

## Chapter 2

### Style

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"Every apparition can be experienced in two ways. The two ways are not at random, but they are attached to the apparitions – they are derived from the nature of the apparition, from two of their characteristics: exterior – interior."

*Wassily Kandinsky*<sup>1</sup>

"Le style c'est l'homme même."

*Georges-Louis Leclerc, Comte de Buffon*<sup>2</sup>

Although people find it difficult to define the concept of style spontaneously, they classify each other as belonging or not belonging together by respective styles. They always do so when they see others as punk, nerd, hipster, hippie, yuppie, emo, or belonging to hip hop or the mainstream. Which succeeds more frequently than not! Yet, the question is how this works and why.

Sociology asserts style to be either representative or constitutive of social groups, or else both.<sup>3</sup> However, there is consensus in all of sociology that social

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1 Kandinsky 1973 (1926), p. 13, my translation.

2 Cited after Saisselin 1958.

3 Modernist sociology regards differences in endowment (financial and cultural capital) as being constitutive for forming social groups; style is merely representative of social groups (for example, the Birmingham School in its analysis of British youth cultures [Hebdige 1988]). In contrast, in the postmodern variant of sociology, the group style is understood as the constituent characteristic of the group; it is only by showing a style, that groups can come into being and are able to persist; other socio-cultural characteristics, for example the endowment with capital, play no or only a secondary role. Bourdieu (1982) marks the transition from modernism to postmodernism,

groups and their style form an inseparable entity. Group identities possess group-specific styles; and social distance between groups manifests itself in such differences. I will refer to the group-specific style as the *common style* (of a group).

If social distance between groups is established by means of different group-specific styles, how then will proximity be established within a group? As I will argue in chapter 3, this is achieved by means of the *individual style* of the group members. The more similar individual styles are, the greater proximity is within the group; the more dissimilar they are, the less proximity there is. Individual style and individual identity form an entity.

Collective identity and common style form a corresponding pair, and individual identity forms one with individual style. So, the very core of the production of social distance and proximity is affected by the question of exactly how and why human beings recognise social groups and individuals by their style. To answer this question I need to clarify the concept of style, which is the aim of this chapter.

In science, style is addressed at different levels of aggregation. Sociology addresses it at the aggregate level of object ensembles. The ensemble as a whole, a subset from the world of objects, is defined as a style, freed from its constituent components, and assigned to a social group. At this level of aggregation, the style has lost the material substance of its empirical evidence, 'anything goes' as an ensemble as long as it differs from the ensembles of other groups.

Archaeology and art history search for style on the disaggregated level of the particular object, e.g., an (antique) vase, or a painting. There, characteristics are found which are subsequently searched for in other objects. The subset of objects with these characteristics, remaining variable in number, is then seen as consisting of elements made in their shared style. Objects are thus assigned to different cultural taxa, referred to as a style. For example, ceramic fragment may belong to the cultural taxon of the Ionic style and another to the Corinthian style. Or a painting may belong to the cultural taxon of the High Renaissance and another to mannerism. The assignment of human beings to a style is done eclectically: be they those known by name, painting in a certain style (e.g., abstract expressionism), or the artistic avant-garde of a time and place (for example, the Vienna

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postulating that their outward signals are as representative of social groups as they are constitutive for them.

Secession), or members of a style who will never be identified (e.g., Funnelbeaker culture), showing up in history only through association with that style.<sup>4</sup>

The following considerations remain in the tradition of art history and archaeology if we start from the analysis of style in the world of things. However, from a sociological point of view, I perceive this material style as being interwoven with the social. In this context, I will define the term 'style' more precisely, step by step.

## Beauty versus the Aesthetic

Beauty is a value and a quality, aesthetics is merely a quality.<sup>5</sup> In the following, style is understood as an aesthetic concept: a style can be, but isn't necessarily beautiful. A punk wearing a safety pin in his or her ear and a representative of goth, pale as death, also show style – no matter how ugly they may be perceived to be. The aesthetics of a style is reflected in the quality of the ensemble of objects that constitute it. In this interpretation, style is a neutral concept. So, when I refer to the style of one group and that of another, I am referring to the different qualities as they are shown in their *o/+consumption*.

As a concept of aesthetics and not a term for beauty, style has an important implication for all that follows: two styles cannot be ordinally ranked. As a style is not a value but merely a quality, it defies ordinal comparisons such as: more or less beautiful than another style, more or less accomplished, more or less appealing, more or less contemporary. Two styles are incomparable in this normative sense, they are economic substitutes for "Yes to this, no to that!", or alternatively, 'No to this, yes to that!' As they are merely different qualities, styles lend themselves to the production of social distance and proximity without imposing hierarchies themselves.

Style, understood as being aesthetic, is therefore equally suitable for the analysis of stratified and non-stratified societies. As the object of scientific investigation, the human being may be admiring or pejorative of other people's 'styles', but the sentiment of beauty cannot be the issue here. Instead I take both the individual and the common style as the fundamental scientific concept for the analysis of stratified and non-stratified society.

