, researching what has been written about the relation between fashion and identity in particular is of interest. In order to create a focus of research for the following section, one more insight that Butler and Pirandello provide us with may be helpful. Since there are, according to Butler, no grounds for an internal continuous being and there are only performances of identity that are consequently internalised, then there cannot be ‘a doer behind the deed’ - a concept Butler borrows from Friedrich Nietzsche (Butler
If there is no ‘doer’, no ongoing identity, the ‘deed’ becomes of primary interest and one may question what a body and fashion may do. The elaboration of this question will, as mentioned earlier, be addressed in the remainder of my dissertation. In the following, however, the ways in which the clothes one wears are regarded for the identity they provide the wearer with will be explored.

**Fashion’s Systems of Significance**

In the previous section, I developed a perspective upon fashion and identity which denies the idea that the one can communicate some inner ‘authentic self’ through dress, since such a self cannot follow from the socially constructed identity which we may communicate through our attire. We, nevertheless, have grown accustomed to believing that such an outer performance stands for our inner perceptions. We have, to reiterate Judith Butler, internalised and as such naturalised the idea that our identity performances reflect, signify and communicate our continuous being. In the following, I will examine how this concept of fashion identity as signifier of one’s being has developed through time. It is my aim to further unravel how the persistent belief in fashion as significant for our being has developed; which meanings have pertained through time and what has been emphasised? This section will concentrate on the attempt to systemise and regulate fashioned identities, firstly in social rules and dress laws, thereafter in the systemisation of fashion in written language.

The significance of language for the evolution of culture lies in this, that mankind set up in language a separate world beside the other world, a place it took to be so firmly set that, standing upon it, it could lift the rest of the world off its hinges and make itself master of it.

(Nietzsche 1996 [1878]: 16)

4 See Chapter 2 for an extensive account of Nietzsche and the concept of identity.
The central theme in the quotation above lies in the fact that, according to Friedrich Nietzsche, language has a tendency to lead us to believe that the world we inhabit can be mastered by rendering it into words. With words we order, signify and categorise the things surrounding us and, subsequently, are able to differentiate human beings from animals, for instance. Language allows us to make sense of the world; it enables us to arrange things, beings, and events into significant orders that may otherwise have remained too obscure to even begin to comprehend. Morality, or what we regard as being good or evil practices, relies heavily on language, as do perhaps all other practices that are exclusively human. Apart from spoken or written language, one may also regard certain modes of expression as systems of signification resembling our usage of language in the sense that such systems may also be used to order, label, and categorise the significance of characteristics such as those of dress.

I therefore suggest examining the ‘languages’ of fashion that have been proposed and which have been used in trying to order or make sense of what clothes may signify. I limit myself to systems of signification in relation to the construction of meaning in this section, although I approach these systems from a range of disciplines and paradigms, such as the socio-historical perspective upon sumptuary laws; the socio-economical and philosophical perspectives upon fashion and imitation; and finally the semiological perspective upon fashion as written language. On the one hand, a multiplicity of perspectives enables me to show the development of how fashion and identity are intertwined through time. On the other hand, it may show where the wish to regulate and order fashion’s performances of identity falls short and a different kind of thinking is needed to come to terms with the complex relationship between fashion and identity.

In this light, the development of dress codes is of particular interest. Designed to regulate the appearance of individuals according to sociological variables – such as gender, age, class, occupation, religion, or ethnicity – dress codes may have come to be internalised and appear to

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5 We must, however, also bear in mind that in subordinating our practices to language we implicatively consider ourselves superior to creatures that do not use language in a sophisticated manner. I will return to this characteristic in the following chapter, when discussing Nietzsche’s philosophy in more depth.
be ‘natural’ or at least necessary, yet may be regarded as social constructions just like fashion or gender identities are in fact constructed. That is to say, dress codes are in effect a means to control the individual appearances of people in certain situations and divide the social world into more or less distinct categories. Today, we may recognise feeling either underdressed or overdressed according to a fellow public that has interpreted the social demands that come with dressing for an occasion differently. As such, we will usually take into account whether we are dressing for work or for leisure, and whilst doing so, we will think about the more specific demands and codes that accompany the specific work or ‘play’ we are to undertake. Am I dressing for a meeting at work, or for lecturing a large group of students? Am I joining a barbecue in the park or a marriage celebration? Does the social assembly require me to wear a dress; may I play with an appearance that does not suit my age; how do I strengthen my occupational role? All these questions indicate that when participating in social or public events the prevailing dress codes – at least partly – direct our decisions.

How did dress codes that pertain to sociological variables come into being? Where can we locate them and what was the motivation to enforce them to begin with? I suggest starting by researching the earliest known form of dress regulations in the following section, bearing in mind and questioning how these early sociological codes and rules may have had their effects on the way we dress today. In addition, I will examine what role the concept of imitation may have played in fashion’s dynamic structure, and lastly, I will question and examine the attempt to grasp fashion and identity in written language.

**Rules and Regulations: Sumptuary Laws**

Apart from the fact that we all must be dressed when in public places, contemporary Western cultures know no legislation that dictates what we must and must not wear when at leisure. No one will be fined for wearing out-dated, inappropriate or dirty clothes; covering your private parts suffices to prevent one from being arrested for indecent exposure. Likewise, extravagantly over-dressing, cross-dressing or adopting an otherwise remarkable style is not generally regulated under any official law or
Within schools, workplaces, sports clubs and youth movements such as the Scouts, for instance, either uniforms are compulsory, private corporate legislation is enforced, or dress codes – whether or nor officially recorded – prevail. One may ask to where the regulation of what is considered appropriate apparel can be traced when adopting a historical perspective. That is to say, how can fashion history inform us about how clothing and adornment have become indicative of our sense of ‘self’? I suggest studying the rules and regulations that are known as sumptuary laws to discover the early origins of our modern dress codes.

Sociology and law scholar Alan Hunt provides us with an extensive study of the history of sumptuary law in his Governance of the Consuming Passions (1996). Whilst tracing the history of the laws that curb a passion for consumption in general, he focuses on the particular attempt to regulate dress directed at controlling social appearances (Hunt 1996: xii). Sumptuary laws can be traced back as far as the early sixth century BC, when the Athenian ‘laws of Solon’ restricted elaborate consumption, the size of funerals, and the food that was to be eaten during the ceremony. Similar funeral restrictions existed in Rome, but the Lex Oppia from 215 BC included the regulation of women’s dress, limiting the amount of gold that was to be worn, for instance, and therewith shifted attention from funeral regulations to women’s vanity and luxury.

Although no general legislation is in place, there have been several recent occasions of restrictions in dress that offends people. Calson Analytics of Australia (see: calson.com.au) provides several examples of the 1990’s were offensive texts on T-shirts were banned as well as the following case: ‘In December 2008 a Northampton (UK) magistrate imposed a five-year Asbo on a 59-year-old man who went out in public dressed as a schoolgirl. Peter Trigger had recurrently waited near a primary school. The antisocial behaviour order banned him from wearing a skirt or showing bare legs on a school day at specific times, with Northampton Borough Council commenting that “We appreciate that Mr Trigger has a right to dress how he likes, but not if it is causing distress or alarm to others, particularly young children, which is the case here”.’

A second, and more recent example, is to be found in the mayor of the Dutch city of Tilburg, who decided it is forbidden to wear leather motor jackets with club logos (such as Hell’s Angels) in the city centre from 1 May 2014.
consumptions of both foods and dress (Hunt 1996: 18-20). In medieval Europe, the regulation of dress, ornamentation and personal appearance became the common target of sumptuary law and continued to remain its focus during the late Middle Ages (Hunt 1996: 27). The restrictions were typically targeted at two distinct aspects: limitation of expenditure (the amount of material that was used to create an outfit) and the reservation of certain types of cloth, colours, or dress style for particular social categories. Peasants, for instance, were restricted to wearing one colour only, either black or grey (Ibid.). Hence, apart from advocating theological and economical modesty in medieval Europe, the laws may also be regarded as an attempt to ensure that social categories remain recognisable and are thus signified through the clothing one is or is not allowed to wear.

As the nation-state replaced the feudal model of society in the sixteenth century, governments realised it was their task to ensure a “manifestation of citizenship [in which] clothes act as a system of signs whereby rank is signified” (Raffield 2002: 128). Therefore, sixteenth century Italian, English, and French courts issued laws describing in great detail which materials were reserved for clothing which classes. In 1533, Henry VIII, for instance, passed an act stating that the use of the colour purple and of gold in clothing or decoration (including that of one’s horse) was to be reserved for the king and his relatives (Cox 2006: 6). Apart from reserving colours and materials for the king, the act designates which materials and colours may be worn by dukes, earls, barons, lords, knights, garters, mayors and gentlemen, including graduates of universities, all the way down to legislating what servants could wear:

And that no serving man waiting upon his master under the degree of a Gentleman use or wear any guarded Hose or any cloth above the price

7 The relation between death and fashion, as the shifting focus of the early sumptuary laws also implies, is an interesting one and has, amongst others, been addressed by Elizabeth Wilson (2003 [1985]: 58). For an elaboration upon this subject see Caroline Evans’ ‘This Vertigo of Time Defeated: Fashion Photography and Melancholy’, in Vestoj, the Journal of Sartorial Matters. On Material Memories No. 1, 2009.

8 The ‘Hose’ mentioned in the text above is a ‘[t]ube of fabric, usually of expensive lightweight material, cut on the bias and sewn to fit the foot and »
of 20 pence the yard in his Hose except it be of his masters wearing Hose upon pain of forfeiture of 3 shillings 4 pence.
(Henry VIII 1509, translated by Cox, 2006: 8)

However dated such legislations may seem, Hunt undoes two myths often related to sumptuary laws that are of particular interest in the light of this research project. First, he is convinced sumptuary law has not died with the rise of modernism during the midst of the sixteenth century, but is still present in, for instance, corporate legislation on what to wear and what not to wear within a workplace. Second, he carefully analyses the rise and enforcement of sumptuary laws in relation to the rise and availability of changing styles of dress – often called fashion.9

Although Hunt does not disregard the importance of sumptuary laws in medieval Europe to either grant the higher feudal categories certain privileges and reserve significant types of dress for these categories, or to prohibit certain lower categories of people to wear certain dress styles, he focuses on the sixteenth and seventeenth century when there was a great rise in the volume of sumptuary laws “and dress codes become more comprehensive and increasingly codified in form” (Hunt 1996: 29, 33). As the nation-state replaced the feudal model of society, in the sixteenth century, governments realised it was their task to “construct an order of appearance that allowed relevant social facts, in particular about social status, gender and occupation, to be ‘read’ from the visible signs disclosed by the clothes of the wearer” (Hunt 1996: 42). Hence, we may view sumptuary laws as the imposition of semiotic dress codes, designed to easily recognise and distinguish a person’s wealth, work and gender on the basis of his or her attire.

Hunt relates the emergence of these imposed codes to the wearing of a uniform which makes it possible to precisely read the rank, function and grade of the wearer, which itself can be traced back to

» lower leg’ (Cox 2006: 8).

9 Alike Wilson, Hunt associates the transition from fashion as a verb (le mode in French) to fashion as a noun (la mode) with the growth of cities, trade and capitalism commencing in the fourteenth century in Europe (Wilson 2003 [1985]: 22).
the development of medieval enclosed armour. Such armour obscured human features, such as hair and eye colour and thus a complex semiotics of heraldic symbols was erected (Hunt 1996: 61). The imposed codes cannot solely be found in the symbolic details of, for instance, military uniforms, but also in what Hunt names “ritualised social relations and activities” such as weddings, funerals and job interviews. One will most likely not attend a wedding in a pair of jeans: even though there are no official laws that prevent us from doing so most people will not violate these codes of etiquette. In addition, we may think about workplaces in which dress and grooming codes are enforced. The above leads Hunt to conclude the following:

[...]here is today much more regulation of dress and appearance than was ever the case when sumptuary legislation was most abundant in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. (...) Today the mantle of sumptuary ethic has been picked up by employers and it is employment institutions that are now the primary sites of modern sumptuary regulation.
(Hunt 1996: 383)

From the quotation above, imposed dress codes within a workplace – Hunt’s modern sumptuary laws – may be seen as an attempt to regulate recognisability and offer systems of distinction through which one can read the profession, rank and status of an employee. In addition, we seem to have internalised sumptuary ethics when it comes to dressing for certain occasions such as weddings and funerals, for instance.

As indicated above, there is a second myth that Hunt is set out to unmask: the idea that sumptuary laws are essentially medieval and designed to protect hierarchical structures by preserving old codes. Hunt indicates that the most intensive phase of sumptuary law must be related to the growth of European cities such as Florence, Venice, Paris, London and Amsterdam, for instance, during the fifteenth and sixteenth century. As Elizabeth Wilson demonstrated, the growth of the cities, increased trade and thus the emergence of early capitalism with the demise of feudalism and the rise of urban bourgeoisie during these centuries, created the modern notion of fashion as the changing of styles. “It was only in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries that it became shameful to wear out-dated clothes and those who could afford to do so discarded clothing
simply because it had gone out of style” (Wilson 2003 [1985]: 20). In addition, the growth of cities as well as the fact that class membership and freely acquired economic wealth replaced the importance of pedigree, this became what wearers would signify through their apparel. And as such, sumptuary law “became reactivated as a means of holding out the prospect of stabilizing recognisability in the new urban world of strangers” (Hunt 1996: 141).

With the advance of capitalism at the beginning of the nineteenth century, sumptuary laws proved to be unattainable. As a larger group of people was able to climb the social ladder through newly acquired wealth, conspicuous consumption was brought within wider reach (Hunt 1996: 357). Growing consumption of luxury goods, furthermore, increased economic turnover and the larger the number of people that could afford to spend their wages on clothing, the greater the economic development of a country would be. In addition, the ideas of Scottish political economist and philosopher Adam Smith on the liberation of economics and free trade had become popular (Smith 2007 [1776]). Rather than designating one’s pedigree by means of luxurious materials in dress, class membership, individualism, and freely acquired economic wealth became what wearers would signify through their attire.

Whereas sumptuary laws were originally enforced to distinguish nobility acquired by birth, and as such a means of recognising certain social distinctions that had little to do with what one had actually done to acquire wealth since it was simply inherited, they maintained and even gained popularity when feudalism was replaced by society based on class acquired through wealth gained from trade. The new mercantile class, similarly, wanted to be recognised and distinguished from the labourers for their wealth without much regard for how they had acquired it. I therefore suggest turning to the concept of imitation in relation to fashion and identity in order to further examine what exactly it was the wealthy classes strived to communicate.

Fashion as Imitation

If you are in need of a new coat you may go shopping for one in shops you would normally look for clothes. But perhaps you feel inspired by
a colour, cut, or specific coat you have seen someone wearing on the streets, on the Web, or in a magazine and think it would suit you too and search for this specific one till you find it. Are you then not imitating others to suit yourself – to provide yourself with a fashion identity to perform? If there is, as Friedrich Nietzsche argued, no ‘doer behind the deed’, and no essential core to our personality, how is imitation involved when constructing our fashion identities? To find clarity in this complex yet interesting process, I would like to suggest examining the concepts of fashion and imitation by concentrating on three sociologists that have written about fashion and its relationship with imitation, albeit each in their specific manner and with their specific points of attention.

Firstly, and related to the hierarchic sumptuary laws, I will research the views of American economist and sociologist Thorstein Bunde Veblen as presented in his 1899 *The Theory of the Leisure Class: An Economic Study of Institutions*. Secondly, I will elaborate on the concept of imitation of the socially more powerful or wealthy by adding the perspective of German sociologist and philosopher Georg Simmel, drawn from his 1905 text ‘Philosophy of Fashion’, in which he views the fashion system as a dynamic interplay of imitation and differentiation. And lastly, I will look into the social sphere at large as operating along the lines of the fashion system by examining French sociologist Gabriel Tarde’s concept of fashion-imitation versus custom-imitation as presented in *The Laws of Imitation* (1903).

All three works named above were written around the turn of the nineteenth century when, due to the Industrial Revolution (between late eighteenth and mid nineteenth century), modern modes of production, specifically in textiles, enabled higher living standards for the masses and had sustained a large and wealthy bourgeoisie that used dress both “as an indicator of social conformity, and, paradoxically, also individualized to the wearer’s taste and personality” (Wilson 2003 [1985]: 35). I therefore suggest researching the early developments of fashion as a signifier of social conformity and individualisation through the elaborate concepts of imitation by Veblen, Simmel and Tarde. Beginning with Veblen’s account of ‘Dress as the expression of the pecuniary culture’, I will focus on the awareness he raises about the effects of a society based on class-structures, in which a small number of people possess the largest amount of capital, in relation to the signification of wealth and profession through
dress, as well as imitation and, ultimately, wastefulness.

As the title of his chapter on dress suggests, Veblen explores dress as an expression of pecuniary culture. He, in other words, writes about the manners in which dress reflects economic force and therefore signifies social success insofar as this is concerned with financial resources. Veblen writes that the display of one’s wealth through the apparel that is worn is “more obviously present, and is, perhaps more universally practiced in the matter of dress than in any other line of consumption” (2007 [1899]: 11). That is to say that if one wants to communicate one’s wealth to others on the streets of a city, for instance, dress is something that comes to the eye immediately and is carried around wherever one goes publicly. Veblen characterises this use of dress as a signification of wealth primarily as a waste of money and time, or as he calls it: ‘conspicuous waste’ (Ibid. 113). In addition, and more far-reaching according to Veblen, is the fact that a wearer of elegant clothing also communicates that he or she has no need to take on any kind of productive labour. He reveals his disdain for inherited wealth or wealth acquired through other than productive labour when he writes that:

Much of the charm that invests the patent-leather shoe, the stainless linen, the lustrous cylindrical hat, and the walking-stick, which so greatly enhance the native dignity of a gentleman, comes of their pointedly suggesting that the wearer cannot when so attired bear a hand in any employment that is directly and immediately of any human use.