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4 Much like archaeology, material culture starts from the analysis of individual objects, but it further investigates their systematic connection to the human. Ensembles of objects are, however, not in its focus, and therefore not the style.

5 Costello 2004.

## Individual versus Common

Art historians define the style of objects using the *signature model*. They look for the artist's 'hallmark' in an object. The origin of the word style, *stylus* – the pen of the writer – already points to this. In the signature model, the style of an object is the unmistakable hallmark of its creator. Knowing his individual style, the art historian accredits a newly discovered fresco, previously concealed under a coat of paint, to Titian. Or the art historian exposes a painting previously attributed to Kazimir Malevich as a fake. Or they attribute a newly discovered object to a particular but unknown artist, whose hallmark has already become visible in other works. One such artist is the fifth century B.C. Greek known as 'The Master of the Berlin Amphora', whose stylistic signature is evident on over 300 vases.<sup>6</sup> The signature model is also used in archaeology. However, there the aim is not to identify a creator as an individual, but rather to assign, for example, the finds of a certain area to a culture defined only by its style, such as the Funnelbeaker culture.<sup>7</sup>

Thus, in the signature model, the origin of a thing or a subset of the world of things is determined by means of style, regardless of whether the origin is an individual, a group, or an epoch. In doing so, intentionality is always assumed. As a result, things from nature cannot be of a style, only artificial things can. Their style makes them part of culture. Intentionality may refer to the thing as a whole, as is the case with Joseph Beuys' *Fat Corner* (1982), which he intended to be seen as a whole. It can also refer to the use of a manufacturing technique alone, such as the potter's wheel, which leads to common characteristics of the things produced on it.

Analysts in the tradition of the art historian Heinrich Wölfflin and the philosopher Richard Wollheim, further refine the concept of 'signature' by distinguishing between two basic concepts of style. A work that shows, for example, Titian's individual style, is created by him. A work in the *common style* of Titian is not by him, but shows (as do all paintings of the High Renaissance) characteristics which are exemplary in Titian's individual style. In other words, the individual style of an artist, whether they're known by name or not, is causal for their output. The common style, on the other hand, has a purely taxonomic function; it is a way of classifying objects and thus ordering them into subsets of the world of objects. The individual style is associated with a proper name (of an artist) or

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6 Lezzi-Hafter 2017.

7 Neer 2005.

pseudonym (of a graffiti sprayer), the common style groups objects into subsets with no proper name/pseudonym.

Nevertheless, even the concept of common style cannot do without the idea of a creator: behind their objects too, people invariably exist. Such as the painters of the High Renaissance known by name, the architects, stonemasons and scribes of the gothic period, some unknown by name, the creators of the Funnelbeaker style of the distant past, who remain forever in obscurity. The further back archaeologists and art historians turn their gaze, the less knowledge they can hope to gain from anything other than the styles of things they're dealing with.

The creators of punk, nerd, hipster, hippie, yuppie, emo, hip hop styles, even those of the mainstream, are unknown by name, and these styles cannot be attributed to an unnamed, but particular individual as creator. The styles of social groups form the distinguishing features of cultural taxa, in much the same way as shape, size, but also behaviour form distinguishing features in the morphological species concept of biology. And in the same way that the morphological species concept equates the physical appearance of an arbitrary animal *pars pro toto* to the species it belongs to, regardless of individual differences between its specimens, the individual style of any particular person can be equated *pars pro toto* to the group it belongs to, despite differences in all its members' individual styles. Consequently, the common style made up of these individual styles cannot be attributed to any one of the group's members alone.

That is, the common styles of social groups are the cultural taxa of society. Postmodern sociology's claim that people are no longer separated from one another by socio-economic and socio-cultural differences<sup>8</sup> leaves their collective style as the only distinguishing feature of social grouping – unless you entertain the extreme idea of a totally individualised society that is completely void of group membership. The *O/+consumption* creates social distance in society by means of clear-cut common styles in which it manifests itself. Punk, nerd, hipster, hippie, yuppie, emo, hip hop and mainstream styles are the taxa of post-modern society, for all of which *O/+consumption* is constitutive.

The common style in culture and the genome of reproductive communities in nature are found at the same taxonomic level, namely that where groups of individuals are clustered by their common characteristics. At the lower, more disaggregated level of specimens, there is the individual style in culture and the alleles in nature, which are responsible for individual characteristics within a species (including, e.g., eye and hair colour, lactose and sucrose tolerance in

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8 Müller 1992.

humans). The common style establishes distance between social groups, the individual style the (imperfect) proximity within a group.

So, the consumer always harbours two styles: the individual one, with which they establish themselves within a group, and the common one, which they share with that group. The individual style is nested within the common one, like the alleles are nested within the genome of the species. But unlike the latter, the individual style is not nature's gift, but the result of the individual's stylistic volition, exploiting the freedom granted by the group. In turn, the common style is the result of the collective freedom that the group enjoys within society, and in which the individual styles find their limits.

The distinction between individual and common style casts new light on Georg Simmel's consumer dilemma, the quest for both individuality and conformity.<sup>9</sup> Simmel's dilemma is a communicative one: the more individual someone is, the less their consumer language is understood – the more conformist someone is, the better it is understood. In QTC, the dilemma reoccurs, not as a communicative dilemma, but a social one. It's not about the need that one's individual style must still be understood in non-verbal communication, but rather that one's individual style must not imperil their group's distance to other groups. This limits the subset of the world of objects with which the individual style can be crafted, if the individual wants to remain in their group.

## Original versus Mutation

This raises the issues of the relation between an original and its mutations in a common style, and of the authenticity of an object and the individual style. The original is the origin of a cultural tree,  $\mathfrak{M}$ . In object art, for example, the *objets trouvés* by Marcel Duchamp, such as the urinal staged for the artwork *Fontaine* (1917), are at the origin of the tree. In its branches are Joseph Beuys' *Fat Corner* (1982) and Alex Van Gelder's *Meat Portraits* (2012) as their mutations. Which end of the chains,  $\mid$ , of a cultural tree is more authentic, the original or the mutation?

Often, the original is deemed more authentic: Leonardo's *Last Supper* (1494–1498) prevails over its thousands of mutations (including those created for mere advertising). Applied to the style of social groups, the English provincial gentleman (as a specific behavioural style) is more authentic than the (thing-oriented) German mutations from the *Hubertus* hunter catalogue. The costume of Appenzell Innerrhoden is also more authentic than the mutations at the Oktoberfest.

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9 Simmel 1905.

Steve Jobs embodies the Silicon Valley creative class more authentically than his present-day epigones and is therefore their iconic figure.

Yet, authenticity is a socially constructed reality, which both the Oriental carpet and the juvenile gangster style show. That is why the original is not automatically the most authentic. The mutation can also be authentic from case to case. Stylistically, Lascaux's cave paintings from the last glacial period belong in the same stylistic tree, the archaic style, as Picasso's cubist painting *Les Femmes d'Alger* (1907). *Lascaux* is older, but *Alger* is the seminal work of cubism, and more authentic to it than *Lascaux*. Which end of the chain displays the authentic is not clear from the outset. In Figure 1 (left side) it is either A or D.

Authentic objects are style-specific: almost all styles of social groups express a finished identity, while treating the unfinished one as taboo.<sup>10</sup> In contrast, the gay style *camp* exposes the artificiality of the finished identity, and thereby its changeability. This calls for consistently new, innovative, often provocative means to counteract the solidification of the illusion of the 'natural' finished identity. The latest mutation in camp is therefore more authentic than all its fore-runners.

## Signature versus Expression

For art critics, style is not the same as it is for art historians. Art critics work with an expression model of style, as opposed to the signature model used by art historians. In both models, only artificial objects can have style. But according to the expression model, the intention of the artist is always found in an artwork. This idea of style is therefore not founded on there being a joint origin of artworks, but on commonalities in expression – two pieces are in the same style when they express the same thing or something similar. For example, gothic pieces share the same intention of expressing the almightiness and glory of God. The expression model of style is tailor-made for the analysis of social groups; individuals and groups express their individual and collective identity by means of their style.

But do the signature and expression models share more than style's artificiality? For the philosopher Nelson Goodman, the stylistic signature is merely a metaphorical one. The art historian is speaking metaphorically when saying that an artwork shows the 'signature' of this or that epoch. But the metaphor is in itself a familiar code for expression. Titian's Paduan frescoes are filled with meta-

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10 Mohr 2016.

phors. In distinguishing between these two models, the finer aspects still need to be worked out.<sup>11</sup>

You cannot think of style as affecting the relationship between people if, ontologically, style is mere signature. Because then styles would be nothing but placeholders for people. Although people are distinguishable by them, they would otherwise remain interchangeable. Apart from their signature, punks would have nothing in common with one another and would be no different from bankers. Then the styles called punk, goth and banker could just as well be given the serial numbers 1, 2 and 3, without loss of information. If serial numbers were the sole epistemological contribution of the concept of style – as formulated by the philosopher Judith Genova regarding the question of literary style – it would be hard to see why style should be of any interest at all.

However, it's another story if style's ontology is expressive instead. In that case, different styles express different ideas, including conflict-ridden ones. Punk, nerd, hipster, hippie, yuppie, emo and hip hop styles can then be understood by the mainstream as social criticisms, which contradict one's own style. It is only by virtue of an expressive ontology that style can produce social distance. And it suffices if this ontology is construed, for example, by one group simply believing that another group's style sets the tone for social unrest. For these reasons, I define style as an ensemble of objects whose ontology is expression.

There is an almost unlimited number of codes available for expression<sup>12</sup>, but this does not mean that style is an arbitrary collection of codes. After all, styles also differ in the codes they like to have. Those codes that occur frequently in a style are referred to as the *symbol system* of style.<sup>13</sup> Wassily Kandinsky's symbol system, for example, which is found in his entire oeuvre, comprises little more than dots, lines, and primary colours. Symbol systems can also be found in styles of social groups. The tattoos popular in youth styles are coded differently from prisoner and sailor tattoos.<sup>14</sup> So, in different styles different tools are used to (non-verbally) express social distance and proximity. The language in which different styles speak is, however, a shared one, otherwise one group would not be able to understand what another wants to express. The symbol system of a style is comparable to the speech style of a clergyman, which differs from that of a sports reporter, although both understand each other when they talk about God and sports.