(Veblen 2007 [1899]: 113)

Apart from signifying wealth, elegant clothing thus also signifies what Veblen names ‘conspicuous leisure’ and must be regarded a waste of time for the wearer is unwilling or unable to contribute to productive employment. The inability to work is reflected in the clothing styles that do not allow the wearer to undertake any manual labour since they are too costly and fragile or disable the movement of the wearer. Leisurewear, in Veblen’s account, is thus typically suited to flaunt in (flâner in French) and to show one does not need to involve oneself in physical labour.

Veblen, furthermore, seems visionary when he adds that the reputability of the goods worn is more important than the protection the clothes also offer. This reputability, which Veblen names the ‘spiritual need of
dress’, not only accounts for the change involved in fashionable clothing, it may also indicate the way we today choose to adhere to certain (luxury) clothing brands for their reputation rather than for any other characteristic. There is a striking difference, however, between the usage of reputable goods in 1899 and our day and age in which labour has largely shifted from manual labour to service and office work. Today we seem to reserve reputable clothing for work, and our typical leisurewear consists of jeans and a T-shirt, for instance. The latter are often more suited to the physical activities we may call our hobbies, whereas the former are predominantly worn to work and parties. Nevertheless, reputability in the form of preferring certain clothing brands for leisure remains present and therewith the possibility to signify one’s wealth even when wearing more comfortable leisure wear that would actually be suitable for manual labour.

Although indicating wealth and time for leisure are the two identity markers Veblen adheres to elegant clothing, he continues his chapter by focussing on the idea of imitation. Veblen writes that lower class women, who are normally required to wear clothing suited for manual labour, imitate the higher leisure classes by wearing restraining clothes, such as the corset, when on holidays (Veblen 2007 [1899]: 122). In addition, a growing wealthy leisure class lies in wait for increased imitation of the highest class. According to Veblen, subtlety and knowledge about the “spiritualisation of the scheme of symbolism in dress” then becomes important for the highest class (Veblen 2007 [1899]: 124). In other words, one needs the time and skills to obtain knowledge about the delicate details that symbolically communicate wealth in dress in order to distinguish oneself from the imitations of the lower wealthy class. Veblen regards the time one needs for gaining knowledge about advertising responsible for keeping up with what is needed as signifying the highest wealth in this subtle manner (Veblen 2007 [1899]: 123, 124). The fact that lower classes continue to imitate the higher classes, furthermore, causes the restless search for more and more symbolic and subtle innovation by the highest class, ultimately mainly contributing to the ‘conspicuous waste’ Veblen relates to fashion, imitation and change.

Whereas, according to Veblen, it is always the highest pecuniary classes that lead and decide what dress is fashionable, which the lower classes then imitate, this is certainly not comparable to today’s fashion
culture. We may use reputable brands to signify our wealth. However, it seems that we are less occupied with communicating that we have no need to perform productive labour. Hence, signification of identity through imitation has become much more complex and refined than simply adopting the looks of the wealthy. Today, one may even choose to adopt the looks of the poorest in society to signify fashionability, as a number of designers have shown from John Galliano in his Spring 2000 collection to Vivienne Westwood’s 2011 Fall collection, drawing inspiration from the homeless which became a trend called ‘Homeless Chic’.  

In addition, if the perusal of advertisements, mentioned by Veblen, may still consume our time, it is no longer considered something we need to ‘study’. Advertisements are, furthermore, ubiquitous, which replaces the idea of studying them with choosing which ones to adhere to. Perhaps in this day and age, time and skills are mainly needed to be aware of what is in fashion and to dress accordingly. I therefore suggest we look into Georg Simmel’s more dynamic account of fashion and imitation in the following paragraphs. Simmel also regards fashion as a class struggle whereby the highest classes set the pace of what is fashionable and abandon this once the lower classes have appropriated their styles (Simmel 1997 [1905]: 189). He, however, adds a more abstract notion of wealth to his ‘fashion system’ when he writes about the “wealth of inexhaustible possibilities” in the opening paragraph of his ‘Philosophy of Fashion’ (Simmel 1997 [1905]: 187).

Since, for Simmel, fashion is socially motivated but “not denied absolutely to anyone”: although a worker may envy the rich and may never be as wealthy, he, however, can psychologically ‘feel’ rich by adopting the clothing style of the wealthy persons he envies (Simmel 1997 [1905]: 193). According to Simmel, fashion operates along lines of connection and differentiation; one connects with a certain group, and therewith differentiates from another group. Once workers connect with the wealthy class by adopting their clothing style, the wealthier class will seek to

10 For more information and an ‘evolution of Homeless Chic see: http://jezebel.com/5452006/the-evolution-of-homeless-chic/ , accessed May 2014. In addition, one may remember Cheng Guorong, a Chinese homeless man who received worldwide attention for his inspiring style and became a fashion icon when photographed by an amateur photographer in 2009.
differentiate from this style and will adopt a new style. Simmel accounts this process as responsible for the nature of change inherent to what fashion is. A similar opposition, however, is at work within each individual; we all imitate others and therewith socially adapt ourselves to the ruling social environment, but we also seek to differ from the group we imitate by differentiating from it individually. Or as Simmel writes:

> Fashion is the imitation of a given pattern and thus satisfies the need for social adaptation; it leads the individual onto the path that everyone travels, it 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.

(Simmel 1997 [1905]: 188,189)

The above can convincingly be related to our current concept of belonging to a certain group through the way we dress. The *Exactitudes* project by Dutch photographer Ari Versluis and stylist Ellie Uyttenbroek, for instance, provides us with an overview of (currently) 144 of such social groups connected through their apparel. All these groups, except the first one they recorded, feature twelve people, presented on one page, dressed and positioned alike, ranging from ‘Gabbers’ (which initiated the series) with their shaven heads and coloured tracksuits photographed in 1994 to the 2013 ‘Topshoppers’ photographed in St Petersburg, wearing plain coloured polo shirts and Bermuda pants. At a glance all individuals on each of the two pages look alike. However, a closer look reveals what Simmel names “the tendency towards differentiation, change and individual contrast”. Only one of the twelve ‘Topshoppers’ wears a watch, for instance, and therewith individualises from his group membership whilst at the same time dressing so much like the other eleven members of the group that he may convincingly be regarded as willingly conforming to the fashion imitation of the group.
Figure 1.5
01. Gabbers –
Rotterdam 1994
Photograph: Ari
Versluis & Ellie
Uyttenbroek /
Exactitudes
Simmel’s idea of simultaneous imitation and differentiation provides us with an interesting system for thinking about the dynamics involved in fashion as an identity marker, for it leaves space for individual deviation from the norm. However, my example of members of certain ‘fashion
groups’ or subcultures simultaneously connecting and differentiating from the group they belong to was inspired by Simmel’s essay, it does not follow his persistent thought that fashion is essentially a form of social interaction that is characterised by a trickle-down movement from the upper to the lower classes. In other words, Simmel regards fashion as striving for prestige in the form of imitating the wealthy, much like Veblen regarded fashion as a signifier for the ability to consume much more than one needs and thus labelled it conspicuous consumption. Nevertheless, the communication of prestige, social status and wealth through the display of luxury goods and clothing can still be recognised as part of fashion’s successful enterprise in communication of the presumed identity of the wearer. What more does fashion signify about the identity of the wearer, apart from imitating the looks of the higher classes? I suggest examining Gabriel Tarde’s concepts of identity and imitation (1895/1903) for an answer, for a system of fashion may surely entail more than outer imitation of the wealth of others alone.

Tarde’s 1903 *Laws of Imitation* is so fraught with the term ‘fashion’, he may very well be the “first to give the subject of fashion conceptual dignity by acknowledging its specific social logic and social temporality”, as Gilles Lipovetsky argues (1994 [1987]: 227). However, before looking into how Tarde’s concept of fashion-imitation may enrich the ideas of imitation in relation to fashion as put forth by Veblen and Simmel and described above, it is important to develop an understanding of what precedes imitation of one individual by another. I therefore suggest examining Tarde’s concept of identity as developed in his 1895 *Monadology and Sociology* firstly, since, in order to imitate someone or something, we need to clarify how ones and things are to be seen in Tarde’s view.

“To exist is to differ” Tarde writes (2012 [1895]: 40). In the same paragraph he contrasts difference, which is the starting point of existence, with identity as a point of departure, and states that the latter is merely a “minimal degree of difference” (Ibid.). Tarde herewith emphasises the fact that identifying someone or something is in fact bypassing the infinitive differences that may also – and are foremost to – be detected in a person or a thing. We are not exactly the same today as we were yesterday; two ostensibly similar items of clothing do differ when looking at them and thinking about them carefully; and knowledge of remarkable ideas may change the way we think and lead our lives. What
then replaces identity for Tarde? How are we to distinguish between differences if we cannot identify difference to begin with? Tarde’s solution lies in the alternative for the verb ‘to be’, which he willing trades for ‘to have’ as an indicator of more *spiritual* properties and qualities. Or as Tarde phrases it:

The verb *to be* means in some cases *to have*, and in others *to be equal to*. ‘My arm is hot’: the heat of my arm is the property of my arm. Here *is* means *has*. ‘A Frenchman is a European, a metre is a measure of length’. Here *is* means *is equal to*. But this equality itself is only the relation of part to whole, of genus to species or *vice versa*, that is, a kind of relation of possession. In these two meanings, therefore, *being* is reducible to having.

(Tarde 2012 [1895]: 52 [original emphasis])

It is difficult to not reintroduce identity when thinking about Tarde’s properties. On the one hand, one must think in relations that are to be detected. What we say to be a metre thus *has* a relation with the standard metre. Being someone then consists of the relations or properties one has rather than in what or who someone is, not just in the literal sense, but also in the having of ideas, events, aims, tastes, literature read, desires, beliefs, and so on. The relation involved with the verb ‘to have’ is, in addition, necessarily reciprocal; it is hence not primarily ‘my arm’ that is hot in the example above, it is heat and the arm that are each other’s property in a mutual chain of contact.

Tarde’s emphasis upon the relations or connections that are present, and constitutive of existence, differs drastically from the starting points of Veblen and Simmel who take the identity of the people as their point of departure and as such focus upon what someone *is*. Tarde’s concept can, in addition, be connected with Nietzsche’s notion of there being no ‘doer’ behind the deed, whereas Veblen and Simmel assume there first is a being which consequently represents itself. Deeds, in other words, are not merely actions performed by a being (person). Deeds are what happens between one ‘body’ and another, and as such also imply a focus upon infinitesimal relations and connections that are being made and undone,
rather than returning to a ‘doer’ by emphasising who is the chief actor.\textsuperscript{11} There are, in other words and according to Tarde, only constantly changing relations and connections that come into existence, and he herewith succeeds in avoiding falling back upon representation of the individual identity.\textsuperscript{12}

Tarde thus opens up a perspective upon fashion that revolves around more than outer looks and being. Thinking about fashion through the prism he adopts would entail thinking about the connections that are being made between skin and fabric, for instance. In addition, one could consequently question what happens in between the two, much like the connection of the sun and arm resulting in a hot area. This perspective, however, clearly also has its implications when studying Tarde’s concept of imitation, for it is already apparent that since representation of identity is ruled out, imitation must be about more than simply copying the outer appearances of someone more wealthy than us. I therefore suggest turning to his \textit{Laws of Imitation} (1903) with this idea in mind.

In the ‘Preface to the Second Edition’ of Tarde’s book on imitation, he reflects upon the criticism he received for using the term ‘imitation’ for facts that his critics did not see suited for such a usage (Tarde 1903: xiii). Tarde clarifies himself by writing that philosophers need to either choose a neologism or “stretch the meaning of some old term” and once again explains how he uses the term when he writes that the meaning of imitation in his works is “that of the action at a distance of one mind upon another” (xiv). In other words, imitation for Tarde is about ‘what is had’, the relations or connections that are being created: desires and beliefs, ideas and thoughts, aims and tastes, and so on. He, furthermore, stresses the fact that imitation takes place \textit{ab interioribus ad exterioria},

\begin{itemize}
\item [\textsuperscript{11}] By the term ‘body’ I do not refer to human body alone or per se, but rather to an entity that is capable of connecting with another entity, such as a ray of sun and the skin, for instance.
\item [\textsuperscript{12}] Unlike his fellow-countryman, colleague sociologist and contemporary Émile Durkheim (1858 -1917) who was interested in large representational structures in society, Tarde focuses on “the little imitations, oppositions, and inventions constituting an entire realm of subrepresentative matter” (Deleuze and Guattari: 2004 [1980]: 241). Tarde’s ‘microsociology’ may hence be regarded as inspiring Deleuze and Guattari to their concept of micro-politics (Ibid.).
\end{itemize}
from the interior to the exterior, and therewith starts in non-material and non-personal beliefs and desires that actively or passively, willed or not willed spring from our brain. And consequently, he emphasises the fact that “what is signified comes before the sign” (199, 212, 332). That is to say, in order for something to be regarded as a sign, say luxury clothing as a sign for wealth, there first must be the concept of wealth as a desirable asset that is then tied to the significations through the signs of certain items of clothing. What is more, Tarde allows for a much more abstract interpretation of what may be signified; the ‘interior’ in the quotation above thus may very well refer to a more abstract striving for power and hence prestige through the display of goods than the actual gathering of these goods. Imitation, furthermore, must be regarded as being a positive and productive concept for Tarde, for it is a potential cause of innovation and change; new signifieds that turn into new signs, new ideas that replace the old.

Within societies, Tarde distinguishes between custom-imitations that are conservative, mostly local, traditional, and relatively stable, and fashion-imitations that are extra-national, sometimes even global and responsible for innovation and change. In addition, he emphasises that ultimately “new fashion endeavours will become rooted in custom” (Tarde 1903: 368). This entails that Tarde is convinced innovative ideas and practices will become custom ideas and practices and will in turn make place for new innovations. It is, however, important to realise that for Tarde ‘fashion-imitations’ with their innovative character are not limited to innovations in dress alone. He applies the term of fashion to the whole social field and its dynamics, always starting from ideas, desires and beliefs which are consequently manifested in outward practices of which dress is only an example, albeit an important one. It is thus not so much imitation of outer signs that Tarde describes, but rather the spreading of less tangible qualities that he likens to the spreading of contagious germs:

At the same time, too, every germ of imitation which may have been secreted in the brain of any imitator in the form of a new belief or aspiration, of a new idea or faculty, has been steadily developing in outward signs, in words and acts which, according to the law of the march from within to without, have penetrated into his entire nervous and muscular systems.

(Tarde 1903: 369)
Tarde, like Veblen and Simmel, regards the process of fashion imitation as initially descending from higher classes to the lower ones in society (Tarde 1903: 368). “Only the wealthy classes are able to have costly lessons and make hazardous experiments. But when success is assured the gain becomes general” (Tarde 1903: 219n2). The wealthy classes can thus, according to Tarde, afford to experiment and hence introduce innovations, which are in turn adopted by the lower classes when they have proven successful. Tarde, however, moves beyond the top-down perspective when he states that imitation will eventually lead to democratic equality in which all classes fuse into one (Tarde 1903: 369). He thus creates space for further development than solely from higher to lower classes and authorities, and ties the idea of reciprocity to that of fashion-imitation; specifically in societies where “hierarchical functionaries of very unequal rank meet frequently” beliefs and desires will be imitated more democratically and in both directions (Tarde 1903: 379).

As remarked before, Tarde provides us with a prism that enables a moving beyond identity and as such brings about many more ideas and inspiration than would be fitting for this section. I will, therefore, return to his ideas in due course. Here, I would like to conclude by quoting Tarde’s views upon the dynamics of imitation in a democratic society.

> What is contrary to personal pre-eminence is the imitation of a single man whom people copy in everything. But when, instead of patterning one’s self after one person or after a few, we borrow from a hundred, a thousand or ten thousand persons, each of whom is considered under a particular aspect, the elements of thought or action which we subsequently combine, the very nature and choice of these elementary copies, as well as their combination, expresses and accentuates our original personality.
> (Tarde 1903: xxiv)

The citation above echoes the central theme of Luigi Pirandello’s novel *One, No One and One Hundred Thousand* (1926), which I described when introducing Judith Butler’s concept of identity as a social construct. Tarde, in addition, provides us with a system with which we may begin to think about the dynamic ways in which we have unique personalities; never through whom we are but through always changing and differing
relations and imitations that are created. It is thus not the simple imitation of outward signs we may draw from his work, but, more importantly, the originating thoughts and actions that we also unknowingly imitate and consequently combine.

Unlike Tarde, Veblen and Simmel’s theories and even sumptuary systems rely heavily on identifying signification of wealth in clothing and social structures. One must agree upon the fact that a material, colour, or type of clothing can be related to the signified wealth in a system of articulated ideas, and this involves a translation of signs into some form of language, before it can be applied to recognise and distinguish one from another. I will therefore examine what may be detected about fashion, identifying practices and language in the next section.