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11 Jacquette 2000.

12 Mick, Burroughs, Hetzel and Brannen 2004.

13 Hellman 1977.

14 Irwin 2001.

## Representation versus Exemplification

Two modes of expression exist: representation and exemplification. Titian's Paduan frescoes represent the miracles of Saint Anthony. And yet, some art is not about something else but about itself. As representation, such an artwork would represent itself, which would not be a helpful construct, as René Magritte's *The Treachery of Images* demonstrates. It is a naturalistic depiction of a pipe captioned 'Ceci n'est pas une pipe', expressing that what you see in a naturalistic painting of a thing is not the thing itself, but its representation. Yet the painting itself – here *The Treachery of Images* – is not a representation but rather, in Nelson Goodman's tradition, an exemplification of how the brain's processing of stimuli can produce something that was not previously there. So, *The Treachery of Images* is better understood in Goodman's tradition as 'exemplification'. The means of this exemplification is style, prompting Judith Genova to say: "A piece of work with style, as opposed to one without, not only shows but also says what it is all about."<sup>15</sup>

Put simply, the common style of a group not only shows something, but it frankly exclaims, "We are collectively one-of-a-kind, incomparable!" Punk even yells this. But this is exactly the message needed for the production of social distance. Common style is what creates social distance, what shows and what declares it. Likewise, individual style, which creates social proximity, exclaims, "I am one of you, but cannot be mistaken for any of you!"

In his aesthetics of art, Arthur Danto draws a radical distinction between representation and exemplification. All art, he says, is open to interpretation and so has the semiotic structure of a metaphor. However, he goes on, one can only interpret a metaphor if one understands not only its meaning, but also why exactly this and no other piece of art can embody this metaphor. Hence, while the artist is free in *what* they want to say (what is to be exemplified), they are bound without alternative in *how* it is to be said. There is only one way to represent (the way the ambassador alone represents his/her country). So for Danto, the *how* of an artwork is representation, barred from all alternatives.

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15 Genova 1979, p. 322.

## What versus How

An expressive ontology of style is about which style expresses what and how. The *what* ultimately concerns social positioning, the range of which Dick Hebdige has mapped out for British youth cultures. The object of expression can be crude, like that of the hyper-masculine hip hopper. Or it can be subtle, like that of the post-revolutionary, neo-classical American style, which, to set itself apart from the Rococo of the English colonial masters, made visible the values of the new era, purified of absolutism.<sup>16</sup>

Much like Danto's, an alternative approach assigns style not to the *what*, but to the *how*. Style is then the way something was made, and has nothing to do with what it is. A painting's style thus shows itself in the artist's painting technique (*how*), and not in *what* it expresses. With this ontology of style, the ensuing tasks are clearly divided between art history and archaeology on the one hand, and art criticism on the other. Art history and archaeology deal with facts (the *how*), art criticism evaluates and thereby also *constructs* expression (the *what*) – and is, NB, forever busy legitimising its judgments.<sup>17</sup> If you followed the approach of art criticism strictly, artistic style would lose its status as fact. Transferring this to the style of social groups, what *o/+consumption* then produced would not be fact but merely owing to the imagination of *homo sociologicus*. Would style in society then just be smoke and mirrors?

So, how can empirical substance be restored in the ontology of style as expression? You have two options. First, from a constructivist perspective, the social distance or proximity that two people construct are facts if their behaviour reflects this distance or proximity. But then the world of things is essentially redundant. Secondly, the neat separability of the *what* and *how*, and of art history and art criticism, is to be relativised.<sup>18</sup> In this way, style does not only encompass the *how* of painting, for example with Kandinsky's dots, lines and primary colours. Because in art, *how* something is made can hardly be appreciated without an idea of *what*. Magritte's *Treachery of Images*, for example, shows the *how* only in the *what*: only in the naturalistically painted pipe and the caption 'Ceci n'est pas une pipe' (*what*), the *how* of the contradiction in the *Treachery of Images* becomes

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16 Prown 1980.

17 The fact-based approach of art history and archaeology obviously also addresses the who of the signature model. The surviving Paduan records of instalments paid in 1510 to a Ticiano Vecellio for work done in the *Scuola del Santo*, are proof not only of when the frescoes were made but also by whom.

18 Robinson 1981, Wartovsky 1993.

transparent. Art history that disregards art criticism is therefore doomed to failure. Stylistically, the *how* cannot be separated from the *what*, fact and construct fuse into a joint reality. And, empirically, the different styles of *Harley* bikers and bicycle couriers, for example, can be experienced directly by participatory observation of the joint workings of the *how* and *what*.<sup>19</sup> It is precisely in this experience of the human being by the human being that style produces social distance and proximity.

## The Material versus the Personal

How many sheets of paper fit between the individual and their style? How closely does the individual let their style approach themselves? How do others see the individual in relation to their style? Separate from it or fused with it?