**Fashion as Language**

In an article written years before his renowned book *The Fashion System* (1967), which may be considered classical fashion theory, French theorist Roland Barthes deploys the semiotic theories of Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure to write about the relationship between fashion and language (Barthes 2006 [1957]: 8). Saussure, in the study of human languages, distinguishes between language as a social institution, independent of individual interpretations and usage, which he names *langue*, and language as an individualised act, which he names *parole* (Ibid.). That is to say, one may speak and write in, for instance, English and Dutch; those are *langues* in Saussure’s perspective. Yet the way an individual uses the languages of Dutch and English, may mix words or grammatical structures from one language with another, or may otherwise have developed certain personalised expressions, words, and stylistic pronunciations may be regarded as Saussure’s *parole*. Barthes proposes to use Saussure’s distinction for studying the dynamics of fashion:

> to identify an institutional, fundamentally social, reality, which, independent of the individual is like the systematic, normative reserve from which the individual draws their own clothing, and which, in correspondence to Saussure’s *langue*, we propose to call *dress*. And then to distinguish this from a second, individual reality, the very act of ‘getting
dressed’, in which the individual actualises on their body the general inscription of dress, and which, corresponding to Saussure’s parole, we will call dressing. Dress and dressing form then a generic whole, for which we propose to retain the word clothing (this is langage for Saussure).

(Barthes 2006 [1957]: 8/9)

In other words, when we admire certain items of clothing online, in magazines or in stores, we are admiring dress; the fabricated products generated by the fashion industry, which may be regarded for their systematic character. The moment we get dressed and combine an item of dress with our body, our personal style and taste and with other items of clothing and accessories, we individualise and functionalise dress. The systematic character of dress hence loses its force through the way one actually wears it. Clothing, for Barthes, incorporates both dress and dressing, which in their turn, are regarded for their reciprocal character. Barthes uses the example of broadness of shoulders to illustrate this point. “This is part of dressing when it corresponds exactly to the anatomy of the wearer; but part of dress when its dimension is prescribed by the group as part of a fashion” (Barthes 2006 [1957]: 9 [emphasis added])\(^\text{13}\). When, for instance, power dressing became popular amongst women working in offices during the nineteen-eighties, women with naturally broad shoulders were dressing themselves, whereas women who used blazer jackets with shoulder pads were following fashion and as such would be part of dress.

It is important to realise that Barthes – when constructing the theory for The Fashion System (1967) – is interested in creating a systematic and linguistic sociology of fashion and hence focuses on the langue of clothing: dress, and those instances of dressing that have succeeded in becoming dress. In the foreword of his elaborate account of fashion studied through semiology, Barthes motivates his choice for the system of (written) language as organising principle for his research when he writes that “[m]an is doomed to articulated language” (Barthes 2006 [1957]: xi). For Barthes, human language is the foundation of meaning; it is in

13 I will elaborate on who and what Barthes regards as ‘the [fashion] group’ below.
language that meaning is constituted. What is more, Barthes chooses to focus on the written language used in fashion magazines to describe the items of clothing found also in photography. To exemplify this choice, it is insightful to follow Barthes’ distinction between what he names ‘real clothes’, ‘image clothes’, and ‘written clothes’.

Real clothes, for Barthes, are the actual clothes that one finds in stores, closets and on oneself. He refrains from examining any meaning adhered to real clothes, since “language is not a tracing of reality” (Barthes 1990 [1967]: 5). That is to say, Barthes regards language as unsuitable to trace the meaning of actual clothes being worn. Barthes instead argues that one would need to examine the technological aspects of the manufacturing process as can be found in seams and pleats, for instance (Ibid.). Sight is reserved for Barthes’ image clothes, those clothes we encounter in the form of photography, more specifically in magazines. It is, however, written clothes that become Barthes’ object of research. Written clothes consist of the text a magazine uses to accompany the image; “This romantic white dress is a must-have for summer”, for instance. Barthes favours the written language above the language of photography or the functionalised practice of wearing clothes since written fashion provides him with “a true code”, which is a translation of clothing into language “entirely constituted with a view to a significance” (Barthes 1990 [1967]: 8). Whereas real clothing is burdened by practical considerations, such as that the reasons and hence meaning of wearing a certain item of clothing may be manifold, image clothing entails a transformation of the garment since it is a rearrangement of the given through photography. An image, furthermore, may represent a ‘frozen’ moment: within this moment the possibilities for interpretation are still as manifold as are its possible meanings. Barthes hence levitates the status of text (written garment) above that of an image (iconic garment),

14 Barthes here refers to Andre Martinet’s Éléments de linguistique générale (1960) in which it is argued that there is ‘no necessary correspondence between physical reality and linguistic function’ from: http://www.cairn.info/zen.php?ID_ARTICLE=LING_451_0061 (accessed May 2014).

15 Barthes refers to this transformation through photography by naming it the ‘plastic qualities’ of image clothing (Barthes 1967: 8).
and writes that “the primary function of speech is to immobilise perception at a certain level of intelligibility” (Barthes 1990 [1967]: 13 [emphasis added]). He, at least in his search for a semiotics of fashion, feels the needs for a single certainty at the basis of his Fashion System and finds this ground in written fashion.

Rather than questioning the consequences of developing a perspective on such a basis for the relevance of my research project (in which I am primarily interested in moving beyond the communication of identity of the wearers, and thus in real clothing), I suggest examining two other points Barthes makes: the ‘fashion group’ mentioned above, and the role Barthes designates to fashion magazines when it comes to the creation of meaning. To begin with the latter, we saw above that Barthes chose written fashion as a basis for his semiotics because he regarded language as most suited for rendering precise meaning. In his foreword, however, he questions the origin of the abundant use of language in fashion magazines and asks why it interposes, through the medium of the fashion magazine, “such a luxury of words, (not to mention images), such a network of meaning” between the item of clothing and its user (Barthes 1990 [1967]: xii). The reason, according to Barthes, is an economic one. He writes that there is a different consciousness for producers than there is for consumers; the latter desiring the object (item of clothing) as in dreaming of it, the former creating the name (written fashion) and selling its meaning. By multiplying and changing the meanings of items of clothing, the producers will multiply and change dreams and desires on the side of the consumer and as such succeed in maintaining an economically successful system of sales. Or as Barthes writes:

In order to blunt the buyer’s calculating consciousness, a veil must be drawn around the object – a veil of images, of reasons, of meanings; a mediate substance of an aperitive order must be elaborated; in short, a simulacrum of the real object must be created, substituting for the slow time of wear a sovereign time free to destroy itself by an act of annual potlatch.
(Barthes 1990 [1967]: xii)

Apart from magazine editors, Barthes regards designers, experts and manufacturers as belonging to the fashion group and responsible for
determining and changing what he designates the vestimentary code. The real dress code, that is the meaning of the actual clothes worn by people “must conform to the norms (as obscure as they may be) of the fashion group” (Barthes 1990 [1967]: 41). Barthes emphasises the authority of the fashion group in relation to assigning meaning to clothes, when he writes about fashion as ‘Law’. He says that contrary to spoken language, which evolves through time, meaning in fashion is actively changed each year (by the fashion group). In this sense he regards the signifying character of fashion as arbitrary; someone (the fashion group) has to state what is ‘in’ fashion and what the meaning of the items of clothing entails by connecting written metaphors to certain items of clothing (Barthes 1990 [1967]: 269). Analysing these written metaphors leads Barthes to conclude that “Fashion is a monarch whose realm is hereditary, it is a Parliament which renders femininity obligatory” (Ibid.). Although Barthes does not emphasise a trickle down movement of meaning from the wealthy to the lower classes, he does assign a hierarchic position to the fashion group, which is nevertheless also motivated by economic force.

For Barthes the meaning of fashion is, furthermore, arbitrary, constituted and actively changed by fashion professionals with authority (mainly magazine editors in his account). Today, however, authority does not rest with magazines solely. Through weblogs, social networks and even by encountering others on the street, we may notice that there no longer is ‘an authority’ to which we can assign the fabrication of what is ‘in’ fashion and which meaning one adheres to certain items of clothing. That is, to follow Barthes, fashion’s parole (the manner in which individuals assign meaning to their clothing) has become more influential than ever before. In addition, within Barthes’ Fashion System there is only room for ‘dressing’ (parole) once it has become part of ‘dress’ (langue). But is it not dressing what we do with clothing, the manner in which we functionalise and use it when we dress ourselves? However ambiguous, open and arbitrary the meanings we perhaps adhere to fashion may be, it is the way we use clothing and what it does for us that cannot be grasped that simply in a system. Barthes seems to agree upon such a perspective when he writes that his book may disappoint:
It would have been more agreeable to analyze a system of real Fashion (an institution which has always held a lively interest for sociologists) and apparently more useful in establishing the semiology of an independent object, one in no way related to articulated language. (Barthes 1990 [1967]: x)

In a later publication, Barthes clarifies his self-critique and writes that his reliance on the written – and as such ‘articulated’ – language of the fashion magazine has led him to conclude that since fashion is always present-oriented, the fashion system is necessarily arbitrary since “clothing is not in itself a system of meaning, as language is; in terms of substance, the support represents the materiality of the item of clothing, as it exists outside of any process of meaning” (Barthes 2006 [1969]: 115, 116). Thus, although Barthes emphasises that the meaning we attach to clothing is arbitrary, present-oriented and prescribed by fashion magazines, the materiality and affects one may associate with wearing clothing cannot be grasped in an independent system of meaning. Today, one can also recognise the arbitrariness of meaning related to clothing; what is in fashion one year, will be regarded (and described as) passé the following, although, it is no longer just fashion magazines that present us with fashion’s meanings. The process has become much more democratic since individual blogs and social media enable many more individuals to participate in creating the short-lived meaning of certain items of clothing. That leaves us with Barthes’ hint to focus on the affective qualities of clothing, which is something I will certainly do in subsequent chapters. 