From an extreme standpoint, style is an artificial pose, manner devoid of substance. If you lean toward this view, it is difficult to imagine the subset of the world of objects, visible in style, to credibly produce and communicate identity. Then, you are essentially assuming *O/+consumption* has no impact on utility. From this perspective, the orthodox consumption theory is the right one for you.

The pragmatist philosopher Richard Shusterman's somatic style concept (*somaesthetics*), which is inspired by Eastern philosophy, offers the opposite view.<sup>20</sup> Somatic style is *habitus* fed by spirit.<sup>21</sup> It manifests itself in the individual's behaviour. The artificial gait of the fashion model on the catwalk does not belong to it. Rather, somatic style shows who we are. It is the natural expression of our personality. It may be understood as the spiritual base of our identity. Our spirit reveals itself to others through our body and is recognised by them in our physicality. The somatic side of our style grants or denies authenticity to our overall style. In a coherent overall style, the superficial world of things is anchored in the depth of our spirit; in an incoherent overall style, the somatic style mercilessly reveals the artificiality of our material style – the 'gentleman' I may wish to be is downgraded to a mere wearer of tweed jackets.

If you agree with Shusterman, style is the human being itself – in contrast to Comte de Buffon's own understanding of his *Le style c'est l'homme même*, where the

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19 Schouten and McAlexander 1995, Kidder 2005.

20 Shusterman 2011.

21 This contrasts with Bourdieu's *habitus*, which to a greater extent is fed by the social via parental upbringing.

writing style is the result of role play by the author.<sup>22</sup> Style, according to Shusterman, demands an intentionality that comes from the spirit, animating our feelings, desires, thoughts, actions and expression. Our animating spirit, which underlies all our exterior appearance, helps others recognise us. Our individual style is therefore not so much a bold creation, but rather slowly comes about by our constantly working on and developing ourselves. The somatic stylisation of our exterior serves one purpose only: the strengthening of our spirit. Our somatic style is thus as much our character as it is our corpuscle, as much our inner subjectivity as it is our outer form, connecting inside with outside, depth with surface. It remains malleable as a variable, but it cannot be changed by us on a whim; we can't change it the way we can change our shirt.

In Shusterman's understanding, the dark complexion in kogyarū's outer appearance is not part of a coherent somatic style, nor is the theatricality of pro wrestlers, nor are the crocodile tears shed by figure skaters in the 'kiss and cry' area, bodies pumped full of anabolic steroids, nor is Beau Brummel's posing. But Emma Hart's posing, expressing a classical ideal, can be part of a coherent somatic style, as can be parkour acrobatics, as a physical expression of the mastery of the urban world. In some sports, bestowing points for good posture is an attempt to evaluate the magnificence of the spirit in what is visible in the physical; for example, posture points scored by the dressage rider for the harmony of the human spirit with the animal. That which is evaluated by the posture points in dressage is the somatic style of the rider.

So, I understand the style-creating *o/+consumption* of "Yes to this, no to that!" as being coherent with its underlying spirit. In a simplified but not entirely false economic interpretation, the somatic style can be understood as a restriction on *o/+consumption*. Where it is violated, a signalling failure occurs, which will be discussed in chapter 10. Where it is observed, the overall style retains the substance and authenticity that are prerequisite for both communication and identity. Emphasising individuality, QTC is a consumer theory of the Western world; in its accommodation of the somatic style it remains, however, amenable to Eastern philosophy.

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22 Saisselin 1997.

## The Material versus the Social

A question still lingers: what sets a person apart from their style? If the world of objects is viewed as the structured framework that allows society to exist, then the person is the creation of their style. The world of objects is then the subject, whose language-like communicative capacity existed before the people using it. Alternatively, the world of objects can be viewed as a medium into which people write their intentions and beliefs.<sup>23</sup> In this case, style is created by people, and a person is to be viewed as the subject that already existed before the world of objects it uses.

When you take into account couturiers, designers, creative directors, the trendsetters in the hotspots of hip cities, and charismatic leaders, you tend to take the second view: (human) commerce makes style. However, the problem with this view is that it implicitly assumes the world of objects to be soft – people write into it whatever they wish, as if into warm wax. In the first view, by contrast, the world of objects is hard – what can be read in it has always been there, people themselves do not cause anything. This view has a different problem though: social innovation is difficult to imagine.

If you wish to avoid these problems, you must find an analytical compromise between the human being and style – between subject and object. To do this, the hitherto strict separation of the material and the social world must be overridden – that is the necessary compromise. The Actor Network Theory (ANT), a theory popular in cultural anthropology, offers that potential.<sup>24</sup>

Central to ANT is the concept of agency as an autonomous, but not necessarily intentional source of *action*. In ANT, both humans *and* things have agency. The difference merely lies in humans acting intentionally, which things cannot. But like humans, things can act autonomously: fences, paths and gates, for example, do not pursue goals, but they do affect people by means of non-verbal communication. Congestion and panic can be the results of the ‘actions’ of fences, paths and gates in sports stadiums – just as human actions are sometimes dysfunctional. The digital revolution is a case in point: if the wheel of digitalisation can no longer be turned back, then this metaphor for the ‘acting’ world of things demonstrates exactly what ANT is about. It is this symmetry between humans and things that allows both to interact in a network of actors: things ‘act’ and humans act, the material world is autonomously manipulated by humans, and so is the social world by the material world.

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23 Boast 1997.

24 Latour 2005.

But the crux of the ANT approach in its application to style is that stylistic innovations are syntactic innovations. For example, a recombination of the world of objects into a new subset (bricolage in fashion), the re-emergence of an accessory long forgotten (the hipster's moustache), a new way of behaving (parkour). However, syntactic innovation does not suffice for creating social distance and proximity. For this, semantic innovation (expression) is also needed: with the new syntax, new allusions need be made (expression) to another domain (the social).<sup>25</sup> That is to say, only with semantic innovation as expression can a new social reality be produced. It may be immediately obvious to you that fences, paths and gates exercise agency, and even how. But whether and how this agency could be so potent as to autonomously manipulate complex processes such as the production of social distance and proximity remains obscured. Convincing examples of this are lacking. Herein lies the crux I mentioned above.

Here, semiotic anthropology offers an alternative to ANT.<sup>26</sup> In semiotic anthropology the material plays only a passive role. Subsequently, the interrelationship between the material and the social, with all its degrees of freedom, emerges from an iterative process between culture and the social (semiosis). Consequently, it remains strictly in the human domain. In this iteration, it is culture that determines the mutability of the language-like communication capabilities that the world of objects affords. The current culture is the crystallisation of all these past mutations ('crystallised history').

However, here yet another problem arises: although semiotic anthropology reduces the degree of ambiguity between the material and the social, it doesn't eliminate it. A specific interrelationship between the material and the social can be established *post festum*, but it cannot be predicted. But since, epistemologically, the world must be *one* and cannot be two, this ambiguity is arbitrarily assigned by semiotic anthropology to the world of objects and not to the world of the social: (almost) arbitrary objects can signify a specific social feature. The Birmingham School's analysis of British lower class styles is a case in point: velvet (material) is not an object of interest as such, and the ambiguity of its symbolic potential is not worth analysing. Only as the cloth of the suit of the *mod*, whose place in the English social structure the school defines as fixed, is velvet of interest, because the *mod*'s velvet suit – NB *post festum* – signifies the *mod*'s place in the social structure. This attribution – the material as ambiguous, the social as unambiguous – is surprising.

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25 Hellman 1977.

26 Parmentier 1997.

The *o/+consumption* approach to the production of social distance and proximity provides the following bridge between ANT and semiotic anthropology:

- As in ANT, the material is an object of interest *ex ante*, but unlike in ANT, it has no agency of its own.
- Only humans act (semiotic anthropology).
- The social is *ex ante* undetermined (ANT).
- Instead, the material is less ambiguous than semiotic anthropology admits.
- The material order is the structure,  $\{\circ, |, \mathfrak{M}\}$ , of singletons, chains and trees in the world of objects.
- The subsets,  $\{\circ, |, \mathfrak{M}\}$ , of the world of objects structure the social by means of their properties of incomparability and comparability.
- Human agency, via *o/+consumption*, produces social distance and proximity.

## Overview

Establishing the order of singletons, chains and trees, culture determines the incomparability and comparability within and between subsets  $\{\circ, |, \mathfrak{M}\}$ ; that is, the material, loaded with meaning, by which consumption produces social distance and proximity. In the following, when I speak of the world of objects, I am referring to the world of things-cum-behaviours that has already been assigned by culture.

This ordering power of culture is symbolised by  $\square$  and, for sake of simplicity, I will (mostly) equate it with culture itself: culture is  $\square$ . I define the world of objects as a thing-cum-behaviour world, ordered by culture into disjoint subsets of  $X$ . A singleton is an incomparability,  $(\circ, \square)$ , ordered by  $\square$ . A chain is a totally ordered subset of strict but comparable non-identities,  $(|, \square)$ , of  $X$ . And a tree is a partially ordered subset,  $(\mathfrak{M}, \square)$ , of  $X$  with the ordering properties of chains,  $|$ , in each of its branches. Hence, the subsets of singletons, chains, and trees of  $X$ ,  $\{\circ, |, \mathfrak{M}\}$ , are also ordered by  $\square$ . Thus, it is culture alone that creates the world of objects,  $(X, \square)$ , from the unordered material,  $X$ . Only through culture does the social emerge – the distance between and proximity within social groups.

Piña is made into an object that expresses Filipino identity only by the shared knowledge of its role in stripping American colonial rule (culture). The (art-historical) appraisal of Titian (culture) makes his oeuvre a coherent ensemble of things representing an entire epoch. The examination of the Oriental carpet's

attributes (culture) turns carpets into objects that are more or less authentic. Traditional notions of gender roles (culture) let the cut of clothes be more or less macho or sissy. And it is culture that puts the poses of an Emma Hart and Beau Brummel into different subsets of the world of objects. The world of objects,  $(X, \square)$ , is an order created by culture,  $\square$ , out of the unordered thing-cum-behaviour world,  $X$ .