16 Systems of Signification for Fashioning Identities?

From examining fashion as a system of signification through sumptuary laws, fashion as imitation and fashion as a written language – through the texts of what may be regarded as classical authors within fashion theory – a number of provisional conclusions may be drawn. Firstly, apart from Tarde and Barthes’ perspective, fashion as described in the former section centres around the communication of economic status.

16 See, for instance, Chapter 4 (Clothed Connections).
exemplified by wealth and signified through what one wears. From the
nobility during the late Middle Ages to the wealthy classes in Veblen and
Simmel’s accounts of fashion as communication, the focus has been on
how individuals strive for increasing their wealth. Even Tarde recognised
that the wealthy class possess the time and money needed to experiment
with innovations in fashion, which – when successful – would trickle
down to lower classes. He, however, also envisioned a more democratic
situation in which people of different status meet often, exchange ideas
and influence each other’s behaviour in dress no matter whether this
occurs in a trickle up or trickle down manner. This is perhaps a sound
vision for today’s situation, although it has taken decades after Tarde
shared his ideas for the situation to change and to become more dynamic
than simply imitating the looks of the wealthy. One may hence conclude
that fashion originated from, and persisted to, mainly communicating the
amount of financial resources of the wearer until the industrial revolution
made it possible for the masses to communicate more diverse signifi-
cations in dress.

In trying to come to terms with how fashion may be significant for
one’s identity, Barthes concluded that language cannot trace reality, yet
is the only means by which we can convey a meaning that may be drawn
from what we wear. A meaning that, in his theory, is constructed by those
with fashion authority. Perhaps we can conclude this part by referring
back to Nietzsche’s remark which was cited when discussing fashion
and identity as appearing intertwined. He emphasised that language
constructs a second world, alongside the one in which we exist and – to
follow Tarde – differ. The languages of the first centuries of fashion
concentrated on organising society along the lines of financial resources.
They signified what was perhaps the most important means to ensure a
life at all: money. Currently, however, the situation is quite different. We
seem to find ourselves in Tarde’s more democratic situation, meanings
are exchanged in all directions, cannot be easily fixed and finding the
language and the meaning of fashion performances today has, obviously,
become much more complex, and, to follow Barthes: appears essentially
arbitrary. I will therefore, in the following section, concentrate upon what
may be said about the signification of identity through fashion in the
more ambiguous sense which characterises contemporary fashion theory.
Fashion’s Ambiguous Play

In the above, we have seen that although there have been many attempts, in one way or another, to systemise the construction of meaning in relation to fashion and fashion’s manner of constructing our identities, from sumptuary laws, to imitation and, finally, through semiology – none of these systems proved sufficiently comprehensive. We seem to have ended up with the construction of meaning in relation to fashion through playing with metaphors, as Barthes suggested. In this part I will therefore research what has been written about fashion as ambiguous play with meanings. Firstly, Jean Baudrillard’s rather critical account of meaning in relation to fashion’s play will be examined. By comparing his view to Elizabeth Wilson’s more optimistic view I seek to find a middle way in which there may be room for meaning, yet not without losing sight of what consequences our playing with identity may have. In order to establish the latter, the critique Australian art and design theorist Llewellyn Negrin phrased in reaction to Wilson will be taken into account.

Enchanted Simulation

For French post-structuralist philosopher Jean Baudrillard, all one can do with fashion is play superficially with its signs and significations since there is “no longer any determinacy internal to the signs of fashion” (Baudrillard 1976: 87). In other words, what clothing may signify is merely ‘fashion itself’, since, according to Baudrillard, there is no longer any meaning behind the outer signs of dress. Baudrillard hence regards fashion as self-referential; what it is are its signs while those signs construct what fashion is. Anything may become a sign yet its meaning remains superficial and ultimately empty. The signs that make up fashion, furthermore, are exchanged through products that construct what fashion is and these products have what Baudrillard names “a form of general equivalence” that is fashion itself (Baudrillard 1976: 92). That is to say that, according to Baudrillard, there is no qualitative exchange of value: fashion’s signs are empty, there is only quantitative exchange of value.
that can be found in the actual price paid for the products. Like Barthes, Baudrillard emphasises that models are required to communicate what fashion is at a certain time and place and how and when fashion shifts signs. He designates ‘the media of fashion’ this task.

In addition, Baudrillard grants fashion no truly creative power: it cannot produce anything meaningful or truly new precisely because what fashion is, is reproduced from the media of fashion that operate according to a model. Or as he writes:

All cultures, all sign systems are exchanged and combined in fashion, they contaminate each other, bind ephemeral equilibria, where the machinery breaks down, where there is nowhere any meaning [sense].

Fashion is the pure speculative stage in the order of signs.

(Baudrillard 1976: 92)

There is no space for any meaning with regard to fashion and its speculative and floating signs in Baudrillard’s perspective. There is thus also no relation to be found between these speculative signs and what they may or may not communicate with regard to one’s identity. We play our ‘enchanted’ games by the rules of simulation created by the way fashion is communicated in words and – mainly – images.

Before turning to a more positive perspective upon fashion, communication and meaning, there are two points that Baudrillard makes about the limits of fashion when it comes to thinking that I want to take into account, since they may prove valuable for the development of a new perspective upon fashion later in this dissertation. Firstly, for Baudrillard fashion must not be extended beyond the human practices into animal behaviour, since fashion knows nothing about ritual, animal finery; fashion deals solely with human practices (Baudrillard 1976: 90). Animals do not get dressed, would summarise Baudrillard’s point in an overtly simple manner. One may, however, question and contest Baudrillard’s exclusion of animal behaviour and animal-like experiences in relation to dress, which I will undertake in the following chapter. Secondly, Baudrillard does not limit fashion to “dress and external signs” (Ibid.). He sees the logic of change as mediated by models and motivated by economic exchange in all modernity’s practices from art to science, politics.
and revolution, and from media to sex. In short, we may conclude that for Baudrillard we cannot escape fashion since “the alternative to fashion does not lie in a ‘liberty’ or in some kind of step beyond towards a truth of the world and systems of reference” (Baudrillard 1976: 99). According to Baudrillard, changing the way fashion operates requires a deconstruction of signification and a deconstruction of our political economy (Ibid.).

This leaves us with a rather grim image; we are trapped in a system in which we may only communicate through simulation, motivated by money and end up not ‘saying’ anything meaningful. For Baudrillard, our fashion discourses are entirely built around meaningless signs and Baudrillard’s ‘enchantment’ is perhaps best characterised as an animated pleasure that, however, can never be animistic. He thus situates fashion within an essentially human and as such sociological and cultural sphere. On may, however, take Barthes’ remark into account and wonder whether the affective qualities of clothing also exclude a move beyond such a perspective. Clearly there must be more to be said about a phenomenon we wear on our skin and use on a daily basis to construct our identities. I therefore turn to what may be considered a reference work on the significance of fashion.

**Ambiguous Play**

Elizabeth Wilson rejects Baudrillard’s view on fashion as meaningless play (Wilson 2003 [1985]: 53). She contrasts his views, which are in her

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17 This idea of fashion as exemplary for all aspects of modern culture has been elaborated upon and described by Gilles Lipovetsky in his 1987 *The Empire of Fashion. Dressing Modern Democracy*, New Jersey: Princeton University Press. Since I focus specifically on how dress may be regarded as indicative for one’s identity, I choose not to further examine this aspect here.