Table 1 presents the overall picture. Style is defined as  $o/+consumption$  of  $\{o, |, \mathfrak{M}\}$  in a human agency network. Style is therefore not only that which consumers display with their “Yes to this, no to that!” decisions, but this communication is also loaded by culture with dissimilarity information,  $\{o, |, \mathfrak{M}\}$ , that is to say with information about the comparability and incomparability of objects. Examples: brown versus black dress shoes communicates a different bilateral dissimilarity between two wearers than brown dress shoes versus bath slippers; piña as a fabric versus cotton communicates a different dissimilarity than thin versus thick cotton; a smartwatch on one wrist versus a vintage watch on another person’s wrist communicates a different dissimilarity than a vintage *Omega* versus a vintage *Tissot*.

The consumption of quality is always to be understood in this sense. A given quality is one side of a dissimilarity *potential* of an object which is this quality; this quality/object is only consumable jointly with other qualities/objects, which provide other sides to that potential, thereby creating concrete dissimilarity relations between these qualities/objects and that with the initial dissimilarity potential. A given quality is thus consumable only in a pack of qualities, as a dissimilarity between them. The ‘commodities’ consumers consume are these dissimilarities. They are created by culture.

Table 1: Overview.

| Sphere                                                                                       | Key Function         | Key Process                                                                          | Output                                         | Discussed in |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------|--------------|
| World of things-cum-behaviours                                                               | input X              |                                                                                      |                                                | Part 1       |
|  Culture □  | organising authority | determination of dissimilarities in the world of things-cum-behaviours               | ordered world of objects (X, □) with {s, l, h} | Part 1       |
|  Economy    | human agency         | 0/+consumption of {s, l, h} in the agency-network =: collective production of styles | bilateral dissimilarities                      | Part 2       |
|  The Social | communication        | elective affinity                                                                    | social distance and proximity                  | Part 3       |

The world of things-cum-behaviours is the unordered input into culture, from which it receives its meaning as (bilateral) dissimilarities. Thereby, the world of things-cum-behaviours becomes an ordered world of objects. In the economy, the world of objects is used (instrumentally) by human agency in *0/+consumption* for the production of (bilateral) dissimilarities between individuals. In the social realm, elective affinities are formed from these bilateral dissimilarities and social distance and proximity are produced.

## The Micro and Macro Composition of Style

In his art-theoretical treatise *Point and Line to Plane*, Wassily Kandinsky, founder of abstract expressionism in painting, identifies two key features of the human experience of the world of objects. We can experience a subset of the world of objects – in his case every instance of a painting – either as a whole (exterior) or by its constituent parts (interior). In this, Kandinsky broke with the practice prevalent in art theory at the time, of searching for the effect of a painting in its exterior only, i.e. in the subset as a whole – in his case, the whole plane of a canvas. He argues instead for searching for the effect of constituent parts – in his case, dots and lines – whose peculiarities would approach the viewer by coming out of the plane of the canvas like someone approaching us by stepping through a door.

Yet, Kandinsky continues, a particular element has no independent effect, but is effective as part of the composition of all the elements on the plane of the canvas. For him, composition is the internal, functional subordination of basic elements and their build-up within a specific painterly objective. Using different compositions of dots and lines on the plane, he demonstrates how subsets of basic elements are perceived by the viewer as compositions. Although arising from its elements, a composition functions separately. The implication of Kandinsky's conclusion for consumption theory is this: consumer utility is not directly derived from the properties of basic elements, but from a composition of constituent elements, which has become a new property separate from them.

I will operationalise this for style in the following way: Kandinsky's dots and lines are basic elements that correspond, for example, to buttons and cords on uniforms; they affect utility only in the form of a composition, a painting or a uniform. I define such a composition of basic elements as an object,  $x$ , from the world of objects  $(X, \square)$ . As a composition of basic elements, the object possesses an independence lent by culture.<sup>27</sup> Objects,  $x$ , are the input into *o/+consumption*. Its output is style and its effect social distance and proximity. Kandinsky's compositions form the micro world of style.

For once, the orthodoxy is right in defining consumer goods as utility generators at the aggregate level of Kandinsky's composition, i.e. paintings, uniforms, etc., as a whole, each composed of basic elements. But not for good reason: in the orthodoxy, a consumer good is that which carries a price tag, something Kandinsky's dots and lines do not. Only the painting does. Object,  $x$ , and the orthodox consumer good only coincide by chance if the value chain spits out the consumer good exactly when it has attained the Kandinskyan composition property. That this only happens by chance is because the orthodoxy deems value to be exchange value, whereas QTC views it as the use value of social distance and proximity.

Kandinsky reveals the cultural ties of objects even further: according to him, the dot functions as sound, the line as colour. Since no dot is a sound and no line a colour, these functions are not contained in the physical painting, but in the mind of the viewer. That is to say, Kandinsky's world of objects begins to exist only in the viewer's perception – no object 'artwork' can exist without the viewer as the subject. Applying this understanding to consumption results in a radical conclusion: no object that a consumer can consume exists 'out there, in the world'. Instead, every

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27 An object can therefore be understood as  $x = (x, \square)$ . However, since I take  $(x, \square)$  as given, i.e. since I do not deal with the nano-issue, whereby, for example, a subset of gold buttons and field-grey cloth constitutes a particular composition (uniform) compared to a subset of pineapple fibre and horn buttons, I stick with the shortened notation  $x$ .

object,  $x$ , and thus every composition of objects, and hence every style, only begins to exist in the senses of the consumer – barong tagalog from piña, Titian's works, uniforms, costumes, art styles, living statues, dandyism, the Cosmati mosaics in Westminster, kogoyaru, the gentleman, Klimt's *femmes fatales*, the emancipated female, hip hop, as well as Kandinsky's compositions of dots and lines. Not even in the micro world of style does the material exist without culture. Only the black in the paint box is still without culture.

The micro world of style is still unordered, consisting only of singletons, but these are already Kandinskyan compositions. The macro world of style begins with the ordering of objects, as at least  $|$  or  $\mathfrak{M}$ . Orders,  $|$ ,  $\mathfrak{M}$ , or  $\{\circ, |, \mathfrak{M}\}$ , are macro compositions consisting of Kandinskyan micro compositions. Style, both individual and common, is thus a macro composition.

One such macro composition of objects is Titian's oeuvre,  $\mathfrak{M}$  (Figure 3), although his pieces are not gathered in one place. The collection of paintings by Gustav Klimt in Gilles Néret's book *Gustav Klimt* is, however, a macro composition that can be viewed together as a whole,  $\mathfrak{M}$ . A collection of Louis Armstrong records, arranged in order of year of production,  $|$ , is a macro composition that can be viewed, heard and grasped. Regardless of the number of objects contained in a macro composition, it is an entity created by culture: each object it contains is arranged in a certain order in relation to other objects it contains, as a chain or tree. Some chains can be extended, for example, by adding a previously lost Louis Armstrong recording to the collection without disturbing its order. It is still a macro composition. In the same manner, some trees can be combined with some other trees to form even larger ones without disturbing their order. For example, if Klimt's oeuvre is combined with all the works (of other painters) in his style.

You also find singletons, chains and trees united in larger subsets,  $\{\circ, |, \mathfrak{M}\}$ . You can find the record collection,  $|$ , together with purple batik scarves,  $|$ , prints of Klimt's paintings,  $\mathfrak{M}$ , and a vintage car,  $\circ$ . They are fragmented arrangements, which are still united in a subset of the world of objects by the simple fact that a consumer surrounds herself with them in *O/+consumption*.

Macro compositions,  $\{\circ, |, \mathfrak{M}\}$ , are typical of consumer styles. One outside observer may be bewildered by  $\{\circ, |, \mathfrak{M}\}$ , to another outside observer it may be familiar – as when the one but not the other comes to grips with the macro composition of Louis Armstrong records, purple batik scarves, Klimt prints and the vintage car. Sometimes consumers demonstrate less complex macro compositions, which may even shrink down to a  $\{\mathfrak{M}\}$  – for example, if in the above-mentioned composition Louis Armstrong's music is replaced by sitar music, the *femmes fatales* by photos of a guru, and a Dutch bicycle is stored in the garage instead of the vintage car. In any case, consumer styles are macro compositions,  $\{\circ, |, \mathfrak{M}\}$ . For

simplicity's sake I define it in the result of the consumer's *o/+consumption* as  $\{\circ, |, \mathfrak{h}\}$ : if style is the individual itself, then the individual is  $\{\circ, |, \mathfrak{h}\}$ .

So, for further analysis, I view the consumer as being solidly fused with all they surround themselves with, as well as with all they steer clear of. Critics of capitalism denounce that fusion as 'consumerism': consumption is seen as a collective fetish, corrupting and infantilising the human being. So, do I think of society as a decadent consumer temple? No! A consumer's individual style or the common style of their group can be precisely what consumerism critics decry, but it can just as easily be quite the opposite: an ascetic style, a minimally hedonistic style, an intellectual style, an artist's consumer style, etc. My approach does not narrow the scope of consumption down, it allows for both, the capitalism critic's hell as well as their heaven.

I define as *style system* the entirety of styles that exist side by side in society, which is the set of all  $n \cdot m$  styles,  $\{\{\circ, |, \mathfrak{h}\}_1, \dots, \{\circ, |, \mathfrak{h}\}_{n \cdot m}\}$ .<sup>28\*</sup> Thus it is clear that social distance and proximity cannot be individually produced, but only collectively. A consumer contributes only a small part to the whole system of *o/+consumption* in society, which produces social distance and proximity only as a whole. The household production of style is always society-wide collective production.

Where the number of members of society is greater than the number of common styles that exist in that society, several people have flocked together around a style that is constitutive for them as a group. There are the Nationalists and 'Americans' in the Philippines, there are the dandies and the rest of the Regency, the punks, nerds, hipsters, hippies, yuppies, emos, hip hoppers and mainstreamers in the present. Social distance between them and proximity within them are brought about by the cultural dissimilarities which inhere within the style system. That raises the question of what exactly cultural dissimilarity is.

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<sup>28\*</sup> With  $n$  as the number of social groups with  $m$  members each.