18 With ‘animistic’ I refer to the philosophy in which all entities living or not are thought of as having a spiritual essence. Articles to examine animism and its further consequences and ideas can, for instance, be found in Isabelle Stengers’ ‘Reclaiming Animism’, *e-flux journal* # 36, 2012, and Betti Marenko’s ‘Neo-Animism and Design. A New Paradigm in Object Theory’, *Design and Culture* vol. 6 (2), 2014.
opinion “oversimplified and over-deterministic”, by emphasising the way people use fashion creatively to communicate their identities, subvert them, or to express their anger at society, and she argues that fashion provides us with artefacts that are used to create a pleasurable experience. In addition, she stresses that relying on one theoretical perspective in order to explain the complex and ambiguous relationship fashion has with meaning leads to “simplistic explanations that leave us still unsatisfied” (Wilson 2003 [1985]: 10). Therefore, in Adorned in Dreams, Fashion and Modernity she sets herself the task to study fashion simultaneously through the perspectives of social theory, through the political discourses that can be found surrounding fashion, and through its artistic (aesthetical) qualities.

Before looking into some of Wilson’s examples that may be related to the perspectives mentioned above, it is also important to review how and why Wilson chooses to use ‘Modernity’ as an umbrella for her multifaceted view on fashion. Her main premise that fashion is an ambiguous game when it comes to expressing one’s identity, for instance, derives from her understanding of modernity and at the same time explains why she is so opposed to a postmodern perspective upon fashion. In a postmodern perspective upon fashion, such as Baudrillard’s, dress and what it may express is necessarily meaningless since everything is possible and we merely play with what is at hand. The reason why Wilson relates fashion to modernity is thus to allow some space for meaning, however ambiguously perceived, to be preserved. Or as she writes:

[T]he word ‘modernity’ attempts to capture the essence of both the cultural and the subjective experience of capitalist society and all its contradictions. It encapsulates the way in which economic development opens up, yet simultaneously undercuts the possibility both of individual

19 Contrary to art history and media studies, for instance, Wilson traces modernism, or modernistic practices and thought back to where they may first be detected and hence relates the origin of fashion to capitalism, trade, cities and modernity back to the 14th century.

20 In the journal of Theory, Culture and Society Wilson and Negrin (see next section) dispute each other’s views on fashion as either modern or postmodern phenomenon. See: Wilson 2000: 121-125.
self development and of social cooperation, ‘Modernity’ does also seem useful as a way of indicating the restless desire for change characteristic of cultural life in industrial capitalism, the desire for the new that fashion expresses so well.

(Wilson 2003 [1985]: 63)

Both fashion and modernity are regarded for their capitalist structure, their loss of a unified self and the thirst for change rather than for tradition. In addition, Wilson emphasises the paradoxical character that ties modernity, capitalism and fashion together. While we adorn ourselves in fashionable clothes and enjoy the aesthetic and even glamorous experience that comes with it, we do so at the cost of exploited workers in developing countries (Wilson 2003 [1985]: 90). While we find pleasure in changing styles and playing with our ambiguous identities, we, in addition, lay enormous claims on the environment. Wilson hence acknowledges the negative sides of the paradox but nevertheless is determined to also emphasise the positive aspects of fashion.

From a social and psychological perspective, for instance, Wilson underlines the power of fashion to, through adopting a certain clothing style, create a sense of unity and identity in a society that emphasises the fragmentary character of the self. This recreation of a lost self extends to Wilson’s political perspective upon gender and identity: when tracing the history of women’s appearance she writes about how “in the nineteenth century the bourgeois woman’s appearance was an artistic production” and identity and appearance became one (Wilson 2003 [1985]: 123).

Much like Lipovetsky’s emphasis upon the manner in which “[fashion] provides an extraordinary way for human beings to detach themselves from their cultural and familial roots”, Wilson praises fashion for its liberating and creative aspects (Lipovetsky 1994 [1987]: 190). Women were and are no longer tied to their hereditary backgrounds and can express how they want to be regarded by dressing themselves accordingly. In addition, Wilson extends her positive stance towards fashion when adopting a more aesthetic perspective upon its relation with meaning when she emphasises the importance of the symbolism of objects worn so close on

21 I will return to the environmental claims as well as the exploitation of workers in subsequent chapters.
our bodies that they articulate the soul (Wilson 2003 [1985]: xi). How this articulation of the soul works exactly and what a soul may be remains unclear in Wilson’s account, but ultimately fashion’s meaning for Wilson is spiritual, something that is there but can only be sensed, or as she names it, fashion is ‘unspeakably meaningful’ (Wilson 2003 [1985]: 3; 271).

This unspeakable meaningfulness of fashion is inspired by eighteenth century Scottish philosopher and author of *Sartor Resartus* (‘The Tailor Retailored’), Thomas Carlyle, and it reflects the complexity of fashion’s basis of communication well; what one sees in the material aspect of clothing is not translatable into clear-cut meanings but rather the result of more spiritual ideas. Or as Carlyle writes:

> All visible things are emblems; what thou seest is not there on its own account; strictly taken it is not there at all: Matter exists only spiritually, and to represent some Idea, and body it forth. Hence Clothes, as despicable as we think them, are so unspeakably significant.
> (Carlyle 2008 [1831]: 49)

Perhaps Wilson herself is most clear about the character of this unspeakable meaningfulness of fashion when she describes that before punk became a performance “it was tremendously angry, anarchic and destructive in intention” (Wilson 2000:123). That is to say that new fashions find their ground in strongly felt urges that cannot be explained rationally or verbally quite as well as they can be expressed through dress. The spiritual character of the meaning Wilson adheres to fashion than perhaps rests in inner drives that subsequently become materialised in dress. She, nevertheless, foregrounds the liberating playfulness we experience when dressing ourselves and therewith includes a paradox between inner qualities and outer ambiguous meaning. Perhaps it is time to question how this play with appearances is influenced before examining ways to approach its deeper spiritual qualities.

*Appearance and Identity*

In reaction to Baudrillard’s ‘meaningless play’ with fashion’s ‘floating
signs’, and critical of the commodities of consumer culture, Llewellyn Negrin challenges Wilson’s positive appraisal of fashion’s liberating possibilities.\textsuperscript{22} Whereas Wilson argues that playing with a multitude of identities can liberate and empower individuals for they may creatively choose to express whatever they want to be, Negrin questions what is left unchallenged in such a perspective (Negrin 1999: 110; 2005: 3). Negrin’s answer rests on interrogating the equating of identity with appearance, and she discovers several downsides to what seems a positive and creative play of identity performances. By focussing on the problems Negrin associates with fashion as a playful tool, I aim to conclude this part by showing that thinking in fashioning identities is no longer desirable or sustainable.

If we can be whoever we want to be, and communicate and play with our identities through what we wear, we will obviously need the clothes to do so. We, however, need to also reduce our identity to “an image which is constructed by the commodities one buys” (Negrin 1999: 110). This reduction of identity to an image is problematic because it leads us to predominantly act in ways the advertising industry wants us to: buy more, change our identities several times a day and according to our activities, and identify with the stereotypes and models they have created for us.\textsuperscript{23} We tend to go out ‘shopping for subjectivity’ and we can do so endlessly because the advertising industry will always be one step ahead of us in offering small changes or new seductions.\textsuperscript{24} Or as Negrin writes:

\textsuperscript{22} Negrin also criticises \textit{Women and Fashion: A New Look} (1989) by Caroline Evans and Minna Thornton; \textit{The Empire of Fashion} (1987) by Gilles Lipovetsky; \textit{Sex and Suits: The Evolution of Modern Dress} (1994) by Anne Hollander; and \textit{Fresh Lipstick: Redressing Fashion and Feminism} (2005) by Linda M. Scott, but I choose to concentrate on Wilson on the basis of their respective articles in \textit{Theory, Culture and Society}.

\textsuperscript{23} More on this mechanism can be found in Chapter 3: \textit{A Delineated Fashion}.

\textsuperscript{24} The term ‘shopping for subjectivity’ comes from Lauren Langman’s ‘Neon cages, shopping for subjectivity’ (1992).
As is argued, in the context of contemporary consumer capitalism, in which the constant “makeover” of the self is widely promoted by the fashion and advertising industries, such a conception of the self, far from posing a challenge to the dominant ideology, is complicit with it. While such a concept may once have been subversive in an age where identity was regarded as fixed by nature or ordained by God, now it is convergent with the imperatives of late capitalism, which actively promotes the idea of a constantly transmuting self where the cult of appearance is privileged over all other modes of self-definition.

(Negrin 2005: 2)

Before looking into which ‘other modes of self-definition’ Negrin has in mind, her remark that even though advertisements put much emphasis onto the individual, we have ended up looking rather non-descript and remarkably alike, is of interest. According to Negrin this is due to diminishing distinctions between classes, gender and work/leisure practices as well as a result of global advertising agencies such as Saatchi and Saatchi, distributing their ‘ideal’ images throughout the world (Negrin 2005: 25).

And perhaps our non-descript, rather universal looks of today are also a reaction to an ongoing stimulation to change, buy, and experiment encouraged by the fashion industry. People grow tired of an ever accelerating and growing choice in what to wear and how to look and may opt-out trying to compete and settle for rather plain looking casual wear.

What is more, Negrin regards the emphasis upon the communication of identity through appearance as an essentially unequal practice, since the body is an important material reality that can be oppressed through unequal social structures by focussing on gender, race or shape (Negrin 2005: 52). Say you are an obese Afro-American woman with limited financial resources; you may try to use fashion to communicate your identity yet your body-size, skin-colour and gender will be of great influence in the communication process. I would like to add the idea here

25 In this light Normcore, a trend predicted by ‘forecasting agency’ K-Hole in 2013 is interesting for it exemplifies exactly the idea of moving away from exclusivity into ‘hard-core normality’, hence the name Normcore. Please turn to Chapter 3 of this dissertation for a more elaborated examination of the Normcore forecast.
that identity is a limiting construct from the beginning, since before one can identify someone as performing a certain identity, this identity must be recognised and fixed at least for the moment of recognition. That is to say that however many different identity categories one may erect they remain constructed and fixed, and as such may not necessarily be complex or subtle enough to comply with the complex and more spiritual experiences of the individual.

Negrin writes that although she is aware of the fact that since Butler’s *Gender Trouble* (1990) we no longer speak of an interior self nor “in terms of binary oppositions of male versus female, social reality continues to be organised along these lines” (Negrin 2005: 151). According to Negrin, there thus occurs a discrepancy between concepts we may theoretically create and social practices that appear much sturdier and harder to undo. In other words, while philosophically there may be no interior self to our identities, people do commonly operate along the lines of possessing such a concept of self. We seem preoccupied by finding a solution for the unstable basis through, for instance, the reading of horoscopes (‘I am a Leo and thus…’); through equating our names, date and place of birth with our origin and sense of continuous being; and by searching – sometimes rather desperately when young and generally more stable when older – for a style of dress that resonates our inner values and beliefs. It is the latter that Negrin advocates in her critical study of appearance and identity when she argues that “[r]ather than being treated merely as a form of aesthetic embellishment devoid of significance, the role of bodily adornment as a carrier of meaning needs to be recognised and more fully embraced” (Negrin 2005: 3). The question, however, remains how Negrin sees fashion reflecting our inner life.

An answer may be found in the importance Negrin adheres to fashion as an embodied practice. She raises awareness of the fact that bodies differ and clothing is dependent on the body for communication to take place and is not a signifier in or by it-self. Or as Negrin writes: “[w]hile it is true that a body is mediated by discourse, it is important to realise that it is not simply a discursive construct but also has a materiality that exceeds this” (Negrin 2005: 154). She quotes cultural theorist Paul Sweetman to illustrate her point:
Fashion . . . involves far more . . . than simply the symbolic manipulation of codes. When I wear a suit, I walk, feel and act differently, and not simply because of the garment’s cultural connotations . . . but also because of the way the suit is cut and the way its sheer materiality both enables and constrains, encouraging or demanding a certain gait, posture and demeanor, whilst simultaneously denying me the full range of bodily movement that would be available were I dressed in jogging-pants and a loose-fitting t-shirt.

(Sweetman 2001: 66, in Negrin 2005: 154)

In conclusion, we may say that apart from developing an insight into the limitations of reducing identity to appearance, Negrin advocates a perspective in which identity does not equal one’s looks but includes a more ethical aspect that makes room not only for the values and beliefs of an individual but also for the deeds that he or she may conduct that cannot be represented completely in dress, or as she writes: “in celebrating the notion of [...] artifice, [...] such a view acquiesces to the advertisement industry which promotes the judgement of people [...] by their appearances rather than by their deeds” (Negrin 1999: 115). Although she, in addition, advocates regarding the body as a materiality that exceeds discursive practices, she also opposes a concept of identity as merely performative since this entails a dissociation from our corporeality. Or as she phrases it: “[o]ur experience of who we are is unavoidably mediated through the physical presence of our bodies” (Negrin 2008: 155 [emphasis added]). Hence, even though she firmly advocates a perspective upon identity that moves beyond the simple equation with appearance, Negrin’s perspective nevertheless remains within the realm of the concept of identity through its focus upon specific bodies. A concept that is, as she argues, limiting and imprecise, but perhaps also prevents a radically open way of thinking about what fashion and bodies can do rather than what they may represent.  

Negrin herself hints at such a perspective when describing Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s (1983) concept of a ‘Body without Organs’ in a footnote, but does not elaborate upon the idea she describes when writing: “The aim should be to transcend identity and subjectivity, fragmenting and freeing up lines of flight, “liberating” multiplicities, corporeal and otherwise, that »
Conclusion

Even though we often know better, we do tend to judge books by their cover, bottles of wine by their label and people by what they wear. Books and bottles, however, have no say in their appearance; their covers and labels are designed by and for human beings. Graphical designers may very well operate along the lines of creating what Barthes named a veil, which is in effect a mere tool to encourage purchase without questioning whether the message conveyed on the outside has any relation whatsoever with the content. People, however, tend to dress themselves and although they may be influenced by the foremost visual veil communicated by the fashion industry, they may also choose to subvert, oppose, neglect, or create alternative meanings for the clothes they choose to wear, and even, albeit in smaller details, for the corporate clothes they are (or feel) obliged to wear within a workplace. Perhaps one more paradox needs to be added to Elizabeth Wilson’s account to clarify the way fashion is characterised: the paradox between being and becoming.

Whereas fashion – like people – is open to becoming and change both are socially regarded for their being, which is identified and as such temporarily fixed and unified, yet ultimately a construct that can impossibly – to follow Tarde – reflect the differences and connections that characterise their existence. When we misjudge a book or a bottle of wine because their design lured us into purchasing them, we may put them aside or possibly develop a headache and waste some money as well. Equating ourselves with the clothes we wear, however, may be more troublesome. Although the fashion industry has proven its skills and success when it comes to encouraging us to identify with the products they offer, there must be more than mere identification at work to describe the constantly differing relations bodies, clothing and surroundings enter into.

Baudrillard does not offer an alternative since he regards fashion as an essentially postmodern and endless game without significance. According to Baudrillard, we play with the signs of fashion and may think » identity subsumes under the one” (Negrin 2005: 167, N6). In the remainder of this research report I will attempt to develop such a perspective and clarify its consequences.
we are communicating (part of) our identities, but ultimately the signs are empty and do not succeed in communicating anything meaningful at all; all we can do with fashion is play meaningless games. Studying fashion through such a perspective would entail negating the idea that fashion can communicate meaning altogether. Wilson and Negrin, on the contrary, are determined to connect meaning to fashion and identity, however spiritual or embodied this may be. Wilson’s ‘unspeakable meaningfulness’ is hard, if not impossible, to translate but perhaps noticeable in the liberation and pleasure one may find in playing with a multitude of identities. Negrin, however, is critical of this playing with identities since it limits who someone is, or performs to be through fashion, to appearance. The latter is, in addition, influenced by social reality in which some bodily characteristics are favoured above others. Negrin therefore advocates an extension of the concept of identity to one’s deeds, and foregrounds an ethical perspective upon these deeds. Apart from including all human bodies in social reality and regarding them equally, such an ethical perspective would need to include the negative aspects of fashion Wilson mentions: exploitation of the workers that produce the (cheap) clothes we wear, and the wastefulness – and therewith the exploitation of our planet – of a practice characterised by change.

In addition, all theoretical perspectives examined in this chapter, with the exemption of Gabriel Tarde’s, share the principle of regarding human bodies as necessarily socially, cultured bodies that are potentially meaningful, identifiable and communicative. And although this may be the way we commonly think and act, perhaps there is more to be detected. Tarde’s emphasis on existence as necessarily differing is of interest here. We may than agree with Malcolm Barnard that identity is a product of difference, it does however not follow that “those who disapprove of fashion are those who conceive or desire an end to this play of differences” (Barnard 2007: 185). One can disapprove of fashion’s capitalistic, wasteful, exploitative, and limiting character, and, rather than disapproving of a play with differences, one can disapprove of a play with identities as encouraged by mainstream brands, but be positive about fashion for how it may succeed in, for instance, effectively revealing urges of anger and subversion such as punk did, according to Wilson.

These affective dimensions of fashion that precede representational structures remain largely unexposed in contemporary fashion theories.
With Tarde one could hence say that the infinitesimal, if not immanent, details and affects that may enable us to experience a spiritual connection with fashion, remain unthought. I therefore seek to move beyond a perspective upon fashion as essentially human and cultured and will turn to philosophy in the following chapter to discover what more may be said about how difference produces identity and as such precedes it. In doing so, I examine what, for instance, may differentiate human language from the silent, unspeakable, or spiritual meaning many theorists discussed in this chapter have touched upon when writing about fashion (Eicher 2005: 270; Wilson 2003 [1985]: 3 & 271; Tarde 2012 [1895]: 52; Carlyle 2008 [1831]: 49).